

**Draft Note to be presented to the Panel (5) Discussion on ‘Trajectories of the Past – The Issue of Sovereignty and Conflict Resolution in South Asia’ in the IDEAS 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on ‘National and Regional Identities: appropriating the past’ to be held at the Institute of Chinese Studies, Hong Kong on 4 February 2012**

Samir Kumar Das<sup>1</sup>

Of late India’s Northeast has been subjected to a series of dense and hitherto unprecedented policy interventions. Commonly clustered as India’s Look East policy, in this presentation I seek primarily to assess how the gaze that India’s Look East casts particularly on the Northeast produces and imagines into existence a space that spreads across the present geography of the region. We also propose to analyse the role of these policy interventions in triggering off and bringing into circulation a host of new geopolitical imaginaries contesting it.

India’s Northeast - as we know - forms the cusp where South Asia becomes less and less South Asia and more and more Southeast Asia and vice versa and an otherwise vast and culturally contiguous space with one of the longest histories of almost incessant immigration from both sides was eventually reorganized into a number of heavily territorialized nation-states with at least in theory rigid and impenetrable international borders around them. The clumsily demarcated and albeit under-administered ‘frontiers’ of early colonial times were gradually converted into neat and surgically precise territorial borders particularly since the beginning of the twentieth century. Subsequently the newly emerged nation-states too realized the importance of drawing such borders as a means of ‘containing’ their sovereign power within their respective territorial jurisdictions.

While many of Northeast’s present conflicts have been as old as its emergence as a landlocked and peripheral region - more pronouncedly in the wake of Partition (1947) and the consequent reorganization of her international borders – rethinking in terms of policy alternatives and new geopolitical imaginaries to get out of the impasse is only a recent development and took off in a significant way only since the early 1990s.

The new geopolitical imagination set off by the new policy thinking envisages a space that apparently refuses to be bound by the present geography of the Northeast as much as it promises to spread across the international borders to the countries of Southeast Asia through such frontline states as Myanmar and Bangladesh. I propose to call this imagined space - the *extended* Northeast - and argue that the way the space is imagined in official circles sets in motion many new imaginaries drawing generously but not exclusively from the region’s recent past history. The extended Northeast as being officially imagined now has a mnemonic effect so to say insofar as it offers a significant cue to the alternative modalities of imagining the extended Northeast. In simple terms,

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<sup>1</sup> Honorary Senior Researcher, CRG and Professor of Political Science, University of Calcutta, Kolkata – 700 027, Email: samirdascu@gmail.com

new policy rethinking has opened up many a possibility that breaks open the given contours of the Northeast as a region. More often than not, as we will argue, it contests – if not subverts - the official imagination. In a sense, Look East aims at ‘liberating’ the region not only from its presently landlocked and peripheral status but also from the hitherto governmentalised modes of imagining it. Cornelius Castoriadis in his famous *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975) aptly noted the inherently insurgent nature of social imaginaries that refuse to be subsumed under the governmentally defined modes and remain in circulation particularly at critical moments when the hegemony of the officially given imaginaries shows signs of losing their gloss.

While India’s Northeast, South and Southeast Asia might have remained politically separate, it is also suggested that political borders that otherwise keep them separate have over time sought to adjust themselves to the changing economic realities and form a composite region of ‘Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia’ (NISASEA) much in the same manner in which say the European Union (EU) has taken shape over the last couple of decades.

Viewed from within, extended Northeast also spreads inwards. A map of the Northeast on India prominently embossed on the folders and CD covers distributed during a summit on financial investment in the Northeast organized by the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII), North Eastern Chapter, Ministry for the Development of the North East Region (MDONER), Government of India and the Government of Assam that hosted it in capital Guwahati demonstrates that the region begins in West Bengal with the Sunderbans. This by no means was an inadvertent error. For, CII’s North East Chapter itself has its head office in Kolkata and the region’s booming tea auction continues to be held in that city – despite strong resentments from the tea-producing states of the region. Map-making, in other words, is a political exercise.

A plea was made in early 2005 primarily by a section of politicians and bureaucrats for extending the ambit of North East Industrial Policy to North Bengal and this should be read together with the demand made a few months back in the same year for according the region with the membership of North Eastern Council (NEC) now based in Shillong. North Bengal’s claim to such membership is reinforced by the fact that it forms part of the same geographical terrain that is called the Northeast. Besides, it also shares many of the features of remoteness, backwardness, strong sub-nationalist sentiment and underdevelopment that otherwise mark the states of the region. The plea for inclusion of North Bengal seemed to have come in the form of a well-thought out economic package for developing a region that is admittedly suffering from West Bengal’s officially unrecognized North-South divide functioning as it were in reverse. Similarly, *North Eastern Region: Vision 2020* promises to remap the region in which West Bengal plays a crucial role – if not as one of its integral parts, at least as its indispensable node. The idea is to improve connectivity by linking Kolkata directly with the Northeast through a ‘freight corridor’ cutting through Bangladesh and further opening it to the ports of Chittagong and Sittwe.

As India's Northeast seeks to open itself to the countries of Southeast Asia, new hopes are created amongst the people of this region for establishing various kinds of linkages with their ethnic cousins living across the borders. History of sovereign nation-states has hitherto 'blocked' the memories of continuity and shared existence. If memory is 'blocked' history, it is only through a 'right stroke' that it 'rushes out' (Samaddar 1998:10).

Look East occasions such an obligation of remembrance 'without which there is no past for us but not that through which the past is past for us' (Merlau-Ponty 2010:103). In simple terms, remembrance makes the present dissolve into the past. Thus to cite an instance, Anand Oinam observes: "... Manipur will be no longer a landlocked state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our sons and grandsons will find it easier to visit our long lost brothers and sisters in Myanmar in the coming decades". The 'natural' connection between South and Southeast Asia in history has already led a section of public intellectuals and rights activists to raise the demand for people's 'natural' right to migration across international borders. Look East policy seems to have released memories of shared past and raised enormous expectations in the minds of the people that the international borders that stand in the middle to separate them from their ethnic cousins are going to wither away in the near future.

If Look East provides the 'stroke' that evokes remembrance, is there any 'right' balance between the stroke and the memory, between what evokes and what gets evoked? If Look East is said to have marked a transition from India's hitherto followed policy towards her Eastern neighbours, then as Paul Gready points out while introducing a collection of essays, 'memory carries an almost overwhelming set of political expectations that frame its form and delivery' (Gready 2003:4). Much in the same vein but quite parallel to it, various armed groups and non-state actors seek refuge in the neighbouring countries and approach them with requests for extending diplomatic and other forms of moral and material support. They too are evidently driven by new geopolitical imaginaries in which *extended* Northeast persists as a powerful imaginary.

A new crop of literary writings in general and novels in particular bring many alternative geopolitical imaginaries into circulation. Because of the obvious limitations of time, I will flag only the issue of market and how it gets redefined by these alternative imaginaries. A novel entitled *Changlot Fenla* authored by Parag Kumar Das, a journalist who reportedly fell prey to S(urrendered)ULFA's (United Liberation Front of Assam, a rebel outfit from Assam) bullets - weaves a story that proceeds along two registers: On the one hand, there is the grand register that in course of being elaborated makes it necessary for the insurgents to engage in the same strategic game that nations play by joining and participating in it and most importantly by turning it to their advantage. The grand register evidently takes the post-Westphalian framework of nation-states as given and unalterable.

On the other hand, there is the hitherto blocked register of a contiguous space that needs to be recovered – if necessary through violent means - from the hegemonic reality of the nation-states firmly ensconced within their rigid and impenetrable borders. It was

thanks to one such strategic move taken by the political class that an otherwise socially and culturally contiguous space was partitioned in 1947 and vivisected into mutually exclusive territories of often rivaling sovereignties. While revolution for the insurgents is also a war game demanding well thought out moves and countermoves, the imaginaries once disentangled from the overpowering concept of strategic game between the nation-states have the potential of organizing and reconfiguring a space that extends beyond not only the present-day Northeast but also the hegemonic modes of thinking in terms of producing and reproducing nation-states. As the protagonist of the novel observes: “Weapons are not the be all and end all of war... One has to match them with people’s power and moral power”.

In the context of anticipated expansion in the flow of trade and commodities, the new imaginary envisages a market that intends to establish direct connection with the eastern neighbours without depending on ‘New Delhi’. Indeed, such habit of dependence has helped New Delhi in establishing monopoly over the economies of this region. In the name of territorial integrity, Assam has been cut off from the rest of the world and New Delhi has ‘unilaterally imposed monopoly conditions on our trade’: “Now it is the imperative of time that we need to do away with the attraction and infatuation for the West and open the door to the eastern frontier”. An alternative market thrives on the region’s ability to retain the unmediated character – that is to say – its ability to flourish independently of the mediation of New Delhi.

But the crucial question is: how does one open the door to the East? Is market connection the only one by which one can reestablish the historical continuities? Or all other connections need to be subordinated to market requirements? The protagonist of the novel is excited while witnessing the ‘Assamese boys’ living in Nagaland marrying local Naga girls and living happily in the remote villages of Nagaland with their families. One has to keep in mind that many tribal organizations including the Naga Students’ Federation (NSF) in the not so distant past have cautioned ‘their girls’ against marrying the non-Nagas. But these cross-ethnic kinship bonds – very much kinship by nature - according to the novel will strengthen the fraternity ‘from within’ and ‘this will one day open the door to the East in this manner’.

As one closely reads through the pages of Adam Smith’s celebrated work *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) – considered universally as one of the key texts of Economics in its pure classical form – one is rudely reminded of his endeavour to not only keep Economics separate from Sociology but to abstract and ‘liberate’ market from such social considerations as family, ethnicity, clan and kinship ties. Smith’s argument seems to have run a full circle. *Changlot Fenla* revolves around the imaginary of an alternative market that is ignited not by any utilitarian calculations of profit or utility maximization a la Smith but by kinship or more accurately cross-kinship kinship networks and social connections that have the potential of transcending the homelands of diverse groups and communities – already dismembered and kept apart by the existing administrative divisions.

The imaginaries of an extended Northeast set in motion by the Look East – the official vision of linking India with what the then Minister of External Affairs would call her ‘Civilizational Asian neighbours’ – exceed the vision itself. Although the official vision releases new and alternative imaginaries it cannot effectively control or appropriate them. Imaginaries being what they are have their ways of instituting and re-instituting the society by way of influencing and shaping popular and insurgent vision and practice. The juggernaut of official Look East will continue to be contested in the near future by a variety of imaginaries already in circulation. It is important that we recover them and bring them to bear on our grand understanding of history and disrupt its unity.

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