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Mobilities and Spaces



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Logistical Spaces II

Mobilities and Spaces

Sucharita Sengupta and Samir Purkayastha

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Borders, Mobility and Migration: A Study on North East India

Sucharita Sengupta and Samir Purkayastha *

Proponents of a 'borderless world', a phrase used by Kenichi Ohmae¹, often argue that strict borders, particularly in the context of South and Southeast Asia are natural barriers to the free flow of goods and persons. It is also generally believed that political decisions giving rise to artificial borders in the region could be turned into zones of economic cooperation in order to promote regional integration through trade and commerce. It is another point however that deconstruction of a border prerequisites the existence of one. The region mentioned above is almost bereft of a neatly etched out border at places which further triggers relentless governance of the borders in order to ensure a restricted movement of the 'illegal'. The question of law majorly comes in vogue following the partition of the Indian subcontinent, when the outsider, also termed as the 'foreigner', becomes illegal for entering without necessary documents like a passport or visa. The independent nation states in South Asia that were born out of the partition sprang to life with turbulent and vague borderlines, never distinctly disconnected and linked forever with each other through shared history, culture, tradition and customs. Therefore, while borders divide, they also are connecting lines. The tragic history of bloodshed and partition in South Asia gave rise to borders that proved more to be fault lines of hatred, mistrust and suspicion than of mutual cooperation and love. The new borders were witness to continuous trans- border and internal migration resulting from economic compulsions, ethnic conflicts, religious persecutions and so on. The political significance of borders thus continue, evoke relentless concern over the legality of population flow across the borders. This is even more relevant for India's Northeast since the region is so used to fearing the 'outsider'. Yet, one cannot deny that the Northeast as a region has been shaped through the mobility of diverse sects' of people, and concern over migration prevailed in Assam, even before the independence of India. We elaborate this in the subsequent paragraphs.

We start the paper from this point with two submissions that are also two pivotal moments in the narrative of migration that we intend to investigate and interrogate through this paper. The first is a policy, to be explained later in the paper that is expected to change the socio-economic profile of a region by connecting it with a bigger regional block. The second happens to be the fact that Northeast India is a region inflicted with certain challenges, despite rigorous attempts since the last decade to change all that hinders development in the region. We thus see the emergence of a network of social institutions and communications, entailing a newer technology of rule. With new logistical expansion and social governance in the region, what remains to be seen is whether there is a

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shift in the pattern of conflict as well or the age old colonial structures exist albeit the massive winds of change blowing over the region. This paper thus tries to address what happens to population flow and control over resources in this context with the Look East Policy, which is now rechristened as Act East Policy, aiming to be the Midas touch in transforming the entire region. Returning to the point from where we started this paper that, more deregulation of borders leads to a barrier free integration of regions through trade and communication, we investigate whether the same holds for movement of people that falls outside the purview of law. Do ethnic conflicts surrounding ‘outsiders’ or ‘alien bodies’ mitigate peacefully or unfolds in a distinct pattern? The complex relation between the inflow of capital and outflow of labour, as had been pointed out by Sanjay Barbor², are some of the aspects that this paper intends to explore by moving in between the history and contemporary. A particular time period and certain specific places have been identified as the fulcrum of the discussion. Select newspaper clippings from 2008 to 2012 and secondary sources like articles and books have helped us in weaving our arguments. We have also visited parts of Assam, for instance Guwahati and Dawki to put forth our contentions through select snippets of interviews.

Section I: The Colonial Legacy of Population Flows & Perceptions

Ranabir Samaddar in one of his essays has argued that violence and its manifestations of suppressing population flow across borders is a combination of the legal, para legal and illegal that has been legitimized from the colonial period in the Northeast and existing till today³. The reason for stating this at the outset of the discussion is because it helps in unveiling the genesis of perceiving migration with apprehension in the region. It also throws light to the nuances of border making and the flows across it in a region tensed with perpetual conflicts. We can thus comprehend that the very notion of migration in the Northeast India is fraught with inherent contradictions. On the one hand it has remained as a highly contentious issue and on the other hand it has been encouraged historically to benefit policy makers in the region. The history of migration in India’s Northeast is therefore not a recent phenomenon.

Most part of the region, sandwiched between the Himalayas in the north and the Bay of Bengal in the South, was almost a terra nullius (nobody’s land) even until the early nineteenth century. Almost all groups inhabiting the region have come from different places at different periods of history and most of the early settlers claim their origin from various places of East and Southeast Asia. Infact, the entire region can be called a ‘museum of races’⁴. This prompted a noted Assamese politician and intellectual, late Gaurishankar Bhattacharya, to state in one of his columns in 1999 that since life in its human form did not originate in Assam all its inhabitants are one-time migrants⁵. The same can also be said for the entire region. Yet, India’s northeast, which was once a melting pot of diverse cultures, language, customs and ethos, has been increasingly drawn towards the vortex of insular and identity conflicts leading to even ethnic cleansing and communal violence. The Assam movement in no unclear term testifies this, followed by a series of micro conflicts till now.

This element of insularity and sense of marginalization is the fallout of colonial legacy. Expansion of British rule to the Northeastern part of India following the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 had led to the demarcation of the region for the first time on the basis of fixed and rigid territorial jurisdiction. This gave rise to the perception of migrants being invaders. The delimitation process, according to R Gopalkrishnan, provided the territorial identity on which ethnic groups of the region were able to assert their distinctiveness⁶. The formation of social blocks based on rigid identities, however, was not followed up with prudent policies to nurture it alongside the sociopolitical ethos evolving outside the region. On the contrary, the British introduced several

policies that established its political and administrative hegemony both in plains and hills and contributed in wedging the us-and-them divide. The introduction of Inner Line Regulation in 1873 and the declaration of most of the hill areas as "Excluded Areas" under the provision of Government of India Act of 1935, isolated the tribal communities from social, political and economic developments taking place elsewhere and further curbed the flexible and fluid social tribal settings that existed in the pre-colonial era, allowing inter-mingling of diverse streams of people. In the plains of Assam, where the East India Company developed considerable business interest, the scenario was another extreme. In a bid to exploit its vast natural resources like tea, oil and coal, the British pushed the area into a demographic turmoil. The need for labour and infrastructure to propel and sustain the colonial regime's economic and industrial interest in the area triggered renewed wave of human migration into the region.

In the pretext of local people's perceived inability to become the mainstay of its economic initiatives, several historians opine that the colonisers started importing tribal and backward caste Hindus from regions such as Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and other parts of British India to work as indentured labourers. Further, to run the administration the British also brought with them officers, lawyers and clerks from Bengal, thus sowing the seeds of antagonism between the Ahom nobility and British bureaucracy represented at the grassroots by Bengali officials mostly from Sylhet, which was tagged to Assam after the latter was separated from the Bengal Presidency in 1874.

Construction of infrastructure such as laying of rail and road networks to connect the nascent economic hubs with nearest ports in the then Calcutta and Chittagong also contributed its bit towards the influx of migrants. Since the newly established infrastructure passed through the thinly populated tea and coal belts bypassing the old trading centres and towns like Barpeta, Goalpara and Sivasagar, it did not help the growth of local economy⁷. To feed the burgeoning population, the British also encouraged Muslim peasants from the erstwhile East Bengal to settle in the fallow and wasteland areas of Assam in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ironically, the Assamese elite initially made a strong pitch for importation of hardworking Bengali Muslim peasants as they deemed it necessary for the economic growth of the region⁸. Subsequently, when they realised that the policy was only benefiting the colonial economy at the cost of swamping the province with 'outsiders', they got alarmed and started resenting the move. But by then it was too late. Goalpara, a district annexed to Assam from Bengal in 1874, witnessed an increase in population by 30 per cent between 1901 and 1911, with immigrants forming a fifth of the total population⁹. The settlement of these landless peasants from East Bengal districts was not, however, restricted to Goalpara alone. Migration to other parts of the province like Nowgong, Darrang, and Kamrup also received momentum, bringing these migrants into direct confrontation with the indigenous population as with the growth in their numbers, they started penetrating the living space of the local people changing demographic as well as economic equations. During the British regime a large number of general labourers and earth workers from Bihar and United Provinces, traders from Rajasthan and Nepali cattle-herds too migrated into the region putting further pressure on land and resources.

The demarcation of common boundary with Bhutan was sealed by 1872-73 and in the same time, as mentioned above, the 'inner line' was drawn up segregating the Northeastern frontier from the plain land. Scholars well conversant with the history of Northeast India would know that the line was a political decision intended to separate the hills from the plains in order to prevent 'leakages of official revenue'. Also, no foreigner could now cross the line without an official permit. Landholdings and traders were also restricted through this regulation¹⁰. The inner line was inevitable since the government had realised that it was losing out on a substantial amount of revenue and hence a clear

demarcation between the rental and non rent paying population was necessary for its own benefit. The line thus drawn to demarcate the legal from the illegal was drawn and redrawn till the 20th century, “in order to variously accommodate the expansive compulsions of plantation Capital, the recognition of imperfection in survey maps, the security anxiety of the state and the adaptive practices of internally differentiated local communities”¹¹. Initiation of the inner line, demarcating the worlds of law and non law, further added to the isolation of the region. However, migrants were still needed by the British in order to provide human resources and labour, as a result of which Assam’s demography changed with more and more influx of people. The demographic change ushered in by the industrialisation of the region led to major cultural, economic and social change, which became a source of antagonism between the locals and the outsiders —the reverberations of which are felt in the region till date. As is explained by Ranabir Samaddar, the anti foreigner’s agitation in Assam displacing around two million persons in the post independent era, probably for the first time, brought forth the issue of migration and citizenship which serves as a crucial link “between the so called parliamentary sphere of politics and the dark sphere of identity politics”¹². Hence, ‘foreigners’ could stay to keep the tea and timber industries running, to generate revenue and production, but not to exercise any claim on citizenship, which remains an instrument for the survival of the indigenous. In 1921, almost one-sixth of the population of Assam was employed in the tea gardens, hailing from Jharkhand. Peasant migration in Assam mostly took place from various districts of the then East Bengal like Pabna, Mymensingh, Dhaka and so on raising concern yet again over the ‘alarming’ rate of population growth.¹³ Another important aspect of the colonial economy was the complete absence of indigenous capital in the organised sectors such as tea, coal, petroleum, railways etc., though between 1881 and 1901, investment in this sector was around Rs 200 million¹⁴, which is one of the highest investments in a region in British India. This huge investment, however, did not lead to the growth of local capital. On the contrary, markets sprouted by the migrants around the neo-industrial belts were flooded with cheap imported goods which struck a serious blow to the existing indigenous economy by out-competing local products.

During the colonial era, migration to the region was, however, mainly restricted to the plains of Assam as the business interest of the East India Company was mostly limited to the area. The princely state of Manipur and hills of Assam province including the present day Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and parts of Arunachal Pradesh, by and large remained either unattractive or out of bounds to the migrants, except for a few Nepali grazers. Fertile and sparsely populated Tripura was, however, an exception to the usual pattern. During the decades before India’s independence, Tripura witnessed a surge in the influx of migrants from the then East Bengal so much so that in 1931 migrants constituted 29.8 percent of its total population. In case of Assam, in 1911, the migrants constituted 13.4 per cent of its population while in 1921 it was 17.3 per cent and in 1931 it was 15.3 per cent. During the corresponding periods, the contribution of migrants to Manipur’s population was 2.3, 2.2 and 1.7 respectively. (See table 1 below).

Table I: Percentages of in and Out Migrants

Year	In-migrants			Out Migrants		
	Assam	Manipur	Tripura	Assam	Manipur	Tripura
1911	882,068	7,995	NA	13.4	2.3	NA
1921	1,290,157	8,416	NA	17.3	2.2	NA
1931	1,317,850	7,625	113,849	15.3	1.7	29.8

Source: Census of India for the year 1911, 1921, 1931

As discussed above, the prime cause of migration into the region during the colonial regime, according to several historians, was the British policy of encouraging influx of people to explore the region's vast natural resources like tea, coal, oil, timbers etc to boost the region's economy. In the post-colonial era, apart from economic reasons, persecution and threat in their homeland forced people to take shelter in the region. The partition had not only rendered the region landlocked by severing many important communication routes with the mainland, but also precipitated fresh waves of migration into the region. The rate of net in-migration to the Northeast was expectedly very high in the first few decades after independence as it had witnessed a massive inflow of Bengali Hindu refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan. The surge continued until the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Along with Bengali Hindus, minority Chakmas and Hajongs too fled the erstwhile East Pakistan to take shelter in the Northeast during that period. The existence of Chakmas and Hajongs in their native place was further imperiled by the construction of the Kaptai dam on the river Karnaphuli in 1962. They entered India through what was then the Lushai Hills district of Assam (today's Mizoram). While some stayed back with the Chakmas who were already living in the Lushai Hills, the Indian government gave settlement to a majority of the refugees in the sparsely populated North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), present-day Arunachal Pradesh. Consequently, the number of net in-migrants in NEFA (Arunachal Pradesh) became more than double during 1961 to 1971. The upward trend continued for another decade. (See table 2, below).

Table II: Net in Migration in the North-Eastern States, 1961-2001

States	Net in-Migrants					Migration Rate(per100)				
	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
Arunachal Pradesh	30,075	67,544	1,23,542	1,08,385	62,213	8.9	14.4	19.5	12.5	7.2
Assam	12,36,155	13,29,110	---	5,21,882	-154,654	11.4	9.1	--	2.3	-0.7
Manipur	10,770	25,954	21,971	-14,736	-26,156	1.4	2.4	1.5	-0.8	-1.4
Meghalaya	---	86,218	16,602	42,418	14,430	---	8.5	8.7	2.4	0.8
Mizoram	---	33536	-7385	---	-704	---	8.5	-1.1	--	-0.1
Nagaland	13,477	42,279	78,384	32,578	-16511	3.7	8.2	10.1	2.7	-1.4
Tripura	3,98,273	5,24,847	4,85,236	3,90,731	27,970	34.9	33.7	23.6	14.2	1.0

Source: Compiled from Census of India, various years, as mentioned above.

Again, the military coup of 1962 forced many Burmese Indians to flee the country and take shelter in the Northeast. Many of the descendants of the uprooted Tamil migrants are now settled in Moreh in Manipur. Significantly, in the decade following 1960, Manipur recorded marginal increase in the number of net in-migrants. Otherwise, the rate of migration in the state was never very high. Widespread and persistent ethnic, political, and religious persecution by the Burmese military regime subsequently compelled thousands from the Chin community to take refuge in neighbouring Mizoram. Most Chins came to Mizoram between 1988 and the mid 1990s. The Tibetans were yet another group of people to cross over to the Northeast from a neighbouring country, fleeing persecution. They came when Dalai Lama fled China in 1959. Besides, inter-state migration to Northeast from Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Odisha too was unabated in the first few decades since Independence. And unlike the colonial period, the post-partition migrants did

not restrict themselves mainly to Tripura and the plains of Assam. They fanned out over the entire region.

During the decade 1961-71, all the seven northeastern states witnessed a spike in migrant population as has been shown in the table 2. This upsurge deepened the sense of insecurity among the indigenous inhabitants across the region. Soon anti-foreigner movement engulfed Assam, changing the demographic profile of the region further. The movement was initially directed against Bengalis, or to be precise against 'illegal' migrants. But as the raging fury spread, it morphed into a virtual crusade against all outsiders, obliterating in the process the thin-line that distinguishes a century old settler from an interloper or a refugee from a transgressor. Residents who have lived in the region all their lives overnight became 'outsiders' despite their provenance and acculturation in the region. As a result, the Northeast witnessed a series of uprisings against perceived 'aliens' in the form of ousting "non-tribal" campaign in Meghalaya, drive against Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh and Chin refugees in Mizoram, attack on Bihari migrant labourers in Assam, and Manipur and so on and so forth.

Migrant: Who?

What flows from the above discussion therefore is that it becomes very difficult to distinguish between the 'original' settler and the migrant in the context of Northeast India. It would therefore be naïve to allot every act of terror or militancy in the region to the presence of 'outsiders', yet, we constantly perceive 'immigration' to be a threat in the region. While borders connect regions, in the context of South Asia they also disconnect and are looked upon with hatred. Bordering districts and people are also often considered suspect for all kinds of activities that take place outside the scope of domestic law and hence as Paula Banerjee explains, concern on securitizing the borderlands in reality tends to ignore the security and welfare of the people living in those borderlands¹⁵. Violence employed by the state to govern peace in bordering districts is thus legitimized and is as natural as the borders themselves. The historical question of race and control to power and making the migrant an enemy thus leads us to 'the confusing figure of the 'immigrant', who is to be treated with violent punitive measures to securitise the indigenous¹⁶. Clashes that we have seen repeatedly unfolding in the Northeast naturally flow from the co- existence of the pre modern along with the construction of the modern. Economic development in the region then must eliminate backwardness of all forms and it must begin with more stringent border patrolling measures and by restricting immigration.

The partition of India marking the end of the colonial rule further complicated the Northeast India as a contested borderland¹⁷. Contest over resources and territory stems out from an insecurity and disorder that already prevails in the region. Scholars like Sanjib Baruah remind us of this durability of this disorder that essentially characterises the political economy of the Northeast¹⁸. Borders therefore are also sites of power, security and state sovereignty but it is an irony that bordering districts are most often the least developed, marked by a high rate of crime. For instance, the series of violence in Kokrajhar, a border district in Assam, time and again testify this. The 2012 riots, the recent ones in 2016 and in between the sporadic eruption of ethnic conflicts, often relating to migrant labourers are cases in point. Statistics indicates there is an increasing trend of out migration than an influx of people in Kokrajhar, yet the fear of the 'outsider' prevails. The human development index in Kokrajhar is extremely low and the district seriously lacks in sectors like life span, decent standard of living and education. The HDI value of the region stands at 0.354 (Rank 15 in the state), which is below the overall state average of 0.407. In terms of income, education and health, the district occupies 14th, 22nd and 9th position respectively. The district is located on the

North Bank of the river Brahmaputra and is surrounded by the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, Dhubri district in South and Bongaigaon district in the east. In the west lies the state of West Bengal. The district has been described as the 'gateway to the north eastern region of India' since it has both road and rail connectivity with the other northeastern states. It has a total area of 3, 1692.22 sq.km and a total population of 905,764, according to the Census of India, 2001. Given the strategic location of the district, it is no guess that the district might witness a steady influx of persons. It should be noted here that Kokrajhar was originally a part of the undivided Goalpara district, which is infamously branded as having a large number of 'outsiders'. Till 1956, Kokrajhar remained a small village. In 1957, a new subdivision called the Kokrajhar sub-division was carved out from the northern part of Dhubri subdivision and some parts of Goalpara subdivision. In 1989, there was further reorganization of the districts of Assam and 40 percent of Kokrajhar was included in the new district of Bongaigaon. The district now has two revenue subdivisions – Kokrajhar and Gossaigaon. It relies mostly on agriculture as the major economic activity and 27.1 percent of land was allotted for the same. According to this report, about 4500 persons have to daily commute or have migrated out to neighbouring states for employment. Although the district is hugely populated by Muslims, the report claims that Hindus have more access to governmental jobs than other communities¹⁹. Notably, the anti-migrant hostility in the region is palpable even as census figures and observers indicate that of late extent of migration has slowed down.

As per the census data on migration as has been put in the Table II, the volume of net in-migration increased in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram till 1981 and declined thereafter. In Manipur and Tripura it started declining since the earlier decade, while in Assam although migration data are not available for 1981, the net in-migration in this state experienced a downward trend between 1971 and 2001. Even the National Sample Survey (NSS) on migration conducted between July, 2007 and June, 2008 too showed similar sliding trend, See table III, below:

Table III: Net Migration (per 1000 of population) for each Northeastern State

States	Type of Estimate					
	In-Migrant	Out Migrant (to Another State)	Out Migration (To Abroad)	Net Migration	Population	Net- Migration Rate
Arunachal Pradesh	53	268	1	-216	10,739	-20
Assam	1070	2282	27	-1239	249966	-5
Manipur	15	609	3	-597	20119	-30
Meghalaya	173	330	8	-165	23118	-7
Mizoram	215	226	1	-12 8	786	-1
Nagaland	233	277	1	-45	9654	-5
Tripura	895	273	33	589	34579	17

Source: NSS Report No. 533: Migration in India: July, 2007-June, 2008

Corroborating these figures, the President of Purvottar Pradeshik Marwari Sammelan, Madhusudan Sikaria said:

Following the spurt of movements for ethnic assertion, the people from other parts of the country became wary of venturing out to the region for the purpose of permanent settlement. Even the earlier settlers started exploring better avenues outside. The economic liberalization also opened up avenues and job opportunities elsewhere in the country. This has not only halted inflow of migrants, but has triggered the phenomenon of out migration. I can tell with authority, at least about the business community that many have shifted out from the region. The situation is particularly grave in some of the hilly states.²⁰

Even a state like Tripura, where large influx of Bengali migrants in earlier decades changed the demographic pattern, witnessed a considerable decline in non-tribal population. The non-tribal population declined from its peak level of 71.56 per cent in 1981 to 69.5 per cent in 1991 and had further gone down to 68.95 per cent in 2001²¹. Tribal population in the state as per 2011 census rose to 31.75 per cent from 31.05 per cent in 2001. The percentage of Schedule Tribe population in Meghalaya too increased from 85.94 in 2001 to 86.15 per cent in 2011 as per census figures. In contrast, the percentage of Non-schedule Tribe population declined from 14.06 percent to 13.85 percent between the decades²². According to Manas Chaudhuri, former Shillong Times editor, “with the three riots (1979, ’87, ’92), the backbone of the non-tribals was broken and an exodus started. Meghalaya is the only state where in the past 40 years, the population of the minority (non-tribals) has declined by 2 percent every 10 years. When the state was formed, non-tribals constituted 20 percent of the state’s population, but today it has fallen below 10 percent”²³. Nevertheless, in popular perception, these statistics and counter narratives remain largely discursive. Policies and debates are continued to be built around the perceived threat posed by the presence of a large number of migrants, many of whom are believed to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. While there is no denying of the phenomenon of illegal-influx of migrants from across the border to Northeast, the extent of the menace is highly debatable as it is gauged on the basis of varied guess estimates made over the years.

In an official letter dated July 11, 1969, Assam’s the then Joint Secretary Home, Madan Prasad Bezbaruah informed the state’s Jamiat president late Sheikh Ahmed Ali that there were no foreigners in the state. Subsequently, on the floor of the Assembly, the then chief minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha announced the dismantling of foreigners’ tribunals set up under the Foreigners Tribunal Order 1964 as there was no foreigner in the state. Some 23 years later, another chief minister, late Hiteswar Saikia, in response to a query from AGP leader Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, told the state Assembly on April 10, 1992, that there were three million Bangladeshis illegally residing in the state. He, however, soon retracted his statement at a public meeting. In 1997 India’s then home minister Indrajit Gupta claimed the number of illegal migrants in India was 10 million. Gupta’s successor L K Advani, six years later, doubled the number claiming it to be 20 million. Minister of state for home, during UPA government, Shriprakash Jaiswal again brought down the number to 12 million in 2004. A week later, Jaiswal claimed in the floors of the Parliament that the information that he had provided about Bangladeshi infiltrators ‘is unreliable and based on hearsay’²⁴.

Again the ministry of home affairs, in an affidavit filed before the Supreme Court of India in 2012 claimed there was little possibility of ‘foreigners’ being included in Assam’s electoral rolls as it went through several revisions between 1997 and 2005. Even the last three census reports did not find any abnormal population growth in Assam to suggest any large scale influx from across the border. In fact the state’s population growth rates in 1991, 2001 and 2011 were less than the national average.

The very definition of migrant also to a large extent causes the disparity between the official statistics and popular perceptions. The Census defines a migrant as a person residing in a place other

than his/her place of birth (Place of Birth definition) or one who has changed his/ her usual place of residence to another place (change in usual place of residence or UPR definition). The NSS confines itself to the UPR definition. Both in census and NSS, a resident is defined as one who has been staying in a location for six months or more (except newly born infants). Therein lies the rub. Offsprings of earlier migrants or second or third generations of the migrants are not excluded from the definition in the region's anti-migrant discourse. This section of the migrants is accused of restructuring the population structure.

Sources of Discontentment

In a region where the term illegal immigrant is a highly emotive issue, perception often influences public opinion. Powerful organisations that spearhead movements against migrants—both legal and illegal— while debunking the census data, are upping their ante to fortify the region against any influx of migrants. They are convinced that any development initiatives without safeguarding the interest of the indigenous communities through statute would reduce them to minority in their homelands. This insecurity is illustrated in the growing clamour for Inner Line Permit' (ILP) and laws to debar “outsiders” from owning land in the northeastern states. It is however altogether a different matter that Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland (except Dimapur), where the travel-permit system conceived during the colonial regime, is already in existence, are not free from the sense of victimhood underpinning the exclusionary discourses. Moreover, experts and trade bodies feel such laws are detrimental to the economic growth of the region. Ishantor Sobhapandit Regional Director-North East Indian Chamber of Commerce, in an interview with the authors pointed out, “these restrictive policies definitely hinder the growth of trade and commerce. But then we cannot also undermine the local sentiment”²⁵. Even the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), in its report titled ‘Emerging North-East India—economically and socially inclusive development strategies’ published in November, 2015, expressed similar concerns. The report says, “While land acquisition across the country is becoming increasingly difficult and time consuming, the situation in the North-East is even more complicated as in the hilly states and some other areas in Assam, land transfer is restricted by statute to only scheduled tribes. It further observed that the states of the region need to work with the central government and industry to find a way so that industrial growth is not restricted while protecting the interest of the tribal people”²⁶. Notwithstanding such concerns, various influential civil society groups, including North East Students’ Organisation (NESO), now want such restrictions to be extended to other states of the region. Even policy makers in various northeastern states are by and large convinced that such restrictive policies are the need of the hour and at worst, a necessary evil, to protect and safeguard the indigenous communities. This policy approach is amply reflected in Meghalaya Chief Minister Mukul M. Sangma’s response to a question in an interview with the Shillong Times. He pointed out that, “First of all there is no major influx of outsiders - Indians or foreigners- into Meghalaya unlike in some other states of the region. In fact, even Indians from other parts of the country cannot come and settle in Meghalaya because of the existing Land Transfer Act which prohibits transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals. Non-tribals, and that too mostly indigenous ones, can purchase land only in very limited pockets in Shillong. Now my Government is also introducing the Tenancy Bill which will make even taking a house on rent by (undesirable) outsiders very strict”²⁷. In August last year, the Manipur Assembly too passed three contentious bills-- the Manipur Land Reforms and Land Revenue (7th Amendment) Bill, 2015, the Manipur Shops and Establishment (2nd Amendment) Bill,

2015, and the Manipur Protection of Peoples Bill, 2015, ostensibly to safeguard the interests of the indigenous people by stemming the flow of migrants into the state.

The Assam government is also updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) to determine the actual number of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh residing in the state. But, whether even such measures will quell indigenous discontent is a doubtful proposition, because the anti-migrant sentiment is largely a clash over resources and is merely the symptomatic of bigger fundamental problems. Unless those larger socio economic issues that led to government deficiencies, underdevelopment and unequal distribution of wealth, growth of neo-upper classes in the hitherto classless societies and creation of parallel power centers are addressed, anti-migrant angst in the region will continue to flare.

Against the backdrop of these complex and contested situations, the government of India under its ambitious Look East Policy (LEP), which is now rechristened as the Act East Policy (AEP), has undertaken a series of initiatives to pull out the Northeast from its economic hibernation by restoring the centrality of its historic geo-strategic location, vis-à-vis China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, other Southeast Asian nations, and mainland India. For the purpose, the government proposes to invest Rs 92,000 crore for development of roads and railways in the region. “By next decade the Northeast will be well connected both with mainland India and the neighbouring countries. Connectivity in the region is definitely getting a boost,” pointed out Biswajit Chakrabarty, Director North East Advisory Council of Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry, FICCI²⁸. Given the region’s constant fear of getting marginalised and exploited, such well-meaning initiatives too lead to a clash of interest between “locals” and “outsiders.” For instance, on December 15 last year, the Nagaland Contractors' & Suppliers' Union (NCSU) enforced a 12-hour road blockade on National Highway-29 from Dimapur to Kohima demanding that local contractors be accommodated in awarding the contract for the four-laning of Dimapur-Kohima stretch of the National Highway by breaking up the project into smaller packages.

Such development projects of infrastructure also require skilled migrant labour from outside the region, thus depriving the locals of potential job opportunities. “Skilled labourers for road and bridges projects are mainly brought from the Meerut and Mathura districts of Uttar Pradesh, Darbhanga, Kosi and Purnia divisions of Bihar, Murshidabad and Maldadistricts of West Bengal”, said Pradip Sharma, Manager (structure) of IL&FS Engineering Construction Company Limited. Pradip, who had supervised the construction of several road projects in the region said, locals were mainly engaged in non-skilled works like clearing of jungles and carrying of survey equipments. He said under the pretext of these construction companies not giving enough job opportunities to the locals, the militant groups often targeted them and extorted money²⁹. It is worth mentioning here that according to the NSS report on migrants most of the in-migrants move into the northeast for employment. Education and marriage are the other contributing factors, See table IV, below:

Table IV: Distribution (per 1000) of in-Migrants basing on primary Pull factors

States	Employment	Studies	Forced Migration	Marriage	Movement of parent/Earning Member	Others
Arunachal Pradesh	533	92	4	118	51	49
Assam	77	12	60	688	87	46
Manipur	222	241	0	36	412	21

Meghalaya	211	54	9	384	255	50
Mizoram	299	46	19	82	450	56
Nagaland	338	72	6	218	298	59
Sikkim	238	66	1	390	232	72
Tripura	83	17	190	492	129	84

Source: NSS Report No. 533: Migration in India: July, 2007-June, 2008

Another source of conflict is the destruction of ecology and displacement of people due to large development projects as has been illustrated by the protests against large hydro-power projects in some of the states of the region. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that many in the North-East, particularly the influential civil society organisations that might help in shaping public opinions, take the recent government initiatives with a pinch of salt. Echoing this general skepticism, Secretary General of the Naga Peoples Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) NeinguloKrome said, “Connectivity should not pave the way for the migrants to swamp our land. It’s fine to lay new rail networks and construct roads. The local youths should get contracts and jobs in these projects, or else it will give further rise to the existing sense of deprivation”.³⁰

NESO also warned that unless Northeast-specific laws were framed to provide constitutional safeguards to protect the interest of the people of the region, the Act East Policy would push the region into further turmoil. According to the North East Students' organisation advisor Samujjal Bhattacharyya, “We want to make it very clear to New Delhi that in the name of facilitating trade and commerce, there should not be any softening of international border. In fact we are demanding that shoot-at-sight order should be given to border guards to prevent any kind of infiltration from across the border. Further, the economic interest of the people of the region should be protected by safeguarding their rights over land, resources and jobs. There should be 100 per cent job reservation for people from the seven north-east states in Central and semi-Central government organisations in the region”³¹.

These groups and individuals have reasons to be skeptical. The colonial model of economy and governance is an indicator that investment and development of infrastructure alone cannot ensure economic prosperity and employment for the locals. Unless such initiatives are backed by judicious policies keeping in mind local requirements, they become microcosm of exploitation, oppression and impoverishment of indigenous communities, thereby causing social unrest. The protectionist approach, as was adopted towards most of the hill areas during the British rule, too, proved to be counterproductive. Unfortunately, even in the post-Independence period the woes of the northeastern region remained somewhat similar to that of its colonial past. The policy frameworks charted for the region have been more or less an extension of the colonial model of concentrating economic activities in select pockets around which communication and transportation networks have been developed leaving vast areas inaccessible and backward. As was in the colonial time, exploration of natural resources of the region failed to benefit its people at large. Even the retention of exclusionary policies such as the Inner Line Permit system in certain hill areas too failed to instill a sense of security among the indigenous tribals.

The biggest failure of the development initiatives in the Northeast so far has been the inability to pass on the benefits to the main stakeholders - indigenous people of the region. For instance, scores of hydel power projects are being lined up in Arunachal Pradesh but there is not one single investor from North East in those projects. Most of the hydel power experts and technocrats too are from other parts of India.

Assam contributes around 50 per cent of the total tea production in India. It also holds the distinction of being India's oldest oil-producing state. Assam has also substantial reserves of coal and forest products. Yet such high value resources could not economically benefit the province and the region. Why is it so? Let us take the example of the tea sector. The local population has very little stake in the gardens, mostly owned, managed and nurtured by the 'outsiders' and are developed as 'virtual islands' without proper linkages with adjoining villages. Besides, majority of the big tea gardens in the state are owned by companies headquartered in Kolkata. Since they sell a large portion of their produce in the Tea Auction Centre in Kolkata, the state loses out on the vital Sales Tax revenue. Even benefit of the oil and coal sectors to the state's economy has been negligible. Whatever little it gains in terms of employment and royalty is unevenly distributed among the socio-economic groups that too restricted to certain areas only.

Obviously other neighbouring northeastern states have not at all benefited from the hitherto exploration of Assam's vast natural wealth due to lack of intra-regional and intra-state integration. These neighbouring states' own resources, on the other hand, remained largely untapped. Strangely, even though attempts are being made to improve the region's connectivity with the mainland India, intra-state and inter-state connectivity in the region is still in the nascent state of development. So far attempts are only made to connect various state capitals. The state highways and district roads, which are extremely important for facilitating inter-state movement of people and goods, are in a state of neglect in most of the states in the region. Trade and commerce that have developed basing on the few industries in Assam are also mostly controlled by migrant population, mainly from Rajasthan, and naturally they constitute the new capitalist class that emerged in the region after the departure of the colonial masters.

Due to lack of skilled manpower, the local populace also loses out to migrants in employment, as has been again pointed out by Pradip Sharma, interview with whom we have mentioned earlier in this paper, which, in rebound, further deepens the outsider-local divide. This divide - delineated in militancy and other forms of violence and ethnic clashes-- along with governance deficiency again act as a deterrent for the growth of business. Not surprisingly, northeastern states are placed at the bottom of World Bank's 'ease of doing business' index³². Hence, focus of any new development paradigm should not be restricted only to establishing trade linkages between the region and the adjoining global markets. After all, the region's existing linkages with the vast Indian market did not yield desired economic prosperity or social harmony. Intra-regional linkages should be first strengthened and then it should be supplemented by production and skill development. "The region lacks home grown entrepreneurs. The locals should not only be the job seekers. They should be job providers," Biswajit Chakrabarty of FICCI stated in a personal interview while highlighting the challenges before the AEP³³. For this to happen, it is imperative to develop the region into a centre of 'Make in India' and 'Skill India' initiatives so that the main stakeholders—the people of the region—remain the driving force of its economy without having to depend on migrant community for labour or capital. Or else migrants will continue to haunt the collective psyche and the ethnic cauldron will keep boiling.

Out Migration: Trends

The recent trend of more and more people from North-East moving out to other parts of the country for jobs and education has further complicated the 'outsider-local' discord. This was amply demonstrated when conflagration in the Bodoland Territorial Administrated Districts (BTAD) of Assam in 2012 had found violent reverberations in Mumbai, Pune, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and other

Indian cities triggering exodus of people from North-East. Earlier in 2003, trains and passengers from the northeastern region, mostly from Assam, came under attack in Bihar following allegations that Bihari candidates were prevented from attending the examinations for railway jobs in Assam. The tests were to fill up 2,750 Grade D posts. Of the total 6.2 lakh applicants, 94,533 were from Bihar. Local people in Assam feared that Biharis would capture most of the posts and this led to violence against the Hindi speaking people. Ethnic and communal strife in the region had never before found its echo outside the region.

As per the 2001 census data on migration, four Northeastern states viz Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland recorded more out-migration than in migration during the period between 1991 and 2001. (See Table III).

Table V: Figures of Out Migration, 1991 to 2001

State	In-Migrants from Other States	In-Migrants from Other Countries	Out Migrants Migration Rate (per 100)
Arunachal Pradesh	71789	2,931	12,507 7.2
Assam	1,21,803	5,053	281,510 0.7
Manipur	4,529	182	30,867 1.4
Meghalaya	33,710	1,154	20,434 0.8
Mizoram	22,599	8,436	31,739 0.1
Nagaland	33,594	1,752	51,857 1.4
Tripura	40,262	11,246	23, 538 1.0

Source: Table D2, Census of India 2001

http://censusindia.gov.in/Data_Products/Data_Highlights/Data_Highlights_link/data_highlights_D1D2D3.pdf

As against out-migration of 281510 people, in-migration in Assam from other states of India during the period was 121,803 and it was 5053 from other countries. In case of Manipur out-migration was 30,867 as against total in-migration of 4711. During the period 31,739 people out-migrated from Mizoram while the number of total in-migrants was 31035. In Nagaland, the number of out-migrants was 51,857 while number of total in-migrants were 35346. Over 414,850 people from Northeast India migrated to mega cities of the country during 2005 and 2010. It is 12 times growth as only 34,000 people had migrated during 2000-05. This fact was revealed in a research study conducted by North East Support Centre & Helpline, a New Delhi-based support centre for migrants from Northeast India.

This research was carried out during January and February 2011 under the title, “North East Migration and Challenges in National Capital Cities. According to the study, the annual average increase in migration from North East is 13.62%. With 200,000 Northeast migrants in New Delhi alone, that is 48.21% of the total Northeast migrants, the National Capital has emerged as one of the most preferred destinations for migrants from this region. The study also shows that only 5% of migrants return to North East India after completing their studies or work. According to the study, 66.35% of North East migrants migrate for higher studies, out of which, 78.15% for graduate studies, 11.48% for Engineering/managerial, 6.80% for Research/Ph.D. and 3.57% for medical studies while 35% of migrants migrate for employment opportunities in other cities of India with 15% for Government jobs and 85% for un-organized private sectors. Over, 275,000 students from North East India have migrated to other cities of India. According to the study the main push factor for migration of North East people is lack of educational infrastructure and limited choice of

education and unemployment opportunities in the region due to socio-political unrest and communal conflicts³⁴

According to another estimate, a staggering 14 million people are expected to move out of the northeast between 2011 and 2021 in search of jobs elsewhere in the country. According to a study conducted by the National Skill Development Council (NSDC) on development and employment generation potential of northeastern states, the region will have only 2.6 million more jobs between 2011 and 2021 and half of this demand will be in Assam alone, which is about 1,234,357 jobs. As opposed to the low demand, there will be a supply of 17 million people in 2011-2022, an excess of 14 million job seekers. NSDC managing director and chief executive officer Dilip Chenoy while addressing a conclave on skill development in the northeast in Guwahati in 2012 said these 14 million people would potentially be available for migration outside of the region³⁵. This trend and patterns of outmigration again raise serious questions regarding the ability of the development agenda that have been envisaged for the region under the AEP in utilizing the manpower of the region. It also raises concern about future conflict.

Significantly, as in case of the in-migrants, the NSS report reveals that out-migration too is taking place from the region mostly for employment. (See table VI). Hospitality, wellbeing, security, construction, plantation and BPO are some of the sectors that draw workforce from Northeast, says Biswajit Chakrabarty of FICCI. In the construction and plantation sectors, the migrants from North-East are mostly Bengali speaking Muslims from Assam. This group is again branded as Bangladeshis in their workplace. In July this year Bajrang Dal activists attacked a group of workers from Assam at Aldur in Chikkamagaluru district of Karnataka thinking that they were illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The Labourers went there to work at the coffee plantations.

Section II: Look East and the Northeast: the (dis)Continuities

Let us now examine certain key aspects of the Look East Policy that holds the key to Northeast India's development as a region. Although liberalization of the Indian economy was flagged off in the 90s, Northeast India was by and large ignored. The Look East Policy was rolled off in 1991. An official mention of the term was made in the Annual Report of the MEA in 1996 (pg- 32). The decade of the nineties had seen India suffering from a series of economic challenges. In order to recover from which, Narasima Rao, the then PM had initiated several economic reforms, mostly keeping in mind the integration with global economy, focusing on the burgeoning economy of the Asean countries. India's past initiatives towards building 'one Asia' during the 1940 and 50s had not yielded desirable results, thanks to the Cold War. Cultural integration based on shared ethnic ties and history had also failed. India thus now tried to integrate the Northeast with Southeast Asia economically and in areas of common interest like defence, security and so on, notwithstanding the earlier focus on cultural and racial ties. Enumerating this point, Yashwant Sinha, the then External Affairs Minister, in a speech in 2003 had said, "in the past, India's engagement with much of Asia, including Southeast and East Asia, was built on an idealistic conception of Asian brotherhood, based on shared experiences of colonialism and of cultural ties. The rhythm of the region today is determined, however, as much by trade, investment and production as by history and culture. That is what motivates our decade-old Look East policy. Already, this region accounts for 45 per cent of our external trade³⁶."

We can then say that through this strategy two things could be made possible. One, boosting India's trade and countering China's influence in the Southeast and two, bail out the Northeast from its lack of development. It was in all probability assumed that growth and development in the region

would in natural course facilitate in lowering ethnic clashes and ensuring peace. This is not to be happened so fast however. Innumerable media reports testify this. One should however acknowledge the increase in trade with India's neighbouring countries bordering the Northeast like Myanmar and Bangladesh. Border trade has also increased substantially. But how far this increment has contributed to 'develop' the Northeast remains a debatable question. Mostly trade with the Southeast has been through sea ports as Northeast India geographically is a landlocked region. Road and Rail expansions are being undertaken massively, but there also extreme caution has been taken in the decision of selecting the routes that might be opened up to connect the regions. Some of the trade routes like the one connecting Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet, the Stillwell road etc are still closed. The point being made here is that, what are then the determinants that might indicate the success of the Look East Policy in the Northeast. Ethnic clashes continue in pockets, ruckus over maintaining the Inner Line Permit as seen in Manipur and reservation against 'outsiders' or 'foreigners' continue to cloud over the region. It is also a pertinent question as to what a policy could dramatically mean or change in prospering a region that has remained secluded for almost two hundred years.

That mitigating border 'problems' with neighbouring states is a prerequisite for India's Look East Policy to succeed, is clear from another report of 2007 when a public meeting held in Myanmar, organized by the Mizoram Committee for Democracy in Burma and Campaign for Democratic Movement in Burma, appealed the Indian government to snap all ties with Myanmar in order to restore peace and democracy there. The meeting also called for cooperation between India and the UN in combating militancy from Myanmar in India's northeast. The participants in the meeting also urged the state government to take up the issue of growing violence of ethnic Mizos in Myanmar and to also address the issue of a steady rise in influx of refugees "flooding" Mizoram due to persecution by the military junta". Dr. Tint Swe, a member of the parliament of Myanmar and a leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung Sung Suu Kyi highlighted that only through a restoration of peace and democracy in Myanmar, an important neighbouring country of India, can the Look East Policy of India succeed. The participants of the meeting were obviously hinting towards the rise of Rohingya influx in India through Mizoram, without naming them³⁷. It is an irony that even after an electoral change for restoring democracy in Myanmar, the issue of the Rohingyas as the most persecuted stateless community in the world still remains. It is still unaddressed and no direction towards a solution has come up. The new government, following its predecessor, has also expressed its reservations on using the nomenclature 'Rohingya', against which the NLD had called for a change worldwide. Myanmar is important for India's Look East Policy since it connects the Southeast to India's Northeast. Hence in the 3rd phase of the policy, termed by Narendra Modi as the 'Act East Policy' in 2014, he invited Asian interlocutors in Myanmar, Thailand and Fiji to invest in India "and promised the region's political leaders that his government is ready to wrap up pending free-trade agreements with Asian and Australia"³⁸. 2008 was a defining year for Northeast India since by then India had entered into its second phase of Look East Policy, stressing on, apart from economic relations, a larger integration in defence and security. Establishing air and land links to East and Southeast Asia, building transport corridors and trilateral highway project involving Myanmar and Thailand and the proposed rail link between New Delhi and Hanoi were the main areas of cooperation aimed by India³⁹. The Bali Summit of the ASEAN countries in 2003, participated by then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee saw the signing of two important agreements; to connect the regions economically and countering terrorism. Vajpayee also emphasized on building a well built network of roads connecting India to the ASEAN countries to facilitate more connectivity. This business summit was important to lay out India's desire to connect to the Southeast. Vajpayee stated, "India is conscious of the new ASEAN members. We are offering unilateral tariff concessions on

items of export interest to Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam [lesser developed and newer entrants to ASEAN]. We are also seeking to incorporate an early harvest scheme to provide the incentive for a long-term engagement. If we proceed along this course, we can target a trade turnover of US\$30 billion by 2007 and a free trade area within 10 years⁴⁰." While connectivity with India was talked about, there was no separate mention of the Northeast India as a distinct region. The importance of incorporating the Northeast was realized gradually. We will now focus on a few media reports during this phase to highlight two trajectories of reporting.

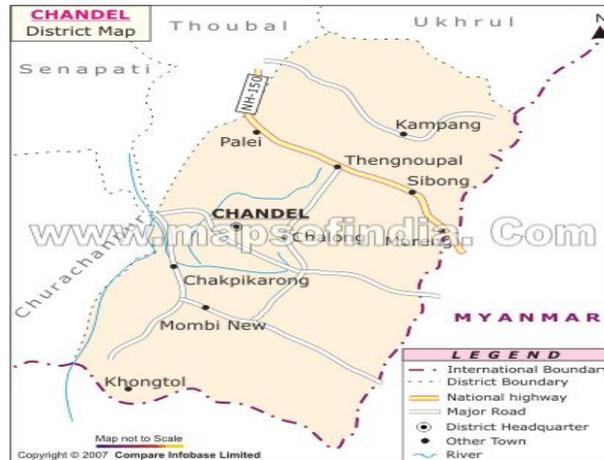
Many media reports during this time indicated how the Look East Policy cannot succeed by surpassing the Northeast. In a bid to promote trade and tourism, the Ministry for Development of Northeast Indian Region (Doner) set up in 2001, in association with the Ministry of Tourism even attempted to convey that not all states in the region suffer from a lack of law and order. In order to ensure socio cultural exchange between the Northeast India and Southeast Asia, it was decided by the ministry that genealogical linkages between the Thai and Ahom communities of Assam would be included in the tourism packages to attract Thai visitors to the region⁴¹. From some media reports it seemed as if the entire region was undergoing massive transformation. A conference held in Guwahati, IIT, organized by the Asian Borderlands Research Network urged the need to go beyond the conventional approach of branding Northeast solely as a strife torn region. In the conference, scholars like Sanjib Baruah also called for a translational approach of studying the problems of Northeast and that the region should be "viewed in conjunction with its neighbouring countries⁴²." Amidst reports of such positive steps being taken to build the economy of the region, as mentioned above, there still continued reports of insurgency, militancy and conflict even now. Border concerns with neighbouring countries, especially China and Bangladesh, continue to plague policymakers. Although the then defence minister A.K. Anthony, in 2008, in a statement made it clear that India's Look East Policy is not against China, border issues with China still remains a concern for Indian leaders. Anthony had highlighted that trade between India and Asian has remarkably grown over the years and that this is not aimed at countering China's influence over the region, rather India needs a healthy relationship with China. He also stressed how India is realizing by the day the growing importance of the South East Asia and hence wants to build up a strong regional cooperation with the region while also balancing and maintaining cordial relation with China⁴³. November 29, 2010 saw India and China agreeing to solve border disputes. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman expressed their will to talk out border disputes with India through peaceful means⁴⁴. Government is also ever ready to spend on securitizing the borders more to check infiltration and insurgency in order to restore peace. It is difficult to assume what precedes the other- peace facilitates development or stricter border security measures lead to peace and security for the people. The active peace loving government thus depends heavily on arms and ammunition to govern peace. For instance, a 53 member Special Weapons and Tactics (Swat) team was deployed in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya against 'militants'. Garo Hills comprises of three districts of Meghalaya and the region shares its border with Assam and Bangladesh⁴⁵.

With regard to Bangladesh, Indian policy has been adhoc. The porosity of state boundaries has seen an intense number of border crossings, both formal and informal, between India-Bangladesh and their borders with Myanmar. On one hand increasing trade and cooperation has been the buzzword for both the countries; on the other hand, fragile borders and mobility across them have always posed a threat to Indian policymakers. Reports of undocumented migration and pages of scholarly writings on them bring out the insecurity of a perpetually tensed nation state. Since the partition of India and then the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 had seen thousands crossing the almost invisible borders for survival, work or medical reasons. Thus allegations and counter blames

in proving the other wrong on the guesstimates of the migrant has also been a matter of discussion alongside the decision to integrate economically. Bangladesh government has repeatedly assured Indian government of a strict vigil of its subjects, that the spaces traversed are legal. Border concerns and violence along the Northeast Bangladesh borders and West Bangladesh borders remain. Among cores of media reports let us highlight few that validate this point. One such report in 2008, talks about continuous social disturbances in Assam which had resulted in a series of killings of Bihari Muslim migrants working in brick kilns. The report mentions the recent killing of 28 “Hindi speaking” people in the Karbi Anglong of Assam. The other concern that remains is the “continuous influx of illegal migrants from Bangladesh”. Incidents of violence were also high with Manipur itself recording 30 percent of the killings in the entire Northeast. 2008 also recorded 358 incidents of violence including 110 murders in Manipur as compared to the previous years. Close to the heels was Nagaland, recording killing of 59 persons. The report further states that the possible hideouts of militants causing these incidents of violence are neighbouring countries, Bangladesh and Myanmar⁴⁶. In a joint meeting between the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and Border Security Force (BSF) held in Shillong in 2008 March, BDR could not contradict the claim of the BSF regarding illegal entry of Bangladesh nationals to India through the Northeast borders, creation of fake Indian currency in Bangladesh, trans border crimes and presence of Indian militant groups in Bangladesh. The then BSF Inspector P.K. Mishra of Assam, Meghalaya, Cachar and Manipur Frontier had also pointed this out, to quote him, “consistent influx of illegal Bangladeshis to India even after BDR’s assurance to check it”. Other issues like cattle smuggling, illegal border trade of contraband items, and obstruction to the development of border areas in India were also addressed in the meeting. Although the meeting ended on a cordial note, the BSF inspector expressed disappointment on the silence of BDR regarding a number of conflicting issues raised in the meeting⁴⁷. In another report in the same month and year we found the Assam chief minister expressing concern at the Assembly house over the presence of militant groups in the state. This news is important since it was the first time that the government formally acknowledged the subject in the assembly. The government also pointed towards stricter border vigilance with help from the State Police. A huge number of arms carried by militant groups from Bangladesh to India, illegally, had been also seized by the Assam police and army in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, Cachar, Karimganj and other parts of the State. The State police reportedly was working in cooperation with the BSF to increase control on the Indo Bangladesh check points and control illegal immigration. The government also promised to initiate a proposal that will raise the number of border outposts and police stations in the border areas⁴⁸. The focus of the discussion was again security centric, security supposedly of the insiders as opposed to the ‘alien’ bodies. Question is whether a constant increase in border patrolling measures have resulted into checking or controlling or stopping flows that are termed by the states as “illegal”. Security was also increased to ‘protect’ hindi speaking Bihari muslims who were under constant attack during this time in the state, as mentioned in a previous section of this paper. We can find uncountable local media reports on the violence rendered against Bihari muslim migrants who constituted a large section of construction labour in Assam.

Border Trade – This study on migration would remain incomplete without a brief note on the nature of Border trade in the region. Of all other border trading zones, Moreh in Chandel District of South Manipur is a very important border trading point between India and Myanmar. For India, Myanmar is a crucial country as it links India’s Northeast with the other Southeast Asian Countries. The Indo-Myanmar Border Trade Agreement was signed on January 21, 1994. Most trade between Indo-Myanmar takes place through the Moreh-Tamu sector. After an initial rise in formal border

trade between India and Myanmar, there has been a sharp decline, according to a report by Gorky Chakraborty⁴⁹.



Source: <http://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/manipur/districts/chandel.htm>

Quite a few studies on Morey have documented the presence of illicit trade alongside the formal trade. Presence of contraband trade, smuggled goods and a strong nexus between traders and locals have been covered by many scholars writing on the subject. There is stiff competition among local tribes – Kuki, Naga, Meitiei and Tamils- regarding dominance on trade. As a result violent clashes took place throughout the 90s, resulting in a change of demography in the region. However, people living in this borderland have found ways to negotiate with the borders through juggling multiple identities. Elaborating this argument, Chitra Ahanthem enumerates on how women in the region have found out ways to deal with the parallel economy and life that a border town offers. From playing the role of community leaders, traders, family heads to sex workers, women in Morey epitomizes the reality that one endures by living with the borders. Far from Morey being an economic hub that might facilitate trade between India and Myanmar, Morey is known for a trading point of banned drugs and arms. Poverty coupled with a low human development index also characterises Morey⁵⁰.

By border trade we mean trade that is concentrated solely in the borderland, which might or might not connect the hearts of cities or states. There is an argument that too much border trade might impede trade in the North East instead of boosting it, as the entire region can't prosper if one or more of its border zones act merely as transits⁵¹. We have already mentioned before, Myanmar is an important country for India so far its Look East drive is concerned. This was reemphasized in an interactive session organized by the Bharat Chamber of Commerce on 'Indo-Myanmar Trade: Challenges and opportunities'. Emphasis was put on improvement of trade between the two countries and reduction of illegal trading at the Indo-Myanmar Border. Representatives of both the countries discussed the possible avenues of cooperation and opportunities between India and Myanmar. Tourism and flight frequency between the two countries were also the focal points of the meeting. The India-Myanmar Joint Consultative Commission to promote bilateral trade was formed in 2015 and it is expected that trade between the two countries will grow from USD 3 million in 2015 to USD 10 million by 2020. Mr. Rakesh Shah, the president of the chamber expressed hope in favour of a , to quote him, 'a sea change in the opportunities between India and Myanmar' after completion

of the Kaladan Multimodal Transport project and the Trilateral Highway project. The Kaladan Multimodal project aims at connecting Kolkata with other East Indian ports with Sittwe on the Arakan coast in Myanmar. The Trilateral Highway on the other hand aims at linking Moreh to Mae Sot in Thailand through Myanmar⁵². An initiative in 2011 was taken to open a second border hat in Mizoram after one in Meghalaya in order to increase trade between India and Myanmar. Anand Sharma, former union cabinet minister of Commerce, Industry and Textiles in the fourth meeting of Joint Trade Commission stated that the border trade point between Morey and Tamu is a crucial trading zone between the two countries and he contended that Zowkhatar (Mizoram) will also turn out to be a crucial trading zone. The meeting which also had U Win Myint, the then Union Minister of Commerce in Myanmar, stressed on the need to have Duty Free Tariff Preference Scheme and Asean FTA Channels to diversify trade. Sharma also expressed interest in participating in the gas sector of Myanmar and having a LCS at India-Myanmar border at Mizoram so that India emerge to be Myanmar's leading trade partner⁵³.

The move to increase and revive border hats along the Indo-Myanmar border is also a leap forward in improving trade and communication between the two. For People residing along the border this has come as positive news since it can “throw up huge opportunities for trans-border commerce” and improving the border economy. There was expectation among the people of a more people to people contact that will also help in reducing violence and crimes along the borders. The State government was also urged to reopen the border hats along the Sonarhat- Lyngkhat (Sylhet-East Khasi Hills Border) in favour of the people residing in the borders⁵⁴.

As mentioned above, several reports indicate the existence of strong informal border trade between India- Bangladesh and India-Myanmar⁵⁵. However as Scholars like Meghna Guhathakurata⁵⁶ points out that Illicit border trade is a much discussed notion but more than the trade itself what invokes concern is the network of traffickers and smugglers that develop as an outcome of this trade. Cattle smuggling, Phensydyl and contraband items like Jute are regularly traded along the Indo-Bangladesh borders. In order to combat smuggling and border killings in the Indo-Bangladesh borders, BSF and BGB representatives in a seminar on Bangladesh-India relations in Dhaka in 2011 argued that legalizing cattle trade between the two countries might solve this problem and could also boost revenue between the two countries. It was also noted that most border killings take place to arrest cattle smuggling, formalizing which will also help both the countries to increase revenue⁵⁷.

We are by now also aware of the fate of the Rohingyas whose first attempt to cross the Bay of Bengal to reach shores of Thailand, Malaysia and Australia resulted into a boom of trafficking industry connecting India, Bangladesh, Myanmar Thailand, Malaysia and Australia. Demand for cheap labour in the rubber plantation of Malaysia and Thai Fishing Industry were some of the reasons why human trafficking of the Rohingyas started in the first place. An absence of formal exchange of labour, inspite of its presence in a theoretical form had also resulted into presence of smugglers and traffickers in these border zones. In the context of India's North-East, the border zones, like Moreh in Manipur, Champhai in Mizoram and Dawki in Meghalaya, have been major routes for smuggling of arms and narcotics. Meghalaya Chief Minister Mukul Sangma in a meeting of the chief ministers of northeastern states with the union home minister held in Guwahati on July 11, 2015 highlighted how the state's international border with Bangladesh was used by various militant groups to cross over to their safe havens in Bangladesh and smuggle the sophisticated arms.

Situation is no different in other border areas in the region. “There are at least 20 insurgent groups active in Imphal-Moreh stretch of the National Highway 2. They frequently extort money from the traders,” pointed out Ishantor Sobhapandit of ICC. Faced with such odds, experts opine that the linking up of the economies of the northeast and southeast Asia necessitates adequate

preparation at the level of the state police forces, not just to ensure that the highways of development remains free from the influence of the insurgents, but also to ensure that common folk, and not the militants gain from the economic linkages.

We shall now glance briefly at few statistics of border trade between India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Exact figures of border trade in the Northeast are difficult to attain due to inaccessibility of the data. If we look at the data available in the website of DONOR, we find record till 2010-11, as per which, border trade of India with Myanmar was on average less than US\$ 1 million per year. A year wise breakup between 2006- 11 is given below:

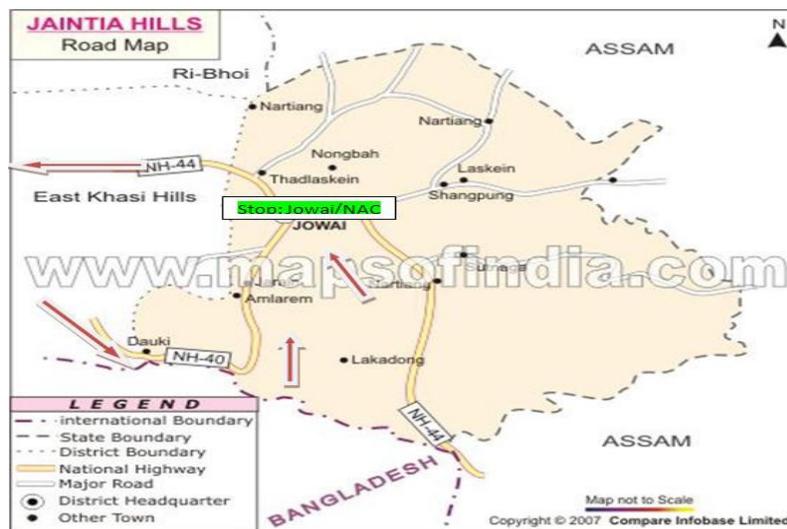
Table VII: Data on India Myanmar Border Trade

Year	Export	Import	Total
2006-07	6.13	2.69	8.80
2007-08	4.94	1.35	6.29
2008-09	1.61	0.76	2.37
2009-10	24.5	8.32	32.82
2010-11	0.26	3.80	4.16

Source: Border Trade, Ministry of Development of Northeast Region, Government of India, <http://mdoner.gov.in/content/border-trade#b>

A Report in 2012 mentions the presence of Land Customs Stations (LCS) which is important in orchestrating trade. All official trade between states is channelized through these stations. There are 40 LCS in the region connecting Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar. Around 18 are with Bangladesh. The report further states that Northeast India's trade with neighbouring countries mainly centers on exporting primary products like boulder stone, limestone, fruits, tea, coal etc. 94% of the export consists of tea and coal. Major commodities of export have more or less remained the same over the years and the percentage of share has increased substantially. From Rs 39590, export has increased to 437.81 in the period between 1999-2000 to 2005-06. The share of tea in export however has reduced significantly. Export of coal is the most important item between India and Bangladesh⁵⁸. Import on the other hand mainly consists of manufactured food items and processed food like fish, yellow peas, cement, dry ginger etc. With Bangladesh, export mainly consists of coal, limestone, stone chips, motor parts etc. For trading zones between India and Bangladesh, Shillong division has the maximum share. Share has decreased in divisions like Karimganj, Guwahati and Dhubri (Chakraborty, pg 25). Import from Bangladesh takes place through the Agartala division mainly. Shillong, Karimganj and Dhubri have registered an increase of processed items like Hilsa and dry fish. Main items of Informal trade between India and Bangladesh comprises of Export- Bidi, sugar, Motor Parts, Betel Leaves, and Nuts, Ganja, Phensedyl, Timber, Bolder stones, Cotton sarees, Cattle and so on. Imports constitute Cosmetics, Dry Fish, Gold, Currency, Audio Cassettes, readymade garments, synthetic fabrics, soap, fish and so on.⁵⁹

The authors' recent field visit to Dawki, shows that the centre of border-trade suffers from tremendous 'infrastructure deficit' and the trade between Meghalaya and Bangladesh is not diversified.



Source: Maps of India

The large stretch of the border is unfenced and the boundary is largely vague—either defined by a small stream, or a river or an imaginary line between the two posts. This allows cross border movements of villagers living on either side of the border, including illegal exchanges. There are also no floodlights and an electronic barrier at the checkpoint through which, on an average 500 trucks and other small cargo-carrying vehicles crisscross every day. Agricultural commodities, processed foods, minerals and garments are mainly imported from Bangladesh through this LCS while export to Bangladesh is dominated by substances like limestone, boulders and agro-horticultural products like ginger and citrus fruits. Harmonising and simplifying the customs procedures, information sharing, customs modernisation, establishing transparent transit rules, and improving logistics in general are some of the areas that need considerable improvement.

Traders and villagers from either side, regularly, cross the border legally and illegally. A local guide Phulmunsan (name changed on request) offered to take the authors to villages on the Bangladesh's side of the border for a fee of Rs 200 per person. "There are several unmanned points along the border through which we regularly go on the other side to visit our relatives and friends. They also come to meet us during festivals and social functions," he said, making mockery of the border. A leisurely walk along the market, where Bangladeshi goodies particularly bakery products are in great demand bears out exactly what our guide had said. Many vendors, especially fisherwomen could be spotted selling their produce or catches making no effort to hide their Bangladeshi nationality. On being asked, a BSF jawan manning the check point said it was a "soft border." Even cross-border marriages are very common in these villages on the fringes.

Conclusion

An improved infrastructure and trade linkages, thus, will not be sufficient to address the myriads of problems confronting the region until and unless such measures are widely complemented by appropriate policies and regulations, and participation of vibrant private sector run by home-grown entrepreneurs. It will also be naïve to assume that the forces of development alone can resolve

insurgencies and problems of identity conflicts in the region as most of the groups that spearhead such movements mostly thrive by extorting money from traders and businessmen and by siphoning off government funds. The growth of trade and commerce may give further rise to this criminal enterprise of extorting money. Mukul Sangma in his address at the meeting of the Union home minister with the chief ministers of the region pointed out how HNLC is concentrating its activities in the bordering areas of the state where “money from coal mining is available.” Therefore, at least at the nascent stage, the development activities will need to be sustained and protected by adequate security particularly in states like Nagaland and Manipur where extortion in the guise of taxes and donations has spawned a parallel economy.

Emergence of local entrepreneurs to a large extent can tackle the menace of extortion as they are likely to be less susceptible to such demand. This will also help lessen the sense of victimhood and angst against migrants and in turn can address the problem of insurgency and identity conflict. For this, local entrepreneurs need to be assisted with financial and administrative support so that trade and business opportunities created by the AEP can be utilised for the economic growth of the local people. Further, ample job opportunities should be created to dissuade the local youths from taking up arms and resorting to violence.

Haphazard and reckless extraction of natural resources will not only lead to environmental degradation, but can also be the source of future conflict. Hence, in order to benefit from the cross border trade, industries need to be developed in the North East so that goods produced in the region can be exported to the neighbouring countries. Special focus should be given to processing and other small scale industries to avoid acquisition of vast land. Region’s artisans and handicraft industry needs to be promoted to empower rural communities. Once employment is generated, it will naturally attract more people in the region but the general apprehension against foreigners and sporadic clashes might impede the flow of infrastructural development. The modern always consists within it the non modern and thus we find the thread of continuation amidst a neo mode of governance. Subir Bhaumik shows in his book the Agartala Doctrine the model of Tripura, that is, how well Tripura has been able to strike the much needed balance. It has pursued the policy of having a friendly Bangladesh in order to face challenges in terms of illegal migration, border challenges and developing the state as per the Look East Policy⁶⁰. What awaits to be seen is whether the rest of Northeast, most importantly the states of Assam and Manipur, which still now face problems of insurgency can follow the Tripura model and govern subjects effectively to ensure not only peace but justice in the region.

**Maps used in this paper have not been drawn to scale*

Notes

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