

***Social and Political Mapping of Popular Movements,
Logistical Vision and Infrastructure of India***

Report and Book Release Event

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**Brief Comments on
*A Social Mapping of Infrastructure, Logistics and India's Look East Policy***

Anita Sengupta, Director, Calcutta Research Group, welcomed all guests with brief comments on the course that the three-year project titled '*A Social Mapping of Infrastructure, Logistics and India's Look East Policy*' had embarked upon together with a number of collaborative workshops, consultative meetings, an international conference and public lectures by eminent journalists, civil rights activists, foreign policy analysts and professors namely Kanak Mani Dixit, C. Raja Mohan, Dr. Sanjay Barbora, Professor S. Akbar Zaidi and Professor Nimmi Kurian among others. Sengupta while addressing all researchers involved in the project highlighted in short the major theme of the project with the North-East sought as a seamless paradigm of connectivity.

Paula Banerjee stated that in the wider scope of studies and research undertaken through the RLS-CRG collaboration, the multitude of dimensions of development in the North-East became evident. She made a special mention of the field interviews conducted by Sucharita Sengupta that involved ethnographic research and helped identify the nuances of infrastructural changes especially in the context of Tripura and Nagaland – affecting the wielding of power in the region which also had gender implications. The site of women pitted against traditional systems of governance brewing into conflicts was newly emerging and made the researchers ponder on the questions of what could benefit the societies.

Sucharita Sengupta spoke about her paper co-authored with Samir K. Purkayastha titled '*Interrogating Migration: Borders, Mobility and India's Northeast*', reflecting on the diversity of culture in North-East India. The paper also looks into the complexities of border porosity, migration, population laws, control on resources, and deregulation of borders leading to trade. Sucharita Sengupta mentioned that the Look East Policy (now Act East) while presenting provisions of space, monitors and regulates population flows. The implications of an upsurge in framing of national and population policies was what interested the researchers in this case. The paper argues that linkages alone cannot look into the problems of border areas that suffer from infrastructural deficit. Finding solutions through friendly relations with neighbouring states needs to be considered as part of development.

Snehashish Mitra mentioned both his papers '*Bridge of Spaces: East by Rear East, Ah! The Northeast*' with Ranabir Samaddar and '*Frontier Towns in the Spatial Dynamics of Trade, Capital and Conflict: From Look East to Act East*' with Soma Ghoshal stressing that both papers chronicled development on its way in the North-Eastern states along with the role of border trade in supporting linkage through infrastructural development. Mitra in his talk underlined that the grouping of villages by the Army against Mizo uprisings may be considered as the second phase of urbanisation in the region. How the border town of Champai had transformed over time with focus on issues of citizenship of Mizo-Chins, eviction of people in Guwahati on the pretext of environmental problems along with the wave of connectivity brought in by e-commerce platforms such as Amazon and Flipkart were some of the themes that this discussion touched upon.

Soma Ghoshal continued the discussion on the paper '*Frontier Towns in the Spatial Dynamics of Trade, Capital and Conflict: From Look East to Act East*' by mentioning that the border towns of Moreh and Tamu were the focal point of the research. A part of the project focused on the complexities of connectivity in frontier towns that have now become well-connected and permeable, although the changes are unwelcome by local ethnic groups. Ghoshal also provided a description of the reluctance of local people of Moreh in accepting new projects due to their apprehension about their own position and say in the development projects, in terms of whether they would become integral part of enterprises or remain mere onlookers.

Subir Bhaumik brought to the forefront, the position that Bangladesh should hold, in the Look East Policy as it evolves, as important for the North-East. He referred to his research questioning why the North-East is considered at all in the first place when seaways serve as easier routes of connectivity through Vizag and Chennai onward to Singapore and Taiwan. Bhaumik argued that before the North-East is looked into from mainland India, one should try and understand the significance of the narrow Siliguri-corridor from the point of view of planners and strategists. He ended by mentioning that in order to understand the policy of Look East through North-East, it is necessary to learn of the integral position and geopolitical base of Bangladesh.

Priya Singh in her presentation stated that the paper '*Cartographies of Connectivity in Asia and the Indian Response*' seeks to locate the position of Asian countries in trans-national infrastructural projects. She went on to describe the emphasis that is laid on historical backdrop of linkages. Keeping in mind the importance of the Belt and Road Initiative in the modern connectivity paradigm, there is an emphasis on the same, and India's role in controlling strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean emerged as a subject of study. The paper attempted to map the entire spectrum of connectivity in Asia.

Comments on the Project

Sanjay Chaturvedi began by commenting on the project evolving critically over the years and asserting that CRG's study has been critical for policies because of its ethnographic significance. He stressed on the role of social empathy and social narratives holding the key to the success of mega projects and pointed to the significance of the concept of the 'social', and faith in scientific and market forces often eclipsing the 'social'. Chaturvedi questioned whether China through One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative had been fanning insecurity masked as security. He summarised the key takeaways from the study through the following points:

- Logistics and connectivity are not the same thing – putting a road/bridge/port does not ensure connectivity. There emerges the three Ds – Disconnection, Dislocation and Displacement. The worlds of those connected and disconnected lie side-by-side, with certain aspects of projects not receiving enough attention.
- What happens to people beyond logistics is a question that is largely driven by geography or mental maps sometimes termed as margins.
- Mediums of connectivity such as rails, roads, bridges run through land, towns and multiple cultures. Thus, interfaces, inter-connectivity and overlaps become important.
- Who the agenda settlers or rule-makers of the game are, is a question of a fuzzy nature, marked by varied narratives.
- Gender-critique of connectivity and strategic phases are important and without mapping the possibilities that connectivity could lead to, its study remains incomplete.

The suggestions that came forward through his discourse were as follows:

- Ecological or sustainable mapping of infrastructure and connectivity could be considered.
- Work that is similar to World Wide Fund for Nature's (WWF) report on how different regions of geopolitics affect regional ecosystems could be planned.
- Homogeneity of human clusters in the North-East and impact of geography on it.
- Climate change and its impacts on ports.
- India's Look West Policy in terms of: a) Indo-Pacific region and its geographies and different definitions of Indo-pacific delineations by US, India and others b) India's Look West Policy looking at transits such as Gwadar port where despite win-win cases there is a lose-lose situation.
- Exaggeration, application and implications are the issues that will come up and need to be addressed.

- The black-holes of connectivity need to be considered in terms of seamless connectivity such as China looking at Afghanistan as a black-hole in BRI.
- Look East and Look West along with ecological understanding of connectivity would be significant and deserving.

Round Table on Logistics and Connectivity

Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay while discussing the presentation '*Cities, Streets and Logistics*', sought to understand the arrival and the figuration of the logistical city in contemporary Kolkata. After a brief Marxist analysis of the logistical turn in urban studies, the presentation moved to understand the logistical aspects of urban provisioning and anticipate the impending changes in this network with the advent of e-commerce. The second part of the presentation dealing with provisioning, was based on ethnographic fieldwork in Kolkata which aimed to understand the metamorphosis of a "bazaar city" into a "logistical hub" in the intersection of the "three great variables": territory, communication and speed mediated by infrastructure, rent and transit labour. The paper looked into the historical backdrop of Kolkata wherein the city transformed from a bazaar city to a junction city and further to a multi-modal network and intersection of two regional corridors. Nature of capital is such that it presupposes passage through infrastructure of different kinds resulting into corrosion of social dimensions. The presentation provided an insight into the transition of Kolkata with surplus profit metamorphosing into rent and bringing solutions through urban provisioning. Bandyopadhyay presented a vivid description of Kolkata as a logistical city with the research drawing from excerpts of several conversations with street hawkers and vendors and their coping with demonetisation. He assumed that there would be many regional variations in producing equitable platforms of supplying chains.

Ritam Sengupta in the presentation titled '*Data Flows and Connectivity*' attempted to establish the case of data in its various current avatars as a logistical object of its own accord. Secondly and following from this, he attempted to establish the question of emergent legal regimes of 'data protection' through the lens of a logistical paradigm of economy and government. The key elements of these elaborations was to establish 'data' or 'big data' or 'personally identifiable data' as an object of capitalist *valorisation* or value-making, distinct from an object pure and simple, of privacy as a right or virtue. The idea was also to establish data as an object that is invested by new modes of value-making by means of circulation, not necessarily divorced from the question of data production, but a complementary attribute of it. A third point in the presentation was to situate on a descriptive plane, the possible geographies over which such

valorisation might be unfolding, following after the staggered arrangement of nodes in a network of global flows.

Question and Answer Session

Several questions came up on the futuristic trend of relation between data management and regulatory mechanism of institutionalization in addition to the influence of usage of data for controlling and determining prices. The role of local traders in disrupting the utopia of e-commerce giants was raised. Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay stated that there has been a shift in the nature of compilation of data by government which is now segregated and the government hints at data not being invaluable. E-commerce functions as a network that has extended post-demonetisation. Ranabir Samaddar noted that going back to Marx, only when there is a sense of waste – is a particular data wasted.

Release of *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade* and Comments on the Book

The book *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade* was released by Bernard D'Mello. D'Mello began by throwing light on how the book talks in detail about the unprecedented Naxalite decade roughly between 1965-75 and how they wanted this to be a decade of liberation and emancipation of the wretched of the Indian earth. He went on to say that it's utmost appropriate for Ranabir Samaddar to be the editor of this book because he understands what it feels like to be a political prisoner in the jails and agreed to his perspective on how this was one of the many anti-colonial armed peasant movements in India. He also remarked on how the editor rightly encapsulated the emotion of movement's defeat and its eventual uprising that continues till day with a lot of political introspection. 'Alongside, the trail of history the movement created as well as the history pertaining to the movement itself was aptly put', he added. Although, he did feel that the book didn't emphasize enough about the Bhojpur armed struggle, the role of Ganeshi Dusad (a landless Dalit labourer who became a skilled Guerrilla fighter) and Subrata Dutta who in his opinion, were key players in the movement. He complimented the in-depth account on Medinipur central jails and how he particularly enjoyed reading it. Towards the end, D'Mello said that it was delightful reading the book and strongly recommended on not missing out the short stories section especially.

Talk on 'The Failure of Yugoslavia'

Rada Ivekovic opened the talk by drawing parallels between the Naxalite movement in India and the recent "yellow vest" movement in France. She then proceeded to give a very rich account of the political atmosphere in Yugoslavia through the years. Two years into World War II, the formation of socialist Yugoslavia and some major movements against Mussolini, fascist rulers like Nazi and the People liberation front happened in the 1990s which acted as a legitimisation for the new born socialist country, she remarked. A rough recollection of important events in the politics of Yugoslavia and their ramifications as narrated by Ivekovic is as follows:

- 20th century- Characterized by a large number of economic migrants from Yugoslavia to Europe
- 1948- Yugoslavia separated from the Soviet Union and it not being part of the Warsaw pact, formed a government that followed neither socialism nor forced capitalism.
- 1960s- Highlighted through workers'/student movements [even though the government was socialist, it was a bit radical too]
- Late 1960's- more strikes, non-alignment movements in Belgrade and people had high hopes for a new economic order.
- Early 1970s- Internationalist student movements and other sectors of the population who had differences with the government [raising voice against the war in Vietnam, subsequent smashing of the American consulate in Zagreb, etc.]
- 1990s- end of the cold war and emergence of nationalist movements within Yugoslavia [but these movements, unfortunately were not designed with the liberation agenda in mind against colonialism-mostly rightist movements or '*palanka*' emerged]

However, one major difference between Yugoslavia and its sister nations was that in the former, it was not construed as one nation and was rather perceived by the people as separate federations put together [not only because there were linguistic differences but also because they wanted to avoid majoritarian nationalism]. Ivekovic went on to talk about her concept of "*Baktasharouihsm*" [dividing, separating and putting together]and how in fact today's world order is not actually headed in the direction of a better Europe. She also emphasized on how the poor and immigrant population are deprived by political agencies from meaningful and effective citizenship which is the case with Naxalites as well.

She ended on sombre yet hopeful note that even though she comes from an era of defeated battles for a good cause, she wished that the same doesn't happen of the Naxalites as well.

Question and Answer session

In the context of her talk on Yugoslavia, Ivekovic was asked if she would consider Tito to be a revisionist, and a stooge of western imperialism, to which she replied that it would be neither, since she didn't subscribe to that terminology. Such terminology is not helpful at all, said Ivekovic, since it leads to dogmatic binarised thinking. As a politician, Tito did what he could – much of it was good, much of it didn't depend on him, and then some of it was bad. But it was a very good period which lasted for some 45 years. But a country is not a closed system, and it also depends on the international political configurations. Ivekovic was also asked as to how she reconciled the idea of populism with national movements, given that populism has spread across the world, while its horizon is the nation. Ivekovic replied that although she did not have a clear answer, there is a general trend visible worldwide, and that it was worrying. Also, she emphasized that there ought to be a distinction made between movements and states that have populism as a governing principle.

Panel Discussion on Popular Movements

Subir Sinha set the stage for a thought provoking discussion through his understanding of various political phenomena in the recent times in U.K in specific. As a sociologist, he tried to throw light on the reasons behind events like Brexit and certain kinds of populism used by people engaged in politics, left wing to be even more specific. He explained how the Brexit movement which initially started out as a '*palanka*' or right wing movement has gone on to become a left wing movement in a matter of just a few years [particularly like the politics of the labour party leader, Jeremy Corbyn]. He also said that the populist politics is often categorized by spurts of surprising events even though they become predictable in retrospect and briefly touched on the Gramsci's theory to fortify his stance. He conveyed with impeccable clarity as to how the 9/11 attack and the economic crisis of 2006-2009 acted as seeds for xenophobia, hatred and neo-liberal form of capitalism. He also highlighted the phenomenon of the "*left-exit*" due to various factors like homelessness, threatened police forces, etc and how this led to a different voting style. He ended his talk with a food for thought on the impasse we are currently at, by quoting the example of Brexit [in the context of how emotional political movements do not always find institutionalised expression/form].

Atig Ghosh complimented the contributions of Subir Sinha by presenting about the Naxalite movement, how it was not a standalone flashpoint characterised by rural, urban & *mofussil* radicalization that found flagrant expression in the 1960's. He emphasized how the armed peasants' movement, food crisis, upsurge of student movements, etc. quickly spread throughout the country against oppressive policies. He conveyed how all these were building blocks that led to the vehemence of Naxalite movement which continue to inspire us and not terrify us. He

concluded by saying that understanding popular movements is quintessential to understanding the political drift of the polity.

Meghna Guhathakurta, having been part of one of them, talked about two movements of very recent history, the Shahbag movement of 2013 in Dhaka, and the Road Safety Movement last year. Social media had a core element to play in these movements. As a self-acclaimed social media activist, Guhathakurta called upon social media to collect images and visuals of these movements. Using those images to provide a commentary on the movements, Guhathakurta designated the Shahbag movement as a Occupy movement. People gathered at Shahbag spontaneously on the question of the trials of war criminals of 1971 for their crimes against humanity. Dissent arose in the popular arena when the war criminals and collaborators themselves became part of the government alliance. The inclusion of these war criminals in the political ethos of Bangladesh created a dissension resulting in the Shahbag movement. It was basically a need and demand for closure from a very young generation, who had not been witness to 1971, but nonetheless wanted to reckon with the past and resolve it. Road accidents triggered the Road Safety Movement by young children. School children came down on the streets. The notion of resistance that this movement employed was a legacy of 1971.

The programme concluded with the vote of thanks delivered by Apala Kundu.