

Report on Research Workshop - Beyond Infrastructure and Logistics: Reconnecting with the Peoples and Societies in the North East

Our Distinguished Chair, Dr. Ranabir Samaddar delivered the opening lecture, introducing the theme of the CRG-RLS project “Social and Political Mapping of Popular Movements, Logistic Vision and Infrastructure of India”. He explains that the project has two segments of research – mapping logistical representation of the North East for the last two decades with special focus on the Look/Act East policy, and mapping popular movements in the first two decades post-independence in India. The questions that require thinking are whether there is an interface between the two, and if yes, then how do they interact with each other. A conversation about what happened to people in the North East outside questions of infrastructure and logistics is what prompted this workshop. Dr. Samaddar talks of reading books on the logistical aspects of the Greek civil war and of the Irish insurgency and its impact on Irish population and politics, which led him to speculate about the logistical aspects of popular politics. This requires thinking on the way infrastructure – social, material - shapes subjectivity, the attitudes of different segments of the population and popular movements, and vice versa. The notion is not very new, avers Dr. Samaddar. Marx talks about how factory mode of production shaped labour subjectivity. He also mentions Tilly’s notion of collective politics and the popular wherein there is nothing intrinsic about what we think of as popular. So, in terms of the Northeast, we have to look at how infrastructure shapes the popular. We need to look at the continuities and discontinuities in earlier and more recent patterns of politics. Migration is one very important aspect to be considered in understanding how social developments impact the popular and vice versa. The Rohingya crisis with its many trajectories is drawing our attention to what borders are all about, histories are all about, and how regional politics is playing an important role in determining the fates of communities. To understand why the Rohingya crisis broke out, we need to take in the politics of the entire Southeast Asian archipelago. With the advent of neoliberalism it is important to understand how neoliberal ways of managing economy and population. Even if we go beyond infrastructure and logistics, will it be able to transcend neoliberal arrangements? Another question that is important in this context is what is the connection with the city or the urban that animates the popular. With the watershed advent of neoliberalism, particularly in the 80s and 90s, the very notion of people is changing and with that, changes in society are being effected such that infrastructures are changing and impacting changes on the population which require thinking about deeply to detect and understand the patterns and discontinuities that are emerging on a daily basis.

Session I

The first session of the workshop had the discussants talking about ‘Popular Movements and Popular Politics in the North East and North Bengal. The discussants were social activist, Abhijit Majumdar, Chitra Ahanthem from TISS of the Imphal Free Press, and Soibam HariPriya from TISS Guwahati. Dr. Paula Banerjee, Vice-Chancellor of Sanskrit University, served as moderator for the session. Social activist Fulan Bhattacharji was invited as a

discussant, but could not attend at the last minute as she was indisposed. Dr. Banerjee spoke a few lines on Tripura in her place.

Mr. Majumdar opened with the statement that North Bengal was fraught with many popular movements. The Naxalbari movement had a huge impact on popular movements both in North Bengal and the North East. Siliguri is the gateway to North Bengal but whether it is part of North East or not, is yet to be determined, says Mr. Majumdar. Tea is a common denominator shared by the North East and North Bengal with their significant roles in the tea industry and their tea estates. The political economy of tea has evolved over decades, and in the era of neoliberalism, several changes have been brought about in the industry. There has been a mainstreaming of the tea workers community, but of late they are demanding their indigenous identity back; there has also been a demand for minimum wages. The Minimum Wages Act of 1948 did not see the labourers getting their due. The tea gardens are the second largest labour intensive industry, but the labourers never got any benefits. For the initial decades after independence, tea unions could never garner popular support from tea labourers, nor educate them on the need to demand minimum wages. In the last three years in North Bengal, the tea workers have been mobilised enough to demand that minimum wages be implemented in the tea sector. Food security is a major issue related to livelihood in the tea sector. Numerous tea gardens were being closed down, and between 2000 and 2007, more than 1200 tea workers died of starvation. Captains of the industry have strong lobbying power, and they say there was a market crisis, but Mr. Majumdar vehemently negates his reasoning. Tea from India is sold globally today, produced by the tea industry in North East and North Bengal. There are about 4.5 lac small and big tea gardens and roughly 40,000 small growers in North Bengal itself. Three years back, the government said they would declare minimum wages, stipulated at Rs. 132.5 in Bengal, but with the nexus between government and industry, and the coexistence of military power and neoliberal market regimes, it is yet to be implemented. The struggle however continues, assures the speaker.

Chitra Ahanthem then takes over, talking about popular movements and popular politics in Manipur. The questions that she looks into are those of whether movements can be manufactured, the riots that are happening, and the values and judgements that are being passed on women. There are communication issues in Manipur, where communication is fractured along gender and age lines. Women do not really have a voice, and the younger generation is usually not lent an ear. This makes the feminist question in Manipur complicated. The general assumption is that Manipuri women are very liberated, particularly with reference to the women's markets. However, says Ms. Ahanthem, the women's markets were there from the times of the kings. Visibility of women was never in question, but their liberation is controversial. During the Kangla protest, women were praised for using their body agentially, but when Kanhailal in 2000, staged the play 'Draupadi' where his wife Savitri Bai bared her body for a cause as the titular character, she was disparaged for using her body to sell art. Ms. Ahanthem then talked about the tyranny of the kings and how they embraced Hinduism, forcing *Meitei* community to follow in their footsteps. They did away with their customs and rituals, and embraced vegetarianism, condemning those *meiteis* who ate meat as impure and likening them to the British. She mentions Hijam Iraboth's revolt

against the regime, and how he came to inspire farmers and peasants to revolt. During the Insurgency Movement, university educated people took up arms based on Iraboth's ideology, and demanded separation from India. But of late, the romance of the movement has died down, with it turning capitalist, which Ms. Ahanthem attributes partly to the Look/Act East policy. In the 1960s, there was the students' movement against Marwari traders who were hoarding rice. Police opened fire on the students rally killing 4. But since the 90s, people have increasingly taken the law into their hands, raising the question of how to distinguish between popular movement and popular agitation or mob justice. These actions are popular, but do they constitute a movement, asks the speaker. She mentions how drug users were the first victims of mob justice in Manipur, and how more recently, schoolgirls were threatened by the military forces for wearing Indian dresses. She expresses concern that the social media influence is increasingly becoming dangerous and abusive, and that factions and leadership questions plague Manipur, and with the change in regime, Manipur's trajectory at this point in time is shaky and uncertain.

Soibam Haripriya, in her turn, talked about three interrelated aspects pertaining to popular movements in the North East- through an analysis of poetry, the anxiety of representation reflected in their literature, vigilante action giving rise to psychovigilante activism, and the governmental award constituted during the pro- Inner Line Permit activism, being given to mothers giving maximum birth. The poem that she analyses is from the translated anthology *The Valley of Lofty Hills*, and it deals with issues of immigration and anxiety of identity, the nation's antagonism to the local, and the precolonial's to the postcolonial. There is the depiction of the Mayang, and his language is incomprehensible to the Europeans, showing how disdain for the spoken gets translated into disdain for the speaker. But the Mayang is also a representation of the postcolonial immigrant into the Northeast and as working class labour, thus reflecting fear of Indianisation. The self is seen as savage, but also the self that grieved the loss of nature caused by the development projects of Look/Act East policy, such as the laying of roads or building of highways. So there persists a continuum in anxiety over immigration to anxiety about nationhood and nationalism. Many of the groups that were part of the Inner Line permit Movement took it upon themselves to drive away the immigrants and therein lies the connect with vigilante action. The ILP and the AMSU (All Manipur Students' Union, who are generally antagonistic forces come together to carry out raids on the trades and shops of immigrant traders, in the name of a collective identity. And women giving birth to maximum children are being rewarded for their contribution to this 'collective identity', thus contributing to vigilante activism. And Ms. Haripriya here attempts to caution against such vigilante trajectories of popular movements and to question notions of the 'collective' that comes out of such fallouts of the popular movements.

Dr. Paula Banerjee began with underlining the fractures condition of popular movements in Tripura. In the 60s and 70s, there was the struggle between the indigenous community and the Bengali community, and within the Bengali community, there were tensions between the Hindus and Muslims. Tripura has been a great victory of the Left; Dr. Banerjee recounts how without military deployment of any great extent, violence in the state was controlled. Tripura is generally held up as the epitome of good governance in the North East. But there are all

kinds of tensions, violence and subversions simmering under the facade of good governance and peace. Particularly in terms of the feminist movement, Dr. Banerjee talks about how there is no women's movement in Tripura at all. There is a lot of funding available to women in Tripura, and women are encouraged to participate in formal governance. But participation in formal spheres has left no informal space for movements or protests. Such spaces are subsumed within the structures of good governance. So what kind of popularity are we left contemplating in Tripura, questions Dr. Banerjee.

Q/A:

The thought-provoking and stimulating discussions naturally evoked numerous questions among the members of the audience.

Ms. Chitra Ahanthem was asked to elaborate on the impact of the Vaishnavite Movement on Manipur, an example of which was the increase in untouchability groups. She explained how the advent of Vaishnavism fractured the Manipuris a lot. The purity-impurity paradigm and vegetarianism entered Manipuri culture and the ancient practice of burials was replaced by cremation. The tyranny of kings and consequently, the crisis of leadership were brought to light. Edicts had to be followed by the subjects or they faced ostracisation; they had no voice to express dissent.

Another member of the audience enquired whether some clarification could be provided on the coercion by the Indian Union on Manipur. Ms. Ahanthem explicated how one of the problems that the people of Manipur had was with the merger, during which the King was taken into confinement, and he could not consult with his *darbar*. There was never any question of democracy anyway, since the king never consulted with his subjects. The other problem was the stepmotherly treatment meted out to Manipur by the Indian Union. Even Nagaland became a state before Manipur.

A question was raised enquiring into the fallout of the Manorama incident on military forces in the Northeast. Once again, Ms. Ahanthem responded by saying that the only tangible outcome was the handover of the Assam Rifles to Kangla Fort. Issues of popular control and human rights abuses still prevail with the local police often joining the army initiatives. The AFSPA also continues to be in place.

Ms. Haripriya was asked to speak about the connections between the unruly popular and the civil popular. She replied how it is the perspective that should matter, and not the authenticity of ethnic identity that should be used as a bind. Vigilante activism is also perpetrated by civil bodies and registered organizations. The notion of the 'collective' that these organisations put forth and the notion of self in terms of self-determination need to be examined.

A final question addressed to Mr. Majumdar was on the commonality between the tea workers' movement and the recent hill peoples' movement, to which he responded that both of these movements had to do with people's aspirations, and their suppression. With regard to the Gorkhaland issue, he asserts that our own Constitution allows people the rights to demand statehood.

Session II

The second session entailed a discussion on 'North East in the Post Look East Era' with Mr. Bharat Bhushan, Editor of Catch News, serving as moderator. The four speakers who contributed to the discussion were Dr. Sanjay Barbora from TISS Guwahati, Tongam Rina of the Arunachal Times, Akum Longchari from Morung Express, and Professor Dolly Kikon from the University of Melbourne.

The discussion opened with Mr. Bhushan sharing his own knowledge and opinions about the Look/Act East policy undertaken by the Government of India. With reference to the name of workshop, he comments that the North East is beyond the reach of logistics and infrastructure. In terms of implementation of the policy, he enquires into the conditions on the ground. His own conversations with various people in both Delhi and the North East only served to reinforce his previous assertion. He cites several examples to validate his stand. The road from More to Tamu and beyond does not serve its purpose. According to a citizen of the North East, one cannot go to Champai using that road; one needs to avail a helicopter or it could take two days to get there. Of the proposed India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the 120 km stretch between Kalewa and Yagyi is yet to be constructed. Of the 71 bridges that form part of the India Myanmar Friendship Road, 2 are being renovated by Myanmar. Renovation work on the rest 69 is yet to be undertaken by India. None of the major projects under Look/Act East are complete and in actuality, there is no looking east at least till 2020, avers Mr. Bhushan. He reasons that sea routes will remain most important in terms of India's connectivity to the East, primarily because of lack of inland connectivity within the North East. He talks of three levels of disconnect – between North East and countries and regions of the East, between North East and mainstream India, and within North East India. Focussing on the policy, he makes certain other salient observations and suggestions. The Look/Act East policy does not meaningfully engage the local actors and there is a need for the development of mechanisms that will foment such engagement, and for involving local actors in foreign policy formulations. Governments and politicians in the North East are far too corrupt, and such influence needs to be checked. North East does not have the entrepreneurial and technical skills to take advantage of the policy, and such skills need to be cultivated in the region. The North East has to discover ways of generating revenue to reduce dependency on central government funds, and find ways to manage insurgency violence within the region which is proving a major hurdle to real development in the North East. No business, no projects can take place in the North East until extortionist taxes are paid to the insurgents. Myanmar traders are reluctant to trade with Indian traders at More; there are no shops on the Indian side of the border not just because of poor road connectivity but because of security reasons. The arteries of trade and commerce cannot be built without control of insurgency in the region.

The discussion is carried forward by Dr. Barbora who reminisces about his experience as a provincial academic at a Chinese conference on the One Belt One Road initiative undertaken by China. His participation at the event changed his perspective on the Look/Act East policy

and he now approaches it from the point of view of building bridges. These bridges have to be intellectual and political ones. When we talk about extending relations beyond logistics and infrastructure, there is a need to rebuild political and intellectual bridges, asserts Dr. Barbora. In the 80s and the 90s, the intellectual connections formed during the human rights and civil liberties movement gave us an idea about the Indian state and the people who constitute that state. What Dr. Barbora finds most instructive are his fact finding missions, whether in the North east or outside, the first of which was in 1995. It was then that he came across the conceptual categories of semi-feudal, semi-colonial and semi-capitalist within India. He expressed his surprise at his Assamese nationalist friends' identification with the Naxalite movement. For the first time, he states, it felt like India was okay about breaking up. We needed a theoretical idea that made it possible to be okay with the collapse of the state. There is no bridge between the 90s and the present. The question to ponder on at the present is why, despite so many initiatives by the politicians and the government, is it so difficult to construct a road in the Northeast. It is not about extracting one's pound of flesh, says Dr. Barbora; it is a fundamental quarrel between people who seek equality in the eyes of law and people who seek autonomy. While he himself does not have the answer to the question, he has come to realize through experience that our questions have to be more nuanced, that we have to be patient and we must learn to listen when others speak. The settler from the plains is not always the enemy, nor is the army truck; it is the neighbour that turns out to be the enemy, rues Dr. Barbora. Comparing Assam to apartheid South Africa, he talks about how in Assam, people have learned to live together separately. But a fact finding mission in 1998 and a conversation with a *dalit* person led him to also ponder on the question of the Northeast's desire for separation, because of the significant need for solidarity ultimately. No matter where we look, explains Dr. Barbora, eventually what remains most important is human relations.

The second speaker was Tongam Rina who provided snippets into conditions of Arunachal Pradesh in the post Look/Act East era, admitting openly that she as a resident of the North East did not accord it the same significance that mainstream Indian politics did. The policy is still an enigma of sorts for people in Arunachal in terms of both its implementation and its benefits. The people have to do what the state government tells them to, and the state government in turn, is subservient to the Indian government. Arunachal Pradesh being a sensitive border state has closed almost all its border trade points; of 12, only 1 with Myanmar is functional. In Arunachal Pradesh, people speak Hindi fluently and converse with each other in Hindi rather than in their mother tongue, and while Tongam Rina admits that the situation is shameful, it is how it is. She talks about how resources are wasted every year on building roads over and over again, that are functional only for 4 months in a year, and get washed away in landslides during the monsoons. The biodiversity of the region is adversely affected and there is no recognition of the fact that the terrain is just not suitable to such infrastructure projects, even if faulty engineering is overlooked. While land is community owned in Arunachal, the state government regulates the water resources, and between 2007-2015, a 142 hydropower projects were signed. She mentions how following the Chinese initiation of a hydropower project in the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra, the Indian and Arunachal Pradesh governments have become keen to initiate similar projects in the lower

reaches of the Brahmaputra. These projects also foment violence within the region. The crux of her argument is that the local people have no say in any of the plans and the projects associated with the Look/Act East policy, the benefits of which are yet to be sampled. The local people should be the decisionmakers, argues Rina, and they need not be instructed what to do with their resources. How they utilize their resources, to what purpose and what extent are matters that they can address for themselves.

For Akum Longchari, the question of language is important. Are we prepared to engage in a conversation where we try to understand each other's languages, he asks. The Look East policy is confined to meetings and conferences where experts come and talk about our people and resources. Our own people are not sure what the policy means, he says, but the demographics of our region is changing because of it. It concerns us but we have no voices. Who is the policy for and from whose perspective was it framed, enquires the speaker. Nagaland state is a result of war and has created wars. The Indian state has used structures of violence to develop infrastructure to the extent that governments created as security apparatus have become entrenched in violence. However, resolution will come only through engagement with these structures. Through the Look/Act East policy, violence is being legitimised, but there have been parallel alternate initiatives taken by the community. The village republics are reaching out to each other. Love Burma mission is reaching out to people on both sides of the border. People are at the centre of this process, but not at the centre of the Look East policy. Mr. Longchari talks of a community based organisation that provides midday meals for 19,000 children as opposed to the government's provision for 15,000. One initiative is people centred, while the other cares for goals and infrastructure. However, though the people of Nagaland have a shared experience of dehumanization, rehumanization efforts are fractured, rues the speaker, for they are working under the rights based structure of violence created by the Indian state, wherein the contest between state and community becomes a contest between communities. However such structures are not permanent or asymmetric federalism would not exist. Akum Longchari stresses the need to transcend the framework of competing rights and engage with values of justice that pertain to all of humanity. We must connect with each other in ways that make it viable for us to create a shared imagination such that we ourselves emerge as the makers of a Look East policy.

The final speaker to put forth her point was Professor Dolly Kikon. She talked about one of her previous articles, where her anger at the Look/Act East policy was blatantly expressed, for contributing to unsettled political, economic and social conditions of life and violence in the Northeast region. With time, her thinking has become more nuanced, the anger less palpable, but nonetheless, she continues to be critical about the Look/Act East policy. Continuing her previous line of argument, she talks about how development projects in the North East are packaged as economic interventions to improve the lives of people, but are detached from militarised ground realities. These initiatives to rebuild post-conflict societies mainly focus on training entrepreneurs and promoting livelihood schemes while overlooking how violence has transformed the very foundation of these societies. In the name of economic development, the indigenous cultures are being reduced to mere commodities, and even the cultural festivals such as the Naga Hornbill Festival come to signify the purely

representational value of such a commodity. Herein Dolly Kikon brings forth an analogy with Susan Buckmore's concept of the 'spectacle' which Buckmore uses to analyse Baudelaire's descriptions of Paris. She explains how the visual aspect of the Look East policy works by transforming development projects into spectacles, with the people of the region are promised pleasure from simply looking at the proposed roads and highways, but reap no actual benefits. Thus, argues the speaker, the phantasmagoria aspect of commerce and capital associated with the Look East policy serves to deceive the people of the region about infrastructural development.

Q/A:

The rousing discussion inspired several comments and questions in the question-answer session. A particular member of the audience who identified himself as Malcolm Munsif had two comments to offer. With reference to the argument made by Tongam Rina, about how the people of the North East should be allowed to decide for themselves regarding the use of resources in the region, he explains how the government's decisions are a reflection of the people's will since in a democracy, the government members are people's elected representatives. Furthermore, he responds to a particular statement in Dolly Kikon's talk – "we can't eat roads"- with the opinion that roads are a sign of development as they create jobs and reduce poverty for society as a whole. Dr. Barbora responded to these comments with the suggestion that he read up on literature that critiques the somewhat naive assumption that roads lead to development. Throughout history, people have avoided the road because the road meant the army and the army meant taxation and violence. Moreover, he stresses how in some regions, particularly militarised ones, democratic elections don't make for the best kind of representation.

Another comment addressed towards Tongam Rina was that the Chinese initiative should not induce the Indian government to build a dam in the lower reaches of the Brahmaputra. A question posed to Akum Longchari was whether Delhi is really willing to settle the Naga issue, which it did not, despite opportunity in 2009-10. Mr. Longchari responded saying that he could not judge whether India is inclusive or not, whether the efforts being made in Delhi are sincere or not. But what matters most is the approach, and there cannot be just one approach. The Framework Agreement of 2015, was no agreement at all, he opines.