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Connectivity Crossroads: Exploring India's Northeast in Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)

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Abstract: India's Northeast is gradually being promoted as a gateway to South and South East Asia with huge possibilities of physical infrastructure connectivity in Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). However, improved physical and digital connectivity including highways, Multimodal Transit Transport Projects etc. may not solely ignite transformation and integrate the development process in Northeast India, which needs a serious look on a number of challenges in the sub-region. Under this backdrop, this paper focuses on historicity and contests of trans-boundary connectivity, the role of sub-regional groupings and regroupings, India's Look East and Act East Policy and connectivity engagement with ASEAN putting India's Northeast at the core, which is at the crossroads. It is argued that a sustainable and equitable development process with active local participation possesses the capacity of transforming Northeast India in tune with the promises of BIMSTEC.

Keywords: Development, Northeast India, regional connectivity, transformation, BIMSTEC.

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Introduction

India's association with Southeast Asia can be traced back to ancient times as it has influenced the region by way of religion, language, culture and civilization. Historical evidence also suggests that there was flourishing economic and cultural relations between India and the countries of Southeast Asia in the pre-colonial era (Kalita, 2018; Bhattacharya, 2014). The British used India as the main strategic base for its colonial presence in the rest of Asia, making India highly integrated with the region's economy (Munshi, 2011).

Newly independent India made a promising start to its foreign policy. It has been noted that given India's sheer size, cultural influence over Asia due to the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism, and the fact that India was the first Asian nation to attain independence, "Nehru viewed Asia as a region in which India's new status should endow it with leadership" (Malone, 2011, p. 201). Several Indian leaders then believed that the nation must emerge as a leader in the region's anti-colonial struggles and pave the way for greater Asian solidarity, and hence, India emerged as one of the leading nations of the Non-Alignment Movement.¹ However, Asia soon divided on cold war lines as staying aloof from one of the two super-power blocs was not feasible, and India then leaned considerably towards the Soviet Union. Given New Delhi's domestic commitment to a mixed economy under Nehru's welfare state², India's economy became inward focused and isolated. It was thus marginalized from the boom in trade and investments between South-East Asia's NICs³ (Lee, 2015).

The collapse of the Soviet Union, India's balance of payment crisis in 1991, and the subsequent loan taken from the IMF to prevent India from defaulting meant that India's centrally planned economy was deemed a failure and India was in serious economic crisis (Haokip, 2015). This crisis

created conditions that allowed economic engagement with Asia. India then brought about 'liberalization, privatization and globalization' to make India's economy open to trade and investment and thus competitive. It is in this broad context that the initiation of the Look East Policy in the 1990s must be viewed, also amidst expansion of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and failure of India to steer the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), etc. which forced India to look eastwards for protecting, consolidating, and expanding its economic interest.

India's Northeast in Look (Act) East Policy

Northeast India is connected to the rest of the country through a short land corridor flanked by Nepal and Bangladesh. Weak infrastructure and poor connectivity have hampered these states' socio-economic growth for decades. A gateway to Southeast Asia, these states are known as 'Ashtalaksmi of India'. Japanese help for Northeast India's infrastructure development is a significant step forward in bilateral ties between these countries. Due to their close proximity, Bangladesh and Myanmar too are vital to the region's economic development and the success of India's Look/Act East Policy.

As stated in the Northeast 'Vision 2020' document, the Ministry of Development for North Eastern Region makes certain logical assumptions in its attempt to achieve economic integration of India's Northeast with Southeast Asian markets: - The Northeast's historical, ethnic and cultural ties with Southeast Asia could be leveraged for greater trade and tourism; - This will help alleviate the "economic imprisonment" and isolation caused by the Indian partition of 1947. The document's acknowledgement that present-day Northeast India was a unified geographic and economic entity under British colonial rule is The Brahmaputra and Barak-Surma rivers used to transport goods between the Northeast and Kolkata port. The Barak-

Surma-Meghna navigation channel linked Silchar and Kolkata. After 1947 Indian partition, inland water transport was severely hampered, and the region became isolated. This isolation has harmed the region. The Indian government believes Northeast India can become the nation's 'Growth Engine'. The government acknowledges that the Northeast cannot be left behind if India is to reach a \$5 trillion economy by 2024-25. The region has abundant natural resources and a huge potential for tourism growth. The region requires good physical connectivity to support economic production and trade. Sub-regional forums like BIMSTEC help to improve physical connectivity in the Bay of Bengal.

Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi introduced the Act East policy at the 12th ASEAN-India Summit and East Asia Summit in Myanmar, characterizing it as a reflection of the emphasis that India attaches to this region. Replacing 'Look' with 'Act' meant that India would be adopting a more pro-active and action-oriented strategy towards the region with a "priority on security, connection and regional integration" (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA] Annual Report, 2014-15). This was also reflected in the establishment of a distinct Indian Mission to ASEAN and the EAS in April 2015 with a dedicated ambassador to manage relations based at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta (MEA Annual Report, 2015-16). (MEA Annual Report, 2015-16).

India's development-driven goal in this phase has placed specific emphasis on increasing connectivity, including infrastructure, people-to-people relationships and trade. The focus on connectivity has been reflected in measures to enable linkages between existing regional forums such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) that has been proposed as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia.

Connectivity: The Cornerstone of BIMSTEC

BIMSTEC initially came into being as the Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand-Economic Cooperation (BIST-EC). Proposed by Thailand and formalised in Bangkok in 1997, the combination was the first attempt to “build a bridge linking South and Southeast Asia” (Palit, Choudhury and Tieri, 2018). It is an encouraging sign that BIMSTEC has been enjoying a great deal of visibility and is more active than it has been in the recent past. The designated chair or lead countries of 14 priority sectors and different sub-sectors have been cooperating with each other for the sake of greater regional integration. India leads the Transport and Communication sector which encourages physical connectivity in the region. A renewed momentum can be traced back to the BIMSTEC leaders’ retreat, convened by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Goa in 16th October, 2016. In the outcome document, the seven member states pledged “to work collectively towards making BIMSTEC stronger, more effective, and result oriented.” The major physical infrastructure connectivity projects undertaken by BIMSTEC, aiming to boost connectivity of the Northeast of India with the Bay of Bengal region include the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, linkage of the Chittagong port with Agartala and the Inland waterways network linking the Northeast with Bangladesh. These projects will complete the loop of connectivity and increase trade and capital circulation under the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area Framework.

Corridors have been created and road connectivity is being built to strengthen Northeast India’s connectivity with the rest of India. The East-West Corridor, which connects Srirampur to the west, is one of the important pathways. It runs along the Bengal-Assam border and reaches all the way to Silchar in Assam. The 670-kilometer stretch of the East-West Corridor between Srirampur and Silchar is now being constructed and now reconfigured as a four-lane highway

The 1360-kilometre-long trilateral highway connects Mae Sot Thailand with Moreh in India through Yangon and Mandalay in Myanmar. India-Myanmar Friendship Road, linking Moreh-Tamu-Kalemyo-Kale is now a part of the trilateral highway. The extension of the trilateral highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are being planned and are at different stages of implementation. This highway could allow seamless movement of both passengers and cargo vehicles which could be a strong alternative to the commercial trade with South-East Asia which till now only takes place via the sea route through Kolkata. This project is significant to the Northeast India as it will enable a physical link with Southeast Asia by road.

Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project proposal could make Mizoram another gateway to Southeast Asia. For Mizoram, this is also an opportunity to join a sub-regional trading bloc and benefit from cheap exports of high-demand consumer items. Derived from the Kaladan River, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project will connect Aizawl, Mizoram to Sittwe port in Myanmar. The project also includes developing a pipeline from Myanmar to Northeast India. The project is particularly significant since it will provide an alternative route for products from Kolkata to Mizoram.

The visit of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2019 was remarkable for Northeast India because Tripura became the recipient of the seven Indo-Bangladesh Agreements. It will become the first Northeastern state to have direct access to international sea trade routes via the Chittagong Port, which will enormously improve the state's trade and commerce potential. An agreement on implementing Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for the utilization of Chittagong port of Bangladesh, was reached between the two countries. The present route between Agartala and Chittagong port involves: 130 km from Agartala and Sabroom by road (Sabroom is a town and a sub-division of South Tripura district) and 178 km from Sabroom to

Chittagong port in Bangladesh via road. According to the Indo-Bangladesh treaty routes, a fairway from Sirajganj (Bangladesh) to Daikhowa (India) and from Ashuganj to Zakiganj (Bangladesh) allowed year round navigation. This aided bilateral and transit trade, much of it moving NW-2 in India. The movement of goods between the Northeast India and the neighboring country of Bhutan via Chittagong port via National Waterways-2 has been tested. According to a PTI report, the Indian side of the Indo-Bangladesh protocol route will utilise both NW-1 and NW-2⁴. At present, Pandu is the only port with multimodal connectivity in NW-2; The Indo Bangladesh Protocol (IBP) route was developed jointly by India and Bangladesh at a cost of Rs 305.84 crores to provide alternate connectivity for the North-eastern states from Guwahati and Jogighopa to the ports of Kolkata and Haldia. The IBP routes Sirajganj-Diakhowa (175 km) on the Jamuna and Ashuganj-Zakiganj (295 km) on the Kushiya are being built to connect with the River Brahmaputra and River Barak (NW-16) in Assam⁵.

Speaking on new components of the connectivity Master Plan, M. Shahidul Islam stated that the new plan also has provisions for emphasis on inland waterways connectivity. "A lot of countries like Nepal and Bhutan will have easy access to the Bay of Bengal by this plan. It not only deals with building roads but also to find out economic viability of those roads," the BIMSTEC chief said, adding that Northeast India will come to play a key role in the whole process. The Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) is in the process of setting up a jetty at Sonamura for inland waterways connectivity with Bangladesh, connecting Meghna River (Bangladesh) with Gomti River (Tripura). Small ships can travel these waterways, each capable of picking up fifty truckloads of cargo, thereby reducing transportation costs (Singh, 2019). The development of inland waterways, especially in Bangladesh, is crucial for two reasons. It is a riverine region. Transport by water links more towns than roadways. Each village is a consumption hub, and may become an export hub for produce, milk, meat, leather, etc. This

region. Former BIMSTEC Secretary General Sumith Nakandala has stated that the organisation's main mission is to "re-enable the environment of cooperation and community in the Bay of Bengal"⁸. This feeling of a shared community is currently found to be lacking in the Bay of Bengal region, and to achieve such an end, BIMSTEC must aim to popularize its brand. This can be achieved via dedicated funding for promotional activities and campaigns from member countries which can enhance the visibility of "Brand BIMSTEC" (Xavier, 2018, p. 30). While government funding would represent a top-down approach, the resultant people to people ties could create a passage for the bottom-up approach to building the Bay of Bengal community.

Citizenship Amendment Act in December 2019-January 2020 were strongly anti-immigrant (Dutta 2019), which does not reflect well for a strong Bay of Bengal community in the near future. The Bangladeshi migrant community is resented in Northeast India because it is perceived that mass migration has transformed the region's demography, endangering the region's indigenous people. Unless the immigration issue is resolved, the people of Northeast India may not desire people to people connectivity with Bangladesh. Bangladesh Foreign Minister A K Abdul Momen acknowledged that the CAA and the NRC are India's "internal issues", but at the same time voiced concern that any "uncertainty" in the country is likely to affect its neighbours.

This event reflects how even the perceived internal affairs of a nation can affect bilateral ties. Thus, on certain sensitive issues such as the one mentioned above, member states must only arrive at domestic decisions after successful consensus building amongst the BIMSTEC member nations to prevent any threat to the creation of a Bay of Bengal community. It could also be argued that BIMSTEC being a forum for solely economic integration lacks the political capacity to ensure that its economic goals are realised.

Physical infrastructure connectivity projects initiated by BIMSTEC member countries would too pass-through sensitive areas of the region. It is highly imperative that the local population view these developments as tools which provide them with means improve their own lives here (Srikanth, 2016). The demand for good physical connectivity within the Northeast for seamless travel and tourism is already found to be necessary. However, there is no inherent demand within the Northeast to integrate the region with the Bay of Bengal region, and thus such integration may be viewed with suspicion by the people. A possible way to generate goodwill towards these cross-boundary infrastructures is to create a demand for such integration. If large scale production of traditional arts and craft and other products from the North East is encouraged, then the local population could view the Bay of Bengal region and ASEAN as a potential market for its products. Human trafficking has increased in the area as a result of the pandemic-induced weak economies, pervasive poverty, and ongoing ethnic strife⁹

Problematic assumption of geographical proximity aiding integration

The Northeast is betting on its geographical proximity to the ASEAN region for its regional integration, but the underlying assumption is somewhat naive. Looking to the east through the Northeast is only one of the several options that the Indian state exercises. The Northeast of India is unlikely to be a transit corridor for the Indian industry because there is no point in taking the costly and circuitous land route to trade with ASEAN when sea freight is cheaper. Hence, the manufacturing sector of the Northeast needs a major boost if the prospect of the region to become a blossoming transit hub between India-ASEAN is to come to fruition. It is only if the Northeast India produces substantial products for export that the land route would make sense logistically. The emergence of the Northeast India as a potential manufacturing region shall also help to offset the flooding of the region's market with cheaper goods from Southeast Asia. The employment

of physical labour to transload cargo from one country's trucks to those of another is a significant cause of inefficiency at border checkpoints and ports. This process could be made more efficient, particularly for large shippers, by utilising pallets and robotic transfer methods such as forklift trucks. Private sector investment in handling facilities and warehouses could be enticed. Otherwise, there is a considerable chance that what little manufacturing currently takes place in the region too would vanish.

Contradiction between integration and isolation in Indian Policy

BIMSTEC and the Government of India have actively attempted the regional integration of the Northeast India with the Bay of Bengal region in recent times. However, to steer this process in the right direction, a study of the historical perspective of Northeast India is necessary. The British Colonial Government focused on economic exploitation of Assam's oil and tea resources. It followed a policy of complete separation of hills tribal communities from the plains people in the Northeast and a separate system of administration for the tribal communities through the Inner Line Permits (since 1873) and District Councils (Singh, 2006).

During the Constituent Assembly debates on the administration of Northeast India, two opposing views emerged: one urged rapid assimilation of the tribal population with neighbouring societies, while the other favoured safeguarded and regulated growth. So the Bordoloi Committee was appointed to report on the Northeast Indian policy, and its suggestions were adopted into the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. To preserve the democratic tradition, cultural variety, and deal with the unique difficulties of the tribes of Northeast India, this clause mandates a distinctive sort of autonomous governance system. These autonomous structures of governance are entrusted with the twin task of protecting tribal tradition, culture and customs and at the same time to undertake development plans (Sarmah, 2012, p. 79).

Apart from the provision of the Sixth Schedule and the ILP, Protected Area Permit (PAP)¹¹, Restricted Area Permit (RAP)¹² etc. are in force in different states of Northeast India. The main objective of the ILP, PAP and RAP system is to prevent settlement of other Indian nationals in the protected states in order to safeguard the indigenous population. Thus, the Indian state recognized the distinctness of the Northeast Indian population and granted regional autonomy to keep its indigenous tribal culture and traditions intact. Essentially, independent India continued the same policies adopted by the colonial British Government (Singh 2006). This developmental path with a British legacy needs introspection today, standing in connectivity crossroads.

In offering the Northeast Indian states the constitutional concessions and autonomy, the Indian state has succeeded to retain the Northeast in some degree of 'isolation' from the rest of India. At this stage, however, the Indian government expects to achieve the regional integration of the Northeast India with BIMSTEC and ASEAN member states, presumably while protecting the tribal people's culture and autonomy, which is also the state's constitutional requirement. This decision raises a few significant issues and worries. How is the regional integration of the Northeast with the Bay of Bengal region to take place while the ILP, PAP and RAP prohibit integration within the Northeast itself? Will the Indian state strive to accelerate the regional integration process by diminishing the autonomy constitutionally granted to the Northeast Indian states, or conversely, will the Indian state let the regional integration move be impeded by these legally imposed 'barriers' in the Northeast? This is a question that the policy bearers in New Delhi must have an answer to, if they are actually genuinely concerned about the developmental destiny of the region.

What does the Northeast of India want going forward? Does the region desire isolation or integration? This may be a very hard-hitting question for

the Northeast India to decide. Meaningful connectivity engagement with BIMSTEC is not possible without dealing with this subject. The nationwide popular uproar and protests over the Indian Government's Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, saw the rising clamour for the extension of the ILP in Assam by various student and cultural organisations which enjoy massive popular support. The state of Manipur implemented the ILP in December 2019¹³ and in doing so it became the fourth state in the Northeast after Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh to implement the ILP.

Thus, it may seem that the people of the region demand either continuation or the extension of the isolationist framework. However, the root cause of such demands by the people of the Northeast, is driven by the fear of being turned into minorities in their respective states due to decades of undocumented illegal immigration into the region, and not necessarily borne out of the desire to remain in isolation. This fear is not merely a figment of one's imagination, highlighted by the massive demographic change in the state of Tripura has shown where the indigenous tribal population of the state turned into a minority after the immigration of Hindu Bengalis after the Partition of India and the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971¹⁴. In a region where pluralism has not yet seeped in and is marked by distinct ethnicity, democracy can turn out to be dominance of small groups by a larger group where the worst form of deprivation is the inherent threat to the existence of an ethnic group as a distinct socio-cultural community (Kikhi, 2009).

The state of Assam already possessed special provisions enshrined in Section 6A¹⁵ of the Citizenship Act of India, 1955, which were the product of the Assam Accord, 1985¹⁶, to safeguard the state from illegal immigration. There is a general consensus in the state that the Centre has failed to keep its promises as mentioned in the Accord, and hence, implementing the ILP is seen as the most effective way to check illegal immigration. Thus, the

popular demand to implement the ILP in the state is the result of failure or lack of viable alternate solutions. This serves to highlight the notion that the people of the Northeast may not be opposed to the integrative framework of the Bay of Bengal region as initiated by BIMSTEC, provided such an event does not lead to their political, economic and social subordination in the hands of other groups.

Another pertinent question that emerges here is whether the Northeast India is merely supposed to serve as an economic corridor for the transit of goods between India and Southeast Asia, or is the regional integration aimed at the development of it? If the regional integration is indeed aimed at the development of the Northeast, the option of integration could be the only alternative. Integration in this regard also carries two dimensions: internal and external integration. Internal integration implies economic, social and political integration within Northeast India whereas external integration denotes economic integration with the BIMSTEC and ASEAN.

Conclusion

The Northeast of India, which is geographically located between 'mainland' India and Southeast Asia, is expected to reap enormous developmental gains as a result of BIMSTEC's initiative, and hence have synergistic impacts on poverty reduction, insurgency, and armed conflict. However, there is growing concern about the influence of increased market imperatives on the region's traditional society, which has a permanent impact on the people's culture and life and would also lead to more settlement of mainland people.

As a result, Northeast India's regional integration with Southeast Asia must be such that indigenous people's values and customs are not lost in the whirlwind of development. However, many of its age-old restrictive regulations must be revised so that the Northeastern states can play a key role in paving the way for economic permeability as a result of their

geographical proximity to these countries stand to gain (Suman 2018). Administration must have a plan outlining how it intends to achieve growth in India's Northeast. As a result, it is critical that the announced regional integration take place within a regulated framework and collaboration with the region's local people, which will help to reduce tensions, improve cooperation between the people and states of the region and most likely expedite the process of regional integration.

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Endnotes:

¹ The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) supported and played a key role in the independence struggles of the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America under the yoke of colonialism. It also struggled to maintain their self-determinism from the two power blocs during the Cold War.

² India's economy under the welfare state possessed capitalist elements but relied heavily on state-owned enterprises in important sectors such as banking and manufacturing, extensive subsidization of important goods and services and a focus on developing self-sufficiency in production.

³ Newly Industrialising Countries of the mid-20th century such as South Korea, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore.

⁴ Devanjana Nag | February 05, 2021 5:06 PM "Indo-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade to improve trading between two nations; details" <https://www.financialexpress.com/infrastructure/indo-bangladesh-protocol-on-inland-water-transit-and-trade-to-improve-trading-between-two-nations-details/2188731/>

⁵ "Assam To Have Tourist Jetties Including One in Pandu, Probable Locations Identified" <https://www.sentinelassam.com/north-east-india-news/assam-news/assam-to-have-tourist-jetties-including-one-in-pandu-probable-locations-identified-552282>