

Comments on Ranabir Samaddar & Snehasish Mitra: *Bridge of Spaces: East by Rear East, Ah! The Northeast*

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The nub of the argument is this: the component parts of the Look/Act East have distinctive logics to themselves and they only make sense in collation through the metaphor of a bridge. The bolts and nuts, the suspension girders, the steel and metal have their own histories and contemporaries of production yet the clubbing together of these disparate narratives make sense only in the call of greater unity in the future, and this deferred future is accessed through the metaphor the bridge. The paper seeks to look at the construction of this bridge. By studying the architecture, the authors contend, the politics of the bridge metaphor can be accessed. Why is the North-East spatially imagined as connecting link rather than a region that has to be taken into account on its own? This is the primary problematic of the paper. Looked from another perspective this is an effort to socially map of the effects of India's Look/Act East policy in the last decade or so.

The paper is ambitious in its scope. It covers multiple themes of expropriation of capital (private and public), projects relating infrastructure, and tries to integrate it within a larger concept of a social in the north east. My reading and interest in the paper stems from what I find implicit and understated in the paper: It reveals a map of the social in the North-East of India through the Look/Act East rather than a social mapping of the region. The difference between the two is crucial in the conceptual organization of the paper. While the latter takes the social body as an already given, opposed to the 'objective' realm of the state, the former is attentive to how this very idea of a social, and its corollary a state, comes into place through practices of governance (carried through by public institutions, private capital in form of Asian Development Banks, insurgent groups, law, etc). To break the bridge into its constituent parts, if one remains with the metaphor, is to look at how logics of connectivity, closely following tracks of capital investment in the region, produces a body called the social in the North East.

And here the paper falls short of what it promises. The recurrent trope in looking at the different arms of the Look/Act East policy is that of a pristine community under siege from the different attacks of neo-liberal state. While one is sympathetic to the spirit of the argument it leads an analytical *cul de sac*. Instead of disaggregating the bridge quality of north-east into its various component units, (which is a function of neo-liberal governance practices in the region), the stated aim of the paper, it *assumes* the preexistence of this bridge. This disjunct between pristine people and machinic disenchanting capitalism, as Timothy Mitchell argues, is an effect of practices of governance that in fact produce this sense of outside and inside, the sense of pure community preservation and pure capitalist extraction. Following Mitchell one can argue that it is the parasitic nature of capitalism that inheres to things and finds its vessels in bodies, machines, and things that characterize it rather than an external force from 'outside' wreaking havoc on pure spaces. One instance of this flattening in the paper can be seen in the way different resource extractions are clubbed together without being attentive to the particular way extraction is carried out. For example how does the particularity of the commodity in question affect the analysis of the democracy and development in deficit conversation? Are all resource extractions the same? Oil, coal, rubber, different commodities lend themselves to varied forms of complexities when the lens of extraction is put on them. Recent scholarship on the relationship between energy and governance argues that oil and coal in different epochs of the twentieth century have generated very specific forms of democratic governance. The negotiations between labour and capital have specific configurations depending on the *kind* of extraction in question. Questions of ownership, resistance can only

accessed when one is tuned into this reality. A flattening of all resource extraction to a Manichean battle between the preserving community of unsullied people outside the practices of governance and a relentless juggernaut of machinic capitalism is an analytical handicap. One can hypothetically ask of the architects of this Manichean scenario: What happens if the community decides to deal directly with the resource extraction and actually participate in it? Will that right the wrong? It is impossible to get out of this bind unless one takes recourse to an idea of a vanguard where, if the community decided to get its proverbial hand dirty, it will be 'misrecognizing' the dynamic of capital. This will in turn put the very idea of the people, the papers precarious conceptual fulcrum, in question. Where and when does such a community exist?

This leads me to final point: Where does the post colonial begin? The bridging idea, the idea of resource extraction, the construction of community, ideas of community property, all of these have their provenance in the British imperial world and how the North Eastern frontier featured in its extractive plantation economy. It is perhaps telling that the categories that organized the colonial imperial world like that of the unsullied tribe versus the rapacious outsider are still the dominant metaphors that control even critical works on the region. This is not to make a facetious point that everything that is happening now has already happened before and thus we should look at history. But to be attentive to the recurrence of certain problematics that have organized the way the region is thought and built as a bridge. One has to look at a critical genealogy of this metaphor rather than assume its existence.