

## ***Interrogating Migration in India's Northeast***

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### **Comments by Meghna Guhathakurta**

My comments will be based not only on the above mentioned paper, but also draw on other papers in the panel on India's Look East Policy, because they are interrelated.

#### ***Role of Bangladesh***

The importance of Bangladesh in India's Look-east policy has been mentioned. This has both positive and negative implications in the region. Positively SubirBhaumik has mentioned in his paper the potential of Bangladesh's role in India's Look East policy, and he uses the Tripura, Bangladesh relations and politics as a model for the way forward for India. Samir Purakayashtha and SucharitaSengupta on the other hand in their paper spoke of the complications that arose from the historical migration of Bengalis from Bangladesh into India's north-east that has led more towards negative trends in the region than positive ones. A study of migration in the North-east must also take into account inter-marital relations and exchanges between the same communities across borders for example the Chakmas, Tipra, Marma, Mizos and Mros of Chittagong Hill Tracts with those across the border with North east India as well as the Rohingya and Rakhinecommunities in the Cox's Bazaars with those across the border in Myanmar.

Border fencing in both the Indian and Myanmar borders with Bangladesh is an anomaly given the porosity of state boundaries. It has failed to stop outmigration from the Bangladesh side as well as from in-migration from Myanmar. It is interesting to note however that despite the electrical fences on the Myanmar border with Bangladesh, there is a system of formal border trade and passage allowed for Bangladesh citizens, who can take a 48 hour border pass to travel to Myanmar within a 10 miles radius. This kind of continuous relations between the two countries has in fact made regional economies survive despite the state level sanctions imposed by the West on Myanmar. This is not something that is practiced formally in the Indo-Bangladesh border thus creating the need for illicit trade routes between the two countries.

#### ***People-centric perceptions and movements***

The people's perspectives are just as important in constructing sustainable policies. Migrating people across boundaries has their own stories to tell, but other kind of solidarities also have surfaced in the politics of the region that bypass or counter state level policies. The resistance movement in Bangladesh against the Tipaimukh dam construction in

the north-east have joined hands with movements in Manipur and Nagaland, something that was not to be seen in the case of resistance of Farakka Barrage in the seventies. Peoples voices are often capitalized by political parties of each nation and hence plays into state-level policies, but sometimes they retain their independence and such trends also need to be studied.

### ***Indo-centric policies***

The discussion thus far in this session has tended towards being Indo-centric, not surprising since it is India's look East Policy that we are talking of. However a policy in order to be realistic also needs to engage with counter policies and positions and hence cannot afford to seem too linear. For example it was suggested in one paper that the Indian private capital could be induced to target the Yunnan province of China as a potential market. But it should also be noted how China has effectively targeted Bangladesh and especially Myanmar as its own potential market for trade and investment over the years. The Bangladeshi market for oranges from the north-east was long overtaken by China. Recently China has also secured the drilling rights of the Sanghu oilfields in the Khagarachhari district of northern CHT indicating the strong and growing Chinese lobby within the Bangladesh state. The daily full flights from Dhaka to Kunming are an indication of the existence of growing trade ties between the regions.

### ***Trade into Trafficking***

Illicit border trade is an issue for concern in most papers. However it is not the trade itself that should be more unacceptable. The danger rather lies when this otherwise normal trade links turn into trafficking routes as a result of vested interests. An example is the case of the Myanmar- Bangla river border where Rohingyas dissatisfied with their future prospects in Bangladesh first started to contract boats to take them across the Bay of Bengal to shores of Thailand and Malaysia and even Australia. However soon this one on one deal with the boat owners turned into a trafficking industry, one of the demands being created by the growing profit of the Thai fishing industry leading to the increasing demand for labor for Thai trawlers

### ***Methodology of 'Social Mapping'***

A final note on methodology. Most papers have used the term social mapping. This needs to be elaborated in a more methodical way. The north-east is a large area geographically and an empirical mapping of the whole region will not be possible. Just as important is the need to understand the depths and complexities of the interaction. This can be done with a few field empirical case studies of selected areas, whereas the conceptual and theoretical reviews can provide the context of the studies.