

Trade, Capital and Conflict: Frontier Towns of Northeast India and Myanmar

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Before going into details of the topic let's keep this in mind that India's Look East Policy is a subset of India's broader foreign policy considerations. India's Northeast has a geostrategic significance, disturbed legacy and contestations among multiple groups. It should be taken into account that when a region is disturbed it's difficult to carry out developmental activities. A major exception in the Northeast is Tripura which has been relatively peaceful in recent years and therefore has seen a number of initiatives regarding connectivity and bilateral ties with Bangladesh. As we speak there is an ongoing blockade in the highway between Nagaland and Manipur called by the United Naga Council (UNC). There was also a counter blockade in the Imphal Valley which was diluted due to the ongoing assembly elections. There have been frequent clashes in Bodoland, Nagaland, and Manipur. Development works have had faced the threats of extortions, taxes and kidnappings. Some of the insurgent groups receive shelter in the Indo-Myanmar border which makes it difficult for the Indian security forces to deal with the issue. There is sparse private investment in the region and therefore inadequate job generation. This is a main cause of outmigration. Most of the state governments are dependent on funds and loans sanctioned by New Delhi. The Northeast Vision 2020 seems like a hazy plan to go forward with no clear cut provisions of activities in the upcoming years. This needs to be taken up seriously if cross border trade is to be pursued. We need to keep in mind China's diplomatic access to Bay of Bengal and how they have developed the Yunan province. I will urge the authors to look into the data of Indo Myanmar trade between 2011-2015. In recent years there have been attempts to develop the border haats and land custom stations. If we have to look east or act we need to relook into the autonomous provisions in the colonial period which later translated into Article 371(A) which was presented in the research proposal. For the question of trade, the proposal has an emphasis on theories, I would however suggest to the researchers to look into the empirical data as well. I am not comfortable with the invocation of Larkin where it is suggested that infrastructure goes beyond its material value and creates allegiance. Notably in the last 70 years, the logistical and infrastructural expansion is yet to create an uncontested notion of citizenship in the Northeast. The authors might find other literatures which might be more relevant for the situation in the Northeast. Particularly interesting would be the mode of resistance by the civil society groups such as Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti led by Akhil Gogoi which seems to be more uncompromising in its stand rather than insurgent groups demanding sovereignty, which have turned into mere rent seekers. These new voice of dissent through the issues of environmental degradation, land ownership and women reservations offer a new insight into the changing dynamics of Northeast India wherein a dialectical interrogation of the frontier cities would reveal a new mode of social governance.