

***Resources and Infrastructure in the Northeast
&
India's Look East and Act East Policy***

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Comments by Sanjoy Barbor

The abstract provided by Samaddar and Mitra has deftly managed to pack a critical look at contemporary transformations, along with a historical overview of the political economy of Northeast India. My note focuses on the main aspects of their study (in relation to the expected outcome, i.e. a 10,000 word paper).

It is important to locate the current resources and infrastructure in Northeast India in relation to the government's Look East and Act East Policy (LEAEP), as a process that is in consonance with earlier colonial policies of resource extraction. Choosing not to mine an otherwise important body of historical work on the establishment of the plantation complex, as well as the laying out of spatial boundaries between hill and valley, might actually work in favour of their effort to historicise the essay. Far too much time is spent in efforts to revisit narratives that speak of enclave economies, non-state spaces and frontiers, when much of it can be succinctly presented in a few well-footnoted paragraphs.

The substance of this proposed essay lies in other, less analysed areas of inquiry. Ethnic violence between indigenous communities and those perceived to be settlers, as well as the entrenchment of a developmental discourse point towards seemingly contradictory processes at work. Is this, as they wish to establish, part of the outcome of neoliberal developmental policies? If so, how is it different from earlier phases of capitalist expansion in the region? The authors will benefit from referring to and joining issues with a current debate between Hiren Gohain (on one side) and three younger leftist scholars – Ankur Tamuli Phukan, Gaurav Rajkhowa and Bidyut Baruah – in *Amar Axom*. The debate hinges on Gohain's characterisation of out-migration of indigenous Assamese youth from rural Assam to other parts of India, as a disempowering act of agency that reflects their lack of commitment to the reconstructing a regional economy, thereby making them complicit in the capitalist logic of drawing agricultural labour out from the farms to urban areas (and allowing in-migration of poorer settlers). Drawing on the works of Partha Chatterjee and Kalyan Sanyal, Phukan, Rajkhowa and Baruah argue that this is a simplistic ("nostalgic", is the word they prefer to use) view of the logic of capital, especially at a time when hegemony is ensured by the discourse of development and welfarist governmentality.

The research questions spelled out in the abstract will undoubtedly address these issues frontally. While the questions are clear, it might be useful to spell out how the mapping will be done. The authors could be more explicit about the sources of information for each question. One is especially excited about the last research question, since it has the potential to bring in a fresh, nuanced perspective on LEAEP. The discussant is also aware of Mitra's fieldwork in the Bodoland Territorial Areas Districts (in western Assam) and feels that he might be able to complement his data with more work among migrants from BTAD located in metropolitan heart of old capital (Calcutta). Combined with Samaddar's persistent and sustained reflections on the nature of capital and labour in India, a textured and granular view of what LEAEP means for migrant Adivasi, Bodo and Muslim communities from BTAD (working in Calcutta), would be something to look forward to.

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