Infrastructure Development in Northeast India: Examining Inequality and Exclusion in the Development Promise of Progress and Prosperity

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Transboundary Spaces and Borders

• The understanding of borders as territorial compartments, as fixed drawn lines on maps, the territorial trap (Agnew 1994)
• The notion of fixity of territorial borders, viewed almost as being natural formations, and not artificial (Anderson 1995)
• Nation-states having absolute sovereign territorial power, the concept of ‘bordered power containers’ (Giddens 1985)
• The transboundary spaces and flows of rivers as opposed to the fixities of the territorial bordered lines of nation-states
Transboundary Spaces and Borders

- The contiguity of transboundary spaces and its flows as being natural in a larger physical and geographical context
- Transboundary rivers are excellent examples of the flows versus fixed notion in territoriality and nation-state borders
- The container concept is challenged by geopolitical realities owing from the transboundary ecological interdependencies
- The vulnerabilities and interdependencies in transboundary spaces are of social, political, economic, ecological nature
Northeast India: Borders/Development

- The eight provinces of Northeast India shares over 90 per cent of its borders with India’s neighbouring countries.
- It has traditionally been a hub of trade and migration routes in the larger South and Southeast Asian region and beyond.
- Communities in Northeast India inhabit across transboundary spaces, with informal exchanges and flows.
- The development of Northeast India has been positioned as part of India’s Look/Act East Policy towards Southeast Asia.
Look/Act East through Northeast India

• Northeast India as the pivot of India’s engagement with Southeast Asia and East Asia through the continental route

• A foreign policy of India deployed to usher in economic and social development to its frontier borderlands/communities

• An uptick in large infrastructure and connectivity projects in the region in line with Look/Act East Policy development

• The ‘Securitization through Development’ agenda of New Delhi in Northeast India through the Look/Act East Policy
What is Sustainable Development?

- Development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising needs/wants of future generations
- Sustainable Development recognizes that growth must be inclusive and environmentally and ecologically sound
- Such growth will reduce poverty, inequality, build shared peace and prosperity for both present and future generations
- Keywords: inclusive growth, environment, ecology, poverty, inequality, peace, prosperity, present and future generations
Northeast India: Vision 2020

• Outlining the development policies, aimed at reducing the infrastructural and connectivity deficit in the region by 2020
• A slew of big infrastructure and connectivity projects were announced by New Delhi in various parts of Northeast India
• An attempt to examine the larger trajectory of development projects in Northeast India, ten years since the Vision 2020
Connecting Peace Progress Prosperity

• In the context of Northeast India, what is the larger vision to connect peace, progress and prosperity by the government?
• Is the development vision in Northeast India inclusive, participatory, environmentally and ecologically conscious?
• Is the core aspect of sustainability and ecological contiguity of transboundary spaces factored in the development goals?
• Is the core aspect of inequality and unequal spaces within Northeast India factored in the development vision/projects?
Connecting Peace Progress Prosperity

• The connections between peace, progress and prosperity has been portrayed in a linear narrative in Northeast India
• Such narratives of development cannot hop, skip and jump the core questions of inequality among various communities
• It cannot bypass questions of long-term ecological sustainability of development infrastructure/ interventions
• Infrastructure development leapfrogging sustainability and inequality can lead to new patterns of conflict in the region
Sustainable Development Chokepoints

• Infrastructure and Connectivity can serve as Sustainable Development Chokepoints, if core questions not addressed
• Conditions where local communities are not able to meaningfully participate in decision-making on such issues
• Prior consultation with local communities on major infrastructure and connectivity projects has not been a norm
• The projects are pushed through, the community comes in to the picture only if it comes as their opposition to projects
SAVE BRAMHAPUTRA FROM Chinese Conspiracy
Strategic vs Socio-Ecological Spaces

• The framing and narrative of national security threats/considerations on infrastructure and connectivity projects
• Such a framing helps push through such mega-projects in borderlands, making for bypassing local community voices
• Northeast India is effectively framed as a strategic space as opposed to the socio-ecological spaces of its communities
• This strategic construction of spaces in Northeast India effect conditions for sustainable development chokepoints
Development Lag and Impetus

• The framing of the development lag Northeast India has seen over past decades as requiring development impetus

• A rushed sense of infrastructural development and connectivity projects in Northeast India to address such lag

• The bypassing of rigorous environmental and social impact assessments of large infrastructure and connectivity projects

• The invocation of the national security discourse effects the bypassing of democratic public-hearings with communities
The Coupling of Unequal Spaces

- The development lag in Northeast India over the past decades has resulted in huge inequalities within the region.
- Infrastructure projects, bridges, roads have led to coupling of unequal spaces and communities in Northeast India.
- This has the potential to create new patterns of conflict in the region, of deprivation and lopsided development pattern.
- This piecemeal/unequal manner of development has led to a sense of infrastructural chaos and futility in Northeast India.
Democratic Deficit in Northeast India

- There is an overwhelming sense of democratic deficit among communities in Northeast India on decision-making
- The coupling of unequal spaces through infrastructure development cannot by itself talk to the linked communities
- The national security discourse invokes communities to share a national burden, forego democratic decision-making
- It means undertaking ecological risks, loss of sacred spaces, even forego participation in the development process/gains
Meanders of Sustainable Development

- Infrastructure development and connectivity projects will be effective with a development vision linked to communities.
- Such a development vision cannot be linear, but meander through the social, ecological and political landscape of the region.
- The development vision has to imitate the physical, ecological and socio-cultural landscape of the larger region.
- The development vision has to involve communities in a participative manner with prior consultation as a basic norm.
Sustainable Infrastructural Scaffolding

• The lack of a sustainable connected vision of infrastructure development has led to pickled roads and sun-dried dams
• Social, ecological, political, economic and institutional scaffolding for infrastructure development to be meaningful
• New Delhi cannot join A and B together, hope infrastructure and connectivity will ensure prosperity in Northeast India
• Reconciliation of development lag and resultant inequalities will allow communities to absorb the development impetus