



**Indian Council of World Affairs**

**Sapru House, Barakhamba Road**

**New Delhi**

**Report of**

**International Conference**

**on**

**“The Age of Multilateralism and Connecting India’s Northeast:  
Opportunities and Challenges”**

**Jointly Organized**

**Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi,  
Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region (DoNER) and  
Asian Confluence (AsCon), Shillong, Meghalaya**

**19-20 March, 2018**

**Sapru House**

A two-day international seminar was jointly organised by Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi, Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region (DoNER) and Asian Confluence (AsCon), Shillong, Meghalaya on “**The Age of Multilateralism and Connecting India’s Northeast: Opportunities and Challenges**”.

The seminar was attended by more than forty scholars from the Northeast, along with academicians from Bangladesh and Bhutan. Hon’ble Shri Jitendra Singh, Minister of State, DoNER was the Chief Guest in the Inaugural Session. The Valedictory session was attended by Shri Naveen Verma, Secretary, DoNER. Along with Ambassadors of Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh and the minister political from the Embassy of Japan, there were Joint Secretary (BM), MEA, representatives from Niti Ayog, Inland Waterways Authority, representative of the Government of Assam, and many other stakeholders who are involved in the integration and development of the North eastern states.

### **Session One**

Session one opened with remarks by **Ambassador Nalin Surie, DG, ICWA**. It was chaired by **Shri M.P. Bezbaruah, Former Secretary, Tourism, GoI, Former Member, North Eastern Council**

**Ms. Sripriya Ranganathan, Joint Secretary, BM Division, Ministry of External Affairs**

- She discussed opportunities and challenges in connecting India's North East region with Myanmar and other countries of Southeast Asia. During her presentation, she highlighted objectives and current status of various projects linking India with Myanmar, Thailand and Bangladesh.
- She mentioned the following key objectives of Kaladan MTT project:
  - Connectivity between Indian Ports and Sittwe Port of Myanmar
  - Alternate route to access NER, thus reducing pressure on Siliguri Corridor.
  - Opens up sea route for NER
  - Provides access to Myanmar and Southeast Asia
  - Contributes to economic and commercial cooperation
- Narrating the current status of the Kaladan MTT Project, she said that Sittwe port, IWT terminal, backup facilities, basin and approach channel dredging are completed. Navigational (River) Channel dredged and aids are already installed. Barges are built and Paletwa Terminal, Back-up Facilities are Completed. She informed the audience that additional works at Paletwa, which was awarded in March 2016, is expected to be completed by April 2018.
- Her presentation also reflects the current status of the Trilateral Highway Project. As she mentioned, upgradation of 69 WW-II vintage bridges (Moreh/Tamu to Kalewa) on a 149-km stretch is being developed by India. Constructions of new RCC bridges (7 major, 62 minor) are planned.
- Further she mentioned that;
  - Kalewa to Yargi: 120.7 km road to be constructed/upgraded by India
  - Yargy-Mandalay: 170 km road is built by Myanmar
  - Mandalay to Bago 560 km road and Bago to Eindu 225 km roads were built by Myanmar

- Eindu to Kawkareik: 70 km to be built by Myanmar
  - Kawkareik to Myawaddy: 62 km built by Thailand
  - Myawaddy to Mae Sot: 3.4 km built by Thailand
- She also highlighted the three key objectives of Rih-Tedim Road project. First, to provide connectivity between eastern part of Mizoram and western part of Myanmar. Second, to provide all-weather connectivity and facilitate trade between India (Mizoram) and Myanmar. And, third is to undertake upgradation of existing cart road to two lane formation from Rih to Tedim in Myanmar.
  - She also narrated the current status of connectivity initiatives involving India and Bangladesh, such as Ashuganj Port to Akhaura Road, Akhaura-Agartala Rail Link, and other bus, railway and waterways service linkages. Underlining the importance of Akhaura-Agartala rail link, she mentioned that the link will provide access to Chittagong Port to the NER and will be the shortest link between the North-East and the rest of India after 2<sup>nd</sup> bridge over Jamuna river in Bangladesh is constructed. She said that the work on this project is in progress at both ends.

#### **H.E. Chutintorn Gongsakdi, Ambassador of Thailand, New Delhi, India**

- He discussed major drivers and challenges while connecting Thailand with India's North East region, Myanmar and other parts of South East Asia. He stressed the need for seamless connectivity between India and Myanmar, Thailand and Myanmar like the European Union. He said that the border between India and Myanmar should not be hindrance. He said that people have to understand that customs officers do not have vision. He underlined the need to convert transport corridors into economic corridors.
- He also talked about connection of Thailand's economic corridors including Trilateral Highway and East-West Economic Corridor. During his presentation, he provided details of five high priority projects under the East-West Economic Corridor. Stressing the need for seamless connectivity, he said that poor connectivity is limiting economic cooperation in the region. He said that liberalisation is still in the national interest.

#### **H.E. Moe Kyaw Aung, Ambassador of the Union of Myanmar, New Delhi, India**

- He stressed the need for improved air connectivity between India and Myanmar. He said that as air connectivity plays an important role in economic and cultural cooperation, direct flights between India and Myanmar are needed. Flights between Myanmar and other Southeast and East Asian countries are more frequent. He recommended bilateral cooperation agreements between Myanmar and India and the North East. He said that the volume of trade between India and Myanmar is not encouraging.

#### **Dr. Prabir De, RIS**

- He said that harmonisation of economic corridors will take place and Eastern and North Eastern states of India are likely to gain more from Trilateral Highway Project. Discussing conceptual framework of economic corridor, he said that sub-regions, which include multiple industrial corridors, connect countries/regions at different development stages in order to effectively utilise economic dynamism.

- Discussing the production networks envisaged between Northeast India and Myanmar, he recognised the following as industries with the to improve bilateral trade: (i) bamboo and wood products, (ii) pharmaceuticals and preparations, (iii) rubber products, (iv) food products, (v) refined petroleum products, (vi) other non-metallic mineral products, (vii) cement, (viii) textile and textile articles, and (ix) horticulture.
- He highlighted some views from Manipur to improve India-Myanmar border trade via Manipur, such as visa on arrival at Moreh, presence of export and import offices in Imphal, build platform for traders/ manufacturers, make available credit facility, foreign policies as well as listening to their grievances, extending cooperation of government officials to support local business, etc.
- He stressed the need for improving customs infrastructure, setting-up animal / plant quarantine facilities, improvement of electricity and telecommunication, setting-up of banks, settling border dispute with Myanmar, replacement of old friendship bridge and transit and cargo handling arrangement between India and Myanmar. He urged the need for customs operations on 24x7 basis, full automation and link-up between customs to reduce transaction time and cost, and acceptance of electronic cross-border Bill of Lading. He also asserted the need to link Myanmar's growth centres with India's North East region.
- As per the speaker, the following are some of the initiatives that India has adapted on the basis of common resources:
  - Customs single window (SWIFT),
  - Ratification of TIR convention,
  - Ratification of WTO TFA
  - Improved services and information for traders (Trade portals; Trade facilitation committees)
  - Synchronization of border (24x7 Petrapole-Benapole border)
  - Improved banking and payment system
  - Single market through GST and transparency
  - Moving towards digital economy
  - Satellites and space technology
  - Strong security establishment
  - Rescue and disaster management capacity in ocean
- Talking about state level agenda he said that NER states will design their ASEAN programmes on socio-cultural, connectivity and economic fronts.

### **Interaction**

- Most of the questions asked were regarding importance of border hats, gap in people's expectations and nature of works. JS, BM, MEA said that Government of India and Myanmar are sitting together and trying to develop more border hats on India Myanmar border. Border hats at India-Bangladesh border are already flourishing. Till date, eight hat locations have been identified, some on the Indian side and others on the Myanmar side.

**Rapporteur for the session was Dr. Amit Kumar, RF, ICWA.**

## Session Two

The second session of the international seminar was chaired by **Ambassador Rajeev Mitter**.

- In his remarks, he outlined major initiatives by the BIMSTEC and BBIN and challenges associated with implementation of projects and institutional functioning of the both sub-regional groupings. He highlighted BIMSTEC's potential for energy cooperation and trade cooperation. He noted that BRICS-BIMSTEC outreach summit held in Goa in 2017 was a 'huge step forward'. While talking about challenges, Amb. Mitter pointed out that
  - Many infrastructure projects have been started but not been completed.
  - BIMSTEC could not finalize the free trade agreement after almost 20 rounds of negotiations.
  - BIMSTEC secretariat does not have adequate human and financial resources to work properly.
  - There are challenges in manpower and finance section.
- He recommended that BIMSTEC should explore possibilities for finances from multilateral institutions especially Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

### **Mr Syed Muazzem Ali, High Commissioner of Bangladesh to India**

- He explained Bangladesh's initiatives in 1980s to launch SAARC with the objective of regional cooperation. He stressed that the idea was create an environment of trust to facilitate cooperation and development. However, he observed that SAARC has not been so successful.
- He explained Bangladesh's initiative of 1997 - known as South Asia Growth Quadrangle, (involving Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Bhutan). He explained BBIN as a new nomenclature in this context. He argued that the focus of the sub-regional groupings is to create new links as well as 'restore' old links which existed in the colonial era. In this context, he mentioned that rail links are restored and new rail links between Agartala and Bangladesh are in the process of construction.
- He stressed that BIMSTEC is an important inter-regional cooperation forum between South Asia and South East Asia. India is important for both BBIN and BIMSTEC. He suggested that these organizations should seek funding from international organisations. He noted that intra-regional trade is very low as far as BBIN is concerned. He stated that Bangladesh would not allow its territory to be used by any extremists and terrorists, but the country also expects reciprocity.
- While talking about Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA), he said that he has "lot of hopes". Nepal Bangladesh and India can go ahead as desired by Bhutan. "It would be another breakthrough in connectivity" if implemented.
- Further, he stated that the role of the secretariat needed to be re-evaluated. BIMSTEC secretariat should be strengthened in terms of human and financial resources. There should be more cooperation and coordination among ambassadors of member states and BIMSTEC secretariat.

- While concluding his presentation Amb. Ali noted that the region has tremendous potential, however, it also faces tremendous challenges. He noted that considerable amount of political will is required to see progress in the region.

#### **Major General Vetsop Namgyel, Bhutan's Ambassador to India.**

- He briefly discussed the politics, society and economy of Bhutan. He termed India as its 'most important neighbour and friend' and talked about 'excellent bilateral relations'. He stressed on the role of India in the regional cooperation process. As the largest economy, with the largest population and most technologically advanced country in the region, India has a crucial role to play. He noted that India's role will be 'crucial'. Bangladesh also has to play 'an important role' in this process.
- He was of the opinion that there is no serious problem among BBIN and BIMSTEC countries, thus, prospects for cooperation are positive. He underlined the success of each of the BBIN and BIMSTEC countries. He noted that Bangladesh's success is remarkable for its middle class growth. Nepal has immense hydropower potential and Sri Lanka has made remarkable progress in human development.
- He explained the reasons for not endorsing the MVA so far and requested the other three countries to go ahead. He noted that "We regret delay... and deeply appreciate understanding shown by three countries".
- He suggested that India's Act East policy and Thailand's Act West policy need to be synergized. He referred to Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index in his speech.

#### **Dr. Samtha Mallempati, Research Fellow, ICWA**

- The speaker analyzed the prospects and challenges of BIMSTEC. She noted that India is keen to expand ties with South East Asia. She argued that slow progress in regional cooperation in South Asia pushed India to look towards Southeast Asia. She added that India's economic engagement with ASEAN has increased and its trade with ASEAN is worth US\$ 70 billion in 2016-17. It has become the 7<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner of ASEAN. She argued that BIMSTEC is considered to be an important mechanism to promote trade, investment and tourism among the member countries.
- She noted that physical connectivity would benefit the North East region of India. She also outlined the progress made and initiatives taken by BIMSTEC such as conclusion of BIMSTEC disaster management exercise, process of facilitating technology transfer, coastal shipping, trade facilitation agreement and on-going energy cooperation. Nevertheless, she said that there are multiple challenges which need to be addressed. Slow progress in economic integration is a challenge for BIMSTEC. She further argued that domestic reforms, social development, trade facilitation, security issues should also be addressed.

#### **Dr. Ashish Shukla, Research Fellow, ICWA**

- The speaker discussed the prospects and challenges of BBIN. He analyzed the centrality of India in the South Asian region and India's neighbourhood first policy. He substantiated his arguments with the size of the population and economy, technological advancement and human resources of India. Regional trade and investment has not realized its full potential in South Asia. Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself said that

Indian companies are investing billions abroad but only less than one per cent of it went to South Asia.

- He highlighted the determination expressed in the Kathmandu Declaration. The Declaration expressed determination to deepen regional integration for peace, stability and prosperity in South Asia by increasing trade, investment and cooperation in energy and security and infrastructure. He outlined successes and achievements made by BBIN such as BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) was signed in 2015. He noted that BBIN has immense potential for increasing trade. India is taking asymmetrical responsibility in building infrastructure and connectivity. Tourism also has huge potential. However, he argued that the BBIN process has been slowed down and JWG meeting has not taken place after January 2016. There is no time bound manner for implementing infrastructure projects.

### **Interaction**

- While replying to a question, Major General Vetsop Namgyel, Bhutan's Ambassador to India, explained the four components of the Gross National Happiness. These are: (a) Preserving national environment, (b) preserving and promoting culture, (c) equitable and sustainable development and (d) good governance
- In response to a question, Mr Syed Muazzem Ali, High Commissioner of Bangladesh to India stated that trafficking of women is an issue of concern and explained the action taken by the government of Bangladesh in this regard.

**The rapporteurs of the session was Dr. Sanjeev Kumar & Dr. Dinoj Kumar Upadhyay, RFs, ICWA**

### **Inaugural Session**

The inaugural session began with the Opening Remarks of **Ambassador Nalin Surie, DG, ICWA.**

- He said that the co-sponsorship of the event by the ministry of DoNER reflected the importance of the integration of the North Eastern Region in a seamless and broad-based manner. He further stated that the northeast was vital component of the Act East Policy of the Government of India. There is a widespread consensus for the social, economic and political transformation and connectivity of the region.
- There is a need to ensure that the development of the region takes place in a sustainable manner while keeping in mind the local sensitivities. Focus on youth is important; and the youth dividend of the northeast is an important factor required to be utilised for the development of the region.
- He said that joint development of the region with neighbours and partners is supposed to bring mutual benefits. Concluding the opening remarks, he asked the participants in the seminar to identify new ideas, suggest ways for development and connectivity of India's North Eastern region. We also need to find how the northeast can become part of our connectivity with South East Asia and development goals.

The Keynote Address was delivered by **Hon'ble Dr. Jitendra Singh, Minister of State (IC), Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER), Government of India.**

- He congratulated ICWA for organising the event and also for facilitating DoNER's work. He said that in the past the northeast was a land of unexplored potential; and there were both (a) physical and (b) psychological reasons for not realising that potential. While we have taken steps towards realising the potential, we need to remember that the region is a land of "diversities within diversities", i.e. within the larger unity in diversity that describes India. The Northeast is not a homogeneous whole but has learned to live in harmony.
- On the psychological distances, he said that the government's idea was not only to bring the northeast closer to the rest of India but also to bring the rest of India closer to the northeast. He stated that although the northeast is constituted of smaller states, they have literacy rates and GDP that are better than the national average. He also made the vital point that the northeast region is ahead of the rest of the country when it comes to women's empowerment. He pointed to the natural talent of the people as well as the higher than average IQ of the youth that is a boon. The challenge he stated is to utilise the potential that the region presents and bring it out from a state of neglect to high priority. Towards meeting this challenge, he said, a psychological outreach has been made. It reflects in the most number of prime ministerial visits in the last four years than all taken together in the past. He informed that Prime Minister Modi had already made 25 visits to the region including attending meeting of the Northeast Council.
- To further reduce the psychological distance and filling the gap, DoNER secretariat is now being rotated around the states of the northeast. The decision for rotating the secretariat on monthly basis was taken by the Cabinet Secretariat back in March 2015. This has shown to the people that Delhi can come to them, and is available. An honest endeavour has gone behind the idea of bringing the DoNER at doorsteps.
- Another way to reduce the distance has been through engaging the youth. The youth have been encouraged to study in colleges across the country. The ministry is organising youth and cultural festivals to attract more people to the northeast. Northeast hostels are being constructed across the country; and northeast calling events are being organised at the places like Chandigarh, Delhi and Bombay. The outreach has given dividends as well. It has done away with the demarcation of mainland and hinterland. This has resulted in distances between the northeast and the rest of India being reduced. This move has helped build familiarity between the people of the region, the government officials and the people from the rest of India.
- The ministry is trying to showcase the various products of the northeast for the nation. Sikkim is an organic farming state and Arunachal Pradesh is the fruit state of the region. Mizoram can be the bamboo state through its prolific use of bamboo in handicrafts and other products; and Manipur as the saree state for its handloom products. For this, bamboo has been brought out of the Forest Act reflecting the kind of micro-thinking involved in the process. The need of the hour is to give more prominence to the north-eastern states and the region as a whole.
- On the physical distance, it was pointed out that the government was working on the Meghalaya-Arunachal Rail track and in a few years one hopes to have trains between Delhi and the various capitals of the states in the region. Sikkim airport has been opened

and is helping reduce distance. The train link between Agartala and Bangladesh is also being built. The government has also initiated a monthly *pragati* programme engaging the State Chief Secretaries of the region to understand the requirements of the people. The common perception is that the money allotted to the states does not get utilised. Therefore, satellites have been brought in on the scene for monitoring purposes.

- The government is encouraging setting up of world class educational institutions in the region. A film and television institute on the pattern of Pune has been sanctioned in Arunachal Pradesh by the finance ministry, for the purpose of promoting film shooting in the region.
- The government has set up a separate northeast road development project that will look after the 'orphan roads' and also the work in progress. The government is looking for developing a separate and direct air link for the region. A separate startup India programme for the region has been supplemented by an initial capital venture fund. The first lot of the fund has also been distributed in Mizoram. To promote tourism, states are being encouraged to attract international organisations like Airbnb. With these initiatives and programmes, the government of India is looking at the northeast region as the engine of new India.

### Interaction

- There was a suggestion to use the media in collaboration with the Information and Broadcasting department for awareness about India's northeast. Agreeing with the suggestion, the minister informed that the efforts regarding media have already started; and a new channel named Arun Prabha has been launched. There is also a programme of rotating girls and boys from the northeast and vice versa to different parts of India. We have actually evolved in the process of knowing each other. However, we need to know more about each other.
- Responding to a question regarding the lack of industry and dearth of skilled human resources in the northeast, he said that there is a separate forum for the northeast region in the Niti Ayog. The first meeting of the Niti Ayog forum in fact happened in Agartala. Some headway has been made in both the aspects.
- In response to the question whether the ministry is interested in capacity building in the fresh fruit sector, the minister said that in fact 40 per cent of fruit in the region is going waste due to lack of storage and constraints of transport and connectivity. The ministry has dealt with many such issues in the last three years. A huge fruit centre has also been set up in the northeast with Israeli collaboration. Japan has also come up with infrastructure projects.
- The minister further informed that the DoNER has brought in e-filing regarding project fundings. Transparency and accountability has been improved, leaving minimum room for pilferage.

**Dr. Sabyasachi Dutta, Director, Asian Confluence** proposed a vote of thanks at the end of the inaugural session.

**The rapporteurs for the Inaugural Session were Dr. Stuti Banerjee and Dr. Saurabh Mishra, RFS, ICWA.**

### **Session Three**

The third session of the seminar was chaired by **Ambassador Nalin Surie**, who welcomed the Speakers on the panel.

**Shri Jitendra Kumar, Adviser (NRE), NITI Ayog.**

- He gave a general introduction about the North East region of India and its vast potential including natural resources, hydro potential and extensive forest cover. He mentioned that the increased attention from the Government of India to the region and the focus has been on the PPP model to PPPP model, which includes people in the growth story. He informed that the new policy for the development of the region is being formulated and young minds are engaged in fresh ideas.

**Mr. Hideko Asari, Minister, Political, the Embassy of Japan,**

- He spoke about his country's policy of Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIPS), saying that 'Indo-Pacific' is relatively a new policy formulation. He was of the view that India's diplomacy has become active at both regional and international levels.
- He mentioned that the role of the Indian Ocean is important and opined that Indo-Pacific connects the potential available in Africa. Mr. Asari was of the view that FOIPS of Japan and India's Act East policy can cooperate in regional development. India's North East is located strategically and economically, and the stability of the region will help the development of other areas closer to the region.
- He mentioned that Japan wants to work in the NE region areas closer to it and cited the examples of Japan-India Act East Forum and the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) initiative between Japan and Bangladesh. He also emphasized developing 'quality infrastructure' for sustainable growth.

**Ms. Mamta Shankar, Adviser, DoNER**

- She described in detail the works undertaken by the Ministry for Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER). First, she underlined that the DoNER is the only territorial ministry of the Government of India.
- She said that the region has population diversity and there is better gender balance and nutrition as compared to other parts of India. Tourism in the region has potential and the connectivity projects have tremendous possibilities, including the development of remote areas.
- She also pointed out the type of terrain in this region is a major challenge, which is being met.

**Ms. Sreeradha Dutta, AsCon.**

- She said that the region has got ‘too little’ and it is too late. The programmes have dismal implementation record in the region. She questioned the delay in implanting the Kaladan project and multiple extensions given to its deadline.
- She stated that while physical infrastructure is being created backchannel discussions are not taking place. She analyzed the movement of people from the region and said that the youth are moving out in search of jobs and employment, which is both good and bad. It contributes to national integration but it shows there is lack of employment in the region.
- She mentioned that corruption has been an issue and doing business is a problem in the NE of India. She favoured variations in regional products, such as *sari* of Manipur, and added that the designs need to evolve with time.

**Mr. Sazzad Alam, ACS, Deputy Secretary, Act East Policy Affairs, Government of Assam.**

- He started by saying that in pre-Partition days, tea from the region was exported through Chittagong port that is now in Bangladesh. He informed that the per-capita income of Assam declined after Partition and the reasons were unavailability of connectivity and snapping of ties.
- He added that this resulted into extremism and violence and the region started to be seen from the security angle. He expressed the hope that the region can be developed as a hub of regional connectivity, for example air connectivity from Guwahati to the ASEAN. He also urged restoration of the Stilwell Road that connects Assam to Kunming in China. He also mentioned that the Rohingya issue can become a challenge affecting the entire region.

**Interaction**

- Questions were asked about the BIG-B project. It was responded that it is an individual initiative between Japan and Bangladesh. However, it can be synergized for wider regional connectivity.
- On the funding of projects in the region, it was highlighted that the Government of India releases funds for the NE region under different heads that cover almost all areas of the region.
- It was informed that the efficiency in project implementation has increased and there is a monitoring mechanism in place, and the indicators have been identified to quantify the development and its pace.
- Regarding the ecological changes in the region due to developmental activities, it was argued that a balance needs to be maintained in development and ecology, and that the ‘quality infrastructure’ also takes into account the environmental aspects of growth.
- It was asserted that development in the region would also contribute in resolving its political problems.

**Rapporteur for the session was Dr. Athar Zafar, RF, ICWA.**

There were two sessions and a moderated round table discussion on the second day.

## Session Four

The fourth session was chaired by **Ambassador Ranjit Rae**

- He remarked on how borders could be managed for people-to-people contact. He maintained that there is a need to neutralise the negative effect of closed borders that are organically connected.
- However, along with the positives of open borders, there are also negative implications, particularly in security terms. The challenge for the government is to reconcile these contradictions.

**Dr. Rakhee Bhattacharya, Associate Professor, North East Studies Program, JNU**

- Her presentation provided an analytical prelude on spatial labour mobility and India's scope for multilateralism.
- There are three connected areas to understand the spatial labour mobility and multilateralism for policy priorities. These include:
  - i. **Macro fundamentals and domestic economic issues of India**
  - ii. **State imaginations of trans-boundary geography having Northeast (NE) as the core space**
  - iii. **Relations between spatial labour mobility and trans-national economy with NE as the linkage space.**
- Movement of people became a subject of state surveillance, which was alien, and created a new historical geography of NE with certain stereotypes for next several decades. In the post-colonial period, as the subjectivity of space changed into a strategic frontier, border became more relevant as territorial security, and trans-boundary pre-mobility of people was restrained through the border militarization.
- The alternative to such projects is to understand the linkage between labour market agglomerations with other such projects of economic integration. A sound normative and epistemic understanding is essential which can provide structural pillars for policy. The past efforts provide strong lessons that an abrupt top-down bureaucratic policy will not work. It creates more ruptures and complexities. The best way to gain trust and confidence of the people is alternative economic security.
- As India's neighbourhood Policy has positioned strategically for integrating economies and markets across the borders. This is an appropriate time to look for viable solution for trans-border movement of people by using their skills for such transformative economics. The policies have successfully helped in transforming the routes across trans-national boundaries and restored *border haats* and other activities. Such efforts at unmaking borders for economy may also create legal space for people's movement and add to economic geography as productive labour market.
- If neighbourhood remains the dominant space for movement, then member nations can look for the benefits of agglomeration of such spaces. Economic nationalism in post-Cold War era put unprecedented restrictions on such movement along with trade and investment, and was primarily related to refugees, displaced persons and illegal immigrants. It had more political than economic implications. New theories recognise migration driven by economic reasons and consider it positive for growth.
- The interaction between agglomeration and labour movement also has the power to scale up economies at various levels. Therefore, labour mobility driven by economic reasons

can lead to a greater concentration of people, skill and talent, which can add to agglomeration benefits in those spaces with congestion cost. Sometimes, sector-based agglomeration can help to address the issue of poverty and other deprivations effectively.

- In NE and its neighbouring areas, various such agglomerated economies can be experimented with local and traditional knowledge which can create a global market in the long -run. Also, textiles and handloom sectors have wide scope to agglomerate in the neighbourhood. The idea of trans-boundary tourism and various start-ups can help to use the idle labour force effectively. This sector can create competitive advantage and can help in greater integration.
- South Asian economies have hardly had successful agglomeration and integration as it has been a site of conflict for a long time. Potential of labour force in the region has moved beyond the space and created enormous values in other parts of the world.
- It is time to rebuild the boundaries and create a strong integration to make its potential labour force to work freely. If market becomes the dominant factor of economy, the labour policy needs to be structuralised and integrated through regulations at trans-boundary level, where people's ability to move across the borders can be one of the preconditions to spur market integration.

**Dr. Dhrubajyoti Bhattacharjee, Research Fellow, ICWA.**

- Movement of people from one region to another is usually perceived with apprehension and has been one of the principal reasons for many conflicts and misunderstandings in the past and present. However, it is important to identify such movement, which can be seen as having a positive impact as well as creating a challenge, especially for the state of Nagaland.
- There are four migration streams: rural-rural, rural-urban, urban-rural and urban-urban. Further, the stream can be intra-district, intra-state, inter-state and beyond borders. Basic reason for movement of people to other regions, especially in India, have been on account of marriage, which is followed by finding better employment opportunities, especially government jobs, which is followed by the search of better education. In Nagaland, one witnesses all sorts of migration that has taken place in the past, and still continues. Within the state, one witnesses the rural-urban movement to be more. However, due to strong tribal identities, one does find the affinity for not losing bonds and linkages with the original place of movement, and one keeps on re-visiting ones homes and villages.
- Despite the implications and the significant policy focus required to deal with related problems of the phenomenon of rural-urban migration, there is no official data with regard to the trends of rural-urban migration in the State. So far, the only available material concerning this is the report of a sample survey (unpublished) of four towns i.e., Kohima, Dimapur, Mokokchung and Mon conducted in 2003.
- After the initial migration from the villages in search of jobs or better education, the families rarely go back to their villages but maintain close social and cultural ties with the village of origin. Over time, the earlier migrants provide a foothold for other family members from the villages to migrate to the towns, thereby initiating what can best be described as a 'chain migration' over the years.
- As per a survey carried out by District Human Development Report, which was published in 2010, the solution comes in the form of out-migration to the urban areas where better educational and employment opportunities exist. In 3 districts i.e., Mon, Phek and

Kohima, the ranking in importance of the various factors causing migration were found to be different. The differences in the way people rank factors such as employment, education, healthcare, amenities, communications etc reflect the facilities available in the rural areas of the different districts.

- As per the 1991 Census, the maximum number of migrants has been from Assam, Bihar, Manipur, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Kerala and Tripura. One would find people from most of the states of India, choosing Nagaland as their residence. One can also find migrants from beyond borders who have chosen to live in Nagaland. As per the 1991 Census, the highest number of foreign migrants was from Nepal, countries in Asia beyond India including Russia, as well as Bangladesh.

**Dr. Pahi Saikia, Associate Professor, IIT, Guwahati**

- She dwelt on the experiences of women in the conflict zones in the borderlands of NE India, and the exclusion of women from the local governing structure and decision-making processes.
- The discussion of integrating the peripheral border of NE with the rest of India as well as South-east Asia and South Asia needs to take note of the women participation which has so far been out of the purview of the tools of analyses in the state-building projects.
- Based on interviews and lived experiences, Dr. Saikia argued that the securitization of territories and delimitation of geographical margins have posed a challenge to assimilate marginalised sections, particularly women.
- In her presentation, she urged a look at the mundane challenges of women engaged in market relations and women facing militarised security in the NE in their day-to-day lives.
- She maintained that there is a need to focus on the role of women not only in the labour market but also in the emerging integrated economies and their participation in the local governance structures.
- She argued that the new pattern of relations between the local and global economies is very essential to see gender from a non-trade security perspective in international politics.

**Dr. Binayak Dutta, Assistant Professor, Department of History, North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong.**

- He spoke about the challenges of contiguity. Globalisation as an idea, starting from the first phase, is an opportunity of paradoxes. In the NE, there is a contradiction in the Act East Policy and drawing fences in the borders.
- He maintained that in terms of creation of a nation-state, borders have been fundamental. This transformation of border lands to 'bordered' lands is crucial in understanding the politics of the region. Thus, while borders were drawn, on one side, migration of people was encouraged, on the other.
- The Census 1951 is a seminal document that starts the politics of peopling in a formal manner. It is also the source of National Register of Citizens (NRC), which is an important innovation in which all census data was transcribed. The Supreme Court of India in 2014 also alludes to the 1951 census saying that it needs to be updated. The argument is that there is a huge problem with peopling and the idea of bordering and people's movement.
- In the 1951 Census, three categories of people are omitted from the project called NRC. This is also the document which is required to be updated. These include:

- i. Displaced Persons: There was a huge migration of people to Assam from East Bengal, particularly from the colonial province called Sylhet at the time of preparing the census.
  - ii. Bi-lingual
  - iii. Indigenous
- There is a constant problem between drawing of borders and people's movement. The problem is how to overcome the problem of connectivity in the predicament of partition. Borders in the mind start impacting the way borders are implemented on the ground.
  - The three D's -Detection, Detention, Deportation- come to play an important role in the NE. Detection is probably hearsay. Detention in NE is a live reality. There are many cases which are pending. There is no legal deportation framework. These are some of the challenges that need to be taken into account.

**Dr. Joseph K. Lalfakzuala, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development (OKDISCD), Guwahati**

- He spoke about the need to understand the perception of borders among the local people. There is a need to look into how people in the North East perceive the border and their demarcation based on the history of free movement in the region.
- There is a scope to harness the Kaladan multi dam project. Also, there is a need to understand the topography for implementing effective infrastructure projects in the region.
- James Scott, the writer of *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* treats Southeast Asia including the North East states except the Brahmaputra valley as the part of the Zomia culture i.e. the non-state space. Though one might not agree with the non-state space concept but this part of the region has seen a long history of fluidity in terms of migration etc. This year, Mizoram celebrated the 126<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chin Lushai conference which celebrated the ethnic linkages between the people of the region. When one talks about connectivity one needs to taken into account the view of the common people who have been accessing the routes since long.
- People-to-people contact is a reality and policy makers need to look into the history of this while making policies on connectivity and development of this region. It is seen that the people on both sides share ethnic linkages, which it is important to take into account while making policies.
- Boundaries are of three kinds—military, political and economic. The military boundary has led to the subjugation of the tribes which is not healthy. The other boundaries such as the economic boundary too have not been successful in the formal context the way it is in informal context.
- The taxes accumulated through border trade are less in comparison to other border trades. The solution lies in people to people contact where the boundary demarcations become a blur and the trade can take place in smooth manner.

**Interaction**

- ILPL is an important factor to check the population flow in the region and outside. A comparative study between Mizoram and Nagaland can be done to see this aspect of ILPL.

- The 1951 census is not reliable data for analysis of the movement of people. Does it mean that the 2017 NRC is the authenticated one? Dr. Dutta answered it by saying that the NRC is an informal unauthenticated document to carry on the census. However, the people have started to rely on this which is unfortunate. Mixing of NRC 1951 and NRC 2017 is like mixing apples with oranges.
- A tensed atmosphere in North East is not conducive for the development of the area including connectivity. The local people have to show identity cards to move around freely. Until and unless these challenges are addressed, problems will remain impacting the development projects in a negative manner.
- The North East is not the focus of the government because of the well being of the people but because of the globalised economy pressure. This pressure has forced the government to give attention to the North East. If this is the case, then what will the government do to not take advantage of the people of the North East? The chair answered that it is a pessimistic view on the development project of the government.

**The session rapporteur was Dr. Arundhati Sharma and Dr. Indrani Talukdar, RFs, ICWA.**

### **Session Five**

In his remark, the Chair of the session **Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia** observed the following points:

- The theme of the session though crucial, has not been deeply explored by scholars of international relations.
- The chair commenced the session by introducing the concept of sustainable development goals, discussing challenges and opportunities about achieving sustainable development goals in context of Northeast India.
- Besides the government and the business community, civil society groups, media and young scholars should deliberate the challenges and opportunities for India's northeastern region to reach the goals of sustainable development.

### **Dorji Penjore, Center for Bhutan Studies, Thimpu**

- There is a close similarity between Gross National Happiness (GNH) of Bhutan and sustainable development goals. However, GNH is wider in terms of sustainable development.
- Sustainable development goals undermine the importance of regulating development of developing countries; it fails to mention consumption in the rest. Therefore, Gross National Happiness is more sustainable and comprehensive in comparison to sustainable development goals.
- There is limitation in SDGS as it is concerned more with fulfilling physical development while neglecting emotional and spiritual needs of people. GNH is more holistic and balanced, and focuses more on collective happiness rather than individual happiness.

### **Dr. Temjenmeren Ao, ICWA**

- He stated that the development initiatives in the region have witnessed a massive onslaught on the existing ecological system. With the development of projects such as road network, building of hydroelectric projects on the rivers in densely forested area, expansion of agricultural land by cutting and burning forests besides traditional jhuming practices, the rich eco-system of the region has been on a decline.
- In terms of flora and fauna, the region was earlier exploited by the British who used forest resources like timber for their fleets and building of railway tracks. Even after independence, proliferation of forest based industries such as paper and plywood industries exploited the forest resources.
- The northeast region has witnessed a growth in the level of urbanization. This has been as a consequence of development in terms of infrastructure that led to the growth of local businesses and towns growing into cities along with the migration of people into the urban centres. This urbanization has taken place in the absence of sustained urban amenities such as proper drainage system, clean water, roads; transport growth has taken place in the region along with the growing urban population, putting a strain on the ecology of the region.
- The acute poverty along with the virtual absence of alternative modes of securing livelihood has resulted in environmental degradation.
- According to the Forest Survey of India Report 2017, Arunachal Pradesh has the highest area of forest cover of 93.61 percent, a slight dip in comparison to 2005. Assam has the highest fall from 34.24 percent in 2005 to 23.62 percent in 2017. Tripura and Manipur also indicated an increase in afforestation.
- One of the ways to tackle forest degradation is through poverty alleviation and eradication in region. The key to addressing the ecological imbalance is to push development through poverty alleviation and changing the perception of forest as a valuable storehouse rather than a source of livelihood.
- There is a need to encourage local participation in the development process.

### **Dr. Ms. Lamya Mostaque from BISS Bangladesh**

- There is a need for cooperation in water and energy sectors for sustainable development of South Asian region.
- Energy cooperation between India and Bangladesh is more bilateral than regional.
- India has ongoing energy cooperation projects with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation (Electricity) was signed in the 18<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit Kathmandu.
- The northeastern region has untapped hydro power potential where only 2-2.5 percent has been harnessed.
- There is a need for clear-cut government policies and legal regime to encourage sustainable development.
- Increasing interdependence in the power sector will act as a catalyst in stabilizing long term relations.
- BIMSTEC and BBIN can serve as alternative for cooperation in the region along with SAARC.

- There are some challenges that all countries are going to face due to the large agenda of SDGs. Align global goals to regional, central and state for local governments to work together.

#### **K. Yhome, ORF**

- There is a continuing disconnect between perception of people in northeastern region and central government's initiative that needs to be bridged.
- There are politicization and securitization issues in Northeast India which need to be balanced.
- There is a need to learn to give and take ownership to local people. Local people can identify challenges and will be able to connect to mainstream policies.
- Lessons to be drawn from border management are also important. Culture, connectivity, commerce and conservation should be included.
- There is a need to develop an eco-system of peace to work together.

#### **Mirza Rehman, IIT Guwahati**

- There is a need to connect Northeast India through peace, progress and prosperity. The understanding of peace, progress and prosperity cannot be in a linear narrative in NE India. Questions of inequality among communities and sustainability should be addressed.
- Development policies cannot bypass aspects of long term sustainability of development interventions and infrastructure. Development policies have linked unequal spaces and it cannot by itself talk to communities.
- Development policies have to be organically linked to the ecological landscape of the region.

#### **Interaction**

- Question was asked as to how truly the structure of Gross National Happiness (GNH) maneuver variables of different linguistic and ethnic communities living in Bhutan? The scholar from Bhutan stated that Bhutan is a large homogenous society and consisted of different groups. The country does not offer privileges for mainstream or major groups at the expense of others.
- Question was raised regarding the status of women in Bhutan. It was also asked if there is any reservation for women and the rate of women's participation in policy making process. The scholar from Bhutan replied that in Bhutan, it has been proven that men are happier than women. Women are lagging behind men in conventional areas like education, literacy, living standard, housing and so forth, whereas they are performing better in non-conventional areas like culture, community, trust, compassion, emotions. Women do all sorts of unaccounted work like house-keeping, child-rearing although women are given equal opportunities and there is much progress. However, there is still a lot of backlog for women empowerment which need to be addressed.

**The rapporteur for the session was Dr. Chayanika Deka, RF, ICWA.**

## MODERATED ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

The moderated Round Table Discussion was Presided by Shri **PP Srivasatava Shrivastav, Former IAS** and jointly moderated by Dr. Nibedita Ray, Director Research, ICWA and Shri Sabyasachi Dutta, Director, AsCon.

Shri Srivastava stated the following in his opening remarks:

- In the deliberations carried out in the last two days it was noted that even after 70 years of Independence there is a huge gap between the people and the Indian state. However, we need to remember that the Central Government is sympathetic towards NE. But if problems still exist we need to sort it out.
- The purpose of the young scholars' forum is to bridge the gap between officials (policy makers) and scholars
- Growth means movement and movement means old things have to give way to new things. For this there are three main things; Connectivity Highway (people-to-people interaction at physical, intellectual, spiritual level), Prosperity Highway (trade and commerce, culture of entrepreneurship), and Progress Highway (Improvement in governance, transparency, participation)
- Introspection is another important point which requires abandonment of blame game. The idea of border management needs a change. Border security means security of all the dimensions on both sides of the border.
- Youth can bring change with the government. Wisdom lies in acknowledging what is lacking with us. The environment of extortion and violence has been a serious problem faced by the people of the NE states.

**It was followed by a discussion among young scholars (from North Eastern states, neighbouring countries and scholars from Delhi) participating in the two day seminar.**

### Speaker I

- Do not commit the mistake of thinking that India is doing a favour to the North East. We should have the bigger picture in mind. It's about the larger international trade via the NE.
- In terms of population, we need to remember that NE cannot be a threat to India. The politics in appointments in colleges and universities, especially the Indira Gandhi Tribal University, are a case in point.
- Resist the homogeneity of the region and argue in a sustained manner for the heterogeneity of the NE.

## Speaker II

- We welcome the Act East policy, but when it comes to implementation we do not know the department concerned.
- The Government has offered several start-up plans but the conditions applied are impractical. For instance, for a fruit storage facility I was told to have at least 5 crore rupees in my account in order to be eligible for the start-up scheme. When such things happen we feel completely out of the game.

## Speaker III

- I agree that the Central Government has done its best, but the kind of state that the region is in only shows that the Government has failed miserably.
- Government has not had the foresight to pursue global economic development which could have helped the NE. In fact, the region ended up serving as a convenient passage for such international partnerships.
- There is no proper police or civilian officer at the borders. We only see the presence of the army, which is both intimidating and threatening. There should be a civilian office or a grievance cell.

## Speaker IV

- There are a lot of expectations and apprehensions from the Act East policy. For instance, increasing securitisation, maintaining of ecological balance. Consultations must be held along with face-to-face interaction with the stakeholders.
- Some kind of paper must be done on the carbon footprint of the Act East policy. We need an agenda for research and for academics to take it forward. (may be something on sustainable development)

## Speaker V

- NE has seen a lot of conflicts and we do not want future conflicts (personal, communal or ecological). There is an inherent democratic deficit and this needs to be addressed. We look forward to wider participation by communities.

## Speaker VI

- Representation of NE in Indian movies. This may help in breaking the stereotypes.

## Speaker VII

- The Minister had said that the hostel for the NE students in Delhi is almost complete. But coming from the ground, I would like to state that the foundation for the hostel has not been laid, forget its completion.

### **Speaker VIII**

- The ubiquitous presence of the army. We have to show our Identity Cards everywhere. There is complete lack of trust between the state and the people. We need to look at the legal aspect. The right to life is under constant threat in the region due to the army's attitude towards the locals.

### **Speaker IX**

- We need to look into Sectoral Development Initiatives and capitalise on efforts already undertaken with a bottom-up approach.

### **Speaker X**

- We are a bridge between the people and policy makers. I take this opportunity very seriously and will take it forward. If we do not have skilled people what benefits will the efforts have for the state to give to the people?
- We need to work on capacity building and reach out to the locals with actual benefits.

### **Speaker XI**

- Central Government has to be sincere in rooting out corruption. If the party is not voted to power, you will not give funds. Has the government ever taken the effort to enquire where the funds are really going?

### **Speaker XII**

- We can also look at the idea of federalism and foreign policy in relation to powers given to the state. This may include the power of negotiation with neighbouring countries.
- Given the diversity of the region, we need to talk about proportional representation.
- Ensure objectivity in evaluation and monitoring of projects.

### **Speaker XIII**

- Develop a pedagogy, knowledge about the communities living in the NE. The NCERT books have little reference to NE India.
- Dissemination of correct knowledge as well as maintain quality of information and text produced in state education departments.

### **Speaker XIV**

- Development of NE to be a priority.
- Issue of sustainability could be a research project where one can look into the demands of the ASEAN countries and the product capability of the NE. This could be channelized in the larger international trade.

**The Rapporteur for the session was Dr. Ambreen Agha, RF, ICWA.**

### Valedictory Session

Opening remarks were given by **Dr. Dhrubajyoti Bhattacharjee, RF, ICWA** and **Dr. Sabyasachi Dutta, Director, AsCon** who briefed on the deliberations that took place in the various sessions.

The valedictory address was delivered by **Shri Naveen Verma, Secretary, DoNER.**

- He appreciated that ICWA and AsCon have been able to provide a platform where both policy makers as well as young scholars could interact, which strengthened the understanding of each other's challenges while bringing the rest of India to the North East.
- He remained extremely optimistic regarding the fast growing developmental work that is taking place, and hoped that the region is turned into a zone of prosperity and growth.
- He further stated that during his frequent visit to the region, he can confidently say that the days of violence and conflict in these states are over, and it was time for all these states to steadily move towards holistic, sustainable, equitable, balanced growth and development.

### Interaction

- While taking questions he stated that as the Secretary of DoNER, he would be always eager to meet young scholars to take their suggestions and listen to the problems that they face.
- He appreciated that some of the scholars present were actively engaged in creating social and economic platforms for supporting the youth from the North East who were in Delhi for education and employment.

The closing remarks were given by Shri **PP Srivasatava**, who thanked Secretary, DoNER profusely.

Vote of thanks was proposed by **Dr. Temjenmeren Ao, RF, ICWA.**

## Main Takeaways

- The two day international seminar provided a unique space for interaction between those creating policy and those who are being impacted upon by them.
- It was understood that there is a need to have constant interaction, creating a space for deeper engagement of youth and civil society, so that there remains formal mechanisms which could remain as instruments in clearing misgivings and misunderstandings, know about problems and challenges, understand various sensitivities.
- The interactions and discussions led to the creation of an agenda for future research relevant to the region and the immediate neighbourhood. The areas of research that evolved from the discussions and presentations.
  - Mapping Connectivity Corridors – building a detailed view of the pre-partition connectivity corridors that existed within the region which in fact was a network of rails, motorable roads, waterways (inland as well as maritime), walking trails, and even air routes that kept the region connected, facilitating movement of peoples, skills and ideas. The existing connectivity corridors and those proposed as well as those outside can also be assessed for understanding their viability as well as scope of revival.
  - Examining products for creating trans boundary value chains – assessing possibilities of creating larger basket of commodities that may be developed through cross border value chains enabling greater economic synergies amongst the states of Bangladesh, India and Nepal, taking example of organic farming, bamboo cultivation etc.
  - Make studies understanding the opportunities and challenges from SAARC, BBIN, BIMSTEC and MGC and finding ways for their rejuvenation.
  - Focus on Border Communities and their livelihoods: Ways and means of development of communities in Border Areas. The scholars, particularly those who have familial bonds to specific border can undertake research on measures of creation of trans-boundary value chains through established mechanisms or evolving new vistas.
  - Studying and assessing the Government of India MSME initiative and the new industrial policy formulated especially for the northeast; and to examine the fits and gaps.
  - To launch a new narrative around movement for flows of skills, ideas and people beyond, the security centric paradigm of borders that exist today to one that is based on collaboration based on information sharing, institutional linkages and infrastructure facilitation.
  - To continue with this process of dialogue, under the forum of ICWA and AsCON, making DoNER an integral part of interaction amongst stakeholders, scholars, academicians etc. The forum can be held in Shillong, New Delhi, or any cities in the Northeastern states.

*Report made by Dr. Dhruvajyoti Bhattacharjee*