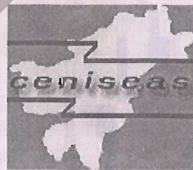


**BETWEEN SOUTH AND  
SOUTHEAST ASIA:  
NORTHEAST INDIA  
AND  
THE LOOK EAST POLICY**

**SANJIB BARUAH**

*Sanjib Baruah*, SERIES EDITOR



**Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast  
Asia Studies**

**OMEOKUMAR DAS INSTITUTE OF  
SOCIAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT  
GUWAHATI, ASSAM, INDIA**

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**CENISEAS PAPERS**  
Number 4

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Guwahati, Assam, India

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Published by

Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies  
Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development  
K.K.Bhatta Road  
Chenikuthi  
Guwahati 781003, Assam, India.

Price: Rupees Twenty Five Only

Printed at:  
Everywhere  
Dispur, Guwahati-781006, Assam  
India.

## SERIES EDITOR'S NOTE

The CENISEAS papers seek to promote the intellectual mission of the Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies [CENISEAS] (briefly described on the back cover of this publication). The Look East policy — India's efforts to improve bi-lateral and multi-lateral ties with the countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) — and its implications for Northeast India, is a major area of CENISEAS's research and public educational programming.

This paper by Sanjib Baruah, head of CENISEAS, outlines the opportunities and challenges of the Look East policy from a Northeast Indian vantage point. Baruah argues that the policy holds promises of historic proportions for the region. It could give Northeast India access to global markets and technology and help the region overcome the handicaps of its landlocked condition. There are potential benefits in other areas as well. A number of Northeast Indian ethnic groups have roots in Southeast Asia. The region's history and culture, Baruah argues, can be a valuable soft power resource in the Look East policy. On the model of the European Union's accommodation to paradiplomacy — the international activities of domestic regional entities — he suggests creating a space

in the Look East policy for cultural and economic diplomacy by Northeast Indian states.

There are, however, significant challenges ahead. Baruah points out that the Indian heartland's ties with South-east Asia have historically been primarily maritime-oriented and not continental. Even today it is cheaper and easier for India to trade with Southeast Asia by sea rather than by land. The land route is through a difficult physical terrain and there are political uncertainties as well as significant risks. There is for instance the danger that improved roads through Myanmar would bring in drugs, illegal migrants, infectious disease and small arms into Northeast India more easily than before.

But to live up to its potential of becoming Northeast India's road to peace and prosperity, Baruah believes that the Look East policy will have to develop by facing up to those risks, i.e. the risks will have to be actively assessed and managed and not just avoided. He argues for a robust continental thrust to the Look East policy including a clear vision of a cross-border region-building project between Northeast India and its transnational neighbours on the east.

India does not have to go it alone. Thanks to the interest of multilateral organizations and of other major countries with a stake in the globalised economy, there is a virtual boom in the construction of cross-national highways, road, rail and air corridors in the world today. But multilateral development assistance for building roads through Myanmar has not been forthcoming because of economic sanctions on Myanmar by the United States and the European Union. However, in the US and in Europe today there is growing recognition that the

sanctions are not working. This creates an opportunity for India. Baruah believes that India is well positioned to play a leadership role in coordinating international policy towards Myanmar. We can promote reconciliation between the military and the democratic forces and facilitate a political transition in Myanmar.

The author wishes to thank a number of institutions and individuals for giving him the opportunity to engage with the subject. He is especially grateful to Mrinal Miri, Chairman of the Governing Board of the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development and to the other members of the Board, and to Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed, Director of the Institute and his colleagues on the Faculty, for inviting him to head the Centre and to contribute to the formulation of its intellectual mission.

A number of speaking engagements in the first quarter of 2004 enabled the author to work on various parts of the argument developed in this paper. He is grateful to Jatin Hazarika, I.A.S. and N.K. Das, I.A.S. for the invitation to present the 50<sup>th</sup> Golden Jubilee Oration of the Assam Branch of the Indian Institute of Public Administration; to Atul Sarma, Vice Chancellor of Arunachal University for the invitation to deliver the 20<sup>th</sup> Foundation Day Lecture of Arunachal University; and to Rajindra Vora of Pune University, India and Anne Feldhaus of Arizona State University, USA for the invitation to speak at the Arizona State University's symposium on Regions and Regional Consciousness. Short segments of this paper have appeared in two articles published in the *Indian Express* (12<sup>th</sup> December 2003) and the *Telegraph* (9<sup>th</sup> February 2004).

The Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies and the CENISEAS Papers series have been made possible by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

**Sanjib Baruah**

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Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies

**Between South and Southeast Asia:  
Northeast India and the Look East Policy**

“Nations come and go, why not regions?”

— Donald Emerson<sup>1</sup>

“The construction of regions and territories is part of the perpetual transformation of the spatial system, in which regions emerge, exist for some time and may finally disappear.”

— Anssi Paasi, 2000

Northeast India is the northeastern borderland of South Asia, but the region can also be described as the north-western borderland of Southeast Asia. A major two-volume work entitled *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations* published by the Princeton University Press in 1967 included a chapter on Assam: the province then more or less coincided with what is called Northeast India today. Peter Kunstadter,

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Acharya, 2003: 24

the editor of the volume, explained the inclusion this way. Assam, he wrote, has a large population of tribal and minority peoples whose languages are more closely related to the languages of Southeast Asia than to those of the Indian subcontinent. Their cultures too resemble the cultures of their neighbours in Southeast Asia. Like the southern boundary of China that does not mark a cultural or linguistic division, India's eastern border, wrote Kunstadter, also does not mark off a cultural or linguistic area (Kunstadter, 1967: 205).

The idea that South Asia is a discrete geographical region separated from Southeast Asia is a fiction. There are no "natural" geographical boundaries separating South and Southeast Asia along the Indo-Myanmarese border. In territorial terms today's 'South Asia' is to a large extent successor to the entity called 'British India'. Northeast India's ties — historical, cultural, social and economic — do not stop at these international boundaries.

We know from the rise and fall of regions like Eastern Europe or Central Asia that regions are not objective geographical realities, but rather contingent and contested entities. The Japanese occupation of Myanmar across Northeast India is a critical episode that led to the Indo-Myanmarese border becoming the dividing line between South and Southeast Asia. The Western Alliance formed in 1943 — the foundation of the post-war geopolitical category Southeast Asia — subsequently placed Myanmar within the geographical ambit of the South East Asian Command [SEAC]. A lot has happened since then. What gives Southeast Asia its coherence, writes a scholar of the region

must count as one of the finest acts of collective self-imagination undertaken by a region's nationalist political elite in the wake of liberation from European and American colonialism. As with nationalism and nation-states, regions may be 'imagined', designed, constructed and defended" (Acharya, 2003: 24).

Southeast Asia is of course not unique in being constructed or imagined as a region. The idea that regions, to paraphrase Michael Walzer, are "social constructions: imagined, invented put together" do not imply that they are any "less real or less authentic than some other" (Walzer, 1995: 324). Indeed Etienne Balibar even suggests that may be "only imaginary communities" are "real" since "every social community reproduced by the functioning of institutions is imaginary, that is, it is based on a projection of individual existence into the weft of a collective narrative" (Balibar, 1991: 93).

It is not my intention to privilege Northeast India's ties to Southeast Asia over its ties to the Indian subcontinent except to note that the living within the boundaries of a modern territorial state has a powerful effect on making some ties seem more natural than others. However, there are slippages in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts to naturalize the space of nation states that become most apparent in border regions. My particular concern here is the "territorial trap" in which Northeast India has been caught as a "sensitive border region" and the opportunities for the region in our era of globalism to get out of this trap and connect with its transnational neighbours<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> I owe the phrase territorial trap to John Agnew (1994).

The paper makes the case for building a cross-border region connecting Northeast India with its neighbours on the east, and explores the prospects for such a project in light of the Look East Policy — India's efforts to strengthen relations with Southeast Asian countries — and the changing dynamics of international diplomatic and economic relations.

### *Historicising Land-locked Northeast India*

Northeast India faces daunting developmental challenges because of its landlocked condition. The Partition of 1947, as B.G. Verghese puts it, "caused the extreme isolation of the Northeast." He describes the region as South Asia's third landlocked "state" along with Bhutan and Nepal. The loss of connectivity and market access as a result of the Partition, he said, "set its economy back by at least a quarter century" (Verghese, 2001). Historian David Ludden puts the same point even more forcefully. Partition, he said, referring to its impact on Northeast India:

cut old routes of communication and mobility across new national borders more dramatically than almost anywhere in the world. The Bengal Assam railway tracks from Guwahati to Dhaka were torn up at the Cachar-Sylhet border, in 1965. Now it is much easier to communicate by phone or mail between Dhaka and London than between Dhaka and Guwahati (Ludden, 2003: 21).

However, on the east and the north Northeast India's isolation

from its neighbourhood has much older roots: that which came about as a result of the advent of Western dominance over sea routes and over global trade<sup>3</sup> and more particularly the British conquest of the region and the decisions to draw lines between the hills and plains, to put barriers on trade between Bhutan and Assam and to treat Myanmar as a strategic frontier — British India's buffer against French Indochina and China. While the British colonial rulers built a major new transportation infrastructure, aimed primarily at taking tea and other resources out of Assam, the disruption of old trade routes remained colonialism's most enduring negative legacy.

Northeast India was on the southern trails of the Silk Road.<sup>4</sup> This part of the Northeast Indian story is not well

<sup>3</sup> At a symposium on global urban problems economist Jeffrey Sachs, one of the leading contemporary thinkers on development, referred to Afghanistan's capital city Kabul as "one of our biggest challenges." "We should not pretend," he said, "that Afghanistan's problems started with the Taliban and will end with the Taliban." Its problems, he joked "started with Vasco de Gama in 1498, when he put the Silk Road out of business by showing the sea route from Europe to Asia and back" (Sachs, 2002). Whether Vasco da Gama's discovery of the sea route had put the silk route out of business is a matter of some debate. But Sachs's remarks go a long way in historicising the land-locked predicament of contemporary Afghanistan. Sach's comments can be applied to Northeast India as well.

<sup>4</sup> The Silk Road — it owes its name to the 19<sup>th</sup> century German geographer, Baron von Richthofen — should not be construed to mean that it was either a single trade route or that it was only silk that was traded along the road. The term refers to a network of trails that connected the western region of China through Central Asia to the Mediterranean. Along the way, there were branch routes leading to other destinations and from where the Silk Road ended there were trade networks that carried goods to destinations in the Mediterranean world, Europe and Asia.

known outside the circle of historians of the ancient and the medieval world. A review of the historical literature on a related theme by Francoise Pommaret, a French historian of Northeast India's neighbour Bhutan, gives a useful picture of Northeast India's place in these trade routes. Pommaret summarizes the state of scholarly consensus as follows: "Kamrupa was on the trading route between southwest China and India. Even though the existence of this route seems well established, its importance as a trading route and its age are controversial" (Pommaret, 1999: 8).

Xuanzang or Hsuan-tsang, the seventh century Chinese pilgrim who visited Kamrupa, had learnt from the people he spoke to that the journey to the southwest borders of Szechuan took about two months but that the mountains and rivers were hard to pass (Watters, 1904; cited in Pommaret: 8). Another historian W. Liebenthal believes that there was a route into Kamrupa from Szechuan perhaps much before Xuanzang's time but it did not become a trade route (Liebenthal, 1956; cited by Pommaret, 1999: 8).

But there is evidence that this route was used even as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. "Assamese merchants," writes N.K. Basu, "went to Yunnan in China by the line of trade through Sadia, Bisa and across the Patkoi range of mountains" (Basu, 1970; cited in Pommaret, 1999: 9). The Mon-yul corridor in Arunachal Pradesh was another link between Northeast India and Tibet. It passed through Tshona dzong and Tawang and was the shortest route between Tibet and the plains of Assam (Pommaret, 1999: 10).

Apart from silk and other goods, the Silk Road also carried ideas, art and culture. Thus it facilitated the spread of Buddhism across Asia. Indeed it is only by taking into account the importance of the southern trails of the Silk Road during ancient and medieval times that it is possible to understand the importance of the Assamese towns of Hajo as an important Buddhist pilgrimage site or of Sualkuchi as an important silk center. There was a time when Hajo was thought of as being Kusinagara, the site of Buddha's historical death and it was opened as a pilgrimage site by a Bhutanese chief and his religious teacher. Hajo became a meeting place of pilgrims from "all of Bhutan and Tibet and even from as far afield as Ladakh and Southwest China" (Aris, 1979: 113). Hajo became a thriving pilgrimage and trading center. It had a cosmopolitan population since it was a pilgrimage center for Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists. The Muslims practiced metal casting and the nearby town of Sualkuchi became an important centre of silk trade (Aris, 1979; cited in Pommaret 1999: 11-12).

A piece of trivia from the world of spices bears the traces of Northeast India's place in ancient trade routes. The botanical name for the cultivated cinnamon bark of southern China is *cinnamomum cassia*. The cultivation of cinnamon in southern China goes back centuries before the Christian era. Yet the most likely etymological source for the term "cassia" is the Assamese term for the Khasi people, Khasia. Apparently cinnamon found its way from the Khasi hills to southern China in very ancient times. Modern experiments have shown that the cinnamon bark of "the eastern Himalayas" is "substantially identical" to Chinese cinnamon bark (Miller, 1969:

75). It seems that very early on cinnamon was brought from the Khasi hills to be widely cultivated in the area that later became known as southern China.

Northeast India's place in trade along the southern Silk Road serves as a reminder that the region's recent history as a remote, underdeveloped and troubled hinterland is neither inevitable nor unchangeable. Its marginalisation has to be understood only in historical terms as the product of changes brought about by powerful global forces including colonial and postcolonial geopolitics. The emergence of British India and the international political boundaries drawn during colonial rule provided the foundation of the postcolonial political order of nation states. The Partition of 1947 and the state of diplomatic relations between India and its neighbours turned Northeast India into a "sensitive border region" requiring special attention based on national security concerns. The condition has not been conducive to the region's economic and political well-being.

### **Northeast India Today: Imagining a Different Future**

In recent years Northeast India has been known for its numerous armed insurgencies, political violence, human rights violations and a generalized democracy deficit — a condition that I have described elsewhere as durable disorder (Baruah, 2002). In both official and academic writings, this condition is often explained by the region's supposed underdevelopment and its poor integration with the pan-Indian 'mainstream.' In this line of thinking it is difficult to escape the failed narratives<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> I owe this phrase to Zilkia Janer. See Janer, 2003.

of national development and nation building in order to imagine an end to the current troubles. The idea that Northeast India is economically backward and underdeveloped and that its ties with the national mainstream are fragile — whatever their validity — has the function of lending legitimacy to today's durable disorder. The democracy deficit, for instance, can be justified as being the result of an exceptional circumstance that would disappear when the region catches up with the rest of India and joins the national mainstream — whatever that might mean.

The futuristic talk of economic development and of Northeast India joining the 'national mainstream' contrasts sharply with the vision of the militias that mostly hark back to history and emphasizes the region's historical autonomy from mainland India. For instance, Assamese independentist intellectuals, according to one writer, 're-read, re-interpret and even re-create history' in order to make the case that "Assam had always been a free nation" (Misra, 2000: 62). The names of the region's numerous ethnic militias evoke the memory of independent old kingdoms. Some of these new histories emphasize the region's historical ties with Southeast Asia. The claims to the continuity of historical ties are of course not unproblematical.

For instance, in recent years there has been a powerful movement of cultural revivalism among the Ahoms of Assam — the westernmost of the Tai-speaking peoples spread in mainland Southeast Asia. After witnessing the performance of a number of Ahom rituals in Assam the German scholar of Tai

culture, B.J. Terwiel wrote:

The leaders of the Ahoms, in their search for an Ahom identity, were thwarted by the loss of virtually all of the Southeast Asian culture, the people long ago having adopted the Assamese language and various variants of the Hindu religion. The old priestly castes, through the custodianship of old manuscripts and their ability to read old Ahom texts aloud, had created the impression that they were still fluent in Ahom. This exaggeration of their knowledge placed them in a difficult position, when, as a result of the exuberant growth of the political revivalist movement, there arose a strong demand for the resurrection of ancient state, community and private rituals. In response to this demand the priests did what they could, searching for clues in the annals, with the aid of dictionaries coining Ahom phrases, and, . . . creating new ceremonial elements virtually out of thin air, thus producing a make-believe ancient ritual (Terwiel, 2002: 22).

While Northeast India's numerous revivalist and identity movements and their cultural politics are interesting in themselves, the reason they demand special attention is that in recent years they have animated certain currents of independentist politics. It is apparent that only small minorities of people are committed to an agenda of political independence from India. We know from the experience of decades of ethnic militancy and counter-insurgency that it is not

difficult for the Indian state to control and contain insurgencies. However, arguments that posit the wish of the silent majority against the will of small militias can be dangerous. They make the continuation of the present policies of counter-insurgency seem unavoidable – they appear as the best of a number of bad options.

Are there ways of imagining Northeast India's future outside the failed narratives of nation building and national development? This paper takes up this question in the spirit of what political theorist Peter Breiner (while interpreting Karl Mannheim) calls "the utopian impulse" to project possibility beyond a given reality as a "discovery process of political projects that may later become possible and realistic" (Breiner, 2001: 4).

#### *Regions, Transnationalism And Globalisation*

In his widely quoted, and equally widely criticized, remarks on the borderless world of the future, Keniche Ohmae had said that the nation state "has become an unnatural, even dysfunctional, unit for organizing human activity. . . . It represents no genuine, shared community of economic interests; it defines no meaningful flows of economic activity. In fact, it overlooks the true linkages and synergies that exist" (Ohmae, 1993: 78). The lines that matter on the global economic map, according to him, are those defining what he called "region states." Region states, according to him are natural economic zones. They may fall within a country or they may straddle the borders of two or more countries. Among the regions that illustrate his point are: Catalonia in Spain, Hong Kong and

the adjacent areas of southern China, the Kansai region around Osaka in Japan and the area combining the Canadian province of British Columbia and the US state of Washington. In India regions like those around Bangalore and Hyderabad — the centers of India's software and pharmaceutical industries — might play a similar role in the global economy.

Since Ohmae wrote those lines more than a decade ago it has been possible to build effective cross-border regions only in some areas; and even in those areas the demand for flexibility in border-crossings has been met, not with generalized forms of easy and fast track border-crossings, but border-control practices that seek to combine flexibility for selected groups with rigidity for others.

The backdrop to these developments of course is what is commonly called globalisation. It may be useful to distinguish two elements in globalisation: (a) the communication revolution and its impact on the nature and scale of production and the resultant reconfiguration of economic space and (b) the phenomenon of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation including the softening of national borders enabling the formation of transnational regions.

It barely needs to be repeated today that the revolution in technology leading to declining transport costs and the virtually free transmission of digitized information has dramatically reduced distances. Production costs under these conditions encourage the organization of manufacturing by globally dispersing operations to exploit differentials in wages or natural or other resource endowments. For instance a manufacturer

in a developed country can choose to locate the labour-intensive parts of the production process in certain countries and capital-intensive parts in others. We in India have become familiar with the phenomenon of business process outsourcing by US and European corporations: airlines, banks and other financial organizations, even health care providers have located their back offices and service centers in Bangalore, Delhi and other Indian cities.

New technology facilitates this way of organizing production. For instance, a Japanese company producing computers can produce components like microchips and transistors in Japan and then send them for further assembly to Thailand, Malaysia or China. The finished product can be exported back to Japan or to markets elsewhere. Similarly it is common now for the automobile industry in Japan, US or Europe to buy parts made in factories in another country. Even in less technology intensive sectors such as the garment industry it is common for synthetic yarn to be produced in one country and for it to be exported to another country for the production of garments. Indeed trade in components as opposed to final products is now a growing proportion of the total world trade in manufactured goods. Many developing countries are beneficiaries of this new international division of labour. Countries like China and India are benefiting in more complex ways, in India's case notably because of its role as a global leader in information technology and a large skilled labour power ready to take advantage of the business process outsourcing by western corporations.

Today's globalised production process depends on

smooth and low cost transportation — goods have to be shipped by trucks, by train, by plane in an almost seamless manner. Furthermore, physical connectivity would have to be supplemented by good telecommunications connectivity. To put it simply it is impossible to participate actively in the global economy without access to a good transportation and communication infrastructure. The synergy between different modes of communication is sometimes missed. Thus the cell phone or the Internet cannot be a substitute for a physical transportation infrastructure. Telephone or video-conferencing, for instance, are not substitutes for face-to-face business meetings but necessary supplements to them. Thus to participate fully in this globalised economy a place needs both good air connectivity and telecommunications connectivity. For instance, the computer, the telephone and the Internet may give a retailer in the US ready access to instantaneous data on trends in changing demand. Thus he can be ready to order a different line from his manufacturer in India in the middle of a season instead of waiting for the next season. But for that to happen the supplier and manufacturer would have to be located in places from where they can produce and ship very quickly and with full predictability to the markets where the demand is.

To facilitate this kind of globalised production some of the rigidities of political borders — tariffs, customs and other restrictions — will have to go. Whether this really happens or not is another matter. But the pressures on borders often created during the colonial era and reinforced during the golden era of nation states are clear.

As national economies respond to the pressures of

globalisation, in many parts of the world, notably in Europe, regions have emerged as a key level of governance, innovation and policy-making. There is significant pressure for region building — a “political project in which leaders, build up a territorial form of reference and forge a territorial system of action” (Keating, 1999) — even when a region may lack long-standing cultural ties. Can Northeast India and its transnational neighbours forge such a territorial system of action?

#### *Transnational Region Building: Potential Economic Dividends*

It is worth spending some time to imagine the economic opportunities that cross-border region building might mean for Northeast India. The region is known today for its high incidence of poverty. “Though the causes of poverty are deep and complex,” writes economist Sushil Khanna of the Institute of Management in Calcutta, referring to Northeast India as well as Nepal, Bangladesh and parts of eastern India, “there is no doubt that the disruption of trade and commerce and communication due to the partition of the country, as well as India’s import substitution strategy of industrialization and gradual erection of barriers to international trade, have disrupted economies that till 50 years ago were well integrated, and deprived the region of the gains from trade based on comparative advantage” (Khanna, 2002: 3).

When national borders define economic space, decisions about locating economic enterprises often work against border regions. This has been the source of some of Northeast India’s past tensions with the Government of India. Borders

tend to distort markets, thanks to tariffs and other rigidities. Producers avoid locating industries near a border since trade barriers limit the market for goods and the area that supplies inputs. It is more rational to locate in an area that is closer to the core of the domestic market. The 'border effect' thus leads producers to locate industries away from international borders. In Northeast India we have heard arguments based on the logic of the border effect being made during controversies about the location of public enterprises. For instance Barauni was supposed to be a better location than Guwahati for concentrating refining capacity. That argument assumed that the market for the products of the refinery would be strictly limited to India and that one could not sell them in Bangladesh or Myanmar without tariffs and other restrictions that would increase the price for consumers in those countries.

But if one begins to imagine the economic integration of Northeast India with surrounding areas in neighbouring countries — going well beyond border trade in a few selected items — the calculations would obviously be different. Border regions will cease to be border regions in any meaningful economic sense. Economic integration could bring about a spurt of economic activities. The removal of trade barriers and harmonization of tariffs on third country products could make border regions attractive sites for investments once we take into account full access to new cross-border markets. Such effects are, of course, not inevitable. Yet the disappearance of the border effect is bound to open new economic opportunities.

Some of the spectacular examples of the impact of economic integration on border areas can be seen in North

America. The border regions of northern Mexico have benefited enormously from the integration of Mexico's economy with that of the United States as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). There has been a manufacturing boom in northern Mexico as a result of NAFTA. It was not only the result of US companies moving south of the border to take advantage of low labour costs, but many Asian producers have also moved to the region in order to produce for the US market. To be sure, many negative effects of NAFTA are apparent in these areas as well. On the north the economies of Canadian provinces have become more strongly integrated to the US than before. The value of cross-border trade between Canadian provinces and the US now far exceeds inter-provincial trade within Canada. "If Canada gradually breaks up," wrote two Canadian newspaper columnists recently, "individual provinces may seek a Puerto Rico-style association with the US" (Lovewell and Westell, 2003). Puerto Rico, of course, belongs to the United States, but it is not a constituent state of the US federation.

No one would claim that integration of Northeast India's economy with Bangladesh, Bhutan or Myanmar would immediately produce effects like the relocation of industries taking place in Mexico or Canada as a result of the market-power of the US economy. But when a natural economic region — in Keniche Ohmae's sense — is allowed to emerge without the constraints of national boundaries, the locational advantages and disadvantages are necessarily very different from those in a situation when bor-

der effects are in full force.

### *A Transnational Politics Of Recognition?*

Apart from economic opportunities, transnational region building can bring important dividends in terms of Northeast India's political troubles. The politics of recognition (Taylor, 1994) is a recurrent theme in the politics of ethnic militancy in northeast India. In the case of Europe regional identities that were seen as threats by European nation-states during their hey-day are flourishing inside the European Union.

The Maastricht Treaty of 1993 establishes the EU's Committee of the Regions in order to give local and regional interests influence in EU decision-making. Some of the historically distinct forms of identities that animate regional politics in Europe are not unlike those that animate the militias of Northeast India. The European political landscape today is dotted by paradiplomacy — international activities on the part of regions and stateless nations. Thus there are more than 200 regional 'embassies' in Brussels that lobby the European Commission and network with each other. For national groups that straddle inter-state boundaries such as the Basque Country, Catalonia, Ireland or the Tyrol, the EU affords the opportunity to pool resources and pursue a transnational politics of recognition that has been able to compensate for their marginalisation within nation states.

Could not EU-style multi-level citizenship allow historic regions like Assam, Manipur, Nagalim and Tripura to reclaim their identities through a transnational politics of rec-

ognition? Even limited cooperation between India and Myanmar can improve conditions in Northeast India. For instance it can make a difference in the current Naga peace process that could end one of the world's oldest armed conflicts. Since Nagas live on both sides of the Indo-Myanmarese border a proposal that might be able to capture Naga political imagination and break the deadlock in the peace process is one that would bring the Nagas of Myanmar into the picture. That, of course, would involve taking the Myanmarese government into confidence.

How realistic is this scenario? Any consideration of its feasibility would have to address a number of obvious obstacles. I will turn to them later. But I would first like to show that India's Look East policy — the overtures since the 1990s toward Southeast Asian countries — holds promises of historic proportions for transnational region-building in the area.

### **The Look East Policy: Where is it Headed?**

India's Look East policy began in the early 1990s during the government led by P.V. Naramsimha Rao. All subsequent governments have supported the policy and have built on it. "ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] and India," said I.K. Gujral to an audience in Jakarta in 1996, when he was India's External Affairs Minister, "are no awkward strangers, we have been neighbours and friends in time, space and existence for as long back as we can remember."

Our habits, customs and social mores, our myths

and legends, the clothes we drape, the cuisine we savor, the art, craft and design that is our shared legacy, even the languages we speak — all bear testimony to this good neighbourliness.

Every aspect of India's ethos, he said, reflects the "footprints of South-East Asia." But "the forces of history and circumstances" had interrupted this relationship. Colonialism and the Cold War, he said "drew artificial boundaries between us" (Gujral, 1996).

These days key Indian foreign and defense policy strategists reject the category South Asia and hint at a natural connection between India and Southeast Asia. They regard South Asia as a category that is disconnected from India's history and civilization, geography and strategic imperatives. The emergence of the term 'South Asia,' says Jasjit Singh, Director of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, reflects a "Washington-centred worldview" that "imagined a world where the Indian subcontinent simply disappeared at the edges of peripheral vision." India's Andaman Islands, he reminds readers, are closer to Indonesia and Thailand than to the Indian mainland (Singh, 2000: 48).

Economics has been a prime mover of India's Look East policy. India had ignored the Asian economic miracle in its early phases since the lessons of the export-oriented economies of a few small countries indulged by the West seemed inapplicable to an economy of India's size and ambition. That view however, was badly shaken by the emergence of China

— its spectacular growth since the 1980s that is based on trade and a liberalized economy (Baru, 2000: 15).

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India's efforts to develop closer ties with Southeast Asia began paying off in 2002 when the ASEAN heads of government and the Indian prime minister met in a summit meeting in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh. Summit meetings with India will now take place after every annual meeting of ASEAN heads of government. ASEAN and India have agreed to work towards negotiating a free trade agreement in ten years. But bilateral free trade agreements between India and individual ASEAN countries such as Singapore and Thailand may be only a year away. 'India's Asian breakthrough' — the BBC headline for one of its reports on the Phnom Penh

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There are a number of bi-lateral and multi-lateral agreements that provide the foundation for India's growing relations with Southeast Asia. Of the multi-lateral relations are the Ganga-Mekong Sub-region and the Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation [BIMST-EC]. There is also the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Regional Economic Forum [BCIM Forum] — an exercise in second track diplomacy — that has its roots in the Kunming Initiative of 1999. Official statements by ASEAN and Indian leaders call for deeper integration of the economies of ASEAN and India in coming years.

Looked at from the perspective of the potential for cross-border region building between Northeast India and its eastern neighbours the most relevant bilateral relationship, of course, is India's relations with Myanmar. In a highly publicized event in 2001 the then External Affairs Minister, Mr. Jaswant Singh inaugurated the 160-km Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo road in Myanmar. The Rs. 90-crore road built by India's Border Road Organization was India's gift to Myanmar. In his speech inaugurating the road Singh said that "the natural movement of goods, people and services for the Northeast is not through Calcutta;" and he described the importance of "opening up the natural outlet of the Northeast" (Assam Tribune. 2001). Myanmar's Construction Minister, Major-General Saw Tun said that the "road will become a vital section of the designated Asian Highway running from Singapore to Istanbul passing through Myanmar and India" (Hindu, 2001). In

ognition? Even limited cooperation between India and Myanmar can improve conditions in Northeast India. For instance it can make a difference in the current Naga peace process that could end one of the world's oldest armed conflicts. Since Nagas live on both sides of the Indo-Myanmarese border a proposal that might be able to capture Naga political imagination and break the deadlock in the peace process is one that would bring the Nagas of Myanmar into the picture. That, of course, would involve taking the Myanmarese government into confidence.

How realistic is this scenario? Any consideration of its feasibility would have to address a number of obvious obstacles. I will turn to them later. But I would first like to show that India's Look East policy — the overtures since the 1990s toward Southeast Asian countries — holds promises of historic proportions for transnational region-building in the area.

### **The Look East Policy: Where is it Headed?**

India's Look East policy began in the early 1990s during the government led by P.V. Naramsimha Rao. All subsequent governments have supported the policy and have built on it. "ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] and India," said I.K. Gujral to an audience in Jakarta in 1996, when he was India's External Affairs Minister, "are no awkward strangers, we have been neighbours and friends in time, space and existence for as long back as we can remember."

Our habits, customs and social mores, our myths

and legends, the clothes we drape, the cuisine we savor, the art, craft and design that is our shared legacy, even the languages we speak — all bear testimony to this good neighbourliness.

Every aspect of India's ethos, he said, reflects the "footprints of South-East Asia." But "the forces of history and circumstances" had interrupted this relationship. Colonialism and the Cold War, he said "drew artificial boundaries between us" (Gujral, 1996).

These days key Indian foreign and defense policy strategists reject the category South Asia and hint at a natural connection between India and Southeast Asia. They regard South Asia as a category that is disconnected from India's history and civilization, geography and strategic imperatives. The emergence of the term 'South Asia,' says Jasjit Singh, Director of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, reflects a "Washington-centred worldview" that "imagined a world where the Indian subcontinent simply disappeared at the edges of peripheral vision." India's Andaman Islands, he reminds readers, are closer to Indonesia and Thailand than to the Indian mainland (Singh, 2000: 48).

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December 2003 the Foreign Ministers of Myanmar, Thailand and India met in Delhi to discuss the technical and funding issues for a 1,400-km transnational highway.

Let me now raise a few questions about the future direction of the Look East Policy that would determine the opportunities for cross-border region building across India's eastern borders.

*(a) Maritime Versus A Continental Orientation*

Northeast Indians think of Southeast Asian countries as their neighbours. But in a maritime sense the east coast of India — Orissa, Andhra or Tamilnadu — is also next-door to Southeast Asia. Indeed historically mainland India's ties with Southeast Asia have been more maritime-oriented than continental. The Indian Ocean Region has seen maritime commercial ties for millennia. The kingdoms of the Andhra and the Orissa coasts had maritime contact with Indochina. Even from the west coast of India "around 600 A.D the Saka kings of Gujarat set sail and reached the west coast of Java" (Baru, 2000: 12). At least one commentator attaches some significance to the fact that Naramsimha Rao — under whose leadership the Look East policy began — was the first Indian prime minister from peninsular India. He belongs to a place very close to the Coromandel coast, known for its maritime ties to Southeast Asia (Baru, 2000: 14).

As it has been in the past, even in modern times it is cheaper and less troublesome for India to trade with Southeast Asia by sea rather than by land. The land route not only

goes through a difficult physical terrain, there is a perception that the route is full of danger. It may be tempting therefore for India to build relationships with Southeast Asia that are primarily maritime rather than continentally oriented. Downplaying the continental dimension, however, will have costs not only for the region-building project that interests me but also in terms of India's diplomatic ambitions. It is not accidental that the world's only superpower, the United States, is both a continental and a maritime power. It is because of this dual orientation that it succeeded the maritime British and gained superiority over the continental Russians and Germans (Wang, 2000: 111). The eventual success of India's Look East policy will depend on India's ability to embrace both a maritime and a continental thrust in its Look East policy.

*b. Towards A Continental Look East Policy: A Seat At The Table For The Northeast*

One way to ensure a continental orientation to the Look East policy would be to give a direct role to the Northeastern states. In 1999, when China brought together experts, scholars and business people from China, India, Myanmar and Bangladesh to initiate a regional economic forum, it invited them to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province. The venue underscored Chinese intention to take advantage of Yunnan's geographical location and of its cultural affinities with its neighbours across the border — and to restore Yunnan's historical role as a bridge to Southeast Asia and south Asia.

Yunnan is well on its way. The road, air and rail links between Yunnan and the rest of China and with its transnational

neighbours are impressive. The Kunming-Vientiane road connects Yunnan to Laos. There is a rail link between Kunming and Hanoi. There are air routes connecting Kunming with Bangkok, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Hanoi, Yangon and Vientiane. The Lancang-Mekong river route links China with Laos, Myanmar and Thailand.

The Yunnan provincial government gives incentives to foreign investors in addition to those available in other parts of China. Kunming today is very much a pan-Asian international city. Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam have consulates in Kunming. Thus while Yunnan's provincial government plays a direct role in the institutions of the Greater Mekong Sub-region, there is little room for India's Northeastern states in the Mekong Ganga Cooperation forum or in BIMSTEC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation). Even at the level of public diplomacy, when it came to India's turn to host the Forum of Regional Economic Co-operation — created by the Kunming Initiative — the meeting took place in New Delhi and not in Guwahati, Shillong or Imphal.

All this is no small irony. After all, it is India and not China that has a democratic and federal polity.

### **The Fears**

What is holding India back? There are a number of factors of which the first is the ambivalence of Indian decision-makers vis-à-vis China.

*a. The China Syndrome*

Jairam Ramesh has observed that when it comes to developing full-fledged economic ties with China Indian attitudes have been “schizophrenic.” On the one hand, Indian companies are aggressively looking for investment opportunities in China and bi-lateral trade with China is “galloping.” On the other hand the Indian government shows “remarkable ambivalence” about Chinese investments in India. We are “prisoners of an old mindset,” he writes (Ramesh, 2003).

In recent years China’s expansive economy has drawn India’s South Asian neighbours into its economic orbit. Not surprisingly this has made many Indians nervous. Myanmar’s trade with both India and China has expanded since 1989 but the trade with China has grown much more rapidly than trade with India. Even China’s trade with Bangladesh has exceeded India’s by a small but significant margin (Garver and Prime, 2002). Apart from the economic sphere Chinese influence in Myanmar in military and political terms has been phenomenal. Indeed it led India to reassess its policy of opposing the military junta and supporting the movement for democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi. The U-turn in India’s policy towards Myanmar after 1993 however, is not only antithetical to India’s proclaimed democratic values it may not even serve Indian interest in the long run.

The Kunming Initiative and the BCIM Forum that it gave rise to advocates regional cooperation on infrastructure development by the four countries. Rather than being involved with China multilaterally, official India however, appears to

prefer regional organizations such as the Ganga-Mekong Sub-region and BIMST-EC that do not include China. At the same time India has sought to improve bi-lateral relations with China. Yet there is enormous potential for following up on the Kunming Initiative, especially the proposal to rebuild the Stilwell Road — the road from Ledo in Assam to the Myanmar Road that connects to Kunming — constructed with American money during World War II. “Since Kunming is already connected with Hong Kong by an express highway,” writes economist Jayanta Gogoi, “North East India, or for that matter India as a whole could establish direct road link with Hong Kong if the Stilwell Road is well developed.” Apparently only a short stretch of the road — about 100-120 miles from the border of Arunachal Pradesh to Myitkyina in Myanmar — needs rebuilding. Beyond Myitkyina the road is well developed all the way to Kunming. Given its route and the rail and road networks linking that part of the road to provinces of south and central Myanmar that borders Laos, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, the Stilwell Road, Gogoi believes, “can connect North East India and the mainland with the entire South East Asian countries” (Gogoi, 2003). At the moment however, the Indian Government seems less than enthusiastic about rebuilding the Stilwell Road. On the other hand there is significantly more interest in building the road to Thailand taking a more southern route away from the emerging Yunnan-Northern Myanmar-Southeast Asia corridor.

Indian moves will remain somewhat hesitant so long as it tries to put China at a distance and remain blind to the uncertainties inherent in the present political stalemate in Myanmar. It would seem reasonable that we prepare for a

political transition from military rule in Myanmar: after all it is unlikely that the junta will hold on to power indefinitely. More synchronization between India's policies towards China, ASEAN and Myanmar would facilitate a more robust and long-term continental orientation to the Look East policy. A Sino-Indian rapprochement is not out of the question. Such a rapprochement could energize the Kunming Initiative. Indo-Chinese cooperation on developing transportation infrastructure could link Northeast India to Yunnan as well as to the rest of Southeast Asia.

*b. The Security Anxieties*

Earlier, I have noted that India has been hesitant about projecting Northeast India in its Look East Policy the way Chinese projects Yunnan. The reasons, of course, are understandable. But it is worth remembering that the ethnic diversity of Yunnan and Northeast India is not dissimilar. Yunnan's population, in Chinese official parlance, is made up of 26 ethnic nationalities. This is not very different from northeast India's demographic profile. Yet the Chinese, at least in Yunnan, do not have to confront anything like the insurgencies that India does. That the political uncertainty in Northeast India has been a major factor in shaping India's Myanmar policy is quite apparent. Indeed it has been argued that it is India's security anxieties — getting Myanmar to act against Northeast Indian insurgent groups that take shelter in Myanmar — rather than a desire to give the Look East policy a continental orientation that explains India's U-turn vis-a-vis Myanmar. Security expert Bibhu Prasad Routray wrote an article looking at the potential effects of the road-building project between

Northeast India and Thailand through Myanmar on Northeastern insurgencies. He concluded the article with lukewarm support for the road-building project with ample caution about the need for heightened border control.

It's actually a case of the positive outweighing the negative. The prospects of human development through regional cooperation and inter-linkages of economies, nullifies the negative effects, which might occur as a result of encouragement to insurgency. Underdevelopment of the region will alienate the law-abiding lot and in turn will feed insurgency, the effects of which would be much greater than allowing few insurgents to pass through the highways. However, an effective monitoring set up must be put in place to prevent the misuse of the highway. In fact such a mechanism must form a part of the broad objective of sealing the porous border (Routray, 2002).

As I argued in a newspaper article India appears doomed to pay a price in terms of its diplomatic agenda for a bumbling Northeast policy that forces it to keep the door to the region half-shut. "By denying itself the use of its natural gateway, India is in effect scaling back its ambitions in Southeast Asia" (Baruah, 2003).

To be sure the sources of the security anxieties are real. Apart from the China factor and the insurgencies roads through Myanmar are sure to bring drugs, illegal migrants, infectious disease and small arms more easily than before. Already there

are signs that smuggling routes for drugs through the Golden Triangle have become more diversified because of the availability of new corridors. Improved roads are sure to worsen India's HIV/AIDS crisis. Yet one of the peculiar challenges of our global era, as I will explain later, is that old-fashioned notions of border control to obtain security may be a cure worse than the disease.

*Towards A Robust Look East Policy*

(a) Today there is a virtual boom in the construction of cross-national highways, road, rail and air corridors in the world — thanks to the interest of multilateral organizations and advanced industrial countries with a stake in the globalised economy. Apart from the pressures from the globalising economy, geopolitical changes are also pushing the process. For instance barriers to the creation of pan-Asian and Eurasian land transport linkages have disappeared thanks to the end of the cold war. While the Trans-Asian Railroad was first proposed during the 1960s it “remained stillborn due to conflict, Cold War rivalries, and lack of economic rationale” (Jasparro, 2003: 1).

The United Nations now has a landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) group. Currently headed by Laos, it addresses the transport problems of landlocked countries. Were Ohmae's ‘region states’ the order of the day Northeast India surely would have belonged to this group. The European Union has a project entitled the “Silk Road of the 21st Century.” The United National Development Program, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and other international organi-

zations are all trying to bring together donor countries, landlocked developing countries and transit developing countries on infrastructure development, trade facilitation and regional cooperation projects. One such cross border regional development project in our neighbourhood is the Greater Mekong Sub-regional Development project. It brings together Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and China's Yunnan Province. Funded by Japan and the Asian Development Bank it too seeks to establish transnational transport networks in the region.

But as far as Myanmar is concerned, most multilateral aid has ceased after the violent crackdown of the democracy movement by the military rulers in 1988. Multilateral development assistance has dried up because of the economic sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union. It is only China, India and Thailand that now give bi-lateral assistance to Myanmar.

While India and Thailand, and China and Thailand has been cooperating on road-building projects through Myanmar, the three countries are not about to sit down together to plan road and rail networks. And given the sanctions regime in place, there are no multilateral organizations involved. Under these conditions there are clearly limits on the scope and ambition of the road-building projects that are being discussed. As Jayanta Gogoi says about the Stilwell road “to develop the Stilwell Road into a Trans-Asian Express highway, a huge amount of capital expenditure would be necessary which is possible only through the co-operation of the countries involved and the international financial institutions” (Gogoi,

2003).

But it is necessary to think beyond one or even two roads. Whether it is the Stilwell road or another road, by itself it cannot be expected to create a cross-border region. The buzzword in the world of transportation these days is Intermodalism. The term highlights the growing emphasis on the integration of different transport systems — road, rail and air. The quintessential item associated with Intermodal transport is perhaps the Intermodal container. These brightly colored rectangular containers that come in standard sizes are the most common sight in major ports as well as in many highways and freight trains passing through areas that are tied to global production networks. The container has become so ubiquitous in international trade because the same container can be carried by road, rail and sea. The world of Intermodal transportation will remain a distant dream if our debates do not go beyond the question of whether to build the Stilwell road or not.

(b) The prospects of building a cross-border region linking Northeast India with its eastern neighbours become brighter if one imagines linking the Kunming Initiative with the Mekong-Ganga project. Sino-Indian rapprochement can bring benefits that can scarcely be imagined at present.

(c) It is essential to think beyond the present military regime in Myanmar. There is good opportunity for India to take a leadership role in coordinating international policy towards Myanmar. In the US and Europe there is growing recognition that the sanctions against Myanmar are not working. As US Burma expert David Steinberg said recently,

There is no doubt in my mind that sanctions and other U.S. actions have intensified Burmese reliance on China to the detriment of U.S. strategic and national interests. . . . The U.S. sanctions regime may make both the Congress and the administration feel morally good, but it is most unlikely to achieve its objective, which is regime change. Sanctions succeed in further cutting off Burma, and making reliance on China more extreme. This is not in either the U.S. or Burmese national interests (Steinberg, 2003).

India is in a good position to play a leadership role in facilitating a political transition in Myanmar in cooperation with other international actors. Once Myanmar has a more stable government based on reconciliation between the military and the democratic forces under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership and multilateral initiatives are in place India will not have to make policy based primarily on fears of Chinese gains in Myanmar.

(d) India should take more advantage of Northeast India's history and culture as a soft power resource. While talking about our shared cultural ties with Southeast Asia, we refer endlessly to Buddhism, Angkor Vat and the Ramayana. But we do not talk about the Southeast Asian roots of the Tai Ahoms or the Khasis. We scarcely acknowledge Balinese Hinduism and art forms are probably closer to Manipur's than to those of the Hindi heartland. Yet in Southeast Asia itself there

is growing awareness of Northeast India. Many Northeast Indian cultural figures too are drawn eastwards. For instance there is keen interest in Thailand in the culture of the Tai Ahoms of Assam. Similarly, Tai-Ahom intellectuals in Assam are focusing on the cultures of their ethnic cousins in Southeast Asia.

The Tai-Ahoms or Ahoms are an offshoot of the Tai people who are called Shan in Myanmar, Thai in Thailand, Lao in Laos, Dai and Zhuang in China and Tay-Thai in Vietnam. Recent conferences in Thailand on the culture of the Tai people have routinely included papers on the Tai Ahoms by Thai scholars as well as by ethnic Tai-Ahom Assamese scholars. Thai official interest in the subject has been quite apparent. For instance Princess Galyani Vadhana not only inaugurated one of those conferences, she presided over all its sessions.

The Ahoms are not the only people of Northeast India with a Southeast Asian connection. The Khasis of Meghalaya had pioneered rice farming in Vietnam's Red River delta before losing out to the Vietnamese. They then moved up the Red River across Myanmar into Yunnan before crossing into India. But to date the cultural ties between Northeast India and Southeast Asia remain completely untapped as soft power resource in India's Look East policy.

### Conclusion

There have been two contradictory developments vis-à-vis regions in the era of globalisation. At one level the significance of regions seems to be on decline as the result of

cross-national flows of capital, people, ideas and images. On the other hand there is a resurgence of regions both in the academic writings on globalisation and in the intellectual horizons of government officials, development experts and corporate managers.

A significant way in which "contemporary global capitalism is different from capitalism's earlier forms," writes Tim Oakes, is that "local cultural diversity and difference are no longer regarded as obstacles to capitalist development, but rather have become core features of the expansion of the commodity form" (Oakes, 2000: 671). Coca Cola's description of itself as multi-local and not multinational is perhaps more than a cute slogan. It is an example of the increasing significance attached to regions and localities in modern business practices. In China, according to Oakes, the promotion of provincial identities has meant that provincial elites are trying to "scale-up more local, place-based identities to match the discrete space within a provincial boundary, as well as rein in transprovincial regionalisms that detract from provincial coherence." This is an example of the ability of the Chinese political process to adapt to "global capital's imperatives of neoliberalism and reterritorialization." In order to attract investments localities today have to compete with one another not only by offering attractive packages of "political-economic incentives, including a disciplined labour force and a liberalized regulatory environment," they also package themselves as "attractive and dynamic" cultural regions. The process has produced what Oakes calls "often tortuous constructions of 'provincial culture' and 'provincial identity,' where diverse local practices are sometimes cobbled together in cumbersome

ways, or erased altogether, in the interests of a 'pan-local' identity" (Oakes 2000: 669-71).

Transnational region building across India's eastern border is not going to be any less tortuous than constructing provincial identities in China. Terwiel found a "pseudo-Ahom" language and "pseudo-old Ahom rituals" playing a role in Tai-Ahom revivalism in Assam today. "Thwarted by the loss of virtually all of the Southeast Asian culture," Ahom ritual experts, Terwiel found, have "filled the gaps in their knowledge by 'relying upon inspiration'" (Terwiel, 2002: 22, 23).<sup>6</sup>

Yet the constructed nature of historical continuity does not make the politics of culture and history in Northeast India any less potent. Indeed as Terwiel puts it "the case of the Ahoms of Assam illustrates how important a lost heritage can be and how a people may yearn for its roots, how keen may be its urge to recover the past, and how it may channel these wishes and urges into a strong political movement" (Terwiel, 2002: 22). I have argued that a transnational region across Indian eastern border could create the space for a transnational politics of recognition that could respond to these urges, apart from bringing about significant economic benefits.

<sup>6</sup> Terwiel's account of the following episode during his field study in Assam is particularly interesting. "The first time I asked an Ahom priest to translate some Ahom, not in general terms but word-for-word, he reluctantly admitted that this was rather beyond his powers and suggested that I pour him a glass of whiskey, since that might help obtain divine inspiration. The whiskey did not have the desired effect, but it did remind the anthropologists of the frequent use of alcohol by religious specialists. May we assume, then, that alcohol and other stimulants are occasionally used to bridge gaps in the historical continuity?" (Terwiel, 2002: 23).

Such a project, of course, cannot take off without powerful patrons. Regions to be "real" have to become what political geographer Anssi Passi calls "an established entity in the spatial structure" that is "identified in political, economic, cultural and administrative institutionalized practices and social consciousness, and is continually reproduced in these practices." Passi calls this process the institutionalization of regions (Passi, 2000: 6). It is not accidental that successful examples of cross-border regions and of paradiplomacy come mostly from Europe. They have occurred under the firm roof and encouragement of the European Union. In the coming together of states into supranational formations if the EU has been a trailblazer, South Asia has been a laggard. Till recently the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation [SAARC] has been paralyzed by hostility between India and Pakistan and it has been capable of taking up only very marginal issues. It is hardly in a position to encourage the building of cross-border regions. In the case of the transnationalism of the kind that is outlined in this paper, there is an added problem. Were SAARC suddenly to gather steam, it will have no impact on transnational relations across India's eastern borders. For that to happen we will have to look for acceleration of the current trends of India looking east and the countries of ASEAN looking west.

In terms of Indian policy there is a danger that security anxieties would stand in the way of a robust Look East policy that includes the vision of a transnational region. But a half-hearted attitude can do more harm than good. There are risks for sure, but in our era of globalism border control may be the wrong way to deal with them. It will only put border control

agents on a collision course with the demands of a global economy. In a dynamic transnational economic region, it is important to recognize, there will never be enough inspectors or sufficient hours of the day to inspect cargo in a busy border-crossing. The security challenges therefore can be dealt with only with a "paradigm shift" in our attitude to border control. Rather than controls at international borders, security will have to be tightened within the transportation and logistics system so that the risk of anyone in the transportation chain serving as conduits for criminals or terrorists is reduced. Transparent systems for tracking regional and global commercial flows could allow "virtual" audits of inbound traffic before it arrives. Increased intelligence and data managing capacities of border agents can ensure that inspectors would target only high-risk goods and individuals (Flynn, 2000: 58). Only close, comprehensive and enduring relationships with our trading partners will allow such a paradigm change in border control.

All of this clearly requires an approach that is bold and innovative rather than cautious.

Let me end this paper with the story of one of the world's most successful airlines. Few people in India know that the story of Hong Kong's Cathay Pacific Airways begins in Assam during World War II. From 1942 to 1945 American and Chinese transport planes carried essential military supplies from Dinjan, Assam to Kunming, China. The planes had to fly over the Himalayan peaks and the route came to be known as the Hump. The treacherous route exacted a heavy human toll. For years after the war pilots had reported seeing metal debris of planes that had crashed over the hump, shining in

the sun over Northeast India, Myanmar and Yunnan.

After the war, Roy Farrell and Sydney de Kantzow, two Hump pilots, cashed in their experience and reputation to found the Cathay Pacific Airways. The experience of flying between Assam and Yunnan gave them the idea of flying passenger and cargo flights in Asia. They named their airline Cathay Pacific: Cathay because it is the ancient name for China and Pacific embodied the ambition of the embryonic airline to fly across the Pacific Ocean some day.

Taking a flight from Northeast India to East Asia today invariably means flying west to Delhi or Kolkata first. Only from one of those western cities can one fly east to Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore or Tokyo. Six decades after the Dinjan-Kunming flights flying west to Kolkata or Delhi in order to go east feels like a time warp and more than just a trifle ridiculous.

Perhaps the dare devil spirit of Farrell and de Kantzow can be our inspiration "The positive embrace of risk," writes sociologist Anthony Giddens, "is the very source of that energy which creates wealth in a modern economy. Risk is the mobilizing dynamic of a society bent on change, that wants to determine its own future rather than leaving it to religion, tradition, or the vagaries of nature" (Giddens, 1999).

Traditional cultures did not need a concept of risk, nor did they have one. Risk is not the same as hazard or danger. Letting our insecurities stand in the way of a robust Look East policy amounts to abject traditionalist surrender to fear. Risk

is about actively assessing hazards in relation to future possibilities. "It only comes into wide usage in a society that is future-oriented — which sees the future precisely as a territory to be conquered" (Giddens, 1999). If the Look East policy is to live up to its potential of becoming Northeast India's road to peace and prosperity we will have to face up to the risks that exist and actively assess and manage them. That would mean taking a long-term view and synchronising our foreign policies towards China, Myanmar, ASEAN — as well as towards Bangladesh and Bhutan — and our domestic policies vis-à-vis Northeast India. Building roads can deliver results only if they are part of a comprehensive transnational region-building project informed by a long-term strategic vision.

On a more academic plane political scientists have been rather complicit with the "territorial trap" (Agnew, 1994). But given the changing spatialities of our age our intellectual horizons must go beyond the national order of things<sup>7</sup>. We will have to be able to project possibilities beyond today's reality and imagine transnational regions of the future. While considering the stubborn economic and political problems of Northeast India — trapped in the geopolitics of the colonial and postcolonial order — it is possible today to look for transnational solutions. Even if they might seem unrealistic today they could become possible and realistic tomorrow.

<sup>7</sup> I borrow the phrase from Malkki, 1996: 447.

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