

Rethinking The Northeast: Spatial Politics, Market Imperatives, And Cultural Contestation's

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Abstract:- The North east region of India historically, has been viewed through a strategic lens, during the colonial era the region acted as a strategic buffer against China and France. Post-independence, the Indian state has continued to hold the same perception of the northeast as a region of strategic importance. These imaginaries of the northeast throughout the years have put the region in a state of what many scholars refer to as “ territorial trap”. It was only after the advent of globalization that India adopted a new spatial imagery, under the Look East policy. The northeast was then imagined as a transit point to connect the mainland with Southeast Asian countries, thereby boosting trade and economic activity. However, this evolving perception towards the northeast has been driven by several factors, including geopolitical aspects, the region's internal quest for identity, and the chronic underdevelopment that has persisted throughout the decades. To overcome the challenges faced by the region, the Indian state has invested a considerable amount of capital in building infrastructure and boosting development. However, the region has not witnessed the realized growth that was assumed by policymakers at the center and has only sustained the prevailing state of underdevelopment and marginalization in the region, which, according to scholars like Sanjib Barua, has described as ‘durable disorder’. The paper aims to examine the historical spatial imaginations of the northeastern region and their ramifications. Also, look into the new issues emerging from the overlap of these spatial imaginaries, in doing so the research takes up qualitative method for enquiry, using primary sources like governments reports along with secondary data using works of relevant scholar's in relevant field.

Keywords: Northeast, Space, Power, Market, culture.

1. Introduction

The Northeast region consists of eight Indian States (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura). The region shares 98% of its border with foreign neighbor's and is only connected to the mainland through a narrow strip of land, also known as the Siliguri Corridor or the Chicken's Neck. This geographic isolation of the Northeast was mainly the cause of the 1947 partition, which led the region to lose its access to the sea. However, the Northeast has been blessed with abundant natural resources, including coal, oil,

natural gas, limestone, and silicate¹. Yet, despite the abundant presence of natural resources, the Northeast has remained in a state of perpetual underdevelopment and poverty. The predicament of the region can be attributed to the historical neglect and marginalization, which is rooted in the colonial spatial outlook of the region as an area of strategic vulnerability. Under British rule, the northeast was considered a good buffer against the Chinese as well as the French, who were then expanding up the Mekong River from Saigon; this buffer adaptation was due to the difficult terrain and general inaccessibility of the Northeast². Any industries established were focused on exploiting local resources, and there was little investment in economic development for the benefit of the local populace³. Post-independence, Indian policymakers adopted this approach and viewed the region's inaccessibility as a beneficial barrier; the conflict with China, coupled with the subsequent proliferation of insurgencies in the region, only further strengthened this line of thinking⁴. Therefore, greater physical connectivity in the region would only increase the vulnerability to external threats as well as hamper the internal security dynamics through armed infiltrators from across the border⁵. This led to the governments to shut off and regulate the national borders more rigorously, greatly restricting the flow of trade and investment. This loss of connectivity and market access has been said to have set the regions economy back by at least a quarter of a century back⁶. This according to scholars like Agnew(1994) puts the region of a country in what he calls “ Territorial Trap” where the conventional state centric imaginary of the region is primarily driven by the geopolitical assumptions, which persist with a clear distinction between domestic and the international spheres, According to Agnew, this assumptions trap’s our understanding of the global politics and spatial relationships, particularly in regions which are marked by trans national flows, overlapping sovereignties and complex local identities⁷.

While the present challenges of the Northeast have been as old as its emergence as a landlocked and peripheral region, which could be traced backed in the post partition era and the frequent re organization of its international borders, the rethinking of the alternative avenues of the policy formation towards the northeast and a new geopolitical imaginaries got its significant push since the early 1990’s, under the look east policy which aimed at liberating the region not only from its presently landlocked and peripheral status but also from the overemphasized state centric assumption’s. The LEP was a foreign policy change from a security centric dealing with India’s neighbors in the East to prioritizing of Economic issues for benefitting from the common

¹ MDONER, “North Eastern Region Vision 2020 Volume 1”, North Eastern Council, Government of India,

2008, pp. 2-6, http://necouncil.gov.in/sites/default/files/about-us/Vision_2020.pdf

² Sailo, “Look East Through Northeast.” 76.

³ Thongkhoolal Hoakip. India's Look East Policy and the Northeast(New Delhi: Sage,2015), 96-97

⁴ Sailo, “Look East Through Northeast”,76.

⁵ Haokip, India’s Look East Policy, 98-99.

⁶ Ibid,99.

⁷ Agnew, John. “ The territorial trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory.” Review of International Political Economy, Vol.1 No.1 (Spring 1994), pp. 53-80.

potential for economic growth across the region⁸, However in doing so, may critique argue that LEP reimagined the Northeast just as a logistical corridor connecting the mainland to Southeast Asia rather than focusing on the developmental aspects of the region according to Barua 2020, “For different social groups, the LEP/AEP has come to be seen as a developmental imposition that risks making the Northeast region a mere regional trade and Logistical transit hub”⁹

Therefore the paper aims to look into the evolving spatial imaginaries of the Northeast region from a securitized buffer zone to a transit corridor under the LEP, these policies have reinforced and reshaped the regions underdevelopment, while the new outlook towards the northeast imagines the region as a gateway to the Southeast Asian nations, with a promise of economic development through improved infrastructure and connectivity, however they continue to adopt the top down model of economic development while neglecting the historical marginalization and ground level realities of the local community, as a result underdevelopment persist, sustained not just by neglect but with development that privileges transit over transformation.

2. Spatiality and The Northeast

According to Chatterjee(2007), Space could be defined as a region with a distinctive features and possibilities. A region usually embodies multiple nations, the meaning of a region not only changes over time but also varies across the notion of space underlying it, in simple terms ,a region can be characterized or defined by three conception of space, although these definitions are often overlapping and are never exclusive in character. These concepts are region as power, as market and/or as community¹⁰. Historically, the northeast has witnessed these overlapping spatially imaginers towards it, from being a region of buffer to becoming a region to integrate economies and culture/society, however many scholars argue these overlapping nature of space has contributed to the policy failuer’s eventually leading to marginalization of the region, therefore it is becomes imperative to have spatial analysis of the northeast through the lenses of power, market and culture, and to look into its overlapping nature and create a way forward.

2.1 Space as Power

When a region is looked through its spatial imaginary as ‘Power’, these could be defined in terms of its geostrategic references and looked upon as zone of conflict arising out of the distribution of power and the patterns of enmity and amity. Great powers have often defined regions by the imperatives of national power, or , space as power. Thus for Britian, Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific once referred to space that they had to control in their fight against imperial Japan¹¹.When added in the northeast context during the colonial rule the northeast

⁸ Taz (Tonmoy) Barua, “The Look East Policy/Act East Policy-Driven Development Model in Northeast India,” *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 1 (2020): 101–120, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973598420908844>.

⁹ idbi

¹⁰ Chatterjee, Shibashis. Conceptions of space in India’s Look East Policy: Order, Cooperation or Community? *South Asian Survey* 14, no. 1(2007): 65-81.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/097152310701400106>.

¹¹ idbi

region completely defined its spatial imaginary through the lenses of power, due to its geo strategic location, as discussed earlier, the region difficult terrain and its general inaccessibility act as a buffer against the Chinese as well as the French, therefore any industries that were set up only focused on the exploitation of the natural resources, with very little investment in the economic development of the local population. In this process the erst while natural space was first de- constructed and then reconstructed. Border and boundary consciousness was raised up more than ever before¹². It recreated spaces and converted these into the colonial space for market, raw materials and surplus accumulation as well as political rule, this reconstruction led to the building of infrastructure, commercial and administrative infrastructure, army cantonments and army colonies¹³ which eventually led to the securitization of the region this idea could be further consolidated when the British created a line System on the pretext of protecting the minority indigenous ethnic groups in the hill areas of Assam by restricting outsider's entry, business activities, land transactions and settlement, For the same purpose in 1935 the hill areas were demarcated and divided into "excluded areas" and "partially excluded area's". The former fell under direct British jurisdiction and the latter were given a limited representative system under British administrative control. In sort, separation and isolation formed the core of British policy towards the North East¹⁴.

Soon after Independence, the Indian state carried out the same policy towards the north east which they had inherited from the colonialist, however the reconstruction of the Northeast became more critical, when the task of integration and state formation faced challenges, Northeast as we understood basically consisted of three states, Assam, a British province, Manipur and Tripura, the two princely states got integrated into the Union of India. This process faced several challenges from the multitudinal ethnic groups in the region from the very beginning and remained a source of trouble for the Indian state from the very beginning. This ethnic movements in the post colonial Northeast ear culminated into various self determination plans starting from identity assertion, autonomy to secessionist movements at different times and scales. This region thereby became the spaces for resistance in post colonial India¹⁵. This movement's, was a result of the deep rotted dissatisfaction with the homogenized nation state and its development projects that were primarily focused in the metropolitan region, while the ethnic zone merely becoming a region for supplying raw materials. This made the region being viewed by the state apparatus largely through security prism. Threat perception of the state and the securitization of the region soon followed in the region through the promulgation of the Armed Forces (Special Powers Act) in 1958. This Act got embedded in the mindset of the Indian state in imagining and Governing the Northeast and "the contradictory politics inherent in the

¹² Bhattacharya, Debaprasad. "Locating Space in Region: Spatial Imaginary in the Context of Northeast India." *Social Change and Development*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (2022): 1–20

¹³ idbi

¹⁴ Inoue, Kyoko. 2003. "Integration of the Northeast: The State Formation Process." *Journal of Peace Studies* 10(3): 16-28.

¹⁵ Bhattacharya, Debaprasad. "Locating Space in Region: Spatial Imaginary in the Context of Northeast India." *Social Change and Development*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (2022): 1–20.

implementation of this alleged new vision appeared destined to grievances among the people in the region¹⁶.

2.2 Space as Market

The second reading of the reading of the space could be done through the lenses of market and economy, Marx viewed that constant search and expansion of market as absolutely necessary for the survival of capitalist mode of production. Marx also viewed space as both a historical product and a geographical expression in which capitalism recurrent search for cheap raw material, new source of labour and market is exemplified through its inherent tendency of driving capital beyond any spatial barriers¹⁷. Other scholar like Harvey also comments on the idea of region as a space of market, which creates a phenomena called the “ Time space compression” according to Harvey, the relatively fixed and immobile configuration of territorial organization termed spatial fixes, that leads the process of accumulation, which later expedited. Through the mechanism of spatial fixes the surplus capital is shifted outside rather than accumulated at home. Time space compression speeds up the turnover time of capital (i.e time of production together with the time of circulation of exchange)¹⁸. This transformation is driven by global institutions like WTO ADB, and world bank and others that pressure nation state to liberalize and open up their economies, this process leads to what Kenichi Ohamae refers to as a creation of “Region State” which is driven by the logic of economic rationality whereby region states are supposed to be the manifestation of natural economic zones engulfing the “ space” or more than one nation state, the boundaries are not imposed by political fiat, rather they are drawn by the invisible hand of global market for goods and services, However in the process region state becomes a diffusion of differences, This spatialization, is even less a fixed structure where boundary marking and the construction of spatial identities become more fragile, more fraught and obviously artificial, market economy thus hegemonies space so as to fit in with the niceties of market mandates¹⁹. Space as a culture is stripped of its essence and redefined as a market economy asset, any local, culture element if found to survive with in the market economy, virtually became market economy product.

Historically the northeast was seen as a region which is ethnically sensitive landlocked and in need of support and protection , this was seen by the policy intervention of the Indian state through special constitutional and legal remedies such as the inner line permit, Excluded area’s and the sixth schedule which aimed at protecting the indigenious population from external intrusion.. According to Das (2010) these exceptionalist regimes create distortions in market

¹⁶ McDuie-Ra, Duncan. “Vision 2020 or Re-Vision 1958: The Contradictory Politics of Counter Insurgency in India’s Regional Development.” *Contemporary South Asia* 17, no. 3 (2009): 311–326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584930903129090>.

¹⁷ Three ‘Returns’ to Marx : Derrida, Badiou, Zizek(Fourth Michael Sprinker Lecture) by Aijaz Ahmad, March 2012.

¹⁸ Harvey, David. (1990). *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, BlackwellPublishing

¹⁹ Shields, R. (2007). *A Sense of Place and Region*, Notes for a Talk, Putting Region in its Place Conference, University of Alberta, October.

functioning and were incompatible with the liberalization agenda pursued since the 1990s. The LEP reframed the imaginary of the northeast from being seen as barrier to now functioning as a bridge, facilitating the flow of goods and services between the mainland and the southeast Asian nations. It is expected that the spatial and historical continuities are likely to facilitate economic integration as much as economic integration is likely to re-establish and strengthen such ties long fractured by partition and the consequent reorganization of international borders. The economic affluence that is bound to result from the economic integration will “liberate” the Northeast from its present landlocked state and make it prosper whether in terms of infrastructural development or terms of generation of employment for the vast unemployed youth.

The northeast vision now looked it as a critical transit and trade zone, a “corridor” rather than cul-de-sac, Das(2010) mentions LEP recasts the region’s development agenda in market terms. As prime minister Manmohan Singh stated, Northeast India must be developed to “produce commodities easily marketable to ASEAN market” and improve connectivity to “make our products acceptable and saleable”²⁰. This showcased the neo liberal commodification of the space, where the cultural aspects of the region begin reduced to a marketing tool, and only serving the logic of export competitiveness, space is reimagined not to empower the local population, rather transforming the region into a site of profit extraction.

Ultimately space as market in the Northeast becomes a double edged sword. On one hand it promises liberation from geographic isolation by integrating the region with the South eastern countries. on the other hand, it risks reducing cultural diversity and lived space into a tradable commodities. The state emphasis on the border softening for goods, while keeping tight control over people mobility and ethnic identities, this creates the overlapping of the idea of space, creating a contestation on the nature of it being opened or closed.

2.3 Space Through Cultural/Social Affinity

The third reading of region is to define it as a space of cultural affinity, it draw our attention to imagine space not just through the lenses of Geography and market but rather focuses on how social and cultural life shape space, with the advent of Modern state, social relations are made to appear congruent between the social boundary of the people and the political boundary drawn by the state, when societies are divided by state boundaries it is expected that the population groups will remain loyal to the state determined political; territorial boundaries in other words, the state seeks to homogenize the society within space as defined in its territorial limits²¹. This process of territorialization of cultural space creates distinct pattern of cultural differentiation/contestation and marginalization. Chatterjee (2007) talks about this contestation in the context of south Asia, where many believe that South Asia is a space of cultural affinity, its people united by common civilization values. While Others disagree and base their case on the right to cultural difference.

²⁰ Das, Samir Kumar. “India’s Look East Policy: Imagining a New Geography of India’s Northeast.” *India Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2010): 343–358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097492841006600402>.

²¹ Bhattacharya, Debaprasad. "Locating Space in Region: Spatial Imaginary in the Context of Northeast India." *Social Change and Development*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (2022): 1–20.

After all, the dual partitions (1947,71) of south Asia and its multiple Ethno religious conflicts involve questions of cultural difference or contestation and the fear of serious marginalization²².

The contemporary social theory of space has focused in emphasizing space as “liberated” from the state centric approach of territoriality and region formation has moved on to the non material dimension. This analysis therefore considers ethnic space with its pre existing social relations as a lived notion that is inseparable from the totality of space²³. State centric interpretation of space in the pre globalization era resulted in state fetishism, where space has been viewed in terms of a static territory, because of which there has been a shift in the spatial outlook of social theory during the neo liberal era, under which there has been greater effort from the various local population to re imagine the territorial boundaries in tune with the existing or imagined socio ethnic boundaries. Contrary to the de- territorialization scheme of global capital, re territorialization emerged beyond the geographic limits of the nations states that went towards the supra national formations real or imagined These supra national formations sought for building a social space for the communities, where information technology played an important role in creation of such social space²⁴. These changes contradicted the nature of economic space for liberating the region through the flow of capital and the aspirations of ethnic populations for liberating from the bondage of state territoriality. Paasi (2000) while contesting the idea of space being imagined merely as an economic unit emphasizes the socio cultural dimensions of the regions. He argues that region are shaped and re shaped by the lived experiences and struggle’s of the social groups, rather than just looking at its economic functions or territorial boundaries. Paasi further puts emphasis on social interaction as a fundamental starting point for understanding regions, specifically how people identify and relate with the place²⁵.

In the context of Northeast India, space as culture earlier was rooted in clan, kinship and memory. The pre colonial era witnessed space as culture which was organized around clan boundaries and community based. These idea od space was culturally embedded and not bounded by rigid administrative borders but defined through social ecological and economic relations Chakraborty and Ray (2015) mentions” The archaic space of Northeast India was essentially clan or Kinship spaces, territoriality was never at the core of this erstwhile clan spatiality²⁶”. It was only after the advent of the colonial rule which drastically transformed the prevalent social structure of the region, converting it into a fixed , administrative space. This deconstructed the social space and reimagined it for strategic and extractive space, This policy was amplified post independence, when the Indian state viewed the region as a space of

²² Chatterjee, Shibashis. Conceptions of space in India’s Look East Policy: Order, Cooperation or Community? South Asian Survey 14, no. 1(2007): 65-81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152310701400106>

²³ Bhattacharya, Debaprasad. "Locating Space in Region: Spatial Imaginary in the Context of Northeast India." Social Change and Development, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (2022): 1–20

²⁴ idbi

²⁵ Paasi, Anssi. (2000). Reconstructing regions and regional identity, accessed at <http://socgeo.ruhosting.nl/colloquium/Paasi1.pdf>

²⁶ Gorky Chakraborty and Asok Kumar Ray, *Understanding Northeast India through a ‘Spatial’ Lens*, Occasional Paper No. 48 (Kolkata: Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, 2015).

resistance, which culminated into longstanding ethnic conflicts and armed rebellion, which in a way was an attempt to resist the homogenization by the Indian state, which clashed with the ethnic pluralism and fragments territorialities of the region. The imposition of the AFSPA and the developmental focus on integration rather than autonomy, created a disjuncture between the nation's state's imaginations and the lived cultural spaces.

The neo liberal era witnessed the changes of the states out look towards the Northeast under its ambitious "Look East Policy" under which the region is reimagined not as a periphery but as a bridge to Southeast Asia, the primary driving factor of the policy was to now see the northeast as a space of market integration. However this shift to a market governed conception of space has marginalized the lived experiences and social imaginaries of local communities. Here space is no longer cultural or social but a marketable asset, a region that is opened for investment and consumer flows, according to a Chakraborty and Ray (2015) "Space as a cultural property is stripped off its essence and redefined as a market economy asset²⁷". Chatterjee (2008) also critiques the strategic framing of space in policies like Look East, he mentions that these policies instrumentalize culture for geopolitical purposes, masking the displacement of community concerns in favor of economic rationality²⁸. This resulting conflict between ethnic space and economic space reveals the underlying contradiction between the developmental gaze of the state and the region's cultural continuity, a phenomena that quite defines the Northeast's political and spatial identity

3. Conclusion.

The Northeast region of India, for a long time has been imagined as a securitized zone and later reimagined as a logistical corridor under the Look/Act East policy, which continues to remain a contested and fragmented space. The various spatial imaginaries of power, market, and culture, rather than complementing each other often clash, reproducing the already existing hierarchies and marginalization.

Das (2007) conception of the "Extended Northeast" is particularly rethinks this landscape. He argues how the Look East Policy has produced new geopolitical imaginaries that extend beyond the territorial aspects of the region, while envisioning it as a interface with southeast Asia. The idea of the "Extended Northeast" offers an alternative spatial lens, that acknowledges the region's cultural affinities and the lived experiences of the people. However, this imagination is often in friction with the top down model of development adopted by state that give's primary importances to the security and market dynamics of the region overlooking the social justice and community agency. Until this contradicting imaginaries of the Northeast region reconciles, policy outcomes will remain fragmented producing friction than coherence.

Together, these critical perspectives underscores the need to reimagine Northeast India not merely as a borderland or transit zone, but as a region with own spatial logic, one that is shaped by historical flows and cultural memories along with economic aspirations and geopolitical

²⁷ idbi

²⁸ Shibashis Chatterjee, "Conceptions of Space in India's Look East Policy: Order, Cooperation or Community," *South Asian Survey* 14, no. 1 (2007): 69–84.

strategies. Spatial justice for the North east cannot come from greater integration alone it must acknowledge the internal diversities, and its right to articulate its own vision of development, identity and belonging within and beyond the Indian state.

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