

Improvement of Connectivity could Transform Assam into a Pivot of Act East Policy: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The Act East Policy (AEP) focuses on strengthening India's relations with countries in the immediate and extended neighbourhood to the east. The objective of the AEP is to boost economic cooperation, trade and commerce, cultural ties with the countries of South, South East and East Asia and Asia-Pacific region. The North Eastern Region (NER) is a vital cog in the wheel of the AEP due to its geo-strategic location and vast resource potentials. Assam is the most crucial North Eastern state for the implementation of the ambitious AEP. The paper seeks to evaluate the importance of Assam in the AEP and government's efforts to develop Assam's transport infrastructure along with North East's through improvement of roadways, construction of strategic bridges, expansion of railway networks, revamping of inland waterways, up gradation of air connectivity and building of multi-modal transport system.

The Act East Policy (AEP) focuses on strengthening India's relations with countries in the immediate and extended neighbourhood to the east. The objective of the AEP is to boost economic cooperation, trade and commerce, cultural ties and develop strategic partnership with the countries of South, South East and East Asia and Asia-Pacific region through engagement at the bilateral, regional and multilateral levels. The major thrust of the AEP is to make India's overall engagement with the eastern neighbours more pro-active and action-oriented. The North Eastern Region (NER) is a vital cog in the wheel of the AEP due to its geo-strategic location and vast resource potentials.

The paper seeks to assess the importance of Assam in the AEP and government's efforts to develop NER's transport infrastructure such as improvement of roadways, construction of strategic bridges, expansion of railway networks, revamping of inland waterways, up gradation of air connectivity and building of multi-modal transport system. The paper also tries to evaluate the prospects of the connectivity projects both

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undertaken and proposed and analyse their challenges. Finally, an attempt has been made to suggest policy measures for proper implementation of the AEP.

The NER acts as a land bridge between India and South East Asia and offers immense possibilities to forge close commercial ties and renew historical and cultural links that the region enjoyed in the past. New Delhi's policy makers know well that the success of the AEP would largely depend on improved connectivity, security, political stability and all-round development of the NER. Through the AEP, the union government is making concerted efforts to address some of the intractable problems of the region including geographical isolation, infrastructure bottleneck and stagnation of industrial growth.

The AEP has four key components-- connectivity, commerce, culture and capacity building. Among them, connectivity is the most important aspect and the realisation of the rest three heavily relies on the improvement of intra-regional, inter-regional and trans-national connectivity of the NER. In its efforts to connect the NER with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the union government has undertaken several projects to develop physical infrastructure including roadways, railways, waterways, airways and telecommunications. A major road connectivity project currently underway is the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (TH).

Importance of Assam in the AEP

Assam is the most crucial North Eastern state for the implementation of the ambitious AEP since it is the centre of all business and transport related activities in the region. Assam is the largest among the eight states in the region in terms of resources, size of market and population. Assam is also the only state in the NER having a viable industrial base and elaborate transport networks including roadways, railways, waterways and airways.

Assam had a prosperous economy in the pre-independence period. However, the partition of the sub-continent in 1947 inflicted severe damage to the economy of Assam as the railways, roadways and waterways which existed between the region and the then East Bengal throughout the colonial period, were closed one after another. The previous Sarbananda Sonowal government of Assam consistently demanded the restoration of the previous road, rail and riverine links with Bangladesh for the revitalisation of the region's isolated economy. Efforts are also being made to address Assam's connectivity issues through regional cooperation forums like Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) and South Asian Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC).

The Assam government is vigorously pursuing the AEP as it believes that it is a panacea for the state's development that has been throttled by insurgency since the early 1990s. It argues that the up gradation of transport infrastructure is set to change the development

narrative of the state. The government has set up an Act East Department for effective implementation of the AEP¹. Moreover, a new research centre on South East Asia has been established at Gauhati University to boost the AEP (De 16 October 2019).

Efforts to Develop NER's Transport Infrastructure and Their Prospects

As part of its “Neighbourhood First” policy, the NDA government is also making concerted efforts to enlarge India’s engagement with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar—all share borders with the NER. In addition to the governments’ efforts, businessmen, journalists, academicians and diplomats from India and other South Asian nations have been interacting regularly to explore the possibilities of increasing trade and commerce of the North Eastern states especially Assam by improving connectivity with neighbouring countries with an extra emphasis on upgrading physical infrastructure in the border areas².

In its bids to facilitate cross-border movement of goods and people, the union government has taken up a number of infrastructure projects in Tripura including Agartala-Akhaura rail line, construction of a bridge over the Feni river to access Chittagong port, a connecting road from Sabroom to Chittagong Port and up gradation of Ashuganj river port in Bangladesh for boosting trade, transit and connectivity between the two neighbouring countries (Bhattacharjee 2015).

Similarly, several new road projects have been undertaken by the Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) along with up gradation of old National Highways (NHs) in the NER including Assam. The MoRTH has also planned to build an Economic Corridor (EC) under the Bharatmala Scheme (BS) to improve connectivity in border and remote areas to facilitate faster movement of cargo and increase of export (Sarma 2019). The Assam government has been pitching for the improvement of the state’s road networks with other North Eastern states to connect with Bangladesh, Bhutan and China.

The Assam government has also taken a number of initiatives in collaboration with the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) to upgrade the state’s riverine transport system and revive the British era water routes with Bangladesh. The state government has been pushing for the development of a robust multi-modal transport networks in the state involving roadways, railways and waterways for proper implementation of the AEP. Moreover, the NER is getting seamless digital connectivity following the signing of agreement between India and Bangladesh for using unspent bandwidth available at Cox’s Bazar.

Improvement of Roadways

The up gradation of roadways is crucial for the NER as this mode of transportation is commonly used by people in this region especially in the hilly areas. Since the early

2000s, the MoRTH has undertaken several new road projects in the NER including Assam. Under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), a total of 9843 km-long road projects have been taken up in Assam at a cost of Rs 8192.45 crore. Some of them have already been made operational, while the remaining would commence soon³. The MoRTH has also initiated extensive road projects to upgrade existing NHs in the region, namely, 37, 37(A), 40, 44, 51, 52(B) and 61. They are reportedly at different stages of implementation⁴.

The NER is part of the union government's other mega road connectivity programmes as well. Under the BS launched in October 2017 by the MoRTH, construction of about 50,000 km of highways categorised as National Corridors, ECs and others have been envisioned across the country. Among the selected ECs, one is called North East Economic Corridor (EC 44). The BS is focusing on improving connectivity in the NER and establishing linkages with the Inland Waterways already identified on the Brahmaputra in Assam. The EC 44 seeks to connect all the state capitals in the region (Sarma 2019). A map showing North East Economic Corridor and multi-modal freight movement through Brahmaputra is given below:

North East Economic Corridor and Multi-Modal Freight Movement through Brahmaputra

- **North East Economic corridor** enhancing connectivity to **state capitals** and **key towns**
 - **Multimodal freight movement** via 7 Waterway terminals on **River Brahmaputra**
 - Dhubri, Silghat, Biswanath Ghat, Neamati, Dibrugarh, Sengajan, Oriyamghat



Source: Ministry of Road Transport and Highways

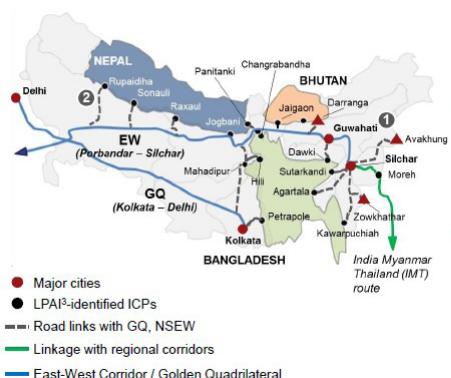
In its attempt to counter the growing influence of India's strategic adversary China in the neighbourhood, New Delhi has taken up several transport infrastructure development projects in Bangladesh and Myanmar. India extended 3 Lines of Credit (LoC) worth about \$8 billion to Bangladesh. Under these LoCs, several infrastructure projects were undertaken in neighbouring Bangladesh to enhance connectivity with the NER. India has also disbursed around \$1.04 billion in grant projects, and has provided concessional loans of \$478.9 million from India's LoC amount of \$ 750 million to Myanmar. Projects on grant funding include renovation of 69 bridges and

building the Kalewa-Yargi road segment of the TH⁵.

Moreover, India has planned to extend the 2800 km-long road from Moreh to Mae Sot in Thailand, to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The TH project constitutes an integral part of India's role in the proposed Trans-Asian Highway. In addition to these, India is fast tracking the SASEC road connectivity programme. A number of international donor agencies including Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank (WB) and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) are currently involved in the infrastructure development of the NER.

As part of the implementation of the AEP, the government of Assam sought immediate up gradation of the intra-regional road connectivity especially those linking the neighbouring countries. Assam could be connected to the TH through the existing NH-39 and NH-36. Both the highways connect Indo-Myanmar border town of Moreh through Dimapur, Kohima and Imphal⁶. The road from Dimapur to Kohima is reportedly in good condition, while the newly-created National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL) has been up grading the Kohima-Imphal Road. The road from Imphal to Moreh is also currently undergoing up gradation (De 20 October 2019). Once these renovation processes are completed, the connectivity of the North Eastern states including Assam with neighbouring Myanmar, which acts as gateway to the ASEAN, will improve significantly. A map showing NER's road connectivity with neighbouring countries is given below:

Road Connectivity with Neighbouring Countries



- 24 Integrated check posts (ICPs) identified
- **Transit through B'desh to improve North East connectivity**
- **Integrating Bangladesh – Bhutan – Nepal and Myanmar – Thailand corridors will make North-East hub of East Asia**

Source: Ministry of Road Transport and Highways

In its attempts to promote the AEP, the Assam government has also called for the improvement of the existing roads between the state and Bhutan. The 38 km-long NH-152 directly connects Assam to Bhutan. Recently, two new roads, namely, NHs-127(C) and 127 (D) have been proposed. Both the highways would connect the proposed East West Corridor from Porbandar in Gujarat to Silchar in Assam, could be connected to Bhutan adding fresh impetus to the Indo-Bhutan economic, commercial

and people-to-people ties⁶.

The Assam government is also pushing for the improvement of the existing road links between the state and Bangladesh. There are four NHs which connect Guwahati to Dhaka. They include: NH-37 and 40 totalling 467 km from Guwahati to Dhaka via Jorabat-Shillong-Dawki-Sylhet; NHs—37, 40, and 151 totalling 657 km from Guwahati to Dhaka via Jorabat-Shillong-Karimganj-Sutarkandi-Sylhet; and NH-37 and NH-51 totalling 261 km from Guwahati to Dhaka through Paikan and Dalu⁷.

Since June 2015, the Guwahati-Dhaka bus service has been operating. The opening of this bus route is set to strengthen trade and historic ties between Assam and Bangladesh. Bilateral discussions are currently underway to open bus services on Shillong-Chittagong and Silchar-Karimganj-Sylhet routes (Bhattacharjee 2015). The Assam government is also making efforts for the up gradation of road networks between the state and Chittagong Port for the revitalisation of its economy. To ensure smooth access to Chittagong Port, it seeks the development of the 612 km-long road from Guwahati to Chittagong via Shillong and Dawki as four-lane highway⁸.

In a significant development on the AEP front on March 9, 2021, Prime Minister Modi virtually inaugurated the “Maitri Setu” (Friendship Bridge) over the Feni river connecting south Tripura’s Sabroom with Bangladesh’s Chittagong Port. This cross-border connectivity will make Tripura the “Gateway of Northeast” to the port, which is just 80 kms from Sabroom. The bridge will be the fastest land route to connect the landlocked NER to the port. It is a new trade corridor between India and Bangladesh with immense potential. A recent WB report says that improving cross-border connectivity could increase India’s exports to Bangladesh by 172% and Bangladesh’s exports to India by 297%. This connectivity has also enhanced the business prospects of Tripura’s adjoining Barak Valley districts of Assam. The port, which is used by India to transport goods to the NER, has potential to play a key role in India’s engagement with South East Asia and its Indo-Pacific vision⁹.

The Assam government is also considering the possibility of connecting Assam with China through Arunachal Pradesh. The reopening of the famous 1,736 km-long Stilwell Road from Ledo in Assam to Kunming of China through Myanmar could bring about a sea change in the business activities of Assam. The NH-153 from Lekhapani to Jairampur, which is part of the Stilwell Road, has been up graded under the Special Accelerated Road Development Programme for North East¹⁰.

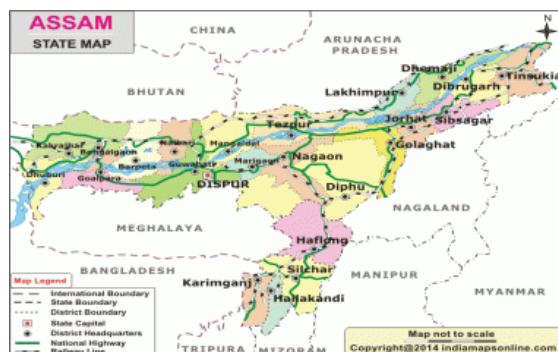
The road from Jairampur to Pangsa Pass, a village on the Indo-Myanmar border, via Arunachal’s Nampong is also renovated. The Assam government has been demanding the revival of this historic road with the cooperation of Myanmar since the early 2000s. The road could be used for conducting Indo-ASEAN and Indo-China trade. Experts have pointed out that the road can reduce the transportation cost of India’s foreign trade by 30 % (Zaman 2012).

The Assam government is also looking for other possibilities of connecting the state with China through Arunachal. The 510 km-long NH-52 in the northern bank of Brahmaputra from Baihata Chariali to Jonai is a vital road that connects Arunachal. The state government has called for the up gradation of this road¹¹. The 1841 km-long strategic Trans-Arunachal Highway (TAH) from Tawang to Kanubari connects NH-52 near Akajan. The TAH is currently under construction and is scheduled to be completed by March 2027. Once this road becomes operational, Assam could be easily connected to China via Tawang.

Assam has proposed the improvement of NER's road connectivity with rest of the country too. The 308.77 km-long NH-31 from Boxirhat (Assam-West Bengal border) to Jalukbari near Guwahati links the entire North East with mainland India. The state government wants immediate up gradation of this road for seamless movement of inter-state movement of cargo and passenger. In order to facilitate industrial development of Assam, the government has also suggested speedy up gradation of some state highways and operationalisation of the missing links including alternate route from Silchar to Guwahati via Harrangajao and Neille¹².

In its attempts to promote the AEP, the state government wants to develop an integrated highway network in Assam in planned way within the next 10 years¹³. There are 39 NHs with a total length of 3900.44 km running through Assam. They include 15 newly declared NHs with a length of 1032.13 km. Moreover, 847 km of road segments have already been identified to be up graded to NH¹⁴. A map showing Assam road network is given below:

Road Map of Assam



Source: Public Works Buildings & NH, Government of Assam

On November 5, 2018, the then Assam Public Works Department (PWD) Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said that the state government has initiated an ambitious project called "Assam Mala" to upgrade all state highways as per the specifications of the NH. Work on some of them has already started while the remaining ones will be taken up soon¹⁵. The state government reportedly spent Rs 22,160 crore during Fiscal Year (FY) 2018-19 on repairing NHs and state highways, construction of bridges and

building of new roads at various places¹⁶. The government has been fast tracking all the ongoing road projects with the aim of completing them by 2020¹⁷. However, the Covid-19 crisis has slowed down the process to an extent.

Construction of Strategic Bridges over Brahmaputra

The pace of strategic infrastructure development in North East has gained momentum in the recent years. In a significant development on May 26, 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi opened the Dhola-Sadiya Bridge to boost connectivity, trade and development in the NER. The 9.15 km-long bridge built over the mighty Brahmaputra is the longest in India. The union government has been trying to make Assam a hub of trade, transit and connectivity. While inaugurating the bridge, Prime Minister Modi said it placed Assam at the centre of India's efforts to expand trade links with South East Asia under the AEP (Bhattacharjee 2017).

The Dhola-Sadiya Bridge is a game changer for the region in terms of connectivity. It connects Dhola on the Brahmaputra's south bank to Sadiya in the north. Following the bridge's opening, the travel time has been reduced from over two hours to just 30 minutes. The operationalisation of the bridge is important from the perspective of development of India's isolated NER as well. By establishing road connectivity with inaccessible and backward areas, the bridge is set to galvanise all-round development in Upper Assam and eastern Arunachal (Bhattacharjee 2017).

Again on December 25, 2018, Prime Minister Modi inaugurated the Bogibeel Bridge near Dibrugarh in Assam. It is also a strategic infrastructure project and an engineering feat. The 4.98 km-long bridge is the longest road-cum-rail bridge in the country and only second in whole Asia. It was a difficult mission to complete this state-of-art bridge given the unpredictable nature of the Brahmaputra and constant soil erosion of its banks. It took 16 years to finish this project after missing several deadlines (Bhattacharjee 2019).

The bridge has significantly improved connectivity between Assam and Arunachal. Establishing seamless connectivity between northern and southern banks of the mighty Brahmaputra has always been a challenging mission. But India has finally broken that jinx. It connects Dibrugarh on the south of the Brahmaputra to Silapathar in Dhemaji district on the Assam-Arunachal border both by road and rail (Bhattacharjee 2019).

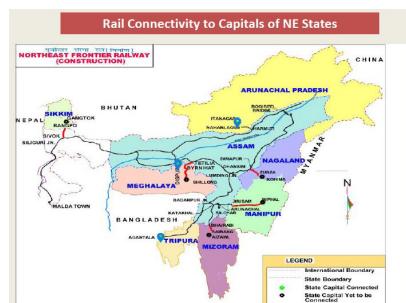
Following the operationalisation of the Bogibeel Bridge, it takes just 40 minutes to reach Dhemaji from Dibrugarh by train and 90 minutes by road. The bridge links two existing NHs—37 on the south bank and 52 on the north bank. With the opening of the bridge, the road distance from Dibrugarh to Itanagar has been reduced by 150 km and rail travel distance by 705 km. The bridge will stimulate economic development of Assam's two isolated and backward districts—Dhemaji and Lakhimpur. Reports suggest that the bridge will benefit about 5 million people in Assam and Arunachal

in sectors like trade, agriculture and tourism and facilitate Assam's connectivity with China through Arunachal (Bhattacharjee 2019).

Assam is anxiously waiting for another milestone. The ongoing Dhubri-Phulbari Bridge Project, nearly 18 km long, will be the biggest in India once becomes operational. The four-lane bridge over the Brahmaputra connecting Dhubri in Assam with Phulbari in Meghalaya, once completed will reduce travel distance between the two towns by 203 km. The newly declared NH-127 B from Srirampur (Assam-West Bengal border) to Tura in Meghalaya via Dhubri and Phulbari through the bridge will vastly improve connectivity between Assam and Meghalaya and in the Indo-Bangladesh border areas. Moreover, the PWD has decided to build about 700 bridges at a cost of Rs 1500 crore to improve road connectivity across Assam¹⁸. In addition to these, the Assam government is pushing for the construction of four new bridges over Brahmaputra, namely, Mjuli-Jorhat, Dhakuakhana-Tekeliphuta-Dishanmukh, Gohpur-Numaligarh and one near Tezpur¹⁹.

Expansion of Railway Networks

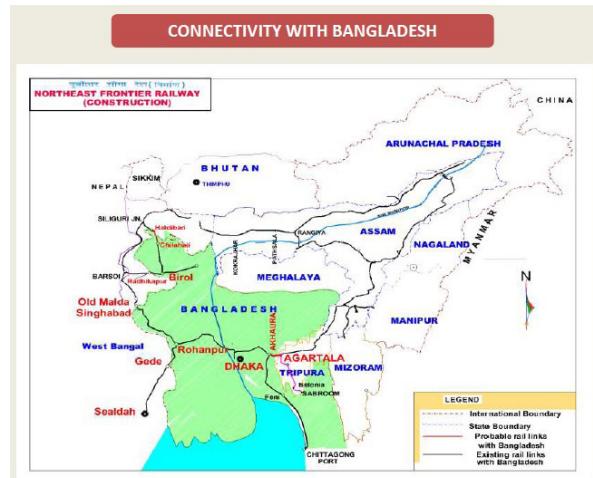
Like the roadways, the development of railways in the NER and its linkages with the railway networks of the neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar is equally crucial for proper implementation of the AEP. Assam is the only state in the region having operational railway networks. In rest of the North Eastern states, railways remained virtually non-existent for long. In order to improve intra-regional railway connectivity, it is important that all the North Eastern states are to be connected to the existing railway routes of Assam for establishing linkages with the national networks. A map showing rail connectivity to capitals of North Eastern states is given below:



Source: Northeast Frontier Railway

India has to develop cross-border railway links with the eastern neighbours for expanding trade and commerce and people-to-people contacts. The Assam government has proposed to restore the pre-partition railway links with Bangladesh such as Chittagong to Makum, Cox's Bazar to Ledo and Golakganj to Moirabari (De 20 October 2019). India also has to take initiative to reopen the Mahishasan-Shahbazpur (Bangladesh) rail route, which has been non-operational since 1996 for the lack

of adequate traffic (Bhattacharjee 2018). A map showing rail connectivity with Bangladesh is given below:



Source: Northeast Frontier Railway

Railways play an important role in strengthening Indo-Bangla friendly ties. The Railway Minister of Bangladesh during his visit to Agartala in November 2017 announced that his country would restore railway links at 12 places between the two nations which were discontinued after the partition. During the colonial period, Assam was also connected to Bangladesh through rail lines that included Karimganj-Chittagong and Mahishasan-Chittagong (Bhattacharjee 2018).

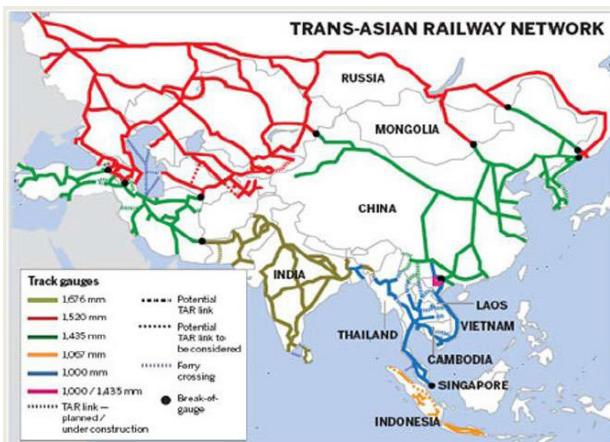
In the recent years, the Union Ministry of Railways has taken up a number of projects to upgrade cross-border railway connectivity. The 15.4 km-long Agartala-Akhaura (in Bangladesh) rail line is currently under construction. This line is being constructed at an estimated cost of Rs 968 crore which is fully funded by India (Bhattacharjee 2018). Reports indicate that the construction of this rail line is progressing well and the much awaited rail link will be completed by September 2021²⁰.

Once this railway line becomes operational, Akhaura will be border inter-change point for Indian and Bangladesh Railways and Assam could establish direct link to Dhaka, Ashuganj river port and Chittagong and Mongla sea ports through Tripura thereby ending its economic isolation and marginalisation. The Agartala-Akhaura rail route will also significantly contribute towards expanding sub-regional connectivity and socio-economic development in both the countries²¹.

The Agartala-Akhaura rail project assumes significance for Assam following the completion of broad gauge conversion of Lumding-Silchar and Badarpur-Agartala sections of the Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR). Recognising the strategic significance

of this rail link, the NDA government has attached top priority to the project. The PMO has reportedly been directly overseeing this project, which is a part of the ambitious TAR (Bhattacharjee 2018).

The TAR, which is an elaborate railway network linking Asian countries with European, also figures prominently in the connectivity projects undertaken to promote the AEP. Under the TAR plan, three railway routes between India and Myanmar through Bangladesh will be constructed/renovated. India is a signatory to the TAR Agreement inked in November 2006 and under this agreement, New Delhi will build and renovate rail links with Myanmar in projects worth Rs 29.41 billion. The TAR connectivity plan includes trans-national railway lines from West Bengal to Tripura through Bangladesh and then Tripura to Myanmar via Mizoram (Sarma 2019). A map showing TAR network is given below:



Source: Northeast Frontier Railway

Another proposed rail route is from Imphal to Moreh and then Tamu in Myanmar. The Imphal-Moreh Railway Project has reportedly been sanctioned. After the implementation of the project, Moreh or Tamu will serve as border inter-change point. Assam could be connected to this cross-border railway link through the Silchar-Jiribam-Imphal rail route. According to recent reports, this project is in advanced stage of completion (Sarma 2019).

The business and industry leaders based in Guwahati have underscored the need of speedy implementation of the Imphal-Moreh Railway Project to ensure greater trans-border engagement. They have reasoned that there would not be much traffic through the India-Myanmar-Thailand TH after its operationalisation due to infrastructure bottleneck. Therefore, they are emphasising the early completion of the Imphal-Moreh Railway Project. The business leaders have further suggested that Moreh township on the Indo-Myanmar border needs to be developed as an international transit hub

between South and South East Asia similar to the kind exists in continental Europe (Pant 2019).

The NDA government has attached priority to the ongoing railway connectivity projects in the NER. The government claims that during 2014-19, railway networks of the region received fresh impetus with liberal funding and speedy execution of the projects²². The increase in the fund allocation for NER's railway projects has been a positive development. The union government has allocated 9% of the railway budget 2020-21 for improving connectivity in the region. The funds sanctioned in the budget was spent on various projects for laying new tracks, doubling of railway lines in the region including the newly proposed doubling of the key 381 km-long Lumding-Tinsukia-Dibrugarh line at an estimated cost of Rs 3810 crore²³.

The NFR has undertaken several infrastructure projects for enhancing the movement of passenger and goods within Assam and between the NER and the country's main railway networks. The work of the new double line from New Jalpaiguri in West Bengal to New Bongaigaon is reportedly progressing well and will be made operational soon. The work has also commenced for the 142 km-long broad gauge (BG) line from New Bogaigaon to Kamakhya via Rangia and it is expected to be completed by March 2023. The work for the 2nd BG line in New Bongaigaon-Goalpara-Kamakhya section has started and its deadline for completion is March 2023²⁴.

Moreover, the construction of a new double line (102 km) from Digaru to Hojai is currently in progress and is likely to be completed by May 2021. Once it is made operational, the capacity of train movement in Guwahati-Lumding section will be increased significantly. The electrification of New Jalpaiguri-Guwahati route is currently underway and is expected to be completed by the end of 2021. In addition to these, on November 10, 2016, the then Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu announced the 12 km-long elevated New Guwahati-Kamakhya railway corridor project. The entire project with an estimated cost of Rs 5000 crore is designed to contribute to the smart city project²⁵.

The NFR had initially set target of 2020 to connect all North Eastern state capitals to the main railway networks of India through Assam. But all the state capitals could not be connected within 2020 as some of the ongoing projects are facing various challenges. While Itanagar and Agartala are already connected to the national network, the railway projects linking the capitals of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya are in different stages of implementation. The NFR has set the revised target of 2022 for completion of Manipur and Mizoram railway projects²⁶.

The linking of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya with the existing networks of Assam will tremendously boost the economy of the NER. The improvement of railway network will facilitate expansion of established business and encourage small entrepreneurs to enter the market²⁷. Besides, it will make transportation of essential

commodities much cheaper, faster and safer to these states. Moreover, for effective implementation of the AEP, Assam needs seamless railway connectivity with the North Eastern states sharing international borders.

Manipur will be connected by a 111 km-long line from Jiribam to Imphal through steep hills and deep gorges. The construction of the first segment of the new line from Jiribam to Vangaichungpao (12 km) was completed in March 2017, while the laying of track from Vangaichungpao to Imphal via Tupul is currently underway²⁸. The Jiribam-Imphal is strategic railway line which will not only put Imphal on the railway map in the next two years but also facilitate the route's extension up to Moreh on the Indo-Myanmar border and beyond to further link it with the proposed TAR.

Mizoram will be connected by a 52 km new railway line from Bhairabi to Sairang near capital Aizawl. Reports suggest that so far, 58.43% of the project has been completed. In Nagaland, the ongoing Dhansiri (Dimapur)-Zubja (near capital Kohima) Rail Project has been fast tracked since September 2018. There is a land acquisition issue involved in the project and the target for completion is three years after complete land is handed over to the NFR²⁹.

Meghalaya's capital Shillong will be connected to Assam through the new Tetelia-Byrnihat rail line. The 21.50 km length of the project falling in Assam from Tetelia to Kamalajari got completed in October 2018. The remaining section in the state, the 108.40 km Byrnihat-Shillong segment of the project has been facing strong resistance from the influential Khasi Students' Union. Therefore, the target for completion has not been fixed as the same would be decided once the entire land is physically handed over to the NFR³⁰.

The NFR has also taken initiatives in the last few years to connect some of the major towns of Arunachal to the railway networks of Assam. Efforts are on to extend the railway network northwards to Tawang and eastwards to Tezu which is not far from India-Myanmar-China trijunction. The preliminary survey of the proposed 378 km line from Bhalukpong to Tawang via Tenga through the rugged mountains is over³¹. After the completion of this strategic rail project, Assam will get an additional route to connect with China through Tawang to boost the AEP.

There are several railway projects in Arunachal under various stages of implementation. Some of them connecting with the railway networks of Assam include: North Lakhimpur-Bame-Aalo-Silapathar (247.85 km), Pasighat-Tezu-Parshuram Kund-Rupai (225 km), Dumduma-Simalguri-Namsai-Chowkham-Wakro (96 km), Dangri-Roing (60 km), Deomali-Naharkatia (20 km), Lekhapani-Kharsang-Miao-Nampong-New Kamlang-Deban (75 km), Tinsukia-Kanubari-Deomali-Lekhapani-Jairampur-Kharsang-Miao-Dayun-Tezu-Bhismaknagar-Roing-Dambuk-Pasighat (300 km) and Margherita-Deomali (31 km)³².

Once these lines become operational, there will be smooth movement of food grain, cement, sugar and other essential items to the North East³³. Besides, the new rail lines will boost tourism and business activities adding much needed impetus to the local economy. Among the North Eastern states, Assam will get maximum benefit from the expansion of railway networks in the region since it has the biggest domestic market in the NER.

The operationalisation of the Bogibeel Bridge is also a game changer in terms of expanding railway connectivity especially in the northern bank of Brahmaputra and Arunachal. It has provided much needed connectivity between the two existing railway networks in the southern and northern banks. The bridge has established links between Dibrugarh and the Rangiya-Murkongselek section in the north bank and reduced the train journey from Dibrugarh to Naharlagun to less than 100 km. It has also offered alternate and shorter routes from Dibrugarh to New Delhi and Kolkata via Rangiya (Bhattacharjee 2019).

Revamping of Inland Waterways

One of the most significant developments in the arena of Assam's transport system has been the persistent efforts of the state government to develop inland waterways through the two major river systems—Brahmaputra and Barak. Both are identified as National Waterways (NWs) No 2 and 16, respectively. The IWAI under the MoRTH has taken a number of initiatives to harness the full potential of NW-2 from Sadiya to Dhubri on the Brahmaputra. The Assam government is also fully cooperating with the IWAI to introduce cruise tourism through the NW-2 to boost the state's economy. The efforts to develop Assam's inland waterways and restore the British era river routes with Bangladesh are integral parts of the promotion of the AEP.

In a major development on December 30, 2017, the then Union MoRTH Minister Nitin Gadkari announced in Guwahati that Rs 1,250 crore was sanctioned for comprehensive development of inland water transport of Assam. The fund will be utilised for constructing 56 new Inland Water Terminals (IWTs) and up gradation of “roll-on, roll-off” service in which people and goods including vehicles will be ferried. A part of the fund will also be spent on the infrastructure development of IWTs at Bogibeel, Nematighat, Kamalabari, Silghat, Jogighopa, Silchar and Pandu³⁴.

In its attempts to improve Assam's passenger and goods ferry services through Brahmaputra, Barak and other rivers, the Sonowal government submitted an Assam Inland Water Transport (AIWT) Project proposal to the WB seeking financial assistance. In November 2019, the WB granted a loan of \$ 110 million for the AIWT Project to be implemented by the Assam government. Under this project, the infrastructure of the ferry services in Assam will be overhauled³⁵.

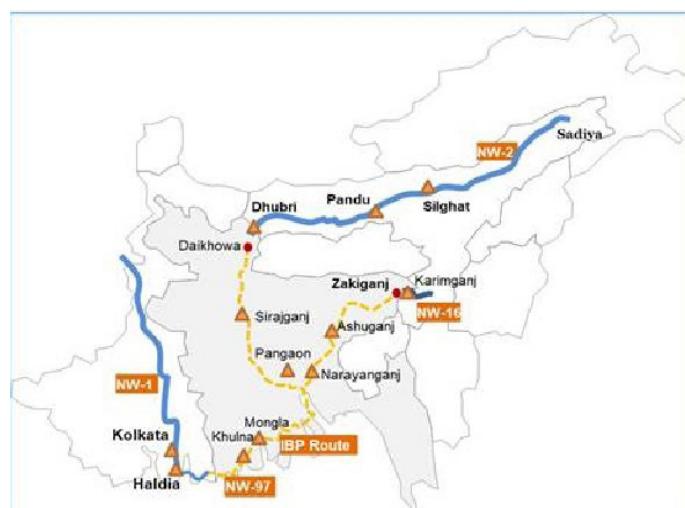
To make Assam's inland water transport both attractive and passenger-friendly, better-

designed terminals and energy efficient vessels will be introduced. To ensure inland water transport more reliable and safer, better navigation aid, appropriate safety gear and suitable marine engines will be used³⁶. The process of modernisation also includes procurement of new Search and Rescue (SAR) vessels, up gradation of state's IWTs, retrofitting of existing vessels and institutional capacity development. The initiative has been designed to realise vast potential of Assam's water transport system, which had remained underutilised³⁷.

Assam's ferry services are crucial for the people living in both the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. The project has been given priority as inland water transport being considered as eco-friendly, economic and convenient mode of transport and is aimed at boosting regional connectivity and access to the remote areas³⁸. Experts have suggested that to ensure safe navigation using electronic charts, night navigation equipments and Differential Global Positioning Systems (DGPPS) stations along the rivers like Brahmaputra and Barak have to be installed and maintained properly. Besides, Assam's IWTs are to be equipped with modern cargo handling machineries (De 16 October 2019).

The up gradation of the state's water transport infrastructure and increased activities through the river routes will generate new business and job opportunities. Initially, the AIWT Project will be made operational at Majuli and Guwahati. Assam's Majuli, the largest river island in the world and a designated United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Heritage Site, could be developed as a heritage tourism circle attracting tourists from the region and neighbouring countries. River cruise services will be launched from Guwahati to Jorhat and back.

NW-2 and Indo-Bangla IWT Routes



Source: Inland Waterways Authority of India

As a part of its attempt to boost the AEP, the Assam government is also pitching for the improvement of sub-regional inland waterways connectivity with Bangladesh. Following the declaration of the Sadiya-Dhubri route as NW-2, the cargo movement through the Brahmaputra has increased to an extent even though facing challenges. Recent reports suggest that export to Bangladesh through IWT has gone up. Dhubri is now fully connected to Narayanganj and there has been regular transportation of cargo vessels through the route. Bhutan is also using this route for trade with Bangladesh (De 16 October 2019). A map showing NW-2 and Indo-Bangla IWT routes is given above

The up gradation of IWT between Assam and Bangladesh will expand trade, create investment opportunities, boost tourism and stimulate economic development. It is estimated that more than 600 million people in India and Bangladesh live along the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers. Besides, millions more live around navigable tributaries (Ahmad 2019). The restoration of the British era IWT routes and their linkages with coastal shipping will substantially increase international trade boosting Assam's economy.

The expansion of waterway connectivity between India and South and South East Asian countries to enhance trade is also a key objective of the AEP. In June 2015, India inked Coastal Shipping Agreement with Bangladesh allowing direct movement of vessels between ports in both the countries instead of a via third country. Along with the agreement, the two sides renewed the 1972 Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade for five more years for boosting trade and commerce through river routes. The current protocol is valid up to March 2020 with a clause for automatic renewal. In view of the Assam government's persistent demands to revive the old waterway links between the NER and Bangladesh, talks are on to start steamer service from Guwahati to Dhaka (Bhattacharjee 2015).

According to the Indo-Bangla protocol, the vessel of either country could travel through specified river routes in the other country. There 4 river routes and 5 ports of call in each country designated under the protocol. Among the ports of call in each country, 3 are from Assam, namely, Karimganj, Pandu and Silghat³⁹. Of the 4 river routes, 3 pass through Assam's rivers. They include:

- a. Kolkata - Haldia - Raimangal - Chalna - Khulna - Mongla - Kaukhali - Barisal - Hizla - Chandpur - Narayanganj - Aricha - Sirajganj - Bahadurabad - Chilmari - Dhubri - Pandu - Silghat; and vice versa (Total one-way length: 1720 km)
- b. Kolkata - Haldia - Raimangal - Mongla - Kaukhali - Barisal - Hizla - Chandpur - Narayanganj - Bhairab Bazar - Ajmiraganj - Markuli - Sherpur - Fenchuganj - Zakiganj - Karimganj; and vice versa (Total one-way length: 1318 km)
- c. Karimganj - Zakiganj - Fenchuganj - Sherpur - Markuli - Ajmiraganj - Bhairab Bazar - Narayanganj - Chandpur - Aricha - Sirajganj - Bahadurabad - Chilmari - Dhubri - Pandu - Silghat; and vice versa (Total one-way length: 1416 km)⁴⁰.

Recent reports say the IWAI has already begun bulk cargo to Assam through the Indo-Bangla Protocol Routes (IBPRs). However, only a few Indian transit cargos are operating through the IBPRs due to less depth available mainly in Bangladesh's Sirajganj-Daikhowa and Ashuganj-Zakiganj segments during dry season. Several sections of the rivers both in Bangladesh and India have to be dredged and deepened to facilitate movement of containerised cargo. To address this issue, India and Bangladesh in their bilateral talks on inland waterways and coastal shipping in October 2018 agreed to undertake dredging work in these segments with India funding 80% of the project⁴¹.

The land-locked and isolated NER has long been demanding access to Bangladesh's Chittagong, Mongla and Ashuganj ports for transportation of goods. There is a good opportunity to transport food grain through the IBPRs as it will be much cheaper than sending by road and railways. In order to strengthen IWT between the two countries, New Delhi and Dhaka signed 3 Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) on October 25-26, 2018. The most important of them was the signing of agreements for the use of Chittagong and Mongla ports for movement of goods from India's NER (D'Silva 2018). This development assumes significance for Assam as the NW-2 will be directly connected to Chittagong and Mongla ports providing much needed alternative mode of transportation of goods from and to the state.

New Delhi and Dhaka also finalised Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for movement of passengers and cruise vessels on the IBPRs and coastal shipping routes. Moreover, the two sides agreed to declare Badarpur on river Barak as an extended port of call of Karimganj in Assam and Ghorasal of Ashuganj in Bangladesh on a reciprocal basis. It was further agreed in the bilateral meeting that a Joint Technical Committee would explore the possibility of the reconstruction and opening up of Jangipur navigational lock on river Bhagirathi subject to the provisions of the 1996 Farraka Agreement. The operationalisation of this route will reduce the distance to Assam by more than 450 km on the IBPRs (D'Silva 2018).

The Proposed Dredging of Brahmaputra

In its bids to address the problems of perennial flood and continuous soil erosion on both banks of the mighty Brahmaputra and enhance navigation through the 891 km-long NW-2, the Assam government has decided to undertake dredging. The Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries carry large amount of sediment during flood every year resulting in the rise of river bed and increase of river width. The dredging will dig out sediments from the river bed and enhance water retention capacity of the river. Consequently, the pressure on the banks will be reduced minimising occurrences of flood and soil erosion⁴².

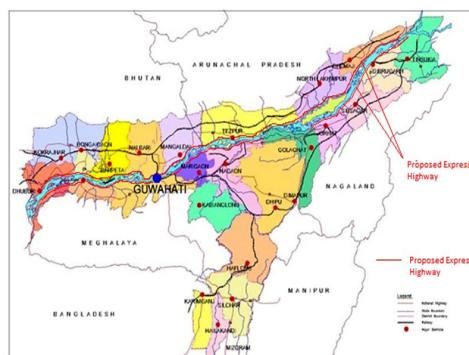
The Union Ministry of Jal Shakti and Social Justice and Empowerment has pointed out that the Brahmaputra is one of the highest sediment carrying rivers in the country. The IWAI needs to undertake regular dredging to maintain required Least Available

Depth (LAD) of 2.5 metre between Dhubri and Neamati; 2.0 metre depth between Neamati and Dibrugarh and 1.5 metre depth between Dibrugarh and Oriumghat⁴³.

On August 23, 2016, the state government held a meeting under the chairmanship of the chief minister on the proposal of dredging of Brahmaputra and its tributaries and decided to start the process in consultation with IWAI and Dredging Corporation of India (DCI)⁴⁴. The IWAI will undertake dredging of Brahmaputra from Sadiya to Dhubri in phased manner. The project will start from Sadiya in the eastern tip of Assam. The dredging operation will be extended up to its confluence with the Bay of Bengal in Bangladesh⁴⁵.

The proper maintenance of embankments along Brahmaputra and its tributaries has also been accorded due importance. Former Minister for MoRTH Nitin Gadkari during his visit to Guwahati in December 30, 2017, asked the state government to take immediate steps to revamp the entire network of embankments measuring about 4,474 km and make them road-cum-dykes. Reports say along with the dredging, a 1300 km-long Brahmaputra Express Highway would be built along the northern and southern banks using the sand extracted from dredging and make the express highway attractive for tourists. In early 2017, an agreement was signed in Guwahati between the Government of Assam, National Highway Authority of India and IWAI in this regard⁴⁶. A map showing the alignment of the proposed Brahmaputra Express Highway is given below:

Brahmaputra Express Highway



Source: Government of Assam

Up Gradation of Air Connectivity

Assam has made big strides in the arena of air connectivity in the recent years. A number of steps including introduction of new air connectivity scheme, opening of air routes between Guwahati and foreign capitals and renovation of the Guwahati airport have been undertaken to promote the AEP. Moreover, Assam's Industry and Commerce Minister Chandra Mohan Patowary, who also heads the Act East Department, said

that the state government has decided to upgrade and revive 55 air strips throughout the state. The British built all the air strips during the World War II; but most of them were abandoned later for various reasons (Guha 2018).

The improvement of air connectivity within the NER is equally important since the other states are connected to the major Indian cities by air only through Guwahati. In October 2016, the Union Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) launched the Ure Desh Ka Aam Nagarik (UDAN) programme under the Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS) for improving air connectivity in the NER. As per the scheme, most of the air routes will be subsidised to ensure that the cost of flying is affordable to the majority of the people⁴⁷.

In its efforts to boost the AEP, the Assam government has formulated an ambitious plan to connect Guwahati by air with the capitals of BBIN and ASEAN countries. In November 2018, the MoCA approved the international air connectivity scheme linking Guwahati with six foreign destinations. They include: Dhaka, Kathmandu, Yangon, Singapore, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur⁴⁸. A map showing air routes connecting Guwahati is given below:

Air Routes Connecting Guwahati



Source: *The Strait Times*

The UDAN Scheme offers financial assistance to airlines to improve connectivity among Indian states and international destinations. The Assam government has decided to provide Rs 100 crore Viability Gap Funding (VGF) per annum for 3 years to boost tourism and industrial investment in the state. In the NER, Assam is the first state to offer funds for the UDAN Scheme International. The plan envisages transforming Lokopriya Gopinath Bordoloi International (LGBI) Airport as one of air hubs linking

South East Asia⁴⁹.

In a major development on September 29, 2018, the Royal Bhutan Airlines started a new non-stop air service between Guwahati and Singapore and back. The introduction of the new route is a part of the Air Service Agreement signed between India and Bhutan on the eve of golden jubilee celebration marking fifty years (1957-2007) of diplomatic relations between the two neighbours⁵⁰.

The opening of the Guwahati-Singapore air service will boost trade, investment and tourism between the NER especially Assam and South East Asian countries. Singapore, an influential ASEAN member, is optimistic about the future prospects of the new air link. India is the third largest tourism source market for Singapore and this new air service would further strengthen cultural and socio-political ties between countries and create opportunities for trade and commerce⁵¹.

The improvement of air connectivity between Guwahati, the business capital of the NER, and the neighbouring countries is a remarkable step towards the realisation of the goals envisaged in the AEP. In the last two years, Guwahati has got connected to two more foreign capitals. On July 1, 2019, the first Guwahati-Dhaka flight was flagged off. Again on September 22, 2019, former Assam Chief Minister Sonowal inaugurated the Guwahati-Bangkok air service. He noted that the new air route would immensely contribute to the renewal of cultural and commercial ties between India especially Assam and Thailand⁵².

The new air service has generated enthusiasm among the business leaders of the NER about the prospects of expanding trade and investment between India and Thailand, which has a robust market. A key Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) functionary based at Guwahati remarked that the opening of the new air route is the first major development on the AEP front. He said some sectors such as health, education and tourism would benefit from better connectivity with South East Asia⁵³.

Another positive development related to the enhancement of air connectivity of the NER is the up gradation of the LGBI Airport at Guwahati—the region's busiest air transit point. The LGBI Airport has been expanded and renovated several times since its establishment in 1958. The ongoing project to develop Guwahati's new integrated terminal was undertaken in 2017 and is likely to be completed by 2021⁵⁴. The regular up gradation of the infrastructure of the LGBI Airport has become necessary in view of the significant rise in volume of air traffic over the years.

Most of the airlines operate daily flights between Guwahati and all metros of India via Kolkata and New Delhi. The airport is fast turning into one of the busiest airports. In 2017, it handled more than 3.7 million passengers, an increase of 36% from 2016⁵⁵. It is expected that in the coming days, the LGBI Airport will play an instrumental role

in broadening and deepening of ties between India's North East and neighbouring countries adding fresh momentum to the AEP.

Building of Multi-Modal Transport System and Logistics Park

In its bids to promote the AEP, both the union and state governments have initiated the process of constructing multi-modal transport system inter-connecting roadways, railways, waterways and airways in Assam and linking it with the existing transport networks of the neighbouring countries. It is a major step towards integrating the NER especially Assam with the markets of neighbouring countries. Such an initiative has been taken for the first time in the landlocked NER. As part of the AEP, some selected areas of Assam will be developed as centres of trade, transit and connectivity.

Under the proposed North East EC Project, 7 IWTs on the Brahmaputra will be renovated. These IWTs will be further upgraded as multi-modal transport hubs with all modern facilities for transhipment of goods from road to rail to waterways for seamless movement of industrial and agricultural products saving time and cost. The NFR has already initiated steps to upgrade Silghat as the first multi-modal transport hub of central Assam⁵⁶.

In order to lessen logistics costs and improve the efficiency of transportation of goods and commodities, the union government has decided to develop Multi-Modal Logistics Park (MMLP) and sought ADB's assistance to carry out MMLP pre-feasibility studies at selected locations, including Jogighopa in Assam. The ADB in its study report suggested development of transport infrastructure for the proposed Jogighopa MMLP, including up gradation and widening of NH-17 from Bongaigaon to Guwahati via Jogighopa. The ADB report also recommended for the improvement of the Dalu-Gelepu road, which will facilitate trade between Bangladesh and Bhutan through Jogighopa and an aggregation and distribution point for international trade and transit cargo⁵⁷.

Reports say the Assam government has already confirmed land availability and Detailed Project Report (DPR) is in progress. The country's first multi-modal hub would be set up at Jogighopa at a cost of nearly Rs 600 crore. Jogighopa, which has a road-cum-rail bridge over the Brahmaputra, is set to emerge as India's first gateway to BBIN and ASEAN countries as well as rest of the NER with the government pushing for the up gradation of roadways, railways, waterways and airways facilities at the proposed hub⁵⁸.

Along with the initiatives to develop multi-modal transport network in Assam, steps have been taken to further improve Guwahati's connectivity within the NER and with neighbouring countries. Guwahati is the most important city in the NER and acts as transit point between the region and rest of the country. Therefore, the up gradation of the existing roadways, railways, waterways and airways connecting Guwahati is

essential for promoting the AEP. Guwahati is connected by roads, rail, waterways and air. The city is connected to a number of NHs: 31 and 37 link the city with the north-western states of India, while 40 and other state highways connect it with the rest of the North Eastern states⁵⁹.

Challenges Facing the Infrastructure Development Projects

Despite government's efforts to push the infrastructure development of India's NER, several problems have delayed the implementation of the ongoing projects. While a few issues are unique to North East, the others are common in rest of India. Some of the challenges confronting the transport infrastructure development projects of the NER include: difficult terrain, incessant rainfall, militant activities, unstable geological features, slow land acquisition process, endemic corruption, lengthy environment and forest clearance process, ecological issues, anti-government movements and resource crunch.

Excessive rainfall in the NER seriously hampers the progress of work of the infrastructure projects. Frequent flooding of Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries during monsoon renders construction work virtually impossible for 6-7 months in the plains of Assam. Even unseasonal rains pose engineering challenge for deep foundation and high embankments (Kukreja 2016). Heavy rainfall results in repeated landslides and ground sinking making the task difficult for workers and causing delays in transportation of construction materials and equipments. This is a common scenario noticed in the NER especially in the hilly regions leading to delay in execution of the projects and escalation of their cost.

The seemingly unending insurgency also seriously affects the implementation of the transport infrastructure development projects in the NER. The militants run parallel economy in states like Manipur and Nagaland where road and rail projects are facing problems. The militants often threaten locals working in the projects and also extort money from contractors and government officials leading to uncertainty and delay in implementation of the projects. The overall law and order of the NER has improved to an extent in the recent years; but the situation in Manipur and Nagaland continue to be an issue of concern. The roads between Dimapur and Imphal and from Imphal to Moreh are most vulnerable to militant activities.

Sluggish land acquisition process is another serious issue confronting the connectivity development projects especially railways. The ongoing rail projects in Nagaland and Manipur got delayed due to this reason. The fear of influx of illegal immigrants among the indigenous people in Meghalaya has also impeded the execution of ongoing projects. A few organisations of Meghalaya did not allow the survey work for the Byrnihat-Shillong Rail Project to be completed apprehending that the improvement of connectivity will lead to the entry of illegal immigrants.

Sometimes delay in releasing funds or completion of official formalities adversely affects the implementation of the projects. This happens in case of India's infrastructure development projects undertaken in the neighbouring countries. Factors like bureaucratic lethargy and red tapism stall the progress of implementation of the infrastructure development projects. Under such circumstances, India's goodwill as development partner suffers a setback.

Another Asian giant China is also engaged in the infrastructure development of South and South East Asian countries and competes with India for influence and promotion of economic interests. China takes advantage of India's dilly-dallying approach and completes the projects much faster displaying its economic prowess. In the recent years, India has lost much of its traditional influence in countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal and Maldives facilitating China's emergence as a major infrastructure developer in the region.

The prevalence of rampant corruption in transport infrastructure development projects is also a matter of worry. This happens mainly in the road projects involving Assam's PWD. The state government officials' involvement in corrupt practices often hinders proper implementation of the projects. Sometimes, ecological issues also impede the renovation/repair of roads. A number of national and state highways pass through sensitive reserve forest areas of Assam where the animal rights groups are active. They register cases requesting immediate halt of work if it is perceived to be threatening the life of endangered species. The Green Tribunal's rulings have stopped works in some parts of Assam in the recent years.

Another big challenge is the dredging of the Brahmaputra with some quarters raising technical and ecological issues. A technical team from the DCI visited Assam in September 2016 and recommended that a thorough morphological and hydrological study of the river is required to find out the possibilities of dredging its enormous silt deposits. Experts are of the opinion that dredging along a particular width of a channel along the Brahmaputra for navigation will not provide a permanent solution to the problems of recurring flood and soil erosion. They say the mighty Brahmaputra and its several tributaries carry massive silt with their flow, about 1.8 billion tonnes per year (Akhtar 2017).

They reason that it is impossible to make the river bed free from silt accumulation by dredging, unless an effective mechanism is applied to capture and dispose of the silt load flowing into the mainstream from its tributaries. Failing to do so will lead to the accumulation of fresh silt immediately. So they argue that undertaking dredging may not be economically viable. Besides, dredging poses a major threat to the aquatic lives of the Brahmaputra and the surrounding national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. Therefore, environmentalists insist that a comprehensive ecological impact assessment study must be done before undertaking dredging (Akhtar 2017).

The Modi government's domestic political agenda and foreign policy objectives sometimes work at cross purpose adversely impacting the infrastructure development initiatives in the NER. In the wake of the violent protest demonstrations across Assam against the contentious Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) during November-December 2019, the Japan government postponed the annual summit with India. Reports suggest that the prime ministers of both the countries were expected to meet on December 15-16 and Guwahati was chosen as one of the venues of the summit. The postponement was a major setback for the NER as Japan agreed to invest Rs 13, 000 crore in several infrastructure projects of the region⁶⁰.

Japan has emerged as a key development partner of India's NER. Since 2011, Japan has been providing aid for the region's infrastructure development. The infusion of Japanese assistance increased after 2014. The Act East Forum, a bilateral coordination mechanism, was established two years back with the objective of ushering economic development in the NER⁶¹.

The current union government's internal contradiction between the domestic and foreign policy issues especially related to the AEP also had a destabilising effect on the Indo-Bangladesh friendly ties. The controversies triggered by the recent National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise in Assam and the politically-motivated anti-Bangladesh statements of some of the leaders of the Modi government invited people's wrath and the Hasina government's displeasure across the borders. Besides, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has created misunderstanding in the neighbouring country. Both the issues have become irritants in the bilateral relations which otherwise witnessed a major upswing ever since Sheikh Hasina assumed power in 2009.

Conclusions

The recent thrust on improving connectivity in the NER reflects the Indian ruling elites' shift from the traditional security-oriented to development-centric approach towards this peripheral region of the country. In the context of globalisation and fast changing regional and global geo-political dynamics, New Delhi's policy makers have been compelled to upgrade the isolated NER's transport infrastructure and its linkages with the neighbouring countries to integrate the region with some of the fastest growing markets of ASEAN and BBIN. However, the union government has to immediately amend its dismal execution record of transport infrastructure development projects in the NER. Instead of indulging in political rhetoric and propagating its achievements, the government should focus on creating a synergy between domestic and foreign policies taking all stakeholders into confidence.

Assam could be transformed into the centre-point of the AEP due to its resource potentials and fairly developed transport network. The state needs a breakthrough after suffering from prolonged insurgency. It is important that the government now fast track the pending projects in view of the recent improvement in the insurgency

situation across the state. Given Assam's sensitivities on some core issues, for example illegal migration, the current political dispensation at the centre should eschew from pursuing divisive political agenda disturbing social cohesion and stability. Many quarters of Assam including academicians, journalists and entrepreneurs apprehend that violence and uncertainty stemming from the controversial CAA could become a serious impediment to the implementation of the AEP. The incumbent union government should realise that the prospects of improved connectivity outweigh the challenges and take a holistic yet pragmatic approach for all-round development of the state.

Appendix

Policy Implications

The foregoing analysis brings out certain policy implications which have critical bearing on the success of AEP integrating NER with global space.

- A. The government should expedite the land acquisition process involving several road and railway projects. Similarly, it should fast track forest and environment clearance procedures without bypassing existing norms. The government must also address the local issues facing the ongoing railway projects especially in Meghalaya. It is the government's responsibility to take the indigenous organisations into confidence that the development of transport infrastructure will bring about significant change in the local people's livelihood and prosperity. This is one of the most important objectives of the AEP.
- B. The Union Ministry of Home Affairs has to reinvigorate the peace process in the insurgency affected parts of North East to bring about sustainable development in the region. The improvement of transport infrastructure in the insurgency-ridden areas will galvanise economic growth. So the government has to remove the hurdles impeding the ongoing projects. To realise the goals envisaged in the AEP, the improvement of connectivity throughout the NER is essential and this could be realised only when peace and stability are fully restored in the region.
- C. The elimination of corrupt practices involving the road projects is also urgently needed. Irregularities and adoption of unfair means in the construction/renovation of the roads in Assam often cause delay leading to severe public inconveniences. The Assam government must revamp the PWD to make it more transparent and accountable. The state government has to realise that there is an immediate need to change the corrupt mindset of the officials and improve internal governance for effective implementation of the AEP.
- D. Another infrastructure bottleneck that needs to be removed without further delay is the poor inter-state road linkages in the NER. Several state roads connecting Assam with neighbouring states are in deplorable state. The intra-

regional movement of cargo and passenger vehicles sometimes become a nightmare in such dilapidated roads. The governments of the North Eastern states are indifferent towards many inter-state roads lying in the remote and peripheral areas. Since the Assam government is pushing the AEP, it could take the initiative to renovate such roads by devising an effective institutional coordination mechanism with the concerned state ensuring seamless movement of cargo and passenger.

- E. India should also fast track the transport infrastructure development projects undertaken in neighbouring countries especially Bangladesh and Myanmar. Moreover, to boost trade and people-to-people ties between NER and ASEAN and BBIN countries as part of the AEP, the MEA has to ensure speedy completion of the ongoing trans-border and inter-regional connectivity projects. The early operationalisation of the India-Myanmar-Thailand TH is important for enhancing Indo-ASEAN trade. The TH could be made operational only after the 3 countries implement a motor vehicle agreement. Furthermore, New Delhi should step up efforts to operationalise the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement in consultation with the concerned countries as early as possible.
- F. Bangladesh is an important eastern neighbour and India requires its crucial cooperation to implement several cross-border connectivity projects initiated under the AEP. Therefore, it is in New Delhi's interest not to generate any unnecessary controversy stemming from its domestic politics and respect Bangladesh's sensitivities. This is more so because New Delhi also needs Bangladesh's support to contain China's growing foot prints in the South Asian region, which is considered as India's own backyard.

These aspects assume significance on the eve of Modi's much awaited visit to Dhaka on March 26-27, 2021, to celebrate Bangladesh's fifty years of independence and bilateral relations with India. In the recent months, India has given a big push to boost connectivity with the neighbouring country aiming at forging a strategic partnership under the vision of Indo-Pacific cooperation. Foreign policy analysts maintain that India seeks to take connectivity to the "next level" in the Bay of Bengal region, which is increasingly becoming the focal point of the Indo-Pacific strategy⁶². It is expected that New Delhi's decision makers will adopt an inclusive approach factoring the NER in India's foreign policy priorities.

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