

## From Local to Global: Arunachal Pradesh as the Potential Connect

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**Abstract:** India's Northeast is geo-strategically assessed to link the East and South East Asia through cross border trade. Crucially the world economy hinges around trade and commerce asking countries to strategise their economy with competitive bids. The unique geographical strength that the Northeast possesses is an addendum to utilise its scope of marketing in the international borders and beyond. Arunachal Pradesh, being the most north-eastern, and strategically sharing its border to China, Bhutan and Myanmar has proved its potential as a hub to 'Look East Policy'. The state has stood reciprocal to globalisation and neo-liberal market trends. The state's horticulture and plantation produce, medicinal and aromatic plants, ethnic textiles, handicrafts, and cuisines are its proudest commercial assets gaining currency from local to global standards. It is no denying of the fact that Arunachal Pradesh can be a potential geo-economic corridor to the East for which it should come up with special economic zones as well as industrial corridors with its potentialities in 5H (hydro, herbal, horticulture, handicraft and handloom) and the 3T (tradition, tourism and technology) for a sustainable international trade. It is on this background that the present paper has come up.

**Keywords:** Arunachal Pradesh, Potential Connect, Southeast Asia, Geo-economic Corridor, Cross-border Trade

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Physiographically converged into the Eastern Himalaya, the Northeast of India chests eight Indian states, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim, an area of 262,230 square kilometres (101,250 sq miles), almost eight percent landmass of the Indian Union confluencing Indo-Malayan, Indo-Chinese, and Indian bio-geographical spheres. The region's population results from ancient and continuous flows of migrations from Tibet, Indo-Gangetic India, the Himalayas, present Bangladesh, and Myanmar (Driem, 2012). Cradle to five Asian nations, viz. China, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh, and connected to mainland India by a 'chicken-neck corridor' through north Bengal, the Northeast is geo-strategically assessed to link the East and South East Asia through cross border trade. The North Eastern Region Vision Document of 2020 is one-step forward to speed up the process of economic development (Retrieved from website-<http://necouncil.gov.in>, Vision 2020). Despite bottlenecks the Government of India has been emphasizing to connect this region with mainstream and link it with neighbouring Southeast Asia through trade. Arunachal Pradesh, being the most north-eastern, and strategically sharing its border to China, Bhutan

and Myanmar has proved its potential as a hub to 'Look East Policy' which got coined way back in 1991.<sup>1</sup>

We see the world been reduced to large economic village with free market scenario and economic zones going 'global'. Crucially the world economy hinges around trade and commerce asking countries to strategise their economy with competitive bids. The unique geographical strength that the Northeast possesses is an addendum to utilise its scope of marketing in the international borders and beyond. The market for its products naturally lies within and beyond the country. To race up employability is to speed up the flow of investment in the sector which seemingly looks viable through border trade with neighbouring countries. It needs to be harnessed to the fullest possible extent. The region is rich with natural resources- minerals, oil, agricultural and horticultural products and even with ethnic produces which claim wider scope for marketing. The state of Arunachal Pradesh stands no less significant in this regard. It is on this background that the present paper has come up.

## **LAND LINKS- NORTH EAST AND NEIGHBOUR-NATIONS**

The North East did develop trade links with Tibet and Myanmar (previously Burma) through land routes. An ancient land route that connected Peshwar (Pakistan) to Parvatipur (now in Bangladesh) was passing through Wazirabad, Lahore (both in Pakistan), Jalandhar, Saharanpur, Lucknow, Tirhut and Katihar, further extending to Assam from Parvatipur (Kumar, 2000: 3). A southern route from Lahore to Bhagalpur through Raiwind (Pakistan), Ferozepur, Bhatinda, Delhi, Allahabad, Varanasi and Patna, and further stretched up to Ganga Sagar (Calcutta) from Patna. The route extended from Bhagalpur to Kajangala in Rajmahal and then to Calcutta. One more anabranch from this southern route led to Kamarupa from Kajangala by crossing the Ganges at that point (Kumar, 2000: 3). History speaks about the Kamarupa king, Bhaskar Varman and the Chinese envoy of the Tang dynasty, Yuan Chuang meeting the Pushyabhuti Emperor, Harsha Vardhana in 7<sup>th</sup> CE at Kajangala (Vasu, 1922: 151; Retrieved from website). Probably they would have followed the same route for travelling to that place from Kamarupa. The route to Kamarupa extended upto the Yunnan province of China. An alternative trade route from India to China passed through Chumbi valley in Sikkim and Tibet. The ancient silk route passed through the north and the north-west.

In early part of twentieth century attempt was made to open up Patkai trade route (Mackenzie, 1981: 64) which was to follow, probably the ancient route linking Brahmaputra valley to the Southeast Asia and Yunnan province of China could not take off. The Brahmaputra valley was also connected with Myanmar through Surma valley and Manipur. Scholars like Sir A.P. Phayre (Phayre, 1883: 3; Retrieved from website), E.W. Dun (Dun, 1886: 6), and James Johnstone (Johnstone, 1896: 280; Retrieved from website) suggest human movement between India and Myanmar through Surma valley and Manipur. D.G.E. Hall too scribes about one such road linking Lower Burma and India through the banks of Irrawady and Chindwin, and Manipur (Hall, 1981: 121). These hills are also connected to China by another route (Pannikar, 1957: 17). Existence of such land routes facilitated trade between the North East and Tibet, Myanmar and Bangladesh. There were at least three routes connecting Surma valley with Manipur and two connecting Manipur with Kabaw valley in the Chindwin river valley (Myanmar) (Singh, 1965: 3). The Brahmaputra was navigable from Gwalando in Bangladesh (confluence of the Ganges and Brahmaputra) to Dibrugarh and upto Sadiya during the floods (Kumar, 2000: 5).

The Northeastern states, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura borders about 1500 kms with Bangladesh. There have been age-old socio-economic ties among them from time immemorial. Brisk

trade between Bangladesh and Northeast continued on old land routes and water ways was found more accessible and proved cost effective compared to other neighbouring countries, like China, Bhutan and Myanmar because of infrastructural and transportal linkages. Even the accessibility of Indian manufactures seems to be more in Bangladesh probably due to liberal Exim policy than the centrally controlled China, Bhutan and Myanmar (Das, 2000: 25-26). India and Myanmar too have agreed to a 4-lane, 3200 km triangular highway connecting India at Guwahati, Myanmar at Mandalay and Yangon and Thailand at Mae Sot and Bangkok. The first phase connecting Guwahati to Mandalay will be extended to Cambodia and Vietnam under Mekong-Ganga Cooperation within the wider framework of Asian Highway Network. This is expected to create a new economic zone ranging from Kolkata on the Bay of Bengal to Ho Chi Minh City on the South China Sea (Nelson, 2012; Retrieved from website).

The road is expected to boost trade and commerce in the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area, as well as with the rest of Southeast Asia. India has also proposed extending the highway to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam (Lyngdoh, 2016; Retrieved from website). The proposed approx 3,200 km (2,000 mi) route from India to Vietnam is known as the East-West Economic Corridor (Thailand to Cambodia and Vietnam became operational in 2015) (Mahitthirook, 2017; Retrieved from website). India and ASEAN have plans to extend this route to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam as this connectivity will generate annually, an estimated US\$70 billion in incremental GDP and 20 million in incremental aggregate employment by 2025, and India has offered US\$1 billion line-of-credit for the India-ASEAN connectivity projects (Financial Express, 2017; Retrieved from website). In December 2020, Bangladesh expressed official interest to join the highway project in order to boost connectivity from Dhaka. The existing Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) motor vehicle agreement facilitates reduced border controls and customs inspection for freight transport between India and Bangladesh (Rajagopalan, thediplomat.com; Retrieved 2021).

The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP), conceptualized in 2008 between India and Myanmar with a budget of over 20,000 crores is India's new gateway to South-East Asia. It provides an alternate route to landlocked north eastern states, reducing the distance from Kolkata to Assam by almost fifty percent. The route to be followed is for the move of men and raw material by ship over the Bay of Bengal from Haldia port (India) till Sittwe port (Myanmar), then move over river Kaladan over floating barges from Sittwe port to Paletwa in Myanmar and finally move by road over 109.2 km from Paletwa to Zorinpui (Mizoram/India) (Sharma, republicworld.com, 2021: Retrieved from website).

The Northeast and Bhutan share a common border of about 650 km and trade between them runs through Assam-Bhutan borders, but seems to be not so encouraging. Same is the case with China too. Sharing of borders between the Northeast and China comes to about 1000 km over hilly terrains. Trade status between them is found negligible probably due to inaccessible natural barriers and strained mutual political dispensation. But trading nexus with Bhutan seems to be encouraging. Around 1450 km-long land route stretching over Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland borders India with Myanmar. Border trade with Bhutan runs through Moreh in Manipur, Champhai in Mizoram, and Lungwa in Nagaland. Much of the commodities that Bhutan receives from China and other South East Asian countries enters unofficially into Indian market through Indo- Myanmar border (Das, 2000: 28).

## **LAND LINKS- ARUNACHAL PRADESH AND NEIGHBOUR-NATIONS**

Arunachal Pradesh, being the most north-eastern and strategically sharing its border to three of the Southeast Asian nations- Myanmar (520 km), China (1,080 km) and Bhutan (217 km) has proved its

potential with three geo-economic corridors to strengthen cross-border trade and relations. These days the geographical boundaries do not hold to be barriers, rather open scopes for development. The significance of the Stilwell Road lost to time during the entire Cold War period, gained currency with globalisation setting in motion. And India's "Act East" policy is one step forward in this context. The road is expected to prove a strong link for cross-border trade and economic integration in the region. It has proved itself to be a hub to India's Look East Policy with its geography opening up opportunity and the doorway to South East Asia. Contextualising the importance of Arunachal Pradesh, the former President Pranab Mukherjee reiterated, "Arunachal Pradesh since has common borders with three countries, is a core stake holder in country's 'Look East' foreign policy which must receive our utmost attention" (*Arunachal Times*: 30.11.2013).

The Trans-Arunachal Highway, also called NH-13, is a two-lane highway project extending from Tawang in the north-western tip of Arunachal Pradesh to Kanubari in south-eastern end of the state and finally ending on NH-52 near Akajan in Dhemaji district of Assam on the right side of Bogibeel bridge near Dibrugarh in Assam. The Highway, passing through the mid belt of the state, will interconnect twelve out of total sixteen district headquarters towns of the state and would thus provide improved connectivity to the state capital and important locations of population concentration and economic activities including the sites of major hydro electric power projects. Out of about 1811 km of the Highway, about 290 km forms part of NH-52 and 10 km of NH-153 (A Note on Trans-Arunachal Highway; Retrieved from website). There is no other road in the entire country that can match the beauty, landscape, road condition, and wilderness of the Trans-Arunachal.

With the two mighty bridges of Dhola-Sadiya and Bogibeel over river Lohit and river Brahmaputra respectively, the entire landscape of eastern Assam and eastern Arunachal Pradesh has dramatically changed not only making it easier for the people living in Dhemaji, Lower Dibang, Lohit and East Siang districts but also opening completely a new circuit for tourism. But the heart of everything is the Trans-Arunachal Highway, an audacious road from Tawang to Khonsa, encircling the whole of Assam, running parallel to the strategic international border. The NH-13 of Trans-Arunachal Highway in Arunachal Pradesh and NH-15 along the upper banks of Brahmaputra form an oval-shaped highway loop. NH-15, being joined by NH-13 at Wakro in Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh runs east to west across Assam along the northern bank of Brahmaputra river before rejoining NH-13 at Yupia, the lower foothills of Arunachal Pradesh. Proposed Arunachal Frontier Highway along the China border, existing Trans-Arunachal Highway across the middle, and proposed Arunachal East-West Corridor across the lower foothills along the Assam border are three major highways in Arunachal Pradesh (North East Today, 2017) which may go a long way to bolster up its border trade with neighbouring countries.

As possible cross-border trading centres Arunachal Pradesh has also mapped out Bletting (Namtsering), Bongkhar and Dongshengmang of Tawang district in Indo-Bhutan border, Pangsau Pass (Nampong) in Changlang district of Indo-Myanmar border, Kibithoo of Anjaw district, Bumla and Kenzamani (Zemithang) of Tawang district, Gelling (Kepangla Pass) of Upper Siang district, Mechuka (Lolla pass) and Monigong (Dumla pass) of West Siang district in Indo-China border. On 14<sup>th</sup> July, 2018, two crucial bridges under Trans Arunachal Highway, the Injupani Bridge, a 140 metre long bridge on Roing-Koronu-Paya road providing uninterrupted access between Roing and Tezu, both important district headquarters, and the Deopani/Eze Bridge, a 300 metre long bridge over the Eze river at Roing were inaugurated in eastern Arunachal Pradesh which are expected to provide round

the year connectivity to the strategic Dibang valley bordering China (ET Bureau, 2018; Retrieved from website).

Nampong, situated in the eastern Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh could offer an obvious opening for the geo-economic corridor carrying India's economic interest with South East Asia. Through the six-lane highways Nampong can be connected to Muse, Lashio, Mandalay and Yangon (Myanmar) through Asian Highway (AH) 14, Ruili, Wanding and Kunming (China) through AH-3, and Bangkok (Thailand), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) and Singapore through AH-2, and further to Phnom Penh (Cambodia) and Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam) of the greater Mekong sub-region through AH-1. The approximate road distance between Nampong-Mandalay-Yangon (1428.2 km), Nampong-Bangkok (2091.1 km), Nampong-Kuala Lumpur (3436.7 km), Nampong-Singapore (3795.2 km), Nampong-Phnom Penh (2737.1 km) and Nampong-Hanoi-Hochi Minh (3066.6 km) can come up as a reasonable alternative in compared to cargo-transferring of merchandise from the Northeast to South East Asia via the Siliguri corridor and the Kolkata port. Nampong can open up space for Arunachal Pradesh on multiple dimensions to align with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum (Pattnaik, 2021).

Quite apropos to note here that China has already launched several infrastructure projects along the international boundary closer to Arunachal Pradesh. India is not lagging behind laying importance to the 1800 km-long frontier highway along the international boundary running parallel to China to connect the border areas. Kibithoo, situated at an altitude of 4,070 feet above sea level in Anjaw district of Arunachal Pradesh too offers geo-economic space for the Tibet Autonomous Region, Sichuan and Yunnan of China. It is expected to yield easier access to the Indian industries to address the south-western and south-eastern Chinese markets. Moreover, as a commercial centre Kibithoo might give a chance to both India and China to engage themselves prioritise trade and commerce to security on a long term timeline.

The west part of Arunachal Pradesh is no less significant with Tawang as a major potential geo-economic corridor linking Bhutan to its west and Tibet to north. A strategic road corridor connecting Tawang to Lumla (western Arunachal Pradesh) to Trashigang (Eastern Bhutan) is highly contemplated to hone the benefit out of border trade for the growth and development of eco-tourism in the sector. The site visit to finalise the proposed sites for the new railway line from Bhalukpong to Tawang with approximately 200 km of railway tracks passing through the villages of Shernup, Jamkhar, Ruikhar, Bekhar, Boksar and the sacred lake known as Tsoh-Manja-Chhenmo (Arunachal Times: 16.06.2021); and the inauguration of the Balipara-Charduar-Tawang (BCT) road (50-99 km), constructed by the Border Roads Organization (BRO) by the Indian Defence Minister on 17<sup>th</sup> June 2021 by virtual mode are expected to not only increase trade but also play a crucial role from the defence perspective (Arunachal Times: 18.06.2021).

## **CROSS-BORDER TRADE- ARUNACHAL PRADESH AS A POTENTIAL PARTNER**

Given the details of land links that Arunachal Pradesh is supposed to have with its neighbour-nations discussed, an effective possibility of a intransient border trade can not at all be ruled out with the background back-up of 'Look East Policy' of the Indian government. India's trading enterprises are no less of their impeccable market strategy expanding into South East Asia and South Asian nations

through its north-eastern neck-corridor carving out a niche in the international market as an Asian giant challenging the efficacy of Chinese trading dominance. But an equally challenging task seems transparently visible for the state like Arunachal Pradesh to place herself in the larger canvas of free trade architecture materialising the opportunities in India-China sector. Nonetheless, it is obvious that any kind of cross border design has to implore the possibilities of mutual congruence and adaptability devoid of intentions of hegemonic power-bulwark. Hence, through mutual friendship and partnership both India and China can determinedly create new avenues for 21<sup>st</sup> century world transforming this geo-strategic zone into a geo-economic zone strengthening trade prospects.

The news regarding China operationalising the first electric train in the remote Himalayan region of Tibet, connecting the provincial capital Lhasa with Nyingchi— a strategically located Tibetan border town close to Arunachal Pradesh (Arunachal Times: 25.06.2021) may be strategically a warning bell for India in Arunachal border, but can be considered an eye-opener in the long run taking into account the border trade issue. The 435.5-km Lhasa-Nyingchi section of the Sichuan-Tibet Railway is expected to be inaugurated ahead of the centenary celebrations of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) on 1 July 2021 which would play a key role in safeguarding the Chinese border stability (Arunachal Times: 25.06.2021). China has earlier opened a key strategic 117-km highway connecting a remote part of Tibet located near the frontier with Arunachal Pradesh about a week after India and China signed the Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to China in October 2013 (Deccan Herald: 01.11.2013; Arunachal Times: 02.11.2013). It is believed, this highway apart from border defence issue, might boost up border trade and prove an alternative to water transport, reducing cost thereto.

The 'Act East' and 'Make in India' policies of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi have accelerated the process of India-Southeast Asia ties further. The Modi-Xi meetings at the BRICS Summit in Brazil in July 2014 and Xi Jinping's high-profile visit to India in September 2014 have strengthened bilateral relations. The three-nation visit of the Indian Prime Minister to China, Mongolia (first ever) and South Korea from 14<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> of May, 2015 and winding up with a Deal worth \$ 22 billion with China, \$ 10 billion with CEOs of Hyundai and Samsung in South Korea and reinforcing the spiritual bond through Buddhism in Mongolia have certainly gone yielding dividends for 'Make in India' in the wake of 'Act East' Policy. The other aspect is that trade between India and China is heavily skewed in the latter's favour, for India exports mostly commodities like iron ore, and China exports value-added manufactured goods; the net trade is almost \$40 billion in China's favour, and it needs to be reversed. It is not clear how it would work, unless India ends up erecting trade barriers to prevent dumping; or, more positively, India starts building highly-engineered, innovative products that the Chinese need.

India Brand Equity Foundation in a Study in November 2013 reports that about 60 per cent of India's export-import business with the ASEAN region include mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation, bituminous substances, mineral waxes, edible oils and animal fat products, electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof, sound recorders and reproducers, television image and sound recorders and reproducers and its parts, nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances and parts thereof (IBER Report, 2013; Retrieved from website). And India's Look East Policy has transformed the role of the northeast region from being the periphery of India to becoming the centre of a thriving and integrated economic space, which is the key to linking two dynamic regions with a network of highways, railways, pipelines and transmission lines. Since Northeast India

is a natural bridge between India and Southeast Asia, an economic integration with its transnational neighbours is expected to open up new opportunities for the region. To achieve the objectives of the Look East Policy, India is negotiating bilateral free trade areas (FTAs) with East and Southeast Asian countries and has entered into a number of pacts and FTAs with the ASEAN countries – Thailand and Singapore, Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

Globalisation and neo-liberal economy have also pushed both the regions into an amiable trading and commercial partnership. Challenges for Arunachal Pradesh seem to be high in the order to compete with other northeastern states while negotiating for border trade. More the options are open for the same trade through cross-border engagements, merrier is the scope for sneaking of the foreign goods into the northeastern markets putting pressure on their Indian counterpart-products for sale. Arunachal Pradesh too is felt vulnerable to such a kind of a situation given its proximity to the border countries, mostly China which is very close to its northern border through Tibet. Threats with regard to surreptitious inflow of drugs, smuggling and dumping of Chinese goods, if at all are there, should be identified and the challenges be addressed by creating a mutual geo-economic space for better commercial atmosphere to take off. It is no denying of the fact that Arunachal Pradesh can be a potential geo-economic corridor to the East for which it should come up with special economic zones as well as industrial corridors with its potentialities in 5H (hydro, herbal, horticulture, handicraft and handloom) and the 3T (tradition, tourism and technology) for a sustainable international trade. For its own economic growth and generation of employments in the above mentioned eight such sectors, Arunachal Pradesh can go for specific manufacturing products with its own brand and ingenuity to create a vision in the international market. It can be a potential connect to world trade with a change in nomenclature from the prefecture-status of a strategic border state to a strategic economic corridor decimating challenges whatsoever on its way.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Look East Policy came into effect under the political dispensation of Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao in 1991 for an effective India's economic and strategic negotiation with its Eastern neighbours based on shared history and culture. The policy further leapt widely into Act East Policy under the present Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a robust and result-oriented national interest in its neighbouring Eastern countries.

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