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- ★ FORMATION, GROWTH AND BREAKDOWN OF IMMIGRANT VOTE BANKS OF CONGRESS IN ASSAM
- ★ FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL: POPULAR PROTESTS IN LATIN AMERICA DURING 2011-2015
- ★ COLONIAL INDIRECT RULE AND THE MAOIST INSURGENCY IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA
- ★ REINTERPRETING BODO LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM IN ASSAM
- ★ A BRIEF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE IDEA OF INDIGENEITY
- ★ THE PLEASURES OF BEING A 'KANIYA': THE POLITICS OF 'LAZINESS' IN COLONIAL ASSAM (C. 1854-1930)
- ★ OPEN VERSUS CLOSED BORDER: INDIA-BANGLADESH BORDER IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY
- ★ NORTH EAST REGION IN INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY: ISSUES AND CONCERN OF CONNECTIVITY AND REGIONAL PREPAREDNESS
- ★ GLOBALIZATION, TEA INDUSTRY AND TRADE UNIONISM: AN OVERVIEW WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM CHAH KARMACHARI SANGHA (ACKS)
- ★ CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER AND CHINESE GLOBAL GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVE: THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERALISM
- ★ POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH SELF-HELP GROUP: A FRAMEWORK OF UNDERSTANDING
- ★ GENDER AND IDENTITY IN LITERATURE FROM INDIA'S NORTHEAST
- ★ THE MAKING OF JORHAT: UNDERSTANDING THE PATTERNS OF MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT (2500 BC TO 1947AD)
- ★ DAM(N)ED THE KOPILI: REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS
- ★ ROLE OF STATE IN ENABLING HEALTHCARE COORDINATION IN INDIA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC
- ★ MAKING OF TRADITIONAL RICE BEER AMONG TRIBAL COMMUNALITIES OF NORTHEAST INDIA WITH REFERENCE TO 'HOR-ALANG' OF THE KARBI COMMUNITY
- ★ PROSPECTS OF GANDHIAN WORLD ORDER IN A VIOLENCE- STRICKEN WORLD
- ★ TROUBLED PERIPHERY - CRISIS OF INDIA'S NORTH EAST BY SUBIR BHAUMIK, NEW DELHI: SAGE PUBLICATIONS INDIA PVT. LTD., PAPERBACK EDITION, 2015; PP 305'



## **NORTH EAST REGION IN INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY: ISSUES AND CONCERNS OF CONNECTIVITY AND REGIONAL PREPAREDNESS**

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### **Abstract**

*With the rise of new government at the centre in India, the age old Look East Policy (LEP) has got elevated to Act East Policy (AEP) and NER has come closer to the epicenter of this new foreign policy shift. So far it was believed that improved connectivity would enable NER to play a key role in AEP and transform its economy drastically also putting an end to age old insurgent violence. However, if NER did not develop a competitive capacity and persisted with a protectionist approach to political-economic changes, it would be difficult for both the Government of India (GOI) and NER to gain any rich dividend from the ambitious AEP. Present study was therefore, an attempt to find out the ramification of such contradiction using the Primary and secondary data available online. It was found that other than 'Connectivity' NER has a lot more other areas to work on in order to make a case or itself so far as AEP is concerned.*

**Keywords:** North East Region, Look East Policy, Act East Policy, Connectivity, Development

## Introduction

The North East Region (NER) has not been inside the cartography of India's development discourse for long. In fact, it was viewed as a peripheral border land, thanks to a governance model which Partha Chatterjee described as a 'colonial governmentality' on the part of the centre. The traditional Indian notion about its NER was actually shaped by British legacy of demarcation of people and territory. "People were (therefore) classified as belonging either to the hills or to the plains" (Baruah, 2008) and territories were branded as 'excluded' and 'partially excluded'. In order to comprehend the exclusion the Inner line Permit (ILP) system was introduced. Though it was done in the name of protection of indigenous population of some parts of NER, it permanently separated them not only from the people outside but also from the other tribes in plains. It allowed the colonial British to administer an ethnically divided NER without interruption. The sense of separate identity was strengthened with the time and by the time India got independence after a traumatic partition on communal lines, identity crisis among the northeasters manifested in the form of demands for independence in some parts and Autonomy in some other. The Indian state response to such demands was intimidating as parts of the NER were declared 'Disturbed Area' by the Union Parliament and the draconian Armed Force Special Power Act (AFSPA) was imposed areas of Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and some parts of Assam. "India, in its post- colonial epoch has been witnessing a number of ethno-identity based mobilization and violent conflicts" (Chhetry 2018, 34). Atrocities of security forces were reciprocated by identical hostility in the form of numerous seditionist and insurgent violence. One of India's most diverse and strategically momentous land got reduced to a 'Zone of Conflict' and the contestation continued even after seventy years of years of India's independence. Perennial conflict and political unrest coupled with policy paralysis concerning NER on the part of the central government have led to situation of what disorder and underdevelopment. NER lagged behind on most of the growth parameter and the natural corollary of which has been failure of its integration with rest of India. NER remained a puzzle box for Indian government and a mystery

unsolved and could feature only in the security discourse under the ambit of India's foreign policy. Things have started to change in the last two decades as Indian government could rediscover the importance of NER and its geo-strategic location in the context of its Look East policy (LEP). With the initiation of LEP and consequent rise in relevance of NER as it could provide land access to the South East Asia (SEA), led Indian state to revisit its Northeast Policy by late 1990s resulting in the formation of first independent Ministry for development of North East Region (DoNER) and efforts to transform the region was resumed. This paper is supposed to focus on the study of gray areas of India's AEP so far as 'Act East through North East' is concerned. It is focused on inquisition of ground realities of NER which creates obstacles in the way of materializing AEP even if Connectivity roads and Highways are constructed.

### **Inception and analysis of India's Look East Policy (LEP) - the limited outreach**

Much of the changes in foreign policy discourse came in the wake of India's Economic Reforms in 1991 and simultaneous to its economic reforms India adopted the LEP, which was seen as a measure of India's outreach programme to its South East Asian neighbors'. "P. V. Narsimha Rao was the first prime minister to truly enact the 'Look East Policy'. With the fall of the Soviet Union, India strengthened the ASEAN and started reaching out to Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and others" (Abhijit Majumdar, 2020). "Looking East" was a less contentious way of embracing market forces and cooperating with U.S. allies and partners, it paradoxically also became a way for India to "Look West" (Jaishankar, 2019). Building on the contemporary imperatives and logic of development, ASEAN-India entered into sectoral dialogue partnership in 1992 and full dialogue partnership in December 1996 and it further advanced to Summit level partnership in 2002 (ASEAN 2021). Another significant breakthrough came in to the mutual relations between India and ASEAN as they initiated Free Trade Agreement (FTA), on 8th October, 2003 in Bali and was finalized on 13th August, 2009 and came into effect on 1st January 2010. (National Apex Chamber, 2019).

Such Engaging policies with ASEAN under the banner of LEP had its impact on the overall relationship of India and the South East Asian countries which can be reflected in the statistics of ASEAN -India Trade and also the in trade volumes of individual member countries of ASEAN with India. Since its coming into effect, India-ASEAN trade has grown from US\$2.9 billion in 1993 to US\$81.33 billion in 2018 (Baruah, 2009). In spite of the growth in India-ASEAN trade, LEP has been mocked as 'Looking East' only owing to some lasting limitations. Connectivity still remained a very big concern; China appears to be better engaged economy with the ASEAN in most parameters. In spite of being aggressive on South China Sea, China shares a more balanced regional trade with the member Countries of ASEAN. The magnitude of Chinese investment in Laos and Cambodia is 117 percent and 40 percent of the total GDP of these two countries. According to world the World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) data China is the largest exporter to all the member countries of ASEAN. WITS data reveal that China's export share with Indonesia stands at 26.23%, Malaysia 20.68 %, Thailand 21.12%, Vietnam 29.82%, Philippines 22.82%, Singapore 13.66%, Myanmar 34.64, Brunei 13.07% and with Laos and Cambodia it stands at woofing 37.41% (WITS,2020). All these China has achieved when "China considered ASEAN as an instrument designed to 'encircle China' and therefore kept a safe distance from the regional body" (Chatterji, 2021). India, on the other hand, shared deep historical and cultural bonding with the ASEAN member countries. Therefore, understandably, India's LEP has fallen short of what it was likely to achieve in first two decades of its inception.

### **Act East -as a proactive shift from the LEP**

"Act East' and its early avatar, 'Look East' are not different; rather, they are two sides of the same coin, representing two different, but continuing phases in the evolution of India's policy towards the Asia-Pacific region" (Kasavan, 2020). The Act East probably started with PM Modi's formal invitation to the ASEAN head of the states to attend the 69th Republic day celebration of India, which was

positively accepted by the ASEAN leaders. It marked a symbolic move towards Act East. As pointed out by the Prime Minister of India, "India's Act East Policy is an important part of our Indo-Pacific vision. ASEAN is and always will be the heart of our Act East Policy" (Speech of Prime Minister of India, 2014). In the 17th virtual ASEAN Summit 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi pointed out that the ASEAN group is the nodal center of India's AEP since the very beginning. India is now an "active member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asian Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus. Today there are 30 sectoral dialogue mechanisms and seven Ministerial-level interactions in addition to annual summit-level meetings" (Kesavan, 2020).

### **Act East and the NER of India: an overview**

"Through the framework of AEP, India seeks to achieve deeper political and economic development goals for the region (NER) by creating sophisticated markets and connectivity links between the region and Southeast Asia" (Dewan, 2021). "It is aimed at ensuring the overall development of north eastern states in terms of people to people contact, border trade through border haats, cultural ties, infrastructure projects...etc." (Sengar, 2018). There has been a lot of enthusiasm at institutional levels regarding the 'Act East' Policy. Assam for instance in May, 2017 introduced "Act East Policy Affairs Department" to formulate, implement and monitor the state policies concerning the neighboring and other foreign countries so as to reap the benefits of implementation of Act East Policy by the Government of India (Notification Govt of Assam, 2017). Assam also initiated 'Advantage Assam- the Global Investors Summit' in February 2018 to attract the global investors to Assam and managed to attract investment worth Rs. 8,020.21 crore and A total of 207 Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) have been signed during the Advantage Assam summit (Singh, 2018). Manipur has been equally enthusiastic about AEP as it has created 'Act East Policy Committee'. It has also constructed trade and Expo centre in Imphal and proposed 69 bridges to facilitate border trade (The Hindu, 2020). Integrated Check Post at Moreh was also inaugurated by PM

Modi on January 4, 2019. Nine Border haats were also supposed to be opened to facilitate locally produced commodities. Intra-regional connectivity, both rail and road has improved in NER.

According to the Reports of North Eastern Council (NEC) total length of different types of road is 3,76,819 km. out of which the length of National Highway around 13,500 km (as per the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways data published in August 2012) and the average road density per 100 Sq Km of area is 143.72Km against the national average of 115.30 Km (NEC, 2021). Since India has been working towards increasing its engagements with SEA under its 'Act East Policy' the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is one of the biggest infrastructure projects in the region (Siddiqui, 2020). This was followed by the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. National Highway 39 that passes through the state capital Imphal up to Moreh on the Indo-Myanmar border is being developed as Asian Highway 1.

However, the question still remains relevant, 'whether NER is prepared for LEP/AEP and the open competition it's likely to bring with it? and if connectivity is the only solution to all problems? Quest to find answer to these questions might lead to some ultimate conclusion.

Though, LEP had a commitment to making India's NER a trading and commercial hub (Deka, 2015). However, it took India nearly a decade's time to form an independent Ministry for development of Northeast, i.e.. The Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) and till 2014, the Ministry could complete only 368 Connectivity Projects out of the 675 projects it sanctioned (DoNER,2021). LEP as such never get going the way it was supposed to. The following data will provide a better impression of the realities of LEP in NER.

**Table-1: Data showing the current status of NER on various development parameters**

| States            | People below Poverty Line (BPL) (in Percentage) |                            | Ease of Doing Business<br>(By FICCI) | Implementation of business Reforms (2016)<br>As per NER Vision 2030 data | Hydro Power (MW)<br>(IBEF data) |        | Infrastructure<br>(Surfaced road 1997) | GDP Contribution<br>(In %) |
|-------------------|---|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|--------|--|----------------------------|
|                   | 2001 Census                                     | RBI Publication (Sep,2020) |                                      |  | Potential                       | Actual |  |                            |
| Arunachal Pradesh | 33.5  | 31.40                      | 31                                   | 31   | 50328                           | 281    | 28.32                                  | 0.13                       |
| Assam             | 36.01   | 34.40                      | 24                                   | 24   | 674                             | 250    | 16.94                                  | 1.67                       |
| Manipur           | 28.05   | 37.90                      | 28                                   | 28   | 1784                            | 105    | 32.88                                  | 0.15                       |
| Meghalaya         | 33.09   | 16.10                      | 34                                   | 34   | 2394                            | 185    | 46.26                                  | 0.18                       |
| Mizoram           | 19.05   | 15.40                      | 29                                   | 29   | 2196                            | 0      | 41.10                                  | 0.12                       |
| Nagaland          | 32.08   | 08.80                      | 27                                   | 27   | 1574                            | 91     | 28.55                                  | 0.14                       |
| Sikkim            | 36.04   | 30.90                      | 30                                   | 30   | 21                              | 15     | NA                                     | 0.15                       |
| Tripura           | 34.05   | 40.00                      | 22                                   | 22   | 4286                            | 84     | 31.10                                  | 0.26                       |
| NER               | 31.42   | 25.86                      | -----                                | -----  | -----                           | -----  | -----                                  | 2.8                        |

(Source: 1. Census Data 2001, 2. RBI (<https://m.rbi.org.in/scripts/PublicationsView.aspx?id=19887>). 3. FICCI, 4. IBEF data, 4. Ministry of Road Transport (GOI). 5. NER Vision 2020, 6. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (Available at: <https://statisticstimes.com/economy/india/indian-states-gdp.php>)

Contrary to scholarly rhetoric, NER presents a very dismal image of itself on numerous growth parameters. A significant portion of NER's population persistently stays inside below poverty line. Its GDP contribution is among the lowest when compared to the rest of Indian States. Together the NER contributes only 2.8 percent of India's total GDP and without Assam this percentage contribution of GDP of the rest of the seven states drops down to only 1.13 percent.. The NER still remains lagging behind on multiple heads. Keep aside the capacity to sustain the global competition, the region is hardly in a position to keep pace with the domestic market challenges it's likely to face once the connectivity projects are completed.

### **NER and the Factors of regional disadvantage**

The irony of reality still persists. Trade surely opens growth opportunities. It is considered a prime vehicle to attract investment. However, there are many examples to prove that trade and connectivity are no panacea... The ability to extract gain from geographical proximity depends on readiness of the economy" (Bose,2019). Trade needs reciprocation, which in turn depends upon 'Absolute and Comparative Advantage' (Dominick Salvatore 2014:32-34). In fact, India's trade with the SAARC countries suffered a lot due to lack of reciprocation. Under the prevailing circumstances what NER can reciprocate for international trade is highly debatable. And if NER is unable to reciprocate than it stands every chance of becoming a dumping yard for outside products. The ASEAN –India trade which stands at above USD 80 billion, but land route through NER is hardly used for such trade. In fact the trade routes are yet to be developed and are tottering at preparatory stages and Indian Ocean Region is used for boosting trade in AEP (Datta, 2017).

### **NER and issues of Connectivity**

NER has much to do before it can compete with the outside challenges. Intra-regional connectivity is still very poor. State capitals in NER is not yet interconnected by Railway network. The national highways are also vulnerable to natural and anthropogenic disturbances. The overall infrastructure remains alarming in spite of making constant progress. This can be reflected with the help of the following table.

**Table-2: Road, Rail & Air infrastructure of NER and their Ranking**

| Name of the states | Road Length Per 100 sq. Km (in Km) | Ranking in terms of Road Infrastructure | Rail Network Length Per 100 sq. Km (in Km) | Ranking in terms of Rail Infrastructure | Ranking in terms of Air Connectivity |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|---|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| Arunachal Pradesh  | 36.7                               | 29                                      | 0.03                                       | 28                                      | 29                                   |
| Assam              | 420.4                              | 04                                      | 4.47                                       | 11                                      | 12                                   |
| Manipur            | 111.0                              | 17                                      | 0.08                                       | 26                                      | 23                                   |
| Meghalaya          | 96.9                               | 21                                      | 0.06                                       | 27                                      | 27                                   |
| Mizoram            | 38.5                               | 28                                      | 0.03                                       | 29                                      | 25                                   |
| Nagaland           | 217.8                              | 08                                      | 0.13                                       | 15                                      | 26                                   |
| Sikkim             | 116.2                              | 15                                      | 0.00                                       | 30                                      | 28                                   |
| Tripura            | 375.4                              | 05                                      | 2.60                                       | 19                                      | 22                                   |

(Source: 2019 INDIA STATE RANKING SURVEY. URL: <https://www.hospitalitynet.org/file/152008769.pdf>)

Other than road infra structure, both rail and air connectivity of NER is consistently poor. Except Assam, most of the states of NER are ranked among the lowest in terms of Road, Rail and Air connectivity, compared to rest of the Indian states. States like Sikkim has not even witnessed the rail link as of now and its air connectivity is also only in the name sake. The state is connected to India through the Siliguri Corridor through an approximately 120 km long national highway no. 10 which is at the same time is highly vulnerable to natural calamities like landslides and heavy rainfall.

As per a field survey conducted in 2014 in the Imphal- Moreh border road connecting Tamu in Myanmar through the More-Tamu Land Custom station (LCS), it was found that the 110 km long Imphal- Moreh national highway which was

supposed to link India to the ASEAN countries, through Myanmar, was highly vulnerable to insurgency related problems... Besides, the Moreh Market area is also a highly contested zone and suffered a serious scarcity of essential infrastructure for trade. The Moreh market didn't have a good quality hotel, there was problems of pure drinking water, electricity supply remained highly obstructed and security has always been an issue (Nath:2014, 74-97).

### **Loose regional cohesion**

North East India as a region is not a cohesive unit, rather 'Balkanized'. Most of the states in NER have border disputes. In a recent incident border disputes led to violent clash between the security forces of Assam and Mizoram resulting in massive casualties. "The two sides fired at each other, leaving seven dead and 60 people injured. Six of those killed were policemen from Assam" (BBC, 2021). The incident was a corollary of unresolved border dispute originated as a colonial legacy. "The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (BEFR) of 1873, which defined the Inner Line Regulations, better known as the Inner-Line Permit (ILP) system...Based on the 1873-regulation, Mizoram claims a 509-square-mile or about 1,318 sq km area of the inner-line reserve forest notified 148 years ago" (Dutta, 2021). Again "In 1933, the British demarcated the northeastern region into separate districts based on cultural, linguistic and tribal lines. This led to a new boundary separating Lushai Hills (Mizoram), Cachar (Assam) and present Manipur" (Baruah, 2021). Assam backs the carving of districts in north-eastern states as per the 1933 demarcation (Parashar, 2021). However, escalation has never been of the recent magnitude where both the states resort to filing criminal cases against the top most leaders of the other states, including the case filed against Assam Chief Minister, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sharma and Member of Parliament (MP) from Mizoram, Mr.K Vanlalvena.

According to Assam Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sharma, Assam has 12 areas of differences with Meghalaya but the dispute with Arunachal is at 1200 places (The Hindu, 2021). In order to reap leverage out of AEP, it is essential that such disputes are resolved and cohesive and integrated NER borderland is restored. According to Prof Sanjay Hazarika "the public image of the Northeast

was shaped by conflict and confrontation, bandhs and violence” and such perceptions needs to altered. Hazarika Further elaborates that, “The visionary Act East Policy and its predecessor Look East Policy rest on the pillars of peace and trust, not just better roads and physical infrastructure. They depend on good relationships between neighbours which enable economic cooperation, transport and trade” (Hazarika, 2021).

### **Contradiction of Orientation**

Yet another significant aspect of NER and AEP is that both have contradiction in orientation. The economic orientation of AEP a liberal one and it breeds out of the economic reforms which India introduced in 1991. As such, AEP talks in favor of free market and open trade. NER on the other hand is ‘Protectionist’ in character. It enjoys constitutional protection under ‘Sixth Schedule’ and some parts of it enjoy the support of ‘Inner Line Permit system’. So, how a region with utmost protectionist orientation will contribute to ‘free market model’ is a debatable subject. The Sixth Schedule of India is based on the recommendation of the North East Frontiers (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-committee popularly known as Bordoloi Sub-Committee under the Chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi, the then Chief minister of Assam. According article 244 The Sixth Schedule consists of provisions for the administration of tribal areas in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. “The idea behind the Sixth Schedule was to provide the tribal people with administration of their own, so that they could safeguard their own customs, traditions and culture, and to provide them maximum autonomy in the management of their own affairs” (Datta, 2020). Other then this NER also holds provision for ‘Inner Line Permit (ILP)’. ILP puts restriction on movement of people from outside in the protected areas. “This is an offshoot of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations, 1873, which protected Crown’s interest in the tea, oil and elephant trade by prohibiting “British subjects” from entering into these “Protected Areas” (to prevent them from establishing any commercial venture that could rival the Crown’s agents)” (District East Siang, 2021). Though it must be admitted that rights of the indigenous people needs to be protected, yet there is no denying that such provisions necessarily restricts free movement of goods, services and people.

Though they protect the tribal rights but at the same time they persistently separate the tribal population from the rest of the world. Such, political discourse of NER is antagonistic to the free trade regime that AEP propagates.

### **Political Culture of agitation and protest**

NER has a very unique political culture ridden with Movements, agitation and protests. It has a long history of armed violence (insurgency) owing to a feeling of identity crisis and apprehensions concerning the so called outsiders. Keep aside the context of Assam Movements or armed insurgencies in various states of NER, comparatively smaller issues have led to serious violence and mass protests. Proposal to grant Permanent Resident Certificate (PRC) to six non-Arunachal Scheduled Tribes (APSTs) communities led to widespread violence in Arunachal Pradesh in February 2019. “Protesters also set ablaze the house of Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein and vandalized government offices, including the Deputy Commissioner’s office and Itanagar Police Station.” (Zahan, 2019). Police firing in response to vandalism led to the killing of at least four protesters, imposition of curfew in the capital city and the Para military forces had to take control of the situation as large scale vandalism of markets, shopping complex and other business establishments were carried out. According to reports the six tribes who were proposed to be granted PRC included Deoris, Sonowal Kacharis, Moran, Adivasis and Mishings and all of them enjoy schedule Tribe (ST) status in neighboring state of Assam. There are consistent *anthropogenic hurdles* that NER has to face. During the Anti-CAA movement in Assam from 8 to 28 December 2019, the road transportation between Tinsukia and Dibrugarh was (also) blocked at several places along National Highway 37, leaving travelers stranded for days, before they could reach their destination ([Kalantri](#), 2019). “a total of 244 cases were registered and 393 people were arrested by the police” (Nath, 2019). In November 2016, indefinite economic blockade swept through Manipur. “United Naga Council Called for an indefinite economic blockade, cutting off normal movement of trucks on National Highway 2 and 37...or long the 100km Imphal- Moreh Road on the Trans Asian Highway No.1” (The Hindu, 2017). The blockade lasted for 139 days. In fact,

Manipur has a disturbing record of blockades', "2004-2005 - 92 days; 2005-2006 - 121 days; 2006-2007 - 83 days; 2007-2008 - 103 days; 2008-2009 - 60 days; 2009-2010 - 154 days; 2011-2012 - 292 days" (Bhowmick, 2014:15). Recent deadly clash between Assam and Mizoram police which led to the unfortunate demise of six Assam Police personnel ultimately resulted in an unofficial economic blockade of Mizoram. "Hundreds of trucks carrying essential items to Mizoram, stranded in Assam for over 10 days following a deadly clash over a border dispute" (Purkayastha, 2021). Movement through NH-306 was brought to a standstill by the blockade.

Such situation is common to most of the northeastern states and has contributed to NER's dismal positioning in 'ease of doing business index'. As shown in 'table no1' none of the states of NER is among the first 20 business friendly states in India.

### **NER – a dependent economy**

NE as a 'Region' comprises 7.9 percent of India's total geographical area (NE vision 2020) and a population of 45 Million, i.e. 3.78 percent of India's total population (Census 2011). Basically an agrarian economy NER "contributes only 1.5 per cent of country's food grain production, thereby depending on supplies from the rest of the country" (Bose, 2019). According to the data available in the NSSO, yield per hectare is lowest in the NER and it hardly produces the goods it consumes the most. Most of the NER consumes rice as staple food, however other than Assam none of the NER states feature in the top ten producers. In fact, with 4.73 million tones produce (Maps of India, 2021). Assam is in ninth place. As such NER has to depend upon other states to sustain its consumption requirements. The NSSO data further reveals that, some NER depends heavily on other states for Pulses, Oil seeds, Cereals, Fiber, meat and fish, egg, milk products and so on. Of these essential products only in fish production Assam is in the top five producing states. However, fish production in Assam has dropped down to 4.4 percent in 2017-18 from 5.5 percent in 2011-12. Most of the fish supplies NER receives are from Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Meat is heavily consumed in all of the NER states and pork is the most popular kind of meat, as in 2010 of the total

meat NER consumed 68.75 percent was pork (NSSO). In 2019, Assam, at over two million, had the highest population of Pigs in India (Statista, 2021). But, ironically enough, in spite of having domestic production, NER's one of the largest consumer of pork meat and imports pork from Uttar Pradesh to sustain its growing consumption need.

Tourism, silk and bamboo industry are presented as some of the potential profitable industries. However, in tourism sector the ground reality is entirely gloomy, thanks to the frequent agitations and lack of coordinated efforts of the parts the governments in the region. The following data of Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India gives a depressing impression of NER Tourism Industry. NER is the lowest receiver of tourists among all the states in India.

**Table-3: List of NE states and their ranking in as recipients of domestic and Foreign Tourists**

| Name of the state | Domestic Tourists Visits (DTV) | Foreign Tourists Visits (FTV) |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Arunachal Pradesh | 30                             | 30                            |
| Assam             | 22                             | 26                            |
| Manipur           | 33                             | 31                            |
| Meghalaya         | 27                             | 27                            |
| Mizoram           | 35                             | 36                            |
| Nagaland          | 34                             | 33                            |
| Sikkim            | 26                             | 24                            |
| Tripura           | 32                             | 22                            |

(Source: Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India (GoI), URL: <https://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/2020-04/India%20Tourism%20Statistics%202019.pdf>.)

According to Forest Survey of India (2017), the total bamboo bearing area of the country is estimated at 15.70 million hectares and more than 50% (90 out of 136) of the bamboo species in India are found in NER of India. Total 32.68 percent of forest area in NER covers Bamboo plants (Forest Survey of India-2017). But, in spite of such natural advantage, according to the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC), the country imported bamboo sticks worth Rs. 370 crores, mostly from China and Vietnam, for meeting the requirements of raw incense stick manufacturing units (The Sentinel, 2020). Another big problem which NER industrial sector faces is problem of unskilled labour. The Ministry of Skill development apprised the parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour in March (2021) that of the Rs 320 crores unspent in 2019-20, Rs 160 crore was on account of low capacity utilization of fund intended for North Eastern Region" (The Sentinel 2020). Low skill level of NER can be perceived through the issue of Mudra loan and Micro Finance scenario in Assam. According to reports of the The Sentinel, "launched in 2015, as many as 60,44,434 accounts have been opened till July2019" (The Sentinel, 2019). But, a significant portion of loans issued under the scheme became Non Performing Assets (NPA) and 'micro finance loan exemption' became an electoral promise of the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in the state Legislative Assembly pools 2021.

Organic farming is encouraged in NER for quite sometimes now and positively enough Sikkim became India's first fully organic state in the year 2015 (as declared by the state Govt. it self). However, contrary to claims, Sikkim relies heavily on West Bengal, particularly, Siliguri (market) in North Bengal for its vegetable and fruit requirements. NER organic farming like the rest of India, suffers from numerous problems. Some of these problems are, Lack of Awareness, Output Marketing Problems, Inadequate Supporting Infrastructure, High Input Costs, Marketing Problems of Organic Inputs, Absence of an Appropriate Agriculture Policy, Lack of Financial Support, Lack of Quality Standards for Bio-manures, and so on (Babu, et. al. 2017). Thus, NER has its own issues to deal with before it can present if self as an epicenter of India's AEP. The problems of infrastructure and connectivity, culture of political agitation, economic and cultural protectionism, lack of entrepreneurship, lack of competitive skill are some of the areas where

there is genuine needs to work on. “North East is suffering from is flow of easy money, which must be resolved in a time-bound manner, if the state and central governments want market forces at play here, so as to harness the local growth potential” (Bose,2019).

### **Conclusion**

For all these ages LEP could not be implemented through NER as the land transport of goods has never been profitable compared to trade through the sea route and connectivity has always remained a major problem coupled with the unfriendly environment for trade that the NER offers. People of the region has been largely apprehensive regarding a grand top down policy like LEP and these apprehensions are detrimental to the genesis and nurturing of an environment of trade and investment. Though there has been a shift in the approach of GOI towards its NER in recent years and connectivity issues are being addressed at a rapid rate. daily construction of highways in NER has increased from 0.6 Km during UPA to 1.5 Km under the present NDA Government (The Print, 2019). With the completion of projects like Dhola-Sadia bridge over Lohit River (a major tributary of river Bramhaputra) connecting Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and Bogibeel (Rail cum Road Bridge) over Bramhaputra, the connectivity landscape of the region has transformed significantly. So, issues of connectivity are now being addressed but, the region has more serious issues to deal with.

It has to promote regional solidarity, culture of political agitation needs to be replaced by positive work culture, economic dependence needs to altered by economic self reliance and enhanced productivity. To do all these it is essential that, the region opens up to the outside world keeping aside its protectionist approach to development. NER needs to develop its own capacity structure and participate to the ongoing market competition if it wants to extract benefits from the AEP. Both Health sector and Tea industry has developed by entering into the competition that the market has offered. But the tourism sector has failed to generate the same kind of success owing the political turmoil and lack of coordinated effort and publicity which are essential in a competitive market system. It is essential that governments in region take special care of skill development initiatives, so that,

economic dependence can be replaced by regional entrepreneurship. Concrete efforts are to be made on the ground to reduce the gap between rhetoric and reality so far as border trade is concerned. Though most of the present studies focus on the potential of NER in border trade under the ambit of AEP, it is equally important to find out the inner contradiction that the NER has deeply internalized over decades and find solution to them. A hostile and balkanized NER is unlikely to provide opportunity structure required to boost trade and commerce. So, efforts to transform the region into a cohesive unit are utmost essential. Political agitations need to be channeled to the right direction so that frequent issues of law and order do not arise. Issues of intra-regional conflicts need to be addressed peacefully thorough discussion. In order to be an engine of development under AEP, NER needs to ensure free flow of goods and services and therefore, it has to work on to identify the factors which hinders this free movement and find ways to protect regional solidarity and cohesion.

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