

Gendering infrastructure in Northeast India

Dolly Kikon

Abstract

In this essay, I offer a gender perspective on infrastructure in Northeast India. Policy documents, vision statements, and livelihood programmes, including various agencies and key actors, underline the significance of building or improving infrastructure in the region to transform lives of people. Understanding infrastructure as networks and matters that create the conditions for the movement of other matters, I highlight how the transformation of the region – from super highways, mining operations, cash crops, to new markets – has created new networks and social relations. Particularly, for the composition of households, family relations, and youth seeking employment, these developments are constitutive of the infrastructure boom in Northeast India and have created conditions that go beyond the material and physical functionality of the material objects such as roads, malls, and increased circulation of goods and people to and from the region.

Adopting a gender framework where the structure of social relations, norms, and practices continue to be centred on biological reproduction, gendering infrastructure in Northeast India presents the unexplored accounts and implications of various types of infrastructure. I show how infrastructure projects and visions take shape and are shaped by communities simultaneously. By adopting a gender framework, I analyse how the economic and political plans and projects to open up the region as a hub of global circulation and development, and, at closer observation, to usher in technological innovations and urbanisation across small towns, villages, and inaccessible hinterlands have led to new social and cultural approaches about family, marriages, motherhood and the determining factors about homemakers and caregivers. Gendering infrastructure makes a case for recognising the importance of social relationships and how power relations and authority are constantly negotiated as construction of roads, expansion markets, and circulation of goods and people grow expeditiously across Northeast India.

Author's profile

Dolly Kikon is a lecturer at the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, Australia. Her research focuses on the political economy of extractive resources, development initiatives, gender relations, customary law and human rights in Northeast India. Before coming to the University of Melbourne, she led an interdisciplinary research project at the Department of Anthropology, Stockholm University. Her work focused on the increasing trend of outmigration among upland societies in Northeast India. The project titled “The



Indian Underbelly: Marginalisation, Migration and State Intervention in the Periphery,” examined the expansion and outcomes of developmental activities of the Indian state in areas associated with economic backwardness, subsistence agriculture and armed conflict. Prior to obtaining her doctoral degree in Anthropology from the Stanford University, Dr. Kikon worked as a human rights lawyer and a community organiser in India. Focusing on land rights among tribal communities in Northeast India, her legal advocacy works extensively dealt with constitutional provisions with regard to land and resource ownership, as well as autonomy arrangement for securing ethnic rights and guarantees.

Gendering infrastructure in Northeast India

Why do we need a gender perspective on infrastructure in Northeast India? Policy documents, vision statements, and livelihood programmes, including various agencies and key actors underline the significance of building or improving infrastructure in the region to transform lives of people. This is a genuine case for thousands of inhabitants across villages and towns who are unable to access basic health, education and economic needs. In this context, the basic concept of understanding infrastructure is often centred on connectivity or networks and matters that create the conditions for the movement of people and goods

A perspective on infrastructure

In this essay, I offer how ongoing developments and aspirations on the ground transform gender relations. Across Northeast India, when people demand for “infrastructure” they generally refer to roads, bridges, schools and clinics. There are aspirations for houses and materials such as water supply and electricity as well. Such processes allow us to move from conceptualising infrastructure from abstract ideas to into providing tangible and concrete evidences on the ground. These materials, as anthropologists have shown, are powerful tools of thinking about the transformation in our lives. As people begin to attach their aspirations, dreams, and failures to roads, bridges, power supplies, machines, planes and buses, we also witness how they deeply share the social, economic and political lives of people. These connections and relations that are formed as a consequence of these connections and networks are often fragile and constantly evolving (Appel, Anand, Gupta 2015).¹

Today, infrastructure visions and plans occupy the central place in policy documents and government mission statements for Northeast India.² In this context, a gendered perspective on infrastructure is important. It will help us to understand the promises and delivery of material structures and networks on the ground as they transform the composition of households, family, and the society across the region.

My focus on gendering infrastructure in Northeast India in this essay aims to foreground the lived reality of communities in the region. This will, I hope, connect the concept of infrastructure with what can at times remain abstract and at the realm of an idea to the

¹ Refer to this special issue of infrastructure <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/714-introduction-the-infrastructure-toolbox> (last accessed 9 December, 2018).

²<http://mdoner.gov.in/>

everyday experiences of people. By adopting a gender lens, I present how social relations and politics are informed by forms of infrastructure, and how social lives of societies are constitutive of the infrastructure boom in the region. The everyday lives of people, who live beside a superhighway or next to a mining town where high tech drilling machines break the earth to extract coal, force us to think about infrastructures as deeply bound up in producing political, social, and economic transformation. These living conditions go beyond the material and physical functionality of the material objects such as roads, malls, and the increased circulation of goods and people to and from the region. From questions about market, mobility, governance and the role of the state, adopting a gender perspective might help us to attend to formations of new relations and politics.

In addition, a gender framework allows us to see how infrastructure projects and visions take shape and are shaped by communities simultaneously. Economic and political plans to open up the region as a hub of global circulation and development, and, at closer observation, visions for technological innovations and urbanisation across small towns and villages have led to social and economic changes. Gendering infrastructure, then, is a way to recognise the importance of social relationships and how power and authority are constantly negotiated as construction of roads, expansion of markets and circulation of goods and people's aspirations grow expeditiously across Northeast India. In the following section, I focus on the ongoing transformation in the post Look East Policy and Act East Policy period. Construction projects and ideas about connectivity, like in many regions of the world, are synonymous with progress and growth in Northeast India as well. I show how ongoing conversations and projects about development and infrastructure impact gender relations across societies.

Post Look East Policy and Act East Policy

In 2005, political scientist Sanjib Baruah edited a special issue titled "Gateway to the East: A Symposium on Northeast India and the Look East Policy" for Seminar. He noted that the Look East Policy, an initiative from the early days of the Post-Cold War was finally showing results. Citing the 2004 ASEAN-India car rally that was flagged off in Guwahati, Baruah gave us comprehensive views and challenges to this grand policy. Yet, he concluded with a cautious note. He argued, "...it may be a while before the political, intellectual and material resources necessary to make the Northeast India's actual gateway to Southeast Asia can be mobilised" (2005). But this has not stopped the excitement of the Look East Policy to grow into the Act East Policy under Narendra Modi, the current Prime Minister of India. Since Modi came to power in 2014, the Act East Policy has been pushed as an initiative to open up the

region. These policies are focused on establishing new ties and renewing old ones with its neighboring states.

Both the Look East Policy and Act East Policy were focused on economic ties with ASEAN countries with an emphasis on infrastructure, manufacturing and trade.³ In this aspect, thinking about gendering infrastructure also means relating to the story of mobility, resource flows, and spatial linkages. My encounter with the Look East Policy in the region took place more than a decade ago accidentally. Focusing on the theme of “people to people contact”⁴ that is propagated in the Look East and the Act East policy reflections, in 2005, I wrote a piece called Operation Hornbill Festival, an invented Naga traditional festival that was launched in 2000 by the government of Nagaland. I was not very concerned about “Look/ looking East”. Instead, I was just simply focused to “Look Around” and what I saw was contradictory at many levels. I wrote, “Showcase events like the hornbill festival, with catchy slogans coined in sanitised offices of the tourism department, hide a murky story of the hegemonic control of the military establishment in civil and political affairs in the Northeast. If anything, they add to the distortion of everyday realities that are vital in reconstituting the social and political voice of the people. This is where the Look East Policy confronts a world outside economic rhetoric.”⁵ In addition, both the Act East Policy and the Look East Policy erase the history of militarisation on societies in Northeast India and the overwhelming public and administrative spaces co-opted by military and security structures.

What happens when one chooses a gender framework to understand the transformation of the region as highways and airports, bridges and water pipes are laid down? Among others, questions about land, ownership, justice and gender equality begins to matter. These matters go beyond the aspirations of the people and force us to focus on the household and, for example, turn our gaze on the womenfolk who sell vegetables beside the shiny highways in the region. When we begin to define infrastructure and development initiatives through a gender framework, we succeed in connecting theory to everyday experiences in order to start new conversations and interventions. This is where we begin to witness how and why it is important to connect with the ground experiences and realities.

Across Northeast India, women have always been visible figures in the market spaces as vendors, workers, traders, and owners of mobile food kiosks. They have always remained visible in the public places as workers – in construction sites, road repairs and agricultural fields. They are also the driving force to keep the household running from cooking for the family, feeding the cattle, mending clothes, taking care of the sick, to fetching water and

³<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=133837>

⁴<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=133837>

⁵<http://www.india-seminar.com/2005/550/550%20dolly%20kikon.htm>

tilling the land. In tribal societies across Northeast India, the predominant distinction of gender identity is set by the traditional councils and the ancestral inheritance rights. Women are neither allowed to hold decision making powers nor are they allowed to inherit ancestral property.⁶ Northeast India is increasingly getting connected through roads and bridges; some villages are getting bridges, and the market is expanding in big cities across the region. But who is getting the benefits and what kinds of gender relations are emerging?

The increasing trend of female migrants leaving the region draws our attention to issues about work and employability. Women are leaving the region as migrants to work in the service industry, factories and as maids. Many of them are vulnerable and experience physical and sexual abuse (Haksar 2016). The promise and implantation of infrastructure and connectivity is also connected to the ongoing trend of migration from the region, which is generating new social relations, gender dynamics, and power networks. Experiences of migrants are a deeply gendered one as I noted earlier. For instance, rural women from Assam who migrate and work in factories and households find it extremely hard to return to their villages and hometowns. They are stigmatised as women with suspect morals and harassed. Many women migrants have no savings because they send their remittances to their respective families in the village. Yet the money is often spent in educating the male members of the family or to construct houses for the brothers. In other instances, married women who leave villages as migrants and send remittances home are often abandoned by their husbands once they return home.⁷

With females migrating from the region, there are cases where men become caregivers. These new roles and expectations at times disrupts the boundaries of what constitutes feminine and masculine works and transform the division of work within the family, but at other times reproduce existing dominant gendered stereotypes.

In addition, the absence and presence of infrastructure is a relevant theme to connect with gendering infrastructure. They make us think how infrastructure ideas (bridges, roads, pipelines) become concrete projects on the ground. Once they are completed, we begin to understand how, for example, the absence or the presence of a bridge in a village becomes an important part of talking about changes that take place within communities.⁸ But absence of infrastructure need not deter communities from talking about it. For instance, the absence of proper market infrastructure in Nagaland has not deterred women traders from selling

⁶<https://scroll.in/article/830065/what-kind-of-nagaland-are-we-moving-towards-a-naga-feminist-reflects-on-the-row-over-womens-quota>

⁷ Conversation from a panel discussion on migration in Northeast India held at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (Guwahati Campus), December 2016.

⁸ Anthropologist Akhil Gupta writes about the ways in which we can also think about suspension; incomplete and suspended infrastructure projects. Such projects, Gupta notes, draws our attention to the temporality of infrastructure. Refer to <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/722-suspension>.

vegetables and fresh produce. Irrespective of the absence of sheds and garbage collection, or basic amenities like toilets and drinking water, women traders and vendors in Dimapur (Nagaland), Guwahati (Assam), Shillong (Meghalaya) or Imphal (Manipur) squat on the ground in poorly maintained urban bazaars or along the city streets. In Nagaland, women traders who fall ill frequently from inhaling the dust and the unhygienic condition of the market place came together and formed the state unit of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA).⁹ Livelihood and poverty alleviation strategies for the women vendors in Nagaland and its neighbouring states, where basic infrastructures are lacking like roads and bridges, require the support of the government and laws. Women vendors selling their produce along the footpaths or beside bus stands due to the absence of designated markets for tribal women traders demand for market infrastructure from the government.¹⁰ This is where the connections between gender, infrastructure and making the government accountable to its citizens become an important political and citizen project. In this context, the absence or the presence of infrastructure on the ground needs to be done by bringing back the state in conversations about development and providing security to its citizens.

Connecting infrastructure and gendered experiences

Irrespective of the strategic economic visions that policy makers and politicians have shared about the Look East¹¹ Policy and East Act¹² Policy, people's experiences have been intertwined with the ground reality. With a deep history of violence and existing dysfunctional ceasefire agreements with various armed groups across Northeast India,¹³ government bodies like the North Eastern Council (NEC) have remains focused on implementing major infrastructure projects like roads, railways, airways, power and telecom connectivity. According to the NEC, these projects are part of the socio-economic plans to develop the region.¹⁴ Yet, the lived reality of the people on the ground like the lives of female traders or migrants is often complex as vulnerable citizens.

⁹<http://morungexpress.com/street-vendors-contribute-to-naga-economy-without-infrastructural-support/>.

¹⁰<https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/north-east/street-vendors-demand-protection/cid/1404008> .

Also refer to [http://e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=features.Spotlight On Women.The street women vendors in Imphal Part 2 By Grace Kamei](http://e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=features.Spotlight%20On%20Women.The%20street%20women%20vendors%20in%20Imphal%20Part%20By%20Grace%20Kamei).

¹¹<http://www.atimes.com/india-switching-look-east-act-east-policy/>.

¹²<https://www.gatewayhouse.in/indias-act-east-policy-far-beyond/>.

¹³<https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/talking-with-the-ulfa/268116>. Also see <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/topic/NSCN-IM>.

¹⁴<http://necouncil.gov.in/about-us/nec-vision-2020-0>.

Development models and infrastructure projects being implemented on the ground are often detached from the lived experiences of the people. Economic empowerment programmes on the ground are often linked to larger issues of land ownership, distribution, and privatisation, and it is insufficient to limit it to workshops. Linking gender relations and infrastructure projects in Northeast India forces us to ask different questions such as the new composition of households (female headed houses), employment opportunities, decisions making powers and the institutional support systems for women who are increasingly losing their land to extractive resource companies involved in coal mining, timber and limestone (Kikon 2015).

In addition, communities also take up infrastructure projects, which can be quite different from the heavy capital and technology driven spectacular scales like building bridges and roads. Old trucks, scribbled documents, patched up footpaths, and recycled metals and woods that rural villages across the region repair and use can be conceptualised as community infrastructure or infrastructure from below. Community infrastructure in this aspect might be understood as matters that create conditions for the formation of new trading connections under extremely tenuous conditions (Kikon & McDuire-Ra 2016). In this context, tropes of infrastructure cannot be reduced to brand new development initiatives and progress alone, but projects/ things/ matters and relationships that people establish with their surroundings. This connects us to the meaning of infrastructure as matters that enable the movement of things, which also shapes the relation between them (Larkin 2013). In the same manner, understanding infrastructure through evidences on the ground might help us to look at new connections between gender and infrastructure.

Reflection: Seeing and acting infrastructure

The development visions and projects, and the lack of it, highlight how policies and other ambitious infrastructure and economic plans have become routine in Northeast India. Both the Look East Policy and the Act East Policy focus on senses of sight and practice. Seeing and action are central to the Look East Policy and Act East Policy in Northeast India.

We have seen models – some those are operational like roads and bridges, others as miniatures in expositions at the planning stage, and the rest under construction. Yet, many of these projects in Northeast – elaborate industries, schools, and hospitals – are not meant for the poor. These projects might benefit the rich and the tribal elites including the contractors and Indian business houses. But this does not dissuade the larger public from aspiring for them. In 2017, I met a female student from Manipur who was excited about the construction of the national highway that would pass her village land. She said: “It is 15 kilometres away from my village, but people are worried. They are going to lose all the paddy fields to the

highway and they don't know what to do after that. I told them that the highway is not for us. We cannot eat the road. But there is also excitement to see the big road and the development that will come.”

The account of this young student who was witnessing the transformation of her village land and her reflection about what is lost and gained with the arrival of a national highway that is going to pass through her village land is an important story to reflect about the infrastructure developments in Northeast India.

Walter Benjamin's struggles to document the physical transformation of the city of Paris in the post-industrial revolution era in Europe must have been a similar one. All the capital cities in Europe, Benjamin noted, were transformed into glittering showcases of progress, new industry and technology. But among all the cities that appeared as paradises, it was Paris that dazzled brightest. Yet, it was from this brilliant and glittering city of Paris that Benjamin thought about darker realities. What was it that the city of light (Paris) had erased? For Benjamin, the dazzle erased the night's darkness. As Paris transitioned from gas lanterns to electricity and finally neon lights, it turned into a city of splendour. A city of mirror where the crowd themselves became spectacles. It reflected the images of the people as consumers rather than producers, keeping the class relations and production virtually invisible. Benjamin described this spectacle of Paris as a phantasmagoria – a magic lantern show of optical illusions, rapidly changing size and blending into one another. The fairs and international expositions between the later part of 19th and earlier 20th century were, according to him, the origin of the expositions. These trade fairs conditioned crowds with the principle of advertisements such as, “Look, but don't touch”, and taught them to derive pleasure from the spectacle alone (Morss 1989).

Conclusion

The ongoing infrastructure projects in Northeast India like the grand highways cutting across the student's village in Manipur are also development spectacles where people are conditioned to derive pleasure about “development and progress” simply by looking at them. Other ongoing development programmes ranging from the extractive activities like plantations and logging, to agricultural programmes such as cash crop initiatives and skill training courses, are similar to shops filled with novelties. We can connect with the phantasmagoria aspect of capital and commerce in the ongoing infrastructure and development projects across the region. Particularly, the ethnic festivals and celebrations of cultures that aim at connecting the region with mainland India remind us of the exciting aspect where the poor are encouraged to attend and learn about the wonderful displays of

development (roads and bridges) or their own culture like weaving, food, and handicraft (in the festivals and expositions). Encouraged by authorities to visit the display and wonders that their own class had produced, many visitors to these ethnic festivals and fairs are unable to afford what is being produced (clothes and food items are for tourists). They can only marvel at the goods and look at the gadgets like the latest technology of water pump or machines. In all these development, the gendered aspect is deeply inscribed as women in the festivals and expositions organised across Northeast India are presented in their ethnic fineries where femininity is reiterated, while males dressed as warriors are inscribed with heightened masculine traits.

Gendering infrastructure in Northeast India, in this aspect, is connected with phantasmagoria – the dialectics of seeing and acting. This deeply resonates with the ongoing transformation in Northeast India. These policies have fundamentally affected the gender relations across communities and also the structure of governance, desire and aspirations. Most importantly, the interests of industry partners and the corporations are visible. Behind the infrastructure projects and plans, the ethnic expositions and merchandise fairs, lies the power of the industry, corporation and technology. These powerful players might pretend to promote a future world of peace, class harmony, and abundance by constructing airports, roads, and bridges. Yet, if we adopt a gender framework, the contradictions and challenges begin to emerge. We begin to see these economic transformations as citizens with rights and not as consumers of these developments.

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