

Youth and infrastructure development in Northeast India

Kaustubh Deka

Abstract

With their varied history and social location, the youth as a distinct socio-political category has historically played the role of effective agents of change in India's Northeast region, both as channels of protests as well as participation. Implications of 'infrastructure development' in India's Northeast, therefore, must be placed in the context of the unfolding 'aspirations' as well as the 'lived realities' of the region's youth. How does the twin framework of security and 'neo-liberal' development operating in the region affects the youth's engagement with the infrastructural interventions? How to connect the infrastructure debate to the phenomena of increasing outmigration of young people from the region, even when the 'ethnic identity' discourse remains significant?

Author's profile

Kaustubh Deka teaches at the Department of Political Science, Dibrugarh University, Assam. Formerly he was with the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. He has been a Fellow at the Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, Chennai, where he looked into the issue of youth and political participation in the context of India's Northeast. He holds a doctorate from the School of Social Science, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His academic interest includes besides others, issues of ecological politics in Northeast India, trends of youth politics and identity assertion in the region as well as inquiries into understanding the category of Northeast India.

Youth and infrastructure development in Northeast India

Section one



Source: Kaustubh Deka

1.1 Northeast India: An infrastructural entity

“Northeast India is littered with concrete. From winding flyovers to towering churches on village hillsides to surveillance towers housing paramilitary forces, concrete is integral to the region’s urban and rural landscapes and everything in between. What can all this concrete tell us? What stories does it open up? What can questions about politics, power, development and culture can concrete raise?” - ‘Concrete and Culture in Northeast India’ Duncan Macduiara¹ (Photo by the author at Kohima, Nagaland, July 2018).

Containing a little less than four per cent of the country’s total population and approximately eight per cent of the total land area, the eight north easternmost states in India, collectively

¹ <http://raiot.in/concrete-and-culture-in-northeast-india/>, accessed on 01.11.18.

referred to as India's Northeast, assume significance due to their geo-political location (at the tri-junction of South, East and South East Asia), ecological resources (a rich bio diversity zone with abundance of water, mineral, forest resources) and cultural diversities (hosting eclectic ethnic minority identities resulting in competing territorial nationalisms). In recent years, the region, as a geographical and historical entity, has attracted much attention as a productive site of research 'in its own right', as more dynamic geographies called for attention to 'emergent spatial configuration between the national and the global' (Karlsson 2018, Willem van Schendel 2002).

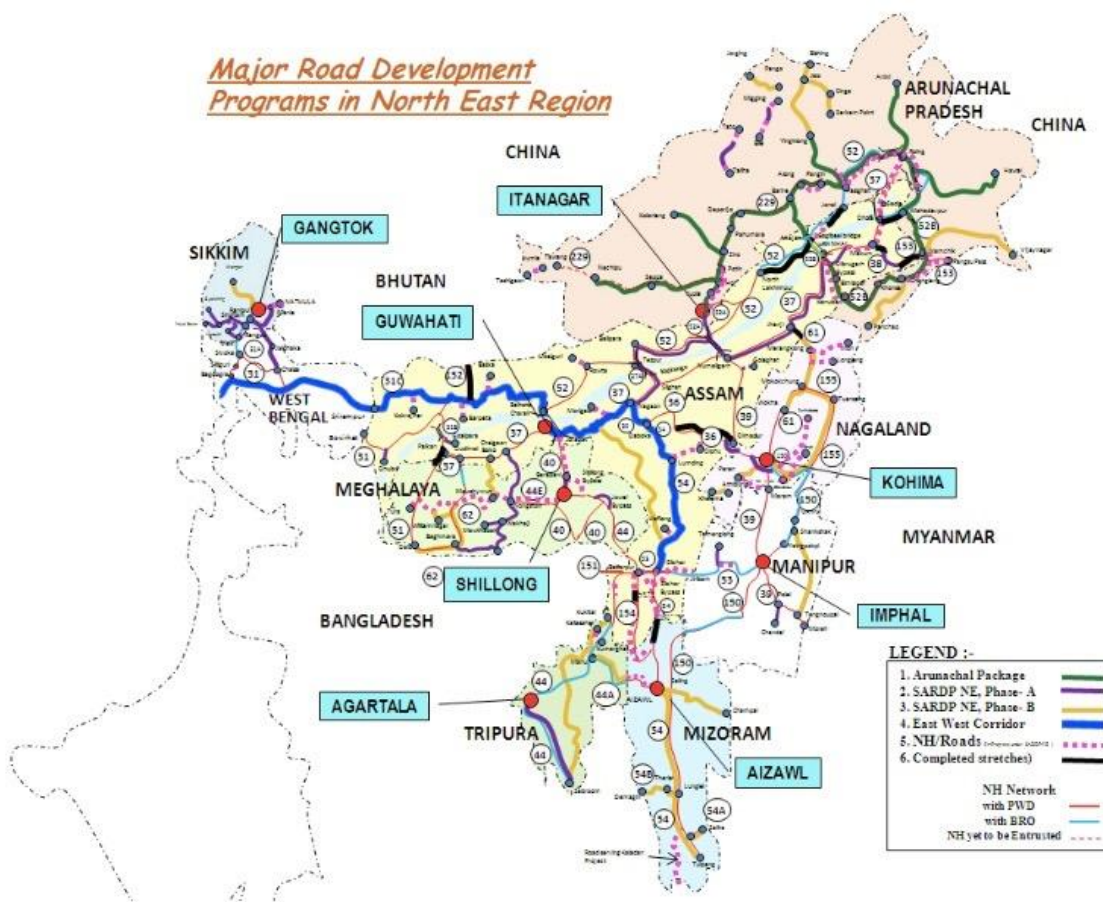
From the 'policy making' perspectives, though, these significances have mostly been construed in terms of a complex geography of difference – the region being projected as one trapped and languishing in an infrastructural void. A void that marks the general perception of the region as remote, isolated and less developed. In the policy making rubrics, the region is moulded in the language of physicality and infrastructure – essentially as a geographical entity – a bridgehead between South-Asia and South-East Asia, precariously connected to 'mainland India' by the 21 km wide road corridor at Siliguri, the gateway for the North Eastern Railway. The 'Chicken's Neck' corridor, "a congested space, the techno-formal domains of security and modern logistics that visualises the region" (Middleton, 2018).

This emphasis on the 'locational disadvantage' faced by the region results in the predominance of infrastructural imaginations in the policy discourse on the region. The Northeast 'Vision 2020' document, considered a key policy guideline by the government for the development of the Northeast region, puts infrastructure development as the key strategy for achieving its vision. The Northeast region being identified in the official discourse as a 'development-deficit' region, immense 'faith' is put in the capacity of infrastructure: "The people in the region envision having state-of-the-art infrastructure not only to enhance the quality of life but also to dictate the pace of economic activity, and the nature and quality of economic growth. The infrastructure deficit is a major deficit in the region, and acceleration in economic growth and the region's emergence as a powerhouse depend on how fast this deficit is overcome."²

Additionally, the Act East Policy proposes the development of the infrastructure of the region by building roads and highways, expansion of air connectivity, extension of railway networks, opening of trade routes, as well as creation of infrastructural conditions for border trade. These have all but put the Northeast region in an infrastructural expansionist fast

²http://mdoner.gov.in/contentimages/files/Vision_2020.pdf, accessed on 20/10/18.

track. Most of the Ministry of Urban Development flagship schemes have been focusing on the region. Nine cities from across the Northeast region have been declared as ‘Smart Cities’ – Agartala, Guwahati, Imphal, Kohima, Namchi, Gangtok, Pasighat, Itanagar and Aizawl. A fund of Rs 14,124 crore for 464 projects has been sanctioned in the first phase as part of the Smart City Mission in the Northeastern region.³ In essence, policy thrust like this means a lot of bridges, highways, rail roads and airports. What does this high level of infrastructural expansion do to the region, which is mired in contradictions of conflict and transition? The critical task is to assess the foundational doctrine on which the rational of such ‘developmental interventions’ are premised.



(Map Source, <http://mdoner.gov.in/infrastructure/sardp-ne>, accessed on 05/11/18)

1.2 The contentious concrete: An exceptional region

Northeast India is in many ways “an umbrella connotation, which tends to wipe off its immense diversity of history, culture and politics” (Misra, 2006: 8). Yet, the term persists and

³ <http://egov.eletsonline.com/2018/03/smart-cities-set-to-elevate-life-in-northeast-india/>, accessed on 02/11/18.

assumes increasing significance as a normative as well as instrumental frame for both policy making as well as social movements. The background to India's Northeast, as a region and a borderland, as "the residual fallout of colonial politics and administration" (Phanjoubam 2009: 158), as "a freak child of partition" (Van Schendel, 2018:273), continues to shape the public discourse in the region in many ways. It is this significant 'transformation' (or the lack of it) of the category defined as Northeast into a 'region' under the post-colonial settings from that of a 'frontier' in colonial times, which is of utmost significance from the point of view of understanding the politics and poetics of infrastructural interventions in the region. 'National security' from above and 'ethno-nationalism' from below shape up the discourse of change in the region, while the revenue generating capacity of the states in the region remains relatively weak with consistently high ratio of central grants-in-aid to their total revenue receipts. Further, in an interview to this author, development specialist Raile Rocky Zilpao also pointed out the 'inorganic' nature of infrastructure development in the region, which is state led as against industry led in most other parts of the country. Therefore, it is not immediately apparent what the effects of infrastructure will be on the development of society at large.

In this understanding, infrastructure is both a practice as well as a discourse manifesting tangible material forms as well as intangible forms in terms of networks and institutions. In the Northeast, besides the presence of 'international' and 'state' boundaries, there is also the presence of "multiple less tangible but nevertheless real boundaries that crisscross the region – fiscal, legal, liquor, and emotional borders among them. Such borders, which do not usually appear on maps, are also underpinned by a similar "border-logic" of dividing a relating territories and peoples (Tunyi and Wouter, 2016:1). How do the phenomena of infrastructure development engage with these complexities of the region? A good place to begin will be to critically engage with the complex life world of the youth of the region – multilayered, fraught with contestations but reflective of the complex realities of the region under transition. But first one needs to take a stock of the existing conditions of employment and opportunities for the youth.

Section Two

Infrastructure and the Youth in the Northeast: Connections-disconnections



Source: Kaustubh Deka, Bogibeel, Assam

“Last month there was heavy rain and ferry services were stopped for two consecutive days. I couldn’t cross over the river and nearly lost my job at the town. But there are more serious cases from my place, where patients have lost life not being able to reach better medical facilities on the other side of the river. We are now hoping that the bridge will be constructed soon and crossing the river will become easier”-- Mrinal Doley, 26, from Dhemaji, who works in a shopping complex at Dibrugarh town at a distance of four to five hours journey including an hour to three of river crossing depending on the season of the year, recounts. The completion of Bogibeel bridge will cut it down to a road journey of an hour.

2.1 Youth and opportunities in the Northeast Region (NER): The state of affairs

As per one report, the Northeast region has its share of 4 per cent of the youth population⁴ of the country in the age group of 15-35 years and also a relatively higher proportion of youth

⁴Notwithstanding all the internal differences in conceptualising, in this study we go by the definition of the ‘youth’ adopted by the National Youth Policy (NYP), 2014. As per this policy ‘Youth’ are defined as those aged 15 to 29 and as per the last census this age-group constituted 27.5 per

unemployment in the same age group compared to all India level.⁵ While unemployment in the region remains a steady phenomenon, at the same time, growing outmigration of the youth from the Northeast to different parts of the country has captured attention. About 137.6 million youth were reportedly workers in 2011-12, accounting for 29.1 per cent of the total workforce in India (NSSO 2014).⁶ The growth rate of the youth employment was around 1.3 per cent per annum during the period from 1993-94 to 2004-05 but thereafter declined in absolute terms between 2004-05 and 2011-12, at the rate of 1.39 per cent per annum. As per a more recent report by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) over 30 per cent of youth aged 15-29 in India are not in employment, education or training, a figure almost three times that of China.⁷ As per the Youth Development Index Report 2017, 'Self Employment' (SE) remains the most preferred segment of youth employment in India (53.5 per cent) across the states. The 'Primary Sector' remains the most engaging sector (64.9 per cent), as far as sectoral distribution of youth employment across states is concerned.⁸ Both these trends holds true for all the Northeastern states too.

However, in almost all the Northeastern states, the figures on these counts are much higher than the national average. As per sources, the number of job seekers in the age group of 15-29 is about 21.03 lakh in Northeastern states.⁹ Census 2011 reveals that states like Mizoram and Meghalaya show decline in total workers indicating possibilities that more are joining the labour force than jobs are created and the literacy rate has not translated into employability and productivity. In a survey conducted by the National Sample Statistics (NSS) data 68th Round, 2011-12 titled 'Formal Skill Acquisition of Population in the Age Group 15-29 Years across the States of India (in per cent)', the Northeast states collectively account for a mere 0.4 per cent of the total youth population against the all India figure of 3.9 per cent. States like Maharashtra (21.7 per cent), Kerala (12.2 per cent) and Tamil Nadu (11.3 per cent) are the better performing ones. Besides, the newly formulated Youth Work Index (YWI), the composite index that reflects upon the quantity and quality of employment among youth, puts the score of most of the Northeastern states in the lower category, with

cent of India's population. The NYP defines 'youth' along the following parameters: as a more fluid category than a fixed age-group, as a person between the age where he/she leaves compulsory education, and the age at which he/she finds his/ her first employment.

⁵ <https://vvnli.gov.in/sites/default/files/124-2017-P%20Amitav%20Khuntia.pdf>, accessed on 25/10/18.

⁶ 'Youth of India', 2017, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Youth_in_India-2017.pdf, accessed on 30/10/18.

⁷ <https://www.livemint.com/Money/JYalqNRT0taQCIU4EuXGRO/More-than-30-of-Indias-youth-not-in-employment-shows-OECD.html>, accessed on 25/10/18.

⁸ http://rgniyd.gov.in/sites/default/files/pdfs/publications/youth_development_index.pdf, accessed on 20/10/18.

⁹ Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 12 March 2015.

the states like Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura being some of the worst performers. The YWI at the national level stands at the score of 0.572, putting India in the Medium category globally ranking in at 133 out of 179 countries.

Higher levels of industrialisation and education, and availability of training infrastructure and training capacities both in the public and private sectors in other states are given as explanation of their better performance. As industrialisation and skill development are seen as the main factors for creating employment opportunities, there has been emphasis on skill development initiatives amongst the youth in the region. As per available data, a total of 93 training centres and 69 skill partners are working in the Northeast region. Assam has 48 training centres with 39 skill partners, Manipur one training centre with one skill partner, Mizoram six training centres with one skill partner, Meghalaya 10 training centres with eight skill partners, Nagaland eight training centres with five skill partners, Tripura 16 training centres with 12 skill partners, and Sikkim four training centres with three skill partners.¹⁰ However, the youth migration from the region to other parts of the country remains a growing phenomenon. This fact points out the complexities of 'job creation' that often has the aspects of both anxiety (needs) and aspirations (prospects).

2.2 Complicating the 'Youth Bulge'

Aiming at youth development is often considered as one of the most cost-effective strategy for achieving growth and development in a country characterised by demographic dividend, as the youth are seen as the 'change agents' aimed at bringing 'good governance at the grassroots' (Gireesan, 2013). With this definition India is considered poised for a 'youth bulge', which reflects the peak of India's 'demographic dividend', as fertility declines and India's population begins to age. According to the population projection 2001-2026 released by the National Commission on Population, the average median projected age of the population of India in 2026 will be 31.39. The same average for the states in Northeast India (excluding Assam) is 33.59 and for Assam it is 30.80.¹¹

However, the concept of demographic dividend and 'youth bulges' needs to be complicated further. Youth bulges are argued to potentially increase both opportunities and motives for political violence as they provide greater opportunities for violence through the abundant supply of youths with low opportunity costs, as they are more likely to experience institutional crowding, in particular unemployment (Urdal, 2006:1-2). In other words, although

¹⁰ <https://vvgnli.gov.in/sites/default/files/124-2017-P%20Amitav%20Khuntia.pdf>, accessed on 22/10/18.

¹¹ http://gujhealth.gov.in/pdf/projection_report.pdf, accessed on 15/10/18.

demographic dividend or “the decreasing dependency ratios represent a potential for economic growth, the realisation of this potential largely depends on the social, economic, and political environment” (Williamson 2001:108). Youths are severely impacted by any developmental projects as much as they are likely to influence the formation of such projects. This is where, to understand the equation between ‘youth’ and ‘development’, the ‘social background’ to the formation of the ‘youth’ as a category of change needs to be investigated. As Fabio Lanza sums up: “There is something politically and historically incongruent in portraying categories (such as ‘students’), places (such as ‘university’), or even communities as always already established” (Lanza 2012:32).

2.3 ‘Youth’ as agents of ‘change’: The dual life of protest and participation

The social category ‘youth’ becomes significant in the Northeast region through the phenomenon of youth assertion and mobilisation as it reflects the larger contradictions brewing in the society, capturing emerging trends through which the socio-political plot gets scripted. It is through the body of the youth that state societal interaction takes place in the volatile Northeast region. Historically, the outline of the political discourse in the Northeast region has often crystallised around the trends of student-youth activism of various kinds. With their varied history and social location, the youth as a socio-political category has played the role of effective and at times pioneering agents of change in the region, both as channels of protest as well participation. The student and youth organisations have provided crucial platforms for the articulation and performance of different identities in the region at various levels. These have ranged from the ‘inception’ of identities within movements to ‘deliverance’ of it in the form of accords as well as their further ‘circulation’ through continuing activism that have been central to the discourse of political change in the state. Their role fits very well with what Jennifer Earl succinctly puts as the functioning of a ‘social movement organisation’ (SMO), “to collect and strategically distribute resources, institutionalise movements, provide strategic leadership, organise protest events, reach out to the media and secure media coverage, and build collective identity” (Earl,2014: 48). Thus, the implications of ‘infrastructure development’ in India’s Northeast must be placed in the context of the unfolding ‘aspirations’ as well as ‘lived realities’ of the region’s youth.

In this context, there is a need to understand the developments in the Northeast region by unravelling the dual narratives of anxiety and aspiration, marked by the coexistence of protest and participation in the social life of the region, a play between a neglect narrative with a long history and “an emerging narrative that is both oppositional and participative”

(Dutta, 2012). At times, 'migrant', other times 'indigene'; at times 'rebel', other times 'participant' – the fluctuating nuances in the complex discourse of the youth as a category of change is reflective of the larger trends in the region. The critical role of 'infrastructure' within this discourse needs to be highlighted and perhaps the trends and nature of the 'infrastructure discourse' itself be re-evaluated on this basis. As we mentioned earlier about the 'unique' background to the formation of the region, here it needs to be re-emphasised that 'territoriality', the spatial strategy to affect, influence, or control resources and people by controlling area, has been a dominant theme in the post-colonial politics of Northeast India (Baruah, 2013). As Willem Van Schendel pretty much sums it up: "Ideas about autonomy, self-determination, historical iniquity, belonging, political strategy and armed resistance against state militarisation circular in the entire region-by means of cross-border networks of kinfolk, trade partners, refugees, co-religionists and political elites" (Van Schendel, 2018 :285).

Within this discourse the ethnic politics and the state policies exists in a symbiotic relation and embedded to this discourse the flow of infrastructural intervention goes on creating ruptures/ consolidations.

2.4 Of aspirations/ exasperations: 'There's nothing to do at home'

Despite the massive proliferation of infrastructural interventions in the region, the number of out-migrating youth has been increasing. In a survey conducted by this author¹², 'infrastructural development' emerged as a top priority issues for youth of the region. The same survey showed that an overwhelming majority of the youth (74.5 per cent) in the Northeast would like to get settled outside the region/ state for better career and job prospects. A survey released by the North East Support Centre and Helpline in early 2011 puts the number of migrants outside the Northeast at 414,850. The same report cites a 12-fold increase in migration out of the Northeast from 2005 to 2011. Karlsson and Kikon calls it 'wayfinding' by the indigenous migrants, "a journey without a map or pathway to follow, with no clear destination or end point" (Karlsson and Kikon, 2017:4), Duncan Mcdue Ra points out the emergence of 'adjacent identities' due to the increasing migration from the region, intensifying encounters between communities from the region and so-called 'mainstream' India (Mcdue Ra, 2016). The often discussed structural factors behind this

¹² A survey was conducted across seven university campuses in the NER targeting the student organisations as well as 'common' students to know their views on elections and the electoral processes. The survey report can be accessed at, https://www.thehinducentre.com/multimedia/archive/02670/Policy_Report_No_1_2670_863a.pdf.



Source: Kaustubh Deka

“The local governance system/ traditional institutions, though recognised by the state, are neither part of the infrastructure planning and implementation process, nor involved in identifying the locations where the infrastructure would be most beneficial. Hitherto, the framework of infrastructure development has been conceived from the statist perspective, thus widening the gap between state and society,” (Zilpao, 486-87: 2018).

(Frame 1 by the author at a road junction near Kidima, Nagaland where sellers (mostly women) carry their load from far off villages in search of passer by customers, December 2017. Frame 2 by the author at Junbeelmela (a traditional annual barter trade fair) at Morigaon, Assam on January, 2018.)

migration are high levels of insecurity and violence, a non-functional local state, lack of educational facilities, a stagnant economy, dependence on subsistence farming, and unsustainable extraction of natural resources (Karlsson and Kikon, *ibid*). Whereas, Sanjoy Hazarika sees this transformation of the Northeast from a “migrant-receiving region” to a “migrant-producing area” as a sign of the Northeast people coming of age (Hazarika, 2018). The ongoing efforts therefore need to be urgently measured alongside unfolding phenomena like youth outmigration as well as alienation that critically reflect on the nature and outcome of the ongoing discourse infrastructural expansions in the region. The significance here cannot be missed that in the same areas where the juggernaut of big infrastructure has moved, alienation of the youth has also been sparked. In many places there are reports of a

(renewed) spurt in the number of youths joining militancy.¹³ Apart from youth absorptions into these infrastructural projects, the path of protest and gun too needs to be looked as ‘responses’ to infrastructure. As Karlsson and Kikon noted earlier: “Despite the visions for development and progress that are promoted in order to reconstruct the underdeveloped and militarised societies of India’s northeast, the increasing number of indigenous migrants draws our attention towards connections between the labour market, conflict and poverty (: Ibid.).

Section Three

3.1 Infrastructure as design of governance?: Contentions and connotations



Source: Kaustubh Deka

Sanjay Barbora talks about India’s northeast being at the grip of “an urban transformation that has followed a counter-intuitive path, influenced by the socially disruptive capacities of capital, calamities and counter-insurgency.”¹⁴ Photo taken by the author of Dibrugarh town, which is undergoing rapid urbanisation in the wake of some major infrastructural transformation with new river bridges and hub of communications coming up.

The Sahitya Akademi winning novel ‘Mouna Outh Mukhar Hriday’ (silent lips, murmuring heart) by the writer from Arunachal Pradesh, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, revolves around the

¹³ <https://nenow.in/north-east-news/renewed-spurt-assam-youths-joining-ulfa.html>, accessed on 23/11/18.

¹⁴ <https://ias.asia/the-newsletter/article/remaking-dibrugarh-contemporary-assam>, accessed on 01/11/18.

story of a couple in love, belonging to two different tribes, who comes into contact first time when 'drafted' by the government road construction work. Despite the lack of a common language, romance blossoms between the two, a development not taken very kindly by their respective tribes. This theme of part resistance, part reciprocity to the 'imposed' and 'sudden' strokes of 'modernity' underwrites most of the narratives of infrastructural developments in the region. The consequences are seemingly contradictory but mutually reinforcing.

Infrastructure in this understanding not only imposes spatial limitations but also creates and consolidates boundaries and borders. In other words, social identities become induced performances, conditioned by the flow and tenor of the infrastructural designs.

To give few examples, the All Assam Chutia Students' Union (AACSU) threatened to commit mass suicide by jumping from the under construction Bogibeel bridge unless the upcoming bridge were named after 'Sati Sadhani, a cultural/ mythological/ historical icon from the community. The youth group put this demand in the context of the government's 'earlier betrayal' of not granting Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to their community.¹⁵ At other place, the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) and the Hynniewtrep Youths' Council (HYC) in Meghalaya have put on hold the extension of railway linkage to the state, being proposed as part Mission 2020, a North East Frontier Railways initiative to connect the capital cities of the Northeast. For these youth groups, railway expansion can mean a threat to their 'indigenous' identity by opening up the floodgates of unchecked influx of the 'outsiders' into the state.¹⁶

Some other commentaries, however, hinted at the possible involvement of the powerful 'truck lobby' in 'using' the student groups to stall the coming of the railways.¹⁷ In various states of the region, proposed infrastructural interventions have brought together youth groups into platforms of struggle bound by the emergence of complex 'ethno-ecological' identities (student-youth in Assam and Manipur against the construction of mega river dams, in Meghalaya against uranium mining and so on) (Deka, 2013). The complex co-existence of the agendas of development, cultural assertions as well as methods of political bargaining in these examples illustrates why youth activisms and policy designs should not be viewed as merely as mutually antagonistic or collaborative enterprises but as being increasingly interlocked within a 'contentious politics'.¹⁸ It is an understanding that, one, challenges the

¹⁵ <https://www.sentinelassam.com/news/all-assam-chutia-students-union-aacsu-threatens-to-commit-mass-suicide/>, accessed on 01/11/18.

¹⁶ <https://www.firstpost.com/india/shillongs-anti-railway-groups-threaten-to-intensify-protest-demand-meeting-with-chief-minister-mukul-sangma-3731911.html>, accessed on 01/11/18.

¹⁷ <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2017/06/14/why-oppose-railways/>, accessed on 25/10/18.

¹⁸ By 'contentious Politics' Mcadam, Tarrow and Tilly meant: "episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an

boundary between institutionalised and non-institutionalised politics (Mcadam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001), two, needs to be understood in the context of ‘a society coming to terms with historical social change’(Baruah,2005) and, three, emphasises on the relationship between movements and the responses of the political system (Saikia, 2011).

Thus, as Northeast India is ‘transitioning’ under the phase of large scale infrastructural transformation under the grip of a changed political economy, the “neo-liberal context of jobless growth, increasingly unregulated and precarious forms of employment” (Menon and Sundar, 2018:2) gets added to the lens of ‘security’ through which the region continues to be largely construed. As we have seen, the result is a contentious engagement of the region’s youth in the infrastructural interventions of the region, both through means of confrontation as well as participation. If the phase of heightened infrastructural expansion in the region is considered primarily as a strategy of strengthening the regime and practices of governance by the state, ignoring aspects of internal equality, environmental consequences and social fabric in the region (Nafis, 2018), it has every prospect of turning the youth in the northeast into a precariat, “a dangerous class - characterised by deep anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation”(Standing, 2011: 113), “youths living a life without the promise of stability” (Ulrik and Jørgensen 2016). The infrastructure discourse engulfing the region must take note of it. Let the foundation be a pragmatic, emphatic and nuanced assessment of the anxieties and aspirations that make up the lives of the youth in the region.

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