

Trade at India's Border with the Neighbouring Countries: Challenges and Prospects

The North East Region (NER) of India, despite being endowed with immense resource potential, is considered to be an economically backward region of the country. The lack of proper accessibility and the absence of infrastructure development and connectivity facilities have physically impeded many of the developmental prospects of the region. The crucial geo-strategic location of the NER along with its rich natural reserves accords the region with the possibility of being India's powerhouse of trade and investment as well as a substantive gateway to the robust engagements with the neighbouring countries. The trade at India's border needs to be enhanced to take advantage of the NER's strategic location. The NER border is critical for business and commercial transactions between North East India and its neighbours beyond international borders or in its vicinity by the people inhabiting the area. The importance of border is profound for the NER as it yields tangible benefits to the region thereby facilitating sustainable economic development. Determinants like geographic proximities, socio-cultural and ethnic affinities, economic complementarities, political commitments, policy coordination, infrastructure development and mutual interdependence extensively bolster the promotion of trade at borders.

Given the NER's significant geo-strategic location by virtue of sharing about 5000 kilometres of international borders with the countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar it can be utilized as a base for India's improved economic association with its neighbours. Moreover, it has one of the most fertile stretches of land along the Brahmaputra valley, whose viability for the cultivation of a wide variety of cash and food crops on a commercial basis is yet to be fully explored. Development of the trade at India's border between the neighbouring countries thus is conceived as a necessary precondition for the economic development of the NER in particular and the country in general. The trade points in the NER border such as at Moreh (Manipur) and Tamu (Myanmar), Zakhawthar (Mizoram) and Rikhwadhar (Rhee, Chin), Avankhug-Somra point at Nagaland, Nampong through Pangsau Pass in Arunachal Pradesh, Dawki in Meghalaya, Suterkandi in Assam and Nathula Pass in Sikkim need to be developed and made operative for fructifying the essence of economic cooperation with the neighbouring countries.

However the ground realities of the region pose certain challenges to the realistic realisation of the trade transactions at border. It encounters a plethora of constraints like the spiralling problem of insurgency, poor infrastructure, rough physical terrain, the influence of various pressure groups, overarching uncertainties among the trading communities and the absence of basic amenities in the border areas. The inherent limitations need to be addressed to in order to make this trade transaction a dynamic. The promotion of trade at borders is a prerequisite for utilising the comparative geographic and natural advantage of the NER and elevating the region out of the menace of economic backwardness, poverty and insurgency.

For appraising the prospect of the trade at borders in strengthening cooperation among the neighbouring countries as well as to assess the intensity of the influence of the the cross-border economic transactions on the dynamics of cooperation among the neighbours it is imperative to build a platform for the dissemination of invaluable insights. The development of the infrastructure, connectivity and communication facilities is ardently required to tap the potentials of the trade of the NER border. The intricacies of the trade at the North East borders are of primarily focuses in the contemporary academic researches and scholarly debates wherein the practical experiences enriched by theoretical perceptions play a vital

role. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS) in collaboration with the Sikkim University proposes to organize a National Seminar on the aforementioned theme in October at Sikkim. The objective of the Seminar is to take a retrospective view of the trade activities at the NER border with some of the neighbouring countries and to assess the benefits accruing from that trade, as also, to identify the lacunae plaguing it. The Seminar will also highlight the negative aspects of the opening up of the trade at borders in form of drug-trafficking, arms-smuggling, illegal immigration fuelling insurgency in the region. The Seminar proposes to invite experts and scholars on the North East Region of India, whose insightful contribution and enlightened academic interaction would lead to a comprehensive understanding of the issues that are pertinent to the theme of the Seminar.

The thrust of the Seminar is to emphasize the potentialities, constraints and prospects of trade at India's borders with the neighbouring countries as well as to appraise to what extent India's North East stands to benefit from the development of the trade transactions. The proposed Seminar seeks to address to some of the following issues:

- Role of the Trade at North East India's borders in the Expanded Engagements between India and its Neighbours.
- North East Region's Political and Security Questions in lieu of boosting Trade at India's borders.
- The implication of the Trade at North East India's borders in the social, political and economic matrix of the NER and its contribution to address the unresolved problems of the Region.
- Whether the pursuit of trade at North East India's border is adequate to alleviate the existing structural problems of the NER or whether its implementation has suffered due to inherent structural deficiencies.