

# REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY FOR SHARED PROSPERITY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOUTH AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA

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### Abstract

Connectivity and infrastructure are essential components of promoting sustainable development especially in geographically land-locked and hilly regions. This article explores the prospects of regional connectivity for shared prosperity in the context of India's North-East region that happens to share borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Nepal, and Myanmar. While briefly surveying the current scenario of shared connectivity, it deals with various measures at bilateral and multilateral levels to augment the regional connectivity with the North-East region through ambitious corridors and their long-term impact on the development and prosperity in the South and South-East Asian region. It also briefly deals with the potentials and prospective role of the small and medium enterprises in facilitating regional connectivity and thereby contributing to the sustainable development and prosperity in South and South-East Asia via North-East region of India.

### Introduction

India's North-East Region (NER) comprises eight States — Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. Occupying eight percent of India's geographical spread, the region is home to only four percent of the country's population, with substantial portion of the population, nearly 68 percent of the population of the region living in the State of Assam alone. There are variations in the density of population which varies from 13 per sq. km. in Arunachal Pradesh to 340 per sq. km. in Assam. With the exception of Assam, all other States of the region have predominantly hilly terrain which is inhabited by an overwhelming proportion of tribal population ranging from 19.3 percent in Assam to 94.5 percent in Mizoram. The North-East

region has over 160 scheduled tribes and over 400 other tribal and subtribal communities and groups.

The North-East Region (NER) lags behind in comparison with the rest of India in socio-economic indicators. The annual per capita income of NER is below against the rest of India average. The percentage of the population below-poverty-line (BPO) in NER is higher than the national average. However, the average literacy rate in the region is higher than the national average, which provides a good pool of educated human which provides a good pool of educated human. Nevertheless, this literacy rate has not translated into higher employability or productivity.

The NER is richly endowed with natural resources. It is identified as one of the world's biodiversity hotspots. Being home to species-rich tropical rain forests,

the region supports diverse flora and fauna and several crop species. The NER's forest cover constitutes 52 percent of its total geographical area. Accordingly, the availability of arable land in the region is limited. This adversely impacts on the cost of delivering public services to the sparse population. Reserves of petroleum and natural gas in the NER constitute a fifth of the country's total potential. Besides, this region is also endowed with minerals like oil and natural gas, coal, limestone, dolomite, graphite, quartzite, sillimonite, etc. The region has a very high potential to generate hydropower, i.e., about 80 percent of the total hydropower potential in the country.

The geographical region of North-East India is situated in the tri-junction of South, South-East and East Asia and as such it possesses a strategic importance of its own in the shifting regional economic paradigms. The NER shares more borders with adjacent neighboring countries rather than with the mainland with which it is connected with a corridor at Siliguri. The NER shares international borders with adjacent countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Nepal and Myanmar as shown in Table 1.

The NER significantly shares more borders with adjacent neighboring countries rather than with the mainland with which it is connected. It has international borders with Myanmar (1643 km), Bangladesh (1880 km), China (1300.25 km) and Bhutan (516 km) and Nepal (97.8 km). It is in this context that NER is perceived as vital transit for many of the newly formed subregional groupings with a vast amount of untapped potential, which is yet to be developed fully. The region entails profound potential of emerging as the main decisive factor for the successful implementation of India's Look East Policy (LEP). However, for want of any proper physical connectivity

with South-East Asia, this potential has remained untapped.

India's trade with South-East nations or ASEAN nations, which stood at US\$ 2.90 billion in 1993, grew to US\$ 80 billion in 2012, and by 2015 it is likely to be augmented to US\$ 125 billion. Broadly speaking, India's total trade with ASEAN accounts for 10 percent of India's trade, and three percent of ASEAN's total trade (Economic Times, 29 October 2013). Undoubtedly, India's trade with neighboring countries and ASEAN nations, including Myanmar, has registered phenomenal growth in recent years; nevertheless, the share of geographically contiguous areas of India's North-East region in this trade growth has been almost minimal. In other words, India's expanding engagement with South and South-East countries has not benefited the North-East region as it should have been owing to its strategic and geopolitical significance.

### Connectivity and infrastructure development

It is in this context that the Government of India in its *NER Vision 2020* report unveiled in 2008 emphasized the urgency for re-designing the development process in NER so as "to ensure that the region plays the arrow-head role it must play in the vanguard of the country's Look East Policy" (*NER Vision 2020*). It is noteworthy that all the eight states of the NER possess different developmental prospects and resources to support their efforts in contributing to the regional as well as national econ-



Figure 1: Map of north-east region of India

Source: [www.geocurrents.info](http://www.geocurrents.info)

omy. Despite its huge untapped natural resources and its acknowledged status as the eastern gateway for India's 'Look East Policy', the NER has remained alienated from the economic resurgence that the rest of the country is experiencing for the past few decades. Apart from a protracted spell of insurgencies in some states and persistent violence, the overall conditions in the region have generally been characterized by as a low-level equilibrium of poverty, non-development, civil conflict, and lack of faith in political leadership.

Most of the states in the NER, while having unique characteristics in some

respects, possess identical economic and geographical attributes. Undoubtedly, the region is endowed with vast natural resources in terms of forests, biological diversity, hydro-electricity potential; nevertheless, it has remained largely underdeveloped. Poor infrastructure and limited connectivity, both within the region as well as with the rest of the India are regarded as key constraints to the growth. "The region, connected to the rest of India by a narrow stretch of land called the 'chicken's neck', needs infrastructure to support and ensure significant investments and developmental aids" (*India's North East*, 2013).

Table 1: State-wise length of international border of NER (in km)

States	Bangladesh	Bhutan	China	Myanmar	Nepal	Total
Arunachal Pradesh	0	217	1080	520	0	1817
Assam	263	267	0	0	0	530
Manipur	0	0	0	398	0	398
Meghalaya	443	0	0	0	0	443
Mizoram	318	0	0	510	0	828
Nagaland	0	0	0	215	0	215
Sikkim	0	32	220.35	0	97.80	350.15
Tripura	856	0	0	0	0	856
<b>Total</b>	<b>1880</b>	<b>516</b>	<b>1300.25</b>	<b>1643</b>	<b>97.8</b>	—

Source: Government of India, MDONER, "State-wise length of international border of NER", available at <http://mdoner.gov.in/content/international-border>

The connectivity through infrastructure development for augmenting economic engagements between India and the ASEAN nations through Myanmar as well as other adjacent neighboring countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal via the North-East states is imperative. In order to understand the current scenario of trade and infrastructure along with future prospects, a brief appraisal of border trade and infrastructure network in the North-East seems appropriate here.

### Border trade

Cross-border trade has emerged a vital component of the economies of the North-Eastern states. India seeks increased economic engagement with ASEAN and other neighboring countries through the gateway of the NER, which is located at a crossroads between three major economies — East Asia, South Asia and South-East Asia. The role of the NER in the growing economic engagement and trade ties with South-East Asia and China in the recent years has been marginal in terms of its contribution to trade and as a trade route. The share of the North-East in India's overall exports is almost negligible.

According to a Planning Commission report on North-East's border trade with the neighboring countries, it becomes discernible that the region mainly exports primary products like boulder stone, limestone, fruits, tea, coal, etc. "Nearly 94 percent of exports from the region consist of tea and coal. On the other hand, manufactured goods have a negligible presence in the export basket. Even the manufactured goods produced in areas other than North-East are not very significant in official border trade" (Planning Commission, 1997).

The industrial sector in the NER is called upon to develop goods to be exported to the neighboring countries in order to benefit from the cross border trade initiatives. Establishment of processing industries can facilitate manufacturing quality goods, which can be offered in international markets at acceptable prices. Infrastructure and connectivity improvements in terms of strategic roads to border areas as well as Integrated Check Posts and

border trade points need to be developed and this would also lead to reduced informal trade between NE and the neighboring regions (*India's North-East*, 2013).

### Trade with Bangladesh

The statistics on India's trade status with Bangladesh, as revealed from a World Bank report, show that over 15% of Bangladeshi imports come from India and as such Bangladesh has a large trade deficit with India; this is offset by surpluses with other countries. Besides, Bangladeshi exports to India, which account for less than one percent of total India's imports, receive tariff concessions (under SAFTA). Ironically, illegal trade between the two countries amounts to three-fourths of regular trade (World Bank, 2006). It is usually argued that strengthening of economic ties with Bangladesh will be mutually beneficial. Four North-Eastern states — Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Assam — share a 1,880 km border with Bangladesh, and a large number of people reside just along the border. The NER markets are advantageous for Bangladesh to sell its products, while the former can elicit investments.

The states of the NER can benefit from their strategic location by bargaining for investments in lieu of opening its markets to Bangladesh. Maintenance of a steady growth rate around six percent successively for the past some years by Bangladesh make it a strong contender for emerging as a middle income country by 2020. The geographical proximity of the NER makes it lucrative destination for Bangladesh to invest in areas such as hydel power, an area in which it has already expressed its interest since it will have to invest very less in transportation. Another advantage that can accrue to the NER States is in terms of importing goods from Bangladesh which will be cheaper than products which are brought into the region from other parts of India as the cost of transportation will be nominal.

Recently Bangladesh and India have decided to set up a number of 'Border Haats' or border markets along the boundaries, which, when opened, are expected to witness bilateral trade worth US\$ 20 million every year. India and Bangladesh set up

the first such 'Border Haat' at Kalaichar in West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya last year. The border haats or bazaars will be established within five km on either side of the international border. The border haats would be allowed to sell local agricultural and horticultural products, small agriculture and household goods, e.g., spices, minor forest products (excluding timber), fresh and dry fish, dairy and poultry products, cottage industry items, wooden furniture, handloom and handicraft items, etc. No local tax would be imposed on the trading, and both Indian as well as Bangladeshi currencies will be accepted (Economic Times, 3 November 2010).

The potential corridors identified through Bangladesh in the *NER Vision 2020* report inter alia include connecting Meghalaya with Bangladesh at Dauki, Shella, Baghmara, Burengapara and Mahendraganj, and similarly Tripura at Kalkalighat, Kamalpur, Khowai, Ranir Bazar and Sabrum will develop international linkages with Bangladesh. This will facilitate alternate routes between these two states, with rest of the country, access to the Asian Highway network and connectivity of major cities in Bangladesh. Potential routes between Meghalaya, Bangladesh, Assam and Tripura are:

- Dauki (Meghalaya)-Jaintipur-Sylhet-Fenchuganj-Silua (all in Bangladesh) and Kalkaliganj (Assam);
- Shella (Meghalaya)-Sylhet-Fenchuganj-Silua (all in Bangladesh) and Kalkaliganj (Assam);
- Dauki (Meghalaya)-Jaintipur-Sylhet-Fenchuganj-Kamaliganj (all in Bangladesh) and Kamalpur (in Tripura);
- Shella (Meghalaya)-Sylhet-Fenchuganj-Kamaliganj (all in Bangladesh) and Kamalpur (in Tripura);
- Dauki (Meghalaya)-Jaintipur-Sylhet-Fenchuganj-Kamaliganj-Shahistaganj (in Bangladesh) and Khowai (Tripura);
- Shella (Meghalaya)-Sylhet-Fenchuganj-Kamaliganj-Shahistaganj (in Bangladesh) and Khowai (Tripura);
- Dauki (Meghalaya)-Sylhet-Habiganj-Shahistaganj (in Bangladesh) and Khowai (Tripura);

- Shella (Meghalaya)-Sylhet-Habiganj-Shahistaganj(Bangladesh) and Khowai (Tripura);
- Bagmara (Meghalaya)-Durgapur-Jari Jhanjali-Shamganj-Bhairb Bazar-Camila, Ramgarh (Bangladesh) and Sabrum (in Tripura);
- Burengapura (Meghalaya)-Piarpur-Begunbari-Dhaka-Camila-Ramgar (all in Bangladesh) and Sabrum (Tripura); and
- Mahendraganj (Meghalaya)-Nandia-Piarpur-Begunbari-Dhaka-Camila-Ramgarh (all in Bangladesh) and Sebrum (Tripura) By linking Mizoram at Tiabung with Bangladesh, a much shorter route between Mizoram and Tripura (at Sebrum) could be developed. Apart from this, alternate routes between Mizoram and Meghalaya can be developed through Bangladesh (via Chittagong and Dhaka).

#### Trade with Myanmar

India and Myanmar are likely to double the bilateral trade to US\$ 3 billion by 2015 by ensuring greater cooperation in sectors such as oil and gas, infrastructure, agricultural products and pharmaceuticals. Both countries have also decided to increase two-way trade through the land route by strengthening the necessary infrastructure. India and Myanmar have implemented the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) since 1st September, 2010. India had also implemented the Duty Free Tariff Preference (DFTP) scheme for Myanmar in January 2009, under which Myanmar would gain market access for 94 percent of India's products at zero duty (Business Standard, 28 September 2011).

The border trade agreement between India and Myanmar, which was signed on 21 January 1994, allowed only 18 kinds of goods. In 2008, both the countries expanded the tradable items from 18 to 40. In December 2012, the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) raised the number of border trade items to 62. Rice, wheat, corn, medicines and 18 other items were added to the list of goods for trade. The other newly added items include agricultural tools, bicycles, coal, garments, edible oil, electrical

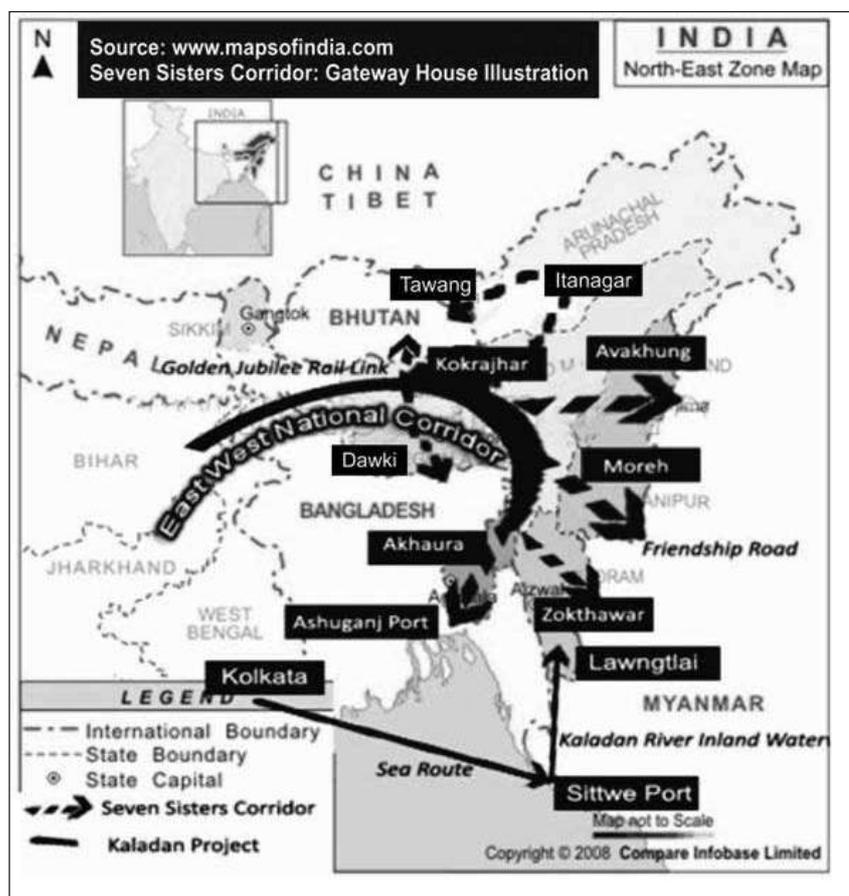


Figure 2: Cross-border trade for North-Eastern States of India

appliances, steel products, tea, beverages, motor cycles and spare parts, semi precious stone, sewing machines and three wheelers/ cars below 100cc (De, Prabir 2013).

India has regarded Myanmar as a significant neighbor which can play important role in breaking the geopolitical isolation of the NER and provide a congenial entrepot to South-East Asia. Accordingly, India in its *NER Vision 2008* report accorded top priority in promoting trade and investing in infrastructure on both sides of the India-Myanmar border. Several agreements have been signed between both the countries in recent years to meet these goals. During Indian Prime Minister's visit to Myanmar in May 2012, memoranda of understanding (MoUs) were signed not only to enhance border development, but also to increase connectivity between the two countries and through Myanmar with Thailand and the Indo-Chinese states.

India's recent initiatives to strengthen trade at border with Myanmar inter alia include upgrading the status of border trade to normal trade, widening of the road from Imphal to Moreh, link road from Champai to border in Mizoram, and international connection of Arunachal Pradesh at Pangsau pass as well as Nagaland at Lungwa.

Development of infrastructure in the NER is reportedly on the priority list of India and India has also agreed to upgrade an extensive network of roads and bridges in Myanmar that will effectively connect the NER not only with the rest of India, but with Thailand as well by 2016. Efforts are also underway by both sides to exploring the possibility of setting up train routes through both the countries.

The utility of various projects related to the trilateral highway as a component of the Asian highway assumes added

significance. It aims at connecting India's north east with Thailand via Myanmar. There has been an agreement between India and Myanmar on the construction and upgrading of the Kalewa-Yargyi stretch of the trilateral highway. This project entails triangular road diplomacy between India, Myanmar and Thailand, with a vision of inter-linking the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea. It is a component of the Asian highway, which is scheduled for completion by 2016. This highway project can be interlinked with other critical projects, which are likely to be completed as part of the 'Look East' policy such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Project and Trans-Asian Railways.

### Trade with Bhutan

Indo-Bhutan bilateral trade is of over INR 6,000 crore with near INR 4,000 crore of India export that constitutes over 70 percent of Bhutan's total import. Out of the rest, 80 percent of Bhutan's export value to India is for hydropower of which also India is the largest buyer. Apart from the trade with India, Bhutan is dependent on Indian passage for its third country trade too because of its land locked location in the lap of Himalaya. Bhutan's border areas with India stretch from Northern West Bengal to eastern Assam. Under a free trade agreement between the two countries, the existing one is effective since 2006 for 10 years. Bhutan enjoys duty free transit of Bhutanese merchandise for trade with third countries too. Bhutan's bypass route to Passakha and Samdrupjongkhar industrial estates in Bhutan can give faster access to deep Bhutan including Thimphu. In addition, Matanga industrial estate in Samdrupjongkhar district in Bhutan is being planned to be directly connected to Bokajuli in Assam by passing Samdrupjongkhar town (Sarkar, 2014).

The *NER Vision 2020* document envisages that by connecting Jashingang Dzong in Bhutan with Arunachal Pradesh and Assam three alternate routes will be developed. The first route from Tawang (in Arunachal Pradesh) to Jashingang Dzong (in Bhutan) — Darranga (in Assam) will provide an alternate route between Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. Secondly, route from Tawang (in Arunachal Pradesh) to Jashingang Dzong-Mongar-Dzong-Kogkha-Tongsa and Dzong-Shemgang Dzong-

Gelekphu (all in Bhutan — Rani Khata (Assam) will provide another alternate route between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The third route from Tawang (in Arunachal Pradesh) to Jashingang Dzong-Mongar-Dzong-Kogkha — Jongsang will link Dzong — Punakha — Gasa — Dotanang — Pokangnag — Thimphu — Kyapcha — Chanakha (all in Bhutan) with Jairgaon in West Bengal.

### Japan's interest

India has invited Japan to invest in and build overland infrastructure in areas of North-East region in India. Japanese companies will have the opportunity to help the development of the northeast specially to build roads, and aid agriculture, forestry and water supply and sewerage in these states. Japanese companies have also been invited to help develop a new port in Chennai, which would be used to improve India's sea-route connectivity. Japanese assistance for Chennai port is also aimed at giving teeth to a new sea-based route that would start in Chennai, and end in Dawei port in Myanmar's Tanintharyi region. The port is being developed by Thailand.

In 2012, Thailand had promised India that it would pump in US\$ 50 billion into Dawei. The development of a new port in Chennai would serve to connect the industrial centers of Southern and Western India with South-East Asia. In addition, Japan's investment in the Bangalore-Chennai industrial corridor would find easy outlet from Chennai. As part of the trilateral dialogue between India, US and Japan, a trilateral highway linking India, Myanmar, and Thailand is likely to see more Japanese and US interest. This is an India-led project due for completion in 2016, but by itself, India is unlikely to make the target (Bagchi, 2014).

### Role of SMEs

The SMEs, comprising over 90 percent of total enterprises in most of the economies around the globe, are credited with generating the highest rates of employment growth and account for a major share of industrial production and exports. The SMEs play a pivotal role in India too in the overall industrial economy of the country. This makes the SMEs significant for real-

izing the objectives of growth with equity and inclusion.

Guwahati in Assam is well placed in terms of entrepreneurship development when compared to the other states in the Northeast owing to its upscale market and good road/rail connectivity and as such it is naturally placed to lead the entrepreneurial activities and attracting large scale investments. Other North-Eastern states also present congenial atmospheres for SMEs and the local populace prefers light industries, as opposed to heavy and polluting industries that create big tussles among the different stakeholders of the industries concerned and harm the ecosystem. A recent study named *State Level Reforms — Increasing Investments in North East* jointly undertaken by FICCI and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF) underlines the condition for constructive dialogue and engagement with policymakers and the administrative machinery in Northeast and the steps that need to be taken to harness the true potential of the region. The availability of the promising opportunities in the Northeast has spurred industry chambers like CII, FICCI to focus increasingly on this region to score well by infusing energy in SMEs, supported by local entrepreneurial skills. The expansion of SMEs in the Northeast will proportionally generate quality employment and will also check outbound migration.

Broadly speaking, all the states of the North-East region, despite having many commonalities, are distinct in their own ways. Thus, keeping this diversity in mind is also essential for policy makers and prospective entrepreneurs. Under the existing circumstances, a greater adjustment is called for from industries for the local conditions prevailing in the entire North-East. With the expansion of infrastructure and completion of corridors, the growth of SMEs will be the one among many desirable outcomes, which is going to shape the future of the very promising North-Eastern region of India (Kumar, 2014).

Viewed in a broad perspective, the SME sector has been faced with a vast array of problems like the purchase of raw materials, manufacturing of products, marketing of goods or raising finance. The SMEs are faced with

intensified competition — both in domestic and overseas markets. The SMEs in India, while trying to cope with these challenges, are also making efforts to improve and sustain competitiveness through rational cost optimization, improved quality, offering better choices by introducing innovative measures and upgraded technology.

According to a CII-PWC report *Innovation-Changing the MSME landscape*: “Statistics are already emerging on the increasing importance of innovation and its scale and scope among the country’s firms today” (Thakur, 2013). Also, a National Knowledge Commission of India study reveals that 42 percent of large firms and 17 percent of MSMEs have introduced ‘new to the world’ innovations during the course of their business. 17 percent of the large companies rank innovation as the top strategic priority and 75 percent rank it among the top three priorities. So innovation is an area, where light industries are making the voyage with positive outcomes. The SMEs functional in the Northeast should also make strides to catch up with this essential trend (*ibid*).

An impressive growth in the service sector has helped in the sustenance of high annual growth rate in excess of eight percent in the Northeast in the past decade. As early efforts of unsystematic heavy industrialization mostly failed in the region, manufacturing became dominated by SMEs in due course of time. The state of Assam is better in terms of entrepreneurship development when compared to the other states in the North-East. With an upscale market and good road/rail connectivity, Guwahati is naturally placed to lead the entrepreneurial activities and attracting large scale investments. But it is also true that the rest six states also present favorable atmospheres for SMEs, as the concern for environmental degradation is quite high among the local population.

In the wake of promising growth opportunities being afforded by North-east, the national industry chambers such as CII, FICCI are increasingly focusing on this region to score well by infusing energy

in SMEs, supported by local entrepreneurial skills. The spread of SMEs in the North-East will proportionally generate quality employment and will also check outbound migration. The growth of SMEs will be the one among many desirable outcomes, which is going to shape the future of the very promising Northeastern region of India.

### Conclusion

Deficit of connectivity and infrastructure have kept the momentum of growth at a low pace in the North-East region of India. Apart from the land-locked location and hilly terrain, the region has the advantage of sharing borders with adjacent neighboring countries which is both a boon and bane. The protracted spell of insurgencies and attendant violence has thwarted local governments’ efforts at promoting development which requires peace at home. However, this situation is undergoing transformation for the better. Keeping in view the interest and anxiety shown by some ASEAN nations, particularly Thailand and Myanmar to forge connectivity and expand economic engagement with India through NER, India should avail of this opportunity.

Myanmar is India’s gateway to ASEAN as it is the only country of this grouping which has a land and maritime boundary with India. With India becoming a summit level partner of ASEAN and a member of the East Asia Summit, improved relations with Myanmar will be beneficial in many respects.

Nevertheless, with better connectivity and implementation of various development projects, the Asian Highway will enable the region to become a business hub of South Asia. Economic linkages already exist by virtue of the prevailing trade between India and Myanmar, concrete economic benefits are likely to accrue to the region with establishment of border haats. In addition, internal trade routes have the potential to enhance accessibility to subregional markets that connect Bangladesh, Myanmar and Bhutan. The pivotal role of the SMEs is imperative for boosting manufacturing

goods in accordance with the raw materials locally available and the markets for the manufactured goods in the adjacent countries.

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