

**The Southern Silk Route and India's Economic Growth
Trajectory: 2000-2015**

SYNOPSIS

of

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Introduction

The advent of the twenty-first century has been predominantly characterized by conscious attempts at increasing interconnectedness between the countries of the world in terms of technological transfers and innovations, skill-sharing, diplomacy, economic-dependencies and socio-cultural relations. Although such initiatives have been witnessed during earlier times as well, since the early 1990s, the process of globalization has had a significant impact on international relations especially with regard to key issues involving security and the global balance of power, international trade, establishment of global value and supply chains, a rapid increase in the pace and intensity of cross-border and trans-national flow of goods, ideas, values and cultures. In the case of Asia, countries like India and China have been touted as future superpowers in global politics and their relations with each other over the years have been closely scrutinized by scholars and strategic elites from various parts of the world, be it with regard to strategic, military and economic competition or rivalry between the two countries, population demographics, border disputes in North and North-East India or with

China's growing influence in South and Southeast Asia as well as in the Indian Ocean Region and India's role as a balancer of this influence. Yet these two countries have a history that long precedes the advent of globalization or even colonialism, especially with regard to trade and the exchange of goods, ideas, religious values and culture.

With this objective, this research studies the historical significance of the Southern Silk Route in connecting the societies of South Asia, Southeast and Myanmar (Burma). It also analyzes the scope for its revival and makes an attempt to address its implications.

Focus Areas

This research focuses specifically on a series of historic road networks extending from Yunnan Province in southwest China, across Burma and up the Irrawaddy River, into what are today the North-Eastern states of India as well as the northern fringes of the state of West Bengal, particularly the town of Kalimpong.

- Additionally, it makes an attempt to understand the importance of the revival of these routes, collectively called the Southern Silk Route and its

economic and strategic implications for India and the Southeast Asian region in the twenty-first century.

- The “tea-horse trade route” between Tibet and India has been studied as one of the branches of the Southern Silk Road in this regard.

Purpose of the Study

1. To study the implications of the resumption and enhancement of regional economic cooperation on various aspects of development in South and Southeast Asia, through the north-eastern region as well as northern West Bengal.
2. To understand and study the existing lines of communication and linkages for enhancing cooperation between the countries connected by the Southern Silk Road.
3. To gauge the economic and strategic potential of the Southern Silk Road’s revival in the case of India vis-a-vis the other South and Southeast Asian countries.
4. To examine the developmental prospects of the north-eastern region of India with regard to the Southern Silk Road and the Asian Economic Corridor.

5. To analyze the prospects and challenges of India's Look/Act East Policy and to study the sub-regional economic cooperation with regard to commerce, culture and connectivity.

Methodology

Coverage: The research employs both qualitative as well as quantitative methods in order to understand the various issues associated with the revival of Southern Silk Road. These issues range from geographical factors and identity politics to strategic and economic prospects.

The units of observation in this regard are the north-eastern states of India, northern West Bengal, Myanmar as well as parts of southern and south-western China. Emphasis is laid primarily on the prospects and implications of a revival of the old Southern Silk Route network on the regional economic landscape.

The research is based largely on primary sources which consist of government documents, observations during the field visits and findings through questionnaire distribution and interviews, as well as secondary sources which include archival materials and printed or published texts.

It employs the purposive sampling method for data collection.

Hypothesis

The following points summarize the hypothesis of this research.

1. This study is based on the hypothesis that the revival of the Southern Silk Route could be highly beneficial for the development of the areas that lie in this route, particularly the North-Eastern region of India as well as northern West Bengal.
2. It may lead to a significant increase in international trade due to the long border the region shares with neighboring countries.
3. India's interest in Southeast Asia through its Look/Act East Policy could be mutually beneficial to all the stakeholders given the reopening of these trade routes.

Research Questions

The research questions that the study attempts to answer are the following:

1. Has the Southern Silk Road played any historically significant role in the development of trade relations between South and Southeast Asia?

2. How important is the role played by the Southern Silk Road in terms of the economic, political, cultural, social and religious development of South and Southeast Asia in the 21st Century?
3. Given the availability of natural resources, biodiversity and manpower in the north-eastern region of India, what role could the revival of or increase in trade through the Southern Silk Road/Route play in the economic development of the region?
4. Can the revival of the route be considered a priority for economic, strategic and socio-political development of some parts of East and North-East India as well as for South-Southeast Asia relations in the 21st Century?
5. What are the major bottlenecks in the establishment of stronger trade relations between north-east India, south-west China and south-east Asia?

Chapterization

The research is divided into seven chapters highlighting important issues related to the revival of the Southern Silk Route. It starts with an introductory chapter which lays the foundation for the research and includes an overview of existing literature on the subject. Chapter 2 discusses the genesis of the Southern Silk Route with an emphasis on its distinct identity with regard to the more commonly

known 'Silk Road' or the Northern Silk Route which successfully laid the foundations for over-land trade between Mongolia, China and Europe. It analyses the various off-shoots of the southern branch of this route based on historical records and trade data sourced from the archives of the Government of India. It makes an attempt to understand the dynamics of trade between India, Nepal, erstwhile Tibet (now the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China), Chengdu (China) and Sikkim (then an independent kingdom). With regard to India here, the northern parts of the state of West Bengal have been focused on. Kalimpong, located in north Bengal, was the epicenter of trade through the branch of the Southern Silk Route commonly referred to as the Tea-Horse route through the Jelep-La (pass).

Chapter 3 studies similar routes in the North-eastern region of India and the role of the British in undertaking connectivity initiatives such as the Stillwell Road (Ledo Road). It also focuses on other routes in the region which served as connecting linkages between British India including the present day Myanmar and southern China. Furthermore, the historic role played by the Ledo Road during World War 2 and the eventual policies fostering connectivity in the region have been discussed here. Chapter 4 analyzes the various trade routes and off-shoots of the Southern Silk Route in the region from a comparative perspective

under the pre and post British-Era scenario. It focuses on trade linkages between India and her neighbors through the different branches of this route and also attempts to analyze the economic trends. The various facets of connectivity have been studied from a regional perspective in Chapter 5 and while the penultimate chapter (Chapter 6) analyzes the issues related to the stakeholders in the revival of the Southern Silk Route, particularly from northern West Bengal and the North-Eastern Region of India. The final chapter (chapter 7) provides a conclusion to the issues analyzed in the preceding chapters with possible outcomes for developmental policies in these areas in the future.

Findings/Conclusion

- Enhancing connectivity between India and Southeast Asia through a revival of the Southern Silk Road network is a multifaceted task which requires implementing strong policy initiatives.
- Development of these connectivity projects and logistical networks would open significant opportunities for industrial development in the region and enhance its trade potential with Southeast and East Asian countries
- With greater connectivity centered on the development of efficient road and rail networks on both sides of the border, the Northeastern states would

be better integrated with the markets of neighbouring countries like Myanmar.

- Its effects would also spillover into the social and cultural realm, since people to people contacts are essential elements of fostering and cultivating good relations in the global arena. It would also drive the tourism sector in the region, especially given the rapidly growing interest in various forms of tourism.
- In fact, in 2020 high ranking government officials in Myanmar had requested their counterparts in India to consider the possibility of developing Imphal into a layover hub for tourists from Myanmar embarking on religious pilgrimages to sites like Bodh Gaya.
- If proper policy decisions are implemented, this would essentially provide an immense boost to similar sites in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Assam and other states of the Northeastern region, while at the same time, exposing other areas of potential cooperation in the process.
- Since the region shares ninety-six per cent of her borders with the neighbouring countries of Bhutan, Bangladesh, China, and Myanmar, it is important to link with the Southeast as well as South Asian markets.

- An improved infrastructure, especially in the bordering regions between India and ASEAN will be insufficient to foster regional integration until and unless it is widely complemented by appropriate policies and regulations as well as participation of the private sector.
- Security considerations have to re-examined, especially under the current nature of Sino-Indian relations and the recurring activities of insurgent groups in these regions.

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