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Journal of Peace Studies

C O N T E N T S

FROM THE EDITORIAL DESK

The War in Ukraine must end 1

ARTICLES

Iran Factor in India's Afghanistan Policy *Rajan Jha & Jita Mishra* 5

Re-Linking the Landlocked Countries: India's Connectivity Initiatives and Options for Nepal and Bhutan *Nihar R Nayak* 26

OPINION

Tawang - Trashigang Corridor to boost development in India's Eastern Border Space *Jajati K. Pattnaik* 44

BOOK REVIEW

Development, Governance and Gender in South Asia – Perspectives Issues and Challenges by Anisur Rahman & Niharika Tiwari Reivewed by *Ghulam Mustafa* 59

OPINION

Tawang- Trashing Corridor to Boost Development in India's Eastern Border Space

Jajati K. Pattnaik*



The border space, conventionally defined as the political boundary between two sovereign entities, is often constructed as an isolated zone, a restricted area, or no man's land straddling the border between two or more states. Unlike India's volatile western border space with Pakistan, India's eastern border space with Bhutan is quite integrative, having deep-rooted foundations based on culture, trade, foreign policy, and convergence of strategic outlook. Contextualising the issue, both at the micro and macro levels, the study seeks to locate Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh in the

northeastern frontier, in the larger framework of cross-border paradigm across a 217 km border India shares with the Kingdom of Bhutan. Moreover, its geospatial position makes it a convenient tool for cross-border trade and sub-regional cooperation to generate growth and development in the region. In this context, cultural links and past trade ties between the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan acted as symbiotic factors for cross-border collaboration under the broader framework of India's 'neighbourhood first' policy. Taking due cognizance of this, the author made several field visits to the border region in order to understand the prevailing situation on the ground

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with a special focus on the Tawang (Western Arunachal Pradesh)-Trashigang (Eastern Bhutan) corridor, and in this report, makes an attempt to identify the cross-border opportunities as well as challenges that the policy makers need to take into account while forging India's eastern border space into India's larger developmental strategies in the region, based on which they can evolve measures to build effective cross-regional trade and commercial linkages.

The Tawang-Trashigang Corridor

The political elites, academia, traders, and grass-roots organisations of Arunachal Pradesh have strongly endorsed the Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh)-Trashigang (Bhutan) corridor for stronger trade and economic ties with the Royal Government of Bhutan. Trade intercourse between the people in Eastern Bhutan, Tawang and West Kameng (Western Arunachal Pradesh) continued informally throughout history.¹ During the British Indian rule, particularly in the 19th century, an annual grand fair was held at Udalguri (Assam) in which the traders from various tribal communities participated. They also held regular fairs at Sadiya and Doimara. The Bhutias from Bhutan came along the Doimara-Amtola-Bhairabkund route to attend the Udalguri trade fair. They

brought cattle, sheep, ponies, musk, woolen blankets among other things from Bhutan, and in exchange, they took salt, rice, oil, wooden mask, etc. (Choudhury 1996). Taking a cue from the past, the people of both Tawang and West Kameng in Arunachal Pradesh are now evincing interest in revival of trade routes with Bhutan to boost economic growth and development in the region.

The local leaders of the Tawang district including the present Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Pema Khandu have time and again demanded opening the Tawang-Bhutan trade corridor. He has gone on record saying: "This road is very important for both countries. It will be a win-win situation not just strategically but also in terms of tourism and economics. The matter has been taken up by Arunachal Pradesh govt with the Union government to take it up with Bhutan" (Mohan 2020). Likewise, the former Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Kalikho Pul had also expressed keenness to adopt Bhutan's developmental model in Arunachal Pradesh through cross-border cooperation. He had said, "Arunachal and Bhutan share not just boundary but cultural and religious history, particularly the communities in Tawang and West Kameng" (*India Today* 2016). He laid emphasis on the 'need to harness the historical,

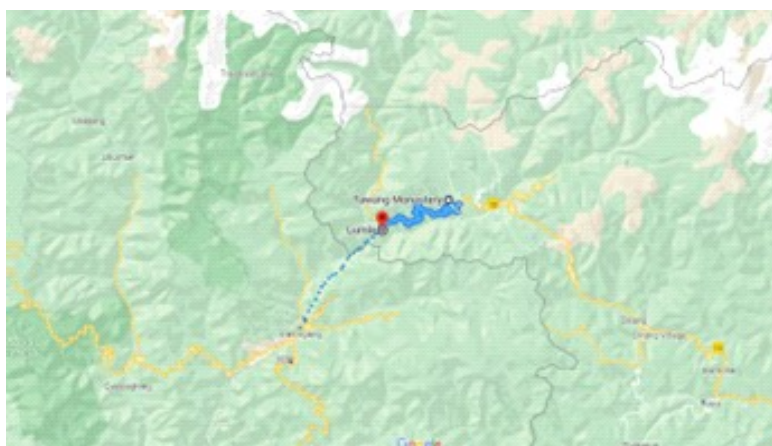
TAWANG- TRASHING CORRIDOR TO BOOST DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA'S EASTERN BORDER SPACE

cultural and trade links between the two regions by establishing border trade centre' (India Today 2016) and exuded confidence that the 'development of this route would enable agriculture and horticulture export from Lumla sub-division along with the newly-created Bongkhar circle headquarters. Appreciating the success story of hydropower and tourism development in Bhutan, Pul stressed on the initiative for study tour between the two regions to learn the process of planning and execution adopted in the country' (*India Today* 2016). He had also called for constructing the Lumla-Trashing road (Map-1) to augment cross-border ties between India and Bhutan linking Tawang of Arunachal Pradesh.

He had even hinted as developing a road network through Bhutan that would connect Tawang to Guwahati (about 450 kms) and "by-passing Sela Pass that often gets blocked due to heavy snow cover during the winter months and landslides in the rainy season" and "cut down travel time by about six hours and increase socio-economic activities between Bhutan and North-eastern India" (Kashyap 2016). The proposed Tawang-Trashing-Guwahati corridor will bring down the distance between Tawang and Guwahati by approximately 150-155 km, when it is compared with the traditional Tawang – Sela Pass- Bomdila- Tezpur -Guwahati route spread around about 450 kms.

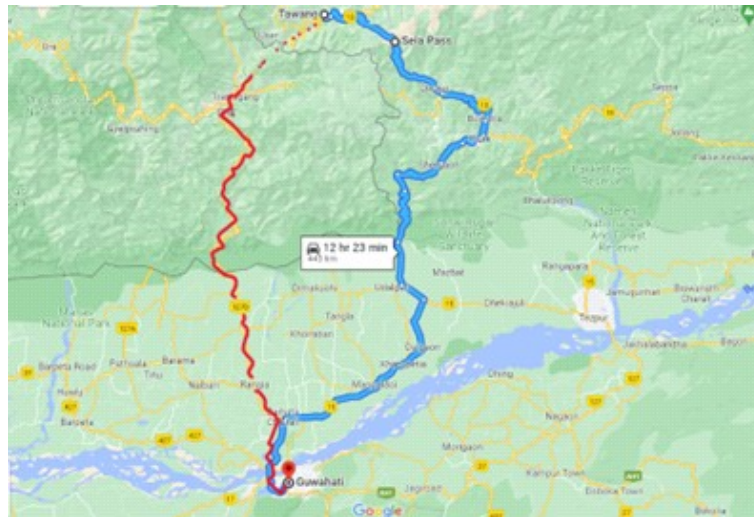
Map-1 Tawang-Lumla-Trashing Road

(The dotted line is non-existent and is being proposed to be built.)



Source: <https://www.google.com/maps/>

Map-2
Traditional Tawang- Sela Pass-Bomdila-Tezpur-Guwahati
Corridor (in Blue) vs. Proposed Tawang-Trashingang-Samdrup
Jongkhar-Guwahati Border (in Red).



Source: <https://www.google.com/maps/>

The local academia has also backed the idea of the early construction of the Tawang - Trashingang road corridor to create free trade architecture in the Eastern Himalayan region. They have largely felt that Western Arunachal Pradesh and Eastern Bhutan have commonalities in the field of culture, tradition, tourism, hydro, herbal and horticulture, etc., and both the regions can harness their potentialities in bilateral ventures to bring prosperity to the bordering areas. Further, the corridor would give an alternative passage to Guwahati from Tawang, easing the traffic movement more conveniently and it would be faster

as compared to the present Tawang-Sela pass-Bomdila-Tezpur -Guwahati corridor (See Map 2).²

During a field trip to the area, responding to the author's queries, the local traders of Tawang opined that Bhutan is a peace-loving country, and it has a strong cultural and customary relationship with India. So, border trading points at Bleting, Bongkhar, and Dongshengmang should be opened in Arunachal Pradesh to enhance cross-border ties with Bhutan. It can also be used as an alternate route by Arunachal Pradesh to reach the Siliguri corridor bypassing Assam in case of any

TAWANG- TRASHING CORRIDOR TO BOOST DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA'S EASTERN BORDER SPACE

blockade/trouble in Assam; and further, formal trading can check smuggling, control and regularize the flow of foreign goods and generate revenue by way of customs/exciseDuties (See Map-3).³

The grassroots organisations like the Tawang unit of the powerful Arunachal Pradesh Gaon Bura

(Village Head) (GB) Association have also urged the King of Bhutan to accord permission to build the Bhutan portion of the Tawang-Trashing Road. Likewise, the District GBs headed by President Kota Lama through a memorandum have appealed to the Bhutanese King to give Royal approval for the construction of a 10 km road to link

**Map-3:
Connecting Border Trading Points
through the Proposed Corridor**



Sources: http://ai.stanford.edu/~latombe/mountain/photo/india-fall-2019/main_files/image005.jpg https://www.nationsonline.org/maps/bhutan_map.jpg
<https://surveyofindia.gov.in/documents/uploads/document-50780-arunachal-state-map.jpg>

(accessed on 23 January 2022)

TAWANG- TRASHING CORRIDOR TO BOOST
DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA'S EASTERN BORDER SPACE

Belting with the Trashigang section. They would mention that “since olden days, the people of Tawang used to visit religious places, like Gombay Kora, Durang Chorten, Gonja Ney, Tango Ney, Thimpu Dzongkha, etc. in Bhutan while the Bhutanese used to visit Tawang Monastery, Gorsam Chorten, Zangdopari Gompa, Taksang Gompa, Urgelling Gompa, Khinmay Gompa, Lhu-gyepu Phobrang (Muktur), Thongmin Gompa, Manma-Gyalam Ney, Thanga-Fe Ney, Banga Jang Ney, Sarong Gompa, Changbu Gompa, Gomshin Ney, etc with great difficulties by undertaking foot march for days together” (Kumar 2020).

The memorandum added that “the road connectivity would facilitate easy movement of people from both the countries” because the “old people face a tough time in traveling to the above-mentioned places on foot”. They urged the King to “provide solace to the righteous people to fulfill their life’s last wish to go on pilgrimage,” as a “Kind King”. (Kumar 2020). Most of the villagers during the author’s field visits also said that the opening of the Lumla -Bleting- Trashigang section would facilitate the locals from both sides of the border to participate in the cross-border trade and commerce in the region, thereby connecting the border space in a spiritually integrated region.⁴

On the other side of the border, the local people of Bhutan are quite optimistic about the Tawang- Trashigang road corridor which they feel, in the event of its completion, would cross-border ties with their counterparts in Tawang. They mostly viewed that the opening of the Tawang-Trashigang corridor would not only link western Bhutan and Eastern Bhutan in seamless connectivity, but it would also pave the way for cross border flow of trade items between Bhutan and Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh generating space for mutual collaborations in hydro, herbal, horticulture, tourism and food processing industries.⁵ Notwithstanding all this, the political establishment of Bhutan has been following a delaying tactic on the proposed corridor owing to its security concerns.

However, the bellicose attitude of China towards Bhutan in the recent past has impelled the Royal Kingdom to rethink its geo-strategic interests in the Eastern Himalayan border space. Beijing recently sought to stall funding by the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) for the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in far-eastern Bhutan claiming the sanctuary and nearby areas being disputed territory. Retorting to this claim, Thimphu stated that the territorial dispute between Bhutan and China is

confined only to 269 sq km in the western sector and 495 sq km in the north-central sector of the Bhutan - China boundary (Indian Defence Review 2020). It claimed that 'no part of its territory in the eastern sector was ever on the agenda of its boundary negotiation' (*Indian Defence Review* 2020). However, India has convinced Bhutan of the attitude of Beijing towards its territorial claim over Eastern Bhutan and aggressive designs over Ladakh in the recent past. It is expected that "Bhutan will take note of what China is doing and act accordingly" (*Indian Defence Review* 2020).

Opportunities

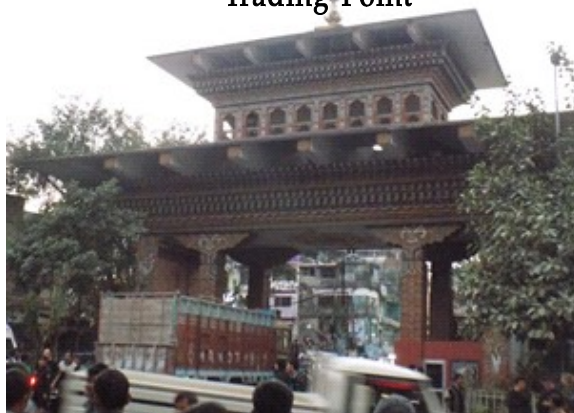
There could be enormous opportunities in the Tawang-Trashigang corridor as have been given below in greater detail.

Border Trade:

Border trade is an important domain of collaboration in the Eastern Himalayan sector. At present, India-Bhutan bilateral trade is mostly conducted through Jaigaon (West Bengal)-Phuentsholing (Bhutan) border trade point (See Picture: 1). At present, India is developing Jaigaon as an Integrated Check Post (ICP) to provide 'systematic, secure and seamless' border trade. It exports heavy machinery, motor vehicles, medical instruments, sponge iron, cement and project machinery etc and imports, marble slab, copper, calcium carbide, ferro silico, M.S. Ingot and TMT bar etc. (LPAI 2021).

In order to diversify the trade routes, New Delhi has also notified Birpara, Rangapani, and Loksan (West Bengal) as permanent Land

Picture: 1
Jaigaon (West Bengal)-Phuentsholing (Bhutan) Border Trading Point



Source: The Author, Phuentsholing, 26 December 2014

TAWANG- TRASHING CORRIDOR TO BOOST DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA'S EASTERN BORDER SPACE

Customs Stations (LCS) and considered notifying Bhairabkunda and Jorlong (Assam) as seasonal LCS to augment cross border trade with Bhutan. It has also specified Bokajuli (Assam)-Motanga industrial estate (Samdrup Jongkhar, Bhutan) as an authorized route for bilateral trade between India and Bhutan (India-Bhutan Bilateral Meeting 2017)

On the contrary, Arunachal Pradesh does not have any official trade route with Bhutan. The people of Trashigang (Bhutan) conduct informal trade across the border in Lumla (see Picture 2) and Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh). A local researcher of Mangnam village of Lumla circle of India- Bhutan border told the author,

“The people of border villages of Tawang and Trashigang have a trade relationship since time

immemorial, although no official record has been maintained. The trade is mostly done during festivals like Torgya and Gorsam kora in Tawang district and Gompukora in Trashigang district every year. Trading items from Trashigang include agricultural and horticulture products like orange, groundnut, processed maize, dry mushroom, dry chili, dry fish, chili powder, amla, cows, horses, processed soyabean, rice cookers, dinner sets, Chinese blankets, cheese, butter, Bhutan made biscuits, religious statues, electric water boiler, electric heater, beers, rums, dry meat, and fish, etc. The export of goods from Tawang is very small and limited. The trading items include incense, cigarettes, sugar, salt, mask, papers, etc. It is very interesting to note that since Bhutan has banned the sale of tobacco under its Tobacco Act of

Picture: 2 New Lumla Market



Source: Man Tsering, Lumla

2010, tobacco items like cigarettes, Beedi, Tiranga, Vimal, and other narcotics are being bought by the Bhutanese from the markets of Tawang. Thus, illegal items are also important products of trade, though they are unlawful and banned.”⁶

He further added that there is a huge potential and scope of border trade between India and Bhutan which would prove beneficial for the economies of both the countries. Thus, there is a fond hope on the ground that the policymakers, bureaucrats, and the local people would take positive steps to develop trade between the two countries and establish direct road communication between Tawang and Trashigang which is yet to be connected from Bhutanese side.”⁷ [please check, the portion from Lumla to the India-Bhutan border needs to be built by India as well.]

Hence both the border regions should explore their full potentials to kickstart formal trade. In this context, the Tawang-Trashigang road corridor could be a catalyst in shifting the contours of the informal nature of border trade to a formal one between Western Arunachal Pradesh and Eastern Bhutan. It depends on how effectively New Delhi convinces the Bhutanese leadership to connect border trade points of Bleting/ongshengmang and Namstering (Tawang) with

Trashigang (Bhutan for mutual geo-economic and geostrategic gains.

BBIN Sub- Regional Cooperation

Tawang-Trashigang corridor could be an important part of the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) sub-regional cooperation efforts linking Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and West Bengal in a free trade architecture. India seeks to uphold the cause of BBIN partially to showcase a regional success story for Modi’s ‘neighbourhood first’ policy. The forum also has deeper strategic considerations because it offers scope for shorter trade routes between the eastern and the north-eastern parts of India. Moreover, both New Delhi and Dhaka have played a key role in fulfilling the long-cherished desire for a transnational corridor under the banner of the BBIN to avoid controversy in the bilateral context. As we know, the granting of transit to India has always been a domestic issue in Bangladesh. Similarly, even though the Royal Government of Bhutan welcomed the BBIN sub-regional grouping and looked at it as a measure that will facilitate economic growth, as a Less Developed (LDC) and land-locked country, it wanted to have special concessions under the protocols’ (Mitra 2016). [No mention of Bhutanese concerns about ecology.]

Resolved MP. Moreover, there is apprehension in Bhutan of influx of outsiders on the one hand and of unsustainable pollution affecting the environment on the other. The fact that Bhutan has not ratified the BBIN-motor vehicles agreement (MVA) so far points to this. The Vice-Consul, Royal Bhutan Consulate General office in India, Prema Tobgay, has gone on record saying: "Bhutan has given go-ahead signal to the other three countries but there are people in our land [Bhutan] [who have] expressed diverse concerns about the impact [of BBIN-MVA] on the environment, culture, peace, and security" (Business Standard 2017).

Contrary to Butanese apprehensions, studies have shown that 'misgivings and concerns of a 'huge influx of vehicles and tourists' would not happen. Senior Indian diplomat, Gautam Bambawale, senior Indian diplomat, Gautam Bambawale, has also stated:

There is a slow but steady increase in trade, tourism and vehicular traffic which is quite manageable for smaller countries. Evidence shows that Luxembourg and Switzerland, the smaller countries in Europe have gained greatly from regional economic integration. The same is true in East and South-East Asia. So, let me urge Bhutan's leadership to ratify and endorse the

BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement" (MVA)⁸ (Mitra 2016).

The main objective of BBIN- MVA is to expand functional transport corridors and then transfer them to economic corridors. Moreover, it would be functional in selected routes connecting India's Northeast keeping in view the origin of the products and its demand in the BBIN sub-region. This would address the demand-supply challenges /gaps among them as well. However, the Bhutan Government has not yet approved the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement citing challenges to its culture and environment. So, the success of the BBIN MVA hinges upon the decision of the Royal political dispensation of the Kingdom. Nevertheless, there is still optimism that Bhutan might eventually join the forum, after addressing their internal issues by taking all the stakeholders on the board for the larger benefit of the region.

Addressing Challenges

The challenges of cross-border cooperation in the Tawang-Trashigang corridor emanate from several quarters which need serious attention.

Security Anxieties

Bhutan remains skeptical to open a road corridor with India due to

TAWANG- TRASHING CORRIDOR TO BOOST
DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA'S EASTERN BORDER SPACE

internal and external reasons. The present political dispensation might be of the view that opening a road corridor with India through its Southeastern territory means inviting security threats to Bhutan from Northeast India's insurgent groups operating from Assam. There were previous reports that insurgents operating in India's North-Eastern states such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), and Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO) had links with the Bhutan Tiger Force, the Bhutan Maoist Party and the Communist Party of Bhutan. Thus, there is an alarm in the Bhutanese establishment that the Communist Party of Bhutan with active support from North-Eastern insurgent groups might get hold of advanced weapons and 'pose a challenge to the hegemony of the Royal Monarch'. (Chandramohan 2009). But with time, the political climate has changed, and the insurgent groups are not as active as they were earlier. Maybe the conservative political establishment of Bhutan is not comfortable with the idea of opening up so many border crossing points in the eastern sector due to a multitude of apprehensions like illegal migration, the fear of majoritarian Sarchops (Eastern Bhutan) by the politically dominant Ngalops (Western & Northern Bhutan), and substantial presence of

Lothsampas (people of Nepali descent in Southern Bhutan) bordering India.

Moreover, Bhutan has not yet constructed any southern road corridor from Phuentsholing in the Southern Western region bordering North Bengal to Samdrup Jongkhar in Southern East bordering Lower Assam. Till now, there is no direct road from Phuentsholing to Gelgphu and Samdrup Jongkhar. All the Bhutanese from Phuentsholing to Gelgphu/Gelephu cross Borapaisa and later to Samdrup Jongkhar via Rangiya in Assam. There is no restriction on the movement of Bhutanese citizens in India. Indian citizens require an 'Entry Permit' from the Immigration Office of the Royal Government of Bhutan either at Phuentsholing or Samdrup Jongkhar to enter the Dragon kingdom.⁹

Of late, India and Bhutan have conversed on the ways to improve security along the international border and the possibility of opening a road corridor linking Tawang with Assam via Trashigang in Bhutan. The Minister of State for Home Affairs, Kiren Rijiju during his two days visit to Thimphu on 2-3 July 2016 focused on the mechanisms to maintain better security coordination along the Indo-Bhutan border, tap trading opportunities between

Bhutan and Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and West Bengal, strengthen cultural exchange and discussed a host of other issues with the Bhutanese officials, including Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay. During the meeting, the Bhutanese Prime Minister is believed to have cited various concerns of the people of Bhutan because of which the country is not yet ready for proposals like joint security along the border (*Indian Express* 2016). However, in the changing geopolitical scenario with the Chinese hegemonic attitude towards Bhutan, it is expected that both New Delhi and Thimphu would augment their security architecture and materialise this long-pending corridor.

***Concerns about the
Gelugpa Discourse: A
Contradiction***

Is Bhutan apprehensive of the overriding influence of Gelugpa discourse from Tawang in the case of the Tawang-Trashigang corridor? It is pertinent to mention here that Bhutan officially follows the Nyingmapa and Kagyupa schools of Mahayana Buddhism. The Government supports both Kagyupa and Nyingmapa Buddhist monasteries. The Royal family practices a combination of Nyingmapa and Kagyupa

Buddhism, and many citizens believe in the idea of “Kanyin-Zungdrel”, meaning “Kagyupa and Nyingmapa as one” (US Department 2007). There could be an apprehension that the opening of the Tawang-Trashigang road corridor might lead to impending cultural influence from the Mon region and possible Gelugpisation of Bhutanese society.

But this factor is also demystified in the field studies as well. As a local academic from Tawang said “There has been a healthy trade relationship between India and Bhutan from very early times. Participating in festivals like Torgya in the Tawang region and Gorsam Chorten and Chorten Cora in Bhutan is a living example of a healthy relationship” and added “Thimphu is not scared of Gelugpa impact in Bhutan though they follow Kagyupa-Nyingmapa as a single unit, they respect Gelugpa sect. A 15-km road construction in the Bhutanese side is being planned which is to be built up soon till Guwahati and it has nothing to do with the Buddhist philosophy they follow”.¹⁰

In sum, the benefits of the Tawang-Trashigang corridor outweighs the limitations as mentioned in this paper. At the micro-level, the concerned stakeholders of the Western Arunachal Pradesh and Eastern

Bhutan can explore their potential for several cross-border projects to bring about inclusive development in the region. Moreover, at the macro level, both India and Bhutan can reinforce their bilateral ventures in the Eastern Himalayan region and use sub-regional initiatives like BBIN to the

mutual advantage of each other. Further, New Delhi can initiate measures to dispel any anxiety or strategic concern of Thimphu in the Eastern Border space considering the larger interest of India's strong neighbourhood ties with the Kingdom of Bhutan. ■

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End Notes

- 1 . Culled from an interview conducted at Tawang on 16 December 2016.
2. Derived views from a conglomerate of sections through personal interviews and open-ended questionnaires at Bomdila, Tawang, and adjoining areas on 14-15 December 2016.

3. Ibid.
4. Derived views from personal interviews at villages nearby Tawang on 16 December 2016.
5. Derived from an interview conducted at Phuentsholing, Bhutan on 26 December 2014.
6. E- interviewed Man Norbu of Lumla on 24 November 2020.
7. Ibid.
8. The Transport Ministers of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal signed a Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA) for the 'Regulation of Passenger, Personnel and Cargo Vehicular Traffic' in Thimphu, capital of Bhutan on 15th June 2015 under the domain of The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. (BIMSTEC). See, Taneja et.al.
9. Personal observation as well as Interview with the Bhutanese people at Phuentsholing on 28 December 2014.
10. Ibid.