



Border Trade in NER in the Regime of ‘Act East Policy’: An Analytical Study.

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Abstract

The paper aims at analysing the trade scenario of the states of India's North Eastern Region (NER), in general and Tripura in Particular with the neighbouring countries of India in the regime of 'ACT East Policy' to promote economic development of this region. The North-East Region (NER) has been thriving to keep pace with the rest of India in terms of socio-economic indicators due to its geographical isolation. Its Poor infrastructure and limited connectivity has emerged as key constraints to its growth of economic development despites of its plenty of natural resources in-terms of forests and spices, minerals like natural gas, oil and coal, limestone, etc. as well as human resources. North Eastern Region has a strategic location in view point of international trade concern. Geographically this region is situated in the tri-junction of South, South-East and East Asia. Government of India has taken several initiatives to improve its connectivity and physical infrastructure to facilitate formal border trade through the NER under 'Act East Policy' in 2014. The setting up of modernised Land Customs Centres (LCS) and 'Border Haat' are the positive initiatives towards the direction of increasing formal border trade. The official trade between Tripura and Bangladesh started in 1995-96 and import-export trade of Tripura with the neighbouring country of Bangladesh has increased from a meagre Rs 4.12 crores during 1995-96 to about Rs 537.08 crore during the year 2018- 19. In the light of the above, the paper based on secondary data is an effort to highlight the export-import scenario of NER with the neighbouring countries particularly with Bangladesh. Appropriate statistical tools are to be used for analysis of data. The paper is to be divided into three sections. Section- I is introductory in nature, highlighting methodology, objectives of the study and review of literature, Section – II deals with discussion and analysis, Section – III remains for conclusion and suggestions.

Key words: NER, Border trade, Look East Policy, Act East Policy.

SECTION-I

1.1 Introduction:

In the era of globalisation cross-border trade, plays a significant role in shaping the economy of a nation. Cross-border trade not only act as significant driver of employment but helps to nourish friendly relation between neighbours by strengthening commercial ties, promoting cultural understanding, and deepening community relationships which promotes the economic development of concerned nation. The Foreign Trade Policy (2004-09) of India was a roadmap for the overall development of the country's foreign trade. It was designed in such a way which is used as an effective instrument of economic growth by increasing share of global merchandise trade as well as generation of employment.

Bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh is conducted under the provision of the prevailing India-Bangladesh trade agreement which signed on march 28, 1972 under the said trade agreement both countries provide most favoured nation treatment to each other. Among India's neighbours, Bangladesh occupies a special position—not only because of India's role in its independence but because geographically, too, it surrounds Bangladesh from three sides. Both countries offer natural markets for each other's export products. Transaction cost of mutual trade can be minimal as result of geographical proximity, common language and a heritage of common physical infrastructures. In early nineties 'Look East Policy' gives a boost to the foreign trade of the nation. The announcement of the Foreign Trade Policy, 2015-2020 ('FTP') by the Hon'ble Minister of Commerce and Industry, Smt. Nirmala Sitharaman on April 1, 2015 is also a positive move towards enhancing foreign trade sector. But in the view point of international trade concern, North- East India has a strategic location. Country's North- Eastern Region (NER) geographically is situated in the tri-junction of South, South-East and East Asia. Its strategic location and the increasing connectivity, growing cooperation and rapid development process of its neighbouring countries; have to be emerged as a huge prospect to enhance its trade activities. There is a scope to NER to improve its economy through trade with the neighbouring countries by using the strategic location of this region.

1.2 Objectives of the study:

The study is mainly focused on the trade relation and performances of NER for promoting its economic growth with the neighbouring foreign countries. In this context, the study is composed with two objectives. One of the objectives is to highlight the socio- economic status of the NER; another is to focus upon the import-export scenario of the NER in general and Tripura in particular with the neighbouring countries of India.

1.3 Methodology:

The present study is an analytical one, based on secondary data. Secondary data was collected from different Government documents. Different literatures related to this are consulted. The statistical tools like line charts, bar charts and table are used to justify the study.

1.4 Literature Review:

Sundaram, (2013) in stressing upon Look East Policy viewed that no vision for NER is complete without a discussion of the Look East Policy. According to him Look-East Policy will bring new era of development for the North East through network of pipelines, connectivity, communication and trade.

De and Bhattacharyya (2007) viewed that bilateral economic cooperation between India and Bangladesh has a great potential in enhancing South Asian regional cooperation.

The scope of immense opportunities in improving infrastructure, especially in the transport segment is suggested by Acharya and Marwaha (2012).

Aspen report (2012) issues like water sharing, transit access, security and border management have major effects on the relationship between the countries and these have indirect effect on trade.

Dubey (2014) opined that geographical proximity and ancient links certainly are the major propellers of India's Look East Policy but lack of Infrastructure, lack of local support, the problem of insurgency in North East Region, lack of coordination between the Governments agencies are emerged as major constraint. It is suggested that 'bottom-up' approach and not 'top-down' approach is to be required where primary role is played by the North East in deciding the contours of Look East Policy and Centre plays the role of a facilitator for achieving fruitful result of looking 'East' through the North East India under the Look East Policy.

Singh (2014) in her study observed that in the regime of liberalisation era, the volume of India's foreign trade has increased but trend of growth rate of imports found to be much more than the exports growth rate which makes a barrier in influencing the economic growth in the positive direction in analysing the trend and composition of foreign trade and its impact on the economic growth of India.

Sun Peng and Heshmati Almas (2010) in their discussion paper highlighted that China's increasing participation in the global trade had stimulated its rapid national economic growth. Both international trade volume and trade structure towards high-tech exports effects on China's regional productivity towards the positive direction.

Ambrose and Sundarraj.(2014) observed that India's foreign trade with the selected SAARC countries, namely, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh has witnessed a general increase over the time. In general trend, among the three countries, Bangladesh found to be a favourable nation in regard to trade with India where India do more exports and imports.

Section II

Discussion and Analysis:

North Eastern Region of India consists of eight states Viz. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura and Sikkim covers country's 7.98% of total geographical area. It covers an area of 2.62 lakh sq. km. The location of this region is found to be strategic as this region is surrounded by international border in almost all side of this region such as China in the north side, Bangladesh in the south west, Myanmar in the east and Bhutan in the north west and is connected with the country's main land through a very narrow strip of land with the width of about 22 km called 'chicken neck.' This region shares only 1% of border with country's mainland and rest 99% is linked with international border i.e., Myanmar, Nepal, China, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. This region is endowed with vast resources (in terms of human and physical) but this region has been lagging behind in keeping pace in terms of socio-economic indicators due to its geographical isolation with the rest of the country.

Table:-1
North Eastern Region at a Glance

States	Area in Sq. Km.	Population	ST	WPR	Literacy rate	*Forest covered total GA (in%)
Arunachal Pradesh	83,743	13,83,727	68.8	42.5	65.38	80.3
Assam	78438	3,12,05,576	12.4	38.4	72.19	35.22
Manipur	22,327	25,70,390	35.1	45.1	79.21	76.11
Meghalaya	22,429	29,66,889	86.1	40.0	74.43	77.08
Mizoram	21,081	10,97,206	94.4	44.4	91.33	88.93
Nagaland	16,579	19,78,502	86.5	49.2	79.55	78.21
Sikkim	7,096	6,10,577	33.8	50.5	81.42	47.31
Tripura	10,486	36,73,917	31.8	40.0	87.22	74.45
India	3,287,263	1,21,08,54,977	8.6	52.9	74.04	21.35

Source: Basic Statistics North Eastern Region 2015, North Eastern Council Secretariat, Government of India

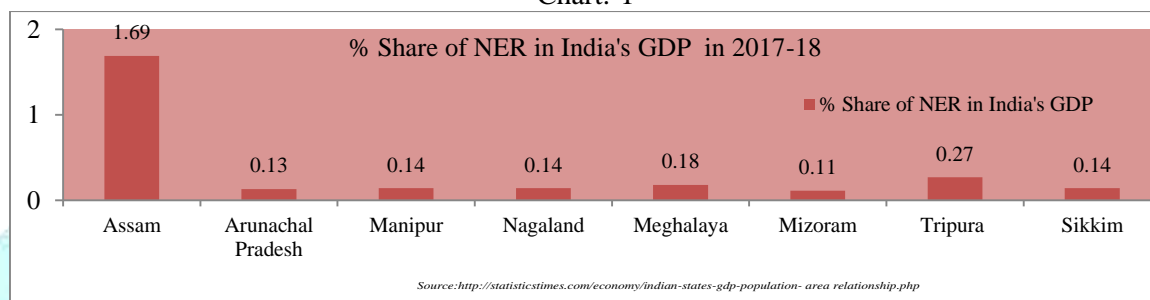
Table:-1 reveals that this region is mainly dominated by ST people, the un-privileged section of the society which is the unique feature of this region. 94.4% people of Mizoram are ST people followed by Nagaland 86.5%, Meghalaya 86.1% Arunachal Pradesh 68.8%. ST people constitute 35.1%, 33.8%, 31.8% of total population of the state of Manipur, Sikkim, and Tripura respectively against the national average of 8.6%. The work participation rate (WPR) is one of the indicators of economic empowerment of the people. The WPR in this region is much lower than the national average in 2011. The WPR in this region as stated in the above table is found to be maximum 50.5% for the Sikkim, and 38.4% in case of Assam against the national average of 52.3%.

Table:-2
Contribution of NER to India's GDP in 2017 -18

States	% share of India's GDP	% Share of population	% Share of area	GDP to POP Ratio	GDP to Area Ratio
Assam	1.69	2.58	2.39	0.66	0.71
Arunachal Pradesh	0.13	0.11	2.55	1.26	0.06
Manipur	0.14	0.14	0.68	0.65	0.22
Nagaland	0.14	0.14	0.50	1.16	0.37
Meghalaya	0.18	0.18	0.68	0.95	0.34
Mizoram	0.11	0.09	0.64	1.21	0.17
Tripura	0.27	0.30	0.32	0.94	0.90
Sikkim	0.14	0.05	0.22	2.61	0.61
NER Total	2.94	3.78	7.98	0.77	0.39

Source:<http://statisticstimes.com/economy/indian-states-gdp-population-area-relationship.php>

Chart:-1



The economic performances of this region are measured by its contribution to the country's GDP. The contribution of NER to the country's GDP is observed 2.8% in the year 2017-18. Out of the states of this region, except Assam none of the states able to contribute at least 1% of country's GDP. Out of eight states of NER only the shares of Assam in country's GDP is observed 1.69% followed by Tripura 0.27%, Meghalaya 0.18%. The share of others three states namely Sikkim, Nagaland and Manipur to country's GDP is observed 0.14% for each state. The share of Arunachal Pradesh to country's GDP is observed 0.13%, the lowest contribution among the NER states. It discloses the worse economic scenario of this region.

Table-3
Share of India's Trade with Bangladesh

year	% Share of Export	% Share of Import
1999-00	1.7280	0.1571
2000-01	2.0984	0.1593
2001-02	2.2867	0.1150
2002-03	2.2307	0.1010
2003-04	2.7266	0.0993
2004-05	1.9526	0.0532
2005-06	1.6145	0.0852
2006-07	1.2891	0.1228
2007-08	1.7922	0.1021
2008-09	1.3481	0.1031
2009-10	1.3615	0.088
2010-11	1.2981	0.1208
2011-12	1.2384	0.1197
2012-13	1.7127	0.1303
2013-14	1.9615	0.1076
2014-15	2.0788	0.1387
2015-16	2.3009	0.1908
2016-17	2.1500	0.2173
2017-18	2.48	0.12
2018-19	2.71	0.2

Sources: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India

India's biggest trade partner in South Asian countries is Bangladesh. India's exports to Bangladesh in the year 2018-19 amounted to \$9.21 billion and imports from Bangladesh for the same period was 1.22 billion. It is encouraging that India's percentage share of export is more than the percentage share of import with Bangladesh. The percentage share of India's export to Bangladesh in the year 2018-19 is increased to 2.71% from 1.72% in the year 1999-2000. The percentage share of Import of India from Bangladesh stands to 0.2% in the year 2018-19 from 0.15% in the year 1999-2000. It is also a matter of concern that the fluctuating percentage shares in connection with import and export is observed from this table.

Table-4
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		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
Total	1880	516	1300.35	1643	97.8	—
India	4,096.7	699	3,488	1,643	1,751	

Source: Government of India, MDONER, "State-wise length of international border of NER", available at <http://mdoner.gov.in/content/international-border> and <https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/BMIntro-1011.pdf>

The table-10 depicts that four states of NER namely, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura share 1880 Km international borders with Bangladesh. India's total length of land borders with neighbouring country Bangladesh is 4,096.7 KM. NER's length of land borders with neighbouring country Bangladesh is country's 45% of total international border with Bangladesh. India's total length of land borders with Myanmar is 1643 km. 100% of such international border area is in NER. NER's share of international border with China is 37% of India's total length of land borders with China. Tripura's share of international border with Bangladesh is about 21% of India's total length of land borders with Bangladesh.

Out of these states the share of Tripura found to be highest international borders with Bangladesh. The length of its international border with Bangladesh is about 856 km which is about 84 percent of its total border. One will find similar culture and working activities of the people resided adjacent to the border areas of both the countries which will boost the economic activities in relation to trade in both the countries.

India's early nineties 'Look East Policy' gives a boost to interact with the neighbouring countries. Government of India has been giving priority to boost the economic activities in the industrially backward region North Eastern states and bringing the NER under the umbrella of "Look East Policy" in October, 2007 was a positive initiative towards the direction of positive border trade. It was visualised in the North Eastern Region Vision 2020 Document that Look East policy as 'an important instrument in promoting economic ties of the NER (North Eastern Region) States with its neighbours with a view to ending its economic isolation' (North East Vision 2020; 271).

The economic integration of the Northeast with South East Asia will enable this region to remove its presently landlocked and peripheral status by way of opening it to the port of Chittagong and connecting it to the proposed Trans-Asian highway passing through such places as Guwahati, Ledo, Jiribam, Yangon, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Hanoi and Lao. The decision in regard to Northeast India to be the gateway to Southeast Asia was a conscious movement to keep the NER in the centre stage of Look East policy. There are 83 land customs stations (LCS) between Bangladesh and India out of which 26 Land Customs Stations (LCS) are along the NER-Bangladesh border for facilitating the border trade. Out of 26 LCS, 20 are functional, while the remaining six are non functional. India's North East and Bangladesh are much more than next door neighbours. Being geographically contiguous, they are 'natural markets' for each other.

Table-5
Total Import & Export in north east India (Rs in crore)

Year	Imports	Exports
2008-09	777.00	170.00
2009-10	985.41	236.95
2010-11	861.42	300.93
2011-12	1242.37	399.11
2012-13	1627.49	444.59
Total	5,406.34	1,506.06

Source: Basic Statistics of NER 2015

NER's import from Bangladesh has been growing consistently during 2008-09 and 2012-13. Exports from the NER to Bangladesh have increased from Rs170 in 2008-09 to Rs 444.59 Cr` in 2012-13. Some of the major export items in 2012-13 include coal, tea, limestone, high speed diesel oil, cumin seed, fresh ginger, and rice. During the same period, imports of the NER from Bangladesh increased from ` Rs 777 Cr in 2008-09 to ` Rs 1627 Cr in 2012-13. Major imports of the NER from Bangladesh included fish, cement, crushed stones, food items, betel nut, synthetic or flavoured drinks and mobile handsets. Tripura has been performing formal import-export trade mainly with the neighbouring country of Bangladesh. The official trade between Tripura and Bangladesh started in 1995-96 through Agartala LC Station. Presently, there are 8 notified Land Custom (LC) stations, namely, Agartala, Srimantpur Muhurighat, Khowaighat, Dhalaighat, Manughat, Old Raghanabazar and Sabroom. In addition, Sabroom (Anandpara) LC has been notified, recently. The Dhalaighat, LC stations is operational for immigration purpose only and Sabroom LC is yet to become operational.

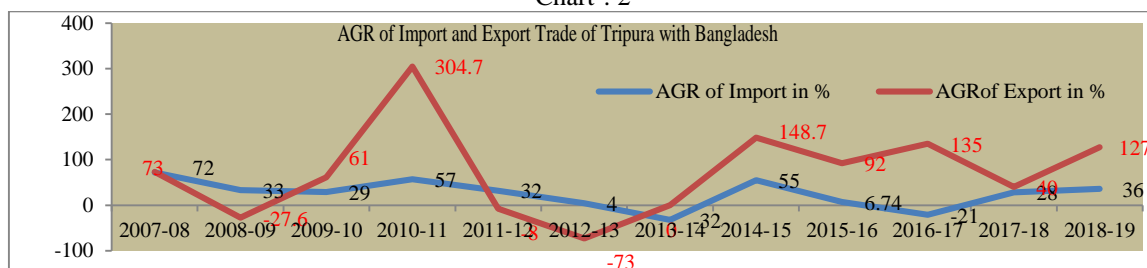
Table-6
Trade volume between Tripura and Bangladesh (Rs in crore)

Year	Imports	Annual growth rate in%	Exports	Annual growth rate in %	Total	AGR for Trade Total
2006-07	48.69		0.87			
2007-08	84.15	72	1.51	73	85.66	72
2008-09	125.94	33	0.26	-27.6	126.20	47
2009-10	162.88	29	0.42	61	163.30	29
2010-11	255.88	57	1.7	304.7	257.60	58
2011-12	329.05	32	1.55	-8	330.60	28
2012-13	342.65	4	0.41	-73	343.06	3
2013-14	229.83	-32	0.41	00	230.24	-32
2014-15	357.65	55	1.02	148.7	358.67	55.7
2015-16	381.76	6.74	1.96	92	383.72	7
2016-17	300.23	-21	4.60	135	304.83	-21
2017-18	384.22	28	6.46	40	390.68	28
2018-19	522.42	36	14.66	127	537.08	37.7
CAGR		25		72		26

Source: Economic Review 2013-14, 2014-15, 2018-19

The chart highlighted that the total volume of trade has increased from Rs.85.66 crore during 2006-07 to about Rs.537.08 crore during 2018-19. Tripura's total volume of trade with Bangladesh has increased more than five times during the period of 13 years. The CAGR of Tripura's total trade volume with Bangladesh is observed 29%. Officially Tripura started trade with Bangladesh in the year 1995-96 and the total trade volume accounted for this year only Rs.4.12 crore. Presently Bangladesh has emerged as India's biggest trade partner in South Asia. India and Bangladesh both are acting not as competitors but collaborators in making both countries prosperous with a view to ensure a better future for their country's people.

Chart:- 2



Source: Computed by author based on Table

It is worth mentioning here that annual growth rate of exports from Tripura to Bangladesh has been higher than imports. Tripura's annual growth of export with Bangladesh has increased to 127% in the year 2018 from 73% in 2007-08. The annual growth of import has decreased to 36% in the year 2018 from 72% in 2007-08. The trend of annual growth rate of exports from Tripura to Bangladesh is not maintained in consistency. In the year 2010-11 annual growth of export was increased to 304%. Then it fall into downward with negative (-8%) in the year 2011-12. Afterwards the annual growth rate of exports rises to 148.7%. A negative import growth rate in the year 2013-14 and 2016-17 is also observed.

Table:-7
LC Station-wise volume of trade in Tripura in 2018-19 (Rs in crore)

Name of LC Station	Export Value	Import Value	Total Trade Value
Agartala LCS	0.57	355.10	355.67
Srimantapur LCS	0.47	95.93	96.4
Mhurighat LCS	00	45.42	45.42
Manughat LCS	10.05	14.58	24.63
Khowaighat LCS	0.24	2.18	2.42
Old Ragnabazar LCS	3.33	9.21	12.54
Total	14.66	522.42	537.08

Source: Economic Review Tripura 2018-19

Agartala LC station plays a significant role in operating trade with Bangladesh. Out of total trade value of 537.08 crore, the contribution of Agartala LC station is observed 355.67 crore in the year 2018-19 followed by Srimantapur LC, Mhurighat LC, Manughat LC, Old Ragnabazar LC and Khowaighat LC. Agartala LC station contributes about 66% of total trade. Maximum import transactions are held through Agartala LC's. Out of the total trade activities through Agartala LC's, import constitutes 99.8% of total trade. Major export activities are held through Manughat LC. Manughat LC contributes about 68.5% of total export trade with Bangladesh. Out of total export trade value of 14.66 crore, the contribution of Manughat LC station is observed 10.05 crore in the year 2018-19. Though Manughat LC is in rural area but contributes more than the urban based Agartala LC in generating foreign income through exporting items.

Table:-8
Commodity-wise composition of Import and Export trade of Tripura with Bangladesh in 2018-19

import		Export	
Commodity	Total Value	Commodity	Total Value
Cement	68.13	Fruits	11.23
Variety of fish – Hilsa, Dry fish	128.27	Electronics	0.05
Broken/crushed stones	9.40	Spices	0.32
Food items/Soft drinks	92.43	Other commodities	3.06
Plastic goods	30.05	-----	-----
Other commodities	194.14	-----	-----
Total	522.42	Total	14.66

Source: Economic Review Tripura 2018-19

Most of the imported item of Bangladesh to Tripura is observed variety of fish like as Hilsa and dry fish which constitutes about 25% of its total trade items import to Tripura. It happens as Bangladesh is the only suppliers of tasty Hilsa fish. Others import commodities of Bangladesh to Tripura include food items, soft drinks, cement, plastic goods crushed stones etc. Export items from Tripura to Bangladesh include fruits, spices and electronics. Cost of import items from Bangladesh like cement, crush stones is found to be much cheaper than India made. The easy connectivity and low transportation cost encourages Tripura to import the cement and crush stones from Bangladesh.

Besides the LCs, the trade activities is also operating between India and Bangladesh through border haat set up exclusively in the states of NE for promoting the wellbeing of the people living in remote areas across the borders of two countries by establishing a traditional system of marketing the local produce through local markets. This market place is organised by the two countries one day each week. The mode of exchange for trade in border haat is made through Indian Rupees or Bangladesh Taka and on a barter basis. This market not only promoting economic activities but also exchanges the cultural activities with the families living adjacent to both border sides. Families living on both sides of border enjoy it like a reunion spot. The commodities like local handicrafts item, fruits like Banana, Jackfruit, Cosmetics, Steel utensils, Saree, cloth material etc. are sold in Indian side in this border haat. The commodities are sold from Bangladesh's side include Dry fish, Bakery items, Saree, Plastic goods, Fruits like Green apple, Water melon, Local vegetables etc. Presently Srinagar-Chhagalnaiya and

Kamalasagar Tarapur border are functioning smoothly and has contributed not in boosting the local economy of both the country.

India and Bangladesh have trade agreement which is facilitative in nature. India and Bangladesh are members of various regional trade agreements including the Asia Pacific Trade Agreement (APTA), SAARC Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) and the Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) which govern the tariff regimes for trade. Under SAFTA, India has granted duty free quota free access to Bangladesh on all items except alcohol and tobacco. Cumulative foreign direct investment (FDI) flow from India to Bangladesh has more than doubled from \$243.91 million in 2014 to \$570.11 million in December 2018. Indian companies have invested in various sectors including telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, FMCG and automobiles sectors in Bangladesh. During Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit in April 2017, 13 agreements worth around \$10 billion of Indian investment mainly in power and energy sectors in Bangladesh were signed.

The Indo-Bangladesh Protocol (water) route of Sonamura (Tripura, India)-Daudkandi (Bangladesh) on Gomati River will be functioning soon The construction of Bridge over Feni River to connect Chittagong port and Akhaura-Agartala rail link work is speedily going on to boost the international trade of NER's. There is a prospect to NER in near future to improve foreign trade by using waterways and rail link. The smooth and speedy intra-regional connectivity within the states of NER is required and attention is also to be required in regard to the export of industrial goods by making proper implementation of the recently introduced 'Skill India' and 'Digital India' programmes.

Section: IV

Conclusion:

The study observed the increasing trend in terms of total trade of NER as well as Tripura with Bangladesh but fluctuating growth rate found to be a barrier to the consistent economic development of the region. The introduction of more Border HAAT and setting up of export

Development fund (EDF) along with bus services between the two countries may improve more trade. Recent development in granting to access the Bangladesh's Chittagong port and railway connectivity between Agartala and Akhaura may improve the trade relation between two countries by reducing infrastructural barriers of NER. One will find a constraint of inadequate provisioning of essential trade services in the LCS along the India-Bangladesh border. Proper attention is required to removing this constraint. Most of the people engaged in border trade are not well equipped to interact with the international trade procedures. This is the barriers to formal trade. It is a need of the hour to design the simplified international trade procedures in a single window system with a view to giving opportunity to the all section of people for participating in the international trade for making success the clarion call of Prime Minister 'Make in India'.

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