Seamless transport connectivity to facilitate barrier-free movement of people and goods is the ultimate goal of any bilateral cooperation between two neighbouring countries or multilateral cooperation among countries located in a contiguous region. It unlocks huge opportunities for provincial regions at the peripheries of the member countries of a sub-regional architecture that, otherwise, lag behind due to a lack of integration with the markets and economy next door. The transport connectivity plan of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) receiving focused attention is good news for India's northeast region. The fourth meeting of the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Working Group held in Bangkok in March provided fresh impetus to the regional connectivity dream after it decided to constitute an expert group for updating and modifying the list of identified projects to keep the BIMSTEC Master Plan on Transport Connectivity a live document and to work out the modalities for implementation of the Master Plan. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs has expressed the view that implementation of the Master Plan would improve connectivity in India's North East and beyond. The parliamentary panel batted for implementation of the Master Plan at the earliest and stated that improved connectivity, by virtue of the region's close proximity to Myanmar, which acts as a bridge for ASEAN, would be instrumental in the success of the Act East Policy. The seven member states—India, Thailand, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Nepal—will have to negotiate and finalise the draft to set the ball rolling. The Master Plan document envisages that leveraging its unique geographic position for strengthening regional connectivity can help BIMSTEC tap into economic opportunities for developing South and Southeast Asia. By establishing better transport links and faster border crossings throughout the region, transformational connections can be built between the two sub-regions through Myanmar, Thailand, and beyond, with BIMSTEC serving as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia and reinforcing relations between and among these regions and countries, it states. Meetings of the G20 held in North-Eastern states helped showcase to the world the region's immense potential, which is also noticed by BIMSTEC member countries. India

leveraging the momentum to push trans-border connectivity projects, including multimodal transport projects, in the BIMSTEC region can help catapult the Northeast to the forefront of sub-regional cooperation. India, Bangladesh, and Nepal are already finalising the Memorandum of Understanding of the Motor Vehicle Agreement of the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) sub-region and can be expected to contribute to the drafting of the MVA among BIMSEC countries. However, Bhutan did not ratify the MVA on environmental concern, and the BIMSTEC experts group, while finalising the draft of the modalities for implementation of the Master Plan on transport connectivity, will have to keep in mind the need to address such complexities and concerns in multilateral projects and cooperation in the transport sector. The completion of about 70% of the 1400-km India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway has not only demonstrated the deepening ties among the three BIMSTEC members in transport and connectivity sectors, but it has also triggered fresh hope of the northeast region becoming the gateway to ASEAN as envisaged in India’s Act East Policy. After completion of the remaining 30% of the work, the dream of driving directly from Guwahati to Bangkok by land will become a reality. It will then transform the northeast from a landlocked region to a hub of ASEAN connectivity. Accelerating the pace of construction and expansion of highways connected to the trilateral highway and ensuring best-quality construction of international standards will be of paramount importance to bolster confidence and create enthusiasm about the region in the BIMSTEC and ASEAN regions. The current pace of highway expansion in the region, however, does not reflect a determined approach by the construction agency to match the aspirations fuelled by fresh momentum in trans-border projects like the trilateral highway. Aligning the infrastructure projects in the northeast region with projects identified by BIMSTEC for strengthening economic cooperation and establishing seamless connectivity is critical to fulfilling the aspirations of the people of the region, particularly the youth of the region, to script a new growth story. For many people, peace and development continue to be the chicken and egg dilemma with respect to the northeast region, with one school of thought insisting on peace to come first for paving the way to

development and another school emphasising the fast-track development works to isolate the forces working at the behest of anti-India forces to sabotage peace and progress in the region. The central and state governments in the region, by pushing the infrastructure projects, including the trans-border and intra-region connectivity projects, have signalled the region’s preparation to get connected to vibrant economic activities in the BIMSTEC and ASEAN sub-regions. Fast-forwarding the economic cooperation among BIMSTEC countries will chart a fast trajectory of development for the Northeast.