



India's Act East Policy And Opportunities For Development: A Study Of Barak Valley

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Abstract

The Act East Policy is a significant expression of India's foreign policy with a view to develop economic integration with South East Asia. The Policy seeks to build a close connectivity between India and the countries of East Asia through the Northeastern region of India. The geographical location of the Northeastern region stands itself as the most favourable location to focus on implementation of India's Act East Policy. Being located in the southern part of the Indian state of Assam, Barak Valley occupies an important position in the Act East Policy as it is interlinked with the other Northeastern states and international border as well. Keeping this in view the present study tries to explore the opportunities for development of Barak Valley under the Act East Policy. The study observes that the geographical location of Barak Valley provides it a chance to become a hub for intra-state and international trade. It is expected that if the Act East Policy is put into operation properly it will usher in a new era of progress, prosperity and all round development for the Barak Valley.

Keywords: Act East, Barak Valley, Northeast, Southeast, Trade.

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The Act East Policy is a significant expression of India's foreign policy with a view to develop economic integration with the Southeast Asia. It is a dynamic policy of the Government of India to strengthen its economic ties with the eastern neighbours as well as far eastern countries. It was originated in early 1990s, when the Congress-led government at the Centre introduced the 'Look East Policy' with a view to build close ties with all the neighbouring countries. The policy is described as a multi-faceted and multi-pronged approach to establish strategic links with many individual countries, forge close political links with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and develop strong economic bonds with them. The new policy focused on equity-based domestic development resulting into the inclusion of Northeastern part of India. The policy remained a guiding force for all the subsequent governments. However, it was in 2014 when

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the BharatiyaJanata Party (BJP)formed the government,thePrime Minister Narendra Modi took the lead and initiated major changes in the existing policy including change in the nomenclature. The objective of the new ‘Act East Policy’ is tointensify economic cooperation, cultural ties, trade and strategic relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region through continuous engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels.The Policy also seeks to build a close connectivity between India and the countries of East Asia through the Northeastern region of India.

In the context of India’s growing and evolving relations with the Southeast Asia, it has become imperative that Northeastern region would be the fulcrum of the overall “Act East” policy because of its geographic proximity and socio-cultural and historic ties with the Southeast Asian region. The Northeast India shares borders with China, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh culminating in a 4500 long international border. Myanmar alone regarded as the prime gateway for the Northeast to Southeast Asia having long 1643 kms of land boundary with the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland.

It is true that Northeastern part of India has enormous possibilities to exploit their geographical contexts and bring significant benefits to populace in a direct and participative manner. It has all the potential and capabilities to develop India into an economic powerhouse as it has a rich source of energy, oil, natural gas, coal, and limestone and other minerals including a perennial water base. It is also rich in horticultural products, plantation crops, vegetables, spices, rare herbs and medicinal plants. The region offers unlimited tourism opportunities, natural scenic beauty, unique performing arts and varied cuisine and handicrafts.

Northeast is a key for India’s tie with ASEAN. It is seen that since the Modi Government came to power various steps like development of connectivity, improvement of land custom stations, tourism, trade and commerce etc. were initiated covering the states of Northeastern region to maintain a good and strong relationship with the countries of Southeast Asia. This vision is well reflected in the Global Investors Summit when the Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that his government’s priority is to develop the eastern part of India as the country’s fast pace of development would only be successful when the people living in the northeast develop.He also put emphasis on the development of connectivity in the region as it is the only way to link the region with the rest of the country. In the same tune Ms. Sushma Swaraj, the former External Affairs Minister of India, also called for the greater connectivity between the Northeastern states of India and Southeast Asia. She emphasized onthe connectivity and economic integration of India’s northeast with its eastern neighbours was the key area for growth and development of the region.

It deserves mention here that the geographical location of this region stands itself as the most favourable setting to focus on implementation of India’s Act East Policy. The entire Northeastern region is the gateway to the Southeast Asia and Barak Valley, the Southern part of the Indian state of Assam, holds a key position in the Act East Policy as it is interlinked with the prominent Northeastern states like Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. It also shares international border as well. It is in this regards the present study made an attempt to explore the opportunities for the development of Barak Valley under the Act East Policy.

Barak Valley: a brief historical and geographical perspective

The Barak Valley region constitutes 8.9 percent of the geographical area of the state and it contains 11.59 percent of the population as per 2011 census. The region shares its border with Dima Hasao district (earlier referred to as North Cachar Hills) and the state of Meghalaya in the north; the state of Manipur in the east; the state of Mizoram in the south and the state of Tripura and the Sylhet district of Bangladesh in the west. The principal river of the region is 'Barak' rising from the Angami Naga Hill of Manipur and reaching the plain near Jirighat. At this point the river takes turn to the West and through Cachar district it reaches to Badarpur (Karimganj) and Haritkar. The river gets divided into two branches - Surma and Kushiara - at Haritkar. It is at this point Surma enters Sylhet district of Bangladesh and Kushiara flows to Karimganj town and finally enters to Bangladesh. The Barak River has also a number of tributaries viz., Chiri, Jatinga, Barail, Dalu, Madhura etc. Apart from these the other prominent rivers are Sonai, Daleshwari, Katakhal, Longai, Singla and Kakra. However, these rivers are not navigable even during the rainy season though it rises up and causes floods in the region (Roy, 2009).

Historically, a large part of the valley was included in the Kachari Kingdom, which was taken over by the British after the assassination of the last Dimasa (Kachari) King Govinda Chandra Narayan on the 24th day of April, 1830. The district of Cachar was created by the British rulers on 14th August, 1832. However, with a view to make Assam an economically viable province, the British transferred both Cachar and Sylhet (together called Surma Valley) districts from undivided Bengal to Assam in 1874. The British splitted Assam into two Valleys: the Assamese dominated Brahmaputra Valley and Bengali-populated Surma Valley. However, it was due to political turmoil that Barak Valley faced a worst crisis at the time of partition, when through referendum a larger part of the Valley (Sylhet district) was handed over to East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) and only a three-and-a-half thanas (constituted the present Karimganj district) were transferred to India and tagged with the then Cachar district through 'Radcliffe Award'. It is because of the political immaturity that the entire Valley lost its age old channels of trade, commerce and transactions. At present, the Valley is composed of only three districts, viz., Karimganj, Hailakandi and Cachar. Among these Cachar district is the largest one with a total geographical area of 3786 sq. km. and covering total population of 17,36,617. Karimganj, the second largest district with total geographical area of 1809 sq. km. and having total population of 12,28,686 and Hailakandi is the smallest one with a total geographical area of 1327 sq. km. and total population of 6,59,296 (Census, 2011).

The Valley is mainly dominated by Bengali speaking Hindu and Mohammedan people. As per 2011 census, out of total population 52.76 per cent are Hindus, 45.47 percent are Muslims, and 1.52 percent are Christians and remaining 0.25 per cent are from other religions. Besides Bengali, there are Manipuri, tea garden workers and other tribal groups reside in the district. Although majority of the population is Bengali, yet Barak Valley is the natural home land of a number of ethnic groups like Dimasa, Kuki, Naga, Khasi etc.

The economy of Barak Valley is predominantly agrarian in nature. The major percentage of the people in the valley depends on agriculture and its ancillary activities for their livelihood. According to 2011 census,

the average size of holdings of Barak Valley and Assam as a whole are 1.52 hectare and 1.50 hectare respectively. The major crop grown in the valley is paddy. Other important crops grown are sugarcane, pulse, potato, mustard seed, vegetables etc. Ahu and Sali are the main varieties of paddy grown in the valley. There is huge potential for fishery, horticulture, animal husbandry and other agro-based industries in the valley.

The principal industry of the Valley is the Tea industry. There are one hundred fourteen tea gardens in Barak Valley, employing a large number of permanent and casual workers. Besides, Union Flour Mill (Silchar) is also a medium scale industrial unit in Barak Valley. The Cachar district more particularly Lakhimpur produces one of the best varieties of pine apples in the world. In addition, there are 282 registered factories in Barak Valley. These factories are mainly manufacturers of food products and wood and wood products. There are also some industrial units based on timber, engineering, chemical, textile, cement, grinding etc. giving employment to a small number people. Again, traditional cottage industries like weaving, sericulture, bamboo and cane crafts etc. are subsidiary sources of income to a large number of rural populations. As regards transport the Valley has a road length of 2233 kms. under P.W.D. including 159 km. of State Highways 607 km. of Major District Road, 1407 km. of Rural Road and 60 km. of Urban Road. Further, the National Highway 53 (Jowai-Badarpur Road) connects Silchar with Guwahati via Shillong. The other important roads that connect neighbouring states are Silchar-Imphal, Silchar-Aizwal and Silchar-Agartala.

Barak Valley and Act East Policy: Constraints and Opportunities

It appears from the above that the region has enough potentialities to become the commercial hub of the entire Northeastern region under the Act East Policy. Though geographically the region is backward in many areas like connectivity, infrastructural development, industrial production etc., still it has enough scope to become the centre of the economic development in the country. Realising its locational advantage, the Government has started paying special attention to the region. Several development initiatives like East West Corridor, Trans Asian Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project etc. were already undertaken by the Government of India under the Act East policy which will certainly lift the valley in the days to come. An assessment of the constraints and opportunities for Barak Valley to emerge as a commercial hub in the entire Northeastern part of India is as under.

Connectivity

a) Rail and roadways:

Since the days of partition the Barak Valley is facing acute problem in establishing links with the rest of India. It is true that due to partition Barak Valley lost its important road and waterways links through East Bengal with the rest of India. Though in the post-partition phase rail and road links were established through hill range but these are subject to huge disruptions due to landslide, flood and blockade. To overcome the problem the NDA government announced two mega project - Lumding-Silchar broad gauge line and Silchar-Saurashtra Mahasada Project - during the last decade of the twentieth century. However, it took long sixteen years to complete the broad gauge project. It was only in 2014 under the initiative of

the Prime Minister Narendra Modi that the project was completed and now Barak Valley is well connected with the rest of the country through railways. The region is also catering to the needs of the people of Tripura. There is a direct train between Agartola and Delhi via Karimganj, which is gradually changing the communication hazards of the people of the valley. In addition, broad gauge rail lines have also been extended up to Tripura via Karimganj. The line will further be linked to Bangladesh through Agartala-Akhua, which is to be commissioned soon. There is a proposal for restoration of the historical rail linkage with Bangladesh through Karimganj and Maulavibazar, which will be very helpful to carry goods from Assam to Chittagong port. Steps are also required for undertaking railway connectivity to the border town of Moreh from Silchar through Lakhimpur and Imphal. But the long-awaited Silchar-Saurashtra Project (also known as East West Corridor) is yet to be completed even after twenty two years of its commencement. It is reported that a stretch of about thirty one kilometre from Balacherra to Harangajao has been pending due to issue of preservation of wild life. Question is often raised as regard to the preparation of detailed project report at the time of formulation of the project. It is alleged that the entire project has got delayed due to the indolent attitude of the Congress government both at the Centre and the state. However, the change in the government at the centre followed by the announcement of the Act East Policy have improved the situation. The present Government has now resolved the issue of preservation of wild life and the work is in progress.

b) Water Transport

Since ages the river Barak and the Brahmaputra were the lifeline of the entire state, The Britishers used these rivers extensively for trade and transport between the Port of Kolkata (earlier referred to as Calcutta) and Assam. It was during the mid of twentieth century that Silchar, the prominent city of Barak Valley, was linked with Kolkata along the Barak-Surma-Meghna navigation channel. Later, the partition of the country gave a setback to the entire water based communication network and Barak Valley was lagging behind in terms of trade and transport. Only a few small ports remained at Karimganj, Badarpur and Silchar providing ferry services locally. However, the Valley has high potential for revival of inland water transport routes. It has been noticed that with the introduction of Act East Policy efforts are being initiated by the Union Government to develop the water routes. In the recent event called 'Namami Barak' held in November, 2017, the Chief Minister of Assam Mr. Sarbananda Sonowal inaugurated dredging operations in the Barak river and stated that "the dredging of the river systems of Assam has begun with the Barak river. Once dredging is done, the Barak River will see a sea-change in terms of betterment of the economic scenario of the region" (The Times of India, 2017). Already dredging of the river basin started at Bhanga point (Karimganj) and it is expected that soon the region will be connected through waterways to the neighbouring states like Mizoram and Manipur with the Haldia port in West Bengal via Bangladesh. The Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) has also proposed to designate River Barak as National Waterways-VI. The improvement of water routes will significantly reduce the transportation cost of goods and it will also accelerate the trade among the states.

c) Air transport

Assam has a total of six airports located at Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Silchar, Lakhimpur and Tezpur. Among these Silchar Airport (Kumbirgram) is the second busiest airport after Guwahati and fourth busiest airport in entire Northeast after Guwahati, Agartala and Imphal having two lakhs (approx.) PAX yearly (Silchar Airport, 2020). The Airport was constructed during the Second World War and later it was transferred to Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF). At present, the airport is jointly operated by Airport Authority of India (AAI) and Indian Air Force (AIF), which put certain restrictions in the movement of the flights. Despite being one of the busiest airport night-landing system is not launched in the airport and this causes serious problem for the people of the region. Realising the importance of the region the Civil Aviation Department of the Government of India proposed for a new Greenfield airport in Silchar. The construction of new airport will not only boost the economy of the Valley but also will make significant impact in all sectors.

Tourism

It is true that the State Tourism Department has never exhibited its will to promote tourism in the Valley. The region is not in a position to attract tourists from the states of India and from the neighbouring countries as it is yet to fix and promote tourist spots as done in other parts of the country. Even the region is far behind than the Brahmaputra Valley which is successful in conserving its forests and wild life ranging from Manas (lower Assam) to Dibrugarh and Kaziranga (middle Assam) and Dibrugarh-Saikhowa (upper Assam). Nonetheless, the Barak Valley has potential to emerge as tourist hub if proper planning is done and facilities are extended. There are a number of spots such as Khaspur, Chatla, Bhuban Hill, Malegarh fort, Mohanpur, Shanbeel, Dalu lake etc located in the three districts of the Valley, which could be promoted to attract the visitors. Activities like trekking in the hills, cruises in rivers, nature walks in the forests, visit to tea processing sites etc. could also be promoted to attract domestic as well as international tourists. Besides, the Valley is inhabited by various ethnic groups who have their distinct culture, art forms, craft, song, dance etc. and these are required to be marketed and promoted for the visitors. In order to boost up tourism as well as to materialise the resources available, the Government of Assam on February 6, 2019 launched the scheme 'Asom Darshan'. Under this scheme Tourism department would focus on the development and promotion of the various places of tourist interest, including those places known for their natural beauty as well as places of religious or historical importance. It is under this scheme that the Government of Assam is planning to develop Bhuban Hills (located at Cachar district) as a major tourist destination of Assam. Moreover, the Government of Assam has also taken initiatives to promote Sonbeel (located in Karimganj), the largest wetland in Northeast, as a tourist destination. What is required is to initiate expeditious steps in promoting the selected destinations as well as to publicise the same through electronic media, newspaper, websites etc. If the plans and programmes that have been initiated under the AEP are implemented in true spirit the Barak Valley will emerge as a new hub for trade, investment and tourism.

Trans-border trade

The Barak Valley occupies an important place in terms of border trade as it shares international border with Bangladesh. Prior to 1990, the Valley as well as the entire Northeast was the concern of the Union Government only in terms of national security. Both the Central and the State Governments did not bother about trade and investment and hence the contribution of border trade in the economy of the region was minimal. The political difference between India and neighbouring countries also resulted into minimum trade. It was only with the introduction of Look East Policy and later Act East Policy that the entire Northeast became prominent towards integration of national economy with the world economy. Under the changed scenario Bangladesh has become an important partner in India's trade strategy. This has given an opportunity to Barak Valley to increase the volume of trade with Bangladesh as it shares long border with Bangladesh. It has been seen that the commodities that are being exported to neighbouring countries like Bangladesh include coal, limestone, distillation plants, stainless steel, marble tiles, motor parts, sanitary items, ceramic wares, citrus, fresh fruits and vegetables, betel leaves, chaw-chaw, rice, dry fish etc. Likewise, the commodities that are imported from countries like Bangladesh include lichhi, potato cracker, cold drinks, dhakaishari, ring chips, hilsha fish, molasses, chanachur, cheese ball etc. It is seen that most of the products which are being exported to Bangladesh via Karimganj actually comes from the states like Gujarat, Maharashtra and West Bengal (Chakraborty, 2009). To regulate volume of trade the Government of India has opened up thirty two Land Custom Stations (LCSs) in the entire Northeast India. In Assam there are thirteen LCSs, out of which three are functional and other ten LCSs are non-functional. The three functional LCS are – i) Sutarkandi (Karimganj), ii) Karimganj Steamer Ghat and iii) Mankachar (Dhubri District), while non-functional LCSs are located at i) Mahisasan Railway station (Karimganj District), ii) Silchar RMS (Cachar District), iii) Karimganj Railway Station (Karimganj District), iv) Karimganj Ferry Stations (Karimganj District), v) Silchar Steamer Ghat (Cachar District), vi) Tezpur Steamer Ghat (Sonitpur District), vii) Dhubri Steamer Ghat (Dhubri District), viii) Golokganj (Dhubri District), ix) Guwahati Steamer Ghat (Kamrup Metro) and x) Latu Bazar (Karimganj District) (Exportable Items and Border Infrastructure, 2020). Among all the available LCSs in Assam, the volume of both imports and exports is much higher in Sutarkandi LCS than others LCSs. This indicates the importance of Barak Valley in general and Karimganj in particular in undertaking border trade with the neighbouring countries. To promote the trade there is need to make other LCSs functional and also expeditious steps are required to develop manufacturing industries in the Southern part of Assam, which will not only become cost effective but also will generate employment opportunities for the youths of the Valley. It was unfortunate to note that Barak Valley was used to export paper to Bangladesh as it was manufactured in the Valley by Hindustan Paper Corporation located at Panchgram, Hailakandi. But due to unsustainable planning the paper production was ceased. There were no steps initiated to create a sustainable supply base by extending funding and support to the local farmers to raise bamboo plantations. Hence, the entire supply was depended upon Mizoram and Dima Hasao district (Gupta, 2009). Gradually, the Mill has ceased production and with the closure of the Paper Mill the export of paper got stuck and the

cost of the paper in local market has increased considerably. Also employment opportunities got minimised. Though the Government assured revival of the Mill but the problem still persists and this is going against the essence of AEP.

It deserves mention here that items like pineapple, bamboo, cane crafts etc are found in abundance in the Valley and these are important component of the economy of this valley. The availability of raw materials, cheap skilled labour and most importantly the prevalence of favourable law and order situation in the entire valley provide a friendly environment for the growth of large, medium and small scale industrial units in the region (Roy, 2009). It is required that the Government must initiate some steps under the existing Act East policy so that the industries come up and the benefits of trade reaches to the people of the region as well as other Southeast Asian nations.

In the education sphere, there is a great opportunity for the Barak valley to take lead as a good number of higher educational institutes like National Institute of Technology, Silchar Medical College and Assam University (Central University) are functioning in the region. Recently, the State Government also announced to construct a new Medical College at Karimganj district to improve the health infrastructure in the Valley. The availability of these educational institutes provides a platform to the youths to pursue higher education in the Valley itself. However, to give exposure to the students these institutes may initiate various academic programmes like student exchange programme, seminars, lecture series etc with the universities/educational institutes of the neighbouring countries. Interestingly, the nearest university to Barak Valley is Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Bangladesh (about 125 km from Assam University) while universities located in Shillong, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and Guwahati are far away from the Valley. It is seen over the last few years that there were some academic activities like seminars/workshops/lectures etc. being arranged in between Assam University and Shahjalal University of Science and Technology and also some of the doctoral students from Bangladesh are pursuing their research work in Assam University. But these initiatives are at the personal level only. Hence, what is required is to formalise the process and the Government must come forward with a scheme of educational exchange programme with the institutes of neighbouring countries, which will not only strengthen people-to-people contact but will also enhance mutual understanding among the citizens of the neighbouring nations. Such type of initiatives is urgently required to materialise the real essence of the AEP.

Thus, it can be said that the Barak Valley has huge potential to emerge as a develop region and also a destination for the visitors. It is the gateway to Tripura, Mizoram, and Manipur for those who are coming from other parts of India and also a connecting link for those travelling from Bangladesh/Myanmar to other regions of the country. Of late, connectivity has significantly improved and now the valley is well connected both by rail and air with Tripura, Guwahati, Kolkata and Delhi. It is expected that if the Act East Policy is put into operation properly then the Valley will certainly become a core of trade and commerce. Immediate attention is required to pay on improving the infrastructure, establishing agro-based industries, providing entrepreneurial training and preserving heritage sites located at different parts in the Valley.

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