



Look East Policy And Its Implications In The Northeast

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ABSTRACT : India is known for huge cultural diversity from north to south we can see various culture, tradition and also can see a huge amount of political diversity in this country. For this various type of cultural diversity government implement various policy to develop them. The Northeast region of India is often called the "Gateway to the East" or the "Gateway to the Seven Sisters"(Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura, These states are located in the northeastern part of India which is known as "seven sisters" of india). However, the city of Guwahati in Assam is specifically known as the "Gateway to the Northeast". This is due to its strategic location and excellent connectivity, making it a major entry point for travelers and goods into the region. In this article I deeply discuss about the look east policy and how it effect the north east side of India. The Look East Policy is first introduced by our prime minister P. V. Narasimha Rao during his time period in 1990s. Basically this policy included into our foreign policy to develop the northeast side of India and build a strong relation with South East Asian countries.

KEYWORDS : Historical Overview, Look East To Act East, Significance And Challenges To Implement The Policy.

INTRODUCTION :

India is a cultural heritage from the ancient time period , India has very strong cultural connection with the South East Asia from ancient time period .The folklore of the eastern coastal states of India is replete with stories of travels to bountiful countries in the east. The temples and monasteries of Angkor Vat in Cambodia, Borobudur in Indonesia, Champa kingdom in Vietnam, the Shwedagon in Myanmar, to name just a few, are standing testimonies to the strong ties that have existed between India and this region. Suvannabhumi, the golden land, is a term frequently used for this region. To the people of this region India was the land of the middle path, the path shown by the Buddha.

Movement of goods and people has been taking place between India and South East Asia for centuries both by land and by sea. The land route was generally more difficult because of the hilly terrain and dense forests but there has always been a regular flow of people across frontiers here and many communities trace their origins across modern borders. The sea route was a busy thoroughfare for trade between India and the region and onward

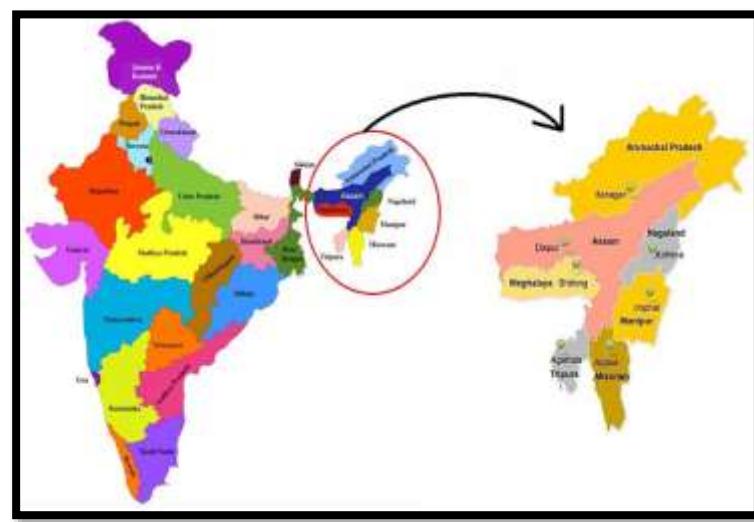
to China. The coming of Europeans disrupted these traditional routes. New alignments and connectivities emerged on colonial lines. The Dutch, French, Spanish, Portuguese and the British divided the region among themselves. This accelerated the movement of Indians to the country, which became an issue in our bilateral relations after independence.

After independence from European colonial rule, which came first to India and then in phases to South East Asia, there was a brief period of euphoria and high expectations. The Asian Relations Conference organised by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1947, even before India's independence, and the Bandung conference in Indonesia in 1955 gave rise to hopes of Asian solidarity and revival. These hopes faded very soon as the world became embroiled in the vicious Cold War between the communist forces led by the Soviet Union and China on the one side and the capitalist forces led by the United States on the other (MEA).

One of the most original and significant contributions of India to human civilisation is the way of behaving with neighbours. Ancient Greek writers were impressed by the fact that India never attacked its neighbours. Of course, there are some stray instances of Indian kings undertaking expeditions to neighbouring countries. Arjuna's campaigns against the Rishikas and the Paramarsikas somewhere in Central Asia, mentioned in Mahabharata, and Raghu's march against Parasikas, Hunas and Kambojas, living along the Oxus in the Pamir-Badakhan region, described in the Taghuvamsa of the poet Kalidasa, may be based on some historical parallels. Likewise, the military campaigns by the Cholas against the Srivijay Empire as a result of the complications in the political and commercial situation of Southeast Asia were serious attempts at interfering in the affairs of other countries. But these instances were the exceptions to the rule that normally the Indians were not interested in the territories of their neighbours (Prakash Nanda, 2003).

During the late 1980s at the behest of the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, India began reviving its relations with South East and East Asia. The Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) for 1995-96 noted that there were hardly any high level contacts between India and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) prior to 1985; however, a definite trend emerged since then which indicated that ASEAN was interested in recuperating old relations with India with the restoration of political dialogue. During the next five years, the Indian Prime Minister visited Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar (then known as Burma), Vietnam and also China in December 1988. India also hosted leaders from South East Asian countries like Suharto of Indonesia, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia, Nguyen Van Linh of Vietnam and Hun Sen of Kampuchea, as well as other ministers. The political exchanges between India and South East Asian countries during the eighties also focused on issues of trade and commerce, energy sharing and cooperation in the field of science and technology. Global political development at the end of the Cold War called for a pragmatic approach in India's foreign policy.

India's engagement with East and South East Asian countries since the 1980s has largely been termed as Look East Policy although there is no official policy document which lays down the guidelines and principles. During his September 1994 visit to Singapore, the Indian Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao delivered a lecture entitled "India and the Asia-Pacific: Forging a New Relationship" at the Institute of South East Asian Studies (ISEAS) in which he emphasized India's eagerness to join the future development path in the Asia-Pacific region in the post-Cold War period. The term "Look East Policy"



appeared in official records of India for the first time in the Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in 1995-96 and referred to India's engagement in the ASEAN region with emphasis on economic and institutional relations. Delivering the 14th Singapore lecture in April 2002, Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee said, "I speak today on ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific... This region is one of the focal points of India's foreign policy, strategic concerns and economic interests... It is a fundamental fact of geography that India is in the immediate neighbourhood of ASEAN" (ASEAN 2002).

In December 2005 in his keynote address at the Special Leader's Dialogue of ASEAN Business Advisory Council in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, India's Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh stated that, since 1992, the Government of India had launched a "Look East Policy" which was not merely an external economic policy but also marked a strategic shift in India's envisioned role in the changing global economic scenario. It was an attempt to reach out to India's civilizational neighbours in South East and East Asia. At the Ninth India-ASEAN summit in Bali, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that India's partnership with ASEAN was a key feature of the country's foreign policy and the foundation of its Look East Policy (LEP). India's engagement with its eastern neighbours has also been acknowledged by ASEAN (Atul sarma et al.,2017).

In one word we can say, through the "Look East Policy" India wanted to connect with the ASEAN countries and also India wanted to socially, economically and politically develop the north east part of India. The Look East Policy seeks to recover that lost frontier by giving the north-eastern region of India scope to re-establish its historical links with the countries in the neighborhoods and bringing it together with the rest of India into the mainstream of Asian development. The Look East Policy was calculated to change the security paradigm into one in which India's security needs in the north-eastern region would move in tandem with its paramount need for development (Lakhan Mehrotra, 2012, Vol. 7, p. 83). Through this policy and the help of ASEAN India wanted to make a strong relation with Bangladesh, Myanmar ,Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam and Japan.

Objectives Of "Look East Policy":

The objectives of the study is through the Look East Policy how India develop the north-east region as well as improve the relation with south east asian countries by the help of ASEAN. We will try to analysis the policy and discuss the growing trade, goods, services, investment relation with the ASEAN countries, here we also discuss the challenges faced etc. Further, one of the objectives of this paper is to identify the opportunities for North-East region of India if the Look East Policy is implemented proactively.

The rationale behind this paper is the growing importance of India-ASEAN relationship. Both regions have been experiencing high growth rate. Further, IndiaASEAN are bestowed with huge consumer base and untapped natural resources. These regions have the potential to lead the global economic growth in near future. North-East of India can be gateway to ASEAN market because of its geographical proximity.

Methodology: This research study is based on secondary data mostly on the books, journal, news paper and other archival records by the government of india related to Look East Policy and India's realtion with ASEAN. An attempt has been done to evaluate India's Look East Policy and impact of this policy in North-East and South East Asia. After this research study we understanding how the north east india is important in international ground as well as india's foreign policy.

Look East to Act East: A Brief Overview

The “Look East Policy” which was announced by the Prime Minister NarashimaRao in 1991, against the backdrop of a struggling economy and the sudden end of Cold War framework, is a part of a concerted effort to elevate the strategic importance of Southeast Asia in the Country’s foreign policy agenda(Kalita, 2018). The primary focus of the policy was revive political ties, increase security with cooperation and develop economic linkage with South East Asia. But if when we look closely the policy, we will see the prevent china factor in South East Asia. The ascendancy of China is a major concern for India. Thus, China is seen as “the principal source of insecurity and the greatest potential threat to India’s long-term interests”. Therefore, India’s closer links with East and Southeast Asia were considered as possible ways to “set limits on China’s influence” or perhaps to “balance” China’s expanding power in this region (Barua & Das, 2008). Through the “Look East Policy” India make a better relation with ASEAN member countries. To implement this policy Prime Minister NarshimaRao visited Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam and Malaysia and India became an active participant in various ASEAN organisations, becoming a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN in 1992 and in 1996 India became a full Dialogue Partner of ASEAN (Kalita, 2018).

In the second phase, this policy takes it a step further led by the NDA government under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Mr Vajpayee gave a new meaning to this policy, and he visited seven of the ASEAN countries in three years and signed numerous agreements of far-reaching. Consequences in 2002 India become a summit level partner and Free Trade Agreement was signed in 2003(Khanna & Kumar, 2018). This new phase also shifting focus from trade to wider economic and security cooperation, political partnerships and physical connectivity through road and rails link (Haokip, India’s Look East Policy: Prospects and Challenges for Northeast India, 2015).

The Look East policy was continued by Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh who exchanged several visits with ASEAN leaders. Indian – ASEAN summits were regularly held (Khanna & Kumar, 2018). In the time of Dr. Manmohan Singh India signed “Long Term Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity” with ASEAN (Haokip, India’s Look East Policy: Prospects and Challenges for Northeast India, 2015).

In 2014 when the NDA government came into power by the leadership of Narendra Modi some major changes were made. He made a high priority to India’s Look East Policy. During his opening statement at the 12th India – ASEAN summit, he underscored the importance of the 10 – nation ASEAN bloc in a new era of economic development, trade, investments and industrialised. He made it known to the world that India is not merely “Looking East” but is now “Acting East” as well, thus, revising the title to India’s Act East Policy. This phase was also characterised by an expanded definition of “East extending from Australia to China” (Devare, 2014). In a speech in Singapore in November 2015, Prime Minister Modi reiterated the “purpose and vigour” with which his government had engaged Asia, adding that, “in the course of the last 18 months my government has engaged more with this region than any other county in the world” (Kalita, 2018).

The Asia – Pacific is considered as one of the fastest-growing regions in the world. Enhancing ties with India’s Asian neighbourhood through ASEAN can bridge the gap and increase connectivity to a wider Asia – Pacific region(Kalita, 2018). For this, the North-Eastern region of India is very important, because this region shares a border with its neighbouring countries. It also reflects a positive development impact on India’s North-Eastern region. Over the years, because, this region of India isolated from the mainland economy of the rest of India. The North-Eastern region of India has the potential to play the arrowhead role in the evolution of the Look East – Act East policy and in fact, it would not be wrong to say that looking and acting east will begin from here (Devare, 2014).

Strategic Significance of North East India for India's Look East Policy :

In the post-Cold War era, the ASEAN nations recognized India as an emerging power capable of playing a pivotal role in shaping Asia's future political and security landscape. They see India's competitive strength and the stability of India's political institutions and the potentials to sustain high economic growth rates. In the meantime, Prime Minister Rao in 1991 through his initiative for economic liberalisation opened up new vistas for regional integration with the global economy. To quote K Indrakumar, "with the collapse of bi-polarity, India's role as a leader of Third World countries diminishes and a kind of inferiority complex emerged in India's ruling circle vis-à-vis Southeast Asia and East Asian economic development. For many decades, India thought it was far ahead of all the countries of Southeast Asia but the superior performance of „ASEAN Tigers“ (Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia) came as rude shock to India inflicting great damage to its image and international status. With the liberalisation and privatisation of its economy, India seems to determined to emulate the „ASEAN Tigers“ model. It is pertinent to mention that India's Look East policy is not a coincidental phenomenon but a logical outcome of neo-liberal economic reforms (Indrakumar, 2009.P 27)." As a result, India formally shaped the Look East Policy to foster closer economic ties with its South and Southeast Asian neighbours with emphasis and building political and economic contacts with the ASEAN members. This policy has led to making India a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of the ASEAN in 1992, a Full Dialogue Partner of the ASEAN in 1995, member of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996. In November 2002, the first ASEAN-India summit was held in Cambodia to mark a major milestone in integrating India in Southeast Asia. The fifth ASEAN-India summit was held in Phillipines in 2007 resolved to implement free trade agreement and is considered a significant breakthrough for the Look East Policy (Gogoi, 2010. P36). It is to be noted that India's perception of the „East“ in the phrase of Look East policy is not confined within ASEAN countries. The ultimate goal is to have a strong hold in the Asia-Pacific region. This region is vital to India's economic and political security because of its geo-political and geo-economic implications. Not only that, the total trade value and economic growth of Asia-Pacific community compete with European union community. In terms of trade it would be bigger than the North American Free Trade Agreement comprising the United States, Canada and Mexico and its combined foreign exchange reserves would be greater than those of European Union and NAFTA. For a newly open economy like India Asia-Pacific region present an enormous growth opportunity.

Look East Policy is deemed to be a major booster in this respect (Indrakumar, 2009.P 29). There has been a continuous effort ever since to move closer to the Southeast Asian countries. Substantive efforts towards closer political, economic and military ties underscore the logic of India's Look East policy. In the recent years the increasing level of political and military interface as part of India's Look East policy between India and Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar has given the signals of broader regional engagement. On the economic front, trading and development oriented ventures like the BIMST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand- Economic Cooperation) and Mekong Ganga Project have gained prominence. Free trade between the countries of this Bay of Bengal grouping and other Southeast Asian countries figure prominently in India's Look East policy (Singh, 2009. P17).

As part of its renewed focus on making the Look East Policy more meaningful for Northeast India, the government has initiated several infrastructure development projects and actively participated in multilateral initiatives that aim to strengthen connectivity between Northeast India and Southeast Asia (Singh, 2010. P 64). Better connectivity of Northeast India with Southeast Asia can transform the region into an attractive economic zone of the world. The decision of the central government to link up the region with Southeast Asia through proposed Asian Highway and Trilateral Highway project involving India, Thailand and Myanmar, proves the point that the government has finally decided to take locational advantage of Northeast India. The proposed Asian Highways would pass through the Northeastern states of Assam and Manipur connecting Thailand via Myanmar. It would

pass through Moreh in India, Tamu and Bagan in Myanmar before reaching Maesot in Thailand (Brahma, 2010. P 23). It is to be noted that the Northeastern states of India have been demanding for long the reopening of Stilwell road for connecting Ledo in Assam to kunning in China's Yunan province via Myitkyina in Myanmar. The reopening of this road could transform the economy of Northeast India by reducing time, cost and distance involved in trade with China and Southeast Asia. China has shown its interest to reopen the Stilwell road by developing its part of the road and linked it with its Highway network. But India has been reluctant about the reopening of the Stilwell road due to insurgency problems and the fear of increase of Chinese influence in its Northeastern region. However, due to the normalisation in India- China relations and pressure from the Northeastern states, India has shown interest in opening of the Stilwell road. Thus, in future the Stilwell road would reemerged as another link between India's Northeast with Southeast Asia including China (Singh, 2010. P 68). Facilitation of these projects entails the sponsorship of the World Bank as plans for the 1360 km trans Asian highways to link India, Myanmar and Thailand in the first phase and with India-China in the second phase. This trans Asian highways will, in due course of time, be part of a much larger trans-Eurasian highway linking South Asia, Southeast Asia, China and Europe (Singh, 2009. P 17). Along with improving road connectivity, the Indian government has placed significant emphasis on enhancing rail, air, and telecommunication links between Northeast India and the countries of Southeast Asia.

The Kaladan Multi-Model Transit Transport Project was launched as part of Look East policy. The project aims to connect the eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata with Sittwe seaport in Myanmar. It will link Sittwe seaport to Lashio in Myanmar via Kaladan riverboat route and Lashio on to Mizoram in India by road transport (Kalita, 2018).

The Asian Highway (AH 48), which connects Phuentsholing in Bhutan to IndoBangladesh border point at Changrabandha in Coach Behar, West Bengal via Dooars, which is a work in progress route, will act as a major boost in the region from socio-economic and political fronts (Kalita, 2018).

With the Trans-Asian Railway and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral highway through Moreh in Manipur nearing completion, India foresees a tremendous growth in trade and commerce making North East India, the next big economic corridor connecting India to ASEAN countries and China (Kalita, 2018).

Challenges for Implementation:

Most of the projects mentioned above are not completed and suffering by various social, political and economic reasons. The states of the North East region have been widely acknowledged for their weak economy, underdevelopment, ethnicity, political immaturity and insurgency. Ethnic Insurgency is a common factor in the North-Eastern region. If we can see the north east region which consists of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, there is more then 200 ethnic groups are exist as per government data (Ministry of Home Affairs). All this north east state except Sikkim face this insurgency. It was followed by the Mizo rebellion in 1966. Assam was also burned in the name of illegal immigrants during the 1980s and these problems are still active today. Another state Tripura was also very much suffered by the insurgency and ethnic problem for the reason of tribal and non-tribal Bengali conflict. For this type of ethnic conflict the government of India introduce the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) in 1958 to grant special powers to the armed forces in "disturbed areas" to maintain public order. It allows security personnel to use force, including opening fire, conduct arrests without warrants, and search properties based on suspicion. It also provides legal protection for actions taken during operations in these areas (MHA). But unfortunately this Act could not reduce this insurgent problem. In this situation, it is very difficult to implement infrastructure development under the Look East policy. For trade, tourism and development need a peaceful atmosphere, but these rebellion groups create an unstable and sensitive atmosphere. In this situation, development is not possible.

It can be seen, thus, that the role of the North-Eastern states in the Look East Policy is very negligible in the past decades, it was ignored by the centre. The central government neglected this region in the policymaking. It gave birth to the resentment among the people (Haokip, India's Look East Policy: Prospects and Challenges for Northeast India, 2015).

The Look East Policy presents a significant opportunity for Northeast India, which in turn holds strategic importance for the success of this policy. There exists immense potential for cooperation between India and Southeast Asian countries, from which the Northeast region stands to gain considerably. To realize this potential, enhanced infrastructure and improved connectivity are essential—achievable only through sustained development efforts. In the last decades, it can be seen that many developmental projects have not been completed for the insurgency problem. The various reports indicate that this insurgency groups receive supports from the neighbouring countries and create disturbance in northeast region.

In recent time period, the insurgency reduce in the north east region the government of India finally withdraw the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) totally from the north east states – Tripura (in 2015), Meghalaya (in 2017) and eight out of 16 police stations of Arunachal Pradesh (in 2018)(Jain, 2018). But when the Manipur high court deletes order on including Meiteis in Scheduled Tribe list on March 27, 2023, two ethnic groups clashes with each other and Manipur became violent again and the government of India deploy the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) in Manipur to control the situation. But till now the conflict continue exist (“Manipur high court deletes order on including Meiteis in Scheduled Tribe list”,2024). If this type of ethnic instability exist in the northeast region ,the look east policy and the better relation with south east asian countries is not possible any way.

Conclusion :

North east region of India always play an significant role to connect with the south east asia through ASEAN organization which also help India to improve the relation with south asian countries as well as improve the socio economic, political and cultural development in northeast region. The geographic location of North East India provides the opportunity to implement India's Look East policy. From the analysis highlights that Myanmar holds strategic significance for India's Act East Policy, as its geographical location serves as a vital bridge connecting India with Southeast Asia.

However, in this context, it can be said that there are some challenges such as geographical and technological challenges, security and political challenges which limit the process of connecting the northeastern part of India with Southeast Asia. Although in this context, it can be said that there are some challenges such as geographical and technological challenges, security and political challenges which have limited the process of connecting the North-Eastern part of India with South-East Asia, it can be said that despite various obstacles, India's “Look East Policy” has been working successfully for the last two decades. From the above discussion, it is evident that India's Look East Policy, initiated in 1991, represents a path of continuity rather than a dramatic shift, as each successive government has consistently pursued its implementation with a similar approach. However, the Modi government has accorded greater significance to the policy, prioritizing it and launching numerous development initiatives, particularly in Northeast India. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Look East – Act East Policy is now progressing towards a new and expanded dimension.

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