

## Look East Policy and its Impact in North-East India

**Dr. Mahan Borah**

*Assistant Professor*

*Department of Political Science*

*Assam University, Silchar, Assam*

### ***Abstract***

*India's North-East, a distinctive geopolitical entity, comprising the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. The region shares borders with four Asian countries such as China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. A number of factors such as insurgency, ethnic conflicts, illegal migration etc have induced a certain degree of instability, political degeneration and have as well contributed to the economic backwardness, retarded infrastructural development and psychological alienation of this region from the mainland India. Thus, the development deficit in the North-East remains a challenge for the government of India. This challenge can be addressed by integrating the North-East with its Southeast Asia region through the policy namely Look East Policy. India's stable democratic political system, large middle-class population, immense military clouts in South Asia, rising economic fortunes and global ambitions make it a potential power that could play very important role in world affairs.*

**Keywords:** *ASEAN, Economic Liberalisation, Look East Policy, North-East, Regional Integration, Southeast Asia.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION:**

India's North-East, a distinctive geopolitical entity comprising the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh is spread over an area of 2.55 lakh sq.km. This accounts for 7.8 percent of the total landmass of India and 3.73 percent of India's vast population. Except the former princely states of Manipur and Tripura, all other states were parts of British colonial Assam. It is to be noted that during the post-colonial period the political map of the North-East transformed very significantly. Nationalism and ethnicity are the two factors which played a very decisive role in the process of transformation of these states in post colonial period. In 2001, Sikkim was included as an eighth state to the key policy making institution namely the North East Council (Brahma, 2010. P18). This region is also known for its diversity, which represents multiple ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious identities and competing ethnic aspirations which is distinct from the mainland India. This distinctiveness places North-East in a unique geographical and political space that reflects its ethnic and genealogical connections to the rest of South East Asian countries (Gogoi, 2010. P1). The North-East region is connected with the Indian mainland by a 22 km land corridor through Siliguri in the state of West-Bengal, popularly known as Chicken's Neck'. The region shares

borders with four Asian countries such as China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh (Brahma, 2010. P18). Contemporary North-East is witnessing three levels of problems such as i. from within, its own historicity and geographical peculiarity, intra-ethnic conflicts and rebel movements, ii. from the mainstream due to non recognition of sufficient regional autonomy and adequate political representation at national level and iii. external supports to the militant groups of northeast and illegal migration from its neighbourhood especially from Bangladesh, Myanmar and China. These factors have induced a certain degree of instability, political degeneration and have as well contributed to the economic backwardness, retarded infrastructural development and psychological alienation of this region from the mainland India (Gogoi, 2010. P1). Thus, the development deficit in the North-East remains a challenge for the government of India. This challenge can be addressed by integrating the North-East with its Southeast Asia region through the policy namely Look East Policy. India's stable democratic political system, large middle-class population, immense military clouts in South Asia, rising economic fortunes and global ambitions make it a potential power that could play very important role in world affairs (Brahma, 2010. P19).

## 2. Objectives:

The objectives of the present study are-

- To understand what Look East Policy is.
- To understand the economic, political, and strategic importance of Look East Policy for North East India.

## 3. Methodology:

The required information is obtained from books, journal, news paper and other archival records both official and non-official. The method of historical analysis is employed to find out the answer of the research objectives proposed.

## 4. The Look East Policy:

The Look East Policy, a part of India's extended neighbourhood policy was initiated by the then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in Singapore address in 1994 and have been followed by the successive governments of India. The intensification of the economic linkages with the ASEAN in the first phase was led by Rao government and later the second phase was led by NDA government under the leadership of A. B. Vajpayee. Under the leadership of Dr. Manmohan Singh, the Look East Policy has been re-energised with a renewed focus on the role of Northeast in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy (Gogoi, 2010. P 34). In the early 1990's, the policy was initiated for the first time when India began a constructive engagement with the military regime of Myanmar. Economics has been a prime mover of India's Look East policy. India wants to have a developing physical connectivity with Southeast Asia through Myanmar and Thailand. With due course of time along with Southeast Asia, the Look East policy involves the deepening of ties with Australia, Japan and South Korea which are major effective economics and political factors in the region (Brahma, 2010. P 22). India's Look East policy has a strong economic imperatives and long term strategic importance. The domestic implication of this policy has given thrust to local economics and bilateral trade and in the long run could transform the economic profile of this region (Brahma, 2010. P 22). In this regard K Indrakumar stated that "the Look East policy is guided by a myriad of inter-related national interest. It is not simply guided by trade as the prime motive but overall politico-economic interest of a burgeoning India vis-à-vis emerging geo-political configuration. India's Look East policy is a major foreign policy shift, in fact, a 'paradigm shift', which has brought changes in India's orientation towards China and Southeast Asia. Till recently India's foreign policy has been

Pakistan centric in particular and subcontinental specific in general. Thus, India has decided to come out of the 'sub-continental cold war situation and take up a proactive role in the region (Indrakumar, 2009. P 20)." Closer ties with Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries are needed to check rising China and to contain conflict in its northeastern region. These political objectives are conjunctively supplemented by the economic imperatives of integration with ASEAN economy vis-à-vis the interest of global economy (Singh, 2009. P17). During the last decade Chinese continental and maritime expansion has created a 'perceived Chinese threat' for India and Southeast Asian countries. The Chinese expansion and presence of US military in the region may create a Cold War situation in near future. Chinese occupation of the disputed Sparty groups of islands and Paracels islands is a testimony to the fact that China wanted to turn South China Sea into a virtual Chinese lake making its exclusive domain. In this juncture on the one hand Southeast Asian nations began looking forward to India's balancing capability and felt that India's military power can no longer be ignored in the emerging balance of power structure in Asia. On the other hand strategically it is important for India to check Chinese influence in the region in the eventual reduction of the presence of superpowers coincided strikingly with similar thinking within the Southeast Asian community (Indrakumar, 2009. P 20). In this context it can be argued that the policy shift through Look East policy is an attempt of India to response to changing geo-politics in Southeast Asia and to assert its role and power in collaboration with the advanced capitalist countries in the changing global equation (Indrakumar, 2009. P 21).

In the post cold war era the ASEAN countries realise that India is an emerging player who can play a very important role in shaping the future political and security environment of Asia. They see India's competitive strength in democratic institution, resilience and stability of India's political institutions and the potentials to sustain high economic growth rates as an emerging economic power. 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 with special emphasis on economic diplomacy. 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 on renewing 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. Economically, the pacific impulse is fast overtaking the Atlantic impulse. The total income of the Asia-Pacific community would rival the European Union's. 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. India is yet to find a strong foothold in the Asia-Pacific Economic Community (APEC) and the present

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).

In accordance with its new policy of making the Look East Policy more relevant for the Northeast India there has been initiation of some infrastructural projects and India has also joined in some multilateral initiatives that provide the opportunity to develop infrastructure linkages 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 Kunming in China's Yunnan province via Myittha 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 reemerge 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 the better road connectivity the Indian government has emphasised importance on better rail, air and telecommunication connectivity between Northeast India and Southeast Asia countries.

## **5. Conclusion:**

In this backdrop, necessary to highlight that there are some challenges such as geographical & technical challenges, security & political challenges that stand to limit the process of connecting India's Northeast with Southeast Asia. However, given the present level of technological development, the geographical & technical problems are no longer a concern. As far as the political and security obstacle are concerned positive result could be achieved through continuous dialogue. The challenges are not insurmountable if all the concerned parties are committed to find out the solutions. The physical connectivity with Southeast Asia has the potential to bring a major transformation in the sociopolitical and economic life of the Northeast. For this transformation along with the process of connecting Northeast with Southeast Asia the government of India must take into account some measures such as better intra-regional connectivity in Northeast, development of export

oriented industries in the Northeast, human resource development, crafting a common agenda for the development of the Northeast, institutional connectivity between Northeast and other sub regional organisations and so on (Singh, 2010. P68).

## 6. Bibliography:

- *Brahma, Jayanta. (2010) Revisiting India's Foreign Policy: Mapping the Northeast on the Foreign Policy Agenda, in Dilip Gogoi (ed) Beyond Borders: Look East Policy & North East India, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2010.*
- *Das Gurudas & Thomas C. Joshua, India's Look East Policy: Implications for Development, in Pushpita Das & Namrata Goswami (ed) India's North-East: New Vistas for Peace, Manas Publications, New Delhi, 2008.*
- *Churchill Laishram, India's LEP and the North-East: A Study on Environmental Impact in Thingnam Kishan Singh (ed) Look East Policy & India's North East, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2009.*
- *Gogoi Dilip, Beyond Borders: Look East Policy & North East India, in Dilip Gogoi (ed) Beyond Borders: Look East Policy & North East India, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2010.*
- *Indrakumar Konthoujam, Mapping India's Look East Policy: Shifting Alignments, in Thingnam Kishan Singh (ed) Look East Policy & India's North East, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2009.*
- *Kolas Ashild and Buzzi Camilla, Northeast India and Myanmar: Looking East towards a Dead-End? in Dilip Gogoi (ed), Beyond Borders: Look East Policy & North East India, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2010.*
- *Niumai Ajailu, Development and Discontent Meet in the North-East: Perspective on India's Look East Policy in Thingnam Kishan Singh (ed) Look East Policy & India's North East, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2009.*
- *Singh Yogendra, Integrating India's Northeast with Southeast Asia: Infrastructural Dimensions, in Dilip Gogoi (ed), Beyond Borders: Look East Policy & North East India, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2010.*
- *Verghese B. G., India's Northeast: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development, Konark, New Delhi, 2004.*