

The North -East Steering India's Look-East Policy

By

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The Look East Policy of India, framed by the Narasimha Rao government in the early nineties, is a substantial manifestation of India's focused foreign policy orientation towards South East Asia; an immensely resourceful and flourishing region. The economy of South East Asia is a virtually untapped market which is up for grabs by major regional economic entities such as India, China, Europe or the USA. India's compatibility with the South East Asian countries with regard to better regional cooperation lies in the fact of its abstinence from exhibiting hegemonistic ambitions, making it more benign towards South East Asia. The camaraderie between India and South-East Asia is clearly visible through the dynamic persuasion of India's Look-East Policy. India and ASEAN reciprocally have embarked upon a number of initiatives for rejuvenating their ties in multiple areas. Frequent tête-à-tête from both the sides promulgates better implementation of the Policy. The improving intensification of economic linkages with ASEAN has inspired India to enter into the second phase of its Look-East Policy. Phase 2 is the deviation from complete economic issues to the broader agenda involving security cooperation, actively constructing transport corridors and erecting pillars of linkages and connectivity. This phase of India's Look-East Policy renders ample relevance to the development of its North-Eastern Region because of its geographical proximity to South-East Asia. The North-Eastern tip of India consisting of contiguous seven sister states- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and the state of Sikkim - constitutes a unique narrow passageway connecting the Indian

subcontinent to East and South-East Asia and acts as a crucial corridor for human migration between these areas. The North-East region because of its favourable geographic location, cradled by the Himalayas in the north, Bay of Bengal in the south and flanked by 5 Asian countries- Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, acts as a gateway to South-East Asia. There are ample possibilities for North-East India to reap benefits from India's thriving relations with South East Asia as the process of globalisation provides the countries with the opportunities to grapple with cross-market accessibility and enabling them alleviate their poverty and economic backwardness.

The ecstatic beauty of India's North-East serves as an attractive tourist spot and its infrastructure is a hub of immense business potential. The term North-East is an ambiguous one leading to portray the image of a single state with homogenous attributes, which is vastly different from the actual standing. On the contrary, the North-East India largely bears the tenets of diversity and distinctness. The North-East India unfortunately is not free from many evils and is often thwarted by gruesome happenings retarding the pace of development. The Look-East Policy is being embarked upon with the presupposition that the improving trade ties between India and ASEAN will certainly elevate the North-East out of the menace of insurgency, poverty and economic backwardness. The Look-East Policy is expected to usher in a new era of development for the North East through network of pipelines, connectivity, communication and trade.ⁱ The ASEAN-India car rally of 2003 was a notable initiative undertaken by the Indian government to emphasise on the geographic proximity between North-East India and South-East Asia. Moreover, India has undertaken some bilateral and multilateral projects for boosting connectivity between the North-East and South East Asia. The important ongoing and potential infrastructure projects in this regard are Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa Road, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Trans Asian Highway, India-Myanmar rail linkages, Kaladan Multimodal project, the Stilwell road, Myanmar-India-Bangladesh gas or oil pipeline, Tamanthi Hydroelectricity project and optical fiber network between North East India and South East Asia.ⁱⁱ But certain obstacles like lack of infrastructural development, absence of enthusiastic response from local people, frequent insurgencies, poor governance in the states, the easy availability of arms and weapons

from across the international border to be utilised in armed movements and criminal activities impede increased relations between North-East India and South East Asia. Moreover, the geographic location of the North-Eastern region makes it more vulnerable to be the core of hostility with massive negative outcomes.

There are enough avenues through which North East India can be related to South-East Asia. Racial, linguistic and cultural similarity prevails among the people of North-East India and those of South-East Asia. If the concerned governments really strive to translate their policies into reality their collaborative endeavors would invariably revive age-old cultural and historical bonds. To highlight the linguistic attachment it should be stated that it is an area of extensive linguistic diversity with predominantly three language families represented- Austro-Asiatic, Indo-European and Tibeto- Burman. Austro-Asiatic languages are now spoken by a single group in North-East India (the Khasi) but they are also found in East India and South-East Asia reflecting that they might have been more frequent in North-East in the past. Indo- European language is spoken from Europe to Central and South Asia with their easternmost occurrence in Nepal, Bangladesh and North-East India. Tibeto- Burman languages are a branch of Sino- Tibetan family which is mainly spoken in North-East India, China and South-East Asia. Thus North-East India sets up an important linguistic contact zone.

Through centuries there has been exchange of peoples, goods and services between our North-East and countries of South and South-East Asia. The Ahoms of Assam migrated several centuries ago from the Shan state of Burma where the language spoken is almost identical to that spoken in Laos and Thailand. The Chins from Myanmar migrated over the past centuries to Manipur and Meities of Manipur have ties for over 2000 years with the Burmans of Myanmar. Similar migration has also occurred to North-East from Yunan province of China. Boosting people to people contact transcending political barriers is an imperative for facilitating cultural interaction among various regions. In contemporary era, physical connectivity is of utmost importance as it channelises the means to accelerate the movement of goods, people and services and thereby acts as a gateway to reviving economic enterprise.

Advanced communication and interaction would foster trade, commerce and tourism prospects in the entire North-East region. But because of the existing hurdles the people of North East region are quite apprehensive about the developmental strategies and consider it as mere rhetoric. It will be fatal for India in the long run if its government ever tries to get integrated with South East Asia by using North-East as a channel for its economic progress. The people of the North-East should not feel ostracised from the mainstream one and simultaneously need to be convinced of the genuine concern of the government about the overall betterment and security of the region.

Thence, it can be asserted that India's North-East Region is a solid domain in orchestrating India's Look-East Policy. The development of the region is a stepping stone towards the success of the policy. For utmost achievement India and ASEAN should be steadily oriented towards their innovative measures with the adequate knowledge of their common interests and gains. India should devote its potential to utilise the available resources in the North-East in their best possible way. The existing opportunities and the challenges are to be assessed and grappled skillfully. North-East India and South-East Asia must grasp the skill of understanding each others' proficiencies, should pay tribute to each others' potential and must reveal greater endurance towards each others' drawbacks. Cooperative endeavors based on mutual trust and confidence will lead to enduring development and proper accomplishment of the Policy.

ⁱ *India's Look East Policy: Prospects and Challenges for Northeast India-3*, accessed electronically at <http://haokip.bandamp.com/blog/17831.html> , on February 23, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Julien Levesque, *NorthEast in India's Look East Policy*, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi, May 6, 2008, accessed electronically at http://www.ipcs.org/article_details.php?articleNo=2558&CID=9 on April 1, 2009.