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Act East Policy and Northeast India: Initiatives and Challenges

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Abstract

The Act East Policy (AEP) is considered as an important milestone in Indian foreign policy focusing more and more attention in the Northeastern part of the land. The policy is target oriented and it tries to push Northeast into the forefront by establishing ties with the Southeast Asian nations as well as South Asia. However, the policy comes across a number of challenges in order to realize the objectives for which it has been initiated. Keeping this in view the present paper tries to explore the major initiatives adopted under the LEP/AEP and the challenges that are being encountered while implementing the various programmes under the AEP in the Northeastern part of India. It is seen that many important projects have been initiated covering the states of Manipur, Mizoram and Assam but due to internal problems which persists in the respective states that projects are still pending for the last several years. It deserves mention that mere announcement of various packages and projects are not enough to promote the region rather the confidence of the local populace is required to be achieved in realizing the goal.

Keywords: *Act East, ASEAN, BIMSTEC, East Asia, Look East, Northeast, Populace*

India's approach towards the eastern region is not a new phenomenon rather the policymakers are always attracted towards the Asia-Pacific region for long. It can be seen that prior to 1991 India maintained mainly bilateral ties with the countries of the east and in the post-1991 era the focus has been changed to multilateral relations with a view to accelerate economic progress as well as to refresh traditional ties with Southeast Asia and East Asia. However, it is true that the strategic location of Northeastern part of India poses security apprehensions, given its shared borders with numerous Southeast Asian countries. Consequently, the strategy of orienting towards the east, fostering multifaceted relations, and cultivating strategic partnerships, which hold significance for the entire nation, with particular relevance to the Northeast. With this context in view, the present paper tries to understand the major initiatives adopted under the Look East Policy (LEP), subsequently rebranded as the Act East policy (AEP), with a particular focus on fostering the development of Northeastern part of India. This paper seeks to grasp the key endeavors undertaken within the frame work of the LEP/AEP to foster the growth of Northeast India. It also aims to assess the obstacles concerning the execution of projects encompassing Northeast India.

Major Initiatives under the LEP/AEP

One of the significant events in India's international strategy is the initiation of a dynamic policy called 'LEP' during the last decade of the twentieth century. Following the disintegration of the USSR the policy makers of India were seeking an alternate approach to enhance economic and strategic

ties with neighbouring nations. There was also economic stagnation and crisis that the country was facing and the policy makers were determined to initiate new policies to overcome the situation. It is in these context two new policies such as opening up of Indian market and developing ties with Southeast Asia were adopted to reinvigorate the Indian policy towards the neighbouring states.

The implementation of the LEP by the Narshima Rao Government in 1991 had the objective of shifting the nation's trade focus from Western countries to those in Southeast Asia. With the commencement of the Policy, P.V. Narshima Rao (the former Prime Minister of India) embarked on a visit to Southeast Asian nations including Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia to foster close connections. This trip facilitated India's elevation to a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of the ASEAN in 1992, a full-fledged ASEAN Dialogue Partner in 1996, and entry into the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996 (Lee Lavina, 2015). Several bilateral trade affiliations were established with countries like China, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, and various multilateral trade agreements between India and countries of Southeast Asia were linked through organizations such as BCIM, BIMSTEC, SAFTA and ASEAN.

With the advent of the twenty first century the development initiatives under the LEP accelerated during both the NDA and the UPA Government. By 2002, India achieved the status of Summit Level Partner with ASEAN, placing it on equal footing with the countries like Japan, Korea and China. Later, India joined the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia which was followed by the endorsement of a collaborative Declaration for Cooperation aimed at combating terrorist activities. A significant advancement within the framework of the LEP occurred in 2004 when the first Trans Asian Car rally started in Guwahati. The rally traversed the northeastern part of India, extending into Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore and concluded its journey in Batam (Indonesia). Subsequently, another noteworthy milestone occurred in 2005 when India became a participant in the East Asia Summit (EAS). Comprising ten ASEAN member states, the EAS also included eight additional members: China, Japan, India, America, Russia, Australia, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea. India's membership in this forum facilitated regional collaboration, particularly in domains such as environment, energy, finance, education, natural disaster management and global health concerns. In continuation of these efforts, the Look East Policy also initiated measures to enhance connectivity with Southeast Asian nations. This included the idea of introducing a Trans Asian Highway connecting Singapore to Istanbul via India, a Trans Asian Railway spanning from India to Hanoi and a Trans-National Gas Pipe line linking Myanmar, Bangladesh and India (Singh and Singh, 2014). In addition, the Union Governments also took strides to enhance the rapport between India and ASEAN member states, resulting in a surge in investments. For instance, exports witnessed a substantial growth from US \$2.9billion to US \$19.1billion by 2009, coupled with an increase in imports from US \$4.1billion to US \$26.2 billion during the same period (Kalita, 2018). It is important to note that starting from the initiation of the LEP, India proactively participated in a sequence of deliberative discussions with Southeast Asian nations through the ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations framework. This encompassed various levels of interactions, including summits, ministerial gatherings, expert-level discussions, senior official meetings, the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference+1 Sessions, the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum etc. India's commitment to fostering regional unity and conversation extended to its participation in key initiatives like the ASEAN Regional Forum, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, EAS, and the BIMSTEC (ASEAN-Indian Centre, 2019).

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However, a significant shift in the entire policy took place in 2014, marked by the Union Government's decision to redefine and elevate the policy as the 'AEP.' This transition was formally announced during the 12th ASEAN-India Summit conducted in Myanmar (2014), where India affirmed the commencement of a fresh phase characterized by economic advancement, industrial growth, and trade within India. Simultaneously, on the international front, India's previous policy (LEP) was revamped into the new policy (AEP) (De, 2019). India, thus, unveiled the new policy and made it clear that the new policy is not mere a change of nomenclature rather a major shift in developing ties with East Asian, Southeast Asian and ASEAN region. The policy aims to amplify ties in the sphere of connectivity, capacity building, economic integration, security issues and culture. Emphasis was also laid on intensifying more and more interaction between Northeastern States of the country and neighbouring states through cultural ties, trade, Infrastructural development and people-to-people contacts. This is reflected in the statement made by Narendra Modi during his tour to the states of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura (November 29, 2014). He introduced a new term 'NEZ' – Natural Economic Zone –for the Northeastern region and focused on the transformation of the region as corridors to Southeast Asia. To effectively implement the policy, India embarked on diplomatic visits to numerous countries, including Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Australia, Fiji, Japan, China, and South Korea. Among the noteworthy outcomes of these endeavors is the strengthening of bilateral relations with Japan, encompassing the establishment of a civilian nuclear agreement for the trade of nuclear technology and equipment, defense cooperation, investment in developing infrastructure including bullet train between Ahmadabad and Mumbai, Smart cities and Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (Sajjanhar, 2016). The relationship between the two nations is important not only for stability but future security for the entire 'Indo-pacific region' as well. It is because of the persistence efforts of the present NDA Government that the country had successfully held the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit (January, 2018). The event was organized with a view to commemorate the twenty fifth anniversary of the initiation of the Sectoral Dialogue between ASEAN and India. The Summit, referred to as the Delhi Declaration, was dedicated to several objectives: expanding the strategic partnership to yield mutual advantages, combating terrorism, reinforcing collaboration on cyber security through the implementation of the ASEAN Cyber Security Cooperation Strategy, addressing transnational crimes (such as human trafficking, cybercrime, piracy, etc.), fostering various forms of political and security cooperation, strengthens economic ties by fully utilizing and efficiently implementing the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area. It also continues its efforts to improve digital as well as physical link in accordance with the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and ASEAN ICT Master Plan 2020, promoting maritime cooperation, fostering the development of various enterprises including the micro level sector, and ensuring peaceful utilization of outer space (ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, 2018). While undertaking all such initiatives the Government has made Northeastern part of India a centre stage of its eastward engagement.

AEP and Northeast India: Initiatives and challenges

The strategic importance of Northeast India made it a centre of the entire new Policy. The region constitutes the northeastern borderland of South Asia and also simultaneously falls under the western borderland of Southeast Asia. The region shares its boundary with Bangladesh (1596 km), Bhutan

(455 km), Nepal (97 km), Myanmar (1640km) and China (1395 km). Among these the main gateway for India to the Southeast Asia is Myanmar and the states like Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh shares along boundary with Myanmar. Thus, the Northeastern region is expected to play a crucial role as a significant link between India and the entire Southeast Asia. The region's expanding associations with Southeast Asia and South Asia cannot come to fruition without placing the Northeastern region at the fore front of policy making (Bhattacharya, 2012). This region's strategic significance was effectively expressed by Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, the former External Minister and President of India, in 2007 when he remarked that geography no longer acts as a mere buffer. India recognizes the considerable geo-economic importance of the Northeastern part of the country as it is an entryway to East and Southeast Asia. There is a firm belief that through gradual incorporation of this area via cross-border market connectivity, the states in the Northeast can act as a connection between the Indian economy and the world's most fastest-growing and dynamic region (Dubey, 2014). To foster the progress of the Northeastern region, the Indian government has introduced various initiatives like the Trilateral Highway Project, the opening of the Stillwell Road, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit-cum-Transport Project, the Asian Railway Link, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, and the Myanmar-India-Bangladesh gas and oil pipeline project, among others.

The Trilateral Highway Project, a long-term initiative, aimed to connect India (Moreh) and Thailand (MaeSot) via Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Spanning around 1360 kilometers, the Trilateral Highway's path commences from Moreh (India) and travels through Tamu (Myanmar), Kalewa, and eventually reaches MaeSot (Thailand). Within this project scope, India made the decision to elevate the quality of the Kalewa-Yagyi road section, covering about 120 kilometers, to meet highway standards. Moreover, 71 bridges were planned for construction in the Tamu-Kalewa segment (Ministry of External Affairs, 2014). The inception of the road connecting Moreh-Tamu-Kalemyo-Kalewa was on February 13, 2001, with the transfer of responsibility to Myanmar occurring in 2009. However, the subsequent progress on the project from the Myanmar government's side has been limited. Following the 2015 elections, the Myanmar government reneged on their commitment, posing challenges to the successful project execution (Rahim, 2018). Simultaneously, the Indian authorities put forth a plan to elongate the highway to include Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Additionally, projects were initiated to improve the Still well Road, which links the North-Eastern region (Lekhapani-Jairampur) to Kunming (China) by way of Myanmar, with the goal of boosting economic and trade activities (Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 2020)

Apart from that the MEA (Ministry of External Affairs) established a Framework of Agreement with Myanmar during the month of April 2008. This agreement was aimed at executing the Kaladan Multimodal Transit-cum-Transport Project, with primary goal of connecting the land-locked region of Northeastern India to the Southern Coastline of Myanmar. It aims to upgrade the Sittwe (Southwestern coast of Myanmar) port and also envisages improving 225km long waterway between Sittwe and Setpyitpy in (Kaletwa) in Myanmar along the Kaladan. Along with this a 62 km long road from Setpyitpy in (Myanmar) to Lawngtlai (Mizoram) connecting with National Highway-54 is planned to be constructed. The development of the Sittwe port enables the people of the country, and particularly that of Mizoram to access the Myanmar market. It widens scope for the traders of Northeastern region to initiate trade with Myanmar and its neighbouring countries (Shekhar and Phukan, 2008).

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It is seen that over the last two decades, the Indian Government launched several ambitious initiatives within the LEP/AEP framework to enhance the Northeastern region. While a majority of these projects were inaugurated at the outset, there has been an inordinate delay ineffectively executing them. Of late, the Government of Assam took several initiatives to make the AEP more relevant. It has undertaken two fresh initiatives: a) the establishment of a new Department (Act East Department), and b) the creation of a research centre dedicated to Southeast Asia within Gauhati University. The Assam government has also achieved success in attracting investments from corporations such as Tata, Sun Pharma, Mahindra, NATCO Pharma, Patanjali, ITC, Dabur, etc., contributing to both infrastructural advancement and youth employment generation. In addition, globally recognized hotel chain business hubs like Radisson Blue, Taj, Vivanta, and Novotel have initiated their operations in Assam. There are also efforts made to improve the health facilities in the state. All India's leading hospital chains like Apollo, Narayana Health, Fortis and Sankar Netralaya already invested and started operating in the state (De, 2019). The Union Government also took steps to set up the AIIMS in Changsari, Kamrup. Another positive aspect under the AEP is the opening up of Consulates in Assam, e.g., Bhutan and Bangladesh started their consulates and issuing Visas. There is possibility for opening up similar Consulates at Guwahati, Imphal and Aizawl by the Government of Myanmar. Besides, the most remarkable step has been the signing of MOU in October, 2016 between the Government of Assam (Skill, Employment and Entrepreneurship Department) and Singapore based ITE Education Service. Another favorable development through the AEP is the inauguration of consulates in Assam; for instance, Bhutan and Bangladesh have initiated their consulates and visa issuance. There is a potential for the Government of Myanmar to open similar consulates in Guwahati, Imphal, and Aizawl. Furthermore, a significant achievement has been the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in October 2016 when the Skill, Employment, and Entrepreneurship Department of the Assam government entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with ITE Education Service from Singapore. Under the provisions of MOU, both the parties initiated the establishment of North East Skill Centre in Garchuk (Guwahati) in March, 2019, which aims to impart quality skill training on Retail, Beauty and Wellness, Hospitality- Food and Beverage Services and Hospitality-Housekeeping (first phase) to the unemployed youths of the region (The Hindu Business Line, 2017).

It deserves mention here that the India-Japan Act East Forum gained prominence on September 14, 2017 during a visit by Japanese Prime Minister Abe to India. This forum is an initiative of the Memorandum of Cooperation between the two countries. The Forum convened its first joint meeting on December 5, 2017 and resolved to concentrate on enhancing the modernization of the northeastern part of India. This effort includes improving connectivity, fostering industrial connections, developing infrastructure, and promoting interactions among people through tourism, culture, and sports. Again, on October 8, 2018

the Forum holds its second meeting and reaffirmed to further expand the ties between Japan and India focusing on the Northeastern part of the country. In addition, the Japanese Government also opted for cooperation in important projects across Northeast India. These include projects like Guwahati Water Supply Project and Guwahati Sewage Project, Sustainable Forest Management Project (Tripura), Forest Management Project (Nagaland), Bio-diversity Conservation and Forest Management Project (Sikkim), Technical Cooperation Project for Sustainable Agriculture and Irrigation (Mizoram),

Northeast Network Connectivity Improvement Project (Meghalaya), etc (Singh,2019).

Similar to these initiatives, it is essential for the other Northeastern states to extend cooperation in implementing the on-going projects and also to initiate innovative projects under the AEP. However, there are some internal problems faced by the states like Manipur and Mizoram in implementing the ambitious projects. It is seen that the participation of the local people is minimum and they are suspicious about the intention of the governments. It is worthwhile to mention here the case of a small village known as 'Haollenphai' located adjacent to Moreh town (Manipur). The Government of India decided to upgrade Moreh town as a smart city (under Smart City Plan) and decided to acquire land in one of the nearest village called Haollenphai so that the village becomes a trade hub for business with South East Asia. But till date the plan is not executed due to stiff opposition from the local people in acquiring land (Roy, 2015). The result is that the border town is lagging behind in all respects and it is creating a hurdle for realization of the AEP. In addition, there are instances of insurgency activities, extortions and community based agitations in and around Manipur which create troubles for vehicles to carry goods (Mukherjee, 2018). In case of Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project also, there is unrest among local people living in the Chin and Rakhine region (Myanmar) bordering South Mizoram. They looked at the

Project as a source of pollution, loss of livelihood and displacement. There are threats for complete blockade from the inhabitants of Lawngtlai (Southern part of Mizoram) as they did not receive proper compensation in return of their several amenities like Churches, community halls etc. for the project. Above all, the people are accusing for not consulting them about the implementation of the project or making them aware about the impact of such project. Even they are not part of any benefits resulting from the project. Such mistrust and lack of governance have created hazards for the smooth working of the project (Rahim,2018). What is required in all cases is getting the confidence of the people. Before launching any such project local populace need to be consulted, compensated and involved.

It has been seen over a period of time that in spite of its strategic importance and huge potential for trade and investment, Northeast India is yet to emerge as an economic corridor between Southeast Asia and India and it is evident from the low level of trade in all the Land Customs Stations (LCS) available in the region. At present, there are thirty one (31) LCS exist in entire region but out of these only nineteen (19) are functional, viz. Moreh (Manipur), Champhai (Mizoram); Srimantapur, Agartala, Manu and Old Ragnabazar (Tripura); Sutarkandi, Karimganj Steamer ghat and Ferry Station, Mankachar, Dhubri Steamerghat and Hattisar (Assam); Dawki, Shellabazar, Bholaganj, Borsora, Baghmara, Ghasuapara, Dalu and Mahendraganj (Meghalaya). However, LCSs like Demagiri (Mizoram); Muhurighat, Khowaighat and Dholaighat (Tripura); Mahisasan Railway Station, Silchar RMS, Golakganj, Ultapani, Darranga and Guwahati Steamerghat (Assam); Rynku (Meghalaya), Nampong (Arunachal Pradesh) are totally non-functional (Commissionerate of Customs (Preventive), North Eastern Region, Shillong). The problem lies with all the LCSs is the poor infrastructural facility, in adequate ware housing and cold chain facilities. It is urgently required to make the non-functional LCSs functional and also upgrade the existing LCSs with state-of-the-art integrated check-posts (ICPs) with all facilities like weigh-bridge, ware housing, parking facilities etc.

Along with the problem of LCSs, Northeast face a serious challenge in terms of transaction cost which is actually the result of varied macro-institutional factors like frequent strike and road blockades,

smuggling in borders, extortions, illegal collection of fees, rent seeking, clashes between groups and absence of concrete mechanism to mitigate those disputes (Panda,2017). Over the period of time it is seen that the national highways No. 39 (via Assam goes to Nagaland and connects Dimapur, Kohima, Imphal and Moreh) and 53 (enters Manipur from Barak Valley of Assam and connects Imphal via Jiribum) have been subjected to frequent blockades. In addition, the prevalence of corruption in all sectors and natural barriers in the form of landslides, flood etc in most of the areas of Northeastern part of India is further enhancing transaction cost.

Another great problem that is being cropped up in the entire Northeastern region is the issue of Inner Line Permit (ILP). On the one hand, the Government is trying to make free flow of goods and also promoting tourism for enhancing more and more linkages among people, while conversely there are severe protests and demonstrations in almost all the corners of Northeast India to issue ILP so as to protect tribal tradition and culture. Of late, the Inner Line Permit (ILP) was put into action in Manipur starting from January 1, 2020. This move positioned Manipur as the fourth northeastern state, following Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Nagaland, to adopt the ILP system. Notably, the Government of Meghalaya also collectively endorsed are solution to enforce ILP within the state. Additionally, in Assam, the All Assam Students' Union has initiated calls for the implementation of ILP. This situation gives rise to apprehensions about the comprehensive growth of the region, as these initiatives seem to contradict the spirit of the AEP. To make Northeast an economic hub of India, at first, the internal problems need to be resolved. The projects that are already initiated under the AEP and also under sub-regional cooperation are required to be completed taking local people into confidence. Steps need to be initiated to improve the inter-state connectivity so that maximum advantages can be achieved. Though the Government of India had taken several steps like Special Accelerated Road Development Programme-North East (2005) to address the issue of remoteness caused by limited connectivity, yet the problems still persists, e.g. Silchar (Assam)-Saurashtra (Gujrat) Mahasadak project, which was inaugurated two decades back (October 10, 1998) is yet to be completed. A stretch of 31 km (Balacherra to Harangajao) of the project has been pending a sit falls in the proposed Borail Wild Life Sanctuary. An apathetic attitude on the part of the Congress led Government both at the Centre and State was responsible for this in ordinate delay. It is true that such type of governance creates geo-political isolation and act as an impediment to the realization of the AEP. However, the issue has been resolved under the present BJP led government and there are expectations that the project will be accomplished within a year or so.

To overcome stagnation in the region it is imperative to develop an integrated market in the region and more attention is required to be paid on developing trade relations with the neighbouring countries. As for instance, Myanmar, which is rich in natural gas, may contribute significantly to boost the economy of Northeast India. The ONGC is presently engaged in the exploration of gas reserves in Myanmar, which could potentially be transported to India via the northeastern area by laying down pipelines (Sarma & Choudhury, 2018). Already the Government of India planned to extend gas network to Myanmar through Bangladesh. During the 19th National Conference on Corrosion Control in Bhubaneswar (2018) the Union Petroleum Minister Mr. Dharmendra Pradhan stated that the Government is planning to construct pipelines between Dhamra to Bangladesh and Siliguri to Bangladesh to export LNG gas as per requirement of the bordering countries (PTI, 2018). In addition,

it is also urgently required to initiate steps like creation of production centres on the basis of identifying the items available in the region as well as an assessment need to be made to select the items required for the region. It is possible for the states of the Northeastern region to import basic items like rice, pulse, onion, potatoes, betel nut etc from neighbouring countries like Myanmar. Similarly, there is huge potential for the region to export items like lime, cement, fish, fruits, salt, stone etc to the neighbouring nations. As for instance, there is a huge requirement for Burmese (Myanmar) Betel nut in South Assam as well as in other parts of India and taking advantage of minimum trade a syndicate has been engaged in illegal trade of betel nut in connivance with the government officials and this is causing a huge loss for the government exchequer. No steps have been initiated so far to check such illegal trade. It is due to high transaction cost that the trade in large scale has not been taken up and the business community is also reluctant to engross in the process. To overcome such problem it is important to remove bureaucratic hazards, improve inter-ministerial as well as centre-state coordination.

Despite such impediments there are numerous opportunities available to expand interactions and strengthen connections with nations in both Southeast Asia and South Asia. It is widely recognized that the Northeastern part of India resembles to the culture and tradition of many of the Southeast Asian nations since the pre-colonial days. Not only the physical features of Northeast India but the food and dress habits, dance and art forms, traditional social institutions and customs, weaving motifs, folklore etc of the people of Northeast India bear strong resemblance to the countries of Southeast Asia. At the religious sphere also similarity can be traced. Many Buddhist monasteries like Tawang Monastery, Bomdila Monastery, Chillipam Monastery, Rumtek Monastery, Pemayangtse Monastery, Ghoom Monastery,

Lachen Monastery, Dubdi Monastery etc available at Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim could be promoted as tourist hotspot to attract the devotees and other tourists from Southeast Asian nations.

Along with this, the initiation of educational exchange programmes could play a significant role. Various educational institutions in Northeast India, such as IITs, IIMs, NITs, medical colleges, and central universities could take the lead in establishing student and teacher exchange initiatives with educational institutions in South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. Organizing more events focused on student exchange programmes, lecture series, media exchange, and sports events between the northeastern part of India and neighbouring nations would further enhance the historical bonds. Urgent action is required from government bodies like the North Eastern Council to take comprehensive measures in promoting trade, culture, cooperation, and people-to-people connections between the northeastern region and its neighboring countries. Simultaneously, collaborative efforts from the Union Government, State Governments, and the general populace are crucial to ensure the implementation of the AEP as a dynamic policy.

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