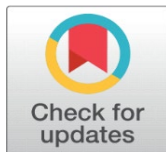
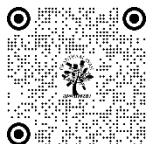


DECONSTRUCTING THE POLICIES FOR INDIA'S NORTH-EAST: UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY, ETHNICITY AND SUB-NATIONALISM

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ABSTRACT

The Look East Policy of 1991 and the rechristened Act East policy of 2014 are designed to have greater ties with India's neighbours to the east, especially South-east Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. While the 'Look-East' policy was designed to foster economic ties with India's neighbours surrounding the North-East region and address India's neglect of the Southeast Asian region, especially during the Cold War. The 'Act-East' policy was formulated to expand these ties to add deeper defence and security cooperation with the same neighbours and cover a wider Indo-Pacific region. 'The North-East' region is the playground for these experimentation and implementation of policies. This development has changed the dynamics of the region in terms of land rights, displacement, resource extraction, demographics and socio-cultural relations including difficulty in deconstructing the matrix of class and ethnicity in the north-east region.

This paper will try to understand the dynamics of development policies and their counter effects on the aspects of identity, ethnicity and sub-nationalism in the north-eastern region of India. It will also understand the after effects of the policy on the crisis of labour markets, migrant workers and will try to study, analyse and understand the existing schisms and limitations in the approach of implementation of government policies in the north-eastern region.

Keywords: Look-East Policy, Southeast Asia, Development, Identity, Ethnicity, North-East India

1. INTRODUCTION

The North-East region is significant for its geo-political location and its importance increases with its tri-junctional value i.e., of the South, East and Southeast Asia. With rich bio-diversity zones and abundant water, mineral and forest resources, the region assumes great value for its inhabitants and the rest of India. The regions people are ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse and this diversity has mostly resulted in clashes and competing territorial nationalisms. The regions richness in natural resources, bio-diversity, ethnic and cultural diversity hasn't helped it to reach high development pedestals, rather it has been trapped and is languishing in a state of neglect and void. The region is considered remote, less developed and isolated and is connected with the rest of India with '21 Km' corridor called the 'Siliguri Corridor' (Deka, 2019).

India's domestic and international policies in the North-Eastern region have been guided by the socio-politico-economic factors affecting the region. The most appropriate example of this fact is the 'Look East' policy of the 1990's

and the current extension of the same policy i.e., the 'Act East' policy. The policies major goal has been to build better ties with the Southeast Asian nations that comprises, trade, cultural, defence and strategic relations. For this to happen smoothly, the North East has been chosen as the 'gateway' (Ziipao, 2018).

2. DEVELOPMENT OF NORTH EAST REGION: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The North East region came under the erstwhile provinces of Bengal and Assam provinces of the British colonial era. Assam separated and earned the status of a province in 1874. Prior to the British era, the region was divided into various kingdoms and chieftdoms. With the exception of the Ahoms of Assam, Meiteis of Manipur, the remaining six states of the North-East region do not have enough written historical account of their tribes, culture and traditions. These historical accounts include the state of development and progress of the people inhabiting the region, and thus this section would primarily deal with development accounts of the region in the post-colonial and contemporary era. Post-independence the North East region was known as 'Assam and Princely States of Manipur and Tripura'.

Nayak and Mishra (2013), have attempted to portray the position of North Eastern states in matters as multidimensional as possible. These matters are divided into eight aspects of development. They are; Infrastructure, Social & Institutional infrastructure, Industry Performance, Service sector and accessibility and openness of the region, Human development, Employment, Privatization of industry and investment and Public efforts expressed in terms of govt. expenditure to facilitate promotion, maintenance and governance of development activities. In their findings through the method of 'Principal Component Analysis', and measuring the indices of prosperity and ranking various states accordingly, they reveal that, Tripura has done well in industrialization and the state of Assam has improved on privatization. The study further reveals that the in the entire North East Region lags behind in infrastructure development

Srikanth (2016), explains the reasons behind India being compelled to pursue the 'Look East' and 'Act East' policies. He cites some of the prominent reasons for India's adoption of a multitude of options, of which the Look East Policy is an important component. These are, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India's economic crisis in the early 1990's, recession in the US and European markets, China's rise as a powerful economy, expansion of the ASEAN and India's inability to steer the SAARC to the level it intended to. Hence, looking eastwards and expanding its economic interests were seen as natural options for India (Devare et al 2014; Mishra 2014; Bhattacharya 2011; Chakraborty and Ray 2014; Haokip 2015, as cited in Srikanth 2016).

3. DEVELOPMENT IN THE NORTH-EAST REGION: IDENTITIES, ETHNICITY AND SUB-NATIONALISM

While various scholarships have given the North East region as an advantageous geo-political region for India, however, there are others that have cited it as a locational disadvantage, primarily reason could be because of the narrow Siliguri corridor, the demographic diversity and the various socio-political and economic problems existing in the region. This disadvantage due to its location, faced by the region has enabled the emergence of the pre-dominance of 'infrastructural imaginations' of the policy discourse of the region. To cite an example, the 'North East Vision 2020' document related to the development of the region, has centred on the development of 'infrastructure' in the region. The document and other official discourse have identified the region as 'development deficit region'. The 'Vision 2020' document puts faith in the infrastructure development and considers it as the best way to improve the lives of the people and economic growth (DONER, 2020)

The 'Look East' Policy that has been rechristened as the 'Act East' policy as mentioned proposes to develop infrastructure in the region, that involves construction of roads, highways, air connectivity, rail networks thus easing the trade routes and building infrastructure for border trade. This infrastructural expansion policy has led to a majority of the Govt. of India Urban Development Flagship schemes focusing in the region. The related data reveals that nine cities of the Northeast region have been declared as 'Smart Cities'. These are, Agartala, Guwahati, Imphal, Kohima, Namchi, Gangtok, Pasighat, Itanagar and Aizawl. A total budget of Rs 14,124 crore for 464 projects has been sanctioned in the first phase as part of the Smart City Mission in the North-eastern region. However, this massive 'infrastructural mission' is being questioned for the rationality and the premises under which this mission will be beneficial for the region. Or is

this project of the government of India benefitting the larger Indian foreign policy and not the NER? Srikanth (2017), writes;

“The Look (Act) East Policy is conceived more as a national policy for promoting trade, technology and investment opportunities; development of North-eastern states was not its primary concern. It is after the initiation of sub regional forums like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM), Mekong- Ganga Cooperation (MGC), etc., that the North East is being projected as a gateway to East and South East Asia”.

Some of the prominent economic corridors and connectivity projects that are planned and proposed by the sub regional forums are; AH1 and AH2 endorsed by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) are passing through north-eastern states (UNESCAP, 2003). It is these projects because of which the Indian government has been giving reassurance to the region that, once these projects would complete, the region will flourish with development, trade, business and its status as a landlocked region would go away as the increased connectivity would solve this problem (Shepherd et al, 2011). While there are contestations, doubts, and scepticism regarding the connectivity of ‘North East’ region with the Southeast Asian region, the most critical task however is to assess the foundational doctrine on which the rationale of such ‘developmental interventions’ are premised (Deka, 2019).

There is an evolutionary trend visible, when it comes to the ‘Look East’ policy, a trend that has led to an economic engagement that is better and greater with India’s eastern neighbours, and that has been building strategic partnerships and security cooperation with the countries of Far East and Southeast Asian countries – such as Japan and Vietnam. Considering these facts, the current government under Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided to concentrate on improving its relation with ASEAN and the East Asian countries. The problem of insurgency was also targeted by this policy, as the region opens to the rest of Southeast Asia, there arrives an opportunity for greater interchange of goods and services, people to people contacts and more opportunities for prosperity and development. India’s eastward thrust enables interlocking the sea and land elements. Thereby, connecting the ‘Look East’ policy to the military, political and economic components (Bajpayee, 2017).

According to some studies, activities under the Look East and Act East policies have resulted in changes that have affected the broader network of markets, capital, power, identities, ethnicity and composition of labour markets and mobility. Chatterjee (2014) explains this change as a tussle between the Indian states’ conceptualization of the LEP (Look East Policy) and the local shareholders needs and requirements. He writes, there is a possibility that, without the consideration of shared cultural resources and investment in people to people contacts, the LEP may create immense wealth, but still bypass the main stakeholders i.e., the people of the region.

Similarly, it is also evident that, successive governments in India have looked towards the east, the concerns of the local people of the Northeast region have been overlooked. Thus, despite the almost thirty plus years of the ‘Look East’ policy and now it becoming the Act east policy, the economic condition of the people of the region, by and large remains the same.

Haokip (2011) explains that there are a few prerequisites that need to be highlighted, before any meaningful trading activities begin, the region needs to focus on sectors like agricultural productivity. To ensure the production of quality goods, processing industries need to be set up, so that these can sustain the demands of the international markets in acceptable prices. There is also the need to revamp the entire network of roads, rail, communication and air transport. Without fulfilling these prerequisites, the Look East Policy will not benefit the region and will merely act as a corridor between mainland India and Southeast Asia. It seems the Look East policy or the Act East policies have been designed usher in development and change in the Northeast region and a rapid transformation of the region is expected in the region. This transformation will heal the damage inflicted by decades of insurgency and sub-nationalism and enable the region to attain the broader network of power, capital and markets (The Wire, 2017). However, there exist many a complications and impediments to governance in the Northeast and if those can be addressed first, it will be easier for the LEP to be implemented and its goals and benefits can reach to the wider stakeholders of the region.

One of the most noticeable lacuna of the Look East policy has been the neglect of the ‘communitarian understanding’ of the region, as the region gives priority to community claims rather than those of the market. Thus, it is easy for the policymakers in New Delhi to chart out various policies relating or affecting the North East region, however, the terms of the policies have to be reconciled with the communities of the North East region. The Look East policy seems to be going through the lacuna that has not been able to involve the communities of the region and this has made the policy a tentative policy, rather than a long term one. The changes in economic development of the Indian state also led to changes

in the patterns of economic governance in the North East India. Whether it is change in the planned development in the first decade of the post-independence era or the New Economic Policy of the 1991, the patterns of economic relations and governance did affect the North East region also.

Maaker and Tula (2020) give an account of how the effects of the new policy led to changes in land ownership and utilization patterns. One of the most noticeable change was the replacement of 'shifting cultivation' or 'Jhum' by the 'settled cultivation' and 'individual ownership' replacing 'community based land management'. The scholars further observe community based land management is crucial for the societies of Northeast India as land is intrinsically linked to social life, cultural heritage, religious convictions and economic sustenance of its communities. Thus, this further developing conflict between market-induced individualized values and an egalitarian community. The conflict then leads to an individual centric value system that ushers in class formation, in what were earlier relatively a strong and united egalitarian societies. This emergence of formal laws and policies from the Indian state encourages the shift in land ownership and land utilization, because the benefits are reaped by the rich and powerful and the state itself. However, this can be destructive for the larger numbers of the indigenous population and thus lead to unsustainable use of natural resources. These changes have been responsible for the class formation and ethnic conflicts among the communities and immigrants in the region.

It is very well understood that the development policies like the 'Look East' or 'Act East' will better access to market, development and there would be peace, prosperity and progress; however, many a sections of the society in the North East region are apprehensive about the mass influx of labours into the region and how this can affect the demography of the region, thus adding to the already existent problems of the region. There have been agitations against railway expansions in Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. Popular culture and mediums like films and social media are expressing this fear of indigenous people being neglected and side-lined in their own homeland due to the so called developmental policies of the state. One of the best examples can be cited of a Manipuri film named '23rd Century' that depicts the future of Manipur being controlled by non-Manipuri's, resulting from the massive influx of people from outside of Manipur. Expressions such as these have led to the demand of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) and this demand has been expressed by both the hill and valley communities, and are in temporal alliance, who are otherwise in conflicting zones on issues like citizenship and land rights (The Wire, 2017).

The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 highlights the Inner line exemptions, for the hill states of the North East. The exemption has been in existence since almost 150 years and was given for the protection of the indigenous culture and society of the region. Protecting the unique linguistic and cultural identity of the people of the region are its main goals. As the majority of mainland India is oblivious to the reality of the North East, especially the rural areas, it has become a requirement that there is a need to understand that the region. This is because of the sharp contrast of the life, people, culture and language of the region in comparison to the urbanised capitals of the mainland India. The villages of the region harbour the simplicity of tribal life that revolves on traditions and folklores of the past. The Inner Line has so far protected the hills of the Northeast as they could have been swamped by people from the plains, who are predominantly driven by mercantile greed (Hindustan times, 2019).

With the rampant developmental policies associated with the Look East and the Act East Policies, the issue of protection of the indigenous communities from the interference of the outsiders (mainly non-tribals from mainland India) comes into play. Thus, it is evident that the indigenous communities want to resurrect the ILP system in places it is not there as was done during the British times, and protect their unique identity and culture. According to Mitra and Samaddar (2017),

"The ILP was introduced by the British to demarcate some areas inhabited by communities rendered as 'savage uncontrollable communities.' More importantly, the ILP was supposed to enact a split between capital and pre-capital. Now, despite the fact that in the post-colonial liberalised regime the 'split' has been cemented to a large extent, the demand of maintaining 'otherness' through the ILP resonates among multiple erstwhile 'savage' communities".

They further argue that, probing the politics related to development and the question of indigenous communities rights and identity protection doesn't outrightly reject the authority of the Indian state or the capital flow associated with it, but it seeks to question the influx of outsiders in the form of mobile labour communities and how they may become a threat to the indigenous communities. This in turn may create a demographic imbalance and reproduce a local hierarchy at multiple levels.

4. QUESTIONING THE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY CALLED 'RESOURCE EXTRACTION'

As far as resource extraction is concerned, there is a dichotomy in terms of support for it and voices against. There is no unilateral tirade against it; if there are communities resisting against it, then there are government officials, elected representatives, community leaders and tribal elites supporting it. At times even insurgent groups support this extraction, thus further leading to 'questioning of the collective opinion of a community when class differences have emerged over time' (ibid. 2017).

There are voices among the tribes too, that support the utilization of the vast resources for the welfare and development of the people. For example, a member of the Angami Naga community said it is useless and foolish to sit on resources and not utilize it for our own development. Some of the controversial cases on resources extraction that have come in national media are; rampant coal and oil mining in the region, the Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary and the infamous rat-hole mining in the coal mines of Meghalaya. The case of resource extraction in the North East is different from other parts of India. Anthropologist and lawyer, Dolly Kikon has grown up in the militarised Nagaland and has shaped her studies on resource extraction. She observes that, community life in the region has been greatly affected by the prolonged armed conflicts and insurgency and the resource extractive regime was existent since the British rule and has continued since independence. Assam has been one of the most highly resource extracted states in India. Between 2014 and 2015, India's crude oil contribution from Assam was 12%, natural gas production was 9%, and the state has been recognized as a lucrative site for the extraction of hydrocarbons, coal bed methane and shale (Kikon, 2019).

Sanjib Baruah writing on the political economy of the hydropower in the Eastern Himalayas, that are part of the North-East observes that though the dams in the North-East are being constructed, however, the produce from the dams is being used somewhere else, that is other part of India. This disproportion in the distribution of potential gains is what the Baruah feels accounts for a deficit in legitimacy in India's ambitious hydropower development plans in the region (Baruah, 2012).

Corruption in developmental projects and schemes is another issue that needs serious focus and that cannot remain untouched. In the last decade or so, there have been reports of Central funds that is meant for the North-East, going into the wrong hands. According to the GOI (Government of India) proposal (25 March 2013), a post of joint director in the CBI was created in order to check the unabated leakage of funds meant for North-East region (Kazi, 2013).

5. CONCLUSION

After understanding the dynamics of development policies and their counter effects on identity, ethnicity and sub-nationalism in the North Eastern region of India, it is quite evident that the policies of 'Look East' and 'Act East' cannot fully erase the fault lines existing in the region. While the North Eastern people are a minority within the territory of India, however, they are a majority in the North Eastern region and there is a precariousness of the existence of minority non-tribal communities like the Bengali Hindu's, Bengali Muslims, Chakma refugees in Arunachal Pradesh and Reang refugees in Tripura. It is also clear that the Look East Policy will benefit only the Indian state, if the communitarian aspects of development are not considered by the government of India, therefore the people of the region, communities tribes have to be involved in any decision making relating to land and any other resource extraction. The issue of demographic imbalance due to the large influx of migrant labours too has to be understood and it also may further lead to gender imbalance as most of the in-migrants are males.

The issue of identity has also dominated the region for a long time. Non-reconciliation of identity issues can be an impediment for any kind of development or progress. There are indigenous question marks over Chakmas, Brus, Bengali Muslims, and Bengali Hindu's, who have been facing opposition from local hierarchical power systems. Unless these questions are addressed and solved, infusion of more capital and implementations of development policies could result in inequality in the region.

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