



## EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S LOOK EAST POLICY: AN OVERVIEW FROM HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Biraj Jyoti Kalita

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of History, Gauhati University,

Email ID: [birajkalitadc@gmail.com](mailto:birajkalitadc@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** India's "Act East Policy", which introduced in the early 1990s as "Look East Policy" by the Government of India is now an important part of India's Foreign Policy (IFP). In fact, the Look East Policy is a paradigm shift in India's perspective towards South Eastern Asia. However, since the decade of 1990s, India's "Look Act East policy" has achieved many benefits and led India's economic development with increasing bi-lateral and multi-lateral trade and commercial relationship with South East Asian countries. It has also increased people-to-people connection in the Northeastern region with Southeast Asia. Although, India's "Look East Policy" has a huge potential for economies development of the Northeast region through trade cooperation with South East Asian countries, there are equally challenging hurdles for socio-economic and political situation of Northeastern region.

**Key Words:** *Look-East, Act -East, Policy, Northeast, Southeast.*

**Introduction:** The "Look East Policy" has been a significant part of India's international diplomacy since the year of 1991. This policy has evolved from diplomatic and economic policy with Southeast Asia to safeguard ties across the whole Asia-Pacific zone. However, it became the most successful strategic policy of India during the Post-Independent Period in the context of new foreign policy of India. It is interesting to note that the "Look East Policy" was enacted by the Prime Minister P.V. Narsimha Rao (1991-1996). All subsequent governments have supported the policy and have built on it. 'ASEAN' [ Association of Southeast Asian Nations ] and India, said I.K. Gujral to an audience in Jakarta in 1996, when he was India's External Affairs Minister, 'are no awkward strangers , we have been neighbours and friends in time , space and existence for as long back as we can remember.'<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Indian Government had taken the "Look East Policy" due to strategic and commercial interests towards Northeast India. Therefore, the research paper attempts to explain the political diplomacy behind the "Look East Policy" and its impact on socio-cultural and economic settings of the Northeast region.

### **Objective of the Paper**

Drawing an interdisciplinary approach, this paper tries to understand the evolution process of India's "Look East Policy" into "Act East Policy". Therefore, the main objectives of the proposed research are thus:

1. To understand the historical background of the India's Look East Policy.
2. To evaluate the various changes of India's Look East Policy.

3. To understand the development phase of Northeast India under the Look East Policy.

### **Research Question of the Paper**

In order to attain its main objectives, the following research questions have been formulated for investigation during the course of this research:-

1. To what extent does 'change' reflect in the evolution process of India's Look East Policy to Act East Policy?
2. What are the problems and challenges faced by Indian Government to implementation of the Look East Policy?

### **Methodology of the Paper**

The data for the research paper have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. Several primary sources were collected from Government documents, publication and reports such as Annual Reports of the Ministry of Indian Government etc. Similarly, several secondary data were drawn from books, article published on national and international journals, newspapers.

The information collected from different sources have been subjected to deductive method and thereafter, authentic information has been used for this paper. Moreover, historical perspective has taken for this study.

### **Discussion**

It is found that the Look East Policy has emerged as a major thrust phase of Indian diplomatic and foreign policy in the Post- Cold war period. Then, the end of the Cold War brought about rapid changes in political, economic and diplomatic strategic environment of the whole world. As result of the Cold War, importance of regional integration has gained among the nation states. India also has focused on regional diplomatic relationship with Southeast Asia countries. It is also noted that the attempts at regional cooperation from 1949 to 1955 where many conferences were organized and attended by India to find out possibilities of such cooperation.<sup>2</sup> These earlier attempts by India ,since independence ,towards regional integration in Asia however failed.<sup>3</sup> A number of political and ethnic factors such as the inter-state tension, ethnic conflict , international tension were responsible for the failure of these attempts. Later on, India became successful to the purpose of regional cooperation with the formation of SAARC [ South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation] in December1985. It provides a platform for the South East Asian Nations to work together in a spirit of friendship and mutual understanding. While the Cold War came to end in 1989, the world appeared to be standing at the door of new era. Hence, India would seek new opportunities and look towards new diplomatic relationship with Southeast Asia countries. It meant thinking out of the box and seeking fresh paradigms to build a matrix of external relations in tune with the brave new world that seemed to be shaping up all around.<sup>4</sup> However, India's effort to regional integration and economic cooperation moved in the early 1990's with implantation of the New Economic Policy in 1991by the Union Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh . The thrust of the New Economic Policy has opened a new door to India's regional

cooperation with the South East Asia countries. As result of these attempts, the Look East Policy (LEP) initiated by Indian Government then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1991 was a real turning point in India's foreign policy as well as economic policy. Initiated along with the New Economic Policy of 1991, the Look East Policy marked as significant strategic policy for India to make economic and political cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. The Look East Policy was officially launched in the year 1991.<sup>5</sup> But the term "Look East Policy" was mentioned first time in the Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs in 1995-96.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting to note that India's Look East Policy went through the two significant phase. In the early part of 1990's, commercial and trade interests has been a prime mover of India's Look East Policy. India has focused to maintain a trade and commercial engagements with Southeast Asian countries. Moreover, the emergence of China as Global Economy power-centre and the growth of ASEAN[ Association of South Asian Nations] provided further drastic impetus for India at East as a possible avenue for trade and commercial engagements .Since the initiation of the Look East policy in 1991, bilateral relations between India and ASEAN have progressed rapidly.<sup>7</sup> India's ties with ASEAN were upgraded to a Sectoral Dialogue Partnership in March 1993in the three areas, namely, trade, investment and tourism.<sup>8</sup> It may be noted that the increasing cooperation between India and ASEAN has led to strengthening of not only trade and business interest but also policy of security strategy which resulted in India's membership to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996. The increasing interests of India in the strategic discourse of the Asia –Pacific region has led a step towards the objective of regional peace and stability of the Southeast Asian region. Further, India came to negotiating with Free Trade Agreement (FTAs) in order to increase its economic and commercial link with Southeast Asia countries. There are a number of bi-lateral and multi-lateral agreements that provide the foundation for India's growing relations with Southeast.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that the partnership with ASEAN, based on free trade and certain common security interests, makes it possible for India to interact with the South East Asian community of 500 million people with a combined GDP of \$750 billion as a collectivity.<sup>10</sup> Thus, India's Look East Policy has played a historical role for the development of economic engagements with Southeast Asia.

Moreover, the second phase of this policy had a new dimension for the development of Northeast India region. Moreover, the Northeast region of India has become a significant region due to its geographical proximity to Southeast Asia in India's effort to "Look East" which focus on trade and commercial engagements with Southeast Asian nations. With the launch of the Look East policy ,India sees the region not as cult-de-sac but as a gateway to the East and thereby attempt to link the region with Southeast Asia through network of pipelines, road, rail and air connectivity.<sup>11</sup> However, Indian policy makers came to realize that the benefits of connectivity of Northeast India region with Southeast Asia countries as a prerequisite for development of India .In order to make the Look East policy relevant for the Northeast India region, Central Government of India has more emphasized on enhancing connectivity of the region with Southeast Asia countries through all modes

of infrastructure development such as land routes, railways, air connectivity etc. India focus on sub-regional economic cooperation such Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Regional Economic Forum (BCIM Forum) with a view to reinforce the Look East policy and boost the development of the Northeastern region.<sup>12</sup>

However, more than two decade after the India's Look East policy, new NDA Government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi brings a renewed focus on its neighbours and change the earlier policy of "Look East" to "Act East". During the East Asia Summit on 14th November, 2014 in Myanmar, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stated that his Government are being made to "Act East" – a change from the "Look East policy". It may be noted that East has received primacy in Narendra Modi's NDA Government from the beginning due to security and economic significance of the region. It is in this context, as India's "gateway" to Southeast and East Asia, that the Northeastern region as a vital connector is now being pushed vigorously.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, 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.<sup>14</sup>

However, the role of Northeast India region in the policy of Act East is negligible till date. When the Look East Policy has been a tremendous success when looked from India's point of view, it has failed to enhance the trade and commercial development of the Northeastern states of India. Similarly, this policy does not clearly assign a definite agenda for the people of the Northeast states of India to participate in it. However, there is considerable scope to active Northeast India's cultural diplomacy to provide necessary backup to its trade and economics engagements in the region. Further, the reopening of the Stilwell Road can make a huge contribution to success for the bilateral relationship between India and China. Moreover, this road will bring Southeast Asia countries much closer to the Northeast India region through Myanmar. Hence, the Bangladesh corridor can provide an opportunity to the Northeast States of India as a captive market for the trade and business of Bangladesh. Thus, India's Act East policy can create a space where bordering states will play a proactive role for the promotion of cross-border business and economic cooperation with the Northeast India. Thus, the success of the policy depends on the commitment of government and policy makers of India to implement the proposed plans under the policy of Act East. The government of India needs to actively engage with local level regional government for peaceful solving the problems such as insurgency, ethnic conflict etc. of the Northeastern States of India.

**Conclusion:** The paper is revealed that the policy of Look East plays a vital role in the development of India's Foreign Policy towards Southeast Asia. As result of the Look East policy, there are a number of bi-lateral and multi-literal agreements, which provide the foundation for India's economies and diplomatic strategy with Southeast Asia. Similarly, the Look East policy of India can usher in a new era of development for the Northeast States of India. The paper is clearly revealed that the policy makers

needs to connect the Northeast region with Southeast Asia for international trade and economies engagements through the roads, air connectivity and rail-line under the Act East policy. The paper also emphasizes that reopening the “Stilwell Road” will transform the Northeast India from landlocked entity to land-linked entity which hold a huge boost for economies of the entire Northeast India.

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