

Look East Policy: Prospects And Challenges With Special Reference To Manipur

Dr. Samom Tejbanta Singh^{1*}, Dr. Subhaarati Oinam², Dr. S. Dharmen Singh³

^{1*}Assistant Professor, Department of History, D.M. College of Arts Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal, Manipur

²Assistant Professor, Department of Education, N.G. College, Imphal, Manipur

³Associate Professor, Department of History, D.M. College of Arts, Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal, Manipur

Citation: Dr. Samom Tejbanta Singh, et.al (2024), Look East Policy: Prospects And Challenges With Special Reference To Manipur, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(2) 1744 - 1747

Doi: 10.53555/kuev.v30i2.8909

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Look East Policy was first initiated by then Prime Minister of India P.V. Narasimha Rao in 1992 and has become a policy of continuous consideration since then. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 which end the long era of Cold war forced India to change its foreign policy with the emergence of unipolar world scenario. The initiation of Look East Policy (LEP) by India is a turning point in the quest for making a foray into the domain of East Asia in general and South East Asia in particular. LEP is not simply guided by trade as the primed motive but larger politico-economic interests of India vis-à-vis emerging geo-political reconfiguration which developed after the post-cold war scenario. In this context the paper is an attempt to trace the historical background /factors responsible for the implementation of the 'Look East Policy' by India after the collapse of Soviet Union in particular and Post Cold war geo-political and economic development in general. It is also a humble attempt to highlight the developmental prospect and challenges for the North Eastern states especially Manipur after the implementation of 'Look East Policy.'

Key Words: ASEAN, Manipur, Challenges, Policy, Prospects.

Introduction

Many of the South Asian countries in the second half of the twentieth century, after decolonization, have faced the same complications of making their own foreign policy. India is not the exceptional, after India got independence in 1947 her foreign policy is going to the westward direction. In the vision of India's policy makers, the east remained closed as it adopted a policy which is keeping aloof from South East Asian politics. India's keen interest after the Post Cold War period towards the closer politico-economic ties through 'Look East Policy' is a watershed mark in her foreign policy. As the phrase 'Look East Policy' itself suggests, it is India's quest for making a venture into the domain of East Asia in general and South East Asia in particular. It is generally accepted proposition that any policy does not emerge in a vacuum. The policy is guided by multitude of inter-related national interests. This policy is not simply guided by trade as the primed motive but larger politico-economic interests of India vis-à-vis emerging geo-political reconfiguration which developed after the post-cold war scenario. In this context the paper is an attempt to trace the historical background /factors responsible for the implementation of the 'Look East Policy' by India after the collapse of Soviet Union in particular and Post Cold war geo-political and economic development in general. It is also a humble attempt to highlight the developmental prospect and challenges for the North Eastern states especially Manipur after the implementation of 'Look East Policy.'

India's foreign policy & LEP

India's willingness and desire to exercise the role of a major power in shaping world politics can be traced back to the early phase of its foreign policy that revolves around the preservation of India's territorial integrity and freedom of policy and promotion of international peace.¹ With these objectives in view, India adopted the policy of Non-alignment under the leadership of the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru during the peak of Cold war period between two superpowers having two contradictory ideologies in the backdrop of mutual distrust, hatred, suspicion, military alliances, arm race and competition for global

domination. It was against this backdrop of bloc-politics that Nehru adopted Non-Alignment as a foreign policy alternative to find a space for third world countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America (ASAFLA).²

The cold war period shaped the economic and political relationship between India and ASEAN.³ In term of security concern there were also differences between India and countries of ASEAN. The inclination of India's policies towards Soviet model and adoption of a closed or command socialist economy characterized by quantitative restrictions on import and tariffs posed problem for ASEAN countries, which had followed overtly market oriented economy. "The inward-looking economy of India and rapidly changing economic strategies of the ASEAN states pushed them away from one another."⁴

One of the major factors responsible for the initial lukewarm relations between India and ASEAN was the existence of the United States of America (USA) and United Kingdom (UK) led military alliances such as South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)⁵, Central Treaty Organization (CENTO); and Five-Power Defence Arrangement among Australia, Britain, Malaysia, Singapore and New Zealand led India to regard ASEAN as "West's Trojan Horse" and stooges of western imperialism."⁶ U.S. 'sphere of influence' in the Pacific Rim and joining by the South East Asian countries such as the Philippines and Thailand in the U.S. led military alliances in SEATO and in Cento by Pakistan was seen by India as the formation of new alliances and political affiliations and ideological groupings in South Asia and South East Asia (SEA)⁷ which were also contradictory to India's policy of non-alignment.

During Cold War Period India was preoccupied by its own security and development problems, this led the contact between India and countries of South- East Asia (SEA) marginal. During this period India's strategy was confined within the 'sub-continent' as a result of humiliating defeat in the hand of China in 1962 border dispute. The 1962 border conflict with China, India- Pakistan war of 1965 made India to confine itself within South Asia. In 1971 India involved in the East – Pakistan crisis. The intervention of India and subsequent liberation of Bangladesh⁸ was regarded by ASEAN as interference in Pakistan's internal affairs; there were anxieties within ASEAN about consequence of a dominant, Soviet-back India.⁹ It was in the middle of the 1980's that saw some changes in ASEAN perception toward India and vice-versa, which could pave the way for meaningful relations. During this period India began a qualitative change in its perception towards SEA region in general and ASEAN in particular for economic and strategic reasons.¹⁰

Disintegration of Soviet Union was a big blow for India not only in political, economic and strategic terms but also for its foreign policy. The disintegration meant loss of all time trusted friend and ally who supported India at various issues. Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries were India's leading trade partner and a big market for Indian goods which had lost with Soviet collapse and disintegration.¹¹ In the post cold war period both India and Russia faced serious economic crisis. At this time the Russian's foreign policy at this stage became west centric.¹² Therefore in the early part of the post cold war period the politico-economic interest of Russia towards India is somewhat diverted and low. During this period India is also facing the same problem of economic crisis. She desperately needed an ally which could fill up the politico-economic 'vacuum' created by the collapse of Soviet Union. Another factor for searching a new ally by India was the outbreak of Gulf War in 1991 just after the end of Cold War. India realized that it would be disastrous only to rely on the Gulf region as a source in order to fulfill its ever-increasing energy demands and requirements.

India started looking eastward for a viable alternative source of energy along with other strategic purposes in mind. It is India's internal economic compulsion along with the geo-strategic implications of the Asia-Pacific region to India's geo-political interests that compelled her to initiate the 'Look East Policy' under the stewardship of Prime Minister P.V.Narasimha Rao.¹³ Thereafter the relationship between India and ASEAN became much better comprising during Cold War period. In the fourth ASEAN summit held at Singapore on January 1992 India became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN. On 14 December 1995 at the fifth ASEAN summit, three years after India became a sectoral dialogue partner; India was elevated to the status of a full dialogue partner, and in 1996 India became a member of Asian Regional Forum (ARF).¹⁴

Look East Policy and Manipur: Challenges and Prospects

There are multiple challenges for Manipur with the implementation of Look East Policy. Historically speaking, Manipur was never part of the great empires of the sub-continent, and it was only when the British advances into Assam at the beginning of the 19th century and in Manipur in the last quarter of the same century; the region was scarcely brought under the umbrella of construct 'India'.¹⁵ After India's independence the relationship between India and Manipur are not going smoothly. The Manipuris were frequently claim in the rest of the country that they are treated as either foreigners or second class citizens. With the widespread ignorance about the region by successive Indian government on one hand and on the other hands even on the part of well-educated Indians has also encouraged the mentality of 'we and them' which has been a significant contributory factors for the rise of armed movement and civil unrest.¹⁶ Geographically speaking, the North-Eastern region especially Manipur provides a unique access for India towards South East Asia and Indo-China. The region shares an international border of over 1500 km. with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, China and Nepal.¹⁷ In contrast, northeast joined to India only by the link of the Siliguri corridor, a narrow neck no more than 14kms wide, so that now only 1% of its borders are shared with India.¹⁸

When India economic policy marked a paradigm shift from west to eastward orientation, the people in general are very optimistic about the imminent economic prosperity and advantages that the LEP will bring to the North East Region.¹⁹ These kinds of expectations are more among the people of Manipur than any others people of the other states because of its historical reason. In *Puyas*²⁰ some prophecies were written down, and in Manipuri society particularly among the Meiteis,²¹ it is generally believed that these prophecies will come true. For example, *Kangla Sha mamangda angouba makok kangani* (meaning white men would be killed in front of Kangla Sha, the sacred symbol of the royal palace and this would lead to the doom of Manipuri civilization.) This prophecy is proven true when Mr. Quinton²² along with four of his associates were killed in the front of Kangla Sha. This incident was the immediate cause for the outbreak of Anglo-Manipur War of 1891 in which Manipur was defeated and conquered by the British.²³ Another prophecy which is passed down from one generation to another is the '*Nongpok Thong Hangba*' i.e. opening of 'Eastern Door' which would eventually open after a long gap of close. It is generally believed among the masses that after the opening of 'Eastern Door' something miraculous would happen to Manipur which led to as era of peace and prosperity. When the implementation of LEP was announced the people of Manipur believed that the prophecy will come true very soon.

People are hopeful as well as excited that the LEP will be the turning point in the economic aspect of Manipur. Even some section of the society in some states of North-East India complained that the proposed trans-Asian Highway²⁴ do not pass through their home states directly. Such as response with high hopes by the people of the North-Eastern states vis-à-vis India's LEP can be explained by the notion that the horizon of trade and commerce would be expanded at an unprecedented rate and free interactions with the nations of culturally similar South East Asia which will lead to an era of economic regeneration and prosperity.²⁵ There is considerable scope of improving trade in certain local products such as rice, tea, spices etc, handloom and handicrafts. Undoubtedly, Manipur would be emerged as a producing and exporting region in South Asia and SEA if LEP would be implemented properly.²⁶ By virtue of its richness in biodiversity, tourism might be one of the most profitable ventures in the region. Upto some extend the problem of unemployment facing by Manipur can be solved if the above ventures are implementing in the proper manner. It is high time that the employment and other opportunities of the common people of both hills and valley areas should be new priorities. This will call for review of the existing social values, economic and political institutions in tune with democratic principles and required of modern time. This is a concern for the governments of India and Manipur as well as politics in the state in general and the hills in particular. The state government and people should be a part in the decision-making process in the Act East Policy and other activities concerning Manipur by the government of India.²⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that the most apparent reason of the policy shift from west to eastward orientation is from the fact that India's gradual realization of the North East region in general and Manipur in particular as a potential economic zone, apart from being a corridor to South East Asia. India's Look East Policy is a significant step for economic development of North-East India in particular and the country in general. This policy aims to improve the economic backwardness of the region and many more. However, Manipur should not be a mere transit route and market of the goods from the rest of India and neighbouring countries. To put it concisely, Manipur, which has been witnessing drastic changes due to the transformation at the global as well as regional level, needs rigorous state and intellectual intervention to assess and evaluate the ideologies, attitude and culture informing that condition, otherwise Manipur will be a clear loser with serious consequences on the economy, culture, health and subsequently even life of the present and future generation. Time will tell us whether LEP would bear fruit in a desirable manner or it will bring catastrophe to the region.

Notes and References

1. Konthoujam Indrakumar, 'Mapping India's Look East Policy: Shifting Alignments,' in Thingnam Kishan Singh (ed.) *Look East Policy & India's North East: Polemics and Perspective*, 2009, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, p.21.
2. *Ibid.*
3. The five non-Communist member countries namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand met at Bangkok on 8th August 1967 and established the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Subsequently on January 8, 1984 Brunei Darussalam joined ASEAN, Vietnam on July 28, 1995, Laos and Myanmar on July 23, 1997 and Cambodia on 30 April 1999.
4. Kripa Sridharan, 'The ASEAN Region in India's Look East Policy' in K. Raja Reddy (ed.) *India and ASEAN: Foreign Policy Dimensions for the 21st century*, 2005, New Century Publication, New Delhi, pp.120-121.
5. SEATO was established by the South-East Asia Collective Defence Treaty, signed in Manila, in September 1954 by the representation of Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines,

- Thailand, the U.K. and U.S.A. The treaty came into force in February 1955. Pakistan withdrew in 1968, and France withdrew financial support in 1975. SEATO held its final exercise in February 1976 and was dissolved in June 1977.
6. Konthoujam Indrakumar, "Indo-ASEAN Relation in the Post-Cold War Periods: Security Dimensions" (unpublished Thesis), Department of Political Science, Manipur University, 2014, p.69.
 7. Sudhir Devare, *India & Southeast Asia: Towards Security Convergence*, 2006, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Capital Publishing, Singapore and New Delhi, p.16
 8. In the time of Partition Bangladesh was part of Pakistan, called East Pakistan, before its liberation in 1971. In this war Bangladesh's armed militia called Mukti Bahini fought along with India army. India emerged victorious over Pakistan in the war.
 9. Kripa Sridharan, *op.cit.*, 2005, p.119
 10. Mohammad Ayoob, *India and Southeast Asia: Indian Perception and Policies*, 1990, Routledge Publication, New Delhi, p.18
 11. Konsam Padmini Devi, "India's Look East Policy and Its Implications on North East India," (unpublished thesis), Department of Political Science, Manipur University, 2012, p.17.
 12. Indra Kumar, *op.cit.*, 2009, p.2.6
 13. *Ibid.*, p.29.
 14. Konsam Padmini Devi, *op.cit.*, 2012, p.21
 15. John Parratt, *Wounded Land: Politics and Identity in Modern Manipur*, 2005, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, p.1.
 16. *Ibid.* p. 2.
 17. Sanjeev Thingnam, 'Redefining Frontier through LEP: A Colonial Articulation of Manipur,' in Thingnam Kishan Singh (ed.), *Look East Policy & India's North East: Polemics and Perspectives*, 2009, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, p.93.
 18. John Parratt, *op.cit.*, 2005, p.1.
 19. Sanatomba Kangujam, 'Trade, Security and Strategic Concerns: The Politics of India's Look East Policy,' in Thingnam Kishan Singh (ed.), *Look East Policy & India's North East: Polemics and Perspectives*, 2009, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, p.175.
 20. Ancient Manipuri Sacred texts
 21. The Meiteis presently composed of seven clan groups called *yeks* were the dominant community who ruled the kingdom of 'Manipur' for more than 2000 years.
 22. Mr. Quinton was the Chief Commissioner of Assam; he came to Manipur for negotiation regarding the palace revolt and hostility which broke out among the royal bloods for the sake of *gaddi* (throne).
 23. N. Lokendra Singh, *The Unquiet Valley*, 1998, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, p.29.
 24. Trans- Asian Highway link India through Assam, Nagaland and Manipur to Myanmar, Thailand.
 25. Laishram Churchill, 'India's LEP and the North East: A Study on Environmental Impact,' in Thingnam Kishan Singh (ed.), *Look East Policy & India's North East: Polemics and Perspectives*, 2009, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, p.75
 26. Ajailiu Niumai, '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: Polemics and Perspectives*, 2009, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, p.49
 27. N. Somorendro Singh, 'New Strategies for Manipur in India's Act East Policy,' in N. Surjitkumar (ed.), *India's Act East Policy: Issues, Challenges and Future Prospects for North-East India*, 2018, Ruby Press & co., pp.14-15.