

India's Look East Policy and Manipur: Challenges and Opportunities for the Tribals

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Introduction:

Look East Policy (LEP) is a strategic initiative in which India has not only reinforced its economic and cultural relations with the countries of ASEAN and East Asia, but also firmed up strategic relations with them through extensive consultations on regional and global security issues and consistent cooperation in defense sectors involving military supplies and naval exercises.

There has been a general perception that India's 'Look East' Policy begins in 1990s, the fact of the matter is that LEP did not begin in the 1990s. It has evolved in four different waves over centuries. The first wave of cultural and commercial engagement between India and its extended eastern neighbours lasted until the 12th /13th century. To this was added a strong strategic dimension by the British Empire in India during the second wave. The leaders of independent India, particularly Nehru, took the lead in launching the third wave by focusing on East Asia as an important part of India's policy of Asian resurgence. However, the imperatives of the Cold War, intra-Asian conflict and rivalries, and India's weaknesses on economic and military fronts did not let its Asia policy blossom (S.D Muni 2012).

The present or the fourth phase of India's "Look East" policy was developed and enacted during the governments of Prime Ministers P.V. Narasimha Rao (1991-1996) and Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004). Along with economic liberalisation and moving away from Cold War-era policies and activities,

India's strategy has focused on forging close economic and commercial ties, increasing strategic and security cooperation and the emphasis of historic cultural and ideological links. India sought to create and expand regional markets for trade, investments and industrial development. It also began strategic and military cooperation with nations concerned by the expansion of China's economic and strategic influence (S.D Muni 2012).

As a result, India has initiated some bilateral projects and also become party to some multilateral projects, aimed at enhancing connectivity between the Northeast and Southeast 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 and/or oil pipeline, Tamanthi Hydroelectricity project and optical fiber network between Northeast India and Southeast Asia (Singh,2008).

The second phase of the fourth Wave of LEP, which began in 2003, is more comprehensive in its coverage, extending from Australia to East Asia, with ASEAN as its core. The new phase marks a shift in focus from trade to wider economic and security cooperation, political partnerships, physical connectivity through road and rail links. Thus, India-ASEAN cooperation now covers broader fields including trade and investment, science and technology, tourism and human resource development, transportation and infrastructure, and health and pharmaceuticals. India signed "Long Term Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity" with ASEAN, which is the 2 corner stone of India's Look East policy. India finally signed the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the ten members of ASEAN in August 2009 (Haokip 2012).

Why North East? Various Compulsions:

North East India was never the main thrust of LEP in its initial phases. It was only in 1997 when Myanmar was admitted into ASIAN as a full member that North East assumed importance in its LEP. Hence North East initiative under LEP is a product of various compulsions in the post-Cold War era.

The geographical proximity of Northeast with East and Southeast Asia has compelled India to focus on the Northeastern region. Though, initially, the

focus of India's Look East policy was to forge closer economic ties with ASEAN member states. This new phase marks a shift in focus from trade to wider economic and security cooperation, political partnerships, physical connectivity through road, air and rail links between India and South East Countries through North East India.

There has been growing realization on the part of Indian policy makers that development of physical connectivity through North East India with Southeast Asia is a prerequisite to fully harness the opportunities provided by LEP. Consequent upon these, India has laid greater emphasis on enhancing connectivity through all the possible modes of infrastructure development such as land routes, railways, air connectivity, waterways, energy infrastructure development both in field of hydroelectric and hydrocarbon and telecommunication linkages (Singh, 2008).

The focus on economic content of international relations, emergence of regional economic groupings, forces of globalisation, slow process of economic integration within South Asia and China's growing assertiveness in the Asia Pacific region in particular and China becoming a super power in terms of economy, security, defense, human resources and technology and apprehension of 2nd Cold War between the US and China had also compelled India to rethink the basic parameters of its foreign policy for which North East India cannot be sideline taking into consideration its strategic geographical location (Haokip 2013).

The growing trends toward regionalism and India's apprehension of being marginalised and isolated in the post-Cold War international system are the other reasons for paying more attention to the rapidly growing economies of East and Southeast Asia.

Acknowledging the close cultural, linguistic and historical relation between various ethnic groups of the North East and South east Asian countries especially Myanmar, there is growing apprehension and concern on the part of the Indian Policy makers that some subversive elements had taken advantage on these areas and had been a great concern and pain in the neck for India for quite a long time and if not checked on time, may be detrimental to India's strategic and national interest in the long run. Hence India's LEP is to plug the hole through border fencing and regional cooperation with South East Countries in order to check and curbs the activities and movement of

various North East Insurgent groups having link and actively operating in India and some of these countries.

Hence, India's Look East policy marked a strategic paradigm shift in India's foreign policy. It is "not merely an external economic policy, it is also a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy. LEP is basically a policy that has emerged largely from China syndrome i.e. emergence of China as an economic, defense and strategic powerhouse on the one hand and India's unofficial agenda of containing China on these fronts. It is just another paradigm shift in India's strategic Policy and it has not much to do with the infrastructural and economic development of the North East India in general and Manipur in particular. LEP would undoubtedly facilitated India's economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asia but the share of the Northeast in this policy remained insignificant (Singh 2008).

Challenges and Opportunities for the Tribals:

Whatever may be the concrete reasons or purposes behind the conception of LEP, the opening of Trans-Asian Highway, Airways and Railways as part of it would definitely affect the Tribals of Manipur in two ways; Challenges and Opportunities.

Even though India's LEP may facilitate greater economic integration of the Northeast with the market economies of Southeast Asia and is expected to bring numerous opportunities and possibility in the North East in general and Manipur in particular, there are numerous challenges which need to be addressed. The process of globalization comes with a complete package of pros and cons and therefore the LEP also poses several challenges to the local economy.

The first challenges take the form of non-traditional security concerns, such as, the inflow of people in the form of tourist, traders, pilgrims and refugee on the one hand, and the inflow of Heroin, narcotics, arms and ammunition and other contraband items and the inevitable rise in human trafficking, sex workers, new ideology and the spread of HIV/AIDS on the other, all of which the common people of Manipur especially the Tribals may encounter

imminent exploitation and will always be on the receiving end (Julien Levesque and Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman).

Secondly, one of the widely perceived fears is that the influx of Chinese and Thai Multi-National Entrepreneurs (MNEs) and technologically advanced small and medium entrepreneurs (SMEs) can intensify the economic inequality and give birth to an unbalanced economic development in which the developed enclave economy remains in conflict with backward popular economy especially the tribal economy all of which the tribals would always be on the disadvantage position.

Third, an unbridled intervention of market forces and blind pursuit of commercialized agriculture in order to cater to the needs and demands of the tourist, transporter, and pilgrims alike can adversely affect the subsistence mode of agriculture and radicalize the tribal communities in state like Manipur (Vibhanshu Shekhar).

Another challenge that the tribal would encountered in the process is in the form of Cultural Shocked. The tribals are the most vulnerable people in terms of cultural and religious assimilation; they easily succumbed to any kind of strong wave of westernization, privatization, cultural, political revolution. And with the strong wave of westernization or Koreanisation, side by side with the advent of globalization the tribals in Manipur are set to face cultural shocked or assimilation.

With Trans Asian Highway in placed, the people got to see all these (people) cultures in LIVE in flesh and spirit. How do they response to this? Protecting, preserving or modernizing their culture and cultural heritage on the one hand and westernization, assimilation or Koreanisation of their culture on the other would be a choice that the tribal have to decide.

Yet another challenge that the Tribal of Manipur would be impacted all the more is the issue of opening up of border as part of LEP and covert fencing of Indo-Myanmar border which has been a porous and unmanned border since time immemorial. This may give a negative implication for the tribals as people belonging to the same ethnic groups inhabiting both sides of the border were engaging in cultural, economic and social relation ever since long before the international boundary was even drawn.

Moreover, LEP will not only mean intensification of connection between Southeast Asia and Northeast India in terms of trade and commerce but also in terms of peoples and ideas which in turn will imply the return of the past and the reawakening of centuries-old ties, especially between Manipur, Assam, and Myanmar. Such interactions will undoubtedly strengthen existing contact and would also definitely bring about development and growth of economy, infrastructure, tourism, trade and commerce, exchange of ideas & knowledge, technical knowhow, education and security but how far the tribals of Manipur would benefit from these engagement and interaction is a matter of concern.

Reaping the Opportunities?

Whether they like it or not! The advent of Trans Asian Highway, Railway and Airway systems under India's LEP, would put Manipur in the international air and road maps. Ten to fifteen years down the line, Manipur is projected to receive between 20 -30 thousand of domestic Tourist, pilgrims, Traders and Transporter annually and an equal number of foreign tourist, Traders, pilgrims and Transporters per year and will host thousand of trans border trucks and vehicles plying and passing through the state on the Trans Asian highway.

To make LEP functional and more advantageous for India in general and Manipur in particular it requires massive investments in infrastructure and other facilities such as construction of roads, railways, air, transport and communication facilities. Hotels, restaurants and resorts need to be built for tourists which are largely absent in the state.

As this development would bring myriad of socio-economic challenges and opportunities for the tribal of Manipur, it would be imperative that the following few recommendations among others are adopted at the earliest to reap maximum benefits from LEP. Hence, the question is how do the tribals transform/translate these challenges into opportunities and how do they reap these opportunities should be the main concern of the tribal intellect, leaders, scholars and the common people alike at this juncture.

Land Protection: As Land, forest and its products are one of the areas or items besides education where the people of Manipur particularly the Tribal in Manipur has a potentially competitive advantage and the produces of

which they can have a comparative advantage in the domestic as well as in the international market with a relatively smaller effort. The first and foremost for the people of Manipur especially the Tribal to cope and withstand the wave of India's LEP in particular and Globalization in general is to protect their traditional Tribal Land at any cost. All sort of encroachment policy and plan of the government, MNCs, Corporate giants and NGOs alike must be objected and foiled. If at all the local people have to part with their land to give ways for construction of Hotel, Parts or any other profit making infrastructural development, a Profit/Benefit Sharing Model agreement with the intending purchaser should be made obligatory.

Human Resource Development: With the coming and full implementation of LEP, huge demand in Human Resources (both skill and unskilled workforce) for infrastructural development, construction works, hotels, hospital & business establishment, companies, language translator for tourist (Chinese, Thai, Burmese, Japanese, Hindi, Nagamese, Manipuri, Mizo, Thadou, Korean etc), salesmen, housekeeping, medical, tourist guide, IT professional, engineers, drivers, security guard etc are inevitable. To meet this high demand, the tribal people especially the youth must be given skill training and development on these arenas and all possible human resources must be tapped and one must be equipped and ready for all opportunities and probabilities.

Tribal Haat/Complex and Development of Small Scale Industries: To cater to the needs and services of the trader, tourist, pilgrims, transporters etc and to attract them, commercialization of tribal culture and artifacts should be encouraged through Tribal Haat/Complex must be developed on the Highway providing all kinds of ethnic products and items such as handicraft, woodcraft, bamboo craft, Tribal music/musical instrument, Tribal Dance, Songs, tribal artifact, ornaments, flora & Fauna, Tribal clothes, books and organic food items like rice beer, Jongchak, Bamboo Sood, ginger, Chili, Turmeric, Bean, medicinal herbs, plants etc. This items/product must be produce in a large scale through Small/medium scale industries.

Village Tourism: Beside developing standard and world class Hotel/Motel on the Highway which is very much essential for all kind of travelers which need high investment and may not be feasible for the common people especially the Tribal, building a model village for each community/tribe in the form of Village Tourism on the highway where tourist and traveler alike will have the

opportunity to experience, taste and see the varied forms of unique ethnic culture, way of life, tribal value system, food, custom, house and environment and in turn have the opportunity to show cash the tribal culture to the world, preserve the unique culture and in return get some income from it.

Entrepreneurship Development: In order to compete in the ever competitive and increasing business and enterprises in this globalised world, various marketing management, strategies and skill must be developed and honed among the tribal. The tribal youths must be employable, saleable, presentable, tradable and good in marketing and entrepreneurship. Otherwise the common people especially the tribal do not have a place in the economic development process of LEP/Trans Asian Highway.

Institution Building: Local institutions such as Financial Institution to fund and sponsored local industries and enterprises, Cultural Institution for preserving and marketing our traditional culture and artifacts, Marketing and Management institutions to train and equipped the youth in entrepreneurship and hospitality & tourism management, NGOs and CSOs to create greater more awareness on the social problems and issues which may arise from LEP.

Creating Awareness: With the increases in traffic and visitors, the rise in prostitution, human trafficking, drugs, HIV/AIDS, crimes, smuggling in Arms & Ammunition, rise in insurgency etc. are unavoidable. It is very easy and tempting to fall prey/victim to any of these onslaught. Besides having a strong and effective state mechanism to control and prevent them, the people must also be ever vigilant and create awareness at the grassroots level through the churches, village authority, clubs, NGOs, CSOs, schools, colleges, university and every possible public platforms.

Affirmative State Intervention:

The governments in the Centre and states need to make serious efforts to ensure that the process of economic integration does not affect the state specially the tribals adversely. The state institutions need to be more efficient and create mass-awareness among the people about how to benefit from the process of economic integration. Both the central and state governments need to invest in developing local capacity, promote local entrepreneurship, and strengthen institutions like Indian Entrepreneurship Centre. Greater responsibility lies with the national and local civil society and state institutions

in addressing those challenges and at the same time creating opportunities and reaping the same.

What is needed for the state as a whole is to initiate intra-district capacity building programmes in the state - development of better connectivity within the state, development of export oriented industries, development of technical and entrepreneurial skills in the local population - and develop consensus over a common agenda for the development of the state to utilize all the sanctioned funds in an effective and result oriented manner. On top of these, the state should also be involved in various sub-regional initiatives, such as the BIMSTEC, MGC and Kunming initiative, as a separate economic entity, which, in turn, would facilitate the harnessing of available regional economic opportunities. The bottom line is that the idea of enhancing connectivity between Northeast and Southeast Asia is a welcome step and has the potential to change the socio-economic landscape of the region. But to make this effective it should be supplemented by efforts to prepare the Northeast particularly Manipur for these challenges and opportunities.

The Indian government and the northeastern states must adopt proactive role and provide not only infrastructures but also political stability and good governance. Greater participation of the local people in production and distribution activities and raising agricultural productivity should be given prime importance. Trade alone will not be sufficient to transform the region into a sustained development path. In addition, growth in trading activities will only benefit those people who possibly are from outside the region and who are economically more powerful to exploit the resources of the region. India's Look East policy should include goals such as encouraging public debate and participation as well as opening doors and windows in the political and economic arena.

Conclusion:

For the LEP to transform Manipur in particular and the North East in general into a truly prosperous and stable states, proper monitoring of the inflow of people, trade and drugs from Myanmar and proper and systematic mechanism to check human trafficking, trafficking in Arms and radical

Ideology must be set up and the spread of drug use and HIV/AIDS must be tackled, so that greater linkages with Southeast Asia appear as an opportunity rather than as an additional source of trouble for the state as it may lead to further marginalization of the common people especially the tribal on the one hand and expansion of Chinese colonialism over North East India on the other.

The issue is not how much inflow of investment or economic development is taking place. What is more important is how the tribal communities of the state respond to these initiatives, how much they participate in the process of development, and how much is their capacity to participate in the process. How skilful and tradable they are. If the tribal population does not participate in the economic processes or find themselves always at the receiving end then the possibility of further marginalization of the tribal and the resultant backlash is very high. Hence, reaping the opportunities created by LEP will be largely determined by how these tribes respond to it in terms of preparedness, equipping themselves, awareness, skill and how enterprising they are.

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