

LOOK EAST TO ACT EAST POLICY AND ITS IMPACT ON IMMIGRATION IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

The Look East Policy was enacted by India to increase her close association with the Southeast Asian Nations for better economic development and co-operation in solving certain common cross-border issues like- insurgency, drug trafficking, etc. The same Policy was however changed by the present Modi Government into Act East Policy in 2014 for further extension of the targets of the previous Look East Policy. However, one aspect that was common in both these two policies was the development of the North-Eastern Region including the State of Assam which has a very high potential for Natural Resources. But the State of Assam has always been facing the issue of illegal immigration creating fear in the minds of the local Assamese Community about losing their identities. Such issues have also made the situation in the region highly unstable. Therefore, a question arises that if such Act East Policy opens up the borders of the State, then will it be able to maintain the security of the identities of the local inhabitants of this region especially when the region has always been neglected by mainstream India and the Politics have also remained mostly ignorant about the issues of the local people. Thus, this paper will make a brief attempt to highlight the consequences of the Look East Policy in Assam to estimate the probable consequences of the new Act East Policy especially concerning the issue of illegal immigration into Assam.

KEYWORDS

Assam; Act East Policy; Bangladeshi; Illegal Immigration; Look East Policy; and Politics

I. Introduction

Look East Policy was adopted in 1991 after the Cold War-era got concluded by India to develop friendly relationships with the American entities in South-East Asia. It was aimed to foster economic and infrastructural developments in the country by bridging cross-border gaps through negotiations, discussions, and also through the opening up of barriers. Later, the present NDA Government introduced the Act East Policy which is a further extension of the objectives of Look East Policy and is a successor of it, for reaching even the far East Asian countries. Both these Policies were expected to bring significant developments in the North-Eastern Region of India including the building of infrastructures like railways, roads, generating employment opportunities, establishing new industries, etc., since North-East India is the only way through which mainstream India can be connected with most of the South-East Asian Nations. Further, we must also acknowledge that this region is a hub of Natural Resources which if used appropriately can bring immense economic development for the entire Nation. Similarly, Assam being a part of this region, also is home to several Biodiversity resources along with oil reserves and also possesses the potentials for hydroelectric power generations. All these assists can be utilized by employing the local people through enhancing the Foreign Deposit Investments (FDI) which is expected to be achieved by this Act East Policy.¹

However, a question arises that whether the journey from the Look East to Act East Policy was that developmental for the North-Eastern Region in general and Assam in particular since many issues make these regions vulnerable to foreign invaders. Such vulnerabilities even increase more as regards Assam is concerned, since Assam does not fall within the ambits of Inner Line Permit as well as Assam has always struggled with the problem of illegal immigration leading to instances of an identity crisis, communal violence, political disturbances, etc. where such issues again came to focus after the passing of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019.² In such a situation, the Act East Policy which aims for fostering economic development through encouraging foreign investments in the region along with opening up of the borders for foreigners to migrate into the

¹The Big Picture: India's Act East Policy, CHISTI (Jun 21, 2020, 02:12 AM) <https://www.drishtias.com/loksabha-rajasabha-discussions/the-big-picture-india-s-act-east-policy>.

²Suhrith Pathasarathy, Why the CAA violates the Constitution? THE INDIA FORUM (Jun 23, 2020: 02:12 AM) <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/why-caa-violates-constitution>.

region might lead to serious consequences for which a study in this dimension becomes important. This article will therefore try to understand that whether such Policies can infringe the identity of the local Assamese people in Assam through the increased settlement of Foreigners into the region or is going to bring developments that will be beneficial for the local people? Whether such Policies shall be implemented as they are or whether there shall be made any amendments in the wake of the present situations for ensuring better security to the identities of the local people within the State of Assam?

II. Journey from Look East to Act East Policy with an analysis of their objectives

Look East Policy was a document that featured India's strategic vision about the world. It was enacted during the reign of Prime Minister Narsimaha Rao after the end of the Cold War in 1991. The main objective of this policy was to give rise to a strategic relationship for economic development with the South East Asian Nations at one hand and to strengthen a Regional Power nexus for countering the influences of the People's Republic of China in 1991. As per relation as East Asia is concerned, India started making friendly overtures with the Burmese military forces after 1993, before which India was supporting Burmese pro-democratic movements, both these countries started co-operating for industrial as well as infrastructural developments in the region. India used to train Burmese military forces while China remained the largest military resources supplier. India, even though was a major trade exchanging country for Burmese Oil and Natural Gas reserves, China's investments have been much more compared to India. Besides all these developments India had been able to maintain a cordial relation with the Burmese for getting co-operation in handling the militancy activities as well as drug trafficking cases in North-East India³ which even includes Assam. India has also been successful in establishing strong commercial, military as well as cultural ties with Cambodia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Singapore. India also entered into several Free Trade Agreements with Thailand and Sri Lanka. India also successfully engaged herself in a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement with

³ Dr. SubhirBhaunik, Explaining India's Silence over Burma, BBC (Jun 01, 2020, 02:13 AM) http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7013975.stm.

Singapore, Early Harvest Scheme with Thailand, etc.⁴ While at the same time India was also negotiating with South Korea, Japan, and other ASEAN members. India even supported the 'One China Policy and also extended her support to the People's Republic of China by recognizing its sovereignty. In 2006 a ten points joint declaration was reached between India and China for improving conflicts between each other.⁵ However, China's close association with Pakistan and its occupation over the disputed Pakistan Occupied Territory of India has put several questions on Indo-China relations, and also Chinese folk more or less had always been a critique of India's Look East Policy.

However, this policy was replaced by Act East Policy by the administration of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi in 2014 to maintain a strong relationship with the ASEAN countries and at the same time, extending such relationships with other countries in East Asia. There is no hard and fast difference between the Look East Policy and the Act East Policy, rather Act East Policy can be held to be an extension of Look East Policy. However, during the launch of Look East Policy, India was struggling in making her economy stable due to the ongoing transition from a State-Controlled Economy to a more Liberalized one and also due to its shift from the Soviet Union nexus to US nexus after the disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991, as per the pressures from International world order was concerned. On the other hand, during the time of adopting the Act East Policy, India almost gained the status of having a robust economy capable of influencing the global world order. Therefore, India possessed a more dominating power to influence policy agreements with the neighboring countries during the time of Act East Policy compared to the times of Look East Policy which ultimately allowed India for imposing conditions on the other Sovereign States for her own interest. Further, the Act East Policy has been successful in building more closer ties with South Korea and Japan.⁶ But on the other hand, few recent events like the violation of the Peace Treaty between India and Pakistan by Pakistan and the recent attacks by Chinese soldiers on Indian soldiers in the Indo-China Border at Ladakh where around 20 Indian

⁴ Walter C. Ladwig, Delhi's Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, "Look East" and India's emerging influence in Asia-Pacific, 5(2) Asian Security (2009), 87-113.

⁵ India-China Relations: Ten-pronged strategy, REDIFFNEWS (Jun 14, 2020, 01:12 AM) <https://m.rediff.com/news/2006/nov/21jintao6.htm>.

⁶ K V Karsayan, India's Act East Policy and Regional Cooperation, RF (Jun 20, 2020, 01:12 AM) <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-act-east-policy-and-regional-cooperation-61375/?amp>.

soldiers were killed and around 100 Indian soldiers were injured, marked an unhealthy relationship between India and China at one hand and India and Pakistan at the other hand. Further, India's association with Nepal has also deteriorated in the last few days.

III. Impact of Look East Policy on Assam

Assam is a state that is located in the North-Eastern Region of India and is one of the most important Natural resource hubs in the entire North-Eastern region of India. The Look East Policy along with bringing an economic integration with Southeast Asia and East Asia, also aimed for developing the North-Eastern States of the Nation since it was the gateway for mainland India to reach Southeast Asia. It aimed to end issues like insurgencies in North-East India once for all by opening up its borders for the entire Southeast Asian countries. By this policy, it was even expected that a massive development will take place due to huge capital investments and marketization of the region with the other parts of the country for efficient utilization of the Natural Resources stocks in the region. However, such developments were also expected to bring a massive influx of laborers and outsiders who might create identity crises with the local communities of the region and such fear has been expressed through several mediums, like- a Manipuri film titled- *23rd Century* featured that in the 23rd century Manipur will be occupied with Non-Manipuris. This kind of fear has often led to the increase in the demands of Inner Line Permits (ILP), which is a device introduced by Britishers during their Rule for demarcating certain areas that were alleged to be under the possession of "savage and uncontrollable communities", at present to secure the citizenship and land rights of the local communities. Few of the North-Eastern States are granted with this ILP but Assam so far has not been provided with such permits. This is a reason which threatened the Assamese Community with the fear of losing their identity against the mobile labor communities. Further, it is also alleged that the imposition of sovereignty on most of the North-Eastern States has been transformed into the imposition of India's policy after 1947 and there remains no doubt that this Policy increased the number of trade volunteers in the North-Eastern Region but at the same time, both after 1947 and also after liberalization of economy, the consent and bargaining power of the North-Eastern communities had been bypassed. Hence, a question as

regards the existence of the identity of the marginalized communities occupies prominence due to such policies.⁷

Now the recent Act East Policy is expected to increase further connectivity with the rest of the Southeast Asian Nations with India where North-eastern Region including Assam will play a vital role since it's the only gateway that connects the rest part of India with the Southeast Asian Nations. This policy is even expected to develop roads, railways as well as other communication mediums for making people across borders come closer.⁸ But the question arises that whether such close communications with the neighboring country will take into consideration the security concerns of Northeast India and mainly Assam since Assam has always suffered from the issue of illegal immigration?

IV. An overview of the problem of Illegal Immigration in Assam

The Census of 2001-2011 in India discovered the fact that the population growth rate in India was 17.6% while in Assam it was found to be 16.93%.⁹ Even before this, the Census report of 1991-2001 showed that the difference in the rates of population growth and the rates of estimated migrants between Assam and India were -2.49% and -0.56% respectively. Most interesting was the growth rate of the Muslim population in Assam compared to that of entire India as a whole which was recorded in 1991 to be 16.23% in Assam and 22.9% in India that further changed to 13.42% in India but surprisingly to 30.91% in Assam as per the Census of 2001.¹⁰ It can be thus argued that such diversified rates of population growth amongst India and Assam show that the growth of population cannot be held to be natural in Assam, while the allegations of increased illegal immigration from Bangladesh seem to be somewhat proved by these facts which were recorded since 1991. Now the question arises as regards the impact of the Look East Policy on

⁷Snehashish Mitra & Ranabir Samaddar, India's Look East Policy and the Northeast: Bridging Space or Widening Schisms?, WIRE (Jun 10, 2020, 01:12 AM) <https://m.thewire.in/article/politics/bridging-spaces-widening-schisms-look-east-policy-northeast>.

⁸Bikash Singh, Act East Policy needs to be made more proactive: Assam CM Sarbananda Sonowal, THE ECONOMIC TIMES (Jun 13, 2020, 01:11 AM) <https://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/act-east-policy-needs-to-be-made-more-proactive-assam-cm-sarbananda-sonowal/articleshow/70422965.cms>.

⁹CMF, basic statistics relating to Indian Economy.

¹⁰Hiranya K Nath & Suresh K Nath, Illegal Migrants in Assam: Magnitude, Causes and Economic Challenges (Jan 24, 2020, 11:11 AM) <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1750383>.

illegal immigration, has it been able to seek out this issue, or has it even widened the scope of the issue concerned?

Assamese community at large consists of approximately 26 different ethnic and racial communities which were living in peace and harmony for ages. But now due to such a huge inflow of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh several issues have emerged which is leading to conflicts amongst the local Assamese communities. Since most of the cultural and linguistic diversities of the minor groups are not properly recorded in Modern Indian pieces of literature as well as other legal or extra-legal documents, therefore such minor groups from within the broader Assamese community are now facing vulnerabilities from identity crises. Even the entire Assamese community is under the threat of losing its identity. There have been even emerging challenges for establishing law and order situations in Assam due to such crises, of which the Bodo-Muslim conflict of 2012 resulted in the loss of 77 lives of people and made several thousands of families to get displaced, is a great example. Not only identity crisis but the region is also facing the threat of Natural resource extinctions.¹¹ It was found that the land under forest cover in Assam was 39% in 1952-53 which came down to below 30% at present. The forest Department Officials stated in research that most forest dwellers do not appear to be local from their appearances. Also, there has been an increase in the rate of encroachments over free land areas available for public places, like land area of Satras (traditional community prayer hall for Neo-Vaishnavite religious followers), Temples, National Parks, etc.¹²

Political issues have also emerged due to such illegal immigration since most of the illegal migrants from Bangladesh have been able to occupy voting rights in general elections due to several vote-bank policies and dark politics across the region. They are now in possession of almost all valid documents required as identity proof for the citizens of India, like Voter ID Card, Rason Card, etc. for which identification and deportation of such people have now become an immense issue. As such lack of job opportunities, lack of access to natural resources, overpopulation,

¹¹ FP Staff, Assam Violence Key Facts about the Bodo-Muslim Conflict, FIRSTPOST (Jan 24, 2019, 01:15 AM) www.firstpost.com/india/assam-violence-5-key-facts-about-the-bodo-muslim-conflict-1507865.html.

¹² J Das & D Talukdar, Socio-Economic and Political Consequences of Illegal Migrant into Assam from Bangladesh, Jour. Tour. & Hosp (2016 (Jan 21, 2019, 10:15 PM)) <https://www.omicsonline.org/pdfdownload.php?download=open-access/socioeconomic-and-political-consequences-of-illegal-migration-into-assam-from-bangladesh-2167-0269-1000202.pdf&aid=69610>.

economic disintegration, social and communal disharmony, etc. are becoming major issues at present for the Assamese community to face.

V. Impact of Act East Policy on Illegal Immigration in Assam

So far it has been observed that how Assam has been flooded with illegal immigration. It is from time immemorial that migrants from other parts of India as well as illegal immigrants from outside India especially Bangladeshi immigrants have flooded the State of Assam to a massive extent but still due to political vote-bank policies as well as conspiracies of all alliance of political parties have always reflected it as a regional issue and restricted it from getting scrutinized through National agendas.¹³ It was thus argued that such issues shall be fought at the National level rather than ignoring it as an only issue of the Assamese Community.¹⁴ However, statistics show that besides the Look East Policy aiming for settling such issues had never been able to do so and the same cannot even be expected to be possible through Act East Policy. Further, due to the opening up of the borders, a huge influx of mobile laborers can be expected within the region who might get permanently settled in the State as has been proved since the past instances. Recently the enactment of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019 which aims for providing citizenships to Non-Muslim communities who entered Indian territory before 2014, is a good example that how foreigners are allowed to get settled in these regions once they enter here through mainland communal politics. As such, opening State borders for greater integration with the other parts of the Nation as well as with the foreign States might even make these communities feel more insecure. Although the Look East Policy was aimed to counter insurgencies through cooperation with the neighboring States since its inception many insurgent groups had been trained to operate from the soils of the bordering Nations of Northeast India including Assam. It is the external support to such insurgency groups that creates instability in the region. It is alleged that these insurgency groups pay huge amounts to the host governments for providing shelter to them and since both Myanmar and Bangladesh are economically poor countries, they often used to get tilted

¹³ Madhab Godbole, *Illegal Migration from Bangladesh*, 7(3), DIALOGUE (2006).

¹⁴ Udayan Mishra, *The Periphery strikes back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*, IAAS, (2000) 174-175.

towards such huge sum of money and thus after making all possible efforts by the Indian governments for reaching their support in handling these issues, India most often faces failures.¹⁵

The Act East Policy of the newly formed NDA Government is also subjected to the same fear and suspicion that similar to the Look East Policy, Policy might also fail to address the issue of illegal immigration in Assam. This fear even increased after witnessing the agendas of the present government through the newly passed Citizenship Act. Therefore, it can be argued that opening up the borders of the State without a proper regulatory mechanism for witnessing the influx of such illegal immigrations is sure to bring an end to many marginalized sections of the Assamese community even if not the entire Assamese community.

VI. Conclusion and Suggestions

The journey from the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy might have seen many revolutionary changes in the approaches of the major world politics, yet it must be acknowledged that the North-Eastern Region of India has suffered more loss than enjoying any benefits which get evident from the huge inflow of illegal immigrants. Migration within the country can still be ignored on the grounds of better economic integrity and for removing isolation of the North-Eastern Regions but migration from outside the country coupled with the issue of allowing them with permanent citizenship, if ignored will not only create a regional issue rather will lead to serious consequences for the entire Nation. Further, the issue of insurgencies has been increasing day by day in the region. It highlights the failure of the Look East Policy and also puts a valid question on the integrity of the Act East Policy.

For removing all such difficulties, a comprehensive policy is required so to increase infrastructural and other forms of economic developments in the North-Eastern Region along with the neighboring countries especially Bangladesh and Myanmar. Politics shall be contested on fairgrounds and for this, Constitutional amendments are required for imposing moral responsibilities on the Political Parties forming governments so that they do not sell the morals of

¹⁵Thongkhohal Haokip, India's Look East Policy and North-East India, Department of Political Science, School of Social Science, North-Eastern Hil University, Shillong (2010).

the soil of their own homeland for the sake of earning few votes in their pockets which forces them to sell their motherland to the foreigners. At last, it is necessary that local people are made politically aware of their rights to understand their situation before going for votes and such awareness shall be spread by social groups.