



ACT EAST POLICY: A MEANS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NORTH EAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

India's ambitious 'Act East' policy for the sustainable development of its North-eastern region by building and enhancing trade and commerce, social entrepreneurship, cultural interaction and other links with Southeast Asia depends on successful development policies in the eight crucial north-eastern states including Manipur which has a major artery and gateway from Moreh on the international border with Myanmar leading into Southeast Asia. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi the new government of India has made its relations with East Asian neighbours a foreign policy priority at a time when the United States has engaged in a "pivot to Asia". The Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj proposed a new outlook calling it **Act East policy**, following on from the Look East policy which was introduced during the government of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and seriously implemented during the following administrations of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh. India's **Look East policy** is an effort to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with the nations of Southeast Asia in order to bolster its standing as a regional power and a counterweight to the strategic influence of the People's Republic of China. Initiated in 1991, it marked a strategic shift in India's perspective of the world. Sustainable development is maintaining a delicate balance between the human need to improve lifestyles and feeling of well-being on one hand, and preserving natural resources and ecosystems, on which we and future generations depend. The idea of **limitations** imposed by the state of development technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs. Methodology: focus group discussion with government officials, and Leaders of different communities and Collection and review of literatures of published and unpublished materials regarding the present issues.

KEY WORDS: AEP, sustainable development, social entrepreneurship, etc.

1. OBJECTIVES

- i. To study Act East Policy with a positive response,
- ii. To analyse Act East Policy and its processes in relation to sustainable development in the near future,
- iii. To probe into innovation of social entrepreneurship, Sustainability, and Act East Policy in the social development of north east India.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on empirical study, focus group discussion with government officials, and Leaders of different communities and Collection and review of literatures of published and unpublished materials regarding the present issues.

3. INTRODUCTION

Act East Policy is the most successful Foreign Policy initiative started by India in the recent past. There are many definitions of 'sustainable development', but what is most frequently quoted is that formulated by the Brundtland Commission in

1987. According to this definition, sustainable development" is that pattern of development which "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs." In addition to emphasizing the intergenerational (and intergenerational) equity, this broad definition also covered two other key concepts. The first is the concept of "needs", especially the needs of the world's poor which are seen to have overriding priority. The second concept is the idea of "limits" on the ability of the environment to meet the present and future needs. The Brundtland Commission also saw sustainable development as a process of change rather than a fixed state of harmony.

In this regard, we should always take care about the developmental processes that any kind of developmental process should not disturb the environment. For example, if we took up a project on Hydro power project or dam or multi-purposed project, we should not compromise the environment degradation so that we should keep in mind the idea of sustainable development. In short, we should utilise our natural resources in a sustainable way.



Social entrepreneurs drive social innovation and transformation in various fields including education, health, environment and enterprise development. They pursue poverty alleviation goals with entrepreneurial zeal, business methods and the courage to innovate and overcome traditional practices. A social entrepreneur, similar to a business entrepreneur, builds strong and sustainable organizations, which are either set up as not-for-profits or companies.

A social entrepreneur is a leader or pragmatic visionary who:

- i) Achieves large scale, systemic and sustainable social change through a new invention, a different approach, a more rigorous application of known technologies or strategies, or a combination of these.
- ii) Focuses first and foremost on the social and/or ecological value creation and tries to optimize the financial value creation.
- iii) Innovates by finding a new product, a new service, or a new approach to a social problem.
- iv) Continuously refines and adapts approach in response to feedback.

4. ACT EAST POLICY AND ASEAN COUNTRIES

India's Act East Policy and the policies of countries like Japan and Australia are balancing the increasing influence of China in the Southeast Asian region; US lawmakers have been informed by a think-tank expert. "As China continues to invest in its military and lay down new hulls at breakneck speed, claimants have sought assistance from other partners in the region. In 2014-2015, they have begun to find it in Japan, Australia, and India," said Mira Rapp-Hooper Director, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). During a Congressional hearing yesterday, Rapp-Hooper said India has begun to implement the 'Act East Policy' to bolster its ties with the region.

At the 2014 India-ASEAN and East Asia summits, Indian officials emphasised freedom of navigation, peaceful resolution of disputes, and importance of international law, she said. In September 2014, India and Vietnam issued a joint communiqué opposing threats to freedom of navigation and use of coercion in the South China Sea. In the same month and again in January 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Barack Obama jointly affirmed common interests in the disputed South China Sea. In June 2015, India and the US signed a defence framework that includes a pledge to increase each other's capability to secure...freedom of navigation across sea lanes of communication. In June 2015, India also sent a four-

ship naval flotilla to Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Australia, as part of a visit to the South China Sea.

Sushma Swaraj noted that countries in the region have also reacted to China's assertiveness through multilateral mechanisms. "Reportedly, Vietnam, India, and Japan have privately agreed to work in a trilateral format to coordinate security policies," she said. Rapp-Hooper recommended that the US establish a mechanism to coordinate partner capacity building efforts in Southeast Asia with Australia, Japan, and India, so that training and equipment support is mutually reinforcing. Sushma Swaraj tells Indian envoys to Act east and not just look east. Official sources said the meeting is a way to chart out the future roadmap and to get a clear assessment about the Indian foreign policy in the region and its potential.

HANOI: External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj today chaired a brain storming session of 15 Indian Heads of Mission in South East and East Asia here and directed them to Act East and not just Look East, as she discussed the foreign policy initiatives under the new BJP-led government.

The meeting deliberated on the security structure in the strategically-important region, Chinese presence and the scope of India's growth, official sources said.

The issue of the contentious South China Sea was also deliberated upon besides the US approach to the region. This is the second Heads of Mission meeting that she has called for since assuming office in May. She held a similar session with Heads of Mission from the Middle East in Delhi. Official sources said the meeting is a way to chart out the future roadmap and to get a frank assessment about the Indian foreign policy in the region and its potential. The issue of connectivity and commercial growth was also discussed besides the Indian Diaspora based in the region. "The meeting will give the Minister first-hand knowledge about the activities of Indian missions, the challenges and the future prospects in the region," External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Syed Akbaruddin said.

India is keen to boost its ties in the region especially with ASEAN. Stressing on the need for strong connectivity within ASEAN, Swaraj has said that there is a need to look at a more "functional visa regime" in the grouping.

She said the new government in India was a strong believer in a participative approach to bring together the members of the strategic community, the Industry, the experts and professionals and the youth in India and ASEAN countries to further the common agenda of development, progress and prosperity.

Indian govt launched the Look East Policy in the early 90's. It was aimed to shift India's focus from the west and neighbours to the booming South



East Asian economies. It is also intended to spur economic growth in the North East. The govt in 2014, Look East Policy was named as Act East Policy.

5. RE-VISIONING THE VISION FOR NORTHEAST INDIA: NER VISION 2020

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh unveiled the "Peace Progress and Prosperity in the North Eastern Region: Vision 2020" document on 2 July 2008 in New Delhi. The Prime Minister portrayed the north-eastern region as the 'land of the rising sun' and emphasized that the initiative was a "unique event in our nation building process". This comes as a logical follow up of his speech way back in 2004 at the inauguration of the India-ASEAN Car Rally when he described the north-eastern states of India as the springboard for economic integration with Southeast Asia, Southwest China and beyond. Despite 98 per cent of its boundaries being international boundaries and its tremendous economic potential, the region has largely remained isolated and hence underdeveloped.

The report, divided into two volumes, contains the vision statement, some general strategies for the region and certain specific sectoral strategies. The vision statement delineates three purposes of the document. One, to structure a grassroots-led development process; two, enhance the role of the north-eastern region in the national economy; and three, recognize the strategic importance of the region in India's foreign policy in general and the Look East Policy (LEP) in particular.

The report acknowledges the fact that lack of communication is a major hindrance in the development of the region, thereby laying special focus on connectivity issues and related infrastructure. The construction of roads and railway lines, with a view to connect the state capitals of all north-eastern states, has been given utmost priority in the report. The report recommends the creation of centres of excellence in the north-eastern states towards developing its human resource which would help integrate the region better within the current globalized processes and contexts. It highlights issues pertaining to capacity-building, people's participation in governance, creation of economic opportunities, and use of resources for the benefit of the local population.

In Volume II, the report provides a sector-specific and industry-wise strategy to be followed. The report outlines a vision for a green revolution in the region with crop-diversification, promotion of agro-based products, promotion of horticulture and floriculture, rural credit and banking, land reforms etc., given the fact that agriculture remains the primary occupation of the north-eastern states' population. The important role of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) industries in reducing poverty and unemployment has

also been acknowledged with a special focus on the role of Khadi and Village Industries (KVI) in the region. The recurrent theme in the strategy is promoting "industries with value addition". The potential in the services sector, especially in tourism and hospitality sector has remained untapped and undeveloped. Additionally, the virtual non-existence of the banking sector is also a matter of concern, as it directly affects the development process. There have been concerns about lack of banking reforms in the north-eastern states affecting the development process, which the report seeks to address by bolstering the financial sector in the Northeast and provides a plan for the same.

The report identifies as its focus areas, three broad categories of infrastructure, namely, transport and communication, industry-related infrastructure, and infrastructure related to the provision of public amenities, all initiating and sustaining the growth process. Some important recommendations have been made, one of them being improved connectivity between the capital cities of the north-eastern states.

The report gives special attention to region-specific needs in the educational sector. It aims to bridge the gap between different geographical areas, in terms of health-related facilities. The report recognizes the fact that around 80 per cent of job creation is still in the agricultural and allied sectors. It plans to promote and build entrepreneurial capabilities and provide vocational education to diversify the employment opportunities.

The role of local government institutions in the planning process and service-delivery has been underlined in the report, envisaging a role for government agencies as enablers of developmental and productive activities, and forging a closer partnership between local bodies and government agencies.

Significant investments in social and physical infrastructure are needed to achieve the goal of 'peace and prosperity' in the region. Each central government department earmarks 10 per cent of its planned budget for the north-eastern region, which needs concrete policies and projects to back up and account for. In order to ensure increased private investment in the region, a secure environment, coupled with improved physical infrastructure and skilled manpower will be needed.

The report devotes a full chapter to India's LEP in the NER perspective. It highlights the fact that the 'Look East Policy must begin with the NER'. The cultural connection between the north-eastern states and the neighbouring countries provides a substantial basis for people-to-people contacts, which would lead to economic development of the region through the strengthening of commercial links with its proximate international neighbourhood.



The full impact of the report needs to be assessed in terms of the political will to initiate its recommendations by the concerned Central government ministries and the state governments. Critical to its success would be concrete policies to back up the funds allocated, accompanied by much needed coordination and unity among the north-eastern states governments.

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