

Book Review**Contextualising Northeast India in Look East Policy****Akshay Jyoti Sarma***

Gorky Chakraborty and Asok Kumar Ray (2014) The Look East Policy and Northeast India, AAKAR Books, New Delhi and OKDISCD, Guwahati; 369 pages

India's Look East Policy was evolved in the early nineties giving paradigm shift to the country's foreign policy and international trade and cooperation. Despite having cultural and historical proximities, India could not ascertain mutual cooperation with the countries of East and Southeast Asia, particularly because of the existing global political scenario and the Cold War polarisations (Naidu 2008; Haokip 2015). Traditionally, India looked towards the West for her economic and trade interests. The dismantling of the Soviet Union and penetration of neo-liberal economy in a globalised set-up, world politics took new directions, one leading to mutual interdependency at the global level in the name of globalization and on the other as the global co-operation seemed to be a protracted process, countries relied on simultaneous bi-lateral and group consolidation.. There was a wave of neo-regionalism creating multilateral blocs in the geographic regions for mutual cooperation and economic integration unlike the traditional military blocs (Hettne and Soderbaum 2000). In south Asia, however, experiment of regional cooperation (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) could not prosper especially due to fragile relationship and trust deficit among its members. The lack of viability in SAARC to fulfil the economic aspirations in the given situation of market economy pushed India to widen the probable arena of cooperation. Conversely, the Southeast Asian Countries went ahead with a relatively successful experiment of regional cooperation, where one can see the vibrancy of intra-regional and inter-regional economic activity in the Asia-pacific region. The authors of the book observe India's Look East Policy is spurred by economic motivations and by the conviction of a large section of Indian elites for strengthening ties with the countries of the Asian Miracle (Chapter II: A Roadmap of the look East Policy, p.67). The ASEAN and other countries in the Asia Pacific are now considered as an expanded 'regional market' and this will induce greater competition and technology spill over, and improved trade logistics leading to greater investment in the region. The World Bank also viewed the benefits of cooperation and integration of South Asia and Southeast Asia as the 'playing field of global finance' (p. 68).

The authors observe that India's Look East Policy over the span of last two and a half

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decades demonstrated different dimensions in the field of foreign policy, trade, defence, security etc. The approach of India, through its Look East strategy is not only to attract investment but also for encouraging Indian entrepreneurs to look for investment opportunities in the ASEAN countries in this regards, the book questions the stake of the Northeast in this LEP approach. The authors are of the view that Northeast India, with its huge geo-strategic significance has an important role here, which has been only highlighted after the launch of the Northeast Region (NER) Vision 2020 in 2008. The Vision attributed the significance of the region in realising the Look East Policy.

The book has rightly debated the notion of space in the Northeast region. As the geographic space of the region has been made and unmade in different times at regular intervals to conveniently accommodate firstly the requirements of the colonial state and secondly, of the post-colonial state, the aspirations of the people has been more than often secondary in this regards. The authors have pointed at three hiatuses while dealing with spatiality in the region: between the colonised space vis-a-vis the lives space of the indigenous communities; between the nationalised space of the modern state vis-a-vis the lived space of the indigenous communities; and thirdly, the globalised space vis-a-vis the lived space of the indigenous communities (Chapter I: Introducing Northeast India, p.16). There has always been an indigenous notion of space among the communities living in the Northeast which have had to confront with the 'exogenous' forces such as colonisation, nationalisation, and globalisation. In the process, the space consciousness of the indigenes of the region has been diluted and re-configured to suit the machinations of the Indian state. While the governments at the centre and the Northeast are keen to provide a good 'business climate' to attract investment from the international corporate, private sector and the financial institutions, the interests and aspirations of the local and indigenous people appear to be sacrificed (p. 57).

Taking note on the re-imagination of the Northeast as a space for the market economy under the Look East Policy, the authors are of the view that such space re-configuration is attempted to give beyond-the-border space, a birth in the global market economy as the issue of space gained wider political economy significance in the contemporary neo-liberal frame (p. 16). The current geo-political imagination of the Northeast has been viewed as the 'extended Northeast', the space of the region extended beyond the region and international borders to the Southeast Asia.

The increasing penetration of capital and its other manifestation also have changed the idea of space in the Northeast. The spatial reconstruction and reconfiguration of the Northeast took place in different modes after its colonisation. According to the authors, right after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 and until The Government of India Act, 1935, the 'bio-space' in the region was created and recreated by arbitrarily drawing border-lines and boundaries. Secondly, through different Acts, the existing Chieftainships were brought under regulation led to structured subordination of the tribes in the region. Thirdly, the denial of the natural rights of the indigenous people and converting the common property resources to private property resources through different jurisprudential instruments namely '*res-nullius*' and '*lex loci*' also squeezed the notion

of space in the region. The natural rights of the indigenous people over space became acquired rights, permissible under the British jurisprudence. Likewise, revenue interests of the colonial government and drive for infrastructure building also squeezed space consciousness of the communities in the region. The authors provide an eloquent example, 'for the construction of the National Highway³⁹ only, as many as ten army expeditions were made on the Angami tract of then Naga Hills, which obliterated numerous ethnic spaces along the tract' (p. 35). Authors have critically argued that the colonial creation and recreation of space in the Northeast India had altered the natural and the archaic space of the indigenous people in the region that they used to enjoy in the pre-capitalist era, which was featured by 'mutual interdependencies of the communities, cultural give-and-take and community level exchanges and social bond'. However, the post-colonial developments such as the three partitions (Burma 1937, India 1947, and Pakistan 1971) and its consequential developments, wave of ethnic assertions have once again impacted the notion of the natural space –'bio-space' in the region leading to the ethnic conflicts, community dissention and bargaining for space.

The authors have well elaborated the NER dimension in the Look East Policy as a space for realising the eastward economic aspirations of the country. Looking at the prospects of the region, government took several policy measures to create conducive business environment and to attract foreign direct investment to the region. Among others, government has offered various incentive packages for investment in different sectors such as tax subsidies, land grants and allowing use of local resources (p.73). The driving force of the Look East Policy was to expand the market economy. The geographic proximity of the Northeast with Southeast Asia has amplified its relevance as a prospective economic zone hitherto been in the periphery of the economic activity. Yet, despite the Vision and stress on opening up of trade routes across the border to accelerate growth process of the region, the economy of the region has not moved forward. Northeast India's share in the regional trade is still very negligible as India's major trade engagement with Southeast Asia and the bulk of this trade is till date carried out through the more convenient sea-routes.

The book has critically dealt with various regional groupings in the region towards achieving larger economic cooperation and regional trade agreements. The authors are on the view that the regional groupings in the South and Southeast Asian region (the SAARC and the ASEAN) are instrumental in trade and market promotion either at regional or sub-regional levels. But there are considerable differences among the member states on ideological, political and strategic grounds leading to failure of becoming a regional trade bloc with substantial bargaining power at the global level, remained captive to the WTO hegemony (Chapter III: Regional Cooperation, p. 137). Conversely, the western regional groupings such as EU and NAFTA have better integrated with the global market with high bargaining power, largely because of forging of their strategic interest and putting aside the inconsequential differences.

So far the nature of integration of Northeast India in the regional market, there has been an inequality and polarity between the 'mega market economy' at the global level

and the 'dwindling farmers, artisans and petty manufacturers' at the local level. As the authors viewed, "not being able to scale up, the trade narrative of the Northeast remained confined mainly within a fiction of border trade, thereby trivialising the larger trade prospect of Northeast India at the regional and sub-regional levels." (p. 140). Thus, Northeast India is becoming the domino of the global capital and market rather becoming an equal player in the regional trade and the market.

The book deserves credit for contextualising the issue of governance and security in the larger context of globalisation and market expansion. The neo-liberal political economy has, however, changed the entire notion of governability. There has been change from a hierarchical and sovereignty based modes of governing to a more horizontal, network-based mode. According to the authors, there has been diffusion of political authority from the state to other actors. Trans-national policy networks are overpowering sovereign space of the states where international organizations, WTO, IMF, civil society organizations, activists group and trans-national non-state alliances are dictating the terms of governance and governability through an agenda called institutional reform (Chapter IV: Governance and Security). It was propagated that 'good institutions facilitate growth and weak institutions negatively affect growth' (p. 150). Institutional reforms are, therefore, necessary for safe function of finance capital and for creating an enabling environment for the private sector-led FDI driven development regime.

In Northeast India, the issue of governance and security has become a major constraint in promoting and integrating the region with the global market. Political unrest in the region has become a concern for the market economy and regional growth as it affects the governance scenario. As the authors viewed, international financial institutions like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank also insisted on governance as conditionality for loans (p. 165). So far as the Northeast India is concerned, institutional reforms and creation of new institutions as 'soft measures' on one hand and using power through state military and imposition of draconian law as the 'hard measures' on the other are instrumental to ensure conducive governance in the region.

Northeast India's stake in the Look East Policy has been visualised from two different perspective. As the authors observe, one view looks the region from the euphoria of economic growth in larger economic and trade frame of the global economy where driving forces are market reforms, transnational connectivity and market integration (Chapter V: The Contemporary Macro-Economic Trends, p. 202). The authors viewed this as the 'continental pole' which eventually bypass and supersede the local concerns of the region. Another perspective looks at the bargaining point of how much it (Northeast) can gain from the continental policy creating hope and excitement in different circles. The Look East Policy has also changed the perception of Northeast India from 'an anthropologist paradise' during colonial era and the 'security perception' in the post-colonial era to the 'gateway for trade and cooperation' with Southeast Asia in the contemporary era of globalisation (p. 204).

Although, Northeast India is moving towards a greater stake in the country's Look East Policy, this region has failed to enhance the capability and competency to be a real beneficiary of trans-national trade and cooperation. The authors argued that this region is still way behind in comparison to the national growth rates. The much hyped development agenda under the aegis of Look East Policy in the region has failed to create opportunities for the shift of the workforce from primary to other sectors. Similarly, manufacturing sector has also shown a declining trend which failed to generate income and also employment in the region although it exhibits a higher employment elasticity compared to other sectors in the regional economy. Likewise, unemployment rate in the region is almost three times higher in the rural areas and double in the urban areas compared to the national rates. Moreover, the trade profile of NER remains quite insignificant even under the LEP regime. There is a gap between the official statistics and the reality in region as much larger share of trade constitutes the informal trade across the borders. On the other hand, NER is formally exporting primary products (raw materials e.g. tea, coal and limestone) which indicate infeasibility of value addition in the region. As a result, the authors view that, the process not only dismisses the scope of resource utilisation for productive purposes that could be fed into the trade in goods but also discourages employment generation (Chapter VI: The Trade Scenario, p.276). The overall trade scenario has not improved in the region even after different initiatives under the aegis of the Look East Policy.

The book provides with a lucid critique of India's Look East Policy. For economic and strategic interests of India, the authors see dual prospects of India's cooperation with neighbouring countries. "On one hand, the hydro-power of the Nepal and Bhutan, gas reserves of Burma, transit facility through Bangladesh and inter-regional private sector investments can add to India's growth story. On the other hand, it possesses a security advantage, where strategic cooperation with these nations can give India the upper hand in dealing with the scores of insurgent groups belonging to the NER and also act as a bulwark against China" (Chapter VII: A Critique of the Look East Policy, p. 289). Despite all these developments, the authors however have rightly questioned the nature of engagement of the Northeast region in India-Southeast Asia cooperation and to what extent the region would be able to meaningfully play a part in the trans-national cooperation or the region would simply remain a passage for trade instead of being a meaningful partner to the process. Although, the Look East Policy has redefined Northeast India as the centre of a thriving integrated economic space, the disruption of old trade routes by the colonial rulers and the absence of the emergence of newer trade routes had deprived NER of its natural markets. As the authors view, the Look East Policy has benefitted the global market more than the Northeast region (p. 338).

The Look East Policy, which is eventual fallout of global economic order, ignored the real need of the local economy of the region. Local community and the local voices are also ignored in the policy making process. The authors feel that instead of domestication of the continental policy through institutional reforms, a policy like LEP should have a domestic root and emerge from below.

The book is worthy of appreciation for its critical approach. It is comprehensive and well elaborated on various aspects nuances pertaining to the Northeast India including the rhetoric and reality of Look East Policy. Apart from few typological errors and a more nuanced approach to confirm to brevity in the last chapter, this book is worth reading for those who wish to understand the political economy of LEP in general and its linkages with the Northeast region in particular.

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