Looking East via Moreh: Prospects and Challenges for the Kukis

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The division of British India and the then Burma in 1937, the hardening of international borders since 1947 and the subsequent disruption of old trade routes by colonial rulers, India’s import substitution economy after 1947 deprived the transborder communities in Northeast India of its natural markets. Of late, there has been much talk about the potential of India’s Look East policy in transforming the region. The inclusion of Northeast as an important component of this policy in 2003 is dubbed as the new paradigm of development in the Northeast development perspective. The policy envisages the region not as the periphery of India, but as the centre of a thriving and integrated economic space. Thus, it is seen as an excellent opportunity to integrate not only with Indian mainland economy but also with India’s neighbouring countries and even beyond. Within the overall framework of development of the Northeastern region through the Look East policy, Moreh has a special place as the first and only thriving trading point in the region. The vicinity of Moreh is inhabited by the Kukis on both side of the international border and there exist a vast potential for development through transborder trade. Despite such proposition, what happens on the ground is a different story. Therefore, it is pertinent to find who actually reap these benefits and what impact does border trade has on the livelihood and identities of people in the border areas. The present paper therefore, attempts to analyse the prospects and challenges of India’s Look East policy in the context of the Kukis.

India’s Look East policy

The Look East policy is a foreign policy initiative of India which was initiated in 1991. The main thrust of the Look East policy is to take advantage of the historical and cultural affinities of the Northeast with its eastern neighbours in order to enhance economic integration with the dynamic East and Southeast Asian countries. Thus, the Look East policy marked a strategic shift in India’s perspective of the world. 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.”

The Look East policy is the product of various compulsions in the post-Cold War period. The focus on economic content of international relations, emergence of regional economic groupings, forces of globalisation, frustration and slow process of economic integration within South Asia and China’s growing assertiveness in the Asia Pacific region compelled India to rethink the basic parameters of its foreign policy. The growing trends toward regionalism and India’s apprehension of being marginalised and isolated in the post-Cold War international system are the main reasons for paying more attention to the rapidly growing economies of East and Southeast Asia.

Due to its sustained efforts to forge cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, India became a Sectoral Dialogue Partner in March 1993, a Full Dialogue Partner in 1995, a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in July 1996 and a Summit Level Partner in 2002. The second phase, 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 linkage. 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 the “Long Term Cooperative Partnership for Peace and
Prosperity” with ASEAN, which is the corner stone of India’s Look East policy. India finally signed the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA) with the ten members of ASEAN in August 2009.

Colonial Legacy in Northeast India

Northeast India is beset with persisting assertions of ethnic nationalism which mainly manifested in the form of ethnic insurgency. Such ethnic insurgencies persist together with drugs and arms smuggling, which is one of their main source of finance. All of the major conflicts in the region are explosions along the fault lines deliberately left as the legacy of direct British colonial rule. The transborder tribes in India and Burma, during the colonial period, were too illiterate and ignorant to have a conception about their future political destiny. Boundary between India and Burma is the outcome of several policies of the British Government since the Treaty of Yandaboo signed in 1826. The transfer of Kabaw Valley in 1934 to Burma is conceived as the glaring instances of “distortion of history” deliberately committed by the British against the interest of Manipur. The British separated Burma from the Indian sub-continent in 1937 under the Government of India Act, 1935. Many of the ethnic communities were divided into two halves by these divisions. The imaginary political boundary drawn by Cyril Radcliffe in Delhi before partition of India in 1947 runs through several villages and even cuts through houses, divided the Garos and Khasis.

The Kuki-Chins “comprises a complicated category of several related tribes in the hilly areas of Manipur, Mizoram, Sagaing division and Chin state, and is plagued by subdivisions, dialects and the politics that feed into the internecine conflicts.” Like any other transborder tribes in the region they have been affected by the popular movements after 1947, which attempts to close off and regulate national borders more rigorously than ever before with a goal to defend national territory against foreign threats and to secure national territory against internal disruption that might be fed by forces across the border. Despite this division and restriction of movements, they continue to maintain their age-old ties. According to Karen Dean, they have “creatively adjusted to the dominating international system of the states” and despite being citizens of different states they are “united through a tight unique kinship lineage network of various spatial trajectories and social bonds, a commonly recognised *lingua franca* and a variety of tangible ethnic features.”

India and Burma followed the British delineation of the Indo-Burmese border. This artificial border have not only caused discomfort but also ruthlessly suppressed the aspiration of these people to live together under one administrative system. As such the ramifications of such policies were termed as the “British Apartheid”. The closure of the borders between the Northeast and the neighbouring countries since 1947 has been regressive on the economy and society. The political division of ethnic groups, the disruption of old trade routes and people-to-people contact is termed as “colonialism’s most enduring negative legacy”.

Looking East via Moreh

The end of Cold War and the coming of globalisation in the early 1990s brought about a new global culture. This new global culture is the deemphasising of political borders and the propagation of a borderless world. The propagation of a borderless world is associated with economic integration under the banner of globalisation. Economic integration in a regional and sub-regional basis is gaining precedence with the formation of an economic zones or what Keniche Ohmae termed as “region states” which may fall within a country or they may overlap the borders of two or more countries. In this globalised world there is a prospect of undoing the effects of colonial legacies.

The new direction of the Look East policy is seen as an attempt by the government of India to tackle the concomitant problems associated with the Northeast India. In the initial stage, the Look East policy was mainly a maritime cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. Since Burma
becomes a full member of ASEAN in 1997, the Northeastern region begins to occupy an importance place in India’s Look East policy. Atal Bihari Vajpayee stated that, “the admission of new countries brought ASEAN literally to India’s doors. From a maritime neighbour, ASEAN became our close neighbour with a land border of nearly 1,600 kilometers. This has added a new dimension to India-ASEAN relations.” This new dimension is the endeavour to exploit the existing economic potentials between the geographically proximate Northeast India and the new ASEAN members. Consequently, the Look East policy has been given a new dimension in the second phase wherein India is now looking to wards a partnership with the ASEAN countries, both within BIMSTEC and the India-ASEAN Summit dialogue as, integrally linked to economic and security interests of the Northeastern region.

According to Rajiv Sikri, India’s Look East policy “envisages the Northeast region not as the periphery of India, but as the centre of a thriving and integrated economic space linking two dynamic regions with a network of highways, railways, pipelines, transmission lines crisscrossing the region.” Such economic integration of Northeast India with its transnational neighbours is expected to open up new opportunities for the region. It is rather a late recognition of the strategic and economic importance of the region to India’s national interests.

The first outcome of India’s conscious efforts is the Indo-Myanmar Trade Agreement signed on January 31, 1994 for the establishment of trade based on equality and mutual benefit. The agreement specified that trade should be conducted through the designated custom posts, viz, (a) Moreh in India (Manipur) and Tamu in Burma, (b) Champhai in India (Mizoram) and Rih in Burma and (c) other places that may be notified by mutual agreement between the two countries. The border trade at Moreh and Tamu was formally opened on April 12, 1995. The agreement initially provided for cross border trade in twenty-two products, mostly agricultural/primary commodities produced in the trading countries. In 2001, some more products were added to the list of tradable items. In practice, the agreement actually does not go much beyond according a formal sanction to exchanges traditionally going on between the local populations in the border areas of the two countries. The agreement also made cross-border trade and contacts legal which is, as Prabakara observed, “a feature of daily experience, indeed a necessary condition of the people’s existence on both sides of the border.” Outside the world of formal trade, he said, there are regular exchanges of goods and services of many kinds. Apart from the flourishing border towns, such traffic goes on even in the “obscure, almost invisible little settlements that dot the border.” India’s trade with countries bordering the Northeast has seen the most dramatic expansion, with the share going up more the five times from 1.7% in 1992-93 to 8% in 2003-04.

To facilitate trade and improve infrastructure in the region, India has concluded a number of bilateral and multilateral projects aimed at enhancing connectivity between the Northeast and Southeast Asia. In this regard India built the 165-km long Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road connecting Tamu and Kalaymyo-Kalewa, which was inaugurated by the then External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh on February 13, 2001. Optical fiber network between Northeast India and Burma has been operationalised. The other important ongoing and potential infrastructure projects are India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Trans Asian Highway, India-Myanmar rail linkages, Kaladan Multimodal project and the Stilwell road. Efforts are underway to have a rail link from Jiribam in Manipur to Hanoi in Vietnam passing through Burma via Moreh.

The then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee proposed holding an India-ASEAN car rally at the ASEAN-India summit in Bali 2003 to draw attention to India’s geographical proximity with ASEAN countries. The ASEAN-India car rally became a reality in 22 November 2004. In his speech Manmohan Singh referred to India’s Northeast as a gateway to “Asian Century”. The India-ASEAN Car Rally reflects the existence of land route connectivity that could facilitate and be a catalyst to free flow of trade, investment and tourism between ASEAN and India through Moreh. India-ASEAN relation is complemented by a number of sub-regional groupings like Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong-Ganga
Cooperation and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Regional Economic Forum. This form of sub-regional cooperation could serve as building blocs for greater economic interaction and integration between ASEAN and India. Through these efforts, the government of India is showing its keenness in developing the Northeast, in which Moreh occupies a central place in looking towards the east.

However, the existing possibilities and the process of enhancing connectivity between India’s Northeast and Southeast Asia is not a cakewalk because there are also geographical, technical, political and security challenges that limit the process of infrastructure development. Despite this potential, the trade through the Manipur-Burma route has remained small and insignificant, amounting to a few crores per year and with little impact on the regional economy.

**Look East policy and the Kukis**

When the whole of the Northeastern region is so enthusiastic to get a pie from this policy, it is pertinent to find the place of the Kukis in this policy.

We may say that the Kuki people have no state so as to benefit from central funds or grants. In fact it is true that most of the Northeastern states receive about 80 percent of their budget from the central government as grants and only 20 percent is to be raised by the respective states. Year after years they passively depend on the central funds for their survival. But how is this money spent? The former Union Minister of State for Commerce and the present Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Environment & Forests, Jairam Ramesh firmly believes that this money is not going for development. This money goes to a series of interlocutors who happen to be politicians, expatriate contractors, extortionists and people working to deliver benefits to the people for whom these expenditures are intended to. Thus, in the foreseeable future there is less faith in New Delhi’s funds for the development of Northeast, especially the undeveloped interior areas.

As the world changes dramatically with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, where the economic dimensions of international relations has become prominent, nation-states focus on economic development. In such urge for economic development trade has an important place, though not the panacea, as trade has been characterised as an “engine of growth”. The opening of Moreh trading point in Manipur and also in Champhai (Mizoram) and Nathula (Sikkim) is India’s recognition of the role of trade in bringing about development. And Moreh is the first and only thriving trading point in the Northeastern region.

India is bringing an opportunity to our doorstep in Moreh. When we look into this deeply through geographical contours it can be said that both the Indian and Burmese side of the border is inhabited by the Kukis, and this opening can be exploited to the fullest by trading and opening permanent business establishments. In doing this the Kukis can come out of the shackles of traditional means of livelihood, i.e., shifting cultivation, and thus conserve the lush forests by diverting the pressure on land.

Apart from economics, colonial geopolitics left the Kukis separated in India, Burma and Bangladesh. This, to a large extent, has created a sense of alienation and had generated sub-nationalist movements. With the objective of making the Look East policy beneficial to the Northeast there has been a call for “transnational politics of recognition” of the geographical and ethnic identities that cut across international borders, taking a clue from transborder linkages in Europe. The premise is that it is the distinctiveness that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity. It is the recognition which is demanded of an individual or group and its distinctiveness. In doing this the transborder communities can revive their age-old relations and reduce the “forced border” created by the British. This could reduce the sense of alienation created by colonial geopolitics. The formation of sub-regional economic groupings like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Regional Economic Forum (BCIM forum) is a way forward.
The Ethnic Dimension

The Indo-Burma and Indo-Bangladesh border is inhabited by a host of ethnic communities who were separated by the division of British India and the then Burma in 1937 and the Partition of India in 1947. These ethnic communities have more in common with the population living across the border than with their own nationals. The affinity of groups with their kin groups across the border and the sense of support (both material and non-material) they derive from them, have had serious implications.

The pangs of separation coupled with several post-colonial aspirations has led to the emergence of various ethnic movements in the region and the inter-ethnic relations are guided by competition for scarce resources. The insertion of the Northeast into larger transnational region is largely advocated for removing the ills of development and the cult-de-sac situation. However, the proposal may not be a perfect answer to the tangled ethnic questions of the region. In a recent study of Mexican trucking across borderlands, Alvarez argues that Mexican truckers continually constitute and recreate ethnicity as part of an entrepreneurial process of successful penetration of foreign markets. He points out that the ambiguities of identities in borderlands can also be strategically played upon to forge, reformulate, and even mobilise ethnic identity to advantage.

Dona K. Flynn also illustrates that Shabe border residents in Bénin-Nigeria Border have similarly forged a sense of border identity in the face of economic change and decreased transborder trade.

As such the proposed transnational regime under the Look East policy is not likely to be effective if the ethnic factor of the region is taken into account. As witnessed in Africa and North America, there could be mobilisation based on ethnic identity to take advantage of the transborder trade. And the already fragile inter-ethnic relations in the region could be in constant peril.

Conclusion

The Look East policy is expected to usher in a new era of development for the Northeast through network of pipelines, road, rail and air connectivity, communication and trade. However, several hurdles need to be overcome of which the region is embroiled for the past several decades before any meaningful activity can take place. Starting from various forms of insurgent activities to the problem of illegal migration and drug trafficking, which are all transnational in nature, the Government of India need to forge cooperation from the neighbouring countries. Such cooperation with the neighbouring countries should not antagonise the people of this region. The transborder communities can be restored through border trade and inter-country trade, which the border region should not act merely as a transit corridor but as a source of local manufacture and enhancing people-to-people contact. The emphasis should be on industrialisation and growth and not merely on facilitating of trade through the northeastern region with the neighboring countries. The Kuki people must adopt proactive role and provide not only a peaceful and congenial atmosphere so that infrastructural development and trading activities are not disrupted. Greater participation in production and distribution activities and raising agricultural productivity can improve their livelihood. Trade alone is not sufficient to transform the region into a sustained development path. In addition, growth in trading activities will only benefit those people from outside the region, who are economically more powerful to exploit the resources of the region.

Despite the enormous potentials of the Look East policy till now the Government of India is following a half-hearted approach. India’s border trade with the countries neighbouring the Northeastern region is declining. Border fencing is followed fervently to check drug trafficking and narco-terrorism along the Indo-Burma and Indo-Bangladesh border which has affected border trade. Recently, India has sanctioned to raise the iron fencing, along Mizoram’s 404 kilometres border with Burma. It has also ordered the fencing of the 14 kilometres of the porous international boundary at Moreh in Manipur. On the one hand the Look East policy looks forward for open border; on the
other hand, the government has gone for fencing which will adversely affect the main purpose. Except the opening of border trade between India and Burma at Moreh and Champhai, and between India and China at Nathula, the 165-km long Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road connecting Tamu and Kalaymyo-Kalewa which was inaugurated by the then External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh on February 13, 2001 and optical fiber network between Northeast India and Southeast Asia, nothing significant has happened on the ground. The Look East policy is on the verge of being lauded as a mere rhetoric. Thus, it is high time that the government of India, especially the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) and Public Diplomacy Division of the Ministry of External Affairs, to look into the ground realities and initiate policies that would benefit the local populace.

Notes and References

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