

**The Look East Policy and Insurgency in India's North East :  
A Few Case Studies (1990-2014)**

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**BY**

**ANANYA BOSE**

**Registration No. : AOOIR1600616**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

**JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY**

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## **PRE-SUBMISSION SYNOPSIS**

### **The Look East Policy and Insurgency in India's North East: A Few Case Studies (1990- 2014)**

The conflicts in the northeast not only expose the shortcomings of the policymakers but also underscore the intergroup dynamics. Consistent external support for all insurgent groups, regardless of their ideologies and perspectives, particularly from Pakistan's ISI and its cross-border linkages, has made achieving peace extremely challenging.

Both media and citizens have alleged the misuse of political power and financial allocations by various governmental departments of the different tribal and ethnic councils. Fraud and extensive misappropriation of government funds are presumed to have been transferred to insurgent outfits to meet their needs. Consequently, India's neighbouring states have taken due advantage of the vulnerable and turmoil-ridden conditions of the northeast. The politics of the region are directly influenced by countries like China, Bangladesh and Myanmar, and even smaller state powers like Bhutan and Nepal. Through political backing, economic assistance, military training and arms supplies, India's neighbours have contributed to the ongoing violence in the region.

The north-eastern states of India comprise 8 states that have continued to struggle with issues of insurgency since independence. While a lot of work has been done on the various aspects of India's northeast, there is hardly any detailed study on how India's Look East Policy functions as a strategy to solve the long-standing insurgency problems affecting the region. This study aims to analyze the discourses adopted by the state, the functioning of civil society and the popular narratives that provide contrasting approaches to the problem. The northeast is connected to the rest of the country through a narrow corridor, called the Chicken's Neck which has an approximate width of 33 kilometres on the eastern side and 21 kilometres on the western side. These boundaries constitute 2 percent of the total, while the remaining borders are shared with China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Bhutan. India's northeast has been a region of persistent conflicts since independence, reflecting its social and

cultural differences, ethnic and linguistic diversity, socio-economic underdevelopment, and unique political circumstances. These problems combined create chronic insurgencies that generally cannot be entirely contained through conventional means. With the implementation of the first phase of the Look East Policy, it was expected that the circumstances would improve with the rise of border trade and economic enhancement. This study attempts a thorough analysis of the trends to see whether the policy mechanisms have helped combat insurgencies in this region.

Like many other Indians, I had limited knowledge about Northeast India and its diverse culture, ethnicity, and turmoil. I became aware of these issues when I came across an article by Professor Shibasish Chatterjee titled "*The Look East Policy and India's Northeastern States*" (Policy Report, March 1, 2014). His article provided me with a broader understanding of the linkages between India and Southeast Asian states, with the northeastern states serving as a connecting point. These linkages encompass not only economic aspects but also historical, political, social, cultural, educational, and strategic ties. Intrigued by this newfound knowledge, I delved deeper into understanding the issues faced by the northeastern states. However, I soon realized that narrowing down these issues was challenging, as each required extensive theoretical and practical analysis. During my separate study of the Look East Policy, I discovered that limited attention had been given to how the policy could contribute to addressing the longstanding insurgency in Northeast India. It is from this perspective gap that my research began.

## **RESEARCH GAP-**

The literature review reveals several research gaps and the lack of systematic studies to apprehend LEP as an approach that was primarily aimed at tackling the ongoing insurgencies in the region. A comparative analysis of the insurgency situations in Manipur, Meghalaya, and Tripura before and after the implementation of the Look East Policy is anticipated to investigate and elucidate whether the LEP has had a distinct impact on countering the insurgencies in these states compared to the past. A study of the trade and economic policies, infrastructure and connectivity across the region, peace accords, and political negotiations both by the state and central

government is expected to shed light on the efficacy of the Look East Policy as a conflict resolution mechanism in this region.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION-**

The entire northeast India has been tormented by insurgencies since independence. Crossing several hurdles, the Indian state has a mixed record of success and failures in dealing with this challenge. A major change in approach came through the introduction the Look East Policy in 1991. The two phases of this policy has yielded several changes in the north east. Infrastructure and communication facilities have improved markedly. Yet, the insurgent outfits have not perished altogether and continue to engage in low intensity conflicts. The relative remoteness, proximity of international borders, limited road and railway connectivity, lack of access to the sea and fuel disaffection breeds insurgency in the region. This study revolves around three major questions.

1. Have liberalized trade relations through the LEP, following in the wake of a new wave of regionalism across Northeast and Southeast Asia, contributed to any veritable economic upliftment of the states as a counter to the ongoing insurgencies in this region?
2. Has the LEP contributed to the fashioning of good governance as an approach to combat insurgencies?
3. Has the LEP engaged with the civil society of the northeast in its efforts to find long-lasting solutions to the problem of political violence in the region?

This study will explore these questions by focusing on three states: Manipur, Tripura, and Mizoram. It will follow a simple research design to find answers to these questions. Each chapter will be devoted to discussing trade and connectivity, good governance, and civil society, respectively. The study will compare empirical evidence gathered from both state and civil societal sources available on the ground to assess whether the Look East Policy (LEP) qualifies as a new approach to dealing with insurgency and political violence in the region. Additionally, each chapter will examine the approach of the state prior to the introduction of the LEP, enabling a proper comparison and leading to a balanced conclusion in each case.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY-**

In my research, I employ a qualitative research methodology that entails a thorough analysis of various sources, including government documents, major policy papers, and local as well as national newspapers. These sources provide valuable insights into the current status of the northeastern Indian region in relation to Southeast Asian states. My work also explores local media sources and local responses to get a clear vision of the ‘static’ initiatives taken towards the northeast. I have included interviews with policymakers and civil society members to analyse the depth of the situations in the northeast. These would be included as my primary resource. As a secondary resource, my detailed literature review attempts to identify the research gaps in this topic. However, due to the COVID-19 situation and health issues, I was unable to conduct fieldwork. Acknowledging the sensitive nature of this research issue, I have made sincere efforts to interview policymakers, civil society actors, and local media personalities to obtain authentic information about the insurgency situations and the development proceedings of the Look East Policy towards Northeast India.

## **INDIVIDUAL CHAPTER DISCUSSION-**

### **INTRODUCTION-**

In the introduction of my thesis I have vividly explored the area of my research with an extensive literature review which includes works of eminent academicians, policymakers and journalists from the northeast and the rest of the country. The focus of these writers lies majorly on northeast India and its potential in aiding international connectivity. After conducting an extensive literature review, my study aims to identify and address the research gaps in previous works. To achieve this, I have organized my major research questions into separate chapters. In these chapters, I provide a comprehensive discussion on my chosen research methodology, which I have deemed suitable for investigating this sensitive research issue. In conclusion to my introduction chapter, I briefly outline the contributions of the Look East policy in bridging the gap between North East and South East Asian states. Subsequent chapters delve into a detailed exploration of the diverse relations between these regions.

## CHAPTER- 2

### LOOK EAST POLICY-TRADE, CONNECTIVITY AND INSURGENCY

Northeast India comprises 8 states with the recent inclusion of Sikkim; and shares maximum international borders with Myanmar, China, Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh and China. During the British Raj, the entire region remained united and acted collectively. However, with the partition of India in 1947, the Northeast region became separated from the rest of the Southeast Asian states by the Mac Mohan Line and remained connected to India through a narrow strip of land known as the Siliguri Corridor, also referred to as the "chicken neck," spanning a distance of 22 kilometres. Since then, the states in the northeast continue to indulge in conflicts to seek independence from mainland India and in the process regain their sovereignty through insurgency. The socio-political discrepancies in the region have been historically condemned by the Indian government. Hence the government has often resorted to the implementation of Martial law i.e. the AFSPA coupled with the deployment of military and paramilitary forces. From independence up till the 90s, India not only suffered from turmoil that was majorly social or political. The rise of economic issues with the end of the Cold War and the crushing defeat of Russia, a long-term economic ally of India were major blows to the country. By then, the Southeast Asian states were gearing up with their economy, compelling policymakers in India to pave the way for regionalism by strengthening its ties with the Southeast Asian states. This could be done by the utilization of regional organizations like the ASEAN. This was the first initiative proposed as per the Look East Policy under then Prime Minister P.V. Narisma Rao. Hence India's participation in ASEAN was to foster trade, connectivity and strategic ties among the member nations. Furthermore, the Northeast region has always had a tendency to align with its neighbouring states. Therefore, policymakers believed that this initiative would not only provide greater connectivity to the landlocked Northeast with the southeastern states but also improve its political and economic conditions.

This chapter hence majorly focuses on how effective the Look East Policy has proved to be in encouraging trade, connectivity and strategic relations among the Southeast Asian states. Additionally, the chapter also explores how the policy dynamics have contributed to subduing the insurgency situations in the northeast. The chapter also

deals with India's relationship with states like Myanmar, Bangladesh, China and Bhutan who are the immediate neighbours of the region.

### **Myanmar**

India and Myanmar share 1600 km of land and sea borders. Myanmar military junta continued illegal trade with India for decades. The Indo- Myanmar border trade was sanctioned in 1994 through three major areas of the northeast – Moreh (Manipur), Champai (Mizoram) and Longwa, Rih and Pangsaw. Amongst all these, only Moreh had and still has proper trading connections with Myanmar. The other areas, which both governments are taking into consideration, are Nampong, Vijaynagar and Khimiyang from Arunachal Pradesh. The land customs station of Moreh lacks the necessary infrastructure to facilitate robust trade with Myanmar. The interstate connectivity with the border areas is highly inadequate and in a state of disarray. There is an immediate need for interstate road connectivity with the national highways for smooth transportation of goods. It is extremely time-consuming to transport goods to Moreh from the rest of the country if such downtrodden road connectivity prevails. With the implementation of the Look East Policy, projects aimed at studying the railway link from Jiribam to Mandalay have been conducted under RITES IN 2005. This issue was discussed in 2013 for the last time and since then no further up gradation has been notified. The Jiribam-Tupul-Imphal broad gauge line is another planned project which was expected to be completed in 2016 and to date receives no up gradation. Among all these odds the trading ties among nations which had previously experienced extensive acceleration received a hard blow when the Indian government imposed a 40 per cent tax on export goods. As a part of the LEP, both the Indian government and the Myanmar government worked together to construct the Indo- Myanmar Friendship Road, with the help of the Border Roads Organization. This road extends from Manipur (Moreh) to Kalewa 9 of Myanmar. This project had its first discussion in the year 2000 but is yet to receive its final results.

The 1,360km India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT), which is another significant project, is expected to connect Moreh in India with Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar. The sole aim of IMT, which passes through Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur, was to enhance trade in the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area. Another project

is the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP), linking Aizawl with Myanmar's Sittwe Port. The project combines an inland waterway and highway project connecting Mizoram with the Bay of Bengal deep seaport in Rakhine state, Myanmar. It aims to develop Sittwe to handle 20,000-ton vessels dredging the River Kaladan from Sittwe to Paletwa, a 158-km-long stretch; and constructing a 109-km-long road that connects Paletwa River terminal to Zorinpui on the Mizoram border, Myanmar. The plans are yet to get their results. The Imphal –Mandalay bus service forms an integrated part of the Look East Policy initiative. The plan of the initiative was submitted to MORTH and MDONER by both states in 2009. The Imphal –Moreh section of the road is about 110 km while Moreh to Mandalay is about 469 km. The MOU for the bus service was amended in 2012 and in 2014 a technical committee meeting was held for the second time. Since then no updates have been achieved. Apart from these projects, India in the year 2012 extended a US\$500 Million loan to Myanmar for infrastructure and power generation, but with the lack of interest, nothing fruitful has come out of it. The major difficulties which India faces in trading and connecting with Myanmar are the constant disturbances created by the military junta of Myanmar towards democratic India through infiltration, trafficking of drugs, instigating insurgents, an increase of illegal trade of contraband products and non-cooperation with the Indian government in implementing any of the projects initiated under the Look East Policy. Under such circumstances, the NE region is at a crossroads. Till India strikes a fine balance in its relationship with the junta government, the connectivity to the East through this region would become a slow lane and the insurgency situation would remain as it was since independence. However, with the cooperation of the Myanmarese government in a series of operations under Operation Sunrise with the Myanmar Army, the Indian government successfully flushed out insurgents who were using Myanmar as a base for anti-India operations. These operations coincided with thousands of pro-democracy protestors gathering in Myanmar to demand the reversal of the 1 February coup that removed Aung San Suu Kyi from power. India had cultivated a relationship with the Myanmarese military between the mid-1990s and 2011-12, when the country held its first polls after 1988. Therefore, cooperation and coordination between the two countries are necessary, taking historical ties into account.



## **Bangladesh**

India's Look East policy intended to look first within its own borders so that its northeastern parts could both be a vehicle and a beneficiary of the policy. Connectivity and economic integration with Bangladesh became important in that context. Bangladesh forms the only Southeast Asian state integrated majorly with the northeastern part of India. Thus the state has similarities in ways of living, culture, customs and religion with major parts of the northeast. This strong bond helped the insurgents to find a safe haven on Bangladeshi soil. Considering this fact; it has been observed that the majority of the 30 border districts of Bangladesh, out of a total of 64 districts, are among the most economically disadvantaged areas of the country. These areas were once important for trade and land connectivity. Amongst these districts, a few have been selected as border trade areas, including Banglabandha, Kuliang, Sabroom, Demagiri, and Kawripinchuaah.

The Indian districts bordering Bangladesh are similarly lagging behind in proper infrastructure and connectivity. Thus it is easy to know that the cross-border economic synergies due to geographical proximity have not yet been fully exploited. Thus there has always been a strong need for both governments to upgrade connectivity to understand the potentiality of the areas to trade. This sub-region serves as a crucial land corridor for connecting India to East Asia, including the proposed trans-Asian road and train links. However, the significance of connectivity goes beyond that, as it also provides access to seaports. It is important to note that the entire region was once united before partition, emphasizing the historical and geographical importance of maintaining and enhancing connectivity in the area.

The hinterland of Kolkata and Chittagong ports has the potential to extend beyond Nepal, Bhutan, and the states of Northeast India to encompass large parts of inland China. As China's manufacturers shift their focus inward, they are actively exploring alternative routes, including reviving the old Silk Route and seeking out new pathways. That is why Bangladesh in particular would like to see the success of the initiative called BCIM-EC, the acronym for Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar economic corridor for better trade and connectivity- especially with India. There has been much talk about transit facilities for Indian goods through Bangladesh. The issue has been narrowly focused in terms of the transit of goods only and not as part of sub-

regional economic integration through which a number of issues have been left unreturned. For example, supply chains can be developed to use the resources of the Indian north-eastern states by setting up labor-intensive processing industries in Bangladesh by Indian investors and exporting the products worldwide through Chittagong port or to the rest of India. This would have been a big idea of India's Look East policy in terms of the priority of the Indian policymakers at the centre facilitating India, Bangladesh and the northeast to be specific. The main economic logic of India's Look East policy lies in the fact that South Asia generally has been left behind in the race to integrate into global supply chains, which is a particularly dynamic segment of world trade. India has seen an upsurge in its trade with some of the south-east Asian countries after it implemented the free-trade agreement with the ASEAN in 2010. With a greater sense of enthusiasm and dedication to its policies, India has the potential to foster comprehensive regional economic integration with its immediate northeastern neighbours, thereby assisting the northeast region in elevating its economic standards.

### **Bhutan**

The India-Bhutan border trade treaty was signed in 1949, and since then, Indo-Bhutan relations have been characterized by coordination and cooperation. This was evident when the Bhutanese royal army collaborated with the Indian government during the "Operation All Clear" to eliminate insurgents from Bhutanese soil. It has been India's second most important trading partner, and due to its location in the upper region of the chicken neck area, it holds significant strategic importance for India and the northeast region. This border area has been used by ULFA insurgents for easy cross-border movements, but both states have taken serious measures to enhance surveillance and control in this regard. This relationship status of both states received a new dimension when India declared a Free Trade Agreement in 2005. The major border land customs stations used by the states for trading are Dananga, Halisar and Ultapani. Trade flows through these areas require more effective management, including the implementation of proper technologies and infrastructure, which has not yet been adequately addressed. Bhutan possesses significant hydropower potential, which has made the northeastern states dependent on it. Thanks to India's consistent cooperation, the Bhutanese government has been able to provide refuge to Nepalese individuals since the 1990s. Trade interactions between the local populations of

Bhutan, Tawang, and West Kameng in Arunachal Pradesh have been carried out in a traditional manner for centuries.

The majority of locals residing in the surrounding areas of the Indo-China border prefer to go to Bhutan for their daily shopping needs instead of coming to Tawang due to the distance factor. The cultural, social, racial, and religious affinity between the local people of Bhutan and Tawang and West Kameng in India facilitates social interaction and mingling, which directly encourages the growth and development of trade and commerce activities in the region. During the 'Torgya' and 'Gorsam' festivals, thousands of Bhutanese visit Tawang Monastery every year, and similarly, thousands of our local people also visit Bhutan during 'Churtem Kora' and 'Gombey Kora' festivals, as Buddhism is followed on both sides. As part of the Look East Policy plan, the first project for hydropower generation was implemented at the Chukla River, ensuring a steady transfer of 78 per cent of electricity to India.

The second project is the National Hydroelectric Project installed on the Kurichu River. The next one is the Sunkosh multipurpose project, which covers the rivers in the northeast. Trade between Assam and Bhutan has always been smooth. The major trading items among these states include apples, areca nuts, and handicraft goods from the northeast. However, the trade ties were ruptured during the 1962 India-China War and the subsequent Chinese domination over Southeast Asian states. Nevertheless, the relationship has managed to remain strong enough for cooperation between the two countries. The Ministry of Bhutan has always shown interest in promoting tourism as part of economic development, which has been appreciated by the Indian government. However, due to the constant cross-border movement of insurgents, entry to Bhutan has been restricted by the Bhutanese government. Additionally, the highways connecting the two states are poorly maintained, which not only hampers trade but also tourism. The Look East policy, primarily focused on the economy, has overlooked many issues that could have further strengthened the bond between the two countries.

## **China**

The relationship between India and China was disrupted during the 1962 war, and it has been difficult to accept the fact that communication between the states has been affected by historical clashes, leading to a decline in trading ties. However, the

situation improved to some extent with Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in 1988. With the implementation of the Look East Policy (LEP), the states focused on various key areas such as trade, security, politics, economy, and cultural relations. They aimed to foster more people-to-people connections, which enhanced continuous cooperation between citizens of India and China.

The trading graph between India and China, which initially exhibited signs of ascendance, is currently experiencing a significant decline. From 2004, there was a 27.5% increase in trade in 2005 (exports). As for imports, there was a 50% increase in 2004, which later saw minimal growth. India, however, is China's 16th largest trading partner, accounting for approximately 1.17 per cent of China's total trading volume. However, Northeast India and China do not share any border trading routes. Thus, the expectations of direct benefits from China were challenging to achieve. Arunachal Pradesh shares maximum borders with China. China's influence can easily be witnessed in any remote village situated in Arunachal Pradesh. The three major trading areas, as discussed by the governments of both India and China during their negotiations, are Zemithang, Gelling, and Kibithoo. In this regard, the northeastern states are supportive of the construction of a 1040-meter transnational road that would connect the states of Myanmar, India, and China. The road would begin from Ledo in Assam. Similarly, railway routes are also being considered for development. The Chinese government has planned to lay approximately 150 kilometers of rail tracks through the Yunnan province. In 2006 a survey group from China visited the West Bengal government to cultivate trading relations between China and the bordering areas of the northeast. Many industrialists from the Chinese province participated in the international trade fair organized by the Assam government. It was hence decided by both the Indian government and the Myanmar government that the opening of Stillwell Road was rather necessary to aid trade relations. Due to the blockade of this trade route, the entire supply of goods was transported from Myanmar to Bengal through Assam.

Another important aspect of China's connectivity development project is the opening of the Nathula Pass. This forms another important trading route with immense potential. The Nathula Pass is a trading route that connects Sikkim in India to Tibet, which is under Chinese administration. This route was reopened in 2006. It spans a

distance of 563 kilometres and serves as a crucial land link between Lhasa and Bengal for trade and connectivity purposes. Since the historical period, Nathula Pass has been used by the Tibetans and the people of Sikkim for trade.

Experts estimate that the trade through this route reached almost US\$48 million in 2007 and by 2010 it increased up to US\$527 dollars. India opened the Changgu Mart in Sikkim with minimal participation from China, even though 60 per cent of the concerned market consists of Chinese goods. The entire zone, including functioning hotels, restaurants, and transportation, is expected to reap the benefits of opening the pass soon. This would also help economic conditions in Sikkim to flourish. The discussion between both states regarding the Gangtok (India) to Lhasa (China) bus service indicates a potential opening of a larger portion of the northeastern zone towards the international boundary. The Indian Government presented Nathu La as an alternative corridor for Kailash Mansarovar. To facilitate this, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed on September 18, 2014, between the Ministries of External Affairs of India and China. This agreement aimed to open a new route for Indian pilgrims to the Tibet Autonomous Region in the People's Republic of China. Nathu La is seen as a safer and easier route for pilgrims, enabling pilgrims to easily travel a 1,500 km-long journey from Nathu La to Kailas by bus. With the increasing popularity of the alternative route, Indian trade through this pathway will experience a significant boost. In addition to Nathu La, other locations like Jelep La in Kalimpong have historically held a crucial role in trade. Areas such as Mile and Topkhana have served as significant business centers with prominent Tibetan colonies. On the flip side, China has been portrayed as a major supporter of insurgents in the northeast, frequently adopting a patronizing stance by providing arms, funding, and training to encourage their activities against the government. China's influence in the northeast is evident when one visits the border regions shared by both the states in the region. China has persistently engaged in the process of brainwashing tribal communities and continues to do so. The fluctuations in India's relationship with China directly impact the tribal communities.

With a vivid survey of existing literature and taking into account the interviews of eminent scholars, the current picture of the northeast still remains unclear. The Look East Policy primarily emphasized economic aspects rather than focusing on promoting good governance in the region. While it gained exposure on the

international stage, this approach had a negative impact on India's relations with several Southeast Asian states, as they were not as smooth as desired. Due to a lack of enthusiasm, there has been a serious lack of technological improvement, security and cooperation in the region. The entire northeast lacks short-term visions of development which should have been ingrained through the Look East Policy. The intra-regional connectivity, along with active people participation in projects, has been neglected under the Look East Policy. The agricultural sector, which serves as the primary source of income for the northeastern region, has not received adequate attention. Moreover, the lack of basic facilities such as water, electricity, and internet further complicates trade relations through the northeast. It is evident that the Look East Policy failed to prioritize the region's development, which is essential for smooth trade with Southeast Asia. Regardless of India's efforts to win the hearts of people in the northeast, unless their basic needs are fulfilled, any economic policy for the region remains insignificant.

## CHAPTER -3

### **LOOK EAST POLICY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE-**

There has been a wide recognition among policymakers and economists of the region that the main stumbling block to economic development in the North-Eastern region is its disadvantageous geographical location. The advent of globalization which is often associated with economic integration requires the development of the region with active implementation of good governance. Due to its extensive borders with China, Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Nepal (accounting for 98 per cent of its borders), North-East India is considered to have significant potential for development in the era of globalization. Consequently, a new policy has emerged among intellectuals and politicians, advocating for the North-Eastern region to pursue political integration with the rest of India and economic integration with the broader Asian region, focusing on East and South-East Asia in particular. This approach is seen as a potential pathway for the region's development. With the advent of this new policy, the Indian Government redirected its Look East policy towards the development of the North-Eastern region in 1990. This shift in focus is evident in the Year-End Review 2004 of the Ministry of External Affairs, which highlighted that India's Look East Policy has taken on a fresh perspective under the government's guidance. India now seeks to establish partnerships with ASEAN countries, both through the Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the India-ASEAN Summit dialogue. These partnerships are viewed as integral to India's economic and security interests, particularly in relation to the North-Eastern region.

With the advent of globalisation and the rise of regional economic cooperation, new policy approaches for development were felt on the domestic and external fronts. The border areas of countries neighboring the Northeast are rich in natural resources and showcase differential levels of economic and industrial development. Hence, the substantial differences in natural endowments between them are significant. The geographical contiguity could facilitate the exploitation of the potential for efficiency-seeking restructuring of the industry.

If the Look East policy is to be pursued fervently it should facilitate India's role in trade, democratic decentralization, good governance, investment, technology,

transport, communications, energy and tourism with its eastern neighbours. Sanjib Baruah, a staunch proponent of a continental Look East policy, advocated that *"India should take more advantage of North-East India's history and culture as a soft power resource"*. This involves reviving the shared historical and cultural ties between the people of North-East India and South-East Asia. Northeast India is the home of numerous ethnic nationalities. Even though the North-Eastern region experiences problems such as ethnic unrest, infiltration, insurgency, immigration, drug trafficking, and gaps in communication, there are also significant intra-regional differences in socioeconomic issues and ethno political aspirations. In fact, the region is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in Asia, and each state has its own distinct culture and traditions.

In the early 1970s, there was a conception that the region "required political representation" as the diverse tribal cultures and diverse sub-nationalities required participation in the 'mainstream democratic process'. New states were created in the region during this period to fulfill specific ethnic, cultural, and political aspirations for self-government among various tribal groups. The idea behind this was that these groups needed representation in the democratic process, and it was believed that once they had a voice and representation in the parliamentary democracy, many of their problems would be minimized. The government of India reorganized the political boundary of undivided Assam through a series of parliamentary Acts enacted during 1962-72. This was done without considering the financial and economic viability of the region. In 1963, the creation of Nagaland involved the inclusion of the Naga Hills District of Assam and the Tuensang division of the North-Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA). Subsequently, the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act of 1971 led to the establishment of another full-fledged state, Meghalaya, and two Union Territories, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh (formerly known as NEFA). Additionally, Manipur and Tripura were granted statehood under this act.

Despite the creation of several new states, the basic problem of integration, insurgency and balanced economic development still remains. The carving out of the states was a restatement of self-development for the tribes, but the machinery and the governance could not fully attain such goals. Although quick politico-administrative and cultural integration, as well as rapid economic development, were considered essential for ensuring the security of the North-Eastern borders, the majority of



resources allocated to the region during this period were directed towards defense needs. Consequently, limited progress was made in the field of economic development. However, the tribal-populated states falling under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution were given the option to either introduce Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) or to continue with their traditional self-government institutions.

All states of India, including the Fifth and Sixth Schedule states, with the exception of Jammu and Kashmir, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram, amended their Panchayati Raj Acts to incorporate the provisions of the 73rd Amendment Act. A large part of North-East India is governed by the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution of India. The Panchayats (Extension to the Schedule Areas) Act, 1996, extends the 73rd Amendment: to the fifth schedule areas. Three states, viz. Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya, which are covered by the Sixth Schedule, are exempted from the purview of the 73rd Amendment. The Sixth Schedule envisages the establishment of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs). These councils have been given legislative, administrative and judicial powers under the Sixth Schedule.

With the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act of 1992, the Manipur Panchayati Raj Act 1994 was passed on April 23, 1994. The new Act has provided for the constitution of a two-tier Panchayati Raj in the valley areas, the Gram Sabha at the village level and Zilla Parishad at the district level. The Act of 1994 was amended substantially in 1996 to accommodate the Gram Sabha in villages having a population of not less than 3,000 and not more than 6,000. In the hilly areas of Manipur, district councils operating under the Sixth Schedule are still in existence. Consequently, these areas are not covered by the provisions of Part IX of the Constitution, which pertains to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Furthermore, as per Article 243 of the Constitution, the provisions related to PRIs are not applicable to Meghalaya.

Hence, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment does not apply to Meghalaya. But the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council passed the Constitution of Village Council Act in 1958 in order to establish and develop local self-government in the rural areas and to make better provisions for rural administration. This would help them to develop them as self-sufficient units. A village council was constituted for each village and group of villages. There was a President and a Secretary for each village council. The 1980s saw a remarkable increase in public expenditure in the region

because development was directed toward a new paradigm. Even though a large sum of money is being poured in as developmental funds the region continues to experience problems of underdevelopment. One problem that arises is the lack of implementation of developmental packages, which neutralizes the intended impact. This occurs due to poor monitoring, lack of accountability, and failure to adhere to the stipulated time frame for project implementation.

Besides, the rural areas of the Northeast heavily rely on Panchayats and Gram Sabhas, but the citizens often have limited knowledge about their representatives. It has been observed that only around 16% of citizens actively participate in election campaigns. When questioned about whether party leaders or MLAs visit their area for campaigning and engage with the citizens, a staggering 98% of the respondents answered negatively. Differences of opinion or perception are quite understandable, especially when there is significant diversity in the backgrounds of the respondents. It is logical that in areas where elections are not visited by outsiders, MLAs, or other political leaders, there would be limited coordination or cooperation among the Gram Panchayats. The existence of separate subordinate institutions further contributes to the complexity. Even the recognition of the heads of Zilla Parishad raises questions and requires establishment points. These entities appear to be remote in the structural framework of decentralization, seemingly disconnected from the Gram Panchayats. As a result, monitoring the functioning of these institutions becomes challenging.

It has been found that the numbers of members in the Gram Panchayats are much larger than the number present in the Zilla Parishad. It has been noticed that the locals with their own relevant reasons, do not associate much importance with the office of the Gram Panchayat. The Panchayats have failed to contribute substantially to their respective territories; especially in fields where they have been expected to contribute the most. Although, they play a large role in providing drinking water, installing street lights, improving IVRs and in addressing the grievances of the citizens only 3% of the citizens acknowledge the contribution of the Gram Panchayats in their respective areas with respect to schools, 20% in water supply, 35% in roads, 2% in street lights, 15% in sanitation, and 10% in housing. The state administrations in the northeast region provide limited facilitation for primary education, resulting in a high number of dropouts. Additionally, students in rural areas are more engaged in farming or

family businesses. The healthcare situation in the northeast is similar to that of schools, with inadequate infrastructure and services.

The only way to access better treatment is by connecting with Gauhati. However, reaching there from remote villages in Arunachal or Manipur is both time-consuming and costly. The health centers in these villages suffer from a lack of proper equipment and doctors. Furthermore, a significant challenge faced in most regions of the northeast is the inadequate availability of electricity and internet services, which hampers banking operations as well. Simply providing a large amount of money to the states does not ensure proper development unless the funds are channeled in the right direction. Hence, developments are at stake in the region. Unless proper coordination is established between the state government, Gram Panchayets and central government, development in the region would be a far-fetched idea. Decentralization of power never means non-interference or a lack of enthusiasm toward the betterment of areas. The region is subject to the AFSPA rule, where the presence of the central government is strongly felt. The same level of commitment should be extended to other essential needs as well. That is where the pulse of good governance lies.

## CHAPTER 4

### LOOK EAST POLICY, CIVIL SOCIETY AND PEACE-

India's Northeast has been the theatre of the earliest and longest-lasting insurgency in the country. The peacemaking and conflict resolution methods employed till date have failed to give the desired results. With India's independence in 1947 and the reorganization of international borders with eastern neighbors like East Pakistan/ Bangladesh, Tibet/ China, Burma/ Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan paved the way for India's Northeast to emerge as a distinct geopolitical region. The region has historically been one of the world's greatest migratory routes, cutting across such countries as Tibet/China, Myanmar/Burma, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh. As a result, throughout history, the region has experienced a variety of races and communities existing in a single region. The widespread identity crisis in Northeast India has been primarily caused by two factors: the large-scale migration of people from outside the region during the past one hundred years and the total dependence of people on the land and the state's apparatus for a livelihood. The failure of various sections of the migrant population to adapt themselves to the local language, customs and traditions has further emphasized the identity crisis. Among the states in the Northeast, Assam faces a complicated problem of separatist demands and insurgency.

During the 1960s, the state witnessed language riots, followed by an anti-foreigner movement in the 1980s. Alongside the ULFA, which was established in 1979 and advocates for an independent Assam ("swadhin Assam"), various ethnic sub-groups such as the Bodos, Karbis, Dimasas, Koch-Rajbanshi, Rabha, Tiwas, and Mishings have also expressed their demands for autonomy. Under the leadership of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, the Bodos initiated an armed agitation, which resulted in the establishment of the Bodoland Autonomous Council. However, despite gaining the council, the Bodos have not abandoned their armed struggle for attaining an independent state. In the North Cachar District, the Dimasas Halem Daogaha is pursuing a similar strategy; although their final objective is not clear. Moreover, there are several Islamic groups operating in Assam, which seem to have affiliations and financial support from entities located outside the region.

Nagaland has become the epicenter of insurgency in the Northeast. Despite the state of Nagaland being established in 1963, seemingly fulfilling the political aspirations of

many Nagas, the formation of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980 brought forth a commitment to pursue complete independence. However, a subsequent split within the NSCN resulted in the emergence of an even more militant faction known as the NSCN (Isak-Muivah), which engaged in conflicts not only with government forces but also with the other splinter group of NSCN, the NSCN (Khaplang) faction. The Naga community claims that the areas inhabited by them were unfairly demarcated by the British colonial rulers. Both the independent and integrationist Nagas hold the belief that they were compelled to share their ancestral territory with the neighboring states of Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh. Their shared objective is to unify all these regions into a single entity referred to as 'Nagalim.' This has brought them into conflict with their ethnic neighbors who oppose the idea of redrawing boundaries. The state is plagued by multiple problems. Three major ethnic groups, the Meitei, Naga and Kuki struggle for supremacy. The valley of Manipur frequently faces incursions from Meitei extremists, while the hill areas endure attacks from Naga militants and inter-tribal clashes between the Nagas and Kukis. These conflicts reached their apex in 1992. Moreover, the situation is further complicated by class and ideological disputes, which are reflected in the various names of Manipur's numerous political organizations.

Various groups vie for local support and influence in the region, including the People's Liberation Army, the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak, the Kangleipak Communist Party, the Kuki National Organisation, and the NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland). In Tripura, tensions regarding socio-economic disparities between tribal and non-tribal communities have been present since the former princely state's accession to the Indian Union in 1948. These conflicts have persisted over time, leading to ongoing simmering tensions in the region. In particular, an influx of non-tribal refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) turned the local tribals into a minority. Frustrated by feeling increasingly marginalized due to the influx of Muslim immigrants, the tribal communities resorted to insurgency as a means of expressing their discontent. In 1979, the Tripura National Volunteers launched an armed struggle to repel the Muslims. Although the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council was formed in 1982, it did not stop the agitation. At present about 20 tribal insurgent groups operate in Tripura, the most prominent being the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and the All Tripura

Tiger Force. Their activities have resulted in the internal displacement of thousands of people.

In Meghalaya protests against outsiders have also become rampant, especially in the case of Bengalis, Nepalese and Marwaris since 1979. In 1992, riots erupted in Shillong against immigrants, resulting in the loss of 31 lives. The Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) has been engaged in a campaign of disruptive activities within the state. Additionally, reports indicate that the Garo Hills area has become a sanctuary for militants from various regions. Killings, kidnappings and extortion have increased significantly over the last several years.

Things are quieter in Mizoram. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the state experienced tribal rebellion led by Laldenga. However, following the signing of an accord with the Mizo militants in 1986, the insurgency largely dissipated. Nevertheless inter-tribal conflicts, and Mizo hostility towards non-locals such as the Chakmas, continue to keep the authorities on their toes. In addition, some outside militant outfits have established remote bases in the state. Arunachal Pradesh is considered the most peaceful part of the Northeast region, although it is not entirely devoid of troubles. In fact, all the hill states, with the exception of Meghalaya, are categorized as 'highly sensitive' by the Government of India. As a result, an Inner Line Permit is required, even for Indian citizens, to enter these states for tourism purposes.

In the Northeast, counterinsurgency operations and inter-ethnic violence have displaced large numbers of people. There has been a disturbing rise in violence against women and children in the region. Furthermore, the use of violence by certain voluntary organizations that harbor sub-national aspirations undermines the efforts of existing civil society, leading to a degradation of civility within the society. Not all sub-national organizations are undemocratic, extremist or uncivil, of course, for example, the Asom Sahitya Sabha. However, the path from a promotion of language and literature—which may appear benign—to the politics of identity formation and assertion is a short one. Instances of solidarity are also evident in grassroots efforts in the cause of peace. There have been several peace accords—in Mizoram (1986), Assam (1985) and Nagaland (1975)—that came about partly as a result of individual and small group endeavors to open up space for negotiation and dialogue. The Church

and the missionaries operating in the region have played a significant role in facilitating dialogue and reconciliation between the insurgents and the government. Their efforts have been instrumental in bringing the conflicting parties to the negotiation table. In the present situation, the best work is being done by women's groups. These groups protest against army atrocities, rampant alcohol sales, and drug addiction, and even provide guards at night to protect villages from raids. Prominent among them are the Naga Mother's Association, the Nupi (women's) movement in Manipur, the Tripuri Sundari Nari Bahini of Tripura, and the Matri Manch of Assam.

Civil society is a source of power and this power must be utilized to influence peace. In Nagaland, the church-led Joint Peace Council is working for reconciliation among the warring Naga factions through the formation of a larger Naga collective identity. Efforts by concerned citizens have also spawned groups like the People's Consultative Group in Assam, which includes eminent writer Indira Goswami. Although the ULFA leadership remains intransigent, these initiatives have led to the building of durable links between different strata of civil society and a burgeoning spirit of cooperation and solidarity. These groups have actively participated in conveying the needs of the citizens to the government as well. As the Look East Policy was intended to enhance the economic development in the northeastern regions, people's consultative groups remained active in pointing out the loopholes in channeling such a significant amount of investment to the northeast without proper monitoring.

With this unaccounted money, tribes indulge themselves more in drugs and alcohol, which have become easily accessible. This has always been a key concern for civil society in relation to the government. Unemployment also pushes them towards addictions, which is another significant issue. Moreover, the abundance of money and easy access to arms smuggled from China and Myanmar, has exacerbated the situation. The Look East Policy not only freed the states from being landlocked but also exposed them to international crimes, making the region more volatile. Civil society, along with peace-building initiatives, has concentrated on addressing these issues that serve as the root causes of insurgency.

## CONCLUSION

I initiated my research with a question focused on assessing the extent to which the Look East policy has successfully mitigated insurgency in the Northeast. The question encompasses three perspectives: first, trade and connectivity; second, good governance; and third, civil society's role in peacekeeping. After considering conversations with eminent personalities who have worked or are currently working on Northeast issues, as well as analyzing books, newspapers, and journals, I have arrived at a certain conclusion. With the implementation of the Look East policy, Northeast India has gained recognition on the international stage. The policy has fostered increased coordination between the Southeast Asian states and the Northeast, thereby strengthening the Indian economy. However, there are also negative implications associated with this development.

Prior to the 1990s, India grappled with numerous internal issues, including the emergency, the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi, riots in Punjab, and the Kashmir issue, while the northeast remained largely neglected. However, with the implementation of the Look East policy, the northeast region at least became a significant concern for the government. During the British period, as the region was clubbed with Bangladesh and Myanmar, connectivity, trade and people-to-people contact were relatively smooth. However post partition, the entire region became a deadlocked region and started protesting against merging with India. The Look East policy initiated several projects, such as the Asian Highway project, Kaladan multimodal project, and the interstate connectivity project. However, none of these projects has shown any significant improvement beyond paperwork. Moreh (Manipur), being an important border zone for trading, lacks basic infrastructure facilities, let alone connectivity with the rest of India.

As far as governance in the region is concerned, the operationalisation of AFSPA reflects the kind of governance the Indian government is allocating towards the northeast. Numerous literature reviews provide evidence of widespread instances of mass torture, fake encounters, and severe human rights violations committed by the armed forces operating under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA). The remote areas of the northeast, particularly the hilly regions, suffer from a lack of effective governance, creating an environment where extortion, kidnapping, and



killings by insurgents have become common occurrences. Constant infiltration is a major cause of insurgency in the region. The government has been largely silent about this matter. The third perspective emphasizes the significance of peacekeeping and civil society. It is indeed true that civil society has taken significant measures to facilitate dialogue between the insurgents and policymakers. However, it is important to note that the demands of the northeast region vary from one state to another. Listening to and analyzing each demand and engaging in negotiations is a time-consuming process. The government, undoubtedly, has other pressing issues to address throughout the rest of India as well.

Every Indian state faces some or other issues and poses its distinct demands to the government. Hence it's somewhat foolish to believe that government will always prioritize the issues of the northeast. On the other hand, the serial bomb blasts in Assam in 2008 took place during the active implementation of the Look East policy with its various developmental projects in the northeast. While Tripura has effectively subdued insurgency through its own efforts and with the cooperation of the left-front government, it still faces challenges in terms of sufficient agricultural facilities, which serve as the primary source of income. Additionally, Tripura's rubber, being one of its largest manufacturing products, struggles to find a proper market in the international forum.

Mizoram, for decades, has been plagued by a sense of disillusionment as they have lost any hope or expectations from the government. Anyone arriving from outside would immediately notice the lack of proper road communication and electricity in Mizoram, which has been a longstanding issue for the state. On the other hand, Arunachal Pradesh constantly faces the challenge of asserting its position as an integral part of India, despite the influence and assertiveness of China.

Meghalaya, for decades, has been grappling with a minority crisis caused by the unregulated influx of refugees, and the state has consistently voiced its concerns regarding this issue. Manipur is enduring a strenuous struggle to persuade the government to repeal the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) and put an end to constant military abuses. Nagaland, historically kept separate from the rest of India by the British, has never fully connected with India and demands autonomy, complete with its own flag, constitution, and anthem.

All of these issues cannot be resolved solely through increased exposure to South East Asian states. Restoring peace requires addressing each of these issues individually, which not only takes time but also requires patience and a genuine commitment to the well-being of the people, transcending mere political considerations. Numerous other issues remain unexplored, and the more I learn, the more I realize how much is still unknown. Hopefully, with policy upgrades and a change in the government's mindset, there will come a day when the suffering and isolation of the northeast region are truly understood.

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