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Look East Policy & India's North East: Polemics and Perspectives

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Look East Policy and India's North East: Polemics and Perspectives edited by **Thingnam Kishan Singh***, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2008, pp. 225, Rs. 650/-

The Look East policy has emerged as one of the prominent foreign policy initiative India has undertaken in the post-Cold War period. It was launched in the year 1991 by the then Narasimha Rao Government with the aim of developing multifaceted relation with countries of Southeast Asia. Such aims include renewing political contacts, increasing economic integration, and forging security cooperation with several countries of Southeast Asia as a means to strengthen political understanding, and enhancing India's political role in the dynamic Asia-Pacific region in general and Southeast Asia in particular. As a result the Look East policy is responsible in making India an inalienable part of the Asia-Pacific's strategic discourse. It is rather a late recognition of the strategic and economic importance of the region to India's national interests.

After 17 years the Look East policy has yielded many benefits and supported India's economic transformation and growth, including closer strategic contacts between India and Southeast Asian countries, an impressive increase in the quantum of bilateral trade with other developing countries in Asia and increased people-to-people interaction. India's trade with countries bordering the Northeastern region witnessed a dramatic expansion, with the share going up more than five times. However, this increase in the volume of trade with India's eastern neighbours has had little or no impact on the Northeast. As a result, in the second phase, the Look East Policy has been given a new dimension wherein India is now looking towards partnership with the ASEAN countries integrally linked to economic and security interests of the Northeastern region.

Thingnam Kishan Singh edited book *Look East Policy & India's North East: Polemics and Perspectives* published by Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi is a collection of articles published in the first four issues of a quarterly journal *Alternative frames* which was rechristened as *Alternative Perspective*. The essays are an attempt to highlight the core issues confronting the Northeastern region vis-à-

vis India's Look East policy. Thingnam Kishan Singh traces the historical factors and circumstances leading to the origin and conceptualisation of the Look East policy. He analyses in detail the role of capital moving across national boundaries during the colonial period and the integration of world economy. Like many of the decolonialised nation-states in the post-war era, India too adopted capitalist path of economic development. The economic crisis in 1991 forced India to succumb to the pressures of IMF and World Bank led economic reforms, which eventually helped to open up India's economy. With this India felt the need to integrate and consolidate its India's trade through regionalism and regional trading blocks. The Look East Policy was adopted as a means to integrate India's economy with the Asian economies. Konthoujam Indrakumar observe that the Look East policy is responsible for breaking the confined and opening up the region to South East Asian region. He traces the attempts by India to forge alliances and its participation in significant world issues and analyses the emerging economic and strategic convergence. In another essay Indrakumar contends that a persisting concept of being a frontier region inherited from the British colonial legacy continues to dominate the overall attitude towards this region on the part of the ruling class of post-colonial Indian State. As such for the Indian State it is not economic considerations but political and strategic compulsions that force it to hold on to the Northeast. He argues that there exists a sense of 'otherness' both in historical and cultural terms from the rest of India accompanied by a high degree of alienation. But he fails to analyse that looking to the east or integrating the Northeastern region with Southeast Asian economies would lead to further alienation of the people.

In the introductory part of his article Laishram Churchill deviates from his main focus of assessing the environmental impact of the Look East policy by raising the persisting sensitivity of the Northeastern people towards ethnicity and cultural patterns. He does not analyse how the northeastern people can cope with or resist the impending juggernaut of cultural imperialism, economic imperialism, Indianisation and globalisation. Churchill emphasises the incorporation of environmental issues in the process of national planning which is crucial to the development process. However without prescribing the alternative course of action left with the

government, he cautions about the possible environmental degradation by citing some major infrastructural projects in the region and around the word.

Neumais essay makes a critical analysis of the developmental approaches of the Northeastern region. He asserts that despite the various strategies adopted by the central governments there is no positive headway in the development of the region due to the virtual absence of economic and industrial infrastructure. He asserts that security fears have suppressed developmental concerns. Sanjeev Thingnam contends that the Northeast India was conceptualised as a frontier region during the British period and the legacy of geo-strategic concerns persisted and were carried over even under independent India's administration. The Look East policy would not be free from implications and challenges like the trade route schemes proposed by M'cosh which confliciting beset with varied were opinion raised by the colonial officers. In their essays Senate Khuraijam H. Sharma and Thingnam Kishan Singh argue that opening the economy of the Northeast will only further reduce it to a market for the developing economies of Southeast Asia just as Northeast India has been a market for mainland India. Mere opening up of the Northeast economy through the Look East policy therefore, entails the risk of destroying the fragile household industries in the region.

L. Suraj Singh traces the relationship between India and Myanmar since 1948 and its implications for Manipur. He identifies some of the strategic, economic that led to the change of India's policy towards Myanmar in the early 1990s. Suraj Singh argues that the concerns of Look East policy are more political and security oriented than economic concerns with border trade. The right type of planning attempts to go beyond the narrow outlook of security maintenance by taking into confidence the local authorities would be a positive improvement in the direction. In his essay Kangujam asserts that the opinion of the Northeastern people, who are going to be the most affected as a result of the implementation of the Look East policy, been has not taken into consideration. The reversal of India's earlier policy towards Myanmar has been due to strategic considerations and it has deviated from its cherished principles of supporting the democracy movement in Myanmar.

Kamujam further points out that the concept of border trade has been meticulously dragged into the picture only with a design to lend an economic colour to the various diplomatic initiatives undertaken with regards to Myanmar. He demands that India snap all diplomatic ties with the military junta calls this a 'far-sighted foreign policy'.

The Indo-Myanmar 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 British India in 1947. These ethnic communities have more in common with the population living across the border than with their immediate neighbours in India. 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 have led to the emergence of various ethnic movements in the region and the inter-ethnic relations are being guided by competition for resources and land. Though there is a wide recognition of the co-ethnics in the border areas of the Northeast with its neighbouring countries in all the essays, there is hardly any attempt to put forth new ideas on the said issue. The insertion of the Northeast into a 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 interwoven ethnic questions of the region. In a recent study of Mexican trucking across borderlands, Alvarez (Robert R. Alvarez Jr., "The Mexican-Us Border: The Making of an Anthropology of Borderlands", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, October 1995, Vol. 24, pp. 447-470) 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 (Donna K. Flynn, "We Are the Border: Identity, Exchange, and the State along the Bénin-Nigeria Border", *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 24, No. 2, May, 1997, pp. 311-330) also illustrats that the 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 factors of the region are 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.

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*__Dr. Thingnam Kishan Singh__, Sub-Divisional Officer of the Ukhrul district of Manipur, was abducted and killed by militants in February, 2009.
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