



Globalization and India's Act East Policy: A North-East Perspective

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Abstract

The paper establishes the linkage between Globalization and India's Act East Policy to its expectations with the ground reality from the eastern borderland of India. The central government extended various policies and programmes to physically connect with Southeast Asia and the Far East through the North-eastern region. The physical connectivity will be through transnational highways, railway line, and waterways. It also tries to unlock the landlocked states of the region through Mizoram by providing a link to the open sea. The government is trying to make and use the borderland as a Gateway to Southeast Asia and further toward the Far East countries. All these projects, however, missed the target of completion and are yet to function. The paper also shows that the borderland is becoming the corridor for Drug trafficking from the 'Golden Triangle' to other parts of the world. It argues that economic globalization through Act East Policy produces tremendous scope for overall development. If people of the region failed to take the advantage of it, then the borderland might just become an 'overhead bridge' to connect between mainland India and Southeast Asian countries bypassing the North Eastern Region.

Keywords: *Globalization, India's Act East Policy, Borderland, Golden Triangle, Drug Trafficking.*

Introduction

Globalization is the process of integration of national and regional systems (economy, politics, and culture) into the world system. The forces of globalization are very strong and sweeping across the globe almost unhindered or hardly hindered by the physical boundaries and policies of the nation-state. It is a borderless world. It increases the economic and also cultural integration through cross-border transactions of goods and services and technology. Cross-border interactions cover social, economic and political aspects and the volume of trade in the border also escalates. It is technology-driven, privatization centric and thus

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oppose to protectionism. Globalization is based on ‘Market Forces Economics’ and spread across the globe by the invisible hand of the market mechanism. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the economic health of India was in a bad shape due to an unprecedented balance of payments crisis, growing fiscal gap, double-digit inflation, rapid depletion of foreign exchange reserve, recession in the industry, etc. The economic crisis was controlled and overcome by restructuring the Indian economy. It was materialized under the leadership of P.V. Narsimha Rao, the then Prime Minister and his Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh (the chief architect and mastermind of the new economic policy) responded to the crisis by legislating a policy known as New Economic Policy in 1991. The new policy was based on a (reform) trinity popularly referred to as Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG) policies. In continuation of India’s New Economic Policy—economic globalization, the then government unveiled the Look East Policy of India [now known as Act East Policy (AEP)] to reconnect with South East Asia and Far East countries. In fact, it has been one of the most important aspects of India's integration into the world economy. It tries to connect India’s Northeast with South East Asian countries and aims to integrate its economy with the world through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In other words, one of the most important forces of Globalization in Northeast India comes through the Act East policy of India. The policy of Act East where series of initiatives India and its eastern partners take for expanding cooperation spanning over and through the North Eastern Region (NER) of India. The policy includes physical connectivity through road and rail links to East and Southeast Asia through NER of India. In the above context, the paper analyses the policy perspective of Globalization from Northeast India.

The Idea of Economic Integration through India’s Act East Policy

The New Economic Policy of India 1991 brought structural adjustment programmes and economic liberalization in the country. The New Economic policy marginally affects/ impacts the people of Northeast India in the beginning (till the early 2000s) due to the backwardness of the region. However, with the advancement of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and its intervention and also through Act East policy (AEP), the central government has been trying her best to integrate the region economically with the world. In other words, India’s Act East policy is a part of India’s response to the process of globalization. According to Pudaite, since the announcement of its intentions for ‘look east’ and its commencement,

“bilateral trade exchanges with some of the countries in the regions have not only grown exponentially, but there has also been a rapid increase in bilateral, sub-regional and regional linkages and institutional interactions, aimed at enhancing and consolidating all round development” (2010: 177).

No doubt, the AEP is an ongoing process with a series of initiatives for broadening and deepening India’s economic cooperation with the countries in southeast and east Asia. Many of these initiatives will be implemented through the North Eastern Region. In the process, this region will be totally globalized. India’s Act East policy is dubbed as the new paradigm of development in the Northeast Region’s development perspective. It envisages

the region not as a backward borderland of India but as a centre for flourishing and integrated economic space. The reorientation of India's policy towards the South East and Far East countries and its endeavour to tackle emerging global economic and political development especially with Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan. The reorientation of India's foreign policy with these countries also brought a new relationship with them. As a result, 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. In the 16th ASEAN-India Summit, during the 35th ASEAN Summit on 3rd November 2019, it was discussed to "increase maritime cooperation, trade and investment, connectivity, as well as cooperation in science, technology, and innovation. On the socio-cultural front, the meeting explored further cooperation on people-to-people connectivity, cultural exchanges, and tourism" (16th ASEAN-India Summit). In the above Summit, the Prime Minister of India said that "India's Act East Policy is an important part of our Indo-Pacific vision. ASEAN is and always will be the heart of our Act East Policy" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019).

One of the important goals of the AEP is the physical connectivity of India with Southeast and East Asia through transnational highways and railway lines passing through NER of India. A massive change is expected and started happening (at least at the policy level if not materialize fully) in the transportation sector in the region through AEP of the government. Some policy initiatives and implementation have become visible, however, most of them may take few more years (5-10 years) to materialize and visible and also the fruit or otherwise of it. Nonetheless, the intention of the Central government is very clear and if the present proposal goes as per plan then (hopefully) in the next 5-10 years, the socio-economic scenario of the region would be permanently changed and making the region as the corridor to South-East Asia and East Asia. For example, a trilateral India-Myanmar-Thailand highway agreement was reached in 2002. The Trilateral Highway is a component of the Asian Highway and cannot be overlooked. In fact, it aims at connecting India's North-East with Thailand via Myanmar. It could minimize the disadvantages of landlocked of India's North-East region and address the challenges of poor infrastructure connectivity. The key infrastructure projects include—the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway running from Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand via Mandalay in Myanmar. This is one of the ambitious projects that seek to connect India with Thailand through Myanmar which the Government of India is trying and hoping that it will be the gateway to ASEAN countries. The first part of the journey i.e. from Moreh a border town of Manipur in Indo-Myanmar border to Kalewa in Myanmar was constructed by the Government of India and known as the India-Myanmar Friendship Highway (IMFH). Moreover, the construction of Asian Highway No. 1 (AH 1) is undergoing in full swing and is expected to complete by mid-2021. This international highway (AH 1) is designed to pass through Imphal up to Moreh in Manipur, India to Maesot in Thailand via Myanmar's Tamu, Mandalay and Myawaddy. The new highway will improve the trading links among India, Myanmar and Thailand and it will be beneficial economically for the people living in the region.

Another project—Trans-Asian Railway (TAR)—is undergoing in the region. The Trans-Asian Railway Network Agreement was signed by 17 Asian Nations including India to build a transcontinental railway network between Europe and Pacific ports in China and formally came into force on 11th June 2009. It includes three lines between India and Myanmar that crisscross through Bangladesh. It can be mentioned here that India's NER is in the middle of the TAR plan. It proposes trans-national railway lines from West Bengal through Bangladesh to Tripura and then from Tripura to Myanmar via Mizoram. There is another proposed route from Imphal to Moreh and then to Tamu in Myanmar. Northeast Frontier Railway has already started construction of a railway line from Silchar (Assam) to Imphal and is in an advanced stage of completion and targeted to complete by March 2022. Another line from Imphal to Moreh has been sanctioned by the government. Once all these projects (AH 1 and TAR) are completed then one can imagine traveling from New Delhi via Guwahati via Imphal via Moreh to Bangkok (or further east) with a border interchangeable point either in Moreh or Tamu in the near future. In short, Moreh will be an important trading town and also a point of entry of the Asian Highway and TAR which eventually aims to link Delhi with the capitals of Southeast Asian countries.

Another ambitious project under the AEP of India is that of Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) connecting Lawngtlai in Mizoram (India) to Sittwe Port in Myanmar. The KMMTTP is a bilateral project of the India and Myanmar governments to connect both the countries by three modes of transportation—road, river and sea. The project was launched by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) under the leadership of Manmohan Singh in 2008. The project aims to unlock the landlocked NER of India to the sea. In other words, the project is to connect the NER of India to the sea. The KMMTTP when completed would first link the eastern seaport of Kolkata (India) to Sittwe seaport in Myanmar across the Bay of Bengal (a distance of 539 KM). From Sittwe, the route will continue 158 KM through waterways over Kaladan River till Paletwa (a western town of Myanmar) and then it will connect to Zorinpuii (Zochachhuah) in Mizoram on the Indo-Myanmar border by a 110 KM long road. It will then be connected by road to Lawngtlai (a southern town of Mizoram) which is 87.17 KM away where National Highway 306 (formerly NH 54) passes by. The project has been delayed for a long time but road construction (in a fast track mode) began in 2018 and is India's single largest developmental activity on a foreign land (Sivaranjini, 2018). In short, the project targets to unlock the landlocked state through Mizoram by providing a link to the open sea. It will shorten the current time taken to transport goods from Kolkata to Mizoram by three-four days and in terms of the distance by more than 950 KM thereby reducing the cost of transportation and time. Besides, it is hoping to reduce the dependency on 'Chicken's neck' that lies between Nepal and Bangladesh in the West Bengal-Assam border. The project has already missed its target, that is, May 2020 and it may take at least another three to four years to complete. There are several other infrastructure projects which are being undertaken in the region in the last two decades or so as a part of India's AEP. All these projects are meant to integrate the region politically with India and economically with the world economy through the Southeast Asian economy.

The Ground Reality

The NER of India is the Gateway to Southeast Asia and beyond through India's AEP. And, the region is expected to gain by integrating her economy into the world economy. The expectation from the people is also very high, however, the fruit of development (through AEP) is still a dream to be accomplished and only 'GOD KNOWS' whether it will be really accomplished or not. The Government of India also realized that key projects are missing datelines in the region. When the KMMTTP missed its deadline, "the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs has expressed its displeasure over the physical progress of the road component, saying it is 'not at all satisfactory'.... indicated "failure of proper planning, monitoring and supervision" (Deccan Herald: 10th March 2020). The PM of India Narendra Modi accepted that poor connectivity is one of the biggest hurdles on the path of development of the north-eastern region, so, his government had sanctioned over 3,800 KM of the national highway, with an investment of Rs 32,000 crore, over the last three years (First Post: 16th December 2017). The former Mizoram Governor Lt Gen (Retd.) Nirbhay Sharma said that the way ahead is to enhance connectivity in all dimensions, namely, information, highways, airways, railways and waterways; 'panchayatva' as Prime Minister (Narendra Modi) has called it in the context of the Northeast (The Hindu: 1st December 2017). It is important to mention here that the policy planners and mandarins sitting in Delhi hardly understand comprehensively and also very insensitive about the region—the periphery and the borderland of India's Northeast. For example, the East-West corridor (3300 KM) starting from 'Silchar' (Assam) to Porbandar (Gujarat). The question here is [Why the East-West corridor of India begins from 'Silchar'? Is 'Silchar' the last city/town of India in the eastern borderland? Certainly not, then why? The mandarins and the policy planners in Delhi can only answer the question satisfactorily. Actually, the political (and physical) map of India does not end in Assam in the eastern periphery of India. There are two states (Manipur and Mizoram) after Assam towards the eastern border of India neighbouring Myanmar. If the government is sensitive enough then the East-West corridor of India should start either from Imphal or Aizawl—the last capital/town in the eastern part of the country. Moreover, the above mentioned two states are yet to connect by railway heads to its capital. In other words, some of the states in the eastern borderland are poorly connected (road, railway and airways) with its mainland even after more than 70 years of India's independence. The so-called 'national highways' in the region are poorly maintained which is barely motorable during the rainy season. For instance, the national highway 306 (formerly NH 54) Aizawl to Silchar is barely motorable (from May-September 2020); a truck takes at least 7-8 hrs to cover the 180 KM long distance. Similarly, the national highway 53 Silchar-Jiribam-Imphal is also in very bad shape. A truck from Jiribam will take at least 12 to 15 hours to reach Imphal (200 KM) if the driver is lucky during the rainy season. Sometimes, it takes two/three days to cover the distance because trucks and buses cannot pass the two suspension bridges [(the only suspension bridges in the national highway of India) one in the Makru river and another in Barak river] freely on a normal manner. They have to wait for their turn. Sometimes they have to wait for their turn for three/four hours to cross one bridge. This may be difficult to believe to many but this is true and it is the hard reality of poor infrastructure in the region. In short, the government has to give more focus on the connectivity of the region. It needs good

roads (proper two/four-lane national highways and state highways) in the region [if not bullet train(s) from NER of India to the national capital of India] for overall development.

One can easily notice that the economies of different states within the region are far from integration. As of now, the markets have been fragmented by several factors like (a) underdeveloped communication networks. For example, there is no direct bus service from Imphal to Aizawl or Imphal to Itanagar, Aizawl to Agartala, etc forget about the direct flight and train services. Also, some state capitals of the region (Aizawl, Imphal, Kohima and Shillong) are yet to be connected by railway heads, (b) high cost of mobility (men and materials) within the region itself, (c) the absence of shared vision among different states, last but not the least, (d) the differences in local laws and customs (Inner Line Permit and landholding system) also seriously hinder economic integration within the region and also with the mainland economy. The economic reform measures enunciated in the country cannot therefore be easily extended in the region. Moreover some believe that the Act East policy is an extension of India's new imperialist policy. It is a new design due to the geostrategic position of the region to serve it as 'a bridge between India and South-East Asia' at the cost of the culture and traditions of people of the borderland. Whatever the case may be, the truth is that the region is now totally dependent on the Central Government for its survival. Dependency Syndrome is very much visible in almost all states of the region. They cannot run the system without financial assistance or grant from Delhi. There is no industry worth mentioning in the region apart from the few industries in the tea estate, oil, and natural gas sector in Assam even though there are huge potentials in different sectors like tourism. In fact, the region has endowed with natural resources like water, oil, natural gas, and huge mineral resources such as coal, limestone, gypsum, uranium, gold, etc. All these are yet to be explored properly. So, what is actually needed is internal resource mobilization by all the states of the region in order to enable to bear the minimum expenses in reaping the benefits of Central assistance or in warding off the debt burden.

Borderland as Drug-Trafficking Corridor

The eastern borderland of India shares a long border of 1643 KM with Myanmar and 1880 KM with Bangladesh. The borderland is known for poor infrastructure and less development in addition to rough terrain, high mountains and deep forests that dominate the bordering areas making the task of 'policing' extremely challenging on both sides of the borders. The Indian Government is trying its best to fence the border (and also guard it) by the security forces particularly Border Security Forces (BSF) but failed. There are many gaps, ungoverned areas and corrupt officials make the long international boundary vulnerable to drug trafficking; where the traffickers can easily manage to sneak in through the so-called 'border'. Most of the drug smuggling takes place directly through Sagaing Region and Chin State of Myanmar which borders with Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. Moreover, the proximity of the 'Golden Triangle' with the borderland (NER of India) is also another major problem of drug trafficking and becoming a corridor for the smuggling of drugs (and also arms) to other parts of the world via NER of India. It is important to note here that the Indo-Myanmar border belongs to the Golden Triangle group, a drug-producing area

where 68 percent of all known illicit opium production and refining in the world takes place. According to Binalakshmi Nepram, there are:

“Some 90 percent of this mountainous terrain is under poppy cultivation and accounts for 65 percent of estimated total world opium poppy cultivation. According to the US Drug Enforcement Administration, Myanmar produces 80 percent of the heroin in Southeast Asia and is responsible for 60 percent of the world’s supply. Heroin from this region soon found its way to Western Europe as new smuggling routes opened through China and the former Soviet Union. Northeast India falls in the heroin trafficking route with many of the heroin labs located near the Indo-Burma border” (2020).

There is rampant cultivation of poppy in various parts of the borderland (Indo-Myanmar Border), particularly in Manipur. The approximate total area under poppy cultivation in different hill districts in Manipur is estimated to be 6000 acres in 2017-18 (Kipgen 2020). The plantation of poppy in Manipur is known to everybody including the Government of Manipur. The Chief Minister (CM) of Manipur, N. Biren Singh said that “Thousands of hectares of land are used for poppy cultivation in areas near the international border with Myanmar” (The Financial Express. 3rd November 2018). The CM of Manipur knows the problems of the drug in society and so he started his government’s campaign titled, ‘War on Drugs’ right after he was sworn in as the CM of the state in 2017. Since then, the government is trying to convince the poppy cultivator to stop it and plant alternative crops. Recently, the government reached out to the village headmen seeking their help to end poppy cultivation and motivate farmers to switch over to alternative livelihoods to make Manipur a drug free state (Deccan Herald 15th September 2020). Interestingly the BJP government led by N. Biren Singh inducted three new ministers on 24th September 2020, among them one (O. Henry Singh) is an accused in a drug-related case. Besides, the CM of Manipur “...had come under controversy after a state police officer, involved in operations against the drug menace, had told the Manipur high court that she had been under pressure from him to go slow in a drug case” (The Wire 20th August 2020).

There are large number of youth in the region who abuse (use illegally) pharmaceutical drugs like phensydyl, Corex, Spasmoproxyvon, Diazepam, Nitrogen-10 (N-10), and psychoactive substances (opioids drugs) such as Morphine, Heroin No-4, and opium. According to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, about 0.70% of Indians (approximately 77 lakh individuals) are estimated to need help for their opioid use problems. The top states in the country are Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Manipur (Northeast states) along with Punjab, Haryana and Delhi (2019: 20). In short, several states in the borderland of the country are today battling a major drug problem.

Borderland as a Consumerist Society

Globalization also leads to the homogenization of culture in some significant aspects throughout the world. The process of globalization which involves tremendous exposure of

local, sub-regional and regional social entities to the forces of market and finance on the one hand, and on the other access to revolutionary means of communication and media influence and energize the latest aspirations in the society. The advancement and expansion of Information Communication and Technology through the internet (maybe by smartphone) and subsequent exposure to entertainment and information through mass media, particularly television, cinema, social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, have brought about changes in people's taste and life experiences of the region. It also increased the incidence of acceptability of international and inter-regional items in areas of food, beverages, dress patterns and many other cultural traits among the people. For instance, jean is now a popular (and accepted) dress among young (both male and female and even old women) in Northeast. The use of modern cosmetics, generally of western (also Southeast Asian countries like Korea) origin has become very fashionable these days and it also commands a big market.

North-East is also not lacking behind but rather ahead in the homogenization of consumption patterns and lifestyles with other parts of the country and the world at large. The food habit and the fashion of the West and also South East Asia such as Pepsi, coca-cola, cheese, pizza, burgers, KFC chickens, momo, chow, chowmein, noodles, denim jeans, rock music, etc, etc. are spreading and deeply rooted in the region. The changes in the lifestyle and increased use of consumer durables such as motor-cycle, cars, electronic devices, television, computer, smartphone, music system, etc. are also very much visible in every nook and corner of the region. The globalization of markets has led to the conversion of traditional objects of art, crafts, and aesthetics having mostly ritual uses in the local communities into marketable communities. Actually, the local products are no more marketable due to lack of technology and competition. This has not only rapidly disrupted the art and culture, but also destabilized the life of the artisans by creating new networks of competition. The cultural threats, globalization poses to society are noted as displacement of the traditional norms of society due to exposure to de-humanizing and retrospective cultural products in the form of fashion, entertainment, consumerism, exposure to new styles of life, etc. The said developments are leading to the high incidence of crime and moral deviance such as human trafficking and prostitution, the cult of money, drug addictions and loss of traditional humanistic values, the disintegration of family life and age-old family values like care of the elderly and emotional bond among the members of the family.

Conclusion

Globalization was introduced in India as a part of the New Economic Policy in 1991 under the leadership of P.V. Narsimha Rao, the then Prime Minister of India and his Finance Minister Manmohan Singh who happened to be the chief architect of the new economic policy. In continuation of India's economic globalization, the then Government of India announced the Look East Policy (now rechristened it as Act East Policy) to connect India's Northeast with Southeast Asia and also integrate it into the world economy. It tries to connect India with the countries in Southeast Asia and the Far East through North Eastern states by road, train, and waterways and increase trade exchanges with them bilaterally and multilaterally. The physical connectivity will be through transnational highways (AH 1), railway line (TAR) and waterways (through KMMTTP). In the Indo-Myanmar border, border

trading points are opened up for border trade in Moreh in Manipur and Zokhawthar in Mizoram. Most of the projects under India's AEP (economic globalization) are yet to be completed however it is expected to complete in the next few years. Once the projects are completed the landscape and topography of the region will also be transformed positively. The impact of globalization in the region is however more negative than positive so far. Actually, the region is becoming a corridor for drug trafficking, human trafficking and arms smuggling. Over and above that, poppy which is very dangerous for the future of the society is cultivated in many places in the region particularly in Manipur. Besides, many youths become addicted to opioids drugs like Morphine, Heroin No-4, Opium, and other pharmaceutical products like phensydyle, spasmoproxyvon, Diazepam, etc. In short, states in the eastern borderland are battling major drug problems. Moreover, India's northeast is becoming a consumerist society. It could not produce what is necessary and required by the people. So, it is high time that political actors at the local, state and regional level put their minds together to resolve some of the ills in the society. It can provide facilities and conduct training to the educated youth particularly in the areas of entrepreneurship, retail business, Agri-business, International business, foreign language especially the South East Asian and Far East languages. The said techniques can generate employment opportunities and also self-employment for youths of the region. Moreover, 'Team India' should not be limited only to the people in Delhi, it should also include Chief Minister, local political actors, civil societies and other functionaries in various states of the region as equal partners. In fact, people and state governments of the region should be involved in foreign policy matter or in the promotion of foreign trade and commerce which is going to affect them. The States Division within the Ministry of External affairs which has been established in October 2014 to coordinate with States and Union Territories for facilitation of their efforts to promote exports, tourism and attract more overseas investment and expertise need to work sincerely with the local actors to understand the needs, aspiration and concerns of the people. In short, economic globalization through Act East Policy produces tremendous scope for overall development. If people of the region fail to take the advantage of it, then the borderland might be used just as an 'overhead bridge' to connect between mainland India and Southeast Asian countries through India's North-East.

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