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IMPACT OF THE NEW UNREST IN THE NORTH-EAST ON INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY



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Background

The North-east is a region that has been characterised by decades of conflict, insurgencies, underdevelopment and neglect. But that is just a part of the lexicon that is largely known to the rest of India. What is equally significant is that there are over 220 ethnic groups and an equal number of dialects¹ that make the region not only a colossus but very difficult to manage, administratively. Decades of neglect of the North East has made cultural assimilation and a feeling of nationhood, a big challenge. The region is also rich in natural resources and its people today are known famously for their soft skills, which is why we find them in large numbers in the services

¹ Jeffery Hays 2008, Tribal Groups in Assam and North East India

industry across the nation. Antiquated land laws, poor infrastructure, endemic corruption, an archaic tribal legal system, an overpowering influence of Civil Society Organisations and lack of public awareness are other issues that have been the bane of the North Eastern States. However, India's rise in the comity of nations is only possible if this region lives up-to its full potential, which calls for a change in her outlook towards this region. It is for this that India is serious about its Act East Policy. The Act East Policy was preceded by the Look East policy which focused on the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and economic integration with them. The Act East Policy however focuses on Economic Integration with ASEAN countries as also with East Asian countries besides having security cooperation with them². The recent announcement of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019 led to widespread protests in the North-east. A large section of the North-east feels that their concerns over preserving their culture, land, resources, jobs and demography will get overlooked with the implementation of the CAA. Left unaddressed, this is likely to seriously affect India's Act East Policy. This paper attempts to showcase how certain recent Acts/legislations by the Centre have caused some turmoil in not only the North-east, but also in Bangladesh and why it is necessary to address these concerns. Some recommendations for addressing these concerns have been made towards the end of the paper.

The Relevance of the North East States

It must be understood that development of the North-Eastern states of India is a sine qua non for the success of her Act East Policy; in other words for the Act East policy to succeed, **“it has to pass through the North East”**. The North East States form the launch-pad to the ASEAN nations through

² Drishti, International Relations, The Big Picture: India's Act East Policy, 12 Nov 2019

Myanmar and for the success of the Act East Policy, it is necessary to have a continuum of connectivity through the states in the North East. Thus what is significant is connectivity, which would include physical, institutional and people to people connectivity³. Road connectivity by far remains the most important in this and the ongoing project of the Trilateral Highway between India, Myanmar and Thailand (Moreh in Manipur, India to Mae Sot in Thailand) is on track, though a bit behind schedule. This highway will eventually connect up-to Singapore and will hold immense potential for overland transportation of goods and people. The need for this highway to get operational soonest cannot be overstated. Conversely for improving sea bound connectivity to the North East the significance of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Trade & Transit Project (KMMTTP) should not be lost sight of. The KMMTTP is the cornerstone of India-Myanmar economic ties⁴. The ₹2,904-crore project has been in the works for long. It is a road-river-port cargo transport project that India is building for Myanmar. The project involves a waterway route from Sittwe Port to Kaletwa (225 km) along the Kaladan River and thereafter a roadway from Kaletwa to the India-Myanmar border (62 km). The Kaladan project will be an alternative route for goods from India's North-East to rest of the country and would make the sole dependence of moving goods through the long winding Siliguri corridor, redundant. Besides, not only will it boost the economy of Myanmar, but will also help India and Myanmar in counterbalancing China's growing influence in Myanmar and the region.

³ Rabha Bipul, Connecting South East Asian Nations Through North East India: Opportunities and Challenges, SSRN Dec 2019

⁴ Ramesh M, Kaladan Project: Key to India-Myanmar Economic Ties, Business Line 19 Jan 2018



(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaladan_Multi-Modal_Transit_Transport_Project)

The KMMTTP

The KTTMMP has often been criticised as being slow, with deadlines being revised and cost escalations happening frequently. It needs to be understood that there are issues within Myanmar also that are causing this delay. The Kaladan movement, an umbrella group of civil society organizations and environmental groups, for instance, has criticized India for opacity in the implementation of the project. Local communities were apparently not consulted or informed about the project’s impact. They are not being included in the project’s benefits and are being discriminated against with regard to wages. Activists are also drawing attention to the Kaladan project’s destructive impact on the environment and impacts on local livelihoods⁵.

Development Needed for North East for the Act East Policy

For the North-east, what then is needed to make India’s Act East Policy a success, given that there are many developmental needs? From the Look East Regime to the Act East Policy initiation regime the main agendas for development have been concentrated for infrastructure development

⁵ Ramachandran Sudha, The Trouble With India’s Projects in Myanmar, The Diplomat 21 Sep 2016

including roads widening, expanding air connectivity, extending railway networks, opening new and reactivating dormant trade routes, facilitating border trade and transit points⁶. Some of these aspects are listed hereunder:-

- **Road.** The Centre has sanctioned Rs 1,90,000 crores for road projects spanning over 14,000 km in the North-east⁷. Besides, since 2015, road projects worth Rs.821.56 crores had already been sanctioned under schemes of North-Eastern Council (NEC). It is necessary to ensure that their progress is monitored regularly.
- **Rail.** It is rail connectivity that would be a game-changer for the Northeast and the Centre's plan to connect all State capitals less Gangtok, are encouraging. Particular mention must be made of the Jirbam-Imphal (110 kms), Bhairabi to Sairang (51.38 km) in Mizoram, Dimapur (Dhansiri) to Zubza (Kohima) (82.50 km) in Nagaland, Sivok to Rangpo (44.39 km) (for Sikkim), and from Tetelia to Byrnihat (21.50 km) roads in Meghalaya. All these are relevant and need to be speed-tracked.
- **Air.** Plans are afoot to construct 19 new airfields for small aircrafts with 30-40 passengers' capacity. This would promote intra-regional connectivity. Besides the UDAN scheme, plans are also in place to link Guwahati to all South-East Asian cities to include Yangon, Mandalay, Dhaka and Bangkok⁸.
- **Telecom.** The North-eastern states would require doubling the telecom infrastructure. Tower and Infrastructure Providers Association (TAIPA) in a recent statement said that at present there

⁶ Master Builders (2017); India's North East Opens (June 19, 2017); The Gateway to Prosperity; <https://www.masterbuilder.co.in/indias-north-east-opensthe-gateway-prosperity>

⁷Northeast Financial Express, Centre Sanctions Rs 1,90,000 crores for Road Projects, 26 Sept 2018

⁸ Barman Arup, Progressive Edges in North East India for South-East Asian Businesses and Trades

are around 7,184 mobile towers in Northeast which need to double up in the forthcoming time to support emerging technologies⁹.

- **Others.** The other important issues that need to be looked into include:-
 - Cold storage chains for agro products.
 - IT hubs.
 - Promotion for business development which needs to be incentivised.
 - Creation of Special economic zones and corridors.
 - Tourism - build on the Hornbill (Nagaland) and Sangai (Manipur) festivals both of which are very popular.
 - Promote medical tourism-large numbers from Myanmar want to capitalise on the medical infrastructure available in Manipur.
 - Creation of universities and colleges.
 - Expanding the Hotel industry.
 - Power – capitalise on the solar, wind and hydro potential.
 - Shorter route for export of minerals and forest products to South-East Asian nations.

⁹ Electronics B2B.com, <https://www.electronicb2b.com/headlines/northeast-needs-to-double-the-telecom-infrastructure-taipa/>

- Creation of additional trade centres besides Moreh in Manipur.
- Improving the security situation –There is a need for continued engagements with Myanmar and Bangladesh.
- Invest in people to people contact, particularly with Myanmar, cultural linkages are immense.

Protests over Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) & National Register for Citizens (NRC). The CAA looks to give Indian citizenship to non-Muslim religious minorities undergoing persecution in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan and the NRC is a fall-out of the 1985 Assam Accord. These two issues suddenly stoked a great degree of unrest and unpleasantness in the entire North-eastern region ever since the CAA was passed in the Parliament in Dec 2019. The people of Assam and rest of North-east fear it will primarily benefit illegal Bengali Hindu migrants from Bangladesh who have settled in large numbers across the region. The Assamese in particular fear that if citizenship is granted to Bangla-speaking Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh, they will outnumber Assamese speaking people in the state.

They cite the example of Tripura, where Bengali-speaking Hindu migrants from Bangladesh now dominate political power, pushing the original tribal population to the margins. Unlike in the rest of India, where people are questioning the exclusion of Muslims, the Assamese don't want immigrants of any religion, whether Hindu or Muslim¹⁰.

¹⁰ Deka Kaushik, India Today, 23 Dec 2019



(Images of Protest in the North East over the CAA and NRC)

(Source: https://www.google.com/search?xsrf=ALeKk029kI6zZ8oPu4gc1A02Ys1dqvKfzQ:1586864095768&q=images+of+protests+over+the+CAA+in+the+northeast&tbm=isch&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjt_nC16efoAhUFAXIKHeyrANUQ420oCnoECAQLw&biw=1242&bih=568)

In Assam, it is felt that essentially CAA scraps what is popularly known as the 1985 Assam Accord, but is officially called The Problem of Foreigners in Assam, Memorandum of Settlement between the Centre, the State Government. The agreement brought an end to a six-year agitation which had taken thousands of lives, disrupted the economy, and toppled several state governments¹¹. Throughout 2019, the North-east region witnessed violent protests against the Citizenship Amendment Bill 2019 (CAB 2019). After the law was passed in Parliament on December 12, 2019, the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) got more violent. The region witnessed at least 18 incidents of violent protests against CAA between December 11-16, 2019. These protests were reported from three states – Assam (11), Meghalaya (four); and Tripura (three)¹².

Extension of the Inner Line Permit System (ILPS) in Manipur, the CAA Linkage & Effect in North East. The ILPS that existed earlier in Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram was extended to Manipur and came into effect from 1st Jan 2020. While there was a demand for an ILPS for many years in Manipur, its announcement in Dec 2019 was seen as an attempt to quell any unrest that was likely to surface in Manipur consequent to the

¹¹ Hazarika Sanjoy, Could CAB Trauma Have Been Avoided Through Sustained Dialogue?, The Quint, 11 Dec 2019

¹² M.A. Athul, Northeast: Consolidating the Peace, South Asia Intelligence Review, Volume 18, No. 42, April 13, 2020

announcement of the CAA. Besides, it was also seen as a means to negotiate the Meiteis' opposition to the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah)'s intricate demand for Greater Nagalim¹³. One of the sections of the CAA states, *“Nothing in this section shall apply to tribal areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram or Tripura as included in the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution and the area covered under The Inner Line notified under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873”*¹⁴. That leaves districts of Assam that are not under the 6th Schedule, Tripura, Meghalaya and Sikkim where CAA would be applicable. The people of these areas now feel that permanent settlement of illegal immigrants will disturb the region's demography and further burden resources and decrease employment opportunities for their people¹⁵.

Apprehensions of the Northeast People over the Act East Policy.

There is a large section of people within the Northeast who are apprehensive about the Indian Act East Policy. These revolve largely around:-

- Fear that their lands and forests will be taken over; largely has to also do with community ownership of land and forest tracts.
- Anxiety that there would be exploitation of the vast mineral resources that exist.
- Trepidation that hydro resources would be largely taken advantage of with no commensurate benefits for the Northeast

¹³ Myrboh Batskhem, The Politics of the Inner Line Extension in Manipur, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol 55, Issue No 5, 01 Feb 2020

¹⁴ Section 3, Claus (4), THE CITIZENSHIP (AMENDMENT) ACT, 2019 NO. 47 OF 2019 [12th December, 2019.]

¹⁵ Outlook Web Bureau, 9th Dec 2019

while causing an ecological imbalance; large dams, power export etc.

- Influx of large number of non-Northeast people who would takeover businesses and job opportunities.
- Demographic imbalance like the Tripura and Sikkim model.
- Threat to indigenous culture and traditions (g) Non-sustainable model of development.

The Reaction in Bangladesh. As of today, it would be right to call Bangladesh as India's most important immediate neighbour due to the ever-increasing and effective cooperation between the two countries ranging on various issues including security, trade and economy as also regional connectivity. However, the CAA and NRC issues have not gone down well in Bangladesh. Gowher Rizvi, the advisor to Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, said in Oct 2018 that his country will take back all Bangladeshi nationals living illegally in India. However, this will happen only if India successfully proves that the illegal immigrants are Bangladeshi nationals¹⁶. Bangladesh's Foreign Minister A K Abdul Momen also rejected the "allegations of minority repression in Bangladesh." Bangladeshis feel that there will be millions of Muslims unable to prove their claim to Indian citizenship under the rules of the NRC who would not get the protection of the faith-based amnesty that the CAA now provides. The Bangladeshi discontent on the CAA was well reflected when Bangladesh foreign minister A.K Abdul Momen and home minister Asaduzzaman Khan cancelled their

¹⁶ India Today, 5th Oct 2018

respective visits to India while citing “scheduling” reasons for the cancellation¹⁷.

Recommendations

It needs no over-emphasis that India’s Act East policy is very relevant. For the policy to pay the necessary dividends, the process has to begin by ensuring that a suitable ecosystem is in place in our North-East, which should include taking care of concerns of important neighbours like Bangladesh and Myanmar. Any new policy decisions have to be thought through. Some recommendations for the Act East Policy to achieve its true potential given the current state of disquiet in the North East are as stated below:-

- The Centre must take into confidence all stakeholders, particularly all State Govts and the important Civil Society Organisations in the North East before enacting new laws/Acts.
- The slew of infrastructure and other developmental projects announced by the Centre for the North-East (mentioned earlier), need to be fast-tracked.
- Apprehensions of the North-east people have to be discussed by a dialogue process with all important stakeholders and giving them the necessary assurances that India’s Act East policy will not be at their cost and that all their concerns would be given the highest priority.
- The stepping stone to our Act East Policy remains Myanmar. As such, all projects like the KMMTTP, Trilateral Highway, Sittwe

¹⁷ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bangladesh-cancels-foreign-ministers-delhi-visit/article30284126.ece>

Special Economic Zone (Sittwe SEZ) – being established at Ponnagyun town and Sittwe-Aizwal-Silchar-Guwahati-Siliguri-Gaya gas pipeline (still a proposal) need to be aggressively completed, while simultaneously addressing the concerns of Myanmar citizens in concert with the Myanmar government.

- Increase the number of Integrated Check Posts (for trade) on the Indo-Myanmar border between India and Myanmar, like the current one existing at Moreh – Tamu. The current move of establishing nine border haats (markets) with Myanmar and soon to be introduced Impahl – Mandalay bus service, are steps in the right direction.
- Bangladesh is a pivotal nation not just for the security and geostrategic relevance it holds, but also from the scope that it has for roadways, railways and waterways that will help us connect to not just North-East India but to South-East Asia as well. Resultantly, there is a need for the Indian govt to take Bangladesh into confidence and assuage their apprehensions when acts like CAA or policies like the NRC are being implemented.
- India needs to integrate her economy with supply chains, a large number of which are located in East Asia and South East Asia. Specifically for the North-East it may mean a re-look at the existing land laws, addressing infrastructure deficit and skill development for the large unemployed youth.
- Build on the civilizational and cultural linkages with East and South East Asia; essentially leverage the soft power that China is devoid of in this region.

Conclusion

From Look East to Act East has been a 15 year journey. The latter has been a six year old experience of India reaching out to East and South-East Asian countries as never before. For India, the future in mutual benefits lies here. For far too long our geo-strategic, geopolitical and economic energies have been focussed to the West. That has not paid us the necessary dividends. The current levels of engagements need to be taken to the next level to ensure that India gets her rightful place under the sun which is only possible if we have the spotlight on our North-Eastern states.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.