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Concept Note on India's Act East Policy

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India's Act East Policy

North-East India and the people of this region have mostly been deprived of the benefits of economic growth from the liberalization of economies. One of the important reasons for this occurrence, among many others, is attributed to this region's peculiar geographical location. Being surrounded by sovereign nations and connected to the rest of India only by the Siliguri corridor, which is also known as the chicken neck of India, puts this region at a serious disadvantage in terms of connectivity through transportation and communication, further hindering its economic growth.

The peculiar geographical location of this region, on the other hand, could also mean a crucial advantage. This is attributed to the fact that India is connected to other surrounding nations like Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal and the Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN) through the Northeast. In order to start its engagement with the ASEAN, India, in 1991, started its "Look East Policy" during the times of the erstwhile Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao. As a consequence, India started to shift its focus towards the east to increase economic integration and improve security cooperation with South Asian countries. This also necessitated improving rail and road connectivity with these nations to improve the exchange and movement of goods and people. This approach was also necessary to assert India's presence in the region and to counter China's territorial expansionist approach.

The role of the north-eastern region of India to achieve the goals of this policy was integral, for the region not only shared its borders but also cultural homogeneity with most of the neighbouring countries. However, since India is connected to the ASEAN through Myanmar, this meant that India had to digress from its usual support for democratic regimes to establish ties with the military junta government in Myanmar. India, additionally, has established trade relations with Myanmar. These strategic decisions were taken to gradually cement bilateral relations with the region.

In November 2014, India upgraded the “Look East Policy” to “Act East Policy”. Its purpose, similar to the Look East Policy, was to further improve economic, strategic, and cultural ties with the South-East Asian region through intensive and continuous engagement in the areas of connectivity, trade, cultural exchange, defence, and people-to-people contact at different levels. A significant reason behind this, not merely as a consequence but also as a primary aim, is the improvement of economic development of the north-eastern region of India.

Hence, a region that had historically been considered as ‘remote and disconnected’ is now the connecting link to the south-eastern region, thereby improving its strategic and economic importance. However, actual progress towards this can only happen through the real improvement of connectivity and movement. It is, therefore, necessary to assess the real progress and improvements that have happened towards realizing this goal and the hurdles are yet to be overcome so that the ‘Act East Policy’ does not become just another ineffective catchphrase or slogan meant only for raising expectations of the people for political purposes. For true transformation and integration of the Northeast into the economic map of the world, effective implementation of this policy is, therefore, indispensable.

However, amidst the uproar for economic development, progress, and connectivity, we must also remember that the north-eastern region is also an ecologically sensitive geographical area and has unique cultural practices that require protection and promotion. Unregulated increased economic activity and connectivity could also wreak serious havoc to its pristine environment that includes many biological hotspots and unique flora and fauna. It could also mean the destruction of the cultural uniqueness of this region. While economic integration is a homogenizing approach, it cannot be at the cost of the unique cultural identity and the pristine environment of India’s Northeast region.

In light of these concerns, the concept of sustainable development becomes crucial to highlight. Further, mandating Environmental Impact Assessment before embarking on any economic activities in the Northeast region becomes the need of the hour. All in all, integrating the endeavour to strike a balance between economy and ecology into the strategic Act East Policy is an urgent requirement.