



India's Security and Act East Policy: Assam as the 'Springboard'.

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Introduction

The recently concluded assembly elections in Assam have brought to the fore a phenomenon which, hitherto was absent or rather, relegated to the backbenches of popular consciousness in a state straddled by the mighty Brahmaputra. In its recent political history, the dominant tale in the state was primarily centred on a discourse driven by the twin wagons of ethnicity and language. In a country where immense diversity in terms of ethnicities, cultures and languages abound, the manifestation of such aspects into the political, electoral and typical cultural milieu of the respective states is hardly an oxymoron. But the case of Assam holds an exception which necessitates a certain level of engagement which is usually unnoticed in the effervescence of instant news headlines and supposedly epochal moments, anti-CAA protests last year, for instance.

And the recently concluded state assembly elections point towards the emergence of a long-suppressed sentiment and constituency with their moorings outside the dominant and essentialist ecosystem which many scholars of repute refer to as 'Assamese sub-nationalism. As decades of unchecked immigration coupled with the acute reversal of demography in several areas of the state, this new constituency of 'subalterns' - if one may use the term in a referential sense- is increasingly finding resonance and alignment with the larger national prerogatives of security and welfare.

Peculiarity owing to history, location and politics

The inhabitants of the state have always had a common sentiment about preserving its own identity and cultural ethos, no matter how much it comes across as being 'xenophobic' or 'genocidal', as was evident in some international headlines in the run-up to the publication of the final draft of the National Register of Citizens, a document of genuine citizens that is being updated in accordance with the popular demands put forth by the local stakeholders, in July-August 2019. Having highlighted this, the State has been suffering the brunt of illegal immigration tearing into its vitals for a very long time now. Official records of Assam have in them categorically written the entire history of migration of the Bangla nationals to the State in the pre and post-Independence periods. One only needs to comb through these records to discover how this phenomenon has been haunting the socioeconomic and political life of the State since the early part of the 20th century. By the start of the 1920s, the adverse impacts of large-scale migration on the local population were felt. The British colonialists realized that massive migration from East Bengal might eliminate the indigenous population of Assam. After 1920, they

introduced the Line System (mainly in Nagaon and Kamrup districts) to restrict the Muslim migrants to the riverine areas.

In 1936, the FW Hockenhull Committee was formed to assess the working of the Line System. As per the introduction to the Land Administration in Protected Belts and Blocks, Assam (page 1), the Hockenhull Committee recommended the ejection of these ‘unauthorised occupants’ from the areas inhabited by the tribal and backward communities. It further recommended the extension of the prohibited areas to protect the backward communities ‘from the land-hungry outsiders’. In 1939, the Assam government, after considering the Hockenhull Committee’s suggestions, decided that the areas predominantly inhabited by the people of the tribal and OBC (other backward classes) communities should be declared as protected areas. The 1945 resolution on land settlement policy provided for the protection of the tribal and the OBC people. On July 13, 1945, the State government decided for the constitution of the tribal belts and blocks. This was followed by the amendment to the Assam Land Revenue Regulation, 1886 by the Assam Act XV of 1947, which incorporated Chapter 10 in the Assam Land Revenue Regulation, thus providing statutory protection to the tribals and backward class people. The 1951 NRC, albeit incomplete, showed that around 30 per cent of the then Assam population belonged to the migrant communities. They were mostly settled in the undivided Goalpara district, Barpeta subdivision of the undivided Kamrup district, undivided Nagaon district and the Barak valley.

Sr No	Year	Assam	All India	Bangladesh
1	1901-1911	16.99	5.75	9.1
2	1911-1921	20.48	-0.31	5.4
3	1921-1931	19.91	11.00	7.06
4	1931-1941	20.40	14.22	17.6
5	1941-1951	34.98	21.51	0.1
6	1951-1961	34.95	24.80	29.83
7	1971-1981	23.8	24.66	31.83
8	1981-1991	23.8	23.85	22.00

Fig. 1 Relative decadal percentage growth of population of Assam, All India and Bangladesh | Explanatory Notes

Apart from the festering problem of illegal immigration, Assam’s economic condition has also been poor, owing to the systemic neglect and apathy over decades, and its precarious geographical situation, insurgency and lack of connectivity. Hence, the development of the North-East must be pursued on a war footing; otherwise, efforts towards increased cooperation with the ASEAN region would prove futile. It is for this reason that the Central government seems to have tweaked its “Look East” policy to “Act East”, committing to take a more proactive stance by taking into confidence the entire North-Eastern region for its overall prosperity and development.

Look East to Act East: An Evaluation

Northeast India is “the physical and cultural bridge” between India, Southeast Asia, and East Asia (C. Joshua Thomas, 2017, 117). This statement by Joshua Thomas, an eminent social scientist who keeps a special gaze on the issues pertaining to Northeast India, sums up the symbolic visualization of the policy of Act East vis-à-vis India’s foreign policy and the special position which India’s Northeast and especially, Assam holds in this entire setup. And at the outset, India’s relationship with the East and South-East Asian nations collectively forms the basis of the Act East policy. A legitimate interplay is provided by this policy between India’s North East and the larger ASEAN region. Act East policy has offered genuine prospects for India in general and Northeast India in particular. The following factors denote how the North-eastern part of India is instrumental in the larger rubric of Act East policy:

- The border region is less developed and remote and where majority of its inhabitants are extremely diverse ethnically, both intra and inter-region.

- Northeast India has been disadvantaged ever since the partition of India happened. Infrastructures of communication that existed from the village to the regional levels suffered blockade which led to the isolation of the region.
- To give an example, the Assam Bengal railway route from Guwahati to Dhaka has stopped operating since 1965.

An ephemeral background

India's Look East Policy was initiated under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and it was essentially limited to Southeast Asia. The policy attained a tangible and strategic character as India deepened her engagement with the ASEAN nations. India first became a sectoral dialogue partner in 1992, a full dialogue partner in 1995. India became an Asian Regional Forum member in 1996 and thereafter, went on to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, 2003. After the relationship was promoted to the Summit level. All of this finally culminated in the India-ASEAN Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2012. This was appropriately complimented and followed up by India's association with the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Ganga -Mekong Initiative, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus collaboration.

The Look East Policy was upgraded to and rechristened as the Act East Policy in 2014 with a BJP led NDA government coming to power at the Centre under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The upgraded policy includes within its ambit a larger expanse in terms of geography (extending all the way up to the Pacific Island nations) and a renewed attention and focuses to the hitherto neglected Northeast India which borders Myanmar, an ASEAN member. The erstwhile policy of Look East, perhaps due to its insufficient obligation, had manifested in not very promising results. India's influence and diplomatic bearing on these regions were remarkably restricted, while concomitantly, the Chinese influence kept increasing which threatens the overall alignment and stability in the entire region. And since 2014, it appears that the Indian government has reignited and invested substantial efforts towards forging close ties with the East and South-East Asian partners. Common cultural milieu, the moral leaven of Hinduism and Buddhism, a shared experience of colonial history among others are often recollected and stressed upon in the larger eloquence to rekindle a sense of fellowship. And talking about cultural milieu and soft power, it can act as a firm complement to the overall policy matrix of Act East Policy. And to make the same policy matrix rewarding, people-to-people contact along with trade is a vital aspect here and to facilitate the same, many infrastructure and connectivity projects have been undertaken. These include the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project, the Indo-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project, Rhi-Tiddim Road Project and Border Haats.

Regional policy with a sense of strategic concern

The clashes between India and China at the Galwan valley last year undoubtedly mark a turning point in the bilateral relations between both the Asian heavyweights. Though ties had hardly been pleasant between the two nations, the incident at Galwan and the subsequent stand-off which refuses to abate even after almost a year of the clashes, it hardly needs reiteration that the coming times will witness a further hardening of positions by both the countries. Though much of the mainstream focus and chatter has been around our land borders at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), such routine skirmishes on the land could well be a deliberate and systematic ploy by Beijing to keep India singularly engaged on her northern frontiers and thereby, preventing New Delhi from focusing where it needs to- the oceans and the seas. To put it into context, the geostrategic dimensions of the Act East Policy are vital for the overall health of India's foreign policy. For instance, countries like Malaysia and Indonesia are located adjacent to the Malacca Strait and the Lombok Strait, and ensuring free and secure access to these points is of crucial significance for the economic pursuit and footprint of India in the region apart from the general principles and facilitation of trade and movement on international waters. And it needs to be stated that the Malacca Strait is equally crucial for China, with nearly 80 per cent of Beijing's annual energy supply passing through the strait.



Fig. 2 'PASSEX' Naval Exercise between the Navies of India and Vietnam, 2020 | Source: Ministry of Defence, India.

Now coming back to the point of command, India's increasing naval exercises with the navies of east and south-east Asian countries is a testimony to the fact that India wants to assert its own legitimate command and influence in the region. A strong Indian navy is a prerequisite for maintaining law and order as well as freedom of navigation along the entire maritime expanse of the Indo-Pacific region and the waters in its vicinity.

Assam as the 'Springboard' of Act East

Interacting at a press conference on the Act East Policy in Guwahati on the month of February this year, Union External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar affirmed that Assam stands as the 'Springboard' of the Act East Policy and stands central to the overall health and success of the policy. Beyond the allegorical nature of the statement by the minister lies a substantial reason behind the promotion of Assam as the bulwark for the successful implementation of the policy. In terms of sheer physical characteristics, Assam is the largest state in terms of population and second-largest in terms of size. Its economy is the largest in the North-eastern Region (NER) and its border touches the borders of seven states and two foreign countries, i.e., Bhutan and Bangladesh. It has nearly inexhaustible water resources and its land is highly fertile. In the year 2020, Assam's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) stood at around 4.09 lakh crore (US\$57 billion), contributing nearly 62 per cent of the entire GDP for the NER.



Fig. 3 International Regional Corridors across Assam | Source: Asian Development Bank

The Government of Assam has established industrial infrastructure that is currently supporting 800 industrial units including an export processing industrial park at Amingaon in Kamrup district, 3 industrial growth centers, 11

industrial infrastructure development centers, a food park at Chaygaon and a North East Mega Food Park at Nalbari District, along with 21 industrial estates, 8 mini-industrial estates, 17 industrial areas, and 18 growth centres. However, for Assam to leverage its advantageous geo-strategic location to further develop its economy, it needs to aggressively, in fact, resolutely promote the development of infrastructure and bolster industrial growth. In this endeavour, it faces a certain familiar set of challenges as the rest of NER in terms of land acquisition, availability of power, ease of transport and logistics, availability of skilled manpower, credit disbursal and few intricate taxation issues. Apart from the abovementioned factors, there is an intangible or rather 'emotional' factor that has acted as a hindrance preventing Assam from leveraging its inherent advantages for its relative prosperity. That factor or rather character happens to be the issue of an agitation centric and rhetoric driven public discourse which has caused more harm than good to the state. After the 'Assam Agitation' which ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 between the Rajiv Gandhi led Congress government at the Centre and leaders of the Assam Movement, the state perennially entered into a phase where mass hysteria and a sentimental outlook almost substituted a more realistic and holistic understanding and assessment of complex issues.

This had telling consequences that adversely impacted the state's prospects in regards to growth of infrastructure, jobs, investment by companies and industries and above all, an inability to gauge and prefigure the challenges that the future would hold due to the rapidly changing demographic composition in several areas of the state due to the influx of immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh as well the changing contours of geopolitics in the larger South Asian region that would have implications for India's national security as well. Nonetheless, recent developments in the overall electoral, political and social spheres could well propel a shift much awaited. There has been an observable change in the landscape of the state with significant improvement in areas like physical infrastructure, electrification and connectivity by road, rail and air. Issues like national security, economic security and a resolute and logical approach to the issue of illegal influx have started to take centre stage.

To Conclude

The world is going through an unprecedented phase as the outbreak of a global pandemic has invariably set in motion certain processes that would be having far-reaching consequences for the established patterns at the global and regional levels. This necessitates a certain realignment and alteration of many policies and approaches on part of individual nations. It is in this context that the Act East Policy needs to be urgently recommenced given the special association it holds with Northeast India. A resource and talent-rich Northeast India, with Assam as its springboard, is the main propellant of this policy.

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