

India's Look East Policy: Opportunities for the tribal of Manipur

Chungkhosei Baite

ICSSR Full-time Post-doctoral Fellow
Department of Political Science, Manipur University,
Canchipur-795003, Imphal.
Email: chungkhosei@yahoo.co.in

Received: November 1, 2020; Accepted: November 12, 2020; Published: November 25, 2020

Cite This Article: Baite, C. (2020). India's Look East Policy: Opportunities for the tribal of Manipur. Journal of Progressive Research in Social Sciences, 10(2), 46-49. Retrieved from <http://scitecresearch.com/journals/index.php/jprss/article/view/1967>

Abstract.

India's Look East policy was launched in 1991 by the then Narasimha Rao government to renew political contacts, increase economic integration and forge security cooperation with several countries of Southeast Asia as a means to strengthen political understanding.

There is different opinion or interpretation among scholars and writers regarding the implementation of India's Look East Policy. Some says Look East Policy would generate socio-economic and commercial development to the people of Manipur in general and tribal in particular. In the contrary, some scholar and writers have the opinion that India's Look East Policy is a threat to tribal culture and their traditional land ownership system.

This paper intends to throw lights what kind of development or benefits have been brought by India's Look East Policy for the tribal of chandel district in Manipur.

Keywords: Trade; Tribal; Development; Opportunity; Employment.

Introduction

Ever since India opted for economic liberalisation in the early Nineties as a response to economic globalisation, Look East Policy has generated extensive debate in the academic discourse. India's Look East Policy is a policy initiative which seeks more interactive economic, commercial, military, security and cultural co-operation with Southeast Asian countries through opening up of the Northeast region. Northeast India remains strategic in the entire scheme of Look East Policy by virtue of being the gateway to Southeast Asia. Of all the North-eastern states, Manipur occupies the most strategic position. Both the Trans Asian Highway and Trans Asian Railway are going to pass through chandel district of Manipur by cutting across the international border. Therefore, chandel district occupies the most important and strategic position for the successful implementation of India's Look East Policy. Chandel district is one among the five hill districts of Manipur which is inhabited mainly the Kukis tribes and a section of Naga tribes of Manipur.

According to certain informed quarters, a lot of benefits could be derived from such regional economic co-operation. It has been stated that the Look East Policy would bring economic development among the tribal of Manipur by commercialization of tribal culture and artifacts on the highway providing all kinds of ethnic products and items. In fact, the tribal population on the high way would have variety of opportunities when India's Look East Policy is fully implemented. For the successful implementation of Look East Policy, construction of infrastructure like star hotel, motel, guest house and commercial Centre would be necessary. As such, there will be a huge demand of man power both skill and unskilled workers or laborers. Therefore, it is expected that people of Manipur in general and tribal in particular would have an employment opportunity. There will be increased in the number of tourists (foreign as well as national) in Manipur when Look East Policy is fully implemented. The hill people settled on the Asian high way will have opportunity to built a model village for each community/tribe in the form of village tourism on the high way where tourist and travelers alike will have the opportunity to experience, taste and see

varied forms of unique ethnic culture, way of life, tribal value system, food, custom, house and environment and in turn have the opportunity to show cash the tribal culture to the world, preserve the unique culture and in turn a lot of income from it.

Another perspective which is diametrically opposed to the above stated disposition holds that the Look East Policy is a threat to people of Manipur. One of the widely perceive fear is that the influx of Chinese and Thai Multi-National Entrepreneurs (MNEs) and technologically advanced small and medium entrepreneurs (SMEs) can intensify the economic inequality and give birth to unbalanced economic development in which the developed enclave economy remain in conflict with backward popular economy especially the tribal economy all of which the tribal would always be on the disadvantage position. Another threat of India's Look East Policy to the tribal of Manipur is annexation of their land and loss of traditional land ownership in the society. The state government as well as the central government would carry out construction of various infrastructures like broadening of Asian high way, international trade Centre, hotel, guest house, etc. which would encroach tribal land. Still another threat of India's Look East Policy for the tribal of Manipur is cultural shocked. The tribal are the most vulnerable people in terms of cultural and religious assimilation; they easily succumbed to any kind of strong wave of westernization, privatization, cultural and political revolution. And with the possible strong wave of westernization or Koreanization; side by side with the advent of globalization the tribal in Manipur are set to face cultural shocked or assimilation. In fact, India's Look East Policy is a threat to the tribal of Manipur. Despite its various threats, it cannot be denied that India's Look East Policy has generated a great opportunity to the people of Manipur in general and tribal in particular. The opportunities and possible opportunities generated by India's Look East Policy for the people of Manipur with special reference to tribal of chandel district have been throw lights in this paper. The paper is largely based on field work and structure personal interview.

Look East Policy and its opportunities for the Tribal

India's Look East Policy was started by then prime minister of India Narasimha Rao (1991-96) and has continued during the tenure of former prime minister of India Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004) subsequently in the tenure of Manmohan Singh (2000-2014) and finally under the Prime minister ship of Narendra Modi (2014- till date). The main objectives of India's Look East Policy were to reengage India's trade focus with the neighbouring Asian states and to the emerging South East Asian countries. Its aim is to cultivate socio-economic, political, cultural and strategic relations with the South East Asian Countries in order to strengthen India's position in the region. The Look East Policy has faced many problems like infrastructure problem, insurgency problem, problem of land road transportation, etc. for its full implementation. In other word, India's Look East Policy is far from its full implementation. However, Look East Policy is still far from full implementation, it has generated variety of opportunity for the tribal of chandel district in Manipur.

Trade and Commerce

Manipur occupies the most strategic position for the implementation of Look East Policy because the Asian Highway (popularly known as Trans-Asian high way) which connects India to the rest of Asian and South East Asian countries passes Manipur. This Highway passes chandel district of Manipur and connect Burma through Moreh commercial town. Development of Asian highway is important for the implementation of India's Look East Policy because it is the only land road which connects India with Asian and South East Asian countries. In other word, all activities related to trade and commerce between India and Myanmar by road is carried out through this Highway. The beginning of India's Look East Policy marked the beginning of the development of Asian Highway. The high way development work was done in phase wise. The first phase of the Trans-Asian highway developmental work had been started just before Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) Car rally from Kolkota in India to Kunming in China in 2013. The first phase covered the hill section (Chandel district) of Manipur which was around 60 kilometres. The second phase of expansion work of the Asian high way which was started in the middle of 2018 covered the hill section (Chandel district) including a portion of valley section (Thoubal and Kakching district) which is about 80 kilometres. The Asian highway extension work is going on in full swing.

Prior to the implementation of Look East Policy, there were no street vendors in the villages on the Asian highway except Moreh town. The coming of India's Look East Policy has brought street vendors in the villages like Tengenoupal, Khudengthabi, etc. on the Asian highway. Along with the expansion of Trans-Asian high way in 2013, the number of street vendors on the national high way and at Moreh commercial town increased as there is increased in the number of daily visitors and travellers. Improvement in shops, Hotels and restaurants in Moreh commercial town can be seen since the implementation of Look East Policy. Though business establishments own by tribal in Moreh commercial town were not big enough, development and increase in the number of tribal business establishments like handloom industry, handicrafts industry, etc. can be seen since the implementation of India's Look East Policy.

There are more than ten tribal villages on Trans-Asian highway. There are street vendors who are selling mostly their local products like bamboo shoot, gingers, turmeric, hot chillies and other Myanmar product eatable in most of the villages on the Asian high way. A street vendor at Khudengthabi village said, with the development of Asian high way, the number of street vendor on the highway increases as increase in daily traders and visitors. He further said, he earned more than three thousand per day by selling local products such as bamboo shoot, banana, nimbu, hill chilly, etc. There are three villages viz., Pallen, Tengnoupal and Khodengthabi where people like tourist, traders and visitors are compulsorily halt or stop by security forces for checking. During checking of travellers and passengers at these villages, street vendors and shopkeepers on the highway have an opportunity to sell their local products like bamboo shoot, muster leaf, ginger, chilly, turmeric, etc. in a good number or quantity.

Women participation in trade and commerce

One of the most striking features of India's Look East Policy is participation of women in trade and commercial activities in Manipur in general and among tribal societies in particular. Traditionally, women are considered as just a domestic helper among tribal society. In other word, women in the tribal society were engage in household work alone. They are not allowed to take part in business and commercial activities. This practice is no exception among the tribal society of Manipur. Among the Kuki tribal society, women are engage in household work like washing cloth, utensil, carrying fire wood in the jungle, and some time helping men folk in cutting and clearing jhum land. Traditionally women are not allowed to do business and commercial activities. The same practice is followed by the Naga tribes of Manipur.

With the implementation of India's Look East Policy, women can take part in business and commercial activities among the tribal society of Manipur. Most of the street vendor selling their local products and other daily necessary items on the Asian highway were women. The number of women street vendor in the villages on the national highway increased since the beginning of extension work of Trans-Asian Highway in 2013 as there is increased in number of daily visitors (foreign as well as National), local businessmen and commuters on the Asian highway. A large number of women shopkeepers can also be seen at Moreh commercial town. Therefore, it can be said that India's Look East Policy has brought women participation in trade and commercial activities. In other word, India's Look East Policy has given trade and commercial opportunity to women among the tribal society of Manipur.

Promotion of Handicrafts

Another striking feature of India's Look East Policy may be mentioned as promotion of handicrafts. Tribal of Northeast India in general and Manipur in particular are by nature excellent in handicrafts production comparatively to tribal in other parts of India. Productions of Handicrafts are one of a means of livelihood of tribal society in Manipur. Though there is no state government run or sponsor handicrafts industry in the hill areas of Manipur, tribal are producing handicraft items and sold it to the market at the Imphal Bazar, Moreh commercial town and at the other towns of the Manipur since time immemorial. A craftsman by profession at Moreh market said, he had produced a good quantity of handicrafts since the implementation of India's Look East Policy as increases in demand of the products at the market. He said he could sell ten to twenty items per day at the market. The implementation of India's Look East Policy along with the expansion of Trans-Asian High way in Manipur has brought a good market of handicrafts production. It can be seen that beautiful handicrafts items like ivory box made of cane, basket made of Bamboo, bamboo spoon, metal crafts, walking stick, doll and toys, etc. in varied form are sold in the villages like Tengnoupal, Khudengthabi, Pallen and Kakching Lamkhai, etc. on the Trans-Asian highway and Moreh commercial town in Indian and Namphalong international market in Myanmar side. There is increasing demand of handicrafts production as increases in the daily visitors (foreign as well as National), local businessmen, traders and commuters on the Asian National highway and at Moreh commercial town and Namphalong international market in Myanmar. Craftsmen may transport their handicrafts products to Asian and Southeast Asian countries if the demand of the products continues to rise in the market when Look East Policy is fully implemented. The Manipur government had made full efforts for overall development of handloom and handicrafts industries in the state. Manipur Handloom and Handicrafts Development Corporation and Manipur Development Society are the two agencies of the state government taking utmost effort for production and marketing of handloom and handicrafts products. There is a possibility that Manipur government as well as central government to take up necessary steps or programs for the development of handicrafts in the hill areas or hill districts like establishment of handicrafts industry, handloom industry, training institute, etc. for the promotion of handicrafts and handloom products if the demand of the productions continue to rise.

Expose of tribal culture

Tribal of Manipur have a rich culture and tradition. According to the annual census 2011, there are thirty three tribal groups in Manipur. There are two different conglomerates of Manipur tribal. All the tribes in Manipur are either under Kukis or the Nagas. There are around nine tribes settled in chandel district of Manipur. Most of these

tribes are settled on the Asian highway. Kukis are the majority tribal groups who occupied the Asian National way and Moreh commercial town. Different tribes have different dances, music, musical instruments, ornaments, cloths, books and different food and consumable items like stick bean, bamboo shoot, ginger, turmeric, beam, medicinal herbs, plants, rice bear, banana bear, etc.

The implementation of India's Look East Policy has given the opportunity to the tribal of chandel district to expose their unique and varied culture to the world. Food items like bamboo shoot, stick bean, ginger, tribal hot chili, turmeric powder, etc. are seen sold in the villages like Khudengthabi, Pallel and Tengnoupal, etc. on the highway since the development of Trans-Asian highway in 2013. Such tribal food items are also sold at Moreh commercial town in Indian side and Namphalong international market in Myanmar side. There is a great chance that the tribal of Manipur in general and chandel district in particular would have more opportunity to show cash their unique traditional cloths like lungi, shawl, half jacket, muffler, etc. and consumable items like rice beer, banana bear, etc. which would attract foreign and national tourists including local businessmen when Look East policy is fully implemented.

Employment opportunities

India's Look East Policy has generated employment opportunities to the people of Manipur in general and tribal of chandel district in particular. There are a large number of person who could earned by selling their handicrafts product like Bamboo basket, walking stick, bamboo spoon, metal crafts, etc. on the Asian highway and Moreh market daily since the of implementation of India's Look East Policy. A man from Moreh Ward No. 1 said that, he had been engage in handicrafts profession since the implementation of India's Look East Policy. It can also be seen that a large number of women who could earn by selling their handloom products like shawl, lungi, muffler, shocks, hand glove, etc. since the implementation of India's Look East Policy. There are large numbers of unskilled tribal workers who are employed in the expansion work of the Asian high way.

With the coming of India's Look East Policy and for its full implementation, construction of Roads, construction of star hotels at state capital, Moreh commercial town and other suitable places, construction of motels on the trans-Asian highway, guests house, hospitals, shops, market, business establishments, companies, etc. are inevitable. As such, there would be huge demand in human resource both skill and unskilled workforce like Engineer, doctor, nurses, language translator for tourists, waiter, salesman, cook, washer man, housekeeper, catering, sweeper, driver, tourists guide, security guard, etc. Therefore, it can be expected that people of Manipur in general and tribal of chandel district in particular would have a great employment opportunity when India's Look East Policy is fully implemented.

Conclusion

There is a great debate among scholars and writers about the implementation of India's Look East Policy. According to some scholars and writers, India's Look East Policy generated a great benefit to the people of Manipur. Contrastingly, there is another thought that hold the view that India's Look East Policy is a threat to people of Northeastern region of India in general and Manipur in particular. In fact, India's Look East Policy has certain threats to the people of Manipur in general and tribal population of the state in particular. Demographic imbalance is one of the most problems in Manipur. There would be incessant influx of outsiders in Manipur which would create more and more demographical imbalance when Look East Policy is fully implemented. India's Look East Policy is a threat to the tribal of Manipur. The state government as well as the central government will carry out construction of various infrastructures like international trade Centre, star hotel, guest house, rail way, broadening of Asian high way, etc. for development purpose. Encroachment or annexation of tribal land will be inevitable for the construction of the various infrastructures which could result in loss of traditional land ownership among the tribal society. There could be cultural shock when Look East Policy is fully implemented. The tribal are the most vulnerable people in terms of cultural and religious assimilation. There is possibility of any kind of strong wave of westernization, privatization, globalization and cultural revolution. With the possible strong wave of westernization or cultural revolution along with the advent of globalization, the tribal in Manipur especially tribal of chandel district are set to face cultural shocked or assimilation. Despite its threats, India's Look East Policy has generated a great benefit to the tribal of chandel district in Manipur.

References

- [1] Singh K. Mukta Sana, 2018. Looking East to Act East Policy of India and Manipur, New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House.
- [2] Singh, Thingnam Kishan. 2009. (Ed.), Look East Policy and India's North East: Polemics and Perspectives. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- [3] Sharma, I., M. Aarif Rather and N. Mohandas Singh, 2016, India's Look East policy and Northeast India: Prospects and Challenges. Man and Society: Journal of North-east Studies, ICSSR, Vol. XII.