UNIT 13: DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE IN NORTH EAST INDIA

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13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- understand North East India as a region and its significance
- understand development discourse in North East India
- know the North Eastern Council
- know the DONER
- know the Look East policy
- know the Act East policy
- understand public response to the developmental discourse in North East India.

13.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit intends to highlight the context and discourse of development in North East India. North east India is the easternmost region of India representing both a geographic and political administrative division of the

country. The region earlier comprised the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura, popularly known as the 'Seven Sisters.' In the year 2002 the State of Sikkim also came under the umbrella of this region owing to its proximity to the area and somewhat similar type of developmental and other problems. They are known as eight siblings and referred to as 'eight sisters' or 'seven sisters and one brother'. These states cover an area of 2, 63,179 sq. km, approximately eight per cent of the country's total geographical area and house around 3.76 per cent of the total population of the country. Around 98 per cent of the boundary of these states has international borders. This whole region command special importance in India, not only because of their location but also because of their cultural and historical uniqueness.

The variety of ethnic groups, languages and religions reflect the multi-cultural character of the states. States like, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are predominantly inhabited by tribal people with a certain degree of diversity among the tribes. States like, Assam, Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim are inhabited by people of various religious denominations like, Hindus, Christians and Muslims and a combination of local tribes and communities. The people of Assam and Tripura mainly live in valleys, whereas most people in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland live in hilly areas.

For rest of the world and even India, the Northeast conjures up the idea of a region, which is more or less unitary - culturally, 'racially' and linguistically. This idea of a unitary Northeast is now, of course, being gradually replaced by a more realistic notion of its variety of cultures, languages histories and traditions of governance. The North East India is not a homogenous set of similar cultures, traditions, religions, food habits, literature, dresses, style and languages, it is indeed the most diverse part of India. North east India, inhabited by people of diverse races, religions, cultures, languages and dialects has many specific features which distinguish it from rest of India.

North east India is essentially the creation of the British. In the early 19th century, both the Ahom and the Manipur kingdoms fell to a Burmese invasion. The ensuing First Anglo-Burmese War resulted in the entire region coming under British control. After Indian Independence from British Rule in 1947, the Northeastern region of British India consisted of Assam and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura. However, immediately after independence fissiparous forces led to the dismemberment of greater Assam resulting in the formation of seven North- Eastern states. Subsequently, Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya in 1972, Arunachal Pradesh in 1975 (capital changed to Itanagar) (formed on 20 February 1987) and Mizoram in 1987 were formed out of the large territory of Assam. Manipur and Tripura remained as Union Territories of India between 1956 until 1972, when they attained full-fledged statehood. Sikkim was integrated as the eighth North Eastern Council state in 2002.

Geographically, this region is almost isolated from the rest of India. The North East region of India occupies strategic geopolitical situation due to its international boundaries with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal. The NE region is thus the meeting point of South Asia, South East Asia and East Asia.

13.3 UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE IN NORTH EAST INDIA

The Northeast India has remained at the stage of relative backwardness for a long time where inter-state and intra-state differences in the economic development within the region are also quite glaring. The region suffered from lack of infrastructure in various sectors like communication, technical expertise, etc. The region has remained isolated from the rest of the country because of its location and terrain and has failed to secure equal benefits in the process of development. This has resulted into social-political disturbances and unrest for a few years. While the region has a lower level of industrial and economic development, it has abundant forest and water resources. Petroleum and tea are two significant resources harnessed in

the region. At the same time, agriculture, horticulture and handloom continue to be the main activities of these states.

The concept of north-east India as a homogenous entity and the regional reorganization of this multi-ethnic setting have done colossal damage in social, political and economic parameters.

In evolution of the policy for the region, the policy makers should have paid greater attention to the fact that the region has immense geo-political diversity as well as strategic significance.

Having their common borders and cultural proximity to countries like China, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar these small units of north east region have perennial problems of insurgency and integration with the main land. Insurgency flourishes when the people have a feeling of separate identity on the basis of ethnicity, culture or history. This is compounded by a sense of neglect, exploitation and discrimination, and immensely aggravated by bad governance, corruption and economic backwardness. All these factors exist in the North East. The key to the situation, clearly, is to provide good, corruption-free governance, and economic development. It is rightly said that when people in Delhi think of the Northeast, they think of the distance, and that translates itself into a mental gap. When the people of the Northeast think of Delhi, they think in terms of different levels of development, and this translates into an emotional gap. People hope that these gaps can be bridged, and that, with changes in attitudes, the Northeast will take the high road to peace and prosperity. Apart from some common issues the north eastern states also have some specific problems. Apart from other factors natural calamities like flood is one of the major obstacles in the development process, which costs the region dearly every year.

Since Independence the approach of the Indian State towards the North eastern region has been changing. Apart from other approaches, from the 1980s the Indian state also adopted 'Development Paradigm' which suggested that if the Government can build schools, bridges, internet

centers, IITs and refineries, the people will be happy. It was thought that if development is ensured, they will forget about problems of identity, problems of assertion, secessionism etc. But, these approaches have not seen much success till now. Two main reasons behind the failure of different approaches are lack of political willingness and corruption. The Government of India is also planning to make various ambitious developmental projects looking at the rich resources of the region. However it is important to take opinions of civil society organizations and common people while taking any such steps. For better understanding of the development discourse in the north eastern region it is imperative to know the vision, functions and operations of the NEC, DONER, Look East/Act East policies of the Government of India.

13.3.1 North Eastern Council (NEC)

The Northeast India has remained at the stage of relative backwardness for a long time where inter-state and intra-state differences in the economic development within the region are also quite visible. The region suffered from lack of infrastructure in various sectors of communication, technical expertise, etc. Over the years, all these have multiplied to create a severe adverse economic imbalance in the region. Thus, regional cooperation for removal of the basic constraints and development of the region called for an awareness of regional nature and concerted efforts and the cooperation on the part of the political units of the NE region.

This idea of regional cooperation in economic development of the region crystallized in the form of the North Eastern Council Act 1971 enacted by the Parliament. The NEC was finally inaugurated by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi on 7 November 1972. Set up as an advisory body with the main objective of 'ensuring balanced and economic development of the northeastern part of India, the Council is also expected to formulate for generalizing these objectives. All such schemes formulated by the Council are in addition to the schemes already formulated by the states themselves as well as central sector schemes. The North Eastern Council is essentially a coordinating body for infrastructural growth of the region. Similarly

proposals relating to the development of power generation and of agriculture,veterinary and animal husbandry services in the region have also been considered by the council. The major activities sponsored and financed by the North Eastern Council are assessment of resource potential, industrial surveys, and preparation of data bases for development planning and development of infrastructure, especially construction of roads, bridges and power generation; planning improvement and development of agriculture and promotion of industries etc.

The council consists of the following:

(1) The Governors,

(2) The chief ministers of the seven states, and

(3) The President may also nominate a union minister to be a member of the council if he/she deems it necessary.

The President nominates two of the members of the council to act as chairman and Vice-chairman respectively. In addition, all states have a minister to represent it on the council.

In the pre-NEC era, the lack of fund in the states was the major hurdle in taking up big projects for the infrastructure development activities. Therefore the states mainly concentrated in those projects which yielded quick results. As a result no big projects came up in the infrastructure sector during the first four Five Year Plans. Thus, the region failed to keep pace with the development at par with the rest of the country. But with NEC the development process of the region has been gradually changing in the positive direction.

13.3.2 The Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER):

The Central Ministry of Development of the Northeastern Region was created in 2001 but only in May 2004 it was granted the status of a full-

fledged ministry. Ministry of DoNER is the only ministry of India that deals with a particular region in India's Union ministries. It caters to the needs of the eight north eastern states of India. DoNER was created for the purpose of facilitating the relations and the work between the Central Ministries and Departments and the State Governments of the North eastern region mainly with regard to economic development. This includes the improvement, the functionality of the infrastructure, and the provision of an investment friendly environment. In general, DoNER takes care of issues which range from the planning and execution to the monitoring of development schemes and projects in the North Eastern Region. The Ministry of DONER, in its official website, points out that it is responsible for the matters relating to the planning, execution and monitoring of development schemes and projects in the North Eastern Region. It's vision is to accelerate the pace of socioeconomic development of the region so that it may enjoy growth parity with the rest of the country.

Furthermore, DoNER coordinates with and hands some tasks over to other Central Ministries and Agencies. Additionally, it remains in constant touch with the North Eastern State Governments in order to detect areas, which need further attention and follow up with other Central Ministries or Agencies. The evolution of a full-fledged Central Ministry specifically on the development of the Northeast of India is good, as it shows greater political attention.

According to the Allocation of Business Rules 1961, some of the subjects that have been allotted to the Ministry of DoNER are given below.

1. Matters related to the developmental schemes and projects of the NER including those in the sectors of power, irrigation, roads and communications

2. Road works financed in whole or in part by the Central Government in the NER.

3. Planning of roads and inland waterways transport in the NER.

4. Hill Area Development Programme and Border Areas Development Programme in the NER.

5. North Eastern Council etc.

The Minister of DoNER is assisted by Union Secretary and other Joint Secretaries. DoNER has its nodal officers in all the 8 North Eastern States of India. It also has its nodal officers in all the ministries of Union of India. The Minister of DoNER is the ex officio Chairman of North eastern council.

Many intellectuals of this region consider DoNER as one of the weakest Central Ministries of the Indian Government. They think that the Ministers are usually neither specialists on the NER nor are they from the Northeast themselves. They, therefore, suggest that the money would best be given to the North Eastern Council, to endow it with more powers and to make it more functional in that sense.

Though DoNER and NEC are organizationally different, both have the same person, who is both the DoNER Minister and ex officio Chairman of NEC, to lead.

The Ministry of DoNER, in its website, explains that the nature of the associate organizations of the Ministry of DoNER is complex. NEC is listed as one of the associate organisations of the Ministry of DoNER. There is a view of the need to clarify the unnecessary overlapping of responsibilities between NEC and DoNER Secretaries, as such overlapping leads to not only confusion among the departments but also delays in effective implementation of policies and programmes sanctioned for the faster economic development of the region.

13.3.3 Look east policy

The disintegration of Soviet Union, the end of cold war, the intensification of the process of globalization, liberalization and privatization led to the fundamental changes in the global political and economic architecture. The

demise of communist economies of Soviet and other east European countries led to the final victory of capitalist path of development anchored on the ideology of neo-liberalism. Politically, the US remained as the only super power of the world, though the emergence of certain other countries such as China, Germany and Japan was also visible. Some of the new problems such as US hegemony and weakening of the UN mandate also emerged. The new global economic and political conditions had deep impact on the domestic and foreign policies of global actors. The inter-state relations were drastically restructured. India was no exception to it. In the domestic front, India initiated massive programme of economic liberalization, with the twin objectives of achieving rapid economic growth and close integration with the global economy. In the external front too, it brought about major changes in the content as well as direction of her foreign policy.

The Look East policy has emerged as an important foreign policy initiative of India in the post-Cold War period. India's financial crisis of 1991 coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union which was India's valued economic and strategic partner. Both these developments compelled India to take a fresh look at its foreign policy.

The look east policy was launched in 1991 by the then Narasimha Rao Government with the aim of developing political contacts, increasing economic integration and forging security cooperation with countries of South-east Asia. The policy marked a shift in India's perspective of the world, where the strategic and economic importance of South-east Asia to India's national interests is being recognized.

The economic potentials of this policy emphasize a link to the economic interests of the North-eastern region of India as a whole. In recent years, the development of this region is being factored into the overall strategy of national development, as well as in the conduct of India's relations with other countries. India's Look East policy correctly identified Northeast India as the gateway to the East and it was one major initiative undertaken by the government of India.

Under the Look East policy, four broad objectives had been pursued in the several years since its initiation. The major priority areas of the Look East policy are-

1) Regional Integration: The main objective of the Look East policy is economic integration with East and Southeast Asia.

2) Reform and Liberalization: Though the Look East policy is a by-product of India's economic reform and liberalization in 1991, the policy seeks further reforms to liberalize trade and investment in order to forge deeper economic integration with East and Southeast Asian countries.

3) Rapid Economic Growth: In the aftermath of India's liberalization, look east policy provided a development alternative as well, in synchronization with the globalization and the resurgence of Asia as an economic powerhouse. India is also encouraging East Asian investment in the transport, communications and power sectors to keep pace with its expanding economy.

4) Development of the North-eastern Region: The Look East policy is also a means of reducing India's internal development disparity. The North-eastern states lag behind in economic development and this gap has widened since independence. The sense of neglect has resulted in various forms of unrest in the region. With the launch of the Look East policy, India sees the region as a gateway to the East, thereby attempting to link the North-eastern region with Southeast Asia through a network of pipelines, road, rail and air connectivity.

The impact of look east policy has been favorable to India. East Asia accounts for a significant part of the rise in India's foreign trade. India's trade with East Asia had been less than 10 percent of India's international trade in the early 1990s. Now it stands at more than 25 percent. The Look East policy marked the beginning of a vibrant relationship on the economic, political and strategic fronts. In the recent time the Look East Policy has

been changed into Act East Policy while emphasizing on a proactive role of India in this region.

Agile players like China exploited India's weakness in the timely implementation of projects or lack of coordination among various agencies/ departments. ASEAN (Association of Sourt East Asian Nations) diplomats were often heard complaining that India must begin to Act East. It is this need gap that the present government seeks to fulfill. However, it would be the action at the level of implementation which shall determine the success or failure of this policy.

13.3.4 Act East Policy

As a follow-up to India's Look East Policy introduced in the early 1990s, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made "Act East" a launch pad for his government's focused engagement with East Asia. As has been mentioned above, the lack of promptness in implementation has marred the prospect of India's closeness with its eastern neighbors to a certain extent. Keeping this factor in mind India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi used the ASEAN summit in Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw to unveil India's new Act East policy. The term Act East was first popularized by U.S secretary of state Hilary Clinton in a speech during her visit to India in July 2011, where she encouraged New Delhi "Not just to look east, but to engage east and act east".

Earlier, the Look East Policy concentrated on the ASEAN and Japan, but it was realized later that India's outreach to the East could not be confined to ASEAN and Japan, or only in the economic sphere. Consequently, the Modi government decided to put more emphasis on improving India's relations with ASEAN and the other East Asian countries by enlarging the core interests of the region to include the immediate requirements of national and regional security. The Act East policy marks a deliberate attempt to signal a more action oriented policy towards ASEAN specifically and East Asia more generally. Thus the Act East policy highlights India's military,

political and economic interests along with those of regional partners in the East. Mounting tensions in the Asia-Pacific region due to China's hegemonic and aggressive assertions have prompted India to coordinate with super and major powers and also other regional members. India must continue forging closer economic integration and greater connectivity with Southeast Asia, as that would provide ASEAN states the means to reduce their over-dependence on China. Thus all these developments have prompted India to revitalize its role in the East as a promoter of economies and also as an effective provider of security.

The present government highlighted specific recommendations to advance ASEAN - India economic relations over the next few years, including establishing a Special Purpose Vehicle for project financing, building information highways and inviting ASEAN countries to participate in India's ongoing economic transformation.

At a time when manufacturing facilities are shifting to lower-cost economies, both India and the CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) countries enjoy an advantage. With 'Make in India' emerging as a key campaign for manufacturing, developing new global value chains in partnership with the four least-developed economies of ASEAN would bring benefits to both sides. While trade and investment must be greatly increased, it is also important for India to develop infrastructure projects for transport connectivity. India has also strategically focused on human capacity development and small projects with high impact to address poverty alleviation. There is certainly scope to increase bilateral trade, including exports, as India's share of the total trade of these countries has remained stagnant.

Since Look East Policy of India and its outreach to the East have witnessed a significant transformation that does not depend solely on one or two countries or even ASEAN. Thus the Act East Policy has a very strong and effective agenda that can ensure peace and progress in the entire

East and also the whole world in the true spirit of vasudhaiv kutumbkam - "the world is one family".

13.3.5 Public response

The development discourse in the north eastern region has witnessed a kind of mixed public response .While some of the intellectuals support state projected developmental projects and schemes , on the other hand several civil society organizations are vehemently opposing state sponsored developmental projects. For example, the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti has expressed itself very vocally against the Subansiri river dam project. Intellectuals like Sanjoy Hazarika opine that the Government of India's current policy towards the NER pays relatively more emphasis on dialogue and also focuses on taking the opinions of the people into consideration. This is different from the previous approaches which were mostly characterized by coercive and hardlined measures. Most of the intellectuals and civil society organizations feel that the region has been discriminated in every phase of developmental process. The voice of civil society, the voice of intellectual organizations, and the voice of the Northeast do not get heard. It is important to create a climate of opinion in this region about the issues and problems of the region.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: What do you understand by North East India?

Q2: When was Nagaland created as a separate state?

Q3: What are the nations that share International boundaries with North eastern region?

Q4: Under which act NEC was created?

Q5: What was the main aim behind the launch of Look East Policy?



13.4 LET US SUM UP

- North east India is the easternmost region of India representing both a geographic and political administrative division of the country.
- The region comprises of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim .
- North East India is inhabited by people of diverse races, religions, cultures, languages and dialects with specific features which distinguish it from the rest of India.
- The North East region of India enjoys strategic geopolitical position due to its international boundaries with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal. The NE region is thus the meeting point of South Asia, South East Asia and East Asia.
- The Central Ministry of Development of the Northeastern Region was created in 2001 but only in May 2004 it was granted with the status of a full-fledged ministry.
- The Ministry of DoNER, in its official website, points out that it is responsible for the matters relating to the planning, execution and monitoring of development schemes and projects in the North Eastern Region. Its vision is to accelerate the pace of socioeconomic development of the region so that it may enjoy growth parity with the rest of the country.
- This idea of regional cooperation in economic development of the region was crystallized in the form of the North Eastern Council which came into being in 1972.
- The North Eastern Council is essentially a coordinating body for infrastructural growth of the region.

- The Council identified certain priority sectors such as power, transport and communication and health. Over the years, other sectors such as agriculture and allied, manpower development, industry, science and technology, etc., have also become part of NEC's development efforts.
- The Look East Policy has emerged as an important foreign policy initiative of India in the post-Cold War period.
- The Look East Policy was launched in 1991 by the then Narasimha Rao Government with the aim of developing political contacts, increasing economic integration and forging security cooperation with the countries of South-east Asia.
- The economic potentials of this policy emphasize a link to the economic interests of the North-eastern region of India as a whole.
- As a follow-up to India's Look East Policy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi initiated the Act East policy for his government's focused engagement with the East Asia.
- The Act East Policy marks a deliberate attempt to signal a more action oriented policy towards ASEAN specifically, and East Asia more generally.
- The development discourse in the north eastern region has been witnessing a kind of mixed public response.



13.5 FURTHER READING

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2) Datta, P. S; 1992; *"India's Northeast: A Study in Transition";* Vikash Publication House Pvt Ltd, New Delhi.

3) Haokip, Thongkholal; 2015; *"India's Look East Policy and the Northeast",* SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd .

4) Yogi, A .K; 1992; *"Development of the Northeast Region-Problems and Prospects";* Spectrum Publication, Guwahati.

13.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: North east India is the easternmost region of India representing both a geographic and political administrative division of the country.

Ans to Q No 2: Nagaland was created in the year 1963.

Ans to Q No 3: Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal.

Ans to Q No 4: North Eastern Council Act 1971.

Ans to Q No 5: The Look East Policy was launched with the aim of developing political contacts, increasing economic integration and forging security cooperation with countries of South-east Asia.

13.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Short Questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q1: What was the motive behind the creation of North Eastern Council?

Q2: Mention three subjects that have been allotted to DoNER?

B) Long Questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q1: Define North East as a region.

Q2: Elucidate the development discourse of North east India?

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