



BOOK DISCUSSION on ACT EAST POLICY AND NORTHEAST INDIA

With author Dr. Sreeradha Datta

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AIDIA BOOK DISCUSSION

Welcome Remarks

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Major Takeaways

Rishi Gupta

- Look East Policy was launched by the Former PM Narsimha Rao in 1991, the main focus of this policy was to shift country's trading focus to neighbors, connectivity and other areas to the booming South East Asian countries.
- While connecting with neighbors like Myanmar and Bangladesh was important for trade and security, the policy was at the heart of developing Northeast region of India that has been long holding the potential.
- The newly formed government under PM Narendra Modi upgraded it to Act East Policy in 2014.
- Dr. Datta's book covers issues from economic potential of India's Northeast region, connectivity within Northeast region and beyond, energy potential and most importantly raises the question of political instability.

Sunil KC

- India's Northeast plays an important role in Nepal's connection with the globe.
- As a landlocked country Nepal has yet to explore various opportunities of trade, transit and connectivity and the spec of India's Act East policy fits into very well.
- The government of Nepal is very keen in strengthening Nepal's relation with Bangladesh and it is not possible without India's help.
- We have potential of transit routes of rail, road, energy and also waterways as new beginning in our connectivity

Dr. Sreeradha Datta

- The book begins with subcontinent partisan which introduces Geopolitical isolation of Northeast; which covers almost 99% of its external borders with outside India and only around 1% with India.
- Given this physical disconnect there is a huge impact on trade and commerce and apart from that it also introduces a sociopolitical isolation.
- However, this isolation also in a positive way allows the distinct flavor of the region to actually develop.
- When we discuss the Northeast region its basically eight Northeast states which are very different.

- Basically the states like Tripura, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, and Meghalaya play greater role in Act East policy.
- Each state, very distinctive has its own particular not only political entity but ethnic mosaic, cultural moorings, and economy.
- From independence this region has always needed a lot of political accommodation and economic support.
- In the initial layer you find that there was a kind of urban political churning that was taking place in the Northeast, right now that's gradually subsided and there is kind of certain internal stability.
- In the last decade/15 years there has been a very strong effort on India's part to deepen its engagements with the neighbors both with South Asia and South East economies and Northeast is core which shares borders with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar.
- In last several decades India has taken a greater interest in regionalism and sub-regionalism: SAARC, BBIN, BIMSTEC, and when we look at any sub-region Northeast is right in the middle.
- In the initial 30 years Northeast was really the domain for security establishment to engage with and central government was just been happy to being manage that. So there was a little focus on developmental trajectories which actually changed with *Look East Policy*.
- *Look East Policy* did very good work in terms of establishing engagements with the economies of East and South East Asia. But unfortunately somehow the Northeast region was kind of bypassed in this whole interaction.
- This gap is attempted to close by this re-coining of *Look East Policy* in to *Act East policy*.
- There was a lot of policies being discussed in the past and lots of projects are ongoing but the kind of thrust that Northeast got post 2014 is something of milestone.
- The buzz of the economic potential was always there in the Northeast but very little was the actualization of those potentials.
- Northeast's contribution to the economy of India is still less than 3%.
- Assam is the caviar of this region, 70% of the large and medium industries are in Assam but when you look at the overall figures of India that is very miniscule.
- It is very difficult to access the whole region of Northeast which is why for so many years it was inaccessible because there was no physical connectivity.
- The most important element that which now been introduced in the Northeast is the railway. But it will take some time because of its arduous climate and terrain. But once the assemblance of Railway network is put in place this will be a big transformation for Northeast not only for commerce but people to people connectivity.
- On energy sector there is potential but 70% of the energy produced in the region is consumed within the region, so there is very little that you can actually think of exporting.
- The whole discourse of mega hydropower projects have now moved into building mini projects and mini-grids and this is something that we need to focus.

- India has very good energy trade with Bangladesh and Bhutan; Nepal is in conversation with both Bangladesh and Bhutan, and India will have to support in building the grid. But as of now while regional grid can be put on the place, the ongoing domestic requirement is something that needs to be examine and once that is taken care of, others can be dealt with.
- On the political front, political instability has torn this region and it is very sensitive.
- In the Northeast while planning on some transformational development projects one must need to examine the political stability.
- There is no substitute for good governance.
- This whole *Act East Policy* is about how Northeast can be the partner in action.
- Until and unless we involve border population in developmental drive we will not be able to fully implement all plans and projects that we have.
- Beyond the large and grandeur projects we should focus a lot on border population. *Act East* will be truly successful when both urban and rural population can be part of the journey.

Prof. Amena Mohsin

- The major strength of this book is how it talks about the narratives and the narratives are very critical because they are the key not only for the policy makers but also how we imagine a community or a region.
- When it is about narrative it turns periphery into core and it is one of the major contribution of this book to the region.
- Turing the periphery into core, through that you also bring or turn around the criticality of the region.
- This book back and forth talks about that how it is important to have the people as the stakeholder. It brings out governance issues rightfully and North East region is not just a region it is an ethnic mosaic so, one has to look into the differentiation also.
- Differentiation is important for the policy makers also. There cannot be just one formula fit on but there has to be a differentiated approach to the entire issue.
- The connectivity is very important issue for Bangladesh.
- The book mentions India wants to connect with South East Asia and ASEAN is one of its major anchor and I guess there could be some point of departure for Bangladesh in this context. It is true Bangladesh also wants to connect with ASEAN very effectively.
- When it comes to BIMSTEC question has been raised on its viability and sustainability.
- Since it talks about Myanmar which is very sensitive and being located in Bangladesh I cannot not talk about the *Rohingya* issue, the *Kaladan* project.
- We in Bangladesh are truly cognizant of the fact that people have been evicted from the Northern *Rakhaine* region to build up all the projects, special economic zones, and oil and gas exploration at the cost of *Rohingya* population.

- Today Bangladesh is hosting 1.1 million *Rohingyas*.
- One cannot talk about connectivity only in terms of infrastructure.
- India constantly talks about neighborhood policy. So, Bangladesh expected being the non-permanent member of Security Council India would play a proactive role on *Rohingya* crisis instead it is found India abstained from voting on this issues.
- It is found that India has been giving too much thrust on the infrastructure side of it, on economic development but governance issues, issues of democracy and rights issues are involved there. Policy makers would have taken these issues into recognition when they talk about connectivity.
- The border and connectivity issues are very critical for Bangladesh; it brings not only political history of the region but also social history of the region.
- Borders are not only dividing lines but also connecting lines as safe haven for the refugees.
- We need to reimagine the borders as: borders not only that divide but also borders that connect.
- We look borders through security lens but not as connecting zones, which is highlighted by this book very aptly.
- The issue of border killings has been a major thorn for connection between India and Bangladesh.
- For people around the border the concept of border does not exist which is a beautiful way of looking at it.
- We have a lot to learn from these borderland people and we have to include them as major stakeholders.
- I think the book will go on a long way on paving the way to regional cooperation, connectivity and building very stable global system.

Dr. Sreeradha Datta

- Today we live in a neighborhood where I'm hoping that each one will understand the core concerns and addresses it.
- Border killings are happening because of illegal trafficking and there are a lot of illegal factories on the both side of the border which the establishment is aware of.
- Despite the frequent conversations we have not been able to come to a positive conclusion.
- All these things will undermine or unravel the positive things going on.
- However, now it is not anymore the complete domain of security establishment; commerce and tourism are playing huge role to move ahead.
- After many years we have seen the state government working very closely with the central government.
- We are all very people centric, you cannot have a top down approach; nothing can be successful until and unless it comes right from the bottom.

COMMENTARIES

Gen. Ramesh Chopra

- On the issue of security forces on border, it is not so much that the central forces of Bangladesh and India need to take charge. It is the local forces on the both side of the border who have more responsibility.
- It is not unsurmountable problem, if other departments come into the picture certainly the security on both sides can be handled.
- Northeast, Bangladesh and Myanmar for us is the gateway to Indo Pacific; which is no longer ruling security it's all about economy, connectivity, trade and so on.

Amb. Shamsher M. Chawdhury

- Connectivity is a very historical phenomenon and civilization has been built on being able to connect as far as you could go.
- The more we connect South East Asia and South Asia the better off we are.
- In my view ASEAN of six was stronger or at least more cohesive than ASEAN of ten and that is why today ASEAN's lot of activities do not match their actions. And the military coup in Myanmar is out rightly condemnable, not that the end of this coup mean good news for the *Rohingyas*. They will still remain as marginalized unwanted.
- It is important to understand from Bangladesh's perspective that we are keen to link up with South East Asia. India and Bangladesh can work hand in hand in moving into ASEAN and beyond.

- Prepared by Sajina Rai

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