

India's Look East Policy Reconsidered

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The book under review* is a collection of thirteen essays that were first published in a Manipur-based journal, *Alternative Perspectives* run by The Centre for Alternative Discourse. Thingnam Kishan Singh in his editor's Introduction has expressed his hope that a meaningful consensus will be reached by participating in the debate on the much-publicized Look East Policy (LEP) adopted by the Government of India in the post-cold war geo-political reconfiguration during the early 1990s when Narasimha Rao, the then Prime Minister of India, initiated a move to forge a greater economic and strategic tie with the Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The studies printed in this volume seek to take stock of the situation after two decades of the adoption of LEP. On the whole the volume is a well-meant attempt to cover the issues involved and as such is a welcome contribution to the field of North East Studies.

The first two essays forming section 1 give a bird's-eye view of the origins and conceptualization of LEP as also the shifting alignments that have emerged over the decades. Section 2 closely studies the problems of development and discontent and their impact on environment. Section 3, entitled "Manipur: Clouds of Uncertainty - Redefining Frontiers Through LEP", contains four essays concentrating on colonial articulation and the state of underdevelopment prevailing in Manipur. The last section focuses on the Myanmar factor and the global dynamics.

The contributors are (or were) connected with the academia and have produced studies of consummate scholarship, relying more on facts and figures than airing vague generalizations and *ex-cathedra* judgments. Post-modernist jargons are avoided and a wide range of source materials has been harnessed to provide the much needed empirical basis for arriving at certain conclusions which are by and large critical of LEP. Some of the contributors have offered constructive suggestions such as, 'Economy of the North East should be treated as a single economy with free interstate flow of commodities. Instead of pumping money in the region, the government needs to bring concrete solutions. Unless the government has a genuine commitment to solve the problem, discontentment will continue to grow.' (p. 156)

After going through the whole book it is difficult to differ from the following assessment: 'When viewed from Manipur's perspective Indian initiative seems to have more political and security concerns rather than the economic concern related with the border trade.' (p. 177) One contributor is apprehensive of the 'high-pitched form of consumerism, a LEP phenomenon,' that would endanger the life of the people in the North East. He refers to the experience of Marshall Islands with her excessive consumption of liquor and high rate of suicide. Another contributor is confident that 'the indigenous people have nothing to expect from India's LEP, as 'the prospect of economic benefit likely to be associated with it is still fizzy.' (p. 197) Yet another contributor suspects that the implementation of India's LEP will tend to reduce the North East to a mere corridor of Southeast Asia. He cites the case of the Shwe Gas Pipeline project. No gas plant will be installed in the North East through which the pipeline will pass. 'Paradoxically the cost of the gas pipeline shall have to be borne by the

peoples of this region in terms of environmental destruction, demographic dislocation and human rights violation.' (p. 198)

To put it in a nutshell: the prospect is bleak and nobody knows how to get out of the dismal situation that has so long prevailed and is likely to prevail in the North East India in near future.

The volume is neatly produced and well documented. A detailed index adds to the value of the work. □□□

*LOOK EAST POLICY AND INDIA'S NORTH EAST : POLEMICS AND PERSPECTIVES.

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