

Look East Policy of India: The Historical Genesis

Suparna Roy

Associate Professor, Department of History, Assam University Silchar-788011, Cachar, Assam, India

Abstract

The spread of Buddhism during fifth to seventh centuries influenced greatly Asian nations. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawahar Lal Nehru wanted to come closer to Asian countries in the context of common values as opposed to Western ideology. The ideology of Indian Asianism played a great role in the anti-colonial movement.

The trade between India and other East Asian nations played the dominant role alongside cultural influence. Over the years several trade routes are closed and un-used. One such route was known as "Silk Road" which has got tremendous historic reference. In ancient times this route was the main connectivity between China to India, Bhutan and to rest of the world. It was the trade linkages between British India and Tibet through Sikkim (Nathula) during 18th Century.

However beginning independence till 1990 there was a long period of retreat from Asian relations in India. Infact India was largely isolated from South Asian nations since 1950s. The collapse of Soviet Union and the pressure on India's domestic economic liberalization force to rethink its relations with East and Southeast Asian nations in the form of new Look East Policy in 1990s of Government of India. The internal balance of payments crisis in India acts as a catalyst in renewed relationship with Asian neighbours.

1. Introduction

India has exerted both economic and cultural influence on East and Southeast Asia since antiquity. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawahar Lal Nehru wanted to come closer to China and other Asian countries in the context of common values as opposed to Western ideology.

The trade between India and other East Asian nations played the dominant role alongside cultural influence. It was the trade linkages between British India and Tibet through Sikkim (Nathula) during latter half of the 1890s which witnessed a fairly good trade.

The main objective of this paper is to explore the genesis of Look East Policy in the context of both cultural and economic relations between India and East and South East Asian nations.

The study is mainly based on historical method based on primary and secondary sources and other evidences. The available materials collected from both published and unpublished sources. An attempt has been made to establish facts on the basis of evidences concerning past events.

2. Cultural interface between India and East-South East Asia

Culturally the spread of Buddhism during fifth to seventh centuries influenced greatly Asian nations towards India. It was through Buddhism that China and India came near to each other and developed many contacts. Ashoka's missionaries blazed the trail

and as Buddhism spread in China, there began that long succession of pilgrims and scholars who journeyed between India and China for 1000 years. Buddhism and Indian culture had spread all over the Central Asia and in parts of Indonesia, and there were large number of monasteries and study centres dotted all over these vast areas. The first record of an Indian scholar's visit to China is that of Kashyapa Matanga who reached China in 67 A.D in the reign of the Emperor Ming Ti and settled down at Lo yang province. At one time there were more than 3000 Indian Buddhist monks and 10,000 Indian families in the Lo Yang province alone. The Indian scholars who went to China carried many Sanskrit manuscripts with them and some of them also wrote original books in Chinese language. Kumarajiva who went to china in 401 A.C translated 37 original Sanskrit works in to Chinese. His great knowledge was so much admired that an emperor of the T'ang dynasty became his disciple. There was two way traffic between India and China and many Chinese scholars came here. The most famous of the Chinese travellers to India was Hsuan- Tsang who came in the seventh Century. He completed the degree of master of the Law from Nalanda University there and finally became Vice principal of the University¹. Like him many other Chinese scholars studied in Nalanda University. Similarly Sanskrit scholarship was fairly widespread in China and some Chinese scholars' tried to introduce Sanskrit phonetics into Chinese language. However with the decline of Buddhism in India these Indo-Chinese scholarly and cultural interactions practically ceased.

The Indian influence on South East Asian nations can be witnessed by the popularity of Ramayana in Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia where Ramayana ballet is still performed in these countries. Such performances not only revealed the popularity of Ramayana from South Asia to South East Asia, it also reflected the emergence of a new 'Asianism'². India is the land of Buddhism and the South East Asian nations emphasised the vitality of Buddhism during fifth to seventh centuries. Infact India's cultural influence spread too many countries and left its powerful impress. For example, in Cambodia the alphabet is derived from South India and numerous Sanskrit words have been taken over with minor variations. The civil and criminal law is based on the Laws of Manu, the ancient law-giver of India and this has been codified, with variations due to Buddhist influence, in modern Cambodian legislation³.

3. Anti- Colonial Nationalist movement and context of East:

The Indian freedom movement which was conserved against the British rule mainly ensued against Western colonialism. During the 19th century some of the social reformers like Raja Rammohan Ray and Brahmo samaj influenced by Western education wanted to modernise Indian culture through European pattern. However with the beginning of 20th century this trend gradually weakened under the influence of native traditions. Western materialism was opposed in contrast to Indian spiritualism⁴. On India's spiritual philosophy Tagore (1916)⁵ observed "The lamp of ancient Greece is extinct in the land where it was first lighted; the power of Rome lies dead and buried under the ruins of its vast empire. But the civilization, whose basis is society ad spiritual ideal of man is still a living thing in China and India". Tagore regarded Asia as the only continent where real civilization was still alive and defined this 'Eastern mind' with the same criteria as did Mahatma Gandhi 'spiritual strength', 'love of simplicity', and

'recognition of social obligation'. These common features, according to Tagore, made the Asian countries identical and closer to one another⁶.

Almost all the leaders who led freedom struggle in India like Mahatma Gandhi, Pundit Nehru and others were staunch followers of spiritually inclined nationalism in their approach to the movement. Mahatma Gandhi expressed anti-colonial ideology in terms of a civilizational conflict. In *Hind Swaraj*, published in 1909 he did not try to link India's struggle against Western materialism with other Asian cultures, but his nationalism later prepared the ground for a form of Asianism. Indeed, he fought against the West on behalf of values that were presented as typically, such as a spiritually based non-violent approach to policies and a non-individualistic sense of social harmony⁷. Nehru had the great 'Asian' dream and looked on Asia as India's region. In January, 1947, in the constituent assembly, he said that the Indian constitution that was in the process of being formalized will lead also to the freedom of countries of Asia.

4. Genesis of Trade relations

The Survey of India's primary focus of attention for geographical exploration varied during three decades spanning 1863 to 1892-93. The northwest frontier of India and Afghanistan received several pundit expeditions in the 1860s and 1870s. Tibet remained consistently of the highest priority to the Survey of India. Other areas were also traversed by the pundits, who journeyed through Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Burma, and Indo Chinese territory to the north of Tibet. Far to the east Bhutan remained largely unknown territory⁸.

The latter half of the 1890s, witnessed a fairly good trade of British India with Tibet through Sikkim. Over the years several trade routes, which played a major role for the rise of international trades round the globe now are closed and un-used. They are never used any more for the exchange of commodities and culture. One such route was known as "Silk Road" and in ancient years this route was the main commercial road that connected China to India, Bhutan and to rest of the world. The latter half of the 1890s witnessed a fairly good trade of British India with Tibet through Sikkim. It was the report written by John Edgar, the Deputy Commissioner in Darjeeling in 1873 that really captured the attention of the government of British India with regard to the great strategic and commercial potentials of this route in Sikkim⁹. Nathula is the most viable and shortest possible route (around 590 km between Gangtok and Lhasa) to the whole of western China. In early 1770s, Warren Hastings, the Governor of Bengal, was keen to enter in to the trade relations with Tibet. He also cultivated a secret desire to enter China through Tibet. The British did not want to lose time to reach Tibet with its riches lying unattended, with its gold in the monasteries and huge mineral wealth¹⁰.

The latter half of the 1890s, witnessed a fairly good trade of British India with Tibet through Sikkim passes as highlighted by the extract of the diary of the Political Officer for Sikkim. The diary extract of the 16th January 1898 states, "The trade for December is very good, amounting to Rs 3, 41,290. This includes a consignment of Gold worth Rs. 16,800- the finest that has been sent in for some years." The adventurous young husband Mission launched from Sikkim with a military escort (1903-04) accomplished its task of reaching Lhasa thereby leading to 1904 Convention that Convention that firmed up the Anglo-Tibet trade. The trade was conducted through these two very crucial trade routes — Jelepala (the easy level pass at 4,374m) in Kalimpong and

Nathula (the path of the listening ear at 4,310 m) in Sikkim — until 1962. Nathula was the first major cross-border opening for the Northeastern region as a whole which could bring in massive gains in terms of exchange of goods and services. If integrated with tourism activities, particularly the Buddhist circuit, this could be the world's most magnificent eco-tourism sojourn interspersed with nature, culture and economics¹¹.

5. Period of retreat between 1950-1990

Beginning independence in India till 1990 there was a long period of retreat from Asian relations. Infact India was largely isolated from South Asian nations since 1950s. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawahar lal Nehru's better relationship between India and China mainly aimed at showing Asian superiority over West. Nehru even sometimes referred Southeast Asia as greater India¹². It was also evident from the writings on nationalist historians and hindu nationalist circles based on the fact that India is a birth place of Buddhism. This ideological milieu always considered the religions that had first appeared on Indian soil, including Buddhism, as having been acquainted with Hinduism, a belief they based up on their equation that Indianness equals Hinduness¹³. Infact Asianisms, that is, discourses and ideologies claiming that Asia can be defined and understood as a homogenous space with shared and clearly defined characteristics¹⁴.

Unfortunately India's supremacy carried hesitations among South East Asian nations which resulted in a long period of retreat. The hype and objective of Asianism quickly lost its efficiency. Many Southeast Asian countries harbored a fear of India, especially as Nehru seemed anxious to transform his nation into a kind of regional leader. The Indian version of Asianism was not only jeopardised by the rivalry between Beijing and China for Asian leadership, but also by their bilateral conflict. The action taken by China in 1959 to put down Tibet and Sino- Indian war in 1962 put an end to warm relations between India and China. China's influence prevented other Asian countries to support India except Malaysia. At the same time the development of Western-led-alliances, the growing ties between Pakistan and China and the Indo-Soviet alliance all served to cut India off from Southeast Asia for decades. Even Japan, a close ally of the United States during the cold war also kept distance vis-à-vis India¹⁵.

6. Emergence of New Look East Policy of 1990s

The collapse of Soviet Union and the pressure on India's domestic economic liberalization force to rethink its relations with East and Southeast Asian nations in the form of new Look East Policy in 1990s of Government of India. The balance of payments crisis in India acts as a catalyst in renewed relationship with Asian neighbours. The critical situation in balance of payment led India to devalue its currency in two installments in July, 1991 under the direction from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). With the announcement of New Economic policy India ultimately opened its economy for free market oriented global trade.

At the same time the development of apprehensions vis-à-vis East Asia and particularly on the rise of China has contributed to India's effort since 1991 to emulate its Asian neighbours. With the official adoption of Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation by the government of India under the leadership of the then Prime Minister P.V. Narashima Rao and the concomitant economic development in south and East Asian nations led to India's desire to follow the path of their development models. The India's

desire for looking East for economic development was officially announced by P.V.Narashima Rao in 1994 in Singapore and he declared ‘.....happy to have had this opportunity to enunciate my belief in this vision of a new relations between India and the Asia-Pacific from Singapore, which I consider the geographic and symbolic centre of the Asia-Pacific.....and the next century will be a century of partnership for us all’¹⁶.

The essential philosophy of India behind the Look East Policy is to forge closer and deeper economic integration with the eastern neighbours’ i.e. with ASEAN countries. Consequently India became a sectoral dialog partner in March 1993, a full dialogue partnership in 1995, a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in July 1996 and finally to a Summit level partnership in 2002. For the development of sub-regional cooperation, in the year 1997, a sub-regional economic grouping called BIST-EC (Bangladesh-India-Sri-Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation), comprising Bangladesh, India, Srilanka and Thailand was established with a view to strengthen and reinforce India’s Look East policy. Again, the grouping came to be known as BIMSTEC or the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation with the addition of Myanmar, Bhutan and Nepal. When India initiated BIMSTEC in 1997, it received strong support from Thailand, which also saw it as a political and economic forum to bridge Southeast Asia and South Asia¹⁷. However India’s net gain in terms of net worth of foreign trade relations with southeast Indian nations need to be assessed in the context of the broader objectives of “Looking at the East” as pronounced in the governmental policy framework.

7. Conclusions:

There are fundamental changes relating to India’s relations with its neighbouring Southeast Asian nations with the passage of time. Interestingly there is no evidence of joining together of societies that have fundamental cultural and economic affinities between India and other South and East Asian nations. However the existence of common traditions is invoked to form regional or sub-regional co-operations in post 1990s as evidenced by formulations of different trade pacts and economic co-operations. The post liberalisation period renewed the economic relations in the context of greater common market and wider opportunities of tarde.

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