

“India has made its presence felt in South East Asia”: Dr. Datta

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“The Look East Policy of 1992 has been India's most successful foreign policy in recent years. This is evident as almost everything that we own or use in our homes is from South East Asia” exclaimed Dr. Sreeradha Datta during her lecture on *'India's Look East Policy – Recent Trends'*. Dr. Datta, presently Director of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, spoke as part of ICG Lecture Series by Eminent Persons at The International Centre Goa, Dona Paula recently. She further added “in the last 5 years there has been a commendable improvement and this policy has performed beyond its expectations. India is now in a whole new avatar as compared to the 90's”.

“In the early 1990's India was going through a financial crisis, the GDP was touching 5% , the splintering of USSR, India's strongest ally also caused a huge loss in terms of economic and security dependence. This prompted India to look east towards South East Asian countries for economic security. India decided that so as to be able to make its own recovery, it would 'hitch' with this group of countries; which are known to have survived the global economic crisis” she explained.

The Look East policy advocated in 1992 was brain child of then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, and Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. In the 1990's India was emerging out of its colonial past, China was a dominant player and had an early lead, as it already had good relations with other countries in South Asia. Dr. Datta believes that it is unfair to compare Japan or China with India; which is a relatively newcomer, though it is important to acknowledge India's substantial rise from 30 billion to 80 – 90 billion in trade.

In the first phase of this policy, India sought to partner with ASEAN countries. This was achieved by 1995 through dialogue and it is extremely important to understand the role of India's North East which helped in strengthening this relationship through common linkages from history, culture and mythology.

In 2003, the actual terms of agreement landmarked the second phase of this policy. India's interdependence on countries like Vietnam and Cambodia for defence and security requirements was developed. By 2009, the policy had the economic trade agreement in place, significant ties were made with Singapore and Malaysia whose trade and manufacture doubled. India also established trade ties through the important Indian Ocean link; further also gaining a stronghold on the South China Sea. “India and China are known to be the largest military powers in South East Asia and in the Asia pivot, India has made its huge presence felt. When super powers such as the US have to deal with any affairs in South East Asia, it has to keep India in the loop. Thus India's relation has considerably changed over the years and it is prompt to claim that at present India has a politically correct relationship with South East Asia” she explained further.

Dr. Datta is of the opinion that besides sea links, the policy will also achieve considerable progress if the road links are developed. This is geographically possible only through the North East of India. It is important to closely engage and befriend countries like Bangladesh

and Myanmar through the existence of the huge ethnic overlap in this corridor. Although New Delhi has had a vision document for the North East, there is a huge gap in its implementation, thus the entire North East lacks modern infrastructure to facilitate trading activities. She implied that Manipur is the focal point and the ancient trade routes used for centuries may be exploited.

Geographically, Bangladesh is between West Bengal and the North East. “Although at present India and Bangladesh share the best relation since 1975, however Bangladesh is not yet ready to have a walk through border with India and this will further hamper the interests” she elaborated.

Dr. Datta concluded on an optimistic note elucidating, “the new Prime Minister has a huge interest in South East Asia relations as is evident from his first foreign trip to Bhutan and this could be the beginning of the next era of The Look East Policy”.

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