CHAPTER-VI

CONCLUSION

Southeast Asia is comprised of the continental margins and archipelagos lying south of China, north of Australia and east of India. The region has historically been an integral part of Indian consciousness. Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam professed by the people of Southeast Asia were introduced from India. Languages such as Sanskrit, Tamil, Pali have a great imprint on Southeast Asian languages. Many vestiges of Indian political and religious literature and religious symbolism have been visible in relevant quarters in the countries like Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. For countries successive Indian monarchies regarded Southeast Asia as vital to their own strength and security. Trade and commerce between the western parts of Southeast Asia and Eastern parts of India have been carried out for countries.

The advent of the British in India in the early 17th century onwards and the struggle for influence among the Europeans powers such as France, Dutch and the Portuguese and later the British during the 18th and 19th centuries (to control the countries of Southeast Asia), suspended the age old interactions with India. As a result, India’s cultural and commercial relations with the region became subordinates to the political and strategic considerations of the colonial powers. In the process the countries of Southeast Asia developed a distinct politico-cultural personality acquired under the colonial administration mechanism. However, under the force of evolving world order after the Second World War, the process of decolonization of the region began with the independence of Indonesia in 1945 and ended with the independence of Brunei in 1984.

During the Cold war, India and the countries of the region could not come close to each other. India made all efforts to befriend them but exigencies of Cold war did not allow them to realize. The colonial hangover in these countries, and differing perceptions of post-war world kept them at bay from each other. They were economically more close to their former colonial masters and some became part of the US led military alliance SEATO. Presence of large Chinese populations, dominant presence of China in the region, India’s recognition of Vietnamese installed Kampuchean regime of Heng Samrin, and a host of other factors became privy to keep India and these nations apart.
As Cold war came to an end, India was experiencing its worst balance of payment crises. On the other hand, the East Asian economies were at their ascendance. Economic liberalization, creation of free market economies and integration into economic globalization forced India to rethink its foreign policy priorities. Along with economic reforms, India made Southeast Asia as a major feature of its foreign policy. To strengthen it further, India launched its Look East policy in 1991. Under this policy a series of initiatives were taken including the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and BIMSTEC. The Look East policy is focused on the entire East (or Asia-Pacific Region), but the countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Myanmar have taken precedence over the others due to the geographical, historical, economic, strategic and cultural reasons.

The select countries of Southeast Asia (Chapter-I) are geographically close to India and have moderate to sizeable populations of Indian origin. Lying in the tropical region, they have been agricultural economies. Their abundant mineral wealth remained unused until they took up to industrialization and introduced free market economies. Baring Myanmar, other select states have experienced high rate of economic growth after the end of Cold war. They have attracted considerable foreign investment directly or through multination corporations. A micro survey of their economies, society, culture, educational systems, infrastructure and political systems reveals that they are a mix of rich economies like Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore and poor like Myanmar. The countries have democratic political systems, constitutional monarchies and military dictatorship. All of them, except Singapore are endowed with rich natural resources and their human resources are not sufficiently developed. India, therefore, has enough scope to assist and help these countries in different areas of development.

After impendence, India firmly refused to enter into post-war military alliances and indulge into Cold War. It pursued an independent foreign policy of non-alignment. The select countries of Southeast Asia decided to remain non-aligned except Thailand who joined SEATO. Overall, the select states remained away from India due their economic and strategic and regional considerations. End of the Cold War also ended bipolarity and ushered in a new world order in which economic development overshadowed the strategic considerations. To pursue its economic development India considered it viable to be part of Asia-Pacific economic ascendance and launched the Look East policy in 1991 (Chapter - II). To warm up
towards the East was part of India’s economic strategy. India closely examined the evolving international economic scene and felt compelled to fine tune its linkages with the East in general and the select states in particular. It took various initiatives such as Mekong-Ganga Cooperation or BIMSTEC to create mechanisms for closer cooperation with them. However, it had some limitations and faced constraints which did not allow it to realize to its full potential.

After the initiation of the Look East policy, India expanded its bilateral relations with Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Myanmar (Chapter-III). From unenthusiastic relationship of Cold War days, India’s trade and commerce multiplied with the select states especially with the Singapore and Malaysia. Range of export and import commodities increased. Many Indian banks set up their commercial operations in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. Many Indian industries set up their production units and collaborated with local companies to set up joint ventures. Indian IT companies and trained computers engineers showed increasing presence in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Though there has been limited bilateral cooperation in the field of agriculture but many joint projects in science and technology were set up in these countries. India trained scores of engineers, information technology professionals, and defence personals from the select states. Defence cooperation, which was hitherto non-existence, has been strengthened with all of them after the launch of Look East policy. India is now viewed as counterweight to China and a part of ARF (along with Japan, China and Korea) since its inception in 1994. Indian languages and literature is being systematically introduced in the education system of these countries and its cultural troupes, music groups and other such delegations regularly visit these countries. India has established cultural centers in Malaysia and Indonesia in 2003 and 2004 respectively as its cultural outposts and organizes ‘Festivals of India’ in these countries to showcase its cultural diversity in these countries.

India’s efforts to build multiple linkages with the select states have born fruit albeit limited. This is evident from the response of the select countries (Chapter- IV). These countries supported India’s stand on various issues in the United Nations. India’s initiatives brought a change in their attitude towards certain important issues confronting India. For example, Indonesia refused to interfere in the Kashmir issue and Singapore supported India’s stand in this regard. Many of them willingly took part in MILAN exercises hosted and conducted by Indian Navy. They did not react or
condemn the Pokharn II nuclear tests conducted by India in May 1998. They shared India’s concern to stamp out terrorism and expressed their unity and solidarity with India as and when it faced such violence. At the ASEAN too response of these states was obvious. In 1992, ASEAN established Sectoral Dialogue Partner with India, in 1995 India was made Full Dialogue Partner, became a member of ASEAN Regional Forum in 1996, and in 2001 decided to elevate India to the Summit level. They also supported India’s claim for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Through their actions, deeds, official declarations and joint press statements, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Myanmar supported India on its Look East initiatives. Such a response had desired effects and strengthened the evolving relations between the two regions.

India is not the only outside power keen to build economic ties with these countries. In fact, Southeast Asia has always been at cross roads throughout history. In the present context, there is sizeable military presence of China, United State and Australia in the region (Chapter- V). A large number of MNCs from Japan, United States and Australia are carrying out commercial operations in these countries. Considerable financial investments through these companies have helped industrialization and have benefited from economic boom there. China in particular is playing a major role to benefit from the burgeoning economies of these countries. China has also established its military presence on some strategically located islands of Myanmar which has its own implications for India’s security interests. The countries like Australia, China, Japan and US have large scale and long standing economic stakes in the region. Their industries, joint ventures, investment and old relations with these countries are a challenge for India to establish its foothold in the region. India with its limited resources has to compete them to secure recognition as a big power in the region. The presence of these economically rich and technologically superior powers in Southeast Asia have an impact on India’s interests and choices.

The Look East policy is a strategic shift in India’s vision of the world and its place in the evolving global economy. It is being pursued aggressively and has yielded results in economic and political fields. The policy has helped India to strengthen its place in the global economy and get a better deal in its interaction outside South Asia. Due to this policy Indian economy has got integrated with the Asian economy which has increased India’s importance at global level.
First phase of the Look East policy in early 1990s emphasized to renew contacts with Southeast Asia and more specifically the select states that India had drifted away from. Now India has entered into the second phase of the Policy. This phase has a new dimension—the development of India’s remote northeast. India’s search for new economic relationship with Southeast Asia is no longer driven only by consideration of globalization, but to facilitate development of the north east by increasing its connectivity with the neighbouring southeast. Look East strategy now envisages the northeast region not as the periphery of India, but as the centre of a thriving and integrated economic space linking two dynamic regions with a network of railways, pipelines, and transmission lines crisscrossing the region. However it will depend on the continuity of commitment of the government and to give role to the northeastern states in this policy. In spite of more than one-third trade with Southeast Asia, the Look East policy has no impact on the northeast. It has to be paid proper attention on priority as a natural bridge with Southeast Asia.

It can, therefore, be inferred that India and Southeast Asia have geographically contiguous and historically close relationship. These relations have seen many ebbs and flows down the timeline. In its current incarnation, this relation has been re-expressed by India through the Look East policy and other such initiatives. The Policy is a strategy as well as a compulsion in the contemporary globalizing world order. Under the policy, many areas have been identified for mutual cooperation. To make the Policy a success, India has tailored the bilateral relations with each of these countries in a different way to suit the requirements of that particular country and that of itself. The policy has received a healthy response and support in all these countries. However, India faces a number of constraints emanating from its domestic compulsions or challenges faced due to the economic and military presence of other outside powers. India is an emerging global power and fourth largest economy in the world. Its strategy to expand area of influence is incumbent of an ascending economic and military power. East and west flanks of the Indian Ocean are natural sphere of India’s influence and the select countries fall within the sphere. It can thus be concluded that India’s Look East policy, despite its limited success has great future prospects to integrate India into the Asia-Pacific economic region.