



INDIA EAST ASIA CENTER, SHILLONG



**INDIA'S NORTH EASTERN STATES & EASTERN NEIGHBOURS:
ENGAGING FOR CONNECTIVITY, CULTURE & PROSPERITY**

BY

AN INTELLIGENT *THIRD SPACE*

THE SHILLONG DIALOGUE

5-6 DEC., 2014

SHILLONG

CONFERENCE REPORT

THE SHILLONG CONSENSUS

The Shillong Consensus

Shillong, 6 December, 2014

The *Asian Confluence* (a unit of *Divya Jeevan Foundation*) with the support of *Indian Council of World Affairs* organized *The Shillong Dialogue* (4-6 December 2014) in furtherance of its *Intelligent Third Space Initiative*. The basic objective was to explore and highlight the role of Civil Society in reviving the bonds of close friendship, trade and commerce, and the shared cultural heritage and prosperity that existed in the pre-colonial past among the peoples inhabiting the general areas in South East Asia, irrigated by the mighty river-systems of Sindhu (Indus), Ganga, Brahmaputra, Meghna, Salween, Irrawaddy, Mekong and beyond extending up to the Indonesian Islands. India's North Eastern States along with Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh and further beyond constitute the most intricately woven diversity hotspot of the globe at the levels of race, religion, culture, art, language, social customs and bio-diversity. This is the region where many Asian cultures meet. For India, her North Eastern States sharing as many as five international boundaries, form India's gateway to East Asia and theirs to India. India's North Eastern Region (NER) has inherited the best in body and mind from many races; the best in the field of art from many cultures. Its people are equally at home in the martial arts, in games and sports as in fine arts, song and dance, literature and poetry, as in weaving and carving. Nature has endowed NER with immense riches by way of rivers and lakes, forests and fields, hills and vales below the surface of which lies buried boundless wealth of petroleum and gas, coal and minerals, etc. It has plentiful rains and all types of climates where all types of fruits and vegetables, grains and herbs can grow. These qualities are also shared by our neighbors making the SE-Asian region immensely rich. Only we have to come together to convert these rich resources into material prosperity to reap and share the benefits in a sustainable manner.

The composite region is really an Asian Confluence that needs to be celebrated as a global cultural diversity hotspot.

With the policy paradigm of the Government of India changing from **Look East** to **Act East**, and the commitment of the visionary **Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi**, in this regard, time has come for the Civil Society in the NER to take on the role of advocacy among the people to play an active role in making NER an interactive hub in the entire SE-Asian sub-region. There is already considerable rhetoric about NER being India's GATEWAY to the EAST as part of India's Look-East Policy. To transform it into meaningful **Act-East Policy**, it has to be followed by doable actions and tangible realities that bring friendliness, prosperity and happiness to this large Asian Sub-region.

A large number of widely known participants cutting across the spectrum of professions, expertise and backgrounds gathered for three days in this *Shillong Dialogue* and deliberated on issues of serious public and sub-regional interest with very focused conversations on how this prolific and well-endowed sub-region could collectively work and move together to maximize the benefits of cooperation under India's *Act East Policy*, with a special focus on the role of Civil Society. These *delegates* ranged from *politics to diplomacy, bureaucracy to academics, media to NGOs and students to young leaders from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar and Nepal*.

We are convinced that the successful implementation of the *Act East Policy* through people/community-centric projects is a practical proposition that would benefit the entire sub-region and that *India's NER, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal are best-placed to take the lead in kick-starting the process*. Civil Society of the NER is capable of taking a holistic view of the issue and has to play a critical role in acting as bridges of friendship and trust with people from across India's immediate eastern neighborhood and as a major support system to the state and central governments in India. Civil Society can fast evolve and emerge as an intelligent third space in the NER, nurture out-of-the-box solutions for sustainable and symbiotic friendship, peace, development and stability in the sub-region. The need is for a network of like-minded institutions in each country of SE-Asia acting in tandem, to achieve the objectives. *Asian Confluence* can play the coordinating role for this.

For transforming the Look-East Policy to *Act-East Policy*, the Government of India in the Ministry of External Affairs (in conjunction with other key relevant Ministries like Home, HRD, Tourism and Culture) may

consider designating its appropriate agency to advise and approve projects to implement its policies on the ground in close cooperation with the *Intelligent Third Space*. In this context, the *North Eastern Council (NEC)*, which is a Central Agency located in NER with top-level representation from all NE States would appear to be in the best position to play the *coordinating and watch-dog role* to see timely implementation of the relevant projects. To forestall time and cost overruns, *Asian Confluence* could work in close coordination with NEC in keeping track of the progress of such projects and keep the concerned agencies timely advised of the needed corrective measures.

The Shillong Dialogue led to consensus on a few points for consideration of the Government (in the First Space), the Private Sector (in the Second Space) and **Action Points for the Civil Society** to kick-start the process in the Third Space. These are:

1. *Like-minded civil society organizations in the SE-Asian sub-region with the aforementioned common objectives may be networked to function as a Forum to utilise the Intelligent Third space for major thinking and alternative policy dialogues. This Forum may formulate and monitor projects with bottom-up approach to implement the Act-East policy with strict cost and time framework.* These projects should mostly concentrate on softer yet widely people-centric sectors like tourism, culture, education, skill & entrepreneurship, alternative medicinal systems, e-connectivity, etc.
2. *Tourism may be utilized as the fulcrum for encouraging friendship, cultural exchanges, showcasing of handicrafts and local produce, etc.* Specific yet comprehensive projects in the Tourism sector may include *Spiritual Tourism, Heritage Tourism, Health Tourism, Mountain-to-sea Tourism* (Meghalaya, Arunachal, Sikkim and Darjeeling to West Bengal and Bangladesh), *Eco-Tourism* spiced with *Adventure-Tourism* and *War Related Nostalgia-Tourism* and such others. The Third Space calls for setting up of Natural Economic Zones that take into account factors like topographic/demographic contiguity and would like to cooperate with the First and Second Spaces in developing viable sub-regional tourism circuits.
3. *Conservation and showcasing of cultural and intellectual heritage deserves to be given the topmost priority.* A specific initiative, *Behold the Buddha*, is conceived as a grand multi-country collaborative cultural presentation to cover the performing arts of the region where Buddhism has travelled. Fairs and Festivals may be utilized to showcase cultural programmes from countries in the SE-Asian sub-region.
4. *The Third Space should take the initiative to encourage institutionalization of systematic study documentation, research and certification of Traditional Medicinal systems and dissemination of this knowledge throughout the SE-Asian sub-region.* Some of these are well studied and very effective while others are not studied but reputed to be effective. Activities related to bio-diversity and folk knowledge should be institutionalized on a sub-regional basis and linked with similar institutions and practices in the entire South East Asian sub-region.
5. *To ensure that the youth are the driving force in the operationalization of the Act-East Policy, cross border training and capacity building institutions in the form of a regional skill grid may be set up to undertake massive training programmes, knowledge enhancing exercises and exposure meetings, skill development initiatives and entrepreneurial capacity building.* Universities in NER should be encouraged to attract students and researchers. Special attention should be given to selection of faculty and to have region-specific curricula and specializations. That will generate a critical mass of social and natural scientists, academics, management experts and professionals who would hasten the pace of development, peace and stability. At the foundational level, there is great need for drastically improving the standard of teaching, especially in mathematics, science and language, starting at primary levels to improve the percentage of students who opt for the science-stream.

6. *Visa regime should be liberalized in terms of duration, entry points, means of entry and frequency of travel. Visa offices of all the friendly neighboring countries in the SE-Asian sub-region may be opened in capitals of the North Eastern States of India to promote bona fide cross border movement and interactions for education, cultural exchanges, tourism, business, health, civil society activities, disaster management and other pertinent activities.*

7. *Mass advocacy programmes should be taken up in the Third Space by the Civil Societies in their respective countries as a much-needed mutual trust-building measure. The Governments may be persuaded to realistically address geographical realities, development orientations and long term connectivity needs. Multi-sector programmes like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical & Economic Cooperation - which has people-oriented components in the fields of tourism, education, culture etc, that will make connectivity meaningful) and BIG-B Initiative (Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt initiative), should be used as vehicles for promoting Civil Society exchanges as confidence-building measures. These grand ideas should be projectivized without delay and implemented in cooperation with Civil Society to create pockets of surplus in goods and skills, and eliminate the trust deficit.*

8. *Multilateral institutions and professional agencies with much deeper expertise and financing capabilities should be fully engaged with in order to speedily realize the connectivity goals including roads, transport, inland water system, railways and air and other virtual and land based communications networks within the NER and its immediate neighbors for dispersal of surpluses of goods and skills generated by various existing and aforesaid productive projects.*

9. *Civil Society should launch massive awareness campaigns and sensitization drives at all levels (especially among the youth and the student-community) to meet the real challenge, namely: to re-brand the NER from a backward, conflict-ridden, unsafe, economically deficit area, with anti-outsider isolationist mentality to that of one with immense potential of natural wealth, unparalleled developmental opportunities, with progressive people open to learning new skills and earn regional, national and even SE-Asian prosperity; and to function as model gateway of India to the countries in the East. An equally formidable challenge is to develop proper and healthy people-to-people contacts and engage in legal community-centric cross-border projects and transform borders into symbols of inter-dependence and opportunities, instead of clandestine channels for militants and smuggling in drugs, arms and contraband.*

10. *These responsibilities could be taken on by the Asian Confluence in the NER jointly with an Agency in the First Space that represents not only the NE States but also the Central Government which is responsible for effective transformation of its Look-East Policy to Act-East Policy in an effective manner. {The NEC appears to be ideally suited for this purpose provided its functioning is radically rejuvenated.} A Joint Action Coordination Committee should be set up to bring about close coordination for taking the Asian Confluence-movement forward with active cooperation of all the three Spaces. The JACC may have representations from:*

First Space – Central Ministries: MEA, MHA, M.DoNER, Other Ministries & State Govts concerned.

Second Space – Chambers of Commerce/Industry at National & Regional Levels; Bodies representing specific relevant Sectors (like Tourism, Handicrafts, Skill-development etc.).

Third Space – Academicians; Grass-Root Activists, University run organizations and Think-Tanks; ICWA; and Asian Confluence as the focal point.

Conference Concept Brief

India's North Eastern States along with Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh form one of the most intricately woven diversity hotspots of the globe at the levels of race, religion, art, language, social customs and bio-diversity. The region is the bridge between the Indic and the Far Eastern Cultures. This is the region where many Asian Cultures meet. Sharing as many as five international boundaries, it is India's gateway to East Asia and theirs to India. It is really an **Asian Confluence** that needs to be celebrated as a global cultural diversity hotspot.

India has long enunciated her **Look East Policy**. In recent times, this policy has gained further prominence, holding the key to India's regional development as it can help end the landlocked isolation of her North Eastern States and open up the region to the larger East Asian theatre. The level and quality of socio-economic cooperation between India and Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh are key factors for the overall development of the entire region.

Recent times have seen a renewed vigor in engagement among these countries in mainly two spaces: one, led by Governments and two, initiated by Big Businesses. Governments can put in political structures. Big Businesses with government together can take a step forward by putting in economic structures. There is however a *Third Space* beyond such efforts which can be nurtured: that of a Civil Society driven network of communities across the region who are votaries for win-win solutions across borders that ensure overall balanced economic growth, and ensure security and stability. The *Third Space* is not passive but intelligent and nurturing: daring stakeholders, people across disciplines, who think creatively for out-of-the-box solutions.

Transforming the *Look East Policy* to an **Act East Policy** will hinge on Civil Society initiatives that create bridges of mutual confidence and friendship to nurture human capital, which can operate the physical, economic and political infrastructures that Governments put in place. In addition to economic initiatives, organizations and individuals can (and should) play a more proactive role in the region through bottoms-up approach of socio-cultural exchanges of local knowledge & skills through fairs & festivals; trade & commerce; games & sports; debates & competitions; inter-communication over internet, and such like. Developing sectors like education, tourism and health services with injection of ground-level science & technology innovations, can give the large service sector a major boost to sharing of much needed skilled human capital among the neighbors. This holds the key to breaking the psychological barriers, promoting goodwill and prosperity within this larger region and also creating confidence in the political and economic structure that governments are trying to put in place.

However considerable trust deficit in the region inhibits development and win-win synergies from taking place. India's links with South East Asian neighbors span centuries of spiritual, cultural, economic and strategic ties. The hiatus created by colonization, cold war and other developments are finally a thing of the past. India and its South East Asian neighbors must leverage their common history and aspirations to build a better, peaceful and more prosperous future by reviving and redeveloping physical, psychological, economic and organic linkages among the Civil Societies of the region before it is too late.

All these can be most effectively done by the **Third Space**. Engaging with and nurturing this intelligent Third Space can unleash many forces for growth and overall prosperity in this Region.

The proposed brainstorming seminar will bring together a cross-section of stake-holders – civil society, media, business, diplomats and politicians – and come up with concrete and practical recommendations for the region, focusing the role of the *Third Space*.