

The main objective of the conference was to critically evaluate the paradigm shift in development in northeast with a special reference to Assam in channeling the region to a path of rapid growth and sustainable development. Industrialization will be the prime mover of growth in the region, which will help in creating employment opportunities for a large mass of existing unemployed skilled and unskilled labour force. Further, industrialization within a small land - locked region can be made possible only through rapid growth in interregional and international trade. Thus, trade may act as the “engine of growth” in a backward underdeveloped region like the northeast. Assam being the core of the region with its relatively large population and advantages in connectivity can play a crucial role in creating an industrial hub. This will enable the other neighboring states of the region to connect themselves with the hub through various forms of forward and backward linkages thereby generate a growth process within the northeast. Such linkage effects may contribute to optimal allocation of resources within the region through specialization in production and trade. The evolution in information and communication technologies (ICT) has revolutionized the way to conduct business, trade and governance. The “Digital India program” launched by the government is an apt recognition of the role of digitalization and digital connectivity in development. The issue of concern would be how would the northeast prepare itself to capitalize this.

In this backdrop “The Look East Policy”, which marked a significant shift in India’s foreign policy stance, has been construed as a new paradigm of economic growth for the northeast region. In India’s quest for markets, it becomes a natural choice for allying with some nearby regional groups. In the past, India never had significant political and economic interactions with the East and the Southeast Asian countries, although it had strong historical ties with them by way of religion, language, culture and civilization over centuries. This is especially true for the northeast states of India. It is often said that the southeast Asia begins from the northeast of India because of its geographical proximity with Myanmar which is a member of the ASEAN.

India-ASEAN concluded the **free trade pact in August 2008** and signed the **AIFTA** on 13 August 2009 in Bangkok. AIFTA was entered into force on January 2010. The ASEAN-India FTA will see tariff liberalisation of over 90% of products traded between the two dynamic regions. Tariffs on over 4,000 product lines expected to be eliminated by 2016. The conference shall try to focus how the India – ASEAN trade initiatives can trigger a development process in

the northeast region and how Assam being the hub of the region can be benefited from these initiatives.