



Ethnic and Linguistic Ties Between Northeast India and Southeast Asia: Foundations for Regional Integration and India's Act East Policy

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Abstract

Northeast India and Southeast Asia have a rich history of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic connections that span centuries. Their geographical closeness has encouraged migration, trade, and cultural exchanges, resulting in many shared traits among the populations of these regions. The ethnic diversity in Northeast India and Southeast Asia shows notable parallels. Numerous indigenous groups in Northeast India, including the Nagas, Mizos, Kukis, Bodos, and Ahoms, have ancestral ties to ethnic communities in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and other Southeast Asian countries. Anthropological studies suggest that many of these groups can trace their roots back to migration waves from the Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic areas of China and Southeast Asia. Linguistically, the Tibeto-Burman and Austroasiatic families are prevalent in both Northeast India and Southeast Asia. Languages like Bodo, Meitei (Manipuri), and various Naga dialects exhibit structural and lexical similarities with Burmese, Karen, and other Tibeto-Burman languages found in Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos.

This paper will discuss how, by strengthening connectivity and fostering people-to-people interactions, India can leverage these historical ties to create a more integrated and prosperous regional network, and how several challenges hinder deeper integration. Amidst this backdrop, the paper will explore the ethnic and linguistic similarities between Northeast India and Southeast Asia, highlighting how these connections form a solid basis for India's Act East Policy.

Keywords: *Northeast India, Southeast Asia, culture, ethnic, linguistic, connections, India's Act East Policy, regional framework, soft power.*

Since its inception, the Look East Policy has been a significant agenda in India's foreign policy, focusing primarily on forging closer economic ties with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) nations. After assuming the Prime Ministership, Narendra Modi upgraded the Look East Policy into the Act East Policy in 2014 to focus on the Asia-Pacific region's extended neighbourhood and promote economic cooperation and cultural ties through constant bilateral and multilateral engagements. (Horam: Academia:2024)

The oft-repeated statement that "Southeast Asia begins where Northeast India ends" (Patgiri and Hazarika:2016) captures the essence of Northeast India's vitality to India's eastward engagement and Northeast India and Southeast Asia share a deep-rooted historical bond marked by cultural, ethnic, and linguistic interconnections that date back centuries. The region is characterized by a vibrant mix of ethnic groups and languages, reflecting a long-standing exchange of traditions and historical ties that shape its diverse and intricate social fabric. (Press Information Bureau Website) This point was emphasized in 2007 by



Pranab Mukherjee, who was serving as India's Minister of External Affairs at the time. Speaking in Shillong, he noted that the Northeast holds strategic importance, as its development can be aligned with the objectives of India's 'Look East' policy. (Carnegieendowment.org;2007)

Northeast India in India's Look/Act East Policy

In the annals of Indian foreign policy, Northeast India has always remained a strategic linking point and acted as the frontier between India and its neighbours. Ethnically, this region is distinct from the rest of India and has strong ethnic and cultural ties with Southeast Asia. The northeast region is demarcated by India's international borders with China, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Bhutan, and Bangladesh.

India announced the Look East Policy mainly to strengthen economic relationships with Southeast Asian countries, focusing primarily on increasing trade and investment activities. Through this, India intends to develop close economic and cultural relations with the region and create a cooperative environment along its border areas by expanding its footprint into Southeast Asia. The geographical contiguity between the North East Region and Southeast Asia makes the region central to New Delhi's connectivity projects. India has emphasized maritime and land connectivity to facilitate greater movements of goods and people between the regions. Dr. Sarish Sebastian, Dr. Shalini. B., Dr. Philip Varghes (2022), in their study report titled India's Neighborhood Policy towards the Southeast Asian Region: A Study on Act East Policy, contended that during the early phase of looking east, New Delhi did not give much importance to the Northeast. More so, during the Cold War years, New Delhi lacked any definite East Asia Policy, making this region isolated in its economic and foreign policy domain. This condition has been radically transformed in the context of the New Global Order, following India's announcement of the Look East Policy.

With the announcement of the Act East Policy in 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the new government explicitly emphasized integrating Northeast India into the broader strategy. Modi reinforced this by stating that India's eastern engagement begins at Myanmar's western frontier (MEA Website, 2014). The then Minister of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj, while addressing the Governors of India's Northeast region on October 6, 2015, emphasized that the Northeast is a "natural partner" in India's Act East Policy and a land bridge to ASEAN. (Muni and Mishra:2019)

In a parliamentary session on December 23, 2015, Minister of State for External Affairs Gen. V. K. Singh reiterated the policy's objectives—strengthening economic ties, cultural connections, and strategic partnerships in the Asia-Pacific through continued bilateral and multilateral engagement. He stressed the importance of involving the Northeast through enhanced infrastructure and cross-border connectivity, including roads, airports, telecommunications, and energy links (Press Information Bureau). At a business conclave in Assam in February 2018, Prime Minister Modi reaffirmed the region's centrality by stating that the Act East Policy places the Northeast at its core (ANI News, 2018). Sushma Swaraj also emphasized the "3Cs"—Connectivity, Commerce, and Culture—as the policy's foundational pillars, with Northeast India playing a key role in each. The Act East Policy now envisions Northeast India not just as a gateway but as an active participant in India's engagement with Southeast Asia. It aims to rebuild cultural and historical bonds while advancing regional economic integration. As Luo (2024) notes in the *International Journal of Frontiers in Sociology*, the policy encourages a multi-dimensional role for the region, making it a key stakeholder in India's eastward vision. (Luo: International Journal of Frontiers in Sociology:2024)

To transform the borders (India shares a 5,800-km long land border with Myanmar and Bangladesh extends across Assam, Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya, West Bengal, Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. (G

Partha sarathy: 2019) from obstacles to opportunity and opulence, India began to surge in connectivity and made efforts to build infrastructure. Key infrastructure initiatives include upgrading the Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo road in Myanmar, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (which links Kolkata to Mizoram via Myanmar), and the Rhi-Tiddim road connecting Myanmar and Mizoram. Segments of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, spanning about 1,360 kilometers, further boost this connectivity (Gupta, 2012).

Dr. Sarish Sebastian, Dr. Shalini. B., Ph.D Dr. Philip Varghes (2022), again in their study, India's Neighborhood Policy towards the Southeast Asian Region: A Study on Act East Policy, discussed the potential revival of the Stilwell Road, connecting Assam in India with China via Myanmar. The road passes through Arunachal Pradesh and enters Myanmar at the Pangsau Pass. Moreover, major highways in Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Manipur are now integrated into the Asian Highway network (AH-1 and AH-2). Enhancing connectivity between Northeast India and Southeast Asia, the study report highlighted that New Delhi's aim is twofold. First, they aim to lift the Northeast out of its landlocked and isolated state, enabling greater cross-border trade and people-to-people connections. Second, they offer the region's alternate entrée to the sea and the remaining India through Myanmar. According to the study, these initiatives are part of India's broader strategy to overcome the geopolitical limitations imposed on the Northeast during partition and fully integrate it into its Act East vision.

Challenges to Deeper Integration

Mungreishang Horam, in his article, rightfully highlighted that the integration of Northeast India in the later phase of the Look East Policy was visibly premised on the approach towards resolving the developmental gaps and limited participation of India in the Northeast. India intends to incorporate the region's needs and concerns into the broader framework of the country's neighbourhood strategy. He added that this new approach sought to emphasize opening up and unlocking the potential of the region through improved connectivity, economic integration, and a socio-cultural reconnect with India's eastern neighbours. Northeast India, often referred to as India's 'gateway to the East,' holds a pivotal position in strengthening the nation's ties with its eastern neighbours. Consequently, the Look East Policy evolved to include a stronger focus on the region, positioning it as a central lens through which the policy was implemented. (Horam: 2024)

Hence, Northeast India was included in India's Look East policy when India thought of the region's progress by integrating it as an element of its foreign policy orientation. India also saw the Northeast region as a strategic entry point for fostering economic integration and improving connectivity with Southeast Asian nations. As a result, the integration of Northeast India emerged as a key element of the Look East Policy, and over time, the region assumed a central role in India's outreach to the East. The shift from the 'Look East' to the 'Act East' Policy in 2014 further elevated the strategic importance of the Northeast in India's engagement with its eastern neighbours.

But Northeast India is known for its peculiar complications. It is characterised by the geographical isolation from the rest of India, thereby lacking a cultural and historical connection with the mainland. The region stands apart from mainland India due to challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and connectivity, ethnic tensions, insurgency, and issues related to weak governance.

Despite India's efforts to improve connectivity under the Act East Policy, infrastructure gaps, particularly in remote areas of Northeast India, pose substantial challenges. Inadequate roads, limited rail and air links, and insufficient logistical support encumber smooth trade and communication between the two regions.



The geopolitical intricacy of the region, particularly with Myanmar and Bangladesh, presents security challenges that further muddle cross-border cooperation. The region has seen decades of insurgency and is typically characterized as being exceptionally diverse, with a bewildering number of politically salient ascriptive identities. (Lacina:2009) All these States have faced, or continue to face, trans-border terrorist and separatist challenges. Armed separatist groups in India's north-east recently united under the banner of a so-called 'United Liberation Front of Western South Asia', posing a serious security challenge to the subcontinent. Several insurgent groups operate in the region, including the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K), the Kamtapur Liberation Organization, and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) in Assam.

These insurgents have ignored official borders, finding the remote hills of western Burma, Bangladesh, and Bhutan to be opportune areas to obtain shelter, support, and financing. The Naga, Assamese, and Manipuri (Meithei) armed groups established clandestine networks of jungle training camps, arms and drug trafficking routes, and an elaborate extortion system in the neighboring Burmese Sagaing Division and Kachin State. (Renegaud :2008) Another impediment to the integration of the North East region is the requirement for Indian citizens to obtain Inner Line Permits to travel to protected tribal areas in the Northeast. This convolutes the procedure of visiting and investing in the region.

All these have contributed to hindering the development process in the region. Apart from geographical isolation, policy formulation and execution in the region often lack reflection and inclusion of the realities. Peculiar needs and concerns have impeded the development process of the North East, leading to the perpetuation of political instability and poor governance. Consequently, the geographical detachment of India's Northeast, developmental gap, political complexity, and cultural absolutes have contributed to the region's peripheral nature and isolation from the rest of India. These problems and challenges require attention and hence here ethnic and linguistic similarities between Northeast India and Southeast Asia could facilitate regional integration.

Ethnic and Linguistic Similarities between Northeast India and Southeast Asia

Amb (Retd) Anil Wadhwa at Dr. Harisingh Gaur University, Sagar, M.P. on August 9, 2019, it was stated that India's engagement with Southeast Asia has been rooted in common historical connections, cultural links, and shared. The values and culture of India and Southeast Asia are interconnected, and this is based on contacts through civilizations. There is clear historical evidence of India's contact with Southeast Asia dating as far back as the 3rd century AD, marked by trade relations, the spread of Sanskrit, and the influence of Indian epics.

There is also well-documented evidence of technical innovations between South East Asia and India. "The shared heritage between India and Southeast Asia forms the foundation for strong regional cooperation. These similarities span various cultural dimensions, including values and traditions, social structures, folk heritage, languages, literature, traditional arts and crafts, architecture, performing arts, games, indigenous knowledge systems, myths, rituals, and other living traditions, as noted by the Ministry of External Affairs. (MEASite). Northeast India – comprising the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura – holds a distinct geopolitical and cultural closeness to Southeast Asia, reinforcing its strategic significance in regional engagement.

The Northeast of India is a potpourri of different ethnic communities, home to a diverse range of ethnic groups, with a significant percentage of the population being tribal, primarily in the hills. India has

approximately 635 tribal groupings, of them more than 200 are found in northeastern India. Because of the scattered populations that cross international borders, people in Northeast India have linguistic, cultural, and ethnic ties to their neighbours. There is ethnic overlap and connections between some Northeastern ethnic groups and those in Southeast and even East Asia. Assamese Ahoms are seen as belonging to the broader Tai people, who are dispersed across Southeast Asia. Research has also shown that the Khasis of Meghalaya and the Mon-Khmer people of Southeast Asia have a common language.

The ethnic groups of Northeast India and Southeast Asia have shared roots, primarily traced back to migration waves from the Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic regions of China and Southeast Asia. Numerous indigenous groups in Northeast India, such as the Nagas, Mizos, Kukis, Bodos, and Ahoms, share common ancestors with ethnic communities in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and other Southeast Asian countries. Anthropological studies suggest that ancestors of numerous Northeast Indian ethnic clusters moved in a southerly direction from the Sino-Tibetan zone (particularly China and Tibet) and subsequently came in contact with native people of Southeast Asia. The historical record indicates that these were sequential migrations, and in turn, ethnic clusters like the Nagas, Mizos, and Bodos share certain sociocultural features and systems of organization with Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos.

The people belonging to the 'Naga' ethnic tribe are inhabitants of Sagaing and Kachin regions in Myanmar, as well as Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh. Similarly, the Chins of Chin state in Myanmar and Mizos in Mizoram share common culture and history (Singh, 2020). Kukis, who lives on both sides of the border, moves spontaneously to discuss family matters or pay goodwill visits (Majumdar, 2020). The Treaty of Friendship, which came into force in 1952, allowed the indigenous population at the India-Myanmar border a free passage within 40 km on both sides for facilitating local trade and social visits (Trivedi, 2020).

Northeast India and Southeast Asia share common religious practices, agricultural methods, and traditional crafts. The Mizos and the Karen of Myanmar practice identical agricultural traditions like shifting cultivation, also referred to as slash-and-burn farming. Further, the Ahoms of Assam and the Shans of Myanmar have similar societal formations. Their experiences of kingdom building acted as a catalyst for fostering exchanges between them over time. Cultural resemblances exist between Northeast India and Southeast Asia. Different festivals with shared heritage are observed in these two regions for example, Ronagli in Assam, Songkran in Thailand, Laos's Pi Mai, and Arunachal Pradesh's Sangken are festivals that mark the onset of the New Year, and like Songkran in Thailand and Sangken in Arunachal Pradesh, many of them reflect shared cultural traditions and practices. Research by anthropologists and archaeologists has revealed that the Khasi people exhibit cultural parallels with the Mundari and Mon-Khmer communities. These similarities are evident in their use of comparable stone tools and in common funerary customs, such as the practice of setting up memorial stones to honour the deceased. (Tagore, Majumder, Chatterjee, Das: Frontier:2022). This similarity generates a sense of oneness with each other and is a conduit for creating stronger bonds between them. Therefore, these festivals offer an inimitable opportunity for the regions to integrate and form a stronger association based on the common cultural practices and legacy.

Language is a significant means of communication, and linguistic ties between Northeast India and Southeast Asia are significant. Languages spoken in both regions are intensely rooted in the Tibeto-Burman and Austroasiatic language families. The Austroasiatic language family includes languages spoken by ethnic groups such as the Khasis of Meghalaya, who share linguistic roots with the Mon-Khmer languages spoken in Southeast Asia, particularly in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. These languages exhibit strong lexical and



phonological similarities, signifying that historical connections may have contributed to such linguistic similarities between Northeast India and Southeast Asia. It has been observed that the Tibeto-Burman language is ubiquitous in both Northeast India and Southeast Asia. Languages like Bodo, Meitei (Manipuri), and several Naga dialects exhibit prominent resemblance to Burmese, Karen, and other Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos. These languages share phonetic structures, syntactic patterns, and vocabulary. For example, the Meitei language in Manipur shares common grammatical structures and vocabulary with Burmese. Similarly, Naga languages, such as Ao, Angami, and Lotha, have been found to have significant similarities to languages spoken in Myanmar, especially those in the Chin and Kachin regions. All these make it evident that both areas have linguistic commonalities too. The ethnic tribes that are best represented along the boundaries, as we are aware, northeastern states like Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram, share a land border with Myanmar and hence have deep historical and cultural ties. Consequently, North East became a crucial 'gateway' to Southeast Asia, both physically and culturally. Hence, pursuing a proactive cultural diplomacy linking the North East Region and Southeast Asia is necessary and strategically significant for India.

Conclusion and Way Forward

Soft power, in the post-Cold War era, is a crucial component of foreign policy, and as the world's largest democracy, with a rich heritage, culture, and ambitious aspirations, India has always relied on soft power diplomacy. Shashi Tharoor observed in his *Pax Indica* (2012) that India is an enthusiastic proponent of soft power. India leverages its diverse cultural assets—such as Bollywood cinema, yoga, Ayurveda, historical tourism, and its flavourful, spice-laden cuisine—as key instruments of soft power in international relations. (Patil: 2022) Amb (Retd) Bhaswati Mukherjee, in her lecture at Pondicherry University, identified cultural diplomacy as an important dimension of a country's soft power. She highlighted the significance of cultural diplomacy and soft power as key tools for fostering both regional and global cooperation, particularly within South Asia. She concluded that culture now plays a vital role in connecting people, strengthening bilateral ties, and mending divisions caused by political conflicts and hostility (MEA Website). Similarly, in 1996, then-Prime Minister I. K. Gujral pointed out that while India and Southeast Asian nations possess rich cultural resources, these remain largely untapped in diplomatic engagement. He emphasized using the strength of cultural relations to enhance economic and political relations. (Chakraborty:2022)

Once regarded as an isolated and conflict-prone region, the Northeast India region is now experiencing a major geo economic transformation due to India's ambitious foreign policy imperatives connecting Southeast Asia. Accordingly, as part of its 'Act East' policy, New Delhi has increasingly recognized the Northeast's strategic role in facilitating connectivity, given its pivotal location at the crossroads of India's borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, and China (Nayar, 2021). In the days to come, India must concentrate on enhancing regional infrastructure and address the underdevelopment of road, rail, and air transport infrastructure, to ensure connectivity between these states. Endorsing language and cultural exchanges, though it could appear to be an ambitious project, still strengthening cultural linkages between India and Southeast Asia would promise many benefits, as this would lead to more collaborative initiatives that would foster mutual understanding and cooperation and would bolster In conclusion, with its central role in the Act East Policy, Northeast India is poised to shift from being a marginal region to a vibrant hub for trade and tourism, positioned at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia. India's Look/Act East Policy aims to strengthen economic, political, and cultural ties with Southeast Asia, building on long-established historical connections. It would steer India's initiatives to drive the region towards development, driven by shared cultural ties, with the ultimate goal of enhancing India's influence by leveraging culture as a form of soft power.



Therefore, ethnic and linguistic connections between Northeast India and Southeast Asia could catalyse regional integration and play a significant role in India's Act East Policy. These ties would help to transform the North-East, bolster the Look East/ Act East Policy, and provide an opportunity for India to leverage these historical and cultural links to foster deeper economic, cultural, and political cooperation. Consequently, all these would assist India to emerge as a major Asian power utilising its soft power.

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