

India's "Act East" Policy and Northeast India: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract: *An important feature of India's eastward engagement is the role and significance of India's Northeast region. The significance of the Northeast region for India's eastward engagement comes from its geographical proximity and socio - cultural linkages with India's eastern neighbours, providing ample scope and opportunities for promoting economic integration and connectivity, besides enhancing socio - cultural engagements. Realising this potential, the role and participation of Northeast India came to be emphasised as a crucial component of the Look East Policy. With the transition from 'Look East' to 'Act East' Policy since 2014, the role and significance of Northeast India in India's eastward engagement has been given added emphasis. Despite its tremendous potential, the Northeast region is beset with problems and challenges such as underdevelopment, political instability and poor governance, which have hindered the unlocking of the full potential of the region. There is also participation deficit of the region in the formulation and execution of India's 'neighbourhood policy.' In order to transform the potential of the region into reality, there is a need for ensuring the effective participation and integration of the Northeast region in the "Act East" Policy.*

Keywords: eastward engagement, 'gateway to the east', development, transnational approach, neighbourhood policy

1. Introduction

The oft - repeated statement that "Southeast Asia begins where Northeast India ends," [1] captures the essence of Northeast India's vitality to India's eastward engagement. The significance of the Northeast region for India's eastward engagement comes from its geographical proximity and socio - cultural linkages and interspersed communities across the international boundary. The geographical proximity of Northeast India with the frontier provinces of other countries provides ample scope and opportunities for promoting economic integration and connectivity, besides enhancing socio - cultural engagements. These factors place the Northeast region of India at a great advantage when it comes to connecting and engaging with the Southeast Asian nations. However, the Northeast region also faces various peculiar economic and political predicaments, which can be overcome through cooperation with the neighbouring countries. Thus, to address the predicaments of the Northeast region and ensuring overall development, the region has been given prominence in India's eastward engagement. This was highlighted by the then Minister of External Affairs, Pranab Mukherjee, in 2007 in Shillong, when he mentioned that the Northeast "is one region into whose progress and development we can dovetail India's "Look East" policy." [2] However, the Northeast India component was not initially given prominence because India's Look East Policy did not focus on domestic imperatives at the outset.

Northeast India's participation in the Look East Policy began when India started considering the domestic imperative of ensuring the development of the region by integrating it as a component of its foreign policy orientation. In its effort to 'look east,' India began to envisage the Northeast region as the "gateway" for promoting economic integration and enhancing connectivity with Southeast Asia. Consequently, the need for integrating the Northeast region came to be emphasised as a crucial

component of the Look East Policy, and gradually Northeast India became an integral part of the Look East Policy. With the transition from 'Look East' to 'Act East' Policy in 2014, the role and significance of Northeast India in India's eastward engagement has been given added emphasis.

Over the years of its implementation, certain arguments have emerged that the Act East Policy had failed to ensure the effective participation of the Northeast region and also lacked to have a significant impact on the development of the region. What are the factors for these and the probable solutions for them? What are the prospects and opportunities for the Northeast in the Act East Policy? Moreover, whether the Northeast's regional interests and capabilities are homogenous, and how effectively it can be translated into foreign policy, need further study. These are some of the questions that need answers and further analysis. In order to ensure the effective participation and benefits for the Northeast India in the Act East Policy, it is pertinent to examine the policy, specific to the Northeast region and envision its proper role in the policy. Thus, the study is an attempt to analyse and examine the Act East Policy, with specific attention to the Northeast region. To that end, the objective of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of the policy for academic purpose and potential policy input, while also working towards its further development.

2. Literature Review

Given the significant position that Northeast India plays in India's relations with its eastern neighbours, researchers and analysts have worked to understand and analyse the Look/Act East Policy's approach to the region. In the chapter "India's Look East Policy: Genesis," [3] Preet Malik emphasises the significance of Northeast India as a strategic imperative in the development of India's eastward engagement policy. He notes that the Chinese economic and strategic expansion in India's neighbourhood had Northeast

India as its target, making it one of the strategic imperatives in the formulation of India's Look East Policy. In his opinion, the Look East Policy's failure to usher in development in the region was one of its major failings. He further noted that one of the key parts of the policy was the need to find long-term solutions to address the problems in India's Northeast region.

On the other hand, authors like Amar Nath Ram contend that the Look East Policy initially failed to fully take into consideration India's domestic needs in the chapter of his edited book titled "*The First Decade of India's Look East Policy*." [4] Northeast India didn't become a crucial component of the Look East Policy until much later, when the domestic imperatives of the strategy were acknowledged. In their article "India's Look/Act East Policy and the Northeast Region: A Critical Perspective," [5] Hiranya K. Nath and Siddharth Kumar, who share this viewpoint, claim that while the inclusion of the Northeast region in the Look East Policy was an afterthought, it gave the policy a domestic component known as "Look East through the Northeast."

In his book *India's Look East Policy and the Northeast*, [6] Thongkhohal Haokip elaborates on the strategy for integrating Northeast India into India's policy of eastward engagement. Haokip claims that a new dimension was given to the Look East Policy when India adopted the policy of partnering with ASEAN countries by linking it to the economic and security interests of the Northeastern region. Haokip further notes that the "Look East Policy" changed into a strategy in which India's overall national development strategy as well as its relations with foreign nations were integrated with the development of the Northeast region. In a similar vein, Amar Nath Ram noted in his edited book, *Two Decades of India's Look East Policy: Partnership for Peace, Progress, and Prosperity*, [7] that the political unrest and developmental difficulties in India's northeast required a transnational approach, and that it was this approach that led to the inclusion of Northeast India in the Look East Policy.

S. D. Muni and Rahul Mishra write in their book *India's Eastward Engagement: From Antiquity to Act East Policy* [8] that the Act East Policy reflects the integration of the nation's development with its foreign policy under the Modi government in reference to the emphasis placed on the Northeast's centrality. As a result, the policy has placed a specific emphasis on the development of Northeast India through the region's interaction with its eastern neighbours. They contend that the primary distinction between the AEP and the LEP is that the Act East Policy would be evaluated in light of its commitments to the development and integration of the Northeast region. In their edited book *Look East to Act East Policy: Implications for India's Northeast*, [9] Gurudas Das and C. Joshua Thomas pointed out that the Northeast is crucial to the Act East Policy and argued that without acknowledging this, the strategy would merely be another lip service to the Look East Policy.

Similarly, Rubul Patgiri and Obja Hazarika in their article titled "*Locating Northeast in India's Neighbourhood Policy: Transnational Solutions to the Problems of a Periphery*" [10] asserted that the peculiar geographical, political, and

economic circumstances have made the development of the Northeast dependent upon transnational solutions, which need to be reflected in India's neighbourhood policy. They added that while there have been efforts to include the interests and particular concerns of the Northeast in India's neighbourhood policy, these efforts have only been on paper, and that realising these objectives will require more tenacious and sincere efforts, novel solutions, and overcoming regional issues and challenges.

Observing the prospects and challenges of the Act East Policy specific to the Northeast region, Puyam Rakesh Singh writes in the paper "*Crossing the Indo - Myanmar Border: Fear, Cooperation and Mistrust in 'Act East' Policy*," [11] that the Act East Policy will struggle to pass through Northeast India and into Myanmar without a strong political will and a change in the approach. The paper made the observation that for Northeast India to play a meaningful role and participate in the Act East Policy there must be devolution of power and participation by the people in the region.

From the above review of literature, it can be observed that there is a further need for the study of the problems and difficulties involved in incorporating Northeast India into the Act East Policy, as well as a thorough and multifaceted study of the prospects and opportunities the policy presents for the region, both of which call for extensive research and analysis. The research is an attempt to highlight these issues and investigate them with the objective of gaining a proper perspective on the role and significance of the Northeast region in the policy. Thus, the research is an effort, through a deeper study and analysis, to contribute to the knowledge and literature of the policy in order to further its understanding and development.

3. Research Methodology

The methodology adopted for the research is analytical and descriptive, with the data collected from both primary and secondary sources. The research has delved into existing records, state reports, treaties and agreements, official statements and white papers, government archives, and files as the primary source of the study. For secondary sources, the study has sought to delve as far as possible the existing literature like books, journals, newspapers, magazines, articles, research papers, seminar papers, theses, etc. In addition, analysis and commentaries on the theme are amply explored for insights and conflicting interests and opinions.

Brief Profile of Northeast India

The Northeast region of India, also referred to as the "North Eastern Region" (NER) [12] consist seven contiguous neighbouring states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and the Himalayan state of Sikkim. The region comprises an area of 262, 230 square kilometres, which is nearly 8 per cent of India's total land area. Lying on India's eastern periphery, the topography of the Northeast region differs from the rest of India. The Northeast region is largely hilly and mountainous yet enriched by a vast expanse of natural forest and mineral resources. The region shares international borders with several neighbouring countries, namely China,

Bhutan, and Nepal to the north and north - west, Myanmar to the east, and Bangladesh to the south. The North - eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland shares 1, 643 km - long international border with Myanmar. Owing to its international border with Myanmar and proximity to India's eastern neighbours, Northeast India is known as India's "Gateway to East." [13] However, Northeast India is geographically isolated from the rest of India. The Northeast region shares more than 90 per cent of its territories with India's neighbours such as China, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal. However, the region is virtually landlocked and is connected with the Indian mainland through a narrow strip of land known as the "Chicken's Neck" or "Siliguri Corridor" [14] in Siliguri, which is located in the northern part of the state of West Bengal.

India's Northeast is a potpourri of different ethnic communities, with tribal people accounting for a sizable portion of the region's population, mostly in the hills. Northeast India has over 200 of the estimated 635 tribal groups in India. People of Northeast India have ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties to its neighbours due to the interspersed communities that transgress international borders. Some ethnic groups in the Northeast, for example, have ethnic overlap and connect with those in Southeast Asia and even East Asia. The Ahoms in Assam are considered to be part of the larger Tai people who are spread throughout Southeast Asia. [15] Studies have also revealed a linguistic connection between the Mon - Khmer people of Southeast Asia and the Khasis of Meghalaya. [16] The Naga and Kuki - Chin ethnic groups are also scattered across Northeast India and Myanmar. A sizable Meitei Diasporas from the Indian state of Manipur are also present in Myanmar and are part of the country's multi - ethnic society.

Northeast India as a region has its own peculiar problems and challenges. It is characterised by the geographical isolation of the region from the rest of India, thereby lacking cultural and historical connect with the mainland, infrastructure and connectivity bottlenecks, ethnic conflict, insurgency, and incidence of poor governance, among other things. Such characteristics are attributed to have hindered the development process in the region. On top of the geographical isolation, policy formulation and execution that often lack reflection and inclusion of the realities and peculiar needs and concerns of the region have impeded development process leading to continuance of political instability and poor governance. Consequently, the geographical distance of India's Northeast, developmental gap, political complexity, and cultural givens are factors that have contributed to the region's peripheral nature and isolation from the rest of India. The peculiar problems and challenges of the region make it imperative for special attention and policy measures to ensure the region's stability and development.

"Act East" Policy and Northeast India

The integration of Northeast India in the later phase of the Look East Policy was visibly premised on the approach towards resolving the participation and developmental deficits in India's Northeast by integrating the needs and concerns of the region in India's "neighbourhood policy."

This new approach sought to emphasise on opening up and unlocking the potential of the region through improved connectivity, economic integration, and a socio - cultural re - connect with India's eastern neighbours. As India's "gateway to the East," the role, involvement and participation of Northeast India are regarded as critical component of India's eastward engagement. Thus, the Look East Policy was given a new dimension wherein it was viewed through the prism of the Northeast region.

The transition from the "Look East" Policy to the "Act East" Policy (AEP) in 2014 has sought to emphasise the centrality of the Northeast in the policy. Ever since the launch of the policy, the Modi government has emphasised on making Northeast India an integral part of the policy. This emphasis was underscored by Prime Minister Narendra Modi by declaring that "India's Eastern journey begins on the Western boundary of Myanmar." [17] While addressing the Governors of the India's Northeast region on October 6, 2015, Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj, emphasised that the Northeast is a "natural partner in India's Act East Policy" and a "land bridge to ASEAN," with the AEP as "a means to strengthen the stability, economy and prospects" of the Northeast region. [18] Highlighting the objectives of the AEP with regard to Northeast India, Minister of State in the Ministry of External Affairs, Gen. V. K. Singh, in an answer to a parliamentary question on December 23, 2015, also stated that the objective of the 'Act East' policy is "to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties and develop strategic relationship with countries in the Asia - Pacific region through continuous engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels" thereby benefiting the states in the Northeast. [19] Further emphasising the priority that has been given to the Northeast region in India's AEP, the Minister stated that various bilateral and regional initiatives between India and ASEAN countries have included "steady efforts to develop and strengthen connectivity of Northeast with the ASEAN region through trade, culture, people - to - people contacts and physical infrastructure (road, airport, telecommunication and power), etc." [20]

Later in February 2018 while addressing a business conclave in Assam, Prime Minister Modi outlined that "we created Act East Policy and the Northeast is at the heart of it," [21] thus, once again highlighting the centrality of Northeast India in India's Act East Policy. The Act East Policy, therefore, seeks to assign a definitive role and agenda for the Northeast region as an important stakeholder in India's eastward engagement. Besides promoting connectivity and economic integration, the policy emphasises rekindling the region's historical and cultural ties with India's eastern neighbours. Thus, the Act East Policy envisages the effective participation of the region in the policy by promoting a multi - dimensional role for the region.

4. Prospects and Challenges

Economic Dimension

The impetus for enhancing Northeast India's effective role and participation in the Act East Policy lies in the geographical proximity and prospects for integrating with India's transnational neighbours in the East, particularly

Southeast Asian nations. Therein, ensuring transnational connectivity, through overland or surface connectivity occupies an intrinsic role in facilitating Northeast India's engagement with these countries. Besides unlocking the Northeast's economic potential and strengthening its role as a socio - cultural bridge to the East, it can further push the agenda of development in the region. Hence, connectivity is critical to assuring Northeast India's active participation and as stakeholders in India's reinvigorated push for eastward engagement under the Act East Policy, which can give form to the rhetoric emphasising Northeast India as India's "gateway to the East."

The landlocked nature and geographical isolation of the Northeast region from mainland India, adds to the cost and time of procuring essential commodities by factoring in additional transportation charges and insurance payments. As such trade with neighboring provinces across the borders makes sense as a cost-effective measure. For instance, transporting essential commodities to different states in the region from trade centres like Mumbai will have to detour through the "Chicken's neck" and traverse some thousand kilometres. However, obtaining such commodities at the multiple trading posts located along international borders, which are relatively much nearer, would have saved both time and money. It would thus make economic sense, for instance, to promote Northeast India's economic integration with the provinces of north - western Myanmar and south - western China, the viability of which would be contingent on ensuring connectivity.

Improving connectivity networks and infrastructure in Northeast region will also enhance the competitiveness of regional products, attract greater investments and unlock the economic enterprise of the region. It can potentially link the Northeast region to the vibrant markets, economic hubs, and trade gateways of East and Southeast Asia. Besides augmenting economic activities and trade potential of the region, it can facilitate cross - border movement, enhance people - to - people contacts, and open up prospects for tourism. Development in the region can also ensue through improved access to economic opportunities, lower cost of goods and services, improved regional connectivity, and better access to economic hubs and regional and global markets. The improved access and linking with production networks and well established markets has the potential to close regional development gaps within a country while also inhibiting regional conflict. [22]

The Act East Policy presents tremendous opportunity for the development of Northeast India through promoting the region's economic integration with Southeast Asia. However, various issues are impeding the realisation of such potentials. With poor infrastructural development and lack of industries, the region continues to be captive consumers rather than production centres. Without developing industries and enhancing the export capabilities of the region, the opening up of the region to the Southeast Asian economies would seem to only make it a dumping ground for goods from the neighbouring countries. The presence of cheap third country products, sourced mainly from the border transit point in Moreh (Manipur), in the markets of several Northeastern states is an example. Hence,

strengthening the productive capacity of the Northeast region is required "before it is fully integrated with the economies of the neighbouring countries so that it could actively participate and potentially gain from cross - border trade and economic cooperation." [23]

The majority of India's traded goods and exports to Southeast Asia are noted to have come from the markets and industries in mainland India and shipments done through various ports. Thus, even though the proximity of the Northeast region to Southeast Asia enhances its potential to act as a trade corridor, it appears to make more economic sense to use the sea route through the eastern ports of India rather than the land route through the Northeast region, which is nearly twice the distance of the sea route. [24] Considering this fact, in order to have a share in India's external trade with Southeast Asia, there is a need for trade through the Northeast to have an organic link with the local economy. In this way, Northeast India can become a part of India's trade with Southeast Asia rather than the region serving just as a transit corridor. Thus, the focus should be on developing industries in the Northeast based on local resources.

Due to the natural vegetation and climatic conditions of the region, Northeast India has huge potential for agro - processing industries such as, organic farming, horticulture, floriculture, sericulture, and bamboo - based industries, etc, besides other industries based on indigenous tribal handicrafts and handlooms. The potential of the region in these sectors should be properly harnessed. The Northeast has seen an increase in the number of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and start - ups in these sectors, which the Act East Policy can capitalise on by prioritising and enhancing the production and export capabilities of such industries. To transform these potentials into reality, enhancing skill development and facilitating funding for these sectors, as well as infrastructural development and improving connectivity networks in the region should be given priority.

The international boundary that Northeast India shares with Myanmar presents enormous opportunity for cross - border trade and economic engagement in the region. However, the poor state of infrastructure and connectivity networks in Northeast India appears to create hurdles in facilitating cross - border trade. Border transit points, which serve as centres for facilitating cross - border trade, lack proper infrastructural facilities ranging from telecommunication to the banking system. Therefore, efforts must be made to improve infrastructure at transit points with state of the art technology and upgrading banking and financial networks. Besides, the existing curbs on items to be traded should be streamlined to allow for a wider flow of goods, facilitating enhanced cross - border trade.

Socio - Cultural Dimensions

Education and tourism are two sectors where Northeast India could benefit the most from its socio - cultural ties and physical proximity to its eastern neighbours. In the education sector, Northeast India has the potential to become an educational hotspot for the neighbouring countries. Given its geographical proximity to India's eastern neighbours, as

well as the presence of numerous English medium educational institutions in the Northeast region, the region has the potential to attract students from these countries. For instance, universities in Manipur, Assam and Meghalaya continuously admit students for higher education from Southeast Asia countries like Myanmar and Thailand. Along with student exchange programmes and research collaboration between universities in the Northeast and those in neighbouring countries, universities and research institutes can also be encouraged to promote research and expand knowledge on the ethnic affinities and cultural similarities of ethnic communities in Northeast India and those in Southeast Asia, which would potentially help strengthen their bond and linkages. In order to enhance such potential, there is the need for the establishment of more research and higher education institutes of excellence in the Northeast region. Thus, through this aspect Northeast India could also become a “knowledge corridor” between India and its eastern neighbours.

Northeast India has immense prospects in terms of promoting tourism in the region as well. Because of the topographical feature of the Northeast region, which includes an abundance of flora and fauna, the region seems to have enormous prospects for developing nature, adventure, and eco - tourism. Along with the presence of large tribal communities offering unique arts and culture, as well as Northeast region’s ethnic linkages and cultural affinities with the people in Southeast Asia, there is potential for cultural tourism in the region as well. As, for instance, the likes of the Sangai Festival in Manipur [25] and the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland have witnessed the increasing participation of cultural groups and increase in tourist footfalls from Southeast Asian countries. With Buddhism being a major religion in many Southeast Asian countries, and states such as Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim in Northeast India having significant Buddhists populations, and well as the presence of several majestic Buddhist monasteries, such as those in Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, there is scope for religious tourism in these states as well.

The geographical location of Northeast India also presents the potential for medical tourism in the region, particularly from the neighbouring provinces of Myanmar and other less developed Southeast Asian countries. The geographical proximity of the region, along with the existence of quality health care professionals, creates opportunities for the development of an economically profitable health care industry catering to these neighbouring regions. In this regard, Manipur and Assam have the potential to emerge as a hub for medical tourism as the two states appear to have a comparative advantage in terms of accessibility, quality of health care infrastructure, and availability of skilled manpower.

However, tourism and hospitality infrastructure in the Northeast region is considered to be underdeveloped. In order to tap the tourism potential of the region, what is required is to improve infrastructure development and connectivity networks of the region. Developing infrastructure in terms of connectivity, hospitality services, and improving amenities at tourist places needs to be prioritised. Upgrading of state capital airports in the region

to International Airport status would also give a boost to tourism in the region. Further liberalisation of the existing visa regime would promote tourism while also enhancing people - to - people contacts. There is also the necessity to open more foreign consulates in Northeast India to ease up visa application and also in providing assistance to foreign tourists. Ensuring the peace and stability of the region would also pave the way towards unlocking the potentials of the region in these regards.

5. Projection

Common Regional Approach

The prevalence of social divisions along ethnic lines, as well as the complexity over the region’s isolation from the rest of India is often cited as sources of violence, intra - state and inter - state conflicts, and militancy in the region. Such divisive politics are considered to have hampered prospects for collective development in the region. Thus, fostering a shared interest and common grounds for cooperation across the region’s diverse ethnic groups and provinces in order to ensure development of the whole region can push the Act East Policy. Through such common regional approach for development, the better incorporation of the needs, concerns and interests of the region as well as its effective integration into India’s neighbourhood policy are likely to be ensured.

There is also absence of institutional authority or agency specifically for planning, monitoring and implementation of numerous projects and initiatives undertaken in the region as part of the Act East Policy. The success and efficacy of India’s neighbourhood policies would arguably rely on the performance and participation of the Northeast provinces given the region’s advantage as India’s gateway to the east. Ensuring the efficacy of the policy in the region should thus be prioritised. The thrust on activism and a result - oriented approach of the Act East Policy should first show results and begin with the region.

Sub - Regional Approach

Sub - regional cooperation emphasises on cooperation and integration among neighbouring countries. The main objectives of sub - regional cooperation are to promote cooperation in the development of cross - border infrastructure and connectivity, as well as to facilitate trade and enhance people to people contact. Given the geographic proximity of Northeast India with India’s neighbouring countries in the east, it has the potential to be at the forefront of India’s sub - regional cooperation with these countries, which can also be a viable approach and potential mechanism for ensuring the development of the Northeast region. Northeast India’s connectivity and economic integration with Southeast Asia could be ensured through sub - regional initiatives such as undertaking joint projects to improve cross - border infrastructure and connectivity networks, promoting economic integration through increased trade and commerce, and promoting state and private investments across the borders.

Initiating Northeast India’s participation in sub - regional platforms such as, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi - Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Bangladesh - China - India - Myanmar Forum for

Regional Economic Cooperation (BCIM) could provide a potential platform for strengthening Northeast India's connectivity and economic integration with India's immediate neighbours. [26] Along with the benefits acquiring from the development of cross border infrastructure, it seemingly has the potential to unlock the enterprise of the Northeastern states and further boost the economic development of the region. Besides facilitating Northeast India's economic integration with India's immediate neighbours and the growing economies of the ASEAN, it could ensure connectivity and economic engagement of the region with the southern region of China, as well as Bangladesh. Thus, Northeast India can be at the forefront of India's sub - regional engagement with India's eastern neighbours, which would significantly enhance the role and participation of the region under the Act East Policy.

In this regard, an important and vital element in making Northeast India an effective partner in the Act East Policy is the need for de - militarisation of the international border regions in the Northeast. It is possibly through the opening up of the borders and promoting cross - border cooperation and sub - regional initiatives with the neighbouring countries that Northeast India can take full advantage of its geographical proximity to Southeast Asia. For example, the old Stilwell Road, which connects the Indian states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh with China's Yunnan Province and North - western provinces of Myanmar, is said to possess enormous prospects for connectivity and economic integration of Northeast India with Southwest China and Northeast Myanmar. However India's security concerns are believed to have inhibited the opening up and unlocking of such potentials. [27] Thus, the need of the hour is to improve the overall peace and security of the border regions, and the subsequent de - securitisation of such regions and transforming it into a possible channel for bringing growth and development to the region. Furthermore, the coordinated approach towards ensuring development and security should not restrict the healthy interaction of the people in Northeast Indians with those in the neighbouring countries. [28] People living in border areas should be made important agents and stakeholders in any efforts towards cross - border cooperation and engagement.

Engaging Myanmar and Bangladesh

With regards to promoting the Northeast region's transnational connectivity, engagement with Myanmar is crucial, as it is the gateway for India to reach out to the rest of the Southeast Asian countries. Given the Northeast's physical isolation from mainland India and its landlocked nature, Bangladesh is also an important country for promoting connectivity networks in the Northeast as well as improving the region's economic and trade potential. Thus, one of the most crucial factors determining the Northeast region's involvement and participation in the Act East Policy would be India's pro - active engagement and partnership with Myanmar and Bangladesh. Yet so far, there appears to be no defined policy or vision determining India's engagement with Myanmar and Bangladesh in the Act East Policy in relation to Northeast India. A comprehensive policy framework integrating Myanmar and Bangladesh into

India's Act East Policy framework needs to be worked out at the earliest.

6. Conclusion

The launch of the Act East Policy in 2014 has sought to give further priority to make the Northeast an integral part of the policy. The Act East Policy puts emphasis on the Northeast as the "heart" of the policy. However, it largely remains further to be seen whether such emphasis has been effectively acted upon or if it still remains as mere rhetoric. Despite increases in trade between India and ASEAN, which totalled more than 86 billion US dollars in fiscal year 2020, [29] efforts towards Northeast India's economic integration with Southeast Asia have yet to yield significant results. It is argued that the vision of opening up and unlocking the Northeast region's enterprise and integrating with Southeast Asian economies has yet to materialise, as the region's vast potential is still offset by infrastructure and connectivity bottlenecks, as well as inefficient policy implementation. Furthermore, it is observed that many of the transnational connectivity projects initiated under the former Look East Policy have exceeded their estimated dateline and remain incomplete even under the Act East Policy. Intra - regional connectivity projects in Northeast India are likewise seen to be going on at a slow pace, with several still remaining as plans and proposals. Thus, when it comes to connectivity of the Northeast region, India still needs to "act within." A more spirited implementation of the policy and hastening the development of connectivity networks and infrastructure in Northeast India remain critical to ensuring the region's effective participation in the Act East Policy.

Experts and analysts have often underscored the potentiality of a transnational approach to ensure development in Northeast India. However, it remains a question to ponder whether the implementation of the Act East Policy over the years has effected any significant changes in terms of development in the Northeast region. Despite nearly three decades of India's Look East Policy and the recent thrust under the Act East Policy have resulted in some significant growth in trade and investment with Southeast Asian countries, these gains have no indication of acting as a catalyst in Northeast India's growth and development. Given the levels of underdevelopment and problems still faced by the Northeast region, the Act East Policy appears to have largely remained a policy initiative benefiting the rest of the country rather than the Northeast region. Moreover, efforts to incorporate the specific concerns and interests of the Northeast in India's neighbourhood policy seem to remain largely on paper, and such efforts would require sincere efforts as well as creative approaches and solutions to materialise. [30]

The Narendra Modi government has repeatedly stated that Northeast India is central to India's Act East Policy. Instead of simply stating the obvious, the government must develop a viable roadmap for integrating the Northeast region into the Act East Policy framework. Efforts to better integrate the region's needs and concerns into the Act East Policy would potentially provide long - term solutions to the region's developmental deficit and isolation. Northeast India's role and active participation are critical to the success of India's

Act East Policy, and thus the “acting” component of the policy should begin and first show results in the region.

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