



Transforming Societal Dynamics In Northeast India Under The Act East Policy

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Abstract: This paper explores the impact of the Act East Policy (AEP) on the societal dynamics of Northeast India, focusing on key infrastructure initiatives and their implications for the region's social fabric. The policy aims to enhance connectivity between Northeast India and Southeast Asia, fostering economic growth and cultural exchanges. While infrastructural projects promise benefits such as improved trade, regional integration, and economic development, they also raise concerns about land acquisition, ethnic tensions, and social inequalities, particularly in tribal areas. The study examines how these developments affect land use, identity politics, and the broader social structure of the region. Ultimately, the paper argues that while the AEP has the potential to transform Northeast India, balancing development with the preservation of local cultures and addressing socio-economic disparities is critical for its success.

Index Terms – Act East Policy, Look East Policy, North East, Societal Dynamics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Act East Policy (AEP), introduced in 2014 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015), represents a strategic overhaul of India's earlier Look East Policy (LEP), 1991. This transition stems from the recognition that the LEP, formulated in the post-Cold War era to establish strategic partnerships with East Asian countries, no longer sufficiently addresses India's evolving interests. The AEP broadens its predecessor's scope, emphasizing economic, cultural, and geopolitical engagement with Southeast Asia while simultaneously addressing the development needs of India's north-eastern region (ORF Online, 2021). This policy was formally unveiled during visits by the then External Affairs Minister to Myanmar and Vietnam, signalling India's intent to forge deeper regional ties and enhance its position in the global marketplace (Ministry of Development of Northeast Region, 2014).

Aimed at positioning the north-eastern region as a crucial gateway for India's engagement with vibrant economies of Southeast Asia, the AEP underscores the importance of multidimensional connectivity—spanning physical infrastructure, institutional collaboration, and people-to-people exchanges (Sinha, 2022). It aligns with India's broader ambition of contributing to an Asian century through regional integration with ASEAN nations. This shift also reflects India's strategic imperative to counterbalance China's growing influence in neighbouring countries such as Myanmar and leverage historical cultural and linguistic ties between Northeast India and Southeast Asia for mutual development (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015).

The introduction of the AEP has drawn significant interest within the north-eastern region of India, both among citizens and academics. Initiatives such as the establishment of a Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at various universities in the northeast highlight the growing academic engagement with the policy's potential implications (Yumnam & Singh, 2024). Through seminars and discussions, scholars and policymakers have been debating the actionable dimensions of the AEP, particularly its promise of catalysing economic development in a region historically viewed through a security-centric lens (Saikia, 2018). This contrasts with earlier perceptions of neglect and lethargy that characterized the region's integration into national development plans (Singh, 2023).

The ambitious developmental and infrastructural projects envisioned under the AEP have not been without challenges. The north-eastern region's history of resistance to state-led development initiatives, often criticized for environmental and social impacts, continues to complicate its implementation (Dutta & Sarma, 2012). For instance, controversies surrounding hydroelectric projects, such as those on the Lower Subansiri River, have raised concerns over displacement, environmental degradation, and inadequate rehabilitation measures (Power Technology, 2023). Social movements and counter-narratives opposing such projects have underscored the need for inclusive and sustainable development approaches (Down To Earth, 2023).

While the AEP is rooted in India's international relations strategy and national interests, its localized impact on the north-eastern region demands closer examination. Beyond its theoretical promise of alleviating the region's landlocked status and fostering connectivity with Southeast Asia, the policy's practical outcomes hinge on addressing persistent developmental challenges (Drishti IAS, 2023). By exploring the localized dynamics of the AEP, this article aims to bridge the gap between national aspirations and the ground realities of sub-regional economic development, providing a nuanced understanding of the policy's implications for the northeast (Observer Research Foundation, 2023).

2. Objective

To explore the impact of the AEP on the societal dynamics of Northeast India, focusing on key infrastructure initiatives and their effects on the region's social fabric.

3. Research Question

How has the AEP influenced societal dynamics in Northeast India through key infrastructural initiatives and its impact on the region's social fabric?

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyse the localized impacts of the AEP on Northeast India. Here the approach integrates secondary data collection, and critical analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the policy's implications for the region. The methodology is structured as follows:

I. Research Design

The study adopts an exploratory design to investigate the socio-economic, infrastructural, and cultural impacts of the AEP. Given the dynamic nature of policy implementation and its diverse implications, an open-ended approach allows for the identification of emerging themes and trends.

II. Data Collection

- Secondary Data: The study relies on extensive secondary data, including:
- Policy documents and reports from government agencies such as the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER).
- Academic articles, books, and journals discussing the AEP and its connectivity projects.
- Reports from regional and international organizations like UNESCAP and ASEAN.
- Media articles and policy briefs to capture contemporary developments.

III. Comparative Analysis

The study incorporates a comparative framework to evaluate the Northeast region's integration with Southeast Asia relative to other regional connectivity models. This helps to identify best practices and potential gaps in the implementation of the AEP.

IV. Thematic Analysis

Data collected is categorized into thematic areas, including economic integration, infrastructure development, environmental sustainability, and socio-political impacts. This approach allows for a structured analysis of the multifaceted implications of the policy.

V. Evaluation Framework

The study employs an evaluative framework to assess the effectiveness of the AEP in meeting its stated objectives. This includes:

- Assessing the policy's alignment with regional aspirations and developmental goals.
- Examining the inclusiveness and sustainability of its implementation.
- Evaluating the socio-political acceptance of the policy among local communities.

By employing this comprehensive methodology, the study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how the AEP affects the Northeast region, identifying both its achievements and areas for further improvement.

5. Key Initiatives for Advancing Infrastructure in Northeast India

India's AEP reinforces the country's growing focus on developing the north-eastern region by emphasizing transnational development projects that link Northeast India with Southeast Asia. This marks a departure from earlier periods, where the region remained underdeveloped and trapped in what has been described as a territorial trap (Bhaumik, 2009). Historically, the region's governance was dominated by post-colonial

discomfort, shaped by an overemphasis on security concerns and territorial integrity (Chakraborty, 2018). Investments primarily flowed into national security and defence rather than fostering local socio-economic growth (Ghosh, 2016). Rich in natural resources, the Northeast often served as a supplier to other, more developed parts of India, with little focus on its own development (Mishra, 2020). This neglect, coupled with insurgencies, reflected dissatisfaction with the developmental model until recent policy shifts ignited hope for economic progress (Singh, 2021).

Economic development efforts in the region are further challenged by its geographical isolation and landlocked status, which historically hindered integration with neighbouring countries and the Bay of Bengal, as well as with other parts of India (Bhowmick, 2021). These constraints contributed to higher costs of goods and limited industrial and employment growth (World Bank, 2023). The AEP aligns with India's shift towards a neoliberal development approach, integrating the region with broader frameworks such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM), and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation initiative (Vashisth, 2022). These forums collectively promote connectivity projects bridging South Asia and Southeast Asia (Bhowmick, 2021). Foreign policy observers welcome this transition, viewing it as a shift away from conflict-resolution strategies that overly relied on military and police actions (Bhowmick, 2021).

In the context of India's AEP, developing the Northeast region is crucial for addressing its landlocked status. Geography, once viewed as a limitation, is now perceived as an opportunity, positioning the region as a vital link to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021). Large-scale connectivity projects aim to transform Northeast India into a bridge between India and Southeast Asia, navigating its challenging topographies (Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, 2023). These initiatives are designed not only to economically integrate the region but also to foster peace and political stability (Observer Research Foundation, 2023). Infrastructure and economic corridor plans reimagine the Northeast as a gateway to Southeast Asia, merging regional economic integration goals with a vision for national cohesion (Vashisth, 2022).

Connectivity lies at the core of the AEP. Projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway are underway to establish seamless links between India and ASEAN nations (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2014). India has taken up work on key sections of this highway, such as the Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemmyo stretch, and has been upgrading older bridges (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [UNESCAP], 2016). The Asian Highways (AH1 and AH2) connect towns in Northeast India, including Dawki, Shillong, Dimapur, Kohima, Imphal, and Moreh, to major hubs stretching from Istanbul to Tokyo (UNESCAP, 2016). Another key project, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport System, connects Kolkata to Sittwe Port in Myanmar via sea and further extends inland to Mizoram through the Kaladan River (Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region [MDoNER], 2014). Additionally, the Mekong-India Economic Corridor (MIEC) aims to link India with Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, building on ASEAN's \$25 billion investment in India since 2000 (MEA, 2014). The 2014 Trade and Investment Agreement between India and ASEAN furthers this agenda of economic cooperation (MEA, 2014).

These connectivity and trade initiatives place the Northeast at a critical juncture in history. Previously attributed to underdevelopment and weak economic integration with the rest of India, the region's political instability and insurgencies are now being addressed through these transformative projects (Haokip, 2005). Progress on connectivity infrastructure not only strengthens economic integration but also opens new opportunities for cross-border trade with Myanmar, ASEAN countries, and Bangladesh (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2023). However, critical considerations remain regarding the receptiveness of north-eastern societies to these new trade opportunities and the potential impact of large-scale infrastructure projects on the lives of people directly affected by the AEP. Addressing these considerations is vital for evaluating the policy's success and understanding its impact on extending India's neoliberal economic model to the region (Vashisth, 2021).

6. Impact of Act East Policy on Northeast's Social Fabric

The AEP has profoundly transformed the social fabric of Northeast India, redefining societal relationships and cultural dynamics in the region. As the region serves as a strategic gateway to Southeast Asia, the policy has enhanced its connectivity, both physically through infrastructure projects and socially through cultural exchanges (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2023). These developments have revitalized indigenous cultures, with traditional art forms, languages, and festivals gaining a new platform for global appreciation (IDSA, 2023). For instance, cross-border interactions have fostered cultural pride, as Northeast India's heritage becomes part of a broader Southeast Asian narrative (Vashisth, 2021).

However, this integration has brought demographic shifts, driven by increased migration, trade, and educational opportunities. The influx of people from other parts of India and neighbouring countries has

enriched the region's diversity but also presented challenges such as cultural dilution and occasional social tensions (Gupta, 2024). The emphasis on economic development has catalysed urbanization and modernization, sometimes at the cost of indigenous practices and traditional social structures (Saikia, 2018). For example, younger generations may adopt more globalized lifestyles, leading to a gradual weakening of age-old communal bonds and customs (Astha Bharati, 2005). Gender roles have also evolved under the policy's influence. Economic initiatives and employment opportunities have empowered women, particularly in sectors like tourism, handicrafts, and cross-border trade (Gupta, 2024). This has challenged traditional patriarchal norms in some communities, fostering a slow but noticeable shift toward greater gender equality. At the same time, the focus on development has created disparities, with some communities benefiting more than others, risking social stratification (Saikia, 2018).

However, the outcomes of the AEP remain uncertain, with connectivity often failing to translate directly into development. Projects such as road widening in Meghalaya have displaced households, disrupted traditional ways of life, and created social rifts without adequate rehabilitation plans, leading to apprehension and resistance among local communities (Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region [MDoNER], 2024). The policy, while aiming to capitalize on India-ASEAN relations, risks deepening inequalities and exacerbating historical tensions, raising questions about its ability to deliver inclusive and sustainable development for the region (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2023).

Despite these challenges, the AEP has encouraged unity by integrating Northeast India more closely with the rest of the country and its Southeast Asian neighbours. Programs promoting cultural preservation alongside development initiatives aim to balance modernization with respect for indigenous identities (Ministry of Culture, 2023). The policy has created a platform for the region to not only showcase its rich cultural diversity but also actively contribute to India's growing engagement with the global economy (Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region [MDoNER], 2023). In essence, the AEP has become a catalyst for a new social and cultural narrative in Northeast India, blending traditional resilience with a forward-looking vision (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2023).

7. Conclusion

The AEP has emerged as a transformative initiative for Northeast India, aiming to bridge the region with Southeast Asia and the broader Indian economy. Through key infrastructural projects, such as improved connectivity, transportation networks, and trade routes, the policy has fostered greater integration with neighbouring countries, spurring economic growth and social change (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2023). However, these advancements are not without their challenges. While infrastructural development promises economic benefits and greater regional connectivity, it also raises concerns about land acquisition, loss of cultural heritage, and social inequalities, particularly in tribal areas where land is integral to both economic livelihood and identity (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2023). The policy's impact on the social fabric of Northeast India is complex, with both positive and negative outcomes. On one hand, the AEP has facilitated cultural exchange and revitalized indigenous identities by promoting tourism and regional cooperation (Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region [MDoNER], 2023). On the other hand, it has also introduced tensions, particularly over land and resources, as well as an increasing migration of non-indigenous settlers, which has contributed to ethnic and social contestations (IDSA, 2023). As the region moves forward, balancing infrastructural growth with the preservation of its diverse cultural identities and addressing socio-economic disparities will be crucial. The Policy holds significant potential for transforming Northeast India's societal dynamics but requires careful and inclusive planning to ensure that the benefits of development are equitably shared while maintaining the region's unique cultural identity. The continued integration of economic, social, and cultural factors will determine whether the policy succeeds in creating a harmonious and prosperous future for the region (Chavan, 2023).

8. References

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