

## INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY & MANIPUR: DEVELOPMENTS & IMPEDIMENTS

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**Abstract:** India's Act East policy was relaunched in 2014 by the present Modi government to reinvigorate political contacts, increase economic integration and forge security cooperation with several countries of Southeast Asia as a means to strengthen political understanding. Central to these efforts is the recasting of India's restive Northeast as the gateway to Myanmar and the rest of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Manipur has always been one of the most influential and a key state for India to execute its Act-East Policy and to achieve its goal of connecting the South-East Asian nations with India. Manipur has all the assets and resources but they still lie in a dormant stage and despite of its geographical significance and the relaunch of the Look/Act-east policy and passing of 8 years, Manipur still lies in that same dormancy.

The paper aims to investigate and analyse the developments that have taken place in the state of Manipur since the relaunch of Act East Policy and how it will affect the future development of the state. It will also investigate the impediments existing that are hindering the growth and development of the state and possible road ahead. The methodology used in the paper is analytical and descriptive based on the data collected from white papers, government reports, official speeches etc.

**Keywords:** Act East Policy, Manipur, Policies, Development, Impediments

### Introduction

Manipur, which means 'Jewelled Land', is located in a lush green corner of North East India with a profound atmosphere, like an exquisite work of art created by nature's majestic hand. The state is undoubtedly beautiful and has characteristic grandeur and has rich art and is a perfect natural wonder. Manipur has a mix of cultures, where Rajashree Bhagyachand created the famous Raas Lila, a classical dance of Manipur which is largely adored by the locals. However, after the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891, Manipur came under the shackles of British rule as a Princely state. After India gained independence in 1947, Manipur was

integrated into India in 1949, as a Union Territory and became a full-fledged state of India on January 21, 1972. Manipur, where the capital Imphal is located, consists of 16 districts. It borders Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south, Assam to the west, and Myanmar to the east.

The populace estimate of Manipur is approximately around 27 lacs according to the 2011 census<sup>1</sup> of India which includes the people of diverse clans, majorly coming from Meitei, Naga, Kuki. Meitei make up about 53% of Manipur's population. The state's main language is Meitei (known as Manipuri), but it also has different languages, notably Thadou along with Kuki and Naga dialects. About 40% of the state's population is characterized by dialects and cultures rooted in their respective villages. Manipur ethnic groups practice various religions. According to the 2011 census, Hinduism is the state's primary religion, followed by Christianity. Different religions such as Islam, Sanamahism and Judaism, etc. also exist in the state.

Manipur is in a prominent position because of its proximity to Myanmar, which the government of India considers to be the gateway to the South East Asian countries and beyond: the very tenet on which the policy's success depends because it aims to improve the political, economic, cultural, and strategic relationship with the South East Asian countries and beyond, encompassing the entire Pacific region. Manipur has a lot of potential to become a leading state in the region under India's Act East Policy, but only if the centre pays more and detailed attention to solving the problems it has been facing for a long time, such as insurgency, lack of infrastructure, militarization, illegal migration, and drug trafficking.

### **From Look East to Act East: A Paradigm Shift in Regional Panorama**

Post the cold war era, on 24<sup>th</sup> July, 1991 India announced its new economic policy known as LPG (liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation) which made economic activity less constraining and reduction in tariffs or removal of non-tariff barriers. This policy made Indian market available for the international flow of goods, investments, capital, human resources and technology. After opening its gate for foreign investments, and in the backdrop of the new economic policy, India also renewed its foreign policy by taking an initiative to connect with the vivid economies of the Southeast and East Asian region. In order to develop and enhance its political, economic and strategic relations with Southeast and East Asian region India launched 'Look East' policy in 1991, during the Prime Ministership of Narasimha Rao. In the Annual report of Ministry of External Affairs in 1996 the term 'Look East' policy was mentioned for the very first time.<sup>2</sup> This policy pronounced a tactical shift in India's foreign policy as the Southeast Asian region was preferred over other regions.

The 'Look East' policy has ASEAN at its core.<sup>3</sup> India became a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1992 which led to the new dynamism and elevation in the relations. The shared

<sup>1</sup> Census of India, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/page/india-vietnam-relations/>

<sup>3</sup> Sinha, Y. (2003) 'Resurgent India in Asia', Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi: Government of India

interest between these two parties evolved to a new dynamic relations by inviting India as the full dialogue partner of ASEAN in the 5<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit held in Bangkok in 1995.

In the first phase of the look east policy, the emphasis was given on elevating the political, diplomatic ties and enhancement of trade and investments with the ASEAN nations and in the second phase, more emphasis was given on substantiating the economic ties, strategic relations and on physical connectivity in the region. The focus was expanded from Southeast Asia to East Asia and South Pacific. The states of northeast India also became the focus as to connect them with the immediate neighbours and for the economic development of the area. Since the launch of this policy, India's relation has got strengthened with the ASEAN nations and has contributed in India's economic development. The ASEAN-INDIA bilateral trade grew at an annual rate of 11.2%, from US\$ 2.9 billion in 1993 to US\$ 12.1 billion in 2003.<sup>4</sup> Over the two decades India developed strategic partnership with the ASEAN countries and focused on regional integration and connectivity, trade, economic growth and the development of the Northeast states of India.

Despite so much of attention and deliberation being given to the South Asian region, the Look East Policy had mixed outcomes. Although the phase 1 and phase 2 of Look East Policy were success but they could not achieve their full potential. The Northeast region of India could not traverse the opportunities that were brought in by the policy. One of the major reason for the mixed outcome of the policy is China factor and its dominance in the region.

In 2014, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the 'Look East' policy got upgraded and received a new zest and outlook. The policy was revamped and named as 'Act East' that manifested a more proactive approach towards the region. In the new policy the focus was given on improving the connectivity, regional security and integration not only in Southeast Asian region but also in the Asia-Pacific region. The global world economic order has witnessed a shift from 'west' to 'east' and this change was sensed by the Modi government. The main aim of the upgraded "Act East Policy" is to revive political ties, forge regional security cooperation and develop economic linkages by increasing integration with Southeast Asia. The new policy has a greater strategic and political angle to the cooperation. Relationships with Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia, Australia have been upgraded to a strategic partnership to counter the dominance of China in the entire region. The focus of the policy is to boost economic co-operation, building infrastructure for greater connectivity and most importantly to enhance strategic & security ties.

### **Manipur: Its Development under Act East Policy**

Manipur is central to India's Act East policy, and the policy choices India makes here will influence its further strategy of fulfilling its ultimate goal of bringing South-East Asia closer to India. The events that takes place in Manipur are also key to the other three states which border Myanmar i.e. Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram, with ethnic kin and affiliated political movements. Despite the dream of an economic centre, rebels

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<sup>4</sup> Haokip, T. (2014) India's Look East Policy: Its Evolution and Approach, South Asian Survey

still wield great power in the state, and especially in the border towns. New Delhi has still not been able to provide with a realistic answer to the region's demands for ethnic self-determination.

To facilitate the process of projects under Act East Policy in Manipur a series of actions have been formulated and are also associated with the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) that lead to the encroachment of land and resources. The World Bank is financing 400 kV high voltage transmission and distribution lines in Manipur, The Asian Development Bank focuses on financing road projects in Manipur and throughout the region, and The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is preparing to finance the Loktak 66 MW Downstream hydroelectric power plant in Manipur. At the Northeast Business summit held from 21st-22nd November 2017 at least 39 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed with several Southeast Asian countries and companies at Imphal. The Memorandum of Understanding incorporates such as Oil pipelines from Numaligarh (Assam) to Imphal (Manipur), mining of chromium and limestone, etc likewise also signed MOU with the North Eastern Electric Power Cooperation on 28 August 2014 notably 67 MW Khongnem Chakha, 60 MW Irang HEP, 51 MW Tuivai, and 190 MW Pabram HEP projects on the Barak River achieve the goals of sustainable development and climate change mitigation, rather such projects are simply antagonistic to sustainable development and are forestalled by the people of Manipur as those projects will only prompt to unsustainable development and alienation of land and natural resources, by constructing dams over the rivers in Manipur and by mining and extraction of fossil fuels (oil and gas) in the state. Furthermore, according to the Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR), railway works covering a total of 19,135 hectares of forest reserves have been diverted without the consent of Manipur's indigenous peoples, which apparently demonstrates the decision-making process to be subverted by the implementation of development projects which affect people's land and natural resources. The key and ambitious projects that are being undertaken as part of the Vision 2020 plan under Act East Policy are Kaladan Multimodal project which was launched in order to connect the neighbouring country of Myanmar. The project aims to connect the eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata with the Sittwe seaport in Myanmar; it will also link Sittwe seaport to Lashio in Myanmar via Kaladan river boat route and Lashio on to Mizoram in India by road transport. India-Myanmar rail linkages, and the trilateral highway project between India, Thailand, and Myanmar.

A lot of different projects have been started in different sectors in the state under Act East Policy but most of them are still under process. The slow and sluggish pace of the dimensions of project is one of the major reason that they are still under progress. Apart from that the poor connectivity and infrastructure also plays a significant role in delaying of the projects.

#### **Manipur: Its Future under Act East Policy**

Manipur has the potential to play a critical role in assisting India in achieving its Act East and neighbours first policies, as well as in establishing India as a significant partner among the East Asian nations. As it has been stated that Manipur can become a gateway to the dynamic Southeast Asian economics, but the state should not be just seen as a stepping stone for these policies. Manipur has a lot of potential in various sectors, but this can only be realised if the right direction, assistance, or focus is given to it.

Since the revamping of the Act East policy in 2014, there has been a focus on increasing trade and commerce with the nations of Southeast Asia. Moreh, a small town in Manipur's Tengenoupal district, has the potential to become a major cross-border hub. As it is a border town, informal trade between India and Myanmar has existed for centuries. Moreh is the only viable land route for trade between the two countries, due to its geographical location. The centre has launched efforts to develop profitable trade through this route, with new office buildings and customs offices opening in the town. However, due to lack of infrastructure, connectivity, unprofitable policies for traders, endless checkpoints, and delays in crossing the border, traders have resorted to informal trade, resulting in loss of commerce and formal trade between India and Myanmar.

It is past time for the federal and state governments to recognise Moreh town's potential and begin working to develop and transform it into a trade hub.

Tourism is another industry in which the state can thrive. Due to its wealth of flora and fauna, Manipur is described as a 'flower on lofty heights', 'a jewel of India' and 'Switzerland of the East' and hence its breath taking scenic beauty makes it a tourist's paradise.<sup>5</sup> Manipur is the land of natural beauty which is decorated with numerous scenic spots and attractions. It has Loktak lake which is world's only floating lake to Keibul Lamjui National Park, Tharon cave to Kangla fort and other tourist spots. Manipur has the ability to become a tourist attraction not just for domestic but for international travellers as well.

But, despite of having beautiful landscapes and unique attractions Manipur has failed to pique the interest of tourists because of challenges such as poor connectivity from the mainland, safety and security of the tourists, and lack of publicity of the place. These concerns have made it difficult for Manipur to exploit the benefits of having scenic and unique tourist attractions. The state must therefore endorse attractive advertisements similar to those used by neighbouring states to promote active tourism, in an effort to dispel misinformation and ignorance regarding the state, as well work on attractive and economic tourist policies and packages and take on the task of skilling up the locals on how to conduct oneself and deal with tourists. They should also be made aware of the benefits of having a sustainable tourism business, which will help in better coordination and cooperation to ensure the success of the tourism initiative.

After completion, the trilateral highway project under the Act East Policy would then connect the numerous nation of the East Asia which will ultimately introduce international visitors to this region. Manipur should take the advantage of this project to attract more tourists and establish itself as a tourist destination. The sector has the potential to be a trump card for the state in terms of generating revenue and attracting investment. The state must recognise the need, to attract both domestic and foreign tourists to the state's attractions.

Another sector in which Manipur can excel is Medical tourism. India's medical treatment is at par with any of the other advanced country and comparatively at affordable cost. Constructing an advanced facility in the North-Eastern region, which continues to face physical connectivity and infrastructural constraints with the rest of the country, will allow patients in

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<sup>5</sup> [www.ibef.org/states/Manipur.aspx](http://www.ibef.org/states/Manipur.aspx).

the region to receive necessary and critical treatments without having to travel far. The people of Manipur will also no longer have to travel to distant locations to receive world-class medical care. In addition to this, it will also attract patients from Myanmar and Bangladesh due to affordable medical treatment as compared to countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. Considering the state's strategic importance of the state in relation to the AEP, the government of India should facilitate the smooth and proper approval of medical tourists to apply for health visas in order to avoid harassment at the border facility. The promotion of medical tourism will also encourage the development of both formal and informal sectors, which will provide economic earning sources to the people of the state, because when people come for treatment, they look for other services in addition to medical treatment. Generally, such services are provided by the hospitality industry. As a result, there is a need to connect medical, wellness, and leisure tourism to provide appealing tourist packages to attract tourists visiting the state for such reasons.

Manipur state can benefit from the projects that are being developed under the Act East Policy in order to build a bright future and become a developed and economically stable state.

### **Impediments for the smooth functioning of AEP**

#### **Insurgency**

Even after seven decades of unification of Manipur with the mainland India, insurgency still remains one of the major impediments in the development of the state and in the smooth functioning of the policies carried out by the centre in the state.

The emergence of insurgency in Manipur dates back to 1964 with the formation of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), which still remains one of the formidable militant outfits. The perceived unhappiness over Manipur's purported "forced" merger with the Union of India and the consequent delay in awarding it full statehood is largely responsible for the growth of separatist insurgency in Manipur. On October 15, 1949, India and the former Kingdom of Manipur amalgamated, but it wasn't until 1972 that Manipur was given statehood.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), and Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), among others, were among the militant groups that were founded in subsequent years. Several groups from the valley have pushed for Manipur's independence. The NSCN-IM controlled the majority of the movement and pushed for "Nagalim" (Greater Nagaland), which is seen in the valley as a "threat" to Manipur's "territorial integrity." This caused the Naga movement in neighbouring Nagaland to spread into Manipur's hill districts.

In the years that followed, Manipur had become embroiled in a cycle of bloodshed as several militant groups attacked security personnel and clashed among themselves, killing people.

To put an end to the insurgency movement, the Centre declared all of Manipur to be a "disturbed region" in 1980 and enacted the contentious Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which is still in effect today.

Many Kuki rebel groups were formed as a result of Naga and Kuki racial conflicts in the early 1990s, but they have since then scaled down their demand for a separate Kuki state. The further continuance of insurgency led to the formation of smaller outfits like the Zeliangrong United Front (ZUF), People's United Liberation Front (PULF) and other splinter groups.

In spite of ongoing peace negotiations, the NSCN-IM and the Government of India (GoI) had signed a ceasefire agreement in 1997. The United People's Front (UPF) and the Kuki National Organization (KNO), two umbrella organisations for the Kuki, also signed the tripartite Suspension of Operation (SoO) pacts with the Government of India and Manipur on August 22, 2008. The KNO controls 17 of the 25 armed Kuki organisations operating in the state, while the United People's Front controls 8 of them (UPF). The UNLF, PLA, KYKL, and other significant valley-based militant outfits (Meitei factions) have yet to enter into formal negotiations. Yet, a large number of their smaller enterprises have signed the SoO agreement with the state government, which has started the rehabilitation process for the groups. Although the government have taken steps to resolve the disputes and have been open for dialogues and have signed agreements with the groups, yet they have not come to any conclusion. The recent attacks on the military officials in Tengnoupal district of Manipur shows that the centre is yet to come up with a robust solution to this ever going impediment.

### Major insurgent organisations active in Manipur

Insurgent Organization	Ethnic Group	Primary Location	Demands	Current Status
National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isaac Muivah (NSCN-IM)	Naga	North of Imphal Valley	Creation of independent Nagalim – Nagaland	Secret Framework agreement signed, temporarily ending hostilities
Kuki National Organisation (KNO)	Kuki/Zomi	South of Imphal Valley and Sadar Hills areas to the north	Creation of new Kuki (Zomi) State – “Zalengam,” or Freeland	Signed secession of operations agreement, currently in political negotiations
United People’s Front (UPF)	Kuki/Zomi	Same as KNO	Creation of new Zomi (Kuki) State or territorial council within Manipur	Same as KNO
Various “Valley-based” organizations	Meitei	Imphal and on eastern border with Myanmar	Independence or increased autonomy of Manipur	Most refuse to negotiate with India

*Source: Brandon Miliate*

### Militarization

Since Raja Budhachandra was coerced into signing an agreement for Manipur to unite with India in 1949, the state has been experiencing low-intensity military strife. Because the merger was not discussed with and approved by the Manipur Legislative Council, which was established in 1948 with an adult franchise, the merger was rejected by the locals. The Indian government responded to the people's attempts to exercise their right to self-determination by mobilising its troops and then passing special laws that were approved by the Armed Forces (Special Powers) of 1958 and which limited fundamental rights, including compensation rights for other rights violations, such as killing by civil servants.

The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958, which the central government imposed, recognised Manipur as a troubled region and authorised massive military activities. This law even granted a non-commissioned officer the right to kill anyone they suspect while receiving

impunity. With the aim of conducting anti-rebel operations in the 1990s, the size of military activities increased; as a result, at least four divisions and 270 paramilitary companies were set up in the state. The effects of militarization on Manipur's populace have been negative; they have seriously compromised people's physical and mental health and has also led to less trust and confidence in the government.

Security force actions such as arbitrary deportation, detention, and seizure of agricultural land, holy cultural sites, hills, and residential areas, as well as restrictions on fishing, farming, and other activities in wetlands and forests, have posed in fear among the people and less trust in the security forces and the government. Land usurpation for the deployment of troops of military units is the source of substantial challenges and recurring aggravation among the locals, as in the example of the intrusion of nearly 200 hectares of land by a major Assam Rifle unit in the village of Mahakabui in Manipur. The land is controlled, regardless of its worth or the permission of the native population. Since the state's militarization, the armed forces have forcibly taken over indigenous peoples' land, which they were using for religious or educational purposes, and had their sentiments attached to it. The land taken away was then used by the armed forces as their new settlements. Villagers not only lost their land which were sacred to them, but they were also affected by numerous curtailments that were levied on their activities which ultimately had a devastating effect on their livelihoods. For instance fishing on Loktak lake which has been a traditional way of livelihood is now under the control of Armed forces and they have forbidden fishing on Loktak Lake after evening and are strictly regulated at other hours.

A lot of fatality has resulted from intensive artillery and small arms training, which has also hurt locals' domestic animals and cattle. In Manipur, the military is also being made available to defend unsustainable government projects that have been made worse by the aggressive drive of the AEP. The Central Reserve Police Forces (CRPF) and Border Security Forces are enforcing laws against projects like the Loktak hydroelectric power plant project, which left a large number of people in the districts of Thoubal and Bishenpur without remittance and caused enormous damage to the Loktak wetlands (BSF). The Assam Rifles and Indian Reserve have defended the development of Mapithel Dam of the Thoubal Multipurpose Projects in the Ukhrul district, which has been vehemently opposed by the native Manipur population.

Additionally, Assam Rifles has passed legislation to defend the Tipaimukh dam's construction, which has been opposed by locals for more than 20 years. The aforementioned explanation is that certain socio-political circumstances make it difficult for the business environment to operate normally or claim that they don't like the business atmosphere; this creates an alarming scenario in the investor's view.

There have been changes carried out in the state by the central government regarding the militarisation of the state. In some parts of the state the AFSPA act has been removed but the military is still being used by New Delhi to safeguard the construction of dams and infrastructure at the cost of ecology and the flora and fauna of the state.

## CONCLUSION

With the pursuit of an aggressive India's AEP, Manipur and other states in northeast India have been battered by prodigious infrastructures notably the extractive industry, hydroelectric power



projects and other plans. The development of India's economy and technological capacity has been one of the cornerstones of its strategy. Economic cooperation between neighbouring nations has its roots in regional cooperation and is becoming into a dominant force in the global economy. In accordance with the AEP agenda, India's strategy has also been putting these collaboratively oriented measures into practise to re-establish interfaces and coordinate India with its rapid and expanded neighbours, namely with the countries of South East Asia.

With a vision of a Southeast Asian-connected, prosperous Northeast India, the AEP envisions the growth of communication, trade, and commerce that would enable the local populace to significantly increase their ability to meet their basic requirements. In addition to infrastructural development and tourism, border trade has not yet picked up steam and there are sectors like tourism and medical in which development is the need of the hour. Due to the absence of connecting routes, which were expected to be provided under the AEP framework, a significant amount of this trade exchange extension has not yet taken place. It is unnecessary to emphasise how badly the Northeast lacks the physical infrastructure to promote trade and economic ties with its neighbours. Inefficient infrastructure, delays at border crossings, makes it more difficult to expand trade over land with India's eastern neighbours due to its northern border.

The policies in this region lack stability and rigour, and they are not carefully planned. The promotion of AEP is essential for India's success in foreign policy measures, undertaken by the Modi Government to engage with Asian countries, particularly those in south-east Asia. Because Manipur is at a crossroads in the AEP, it is crucial that the federal government and local players take the initiative. The national government and the stakeholders in both states should understand Manipur's crucial role in the AEP. Thus, Manipur's socio-political problems and physical infrastructure, including its roads and railroads, need to be repaired. First and foremost, when all of these plans are put into motion, there is an improvement in the level of cross-border trade between India and South-East Asian countries via Moreh in Manipur. Manipur has been strategically located in relation to the AEP. The scars of insurgency and ethnic violence have long tarnished the state's reputation, despite its enormous potential for developing and promoting sustainable growth. As a result, at this juncture, the state and its people and the centre must work diligently to make sure that the opportunity does not slip through their fingers while also paving the way for future generations to follow and be placed at the pinnacle of governance and development in the country.

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