



## Re-examining India's Northeast regions tourism potential through its policy and economic co-operation between India and Thailand

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### Abstract

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industry in the world and most countries made attempts to develop tourism for its role in economic development, providing jobs and thereby helping in reducing inequalities in income distribution [1 - 3]. Tourism is listed at the top among the major thrust areas in the proposed economic relationship between India and Thailand, specially the tourism potential of Northeast India, because of its location close to South- East Asia. Northeast India comprises of 8 states as Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. It covers 7.9 percent of the total geographical land area of the country's total area of 263, 179 in square kilometers. The region has many natural beauties and is very different from the mainland India in terms of culture, food, language, religion, dress and so on. [4]. Despite having so many unique and natural beauties, the Northeast region of India is still a place of least visited [5]. The paper attempts to re-examine the Northeast India's tourism potential through India's Look East policy, including the recent Act East Policy and its economic relationship with Thailand.

**Keywords:** tourism Northeast India, look East policy, act East policy, development

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### 1. Introduction

Northeast India is composed of eight sister states namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura and Sikkim. It is one of the landlocked regions of South Asia. However, about 4500 km of its border is with five different countries of South Asia, that is, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh [6]. The region, due to its geographical location, has various opportunities for economic growth and development. It has the potential to become a manufacturing hub for engaging with neighboring Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and ASEAN. In addition, the region has a variety of unique natural beauty of flora and fauna, historical monuments, tea gardens and its unique cultural festivals [4]. The North Eastern States are very different from the mainland India in terms of culture, food, language, religion, dress and so on. However, the region has also many socio-political problems such as numerous armed separatists' struggles, political instability, insurgent activities, ethnic classes, frequent bandh (general strike), blockade and violation of human rights, corruptions and so on. All these factors are responsible for the political instability in the region and to slow economic development. Therefore, the Government should take steps and plan for the development process of the Northeast India through examining its prospects and policies, to connect more extensively for economic relationship with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and other ASEAN region. This requires development of

infrastructures: roads, railway lines, river transport, airports, hotels, tour guides, tour information, border check-posts, educational, and health infrastructure, etc. in the Northeast regions. The Government of India needs to invest big sums in the region in order to make Look East Policy or the recent Act East Policy a success. Moreover, linking the Northeast with Myanmar, Thailand and Bangladesh will help in the development of the region and address the issue of poverty. So, Northeast India can be considered as a gateway between South Asia and South –East Asia. Today's challenge is to harness these opportunities to ensure that there is growth and development in this region. Following is the map of Northeast India.

### 2. Importance of the study

Tourism is considered an important industry which has vast scope for the generation of income and employment. Therefore, the Government considered it as an important industry and so gives importance to its development. Infrastructure such as easy roads and economical mode of travel, opening of roadways, conducting sightseeing tours, hospitality and communications, and other necessities are the steps needed to increase tourism prospects in a region [7]. Thus, each and every region, country, continent, city, town, village, ultimately has to improve in the competition to attract tourists [8].

As the Northeast India has 5 International Countries as neighbors, bordered by China to the

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**Figure 1** Map of North-East India's states  
 Source: [http://wikitravel.org/en/North-Eastern\\_India](http://wikitravel.org/en/North-Eastern_India)

North, Bangladesh to the South-West, Myanmar in the East and Bhutan in the North-West [9], it provides an opportunity to the region since its locational proximity can be used to promote tourism and trade links in the entire region. The disruption of old trade routes by colonial rulers, since the Partition of India in 1947 and India's import substitution economy deprived northeast India of its natural markets. This made the region isolated and cut off. Traditional transportation routes: rail, road and river, linking the Chittagong and Calcutta Ports, suddenly became unavailable after the partition of India. As a result, with no industry or means to connect for business with other nations, the region is backward economically and slow in development. This creates many problems to the region such as unemployment, poverty, insurgency, disharmony, breakage of law and order. In addition, numerous armed separatists' struggles and the political instability in the region attributed to slow economic development of the region. The Government of India framed the Look East Policy (LEP) and the recent Act East Policy (AEP) as it provide an excellent opportunity to integrate not only with mainland Indian economy but also with its neighboring countries in the east, with its main aims to solve the Northeast India out of these problems of insurgency, poverty, unemployment and economic backwardness and to re-connect trade ties

between India and ASEAN [5, 10, 24]. These policies are expected to create a new era of development in the Northeast through connectivity with neighboring countries and the ASEAN region, tourism industry development, communication and trade.

### 3. Review of literature

Even though the North-eastern region of India has many unique and natural beauties, it is not popular as a tourist hot spot of India [11]. Ahmad and Hussain [12] made a study of the problems and prospects of the tourism industry in Manipur. The major constraints of Northeast tourism development and uneven performance among these states are insufficient funds, lack of infrastructure, transportation, lack of alternative means of transport, marketing, boundary issues, insurgency effect and permit period. The state has over 50 tourists' spots. It is the treasure house of various economic resources like natural scenic tourist spots, rich culture and ethnic heritage. Tourism has the greatest potential for generating income and employment opportunities in the state because Manipur is not only characterized by the blending of floras and faunas but also exceptionally rich in biodiversity. Therefore, steps should be taken to remove the barriers for tourism development.

Studies made by Neog, Ruhee [13] mentions the importance for the infrastructure led tourism development for the Northeast region as given in the

Vision 2020 document which was released by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2008. Although India is included in the top ten tourist destinations of the world, the Northeast is at the bottom in the overall percentage of tourist arrivals in India. A number of issues is discussed for the region as: Tourism marketing strategies, infrastructure developments and security and administrative issues.

Studies made by Patawari and Sharma [14] looks at the need of advance technology in tourism industry such as development of ancillary industries like accommodation, travel agency which helps the tourism in India and Thailand. Other issues affecting the industry are discussed, including funding and the government tourism strategies.

Khwairakpam [15] states the positivity of LEP on Manipur's economy, if certain policies or programs are taken up by the Government. According to him, the example of Japan, Singapore and Thailand will not be appropriate in the case of Northeast India because those countries are either island nations or surrounded by seas. It will be relevant to take examples of Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Switzerland etc.

Haokip [16] states that the northeastern states had been exposed to international trade during the pre-colonial and colonial period. In the post-independence period, the exploitative nature of the British colonial rule continued in the region with just a change in the stakeholders from British to Indian capitalists. He looked upon the proper implementation of the main component of the 'Look East' policy so as to bring development in the northeastern region through the expansion of regional trade linkage with the economies of its eastern neighbours and to end the landlocked situation and isolation of the northeastern region by opening up the borders and reintegrating the region's economy through improved trade and connectivity between Northeast India and Southeast Asian countries.

Ghai [17] states that the Look-East policy was officially established in 1992 with its aim to contribute importantly to India's efforts of globalization and integration with the world's economy. LEP was established of developing political, economic and strategic interests in Southeast Asia under which India proposed a number of projects in this region

Chareonwongsak [18] gave a speech on the economic relations between Thailand and North East India. According to him, tourism between Thailand and Northeast India has more opportunities to expand because Thailand is main destination for Indian tourists while the Northeast regions of India has the opportunity to receive more Thai tourists even though the place is not popular to Thais. However, with the availability of more economical and convenient transportation, this area could be a new tourism spot for Thai tourists because the route is very near to Thailand as it is connected through Myanmar. In

addition, he mentions some other reasons as Assam, a state of Northeast India is home of Tai ethnic groups and there are many similarities in the costumes and languages of the region with the Northern Thailand.

Boruah [19] studied the Northeast India and the Look East Policy which he states that the Look East Policy has the potential to undo the effects of colonial geopolitics as well as to transform the region by opening borders for trade and commerce.

Work of Gogoi [20] discusses the issues of security, foreign policy, regional economy and sub-regional cooperation, pertaining to the North Eastern Region and its neighborhood which could not only help better the understanding of the region but also help the policy makers to frame a holistic approach towards development of the region. Similarly, Das [21] attempts to explore the potentiality from Northeast Indian States as it has a bright prospect of economic development in terms of tourism industry in near future. The study concluded that the development of tourism industry in Northeast Indian states largely depended upon the formulation of a proper tourism development policy and people's cooperation and consciousness.

#### **4. Methods and Objectives**

The present paper is based on the secondary data from various sources such as review of literatures, journals, books and other electronic sources. The study is in the form of describing facts as it is about the prospect and policy of Northeast Indian States' development. The paper is divided into eight parts as introduction, importance of the study, review of literature, methods and objectives, prospect, policy, Northeast India and Thai economic co-operations, challenges of tourism industry development in Northeast India and the conclusions. In brief, the study aims to explore the following objectives as:

- 1) prospect of tourism industry in Northeast India
- 2) Northeast India in India's Look East Policy and the recent Act East Policy
- 3) Economic Cooperation of India and Thailand
- 4) Challenges of tourism industry development in Northeast India

#### **5. Prospect of tourism industry in Northeast India**

Northeast India because of its location along with its unique features in biodiversity has made the region a prospective region for tourism industry development. Since it has a long international borders with five Asian countries as China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, it is considered as the gateway to South-East Asia. In recent years, the region at large is building important infrastructure so as to develop tourism industry. The region has many culture groups and languages, with a wide variety of exotic flora and fauna which can easily attract tourists from world over who are looking for discovery. The region is inhabited by people of different racial and ethno-

linguistic backgrounds with a large variety of cultural traditional art, culture, handicraft, fair and festivals. The region is bounded with hills, mountains and large rivers which provide ample opportunity for adventure sports like mountaineering, trekking, rafting and other leisure water sports like boating, rowing etc. The climate of the region is ideal for using as health resorts. In fact, Northeast India has all the physical and human elements that fulfils the requirements of the tourists [9]. So, even though Northeast India is backward economically, it has the greatest potentiality for development of trade links with South- East Asia through the Look East Policy of India and the recent policy of Act East Policy by investing and improving the infrastructure for tourism industry development. The tourism industry in Northeast India has huge prospects in different sectors like ecotourism, adventure and cultural tourism, food and accommodation service and art and handicraft, etc., and has enough potential to resolve the prevailing socio-economic crisis leading to unemployment, backwardness, insurgence activities, etc., through economic development and employment generation to the population in the region. The following are the main prospects of tourism in Northeast India:

***Ecotourism, Floriculture and Agro-forestry based Tourism.***

The climate of the region is suitable for agro based industry and forestry farming. Orchids and other flowers' cultivations, bamboos and related products are believed to be a promising industry and generate handsome income as these are grown abundantly in the Northeast regions. Beside this, it is worth mentioning the prospective tourist hotspots in this region given by nature which is unknown at the moment but if properly managed and utilized have the potential to boost the tourism industry of the region. Moreover, mention can be made of the only beautiful floating fresh water lake of Loktak in Manipur; Majuli in Assam, mighty river Brahmaputra in Assam or Cherapunjee, the place gifted with maximum rainfall on the earth in Maghalaya and so on. All these beautiful hotspots of the region may attract tourists from all over the world. The popular Bihu dance and Sastriya Nritya of Assam, the legendary Manipuri dance of Manipur, traditional folk dances of Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura or the unique bamboo dance of Mizoram show the diverse culture, tradition and lifestyles of the region. Moreover, the traditional handloom and handicraft like famous Naga shawl, beautiful textiles of Assam silk, traditional Manipuri textiles, decorative ivory and jewellery, works on pottery, brass, canes and bamboo by different communities in the North-eastern region are being uniquely popular may add as a source to boost in the sector of tourism. Various historical places like Sivasagar, the capital of the Ahom kingdom, Hajo, the pilgrim centre, Sonitpur, the capital of Ban Raja, Khaspur (Silchar), the last capital of the Cachari

kingdom in Assam and Tawang in Arunachal, the secret place of Mahayana Buddhist and memorable places relating to World War-II in Nagaland and Manipur are some important places for the tourist to visit. Despite having the huge potential of tourist attractions, the Northeast part of India remains neglected for which growth and development of the region remain stagnant though efforts were made in the recent years by the Ministry of Tourism and the framing of a policy for its development as the Look East Policy of India and the Act East Policy.

**6. Northeast India in India's Look East Policy and Act East Policy**

The Northeast of India as being the gateway between two sub-regions of Asia - South Asia and South-East Asia have various opportunities for development in the region. It is encouraging to note in this context the role BIMSTEC and other regional initiatives, which are making efforts to play in truly linking this region not only to other parts of India but beyond India. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is an international organisation involving a group of countries in South Asia and South East Asia. These are: Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan and Nepal [22]. There has been growing realization on the part of Indian policy makers that development of physical connectivity with Southeast Asia is essential to fully harness the opportunities provided by 'Look East Policy' and the recent Act East Policy. Even though, the Look East Policy proposed a number of projects in this region, India was not able to complete them in time. Consequently, in order to make the 'Look East Policy' successful for the region, the 'Act East Policy' has been framed by the current government of India. The Act East Policy originated under the Modi Government at the East Asia Summit in Myanmar in November 2014 with efforts to re-engage with the Northeast region, which has often been neglected and ignored by India in the past as there has been no solid strategy for inclusive growth and development of the region. In addition, the Act East Policy is driven by both economic and security interests and extended beyond South East Asia to East Asia with emphasis on enhancing connectivity through all the possible modes of infrastructure development such as land routes, railways, air connectivity, waterways, energy infrastructure development both in field of hydroelectric and hydrocarbon and telecommunication linkages. To strengthen India and ASEAN diplomatic relationship, 10 heads of states from ASEAN countries were invited as chief guests for the first time in the parade of the January 26, 2018, the Republic Day Ceremony at Rajpath in New Delhi which is both unusual and historic [23, 24].

To put the theory into practice, India has also initiated some bilateral projects and also become party

to some multilateral projects, which aimed at enhancing connectivity between the Northeast and South-East Asian. In other words, policy makers have become aware of the geo-economic potential of the North-Eastern region as a gateway to East and South-East Asia. Thus, by gradually integrating this region through cross-border market access, the North-Eastern states can become the bridge between the Indian economy and South-East Asia such as Thailand. In this context, mention can be made of the important projects which are undergoing or initiated such as Moreh - Tamu-Kalewa Road, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Trans Asian Highway, India-Myanmar rail linkages, Kaladan Multimodal project, the Stilwell road, Myanmar-India-Bangladesh gas and/or oil pipeline, Tamarthi Hydroelectricity project and optical fiber network between Northeast India and South-East Asia. Another project is the India-ASEAN summit in Bali, Indonesia, which the then Prime Minister of India initiated holding of a car rally to attract attention to the geographical proximity and its economic potential. India-ASEAN car rally has been organized from Indonesia to India via Singapore, Malaysia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Myanmar. On the whole, this paper states the opportunities for Northeast India within the Look East Policy and Act East Policy framework, where the region stands as a bridge and gateway of historical opportunity with a new era of possibilities for future Asian trade. It is hopefully expected that the policies will help to boost Tourism Industry which in turn will help to fulfill its target by providing employment and economic benefit to the unemployed youths of the state as well as contribute a substantial share to the state economy in the years to come.

## **7. Economic Cooperation of India and Thailand**

India's Northeast have been considered by Thailand as an important place for investment or potential sub-regional market center and a gateway to connect with the vast mainstream Indian market. The main logic for investment by Thailand lies due to its cultural similarities, historical ties and geographical proximity. In addition, the main reasons for Thailand's investment in the Northeast have come from two important considerations. First, India's Northeast offers a substantial alternate market and transit for sub – regional economics for the export driven economy of Thailand. Second, the investment in the Northeast would enable the Thai economies to further diversify the source of raw materials especially material resources such as rubber and bamboo which constitute Thailand's important international exports [18]

Thailand and India have also started a number of projects on developing the transportation infrastructures connecting between countries. For example, the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway project which begins from the Manipur state

in India connected to Mae Sot in Thailand, expanding for a total of 1,360 kilometers. Another project is the Mekong-India Economic Corridor project, which aim to link the transportation route between Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam through Phnom Penh in Cambodia, and Bangkok, to Dawei in Myanmar. The route will be connected with India through sea transportation route between Chennai of India and Dawei.

For the successful implementation of 'Look East Policy' and later 'Act East Policy', the first important step requires the settlement of the continuing insurgencies in the region is required as it would solve many problems regarding India's security concerns. Even though, considerable steps have been made in recent years, it needs more improvement in India and neighboring relations in terms of solving the insurgency problems.

Second, another notable initiative undertaken by the Indian government for economic integration with ASEAN was the India- ASEAN car rally, which was flagged off from Guwahati in Assam in 2003. It is based on the geographic proximity between Northeast India and South-East Asia. Moreover, India has undertaken some bilateral and multilateral projects for boosting connectivity between the Northeast and South - East Asia such as Moreh-Tamu-Kalewa Road, India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Trans Asian Highway, India-Myanmar rail linkages, Kaladan Multimodal project, the Stilwell road, Myanmar-India-Bangladesh gas or oil pipeline, Tamarthi Hydroelectricity project and optical fiber network between Northeast India and South-East Asia. In addition, the first delegation of Thai visit to the region took place in 2004 which is since then followed by various such visits. Thailand and India have managed to cooperate on many agreements. For example, the Thailand-India Free Trade Agreement is one where India and Thailand eliminated the tax barrier on 82 products in 2006. Thailand and India have cooperation through others regional agreements such as, the ASEAN +6 and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation or BIMSTEC. These economic co operations will provide opportunities for both countries as follows:

### **7.1 Trade Opportunities**

Thai products have greater chances of entering the Northeast Indian market since the products from Thailand have great qualities and with more reasonable prices. This will help to reduce the cost of transportation to India with the development of road connection between the two countries. Moreover, free trade agreement will significantly help to lower down the product selling prices. The Northeast India's economy expansion will be highly contributing to a higher purchasing power. Since Thailand still has low trade relationship with this region this economic cooperation will provide a greater number of opportunities for both countries. Example of Thai

products which will benefit from India's tariff reductions consist of chemical products, plastic products, gems and jewelry, auto parts, aluminum products, furniture and parts, cosmetics, vegetables, beans, food preparations, canned sardines, and fruit juices etc. Similarly, the Northeast Indian region will gain more opportunities to export especially main products namely ores, oil, coal, natural gas, and agricultural products such as tea leaves and bamboos.

### 7.2 Investment Opportunities

Investment between Northeast India and Thailand is still at low level as they are dominated by big businesses. However, investment can be developed with improvement of infrastructure connecting both countries such as Thai investors can invest in the petroleum and gas exploration and production and mines. Hydropower is another promising industry to invest because this region has a large quantity of rainwater. The Indian government also supports investments in this sector along with processed agricultural product and food industry. In addition, there is the tourism industry, construction industry, and development of infrastructure which will provide good opportunities for Thai investors.

### 7.3 Tourism Opportunities

Tourism relations between Thailand and Northeast India can be expanded because Thailand is main destination for Indian tourists. In the same way, the region of Northeast India has the opportunity to receive more Thai tourists even though the place is not popular to Thais. However, with the improvement of transportation, this area could be a new tourism destination for South East Asia because the route passes through Myanmar, the neighbor of Thailand. Also, the Assam state in Northeast India is home of Tai ethnic groups which is more enhanced along with the similarities in their costumes and languages. Thus, it can be an ideal tourist spot for neighboring countries as Thailand, provided the limitations for tourism in Northeast India from the Thai perspective such as the limited information on tourism and lack of travel agent and tour operator, lacks of infrastructure and facilities are improved [18].

## 8. Challenges of tourism industry development in Northeast India

As mentioned above, although the Northeast India is having a great potential, the business of tourism developmental components in the region is not satisfying with the desired pace. The reasons of the slow pace of tourism industry development are as follows:

1) Infrastructure deficit such as quality hotels for accommodations, transports and limited marketing facilities

2) Connectivity with remaining parts of India and the world by air, railways or roadways. Although there has been a marked improvement in the region's internal air linkages, it is still not sufficient on an

operational level as the airports are technologically and managerially ill-equipped.

3) Safety concerns of tourists due to insurgencies problems in the region.

4) Skepticism in local people for strangers.

If these challenges are quickly addressed by the government, the Northeast India will definitely bring handsome returns in tourism sector.

## 9. Conclusions

Northeast region has vast potentials for tourism development as it has the beauty of nature and a rich cultural diversity and heritage. Integrating this region through cross-border market access, the North-Eastern states can become the bridge between the Indian economy and South - East Asia. As tourism is a multi-dimensional activity, it covers a large number of economic activities and infrastructures such as successful policy, marketing and provision of security. If the problem of insurgency is solved, infrastructures such as roads and other facilities are improved, along with reconnection and trade links with Asian neighbors through the successful implementation of Look East Policy and the Act East Policy, the region is prone to become a popular tourist and trade zone. This will create jobs and provide employment to the youths of the region and thereby bring sustainable development to the region. Thus, even though Northeast India has a wide potential for the development of tourism industry, the success of it depends upon the proper formulation of its policies. The Government should make huge investments jointly with private ventures to develop infrastructures in the field of transport such as South-East Asian transit route, service and communications, etc., and make affective policies for sustainable development of tourism sector in the region. Therefore, the Northeast regions of India has the potential to become a hotspot tourism resort with the successful reconnection and ties with neighboring Asian countries. On the whole, the Northeast of India provides new opportunity for Thailand to open its economic and business connections. Even though there are some limitations, it can be decreased in the course of time.

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