



## International Journal of Advance Studies and Growth Evaluation

# India's Act East Policy and Manipur: Connectivity and Strategic Significance

<sup>\*1</sup> Dr. Biswajit Choudhury, <sup>2</sup> Dr. Navaneeta Deori and <sup>3</sup> Mayur Krishna Saikia

<sup>\*1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Handique Girls' College, Guwahati, Assam, India.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, CUGS TISS-Guwahati Campus, Jalukbari, Guwahati, Assam, India.

<sup>3</sup> Researcher, Department of Political Science, Handique Girls' College, Guwahati, Assam, India.

### Article Info.

E-ISSN: 2583-6528

Impact Factor (SJIF): 6.876

Peer Reviewed Journal

Available online:

[www.alladvancejournal.com](http://www.alladvancejournal.com)

Received: 16/Aug/2025

Accepted: 17/Sep/2025

### \*Corresponding Author

Dr. Biswajit Choudhury

Assistant Professor, Department of  
Political Science, Handique Girls'  
College, Guwahati, Assam, India.

### Abstract

Manipur, situated in the north eastern part of India holds a strategic value within the framework of India's Act East Policy (AEP). It shares a common border with Myanmar and is a crucial gateway for enhancing regional connectivity and economic integration with the South East Asian Countries. In the border areas many of the communities have cultural and ethnic ties with communities across the border, the ethnic upsurge, socio-political unrest, and border insecurities have significantly disrupted status-quo of the region. These developments have not only hindered infrastructure projects and cross-border trade but have also deepened internal divisions. This article critically examines Manipur's strategic role in the AEP. The article attempts to assess the present infrastructural developments in the region and explores the challenges they encounter. In doing so, it highlights the roadblocks that Manipur has experienced while advancing its goal for improving its road connectivity that propels towards Act East Policy.

**Keywords:** Act East Policy; India-Myanmar Relations; Regional Connectivity; Ethnic Conflict; Border Trade; Myanmar Crisis.

### Introduction

India's Act East Policy (AEP) represents a pivotal foreign policy framework aimed at deepening economic, cultural, and strategic engagement with countries beyond southeast Asian countries to Indo Pacific region. Officially unveiled in 2014, the AEP is a dynamic, implementation-focused successor to the earlier *Look East Policy* initiated in the early 1990s. Its core objectives include expanding trade, enhancing connectivity, fostering people-to-people interactions, and promoting regional security and multilateral cooperation (De, 2020). It aims to achieve dual goals of expanding trade with South East Asian countries and the Indo-Pacific region but also boost the trade prospects for the eight north eastern states of India that are surrounded on all four sides by the international border. The Northeastern region acts as a land corridor linking the Indian subcontinent with Southeast Asia. The region's geographical proximity to Myanmar and the broader ASEAN bloc emphasises its strategic position in fulfilling the ambitions of the AEP (De, Ghosh, and Sahoo, 2021).

Among the Northeastern states, Manipur shares a porous international boundary with Myanmar and the international route of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway passes through its northern part. The state capital, Imphal, is located approximately 100 kilometers from Moreh, a principal border trading post and transit hub. Manipur not only facilitates physical connectivity but also serves as a cultural and civilisational link to Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar, with which it shares longstanding historical, ethnic, and linguistic ties (Das, 2021). Due to geographical closeness and cultural similarity with northern Myanmar, Manipur holds a strategic position under the Act East Policy.

### Theoretical Understanding

The strategic and developmental importance of Manipur within India's Act East Policy is seen through an integrated theoretical approach. In the course of globalisation, the states make attempts to create shared regional space that engages them as active regional and transnational trading partners and this is termed as New Regionalism Theory. This perspective

highlights the way in which borderland spaces, once considered marginal, are increasingly recognised as gateways of economic integration. Manipur sets out as a case study for the concept of new regionalism and its location at the Indo-Myanmar frontier offers India direct land access to Southeast Asia. New regionalism promotes regional integration and to enhance trade among states, respective states alter their foreign economic policies to meet the requirement. The eventual objective for them is to bring economic transformation in the border areas. India's Act East Policy support this approach of new regionalism. Under this framework Manipur has immense opportunities to connect as a trading partner with neighbouring South East Asian countries.

### Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design with an emphasis on exploratory and analytical methods. It relies on both primary and secondary sources to construct a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Primary data is collected through interviews with policymakers, academics, border officials, and local stakeholders in Manipur, as well as through field observations in key sites such as Imphal and Moreh. Secondary data is drawn from official government documents, policy briefs, think tank publications, and peer-reviewed academic works. The analysis involves content examination of policy and institutional texts. The methodology also accounts for non-material factors such as insurgency, migration, and ethnic contestations, which shape both the opportunities and the limitations of connectivity.

### Objectives of the Study

1. Examine the strategic position of Manipur as a gateway in India's Act East Policy
2. Assess the ethnic unrest and security challenges that affect connectivity and infrastructure development

### Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with India's Act East Policy has consistently highlighted the Northeast as a pivotal space in the country's external outreach. Baruah (2020), in *In the Name of the Nation*, argues that the region's earlier construction as a marginal frontier has gradually shifted to one of strategic centrality, positioning the Northeast as a corridor of engagement rather than a periphery.

Medhi (2019) further develops this perspective by emphasising the persistent infrastructural deficits and institutional bottlenecks that limit the pace of regional integration. According to him, physical connectivity alone cannot guarantee transformation unless institutional frameworks are strengthened to sustain economic and social linkages.

Das (2018) underscores the transformative potential of cross-border highways and trade corridors in reconfiguring India's Northeast as a hub of transnational connectivity. He suggests that these projects can generate new patterns of mobility and exchange, thereby altering the region's developmental trajectory.

Sen (2017) shifts attention toward the symbolic value of connectivity, arguing that roads, bridges, and border points are not merely physical infrastructures but also instruments that reshape the Northeast's identity as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia.

Within this broader scholarship, several works focus specifically on Manipur. Haokip (2015) identifies Manipur's

centrality in India-Myanmar relations, given its geographical proximity and cultural ties across the border. Singh (2016) situates Manipur's role within a longer historical perspective, noting its relevance in both colonial frontier management and postcolonial geopolitics.

Security concerns have also been a major theme in the literature. Gogoi (2021) links insurgency, border management, and local resistance to the operationalisation of India's connectivity projects, pointing out the fragile security environment in which these initiatives unfold. Similarly, Misra (2022) highlights how ethnic conflicts and internal contestations undermine the region's ability to function as a stable frontier, thereby complicating the implementation of Act East Policy.

Despite these contributions, much of the scholarship tends to treat Northeast India as a homogenous entity, overlooking the distinctive role of Manipur. This study seeks to address that gap by foregrounding Manipur's dual function as both a developmental hub and a geostrategic frontier, thereby situating it as a critical space in India's external engagement with Southeast Asia.

### Role of Manipur in the Act East Policy

The word Manipur is derived from two words, "Mani" meaning 'Jewel' and "Pur" meaning "City or Place". Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru called Manipur the 'Jewel of India' while Lord Irwin described it as the Switzerland of India'. It is bounded by Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south, and Assam to the west, Myanmar (Sagaing Region and Chin State) lies to its east. The state covers an area of 22,327 square kilometres (8,621 sq miles) and as per Census 2011, it has a population of 28.56 Lakhs. The rural and urban population is 70.79 percent and 29.21 percent, respectively. Sex Ratio in Manipur is 985 i.e. for each 1000 male. Manipur has been at the crossroads of Asian economic and cultural exchange for more than 2,500 years. It has long connected the Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia, China (or East Asia), Siberia, Micronesia and Polynesia, enabling migration of people, cultures, and religions.

Its geography is marked by a fertile central valley encircled by hilly terrains, with Loktak Lake standing out as the largest freshwater lake in Northeast India and a key ecological and livelihood resource. The state shares a 398-kilometer-long international boundary with Myanmar, which positions it as a strategic gateway for India's Act East Policy and as a vital corridor for cross-border trade and regional integration. This geographical location enhances its importance in ongoing connectivity initiatives such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which aim to link India more closely with Southeast Asia. The valley is predominantly inhabited by the Meitei community, while the surrounding hills are home to Naga and Kuki tribes, reflecting the ethnic diversity that shapes the state's socio-political landscape. Despite its rich cultural heritage, celebrated through classical Manipuri dance, handloom traditions, and its historical association with polo, Manipur continues to grapple with structural challenges including insurgency, ethnic conflict, and inadequate infrastructure. The violent clashes of 2023 revealed the fragility of ethnic relations and underlined the urgent need for inclusive governance, peacebuilding, and sustainable development. In the wider Indian map, Manipur thus emerges not only as a sensitive borderland but also as a state of immense strategic and geographical importance in connecting India to the dynamic economies of Southeast Asia.

Manipur shares deep ethnic and cultural ties with tribes across the Indo-Myanmar border. These communities are present on both sides of the border and share a long history of trade, kinship, and traditional cross-border mobility (Florento & Corpuz, 2014; Srikant & Haokip, 2021). This shared heritage is considered as a soft-power tool to promote deeper regional integration and build trust in bilateral relations. Manipur was historically linked to Southeast Asia through trade routes that connected it to ancient kingdoms in Myanmar and beyond, forming part of a broader Silk Route network (Saikia, 2020). These historical linkages enhance the cultural legitimacy of India's current Act East outreach in the region.

Manipur's town of Moreh is designated as a Land Customs Station (LCS) and is one of the most important trading points on the India-Myanmar border. It serves as a hub for formal and informal trade, although challenges like lack of infrastructure, smuggling, and security issues persist (Marchang, 2018; Kshetrimayum, 2010). To address these issues and improve trade efficiency, the Government of India is developing an Integrated Check Post (ICP) at Moreh, along with plans for logistics hubs and warehousing facilities (Department of Commerce and Industries, 2024). These developments aim to streamline customs processes, facilitate legal trade, and enhance connectivity under the AEP. Despite challenges such as drug trafficking and porous borders (Indira, 2015; Laithangbam, 2022), Manipur holds immense potential for boosting cross-border trade, regional tourism, and investment. Strengthening its infrastructure and governance mechanisms are the key to realise this potential (Sinate, Fanai, and Bangera, 2019; Ravi and Kabadia, 2012). Thus, Manipur's strategic location, cultural linkages, and economic potential make it a cornerstone in India's Act East Policy.

### Key Infrastructure and Connectivity Projects

Northeast India has become central to India's efforts to improve regional connectivity and trade through major infrastructure projects under the Act East Policy. Manipur, in particular, plays a key role in linking India with Southeast Asia due to its strategic location bordering Myanmar.

**IMT Trilateral Highway:** The India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway is one of the most significant regional connectivity initiatives. It stretches from Moreh in Manipur (India) to Tamu in Myanmar, and then to Mae Sot in Thailand. Moreh, being the starting point on the Indian side, has gained strategic importance for both trade and people-to-people exchanges (Baruah, 2020; McDuie-Ra, 2015). The highway is expected to reduce travel time, boost trade, and improve cross-border cooperation in sectors like transport, agriculture, and tourism.

**Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project:** Although the Kaladan Project primarily operates through Mizoram, it complements the role of Manipur in regional connectivity. The project links Kolkata Port to Sittwe Port in Myanmar by sea, and then connects inland through river and road transport to Mizoram. It is particularly important for providing an alternative route to the landlocked Northeast (Baruah, 2004; Scott, 2009). With this IMT Highway, Kaladan opens new routes for regional integration and reduces dependence on the Siliguri Corridor.

**Border Haats and Integrated Check Posts (ICPs):** To promote local cross-border trade and community interaction, Border Haats have been introduced along the Indo-Myanmar border. The Integrated Check Post (ICP) at Moreh is being upgraded to improve customs, immigration, and cargo handling facilities (McDuie-Ra, 2015; South, 2008).

This helps streamline both legal trade and secure movement of goods and people, encouraging formal cross-border business and reducing informal trade practices.

**Rail and Road Projects:** Several rail and road projects are being developed to improve Manipur's internal and international connectivity. The Jiribam-Imphal railway line is under construction, and plans exist to extend the line toward the Myanmar border, possibly up to Moreh. This would transform Manipur into a vital transport hub within India's Act East Policy (Baruah, 2020). Furthermore, Asian Highway-1 (AH-1) passes through Manipur, linking it with other parts of India and extending toward Southeast Asia. This road corridor not only supports economic development but also reflects efforts to physically integrate Northeast India with broader Asian markets (Cederlof, 2022; Van Schendel, 2005).

### Challenges Undermining Manipur's Strategic Role

Manipur has been facing significant challenges in recent years, particularly from ethnic violence, security concerns, and disruptions in trade and connectivity. These issues have severely hampered the state's role in fostering regional cooperation and economic integration with Southeast Asia.

One of the major obstacles to Manipur's role in India's Act East Policy has been the ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki communities. Starting in May 2023, violence erupted in the state, leading to widespread displacement, destruction, and loss of life (Colney, 2023). This conflict has resulted in a complete breakdown of law and order, with curfews, internet shutdowns, and a significant military presence. The internal strife has created an environment of instability, undermining the state's capacity to maintain its position as a regional hub for trade and diplomacy as envisioned by the Act East Policy. This ethnic violence has disrupted daily life and affected the functioning of various sectors, including business, education, and governance. The inability to ensure peace and security in the state has had a direct impact on investor confidence, making it difficult to attract investments that are crucial for strengthening regional trade relations.

Persistent internal disturbances have severely impeded Manipur's effectiveness in advancing the Act East Policy. The state has been plagued by cycles of ethnic violence, insurgent activity, and administrative breakdowns, all of which have disrupted cross-border commerce, delayed the execution of infrastructure initiatives, and strained bilateral cooperation. Recurring unrest-manifested through communal clashes, economic blockades, and security challenges, hampered the operationalisation of key connectivity projects such as highway expansions, border trade infrastructure, and integrated check-posts (Baruah, 2020; Hausing, 2018). The fragile internal security environment has generated significant apprehension among investors, traders, and regional stakeholders, thereby diminishing confidence in Manipur as a reliable conduit for regional integration. Although endowed with a favourable geographic location and deep-rooted cultural affiliations, Manipur's continued instability threatens to marginalise its role as a gateway to Southeast Asia within the AEP framework. While Manipur remains central to India's vision of enhanced connectivity with Southeast Asia, the realisation of this vision hinges on restoring political stability, fostering inclusive governance, and ensuring sustained peace in the region. Without these foundational conditions, the strategic potential of Manipur is unlikely to be fully actualised in the evolving regional order.



Manipur's security situation is also deeply intertwined with the spillover effects of Myanmar's ongoing internal conflict. The military coup in Myanmar in 2021 and the subsequent insurgency have destabilised the region, leading to a significant refugee influx into Manipur (Besheer, 2023). The arrival of refugees from Myanmar has placed a strain on Manipur's resources, further escalating tensions between various communities. The rise in insurgency activities, coupled with the porous border between India and Myanmar, has increased the challenges of securing the region. Smuggling and other illegal activities have surged along the Indo-Myanmar border, compounding security concerns and further destabilising the region. This situation has also made the border more difficult to manage, hindering efforts to promote trade and connectivity as part of India's Act East Policy (Ganesan, 2023).

Manipur's role in the Act East Policy has also been significantly hampered by disruptions in trade and connectivity. The Moreh border, a vital gateway for trade between India and Southeast Asia, has experienced frequent halts in trade due to the ongoing ethnic violence and security concerns. The instability in Manipur has made it increasingly difficult to maintain smooth trade relations, especially when border security is compromised by insurgency and smuggling (Ganesan, 2022). Crucial infrastructure projects such as the Trilateral Highway and Integrated Check Posts (ICPs), which are central to improving cross-border connectivity and trade, have been delayed. Construction work on these projects has been affected by the conflict and the security challenges in the state, impeding progress on initiatives that are vital for enhancing connectivity with Southeast Asia. Local resistance and fear of further instability have also affected investor confidence, hindering the realisation of the Act East Policy's objectives. The combination of ethnic violence, security concerns, and delayed infrastructure development has created a climate of uncertainty that has discouraged both domestic and foreign investments (Patton, 2023).

The developments in Manipur, including ethnic violence, security concerns, and disruptions to trade and connectivity, have significantly undermined the state's ability to play an active role in India's Act East Policy. While Manipur has historically been a crucial link in India's efforts to engage with Southeast Asia, the ongoing instability has made it difficult to leverage its strategic position for economic and diplomatic gains. Addressing these challenges is crucial for Manipur to realise its full potential in the broader context of regional integration and cooperation.

### Prospects and Possibilities

The border areas between the state of Manipur and Myanmar have become vulnerable to tension due to prolonged conflicts within the territories. The ethnic tensions and growing insecurity along the border, have highlighted serious challenges for India's Act East Policy (AEP). Manipur could play a crucial role in bridging India to Southeast Asia through the India-Myanmar border, making it vital for development for the success of regional to global connectivity efforts.

To address the challenges and unlock Manipur's full strategic potential it is important to restore peace in the state. Restoring normalcy, it would lead to long-term development and assist in realising the objectives of AEP. Given the ethnic divides in Manipur, the government should initiate inclusive dialogue platforms that involve Meitei, Kuki, Naga, and other tribal leaders to build mutual trust and reconciliation. Community-based peacebuilding efforts must be supported by robust local

institutions, including Autonomous District Councils and Village Authorities, especially in the hill areas. Strengthening civilian administration, reducing the military footprint in civil governance, and ensuring justice and accountability will rebuild people's confidence in the state machinery and reduce grievances (Haokip, 2022; Bhaumik, 2022).

Connectivity is a major pillar of the Act East Policy, and completing the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway should be a top priority. The highway's extension from Moreh (Manipur) to Mae Sot (Thailand) through Myanmar is essential to improve trade, logistics, and people-to-people exchanges. Without security and institutional coordination, its benefits will remain limited. Moreh, the key border town in Manipur, should be upgraded into a smart trade hub with integrated customs, warehousing, banking, and road infrastructure. Better road conditions, border security, and formal trade arrangements will reduce informal transactions and boost formal trade volume (Datta, 2019; Marchang, 2018).

For the Act East Policy to succeed in the region, it must directly benefit the people of Manipur, especially those living in border areas. Economic development should be inclusive, ensuring that all communities, tribal and non-tribal, have access to jobs, markets, and public services. Promoting skill development programs, supporting cross-border local enterprises, and expanding cultural exchange initiatives can improve livelihoods and reduce the appeal of insurgent groups. The eco-tourism and cultural tourism that highlight Manipur's unique heritage can enhance local pride and attract regional visitors (Sinate *et al.*, 2019).

The political instability in Myanmar since the 2021 military coup has had direct spillover effects on Manipur. Refugee inflows, rising drug trafficking, and increased militant movement across the border have complicated India's security landscape. Therefore, diplomatic engagement with Myanmar's authorities, including through ASEAN platforms, is necessary to stabilise the frontier. India should prioritise joint security operations, intelligence sharing, and border area development programmes with Myanmar. Humanitarian assistance to refugees must be handled with sensitivity and coordination to avoid alienating border communities (Mahadevan, 2020; Vijayan, 2023).

### Conclusion

Manipur occupies a geo-strategically vital position in India's Act East Policy (AEP). As a peripheral border state, it has a potential support for transnational engagement with Southeast Asia. Its proximity to Myanmar, combined with its integration into major regional connectivity initiatives-such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project-positions it as a linchpin in India's broader regional integration agenda. A convergence of internal disruptions-ranging from protracted ethnic violence and administrative dysfunction to escalating cross-border security concerns-has severely compromised its capacity to serve this envisioned role.

Strategic connectivity cannot advance in the absence of internal political coherence, social harmony, and institutional legitimacy. The restoration of peace and order in Manipur is not merely a regional necessity but a prerequisite for the operational success of the AEP. Reconciliation among ethnically polarised communities must be actively pursued through inclusive governance, sustained dialogue, and confidence-building measures. Border communities such as those in Moreh must be brought into the fold of policymaking

and economic development, ensuring that infrastructure and trade expansion efforts are participatory, equitable, and responsive to local aspirations.

Infrastructure projects must proceed with greater urgency, but underpinned by robust security frameworks and community engagement strategies. Enhancing state capacity in border management, improving law enforcement, and fostering economic resilience in border towns are essential to prevent the proliferation of illicit activities, including smuggling, insurgency support, and informal refugee movements. India must also deepen bilateral cooperation with Myanmar-despite its current political volatility, address cross-border threats, and manage humanitarian issues collaboratively. The Act East Policy must evolve beyond infrastructural ambition to become a transformative instrument for peace-building and state consolidation in the Northeast. Unless the Indian state addresses the root causes of instability in Manipur with urgency and empathy, the vision of the Northeast as a gateway to Southeast Asia will remain unrealised. With sustained political will, inclusive policy design, and integrated regional planning, Manipur can be repositioned as a robust strategic bridge-one that connects India to its eastern neighbours and empowers its periphery through peace, prosperity, and purpose.

### Acknowledgement

The Authors are thankful to the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, Ministry of Education, and Govt. of India for the support to this study.

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