BRIDGING CULTURES BEYOND BORDERS: THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF NORTHEAST INDIA THROUGH THE LENS OF ACT EAST POLICY

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ABSTRACT

As a brand India has created a buzz among scholars, researchers, Indian diplomats, and the public in general as it moves one step up in the Global Soft Power Index, 2023, ranking from 29th to 28th among 121 countries. India needs to step further up the ladder as a country's worldwide influence and its position in the international scenario are frequently enhanced by its ability to employ soft power. Act East Policy is one such initiative by the government of India that can help develop the country's soft power. Further, the North-Eastern Region (NER) of India known for its various ethnic groups, beliefs, unique customs, and traditions, along with diverse cultural heritage is 'diversity in diversity' in itself. Its diversity goes unnoticed, unrecognised and its contribution unacknowledged as NER is often mistaken to be a homogenous region which is due to lack of cultural sensitivity. Therefore, this study delves into the potential of NER to build soft power across Southeast Asian nations and the world. In this study, the role of cultural sensitivity in public diplomacy under the Act East Policy, with special reference to Northeast India is explored. The research delves into the challenges in promoting cultural sensitivity due to NER's historical complexities, and diversity. The study has adopted a descriptive approach and secondary sources such as government documents, published articles, journals, newspapers, books etc. for collecting data. Thus, a paradigm for diplomacy

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that upholds mutual tolerance, embraces diversity, and fosters the cultural ties that bind Northeast India with South East Asian countries is suggested.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Cultural Sensitivity, Northeast India, Soft Power

INTRODUCTION

The North-eastern part of India is rich in heritage and deeply rooted in customs and is revealed as a heterogeneous tapestry within the intricate web of global connections. Situated amidst lush landscapes, with seven sisters and a brother, this region serves as a salad bowl where various communities and cultures co-exist, forming a dynamic array of identities. Though Northeast is the gateway to East and Southeast Asian Nations, and yet, despite its richness, Northeast India has a history of frequently being side-lined from mainstream India, with its cultural significance overshadowed by geopolitical narratives and a record of marginalisation. However, proper attention to its diverse cultural characteristics can contribute to building bridges between India and other nations while cultivating cross-border understanding as well as contributing to cultural diplomacy across the globe.

Northeast India's diverse culture, unique art forms, customs, traditions and practices can be a powerful tool to enhance its international relations. This can be done through India's existing foreign policy known as the 'Act East Policy' (AEP). The Act East Policy focuses on strengthening ties with other countries, particularly with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) which has become the core of India's foreign policy. ASEAN countries include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam etc. This foreign policy primarily focuses on fostering stronger economic cooperation, promotion of cultural ties and building political relationships with countries of Asia-Pacific regions at multiple levels.

The AEP of India earlier known as the 'Look East Policy' (LEP) during the 1990s was a strategic push by the then Prime Minister of India PV Narasimha Rao. India's LEP saw potential in Japan, Singapore and South

Korea as sources of technological advancement to invest and in East and South Asian Nations as export markets (Chakraborty & Chakraborty, 2018). It is also argued that though LEP focused on Southeast Asian nations, it was the influence of non-Asian countries that catalysed the actual growth of the economy within the Southeast Asian countries (Dubey, 2013). This marks the importance of ASEAN and non-Asian countries and their contribution to the growth of India at the international level.

One of the reasons why LEP shifted to AEP in 2014 is also that LEP was seen to lag in its contribution towards the infrastructural and industrial development of the North Eastern Region (NER) of India (Ghosh, 2023). NER being the gateway to India's eastern partners, its physical and social development remains crucial. Unlike LEP which focussed mainly on the economic aspect, AEP now focuses on enhancing connectivity with its Southeast Asia counterparts through commerce, culture, and communication.

Thus, numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the diplomatic relations between India and Southeast Asian countries, focusing particularly on the Act East Policy (Ghosh, 2023; Ahmed, 2019; Chakraborty & Chakraborty, 2018; Hussain, 2017; Dubey, 2013). These studies have highlighted the crucial need to strengthen social and cultural ties in the Northeast region of India. The Northeast region is well-positioned to connect with Southeast Asian nations, thanks to its geographical proximity, as well as shared socio-cultural and historical links, among other factors. Therefore, it is important to continue to promote people-to-people contact between the involved countries, as this can play a significant role in shaping India's perception as a country that values diversity and tolerance (Hussain, 2017; Ahmed, 2019; Hussain, 2023). This collaboration and interaction will have positive spillover effects on various sectors such as tourism, trade, peace, and mutual understanding. A recent study on India's cultural diplomatic relationship with Cambodia explained the crucial role of cultural aspects in developing India's soft power. By projecting a positive and peaceful image of India, cultural ties can help strengthen India's position on the global stage (Bunthorn, 2022). The effective role of deepening cultural ties can also serve to boost political and economic cooperation between India and Southeast

Asian nations.

This study explores India's culture-based foreign policy and analyse the integration of cultural components of NER with the Act East Policy to develop a robust culture-based foreign policy. Objectives for the study include-identifying the cultural soft power potential of NER and understanding cultural sensitivity for cultural diplomacy. Lastly, the paper examines the challenges in developing cultural sensitivity in NER. For this, the paper has relied on a survey of literatures and has employed descriptive-analytical techniques for producing arguments, proposals and solutions. For comprehending the functioning of AEP journals, articles by Ahmed (2019), Ganapathi (2015) and Hussain (2017) etc. have been referred to. To understand the phenomenon of cultural diplomacy, cultural sensitivity, and soft power studies of Bunthorn (2022), Cummings (2003), Dubey (2013), Foronda (2008), Jeong and Grix (2023), Mark (2010), Mishra (2023), Nye (2004, 2017), Lee (2015), Sarmah (2023) and Tharoor (2008) were looked into. Further, India's foreign policy books and government documents were referred to such as reports by the Ministry of External Affairs etc. Furthermore, relevant state newspapers and other existing literature were consulted for an in-depth understanding of cultural complexities in NER namely Meetei (2014), Patgiri and Hazarika (2016), Vanlalhruaia (2015), Talukdar (2022). After reviewing the arguments presented in the study, certain recommendations were made to improve foreign policies, which would benefit both Southeast Asian countries and India.

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND RISING SOFT POWER: A BIRD-VIEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY

The term 'cultural diplomacy' is relatively new. To establish rapport, discover common ground, construct bridges, and win over trust- cultural diplomacy is essential. Although from the beginning of civilization cultural diplomacy has been practised in various forms. Studies have found that the explorers, travellers, traders, educators, artists etc. worked as informal ambassadors or cultural diplomats in ancient times. Whether in the past or present, these cross-cultural exchanges occur in many different contexts-

such as economy, arts, culture, literature, business, science, sports, and so forth. Throughout time it has improved and gained popularity to maintain a hegemonic relationship between different nations, hence known as Cultural Diplomacy.

A wide range of initiatives aimed at fostering closer relations between nation-states are included in cultural diplomacy. A state can create a favourable impression, spark curiosity, encourage interactions, and foster trust for long-lasting alliances through its culture. This type of involvement was seen back in the days of the Roman Empire to build its alliance (Mulcahy, 1999). French culture is another example that held a prominent place in many European societies during the 17th and 18th centuries due to France's active persistent self-promotion (Lane, 2013).

Colonial powers have also taken cultural assets under the pretence of modernization. Nations like Japan and Britain increased their influence over a large empire by exporting culture in large quantities. After World War II, cultural diplomacy also garnered a lot of attention. The Marshall Plan was one of the many ways that the USA thoughtfully funded the reconstruction of Europe and Japan. The projects and organisations that arose from these efforts matched the interests of Americans with those of the receiving nations. The US and the USSR both made significant investments in cultural events, such as radio programmes, art exhibits, and student exchanges during the Cold War to draw outsiders into their respective domains in command (Lee, 2015). Rather than the Soviet Union's economic or military failings, some scholars even claim that the collapse of the Soviet Union was caused by the general distaste for its culture and identity (Richmond, 2003). All things considered, collaborative and disruptive tactics are all part of cultural diplomacy.

Furthermore, building on Joseph Nye's 1980s concept of 'soft power', American political scientist Milton Cummings defined cultural diplomacy as the notion of "the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding" (Cummings, 2003, p. 1). This widely used definition places a strong emphasis on the pursuit of an ideal (mutual understanding) and the

reciprocity (exchange) process. Other scholars, on the other hand, concentrate on the unilateral process of promoting national interests and portraying a national image through cultural activities (Higham, 2007). Critics argue that this instrumental strategy is more appropriate for informational diplomacy or, to put it more bluntly, propaganda than cultural diplomacy (Mulcahy, 1999; Nye, 2004; Mark, 2010). Notwithstanding these theoretical disagreements, the majority of observers agree that the creative arts, media, sports, and education are all part of the culture. Moreover, a significant number of people consider cultural diplomacy as a subset of public diplomacy since the latter encourages interpersonal relationships rather than state-to-state politics which refer to traditional diplomacy (Mulcahy, 1999; Mark, 2010).

Thus, from the above definitions, it is preferable to understand cultural diplomacy as a set of conduct that is predicated on and makes use of the sharing of ideas, beliefs, customs, and other facets of culture or identity. It reflects a tapestry of interwoven links between nations by making use of the vibrant threads of their distinct yet similar culture. It involves more than merely introducing everyone around the world to the music, artwork, or literature of one country. Rather, it invites a sincere dialogue, for all parties to grow, change, and thrive. Countries may showcase their identities, share their experiences, and emphasise the values they cherish through these cross-cultural exchanges. While traditional diplomacy emphasises power, alliances and enticements, cultural diplomacy focuses on the power of cultural attraction and political ideals giving rise to mutual respect, inclusivity, and adaptability beyond politics towards other nations.

HARNESSING SOFT POWER OF THE NORTHEAST REGION

The NER of India comprises eight states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. It is known for its vibrant culture, rich heritage, and unparalleled physical landscape. The northeast boasts a rich cultural heritage, including arts and crafts, music, cuisines, folk dances, and more. These cultural elements can be harnessed to shape the perceptions of others across Southeast Asia and around the world.

The cultural soft power of northeast India can act as a catalyst for the AEP. AEP today includes not only the 10 ASEAN countries but also Japan, South Korea, China, Australia, and New Zealand (Ganapathi, 2015). Hence, by actively engaging in cultural collaborations, exchanges, festivals, and collaborative projects with the AEP nations, the northeast region can showcase its unique and vibrant cultural identity and reinforce the pride of India in being one of the most diverse cultures in the world. At the same time, it can fulfil the strategic aim of AEP which is to enhance economic and cultural ties between India and East Asian countries. This soft power can then be employed by India to achieve its political goals domestically, regionally, and internationally (Jeong & Grix, 2023).

Furthermore, according to the 2023 Global Soft Power rankings, Asian countries like China and South Korea were ranked 4, 5 and 15 respectively. They are recognised as some of the most powerful soft power countries in Asia and the world. The rankings were based on their performance in eight soft power pillars, including business and trade, culture and heritage, governance, international relations, education and science, people, and values etc. Countries having high soft power also attract investments, trade, talent, and tourism. For example, South Korea's cultural soft power, famously known as the K-wave or *Hallyu*, has contributed significantly to the South Korean economy. The K-wave includes various cultural phenomena such as K-drama, K-pop music, Korean cuisine, online games, beauty products and YouTubers. These cultural exports have generated over 12 billion dollars for the South Korean economy, and they have also helped boost tourism in the country (Hussain, 2023; Mishra, 2023). The K-wave has undoubtedly played a massive role in increasing South Korea's global profile and its soft power influence.

In Northeast India too, one can witness the powerful soft power influence of a few East Asian countries, such as China, Japan, Korea, and others. There is a seamless blending and adoption of Korean or Japanese culture by the people of the region. From the street style to the food habits, music, dance, and festivals, the northeast people have been heavily influenced by the East Asian culture as can be seen in the way people dress, the food they eat, the music they listen to, and the festivals they celebrate.

For centuries, India has placed great emphasis on highlighting its civilizational similarities and fostering diplomatic relationships with ASEAN and other East Asian countries, particularly through Buddhism. The promotion of Buddhism as a foreign policy by our honourable Prime Minister Narendra Modi is something public often witnesses (Scott, 2023). It is high time we recognise the immense cultural richness and diversity of Northeast India and bring it to the forefront. The region is home to a plethora of indigenous tribes, each with its unique customs, traditions, and languages. From the mesmerising folk and classical music and dance of Assam and Manipur to the delectable cuisine of Nagas, and festivals like Hornbill, and Ziro Music festivals that have gained international recognition. Northeast India has a lot to offer to the world. By showcasing and promoting this cultural heritage, we can not only celebrate the unique identity of the region but also foster greater understanding and appreciation among people from different parts of the world.

Furthermore, the northeast region shares many similarities with the Southeast Asian nations in terms of physical features, food habits, customs, and practices. The people of northeast India belong to the same Tibeto-Burman family as many of the ethnic communities in the Southeast Asian nations. The region is ethnically different from the rest of India and bears more similarities in terms of animistic culture, traditions etc. with the East Asian countries (Hussain, 2017; Lalengkima, 2020; Hussain, 2023). This shared cultural heritage and affinity can serve as a strong foundation for building cultural ties, promoting people-to-people contacts, and fostering regional cooperation.

In conclusion, unveiling the cultural soft power of northeast India is not a distant dream but a realistic possibility. Emphasis on cultural diplomacy is important as culture can play an important role in developing mutual understanding by narrowing differences in international relations (Hussain, 2017). By leveraging the region's rich cultural heritage, diversity, and shared cultural affinity, India can enhance its cultural diplomacy with the Southeast Asian nations and deepen its strategic engagement in the region.

SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN PROMOTING CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Cultural sensitivity plays an instrumental role in strengthening socio-cultural ties across nations in this ever-changing realm of international relations by building a sense of tolerance and mutual respect for different cultures. It is about acknowledging the cultural differences among nations and their people by "employing one's knowledge, consideration, understanding, respect…" and adapting to cultural diversity (Foronda, 2008, p.4). This is in turn used by diplomats and experts in foreign policies to build diplomatic relations. As stated by Paasche (2004) the main principle of cultural sensitivity is to recognize the role of culture in people's lives and respect the differences in culture as well as minimise the negative consequences that cultural differences bring.

Furthermore, developing foreign policies also requires government efforts to shape the opinions of foreign nations. And in a world where information spreads fast, people's opinions greatly impact international relations, making it all the more crucial. It is the public's thoughts and attitudes that can either make or break the economy of a nation. This is where cultural sensitivity becomes imperative. It plays a crucial role, this is particularly true under India's AEP, which aims to strengthen India's socio-economic, political and cultural ties with Southeast Asian countries, including North East India (Trivedi, 2010). Scholars argue that AEP has increased the prospects of NER in India since NER is located between the edge of South Asia and South East Asia (Patgiri & Hazarika, 2016). As AEP represents a strategic shift in the foreign policy of India, a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances, and appreciation of the traditions and values of Northeast India can be put forward by being culturally sensitive. It is understood that Northeast India has the potential to develop into a soft power, exploring the domains of music, dance, folklore, and food in Northeast India can yield a significant impact. This will further help to build a stronger connection between India and Southeast Asian nations while fostering mutual respect.

Moreover, in this diplomatic effort, where traditional diplomacy is no longer effective or less effective, it is through cultural exchanges that

relationships between countries can be strengthened (The Power of Cultural Diplomacy, 2023). To build stronger ties between different cultures, it is tolerance and respect, the two important elements of Unity that can essentially be developed through cultural sensitivity (Muslichah, 2017). It can be applied within the states of Northeast India as well, as this will help in building trust among the local communities and their Southeast Asian counterparts. Thus to prevent miscommunication, cultural diplomacy initiatives should acknowledge the cultural sensitivities of North East India as well. This is particularly important in areas where customs and practices vary considerably from one another, especially from the rest of mainstream Indian society. This strategy can aid in overcoming gaps in culture and assuring the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of public diplomacy initiatives under the Act East Policy.

It should be further noted that cultural sensitivity can primarily aid to a better understanding of different cultures and their perspectives which in turn can build soft power via promoting exhibitions of traditional arts and crafts and encouraging people-to-people interaction. Cultural sensitivity can also help to thoroughly comprehend the nuances of the social and cultural environment of North East India, rather than only superficially admiring the customs and traditions. Exploration of the historical complexities, diverse population and their distinctive way of life is also crucial for such diplomacy. In keeping with the AEP, India can encourage sincere and long-lasting ties with Southeast Asian countries by incorporating this knowledge into public diplomacy efforts.

Thus, under India's AEP to successfully execute cultural diplomacy and soft power, cultural sensitivity is essential in promoting cooperation and constructive engagement with Southeast Asian nations. Therefore, cultural sensitivity becomes paramount in understanding the complex cultural landscape of Northeast India and bridging the cultural gap between Southeast Asia nations. Thus, cultural diplomacy requires building trust among countries and understanding and appreciating other cultural perspectives.

NAVIGATING HISTORICAL COMPLEXITIES AND DIVERSITY: CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN THE NORTHEAST REGION

Cultural sensitivity refers to the awareness, understanding and respect for the diverse cultures, traditions, languages and customs of the people living in a particular region. Since the North-eastern states comprise diverse ranges of ethnicities, languages, and faiths are indicative of the state's multicultural composition making it a great example of 'diversity in diversity'. More than 220 of the 705 tribe groupings in India (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, n.d), speaking various dialects and languages of the Tibeto-Burman people are concentrated in this area, making 'Northeast' and 'tribe(s)' inseparable. There is a variation to some extent among the tribes that comprise the majority of the population in states like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. People from different religious backgrounds, including Muslims, Christians, and Hindus, as well as local tribes and communities, live in states like Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and Sikkim. This region is undoubtedly one of the ethnically and linguistically varied regions in Asia and each state has its own distinct cultures and customs. Because of the NER's distinctive historical complexity and geopolitical dynamics, it has been extremely challenging to promote cultural sensitivity in this region.

First of all, the central government has a history of marginalising North-east India, which has caused alienation among the region's many ethnic communities resulting in numerous social movements and struggles (Vanlalhruaia, 2015). Historical grievances such as the imposition of foreign cultures and the negligence of indigenous traditions contribute to intergroup tensions and hinder efforts to promote cultural understanding and sensitivity.

Secondly, the region is the abode of plentiful ethnic communities, each with its exclusive cultural practices, dialects, and belief systems. Managing this diversity requires nuanced approaches that recognize and respect the unique identities of each group. As Charles Taylor argues, due recognition of any culture is a vital human need, when remains unrecognised or misrecognized can instigate hatred (Taylor, 1992 cited in Meetei, 2014). Nevertheless, if not

handled carefully the differences in customs, languages, and social norms can cause misunderstandings and conflicts.

Thirdly, the geopolitical difficulties that affect cultural sensitivity are a result of Northeast India sharing borders with other countries as well. The cultural terrain is shaped by historical displacements, cross-border exchanges and geo-political tensions (Kakati, 2021). Hence, it is difficult to maintain intercultural relations and promote sensitivity without taking larger geo-political surroundings into account.

Fourth, cultural sensitivity promotion is a major obstacle due to the linguistic diversity of Northeast India. There are more than 400 languages spoken in the area which might make it difficult to communicate and comprehend one another (Talukdar, 2022). Not only do language barriers hinder communication, but they also make it easier for cultural norms and values to be misunderstood and misinterpreted (Fiset et al., 2024).

Fifth, the region has witnessed several socio-political grievances and identity issues that have contributed to prolonged instances of violence and insurrection in the region (Subuddhi, 2006). These disputes frequently make intergroup tensions worse and obstruct efforts to foster mutual respect and trust among communities. Promoting cultural sensitivity in conflict-ridden areas requires addressing underlying grievances and promoting reconciliation programs to create sustainable peace through non-violent means as well as holistic peace building (Ueland, 2015).

Sixth, traditional modes of life in Northeast India are changing as a consequence of rising factors like urbanisation, modernization and globalisation. The preservation of cultural legacy and the promotion of sensitivity to indigenous customs are challenged by these changes, even though they also present economic opportunities (Hall & Fenelon, 2015). Thus, a careful assessment of community needs and aspirations is necessary to strike a balance between these factors and cultural preservation.

Lastly, the way Northeast India has been portrayed in the media often feeds prejudices and stereotypes about the region, which spreads false

information and hinders efforts to encourage cultural awareness (Barma, 2023). To promote a better knowledge and appreciation of the Northeast region's rich cultural diversity, it is imperative to address misrepresentations in the mainstream media and support diverse narratives.

Cultural sensitivity in diplomacy becomes imperative in the 21st century as it also contributes to the soft power projection of the country and provides a non-coercive way to influence other countries, form bonds, and work together to address global issues. Thus to foster cultural sensitivity in Northeast India, it is necessary to employ holistic strategies that tackle the above challenges. By recognizing and engaging with these challenges, stakeholders can work towards building inclusive societies that respect and celebrate the cultural diversity of the region.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Historically it was the trade that was the catalysing factor for India's relationship with Southeast Asia but today it has expanded to polity, religion, art, education and other sectors. Cultural diplomacy has become an important foreign policy tool to promote national interests through the promotion of various cultural activities such as cultural events, art exhibitions etc. (Hussain, 2017). Understanding the importance of it, the authors have tried to delve into the intricate relationship between cultural sensitivity, cultural diplomacy and the soft power potential of Northeast India within the framework of the AEP. NER with its rich cultural heritage can emerge as a significant player in shaping India's image and fostering soft power on the global stage.

However, there are various obstacles on the path to realising the full potential of NER. A major challenge for the holistic development of the Northeast region of India is the lack of cultural sensitivity towards the various ethnic and linguistic groups residing there. The indigenous group in the region has been marginalised, and marred with various prejudices and stereotypes which further aggravate the situation.

Notwithstanding the long list of challenges, the authors have made the following recommendations for employing cultural assets of the northeast

region in India's soft power strategy keeping in mind how NER of India and the Southeast Nations can reap the benefit.

1) Indian media both domestic and international can contribute to building a positive national and international narrative of NER. To date, the Indian media is not inclusive as one can hardly see the culture and people of northeast India in mainstream media. This step is important as emphasised in the website of the Ministry of External Affairs 2003, states how significantly Bollywood has influenced India's soft power in other countries making Indian cultures, cuisines, classical and popular music widespread across the globe, as well as making the contribution of Indian writers and intellectuals impactful.

2) Greater cultural collaborations, people-to-people contact through film and music festivals, visits by international delegates, rich border haat programs, and cross-culture interactions through exposure tours conducted by the concerned countries.

3) Preparing the north-eastern people in the hospitality, skill development and service sectors. Creating a climate conducive to conducting business, trade, tourism etc.

4) Organising events that showcase the festivals of Northeast India is suggested taking inspiration from the ideas of Pupul Jayakar, writer and cultural activist, who popularised the festivals of India and its art across France, US, and Japan during the 1980s. Similarly, popular festivals like the Ziro music festival, the buffalo fighting festival of Assam locally known as *Moh-Jooj*, popular music, and sports and art forms of India's North-eastern states can be put at the forefront.

Therefore, such an effort will require robust planning and involvement of all the stakeholders involved and the need for further research studies on the matter. Lastly, to create a positive and influential perception among the Southeast countries, or any country in the world for that matter, India must undertake a comprehensive and all-encompassing improvement program. This is because various underlying issues such as corruption, poverty, unemployment, crimes, and religious fault lines tend to undermine India's reputation on the global stage, and therefore, create obstacles in its quest to

become a global soft power. By addressing these fundamental challenges, India can improve its standing in the world and become a more respected and influential player on the international stage.

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