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CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL
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ARUNACHAL PRADESH: GATEWAY TO CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL RICHES IN INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY

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Abstract

India's Act East Policy has been instrumental in strengthening ties with South-East Asian nations, and the state of Arunachal Pradesh has played a pivotal role in connecting India with its neighbouring countries through various dimensions, including religion, geographical proximity, and cultural affinity. Arunachal Pradesh's rich spiritual heritage, cultural diversity, and ethical framework have significantly influenced its role in fostering mutual understanding and cooperation between India and South-East Asia. Initially, this chapter aims to delve deeper into the intertwined relationship between spirituality, culture, ethics, and foreign policy in the context of Arunachal Pradesh and its contribution to India's Act East Policy (AEP). The chapter also examines government initiatives which bring Arunachal and other North-Eastern states closer to the ASEAN region under the broader umbrella of AEP since 2014, the year when Look East Policy was renamed as AEP.

The interlocking of spirituality, culture, and ethics in Arunachal Pradesh not only serves as a cultural bridge between India and Southeast Asia but also contributes to the soft power dimensions of India's foreign policy, particularly in the context of the Act East Policy. The unique position of Arunachal Pradesh, with its diverse linguistic and cultural tapestry, presents an opportunity to foster physical connectivity, cultural diplomacy, and cross-border trade; this emphasises the state's pivotal role in promoting people-to-people relations and addressing security and geostrategic challenges through a different approach. Arunachal not only shares international borders with a number of India's neighbouring countries, it shares a

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heritage that is rich in common history, religion and culture with those countries. By highlighting the distinct characteristics of Arunachal Pradesh and its contributions to the Act East Policy, this paper aims to provide a fresh perspective that goes beyond the predominant security discourse in Indian foreign policy. The paper aligns with the evolving ASEAN-India diplomatic relationship, with an emphasis on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and the importance of recognising the soft power dimensions of India's foreign policy.

I. Background of Arunachal Pradesh

The North-Eastern region of India is diverse with 100 major tribes, along with numerous sub-tribes, each preserving their distinct identities, cultural traditions, and ways of life. Among these diverse ethnic communities, some, such as the Sherpas, Monpas, Sherdukpens, Khambas, Membas, Nahs, Meyors, Zakhrings, and others, practice the Mahayana form of Buddhism. On the other hand, the Tai-Khamtis, Tai-Phakeys, Tai-Khamyangs, Tai-Turungs, Tai-Aitons, Singphos, Tikhak Tangsas, Chakmas, Moghs, Boruahs, and others adhere to the Theravada form of Buddhism. Of particular note are the Tai-Khamtis, a significant ethnic group in North-East India who are the followers of Theravada Buddhism. Historical records from the 19th and early 20th centuries, chronicled by foreign writers such as T.T. Cooper (1873 A.D), John F. Mitchell (1883 A.D), A. Mackenzie (1884 A.D), J. Errol Gray (1893 A.D), L.W. Shakespeare (1904 A.D), and various British political officers of the Sadiya Frontier Zone, provide extensive documentation of the prevalence of Buddhism and Buddhist institutions among the Tai-Khamtis. These accounts by British writers vividly depict that Theravada Buddhism practiced by the Khamtis closely mirrors the traditions of Buddhists in South-East Asia. However, it is essential to recognise that Theravada Buddhism among the Tai-Khamtis during this era had evolved into a unique amalgamation of Buddhist practices and indigenous belief systems by the late 19th century.

Arunachal Pradesh, the largest of India's seven North-Eastern states, covers an extensive land area of 83,743 square kilometres. It shares borders with several neighbouring countries: Bhutan, China, Tibet and Myanmar. Additionally, it is bordered by the Indian states of Assam and Nagaland to the south. This strategic geographic location presents significant opportunities for international trade, particularly with Asian nations like

Myanmar, Bhutan, and China. The projected Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) for Arunachal Pradesh in the fiscal year 2023-24 is estimated to reach approximately Rs. 37,870 Crore (equivalent to around US\$ 4.60 billion) at current prices. The region's topography is predominantly mountainous, characterised by the majestic Himalayan ranges. Within the state's boundaries, five distinct river valleys—Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit, and Tirap—add to its geographical diversity and natural beauty. Arunachal Pradesh hosts a variety of industries that contribute to its economic and cultural identity. These include thriving sectors such as art and crafts, weaving, cane and bamboo crafts, horticulture, power generation, and mineral-based enterprises. The state's economic landscape is enriched by its abundant natural resources, and showcases a vast potential for growth and development (Arunachal Pradesh Official State Portal).

Religious practices in Arunachal Pradesh showcase a unique fusion of three distinct traditions, each closely tied to specific geographic regions. Hinduism finds its presence in the foothills, while animism thrives in the central hilly areas. In contrast, Buddhism flourishes in the South-Eastern and higher Himalayan territories. In the North-Western zone of Arunachal Pradesh, the influence of Mahayana Buddhism can be traced back to the 8th century A.D. Meanwhile, in the South-Eastern region, the initial encounter with Buddhism can be traced to the migration of the Tai-Khamptis, a Buddhist tribal community, from the Irrawaddy Valley in northern Myanmar during the mid-18th century. The formal establishment of the Theravada School of Buddhism in this region dates back to the early 19th century. During this period, a significant event unfolded when a golden portrait of Lord Buddha was enshrined and venerated within the Bodhivihara (temple) located in Chongkham, situated in the Lohit district. This commemoration attracted the participation of hundreds of monks, turning Chongkham into the epicentre of Hinayana Buddhism for the entire region. Subsequently, this form of Buddhism gained widespread practice throughout this area. (Singh, 2014)

Arunachal Pradesh, often referred to as the 'Land of the Rising Sun', is a region that beautifully encapsulates the diverse cultural fabric of India. Its unique mingles of geography and spirituality make it a remarkable part of the country. From a geopolitical perspective, Arunachal Pradesh plays a crucial role in India's Act East Policy. Its strategic

location positions it as a potential gateway for India's engagement with its eastern neighbours. Recognising this significance, the Indian government has actively highlighted Arunachal Pradesh's integral role within the Act East Policy framework. This emphasis aims to foster greater participation in ASEAN-related events and initiatives, spanning economic cooperation, people-to-people interactions, energy projects, and improved connectivity.

As the region continues to integrate itself within the Act East Policy, the study explores one of the vital connections between Arunachal Pradesh and South-East Asia–Buddhism. It posits that the multifaceted dimensions of Buddhism can significantly contribute to enhancing Arunachal Pradesh's resonance within the South-East Asian consciousness, thereby elevating the state's status as a conduit for expanding India's influence across the ASEAN region.

Ultimately, the convergence of spirituality, culture, and strategic positioning can pave the way for enriched connectivity and collaboration, enhancing economic and social ties between India and ASEAN. This not only underlines the cultural richness and historical depth of Arunachal Pradesh but also underscores its potential as a catalyst for strengthening regional partnerships and fostering greater cooperation on a global scale.

II. Methodology of the Paper

Research Questions

- To what extent can Arunachal Pradesh actively contribute to the advancement of India's Act East Policy?
- How does the intersection of spirituality, cultural heritage, and strategic geographical positioning bolster Arunachal Pradesh's importance within India's Act East Policy framework?
- In what ways does the influence of Buddhism contribute to positioning Arunachal Pradesh as a pivotal player in India's Act East Policy initiatives?

Argument of the Paper

Given its distinctive geographical and spiritual-religious characteristics, Arunachal Pradesh has the potential to strengthen India's presence in the ASEAN region, offering a nuanced and people-centric boost to the Act East Policy.

Methods

To demonstrate Arunachal Pradesh's capacity to augment India's influence in the ASEAN region through the Act East Policy, a comprehensive research approach is essential. This study primarily employs a narrative framework based on secondary resources and qualitative research methods. The examination of government records, statements, and policy documents forms the basis of this paper. The subsequent sections are organised into four parts. The initial two sections focus on assessing Arunachal Pradesh's potential, drawing from gathered information, to effectively position India in the ASEAN region. The first section explores the spiritual and cultural dimensions of Arunachal Pradesh and their potential impact on advancing India's Act East Policy. The second section underscores the strategic aspects of Arunachal Pradesh that can leverage India's Act East Policy. The third section presents key insights derived from significant documents and statements. The paper concludes with a discussion in the final section.

III. Potential of the Spiritual and Cultural Aspects of Arunachal Pradesh to Serve as a Bridge Advancing India's Act East Policy

The historical roots of Theravada Buddhism among the Tai-Khamtis in Arunachal Pradesh unfold a narrative that positions the region as a potential bridge for advancing India's Act East Policy. As the Tai-Khamtis migrated to Assam in the late 18th century, they carried with them their profound faith in Theravada Buddhism, which traces its origins back to the 3rd century A.D. in upper Burma according to their traditional beliefs (Phukan, 2019). The dissemination of Theravada Buddhism among the Tai-Khamtis and neighbouring communities in North-Eastern India was greatly facilitated by Buddhist missionaries from South-East Asian countries, notably Burma. Siradow, a pivotal figure among these missionaries, played a crucial role in introducing Buddhist teachings to the

Tai-Khamtis and Singphos. His journey to the eastern frontier of Assam in July 1882 marked a significant chapter in the region's cultural and spiritual history (Mantche, 2019; Maltesh, 2006). Under Siradow's guidance, two ordination temples were established in 1892—one in Chowkham in present-day Arunachal Pradesh and another in the village of Borpkakey in Assam. These temples became focal points for the propagation of Theravada Buddhism, with numerous Burmese monks settling in Tai-Khamti villages and disseminating the faith in accordance with Burmese traditions. The architectural distinctions of Tai-Khamti Buddhist monasteries, often resembling Burmese pagodas, highlight the cultural uniqueness that Arunachal Pradesh contributes to the larger narrative. The surviving examples of architectural wonders, such as the brick-built stupa in Namsai and the Lathow Buddhist stupa, serve as testaments to the enduring legacy of Theravada Buddhism in the region. The construction of modern stupas, such as the one in Chowkham in 1990, showcases a continued commitment to preserving and advancing this cultural heritage (Das, 2020). Additionally, the district of Namsai is adorned with Buddhist monasteries, each accompanied by votive stupas that date back to the early 20th century. The Golden Pagoda at Tengapani near Chowkham, inaugurated in 2010, stands as a modern marvel, drawing attention with its architectural grandeur and cultural significance. This monastery, with its unique features like a kyong, a kyong fra, a replica of the Asoka pillar, and a library cum guest house, has become a prominent tourist attraction. The incorporation of traditional elements, including statues, mural paintings, and religious manuscripts, showcases Arunachal Pradesh's rich spiritual and cultural tapestry. These Theravada Buddhist monasteries not only serve as repositories for religious artifacts but also as centres for education. Schools operating within these monasteries teach Pali and Tai languages to students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This emphasis on education aligns with the people-centric approach of the Act East Policy, contributing to social development and cultural exchange (Mantche, 2019). The distinct architectural features of Theravada Buddhist monasteries in Arunachal Pradesh, including the design of prayer halls and entrance gates, serve as visual markers that differentiate them from surrounding village structures. The meticulous incorporation of Burmese architectural styles, intricate Buddhist symbols, and the construction of structures like the 'sanken kyong' or 'chong phra' demonstrate the

region's commitment to preserving its cultural identity. Moreover, the region's engagement in festivals like Poi-Sanken, where ritualistic baths of Buddha's idols take place, reflects the living traditions that bridge the past with the present. The festival becomes a cultural spectacle, attracting devotees and tourists alike, and contributing to the region's cultural diplomacy. The intricate interplay between historical roots, architectural marvels, cultural preservation, and educational initiatives in the realm of Theravada Buddhism positions the region as a unique contributor to the broader diplomatic objectives of India in the ASEAN region. The spiritual and cultural bonds forged through these practices can serve as catalysts for enhanced regional cooperation, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation between India and its Southeast Asian neighbours (Das, 2020).

Prominent Strategic Aspects of Arunachal Pradesh in India's Act East Policy

In recent years, policymakers have consistently emphasised the crucial role of Arunachal Pradesh within India's Act East Policy. In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi identified North-Eastern states of India (including Arunachal Pradesh) as 'the gateway' to the East, envisioning its pivotal role in India's relations with its eastern neighbours (Parthasarathy, 2017). This perspective was echoed by then External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj in 2015, who described Arunachal Pradesh as an integral component of the Act East Policy. Former Defence Minister, Manohar Parrikar also emphasised the state's significance within the Act East Policy in 2016 (MEA, 2016). Arunachal Pradesh's strategic importance within the Act East Policy has consistently been a focal point for the government, going beyond security concerns. This approach places a strong emphasis on empowering the North-Eastern region to take a leading role in the implementation of the Act East Policy, through the adoption of a localised and comprehensive development agenda. This dedication has yielded tangible results as the government initiates efforts to strengthen connectivity infrastructure within the state. Notable initiatives include the construction of new roads, airports, and airstrips, all of which have the potential to position Arunachal Pradesh as India's eastern gateway. One particularly significant development is the recent approval of the 1,748 km Frontier Highway, connecting East Kameng district to Changleng district. This highway, designed to link all three

international borders of Arunachal Pradesh, will be interconnected with the Trans-Arunachal Highway (TAH) and East-West Industrial Corridor Highway (EWICH) (The Sentinel, 2023; Nag, 2021). The TAH spans all districts of the state, while the 600 km EWICH facilitates a connection between its eastern and western sections. The Frontier Highway, a strategic initiative proposed in 2014, is poised to enhance infrastructure and connectivity, solidifying Arunachal Pradesh's position as a key pillar of the Act East Policy. The central government's substantial allocation of 44,000 crore for connectivity projects underscores a significant shift in its approach toward border infrastructure development in North-East India. These large-scale border connectivity projects hold the promise of catalysing cross-border trade and promoting economic transformation along border regions. Another important milestone occurred in May 2022 when the state hosted an international buyer-seller meet, highlighting its potential in the regional and global economy. Chief Minister Pema Khandu discussed strategies for enhancing border trade, including the utilisation of routes such as the Pangsau Pass (linking Myanmar) and the Lumla-Tashigang road (linking Bhutan). Plans are also underway to construct a road connecting Dong village to Jachep, with Dong being the easternmost village in Arunachal Pradesh and Jachep located approximately 20 km from Myanmar. While Arunachal Pradesh shares connectivity with Bhutan through the Bomdila-Tashigang Road and the Pasighat-Zemithang Road, issues such as limited infrastructure, security concerns, and bureaucratic challenges have impeded cross-border trade. Alongside efforts to enhance connectivity, it is imperative to address these issues to encourage and facilitate cross-border trade effectively (Kundu, 2023).

Observations from Review of Statements and Government Records

The primary sources which were reviewed by the author, such as the statements by government agencies, policymakers and policy documents, have all reflected well on the potential of Arunachal Pradesh as a gateway of India to South-East Asia. Details are furnished in Table 1. In summary, Table 1 shows that Arunachal Pradesh has significant agricultural potential, as evidenced by the prestigious Geographical Indication (GI) tag, which was awarded to Arunachal oranges, positioning them for increased export opportunities. Additionally, Arunachal Pradesh has the largest bamboo-bearing area

Table 1: Observations from review of relevant and recent Government documents (2018-2023)

Examining Government Records, Statements and Policy Documents	
Details about the Document	Importance of Arunachal Pradesh Reflected through the Document
Final Report: Study of Infrastructure based on Act East Policy Connectivity, Marketing Shed, Electrification etc. for NER States 9th October 2018, published by The North-Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd. (NEDFI Report)	Arunachal Orange has been accorded the prestigious Geographical Indication (GI) tag, which needs to be capitalised for accentuating export potential of the state. This indicates the state's export potential in oranges. Among the NER states, Arunachal Pradesh has the largest Bamboo Bearing Area which indicates the state's potential in becoming the hub for bamboo products.
North-Eastern Region Vision 2020 (NEC Document)	The total length of the Arunachal Package is 3,360 km. The Trans-Arunachal Highway covering a distance of 1,850 km. will link the eastern and western sides of the state. It will ease travel within the state and satisfy the long pending demand of the people of that area.
Inaugural Address by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Natural Allies in Development and Interdependence (NADI) Asian Confluence River Conclave 2022	Now all these are practical illustrations of a future that without exaggeration is buzzing with promise. We are looking at the feasibility of creating a cross-border rail line between Bhutan and India, running through Assam or expanding the Buddhist circuit to connect cherished religious destinations in Bhutan and Nepal to those in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh.
India's Act East Policy, By: Amb (Retd) Anil Wadhwa, 2019	20 port townships are to be developed along the Brahmaputra and Barak River systems to enhance intra-regional connectivity. PM Modi has also proposed the augmentation of air connectivity to and from the region which will help business ties with the ASEAN. At least 50 economic integration and development nodes are to be developed across the region, in tandem with transport corridors to boost manufacturing. Connectivity is also being upgraded in the border areas, with highways and development plans approved for Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur including a 4-lane highway between Dimapur and Kohima.
PIB Notice, April 10, 2023	Union Home Minister and Minister of Cooperation, Shri Amit Shah launches the 'Vibrant Villages Programme' at Kibithoo - a border village in Arunachal Pradesh in April 2023. Shri Amit Shah also inaugurated 9 micro hydel projects of Arunachal Government and 14 infrastructure projects Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) worth Rs.120 crore. He said that the central government has given Rs. 44000 crores to the Arunachal government for the development of infrastructure. He said that in the field of digital connectivity also, 4G connectivity has been reached in 684 villages and about 1327 border villages have been electrified.

Source: Details of various sources have been indicated in the references section

among North-Eastern Region (NER) states, indicating its potential to become a major centre for bamboo products. Infrastructure development is a key focus, as seen in the construction of the Trans-Arunachal Highway, an 1,850 km road that aims to connect the eastern and western parts of the state, improving travel and meeting local demands. Strategic initiatives under the Act East Policy emphasise connectivity, with proposed developments including a cross-border rail line through Assam and the expansion of the Buddhist circuit to include Arunachal Pradesh. The government's commitment is further demonstrated through the recent launch of the Vibrant Villages Programme and the inauguration of multiple infrastructure projects, with significant investments aimed at improving digital and electrification connectivity in border villages. These efforts collectively enhance Arunachal Pradesh's role in regional economic integration, infrastructure development, and strategic connectivity.

Based on the evidence and observations, the Indian government has taken several initiatives to connect Arunachal and other North-Eastern states with the ASEAN region, and as part of the Act East Policy, India has undertaken further initiatives to foster physical connectivity between the North-East region and South-East Asia. India, along with ASEAN, has been actively working on integration and cooperation projects, particularly the Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan corridor, which are currently under implementation (Ghatak, 2021). These connectivity initiatives are critical for the North-East region, including Arunachal Pradesh, to serve as a gateway for trade and cultural exchange between India and Southeast Asia (Chanda & Gopalan, 2009). Furthermore, digital connectivity and e-commerce hold great potential to boost SMEs and marginalised groups in both India and ASEAN by diversifying their client base and improving access to a wider range of products (Majumdar et al., 2020). India's active involvement in BIMSTEC and MGC are testament to India's willingness to connect North-East India with South-East Asia.

IV. Conclusion

The North-East region of India has deep-rooted historical and cultural connections with its neighbouring countries, often transcending political boundaries. These trans-

Himalayan communities, bound by common racial affinities, are not only found in various parts of South Asia and South-East Asia but also share cultural assimilation through common food habits, languages, physical appearances, and ways of life. This cultural cohesion between communities extends across political borders, further nurturing their connections. People-to-people connectivity, a central objective of India's Act East Policy (AEP), is just as crucial as physical infrastructure development. Strengthening the ties between the people of North-East India and those from South-East Asia can be enhanced by recognising and leveraging their cultural similarities. The Deputy Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh emphasised this idea during the 25th anniversary celebration of the ASEAN-India Dialogue Partnership where the potential for cultural affinities to serve as a foundation for diplomatic and economic policies was highlighted.

Individuals from countries like Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia express a strong desire to visit significant sites such as Tawang Monastery, Sikkim, and Bodh Gaya. However, limited connectivity and infrastructure and lack of information currently hinder their travel plans. Implementing more flexible visa policies, especially for religious tourists, has the potential to gradually increase the flow of pilgrims to the North-East. Religious tourism, with a particular focus on Buddhism, can not only bolster India's Act East Policy but also strengthen its bonds with Southeast Asian nations. Such tourism acts as a catalyst for trade between India and Southeast Asian countries.

In this paper, it has been argued that (A) the promotion of Arunachal Pradesh as a destination of Buddhism (particularly Theravada Buddhism) has the potential to increase the footfall of tourists from South-East Asia; and, (B) Arunachal Pradesh, for its distinct geographic and spiritual-religious positions, can situate India in a better place in the ASEAN region giving the Act East Policy a soft yet people-oriented push. This approach will not only enhance India's cultural influence in South-East Asia but will also increase its economic and geostrategic impact.

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