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Manipur's perpetual turmoil and India's act east policy: A sociological perspective

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Abstract

This paper highlights the significance of India's Act East Policy in driving economic transformation and development in Manipur, a state grappling with pressing challenges such as youth unemployment, poverty, and underdevelopment—ultimately impacting its overall well-being. Blessed with favourable resources such as human capital, bio-resources, and a geographically strategic position, Manipur offers its access to a vast market in Southeast Asian countries. However, the state is currently gripped by violence and frozen conflict. Since May 3, 2023, the conflict fuelled by manufactured grievances has been allowed to persist unchecked. The weak and ineffective state response has rendered the indiscriminate violence, untold sufferings and killing of innocent civilians serving as a grim reminder of Manipur's painful history of human suffering dating back to the 1950s. Given Manipur's entrenched sociological challenges including a legacy of political instability, civil unrest, and ethnic insurgency violence, the weakness of the state apparatus emerges as a major impediment to fully leverage the opportunities presented by India's Act East Policy. Without effective governance, security, and stability, Manipur risks being unable to harness Act East Policy's potential for economic progress and development.

Keywords: Manipur, Myanmar, conflict, violence, social suffering, development

Introduction

Located between South and Southeast Asia, Northeast India marks out as Asia's oldest conflict zone; and is one of the most fractured regions in the world as the region is infested with no less than 100-armed ethnic insurgent groups with demonstrated capacity for violence^[1]. All North-eastern states except Sikkim and Mizoram confront long standing conflict and violence with differing degrees of intensity. Ethnic insurgents in Northeast India work in close operational links with each other with their base not only on Indian soil but also in neighbouring countries. Decade's old and widespread conflict and violence in the region, mainly revolve around security driven policies of the Indian state, control over limited resources, mostly land by different ethnic groups, identity politics, domination to control, autonomy struggles and so on. In the whole of Northeast, Manipur alone tops the list in the number of ethnic militias and the most heavily militarised state comparable to parts of Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan, with more than 60000 security forces^[2] stationed in the state. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), Manipur has been a hotspot for insurgent activity, with multiple underground groups operating in the region. Citing reports from SATP, Bhosle^[3] observed that there are approximately 42 identifiable insurgent groups in the state, each representing the socio-political aspirations of their respective ethnic communities. These groups have historically contributed to instability in the region, with their activities ranging from armed conflicts to extortion, illicit power sharing nexus, and territorial disputes.

Manipur's political history of long drawn conflict, violence, death, and destruction presents a significant sociological challenge to India's Act East Policy. The policy aimed at strengthening economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia, relies heavily on the Northeast region, particularly Manipur. Manipur is a gateway of India to Myanmar-a gateway to nations of Southeast Asia. However, persistent insurgency related violence, ethnic conflicts accompanied with violent aggression and perpetual civil unrest can severely impact the implementation and effectiveness of the Act East Policy, hampering Manipur's progress and development.

Methods and Materials

This study employs qualitative research techniques, utilizing document analysis from secondary sources of data and literature. These sources include Government policy documents

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and reports from the Ministry of Home Affairs including the Departments of Internal Security, States, Home, Jammu & Kashmir Affairs, and Border Management, annual reports from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, publications from the Planning Commission, Ministry of Road Transport & Highways, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. Additionally, the study draws rich insights from books, journal articles, and popular media publications including The Washington Post, The Economic Times, The Hindustan Times, The Times of India, and the Press Information Bureau. Equally significant is the researcher's lived experience in the state of Manipur, which provides valuable first hand insights on Manipur. These diverse sources provide valuable insights into the intricate relationships of the pressing issues of policy implementation challenges in politically volatile Manipur, fostering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of these interconnections.

Manipur's Dark History: A Tale of Social Sufferings

Politically, Manipur was an erstwhile independent kingdom and became a princely state of British India after the eventful Anglo-Manipur Wars in 1891. After the British left India in 1947, Manipur was merged into the Indian Union in 1949. Thereafter, Manipur became a Part C state of the Indian Union in 1952 and was under the administration of a Chief Commissioner. Later, in 1956, Manipur was made a Union Territory instead of granting statehood status by electing a popular Government. The people of Manipur perceived these developments a huge setback as their aspiration of forming a popular Government was derided. The local population observed protest demonstrations demanding for statehood. This was responded with heavy state repression accompanied by bloodshed and loss of lives. Protesting people including men, women and youth students faced heavy police repression with injuries while hundreds were arbitrarily arrested. In another historic event of August 1965, three students were brutally killed in police firing when thousands of hungry masses thronged the Chief Commissioner's residence demanding fair distribution of food grains to the masses ^[4]. Vigorous protests and civil movements for statehood demand continued until January 1972 when Manipur was finally granted full-fledged statehood status. Thus, for two decades, the tumultuous political trajectory left Manipur in indelible scar of state tyranny on the minds of the people.

Manipur has witnessed long drawn civil strife and political instability. Subjection of the local population to the misrule of the Chief Commissioners, the presence of heavy military and paramilitary forces in the state, violent suppression of popular movements and the abrupt halting of the infant democratic Government at the time of Manipur's merger with the Indian Union alongside corruption, lack of integrity and political will to put the state into the right track is responsible for the political instability in the state ^[5]. The present democratically elected state is viewed as the product of the overall socio-economic changes in the post-colonial India; and an alien superstructure imposed initially under the British rule, which was consolidated in independent India ^[6]. The failure of the democratically elected state to address genuine aspirations of people has hardened the insurgency movement that ranges from the demand for autonomy of the state to complete independence from India. Even after attainment of statehood, Manipur continues to

grapple with chronic political violence and economic backwardness with a history of death and destruction, systematic violence and victimization.

Insurgency, Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958) & Institutionalised Violence

Insurgency movement in Northeast India began soon after British withdrawal from the Indian sub-continent. In Northeast, Naga insurgency NSCN, is the longest insurgent group, initially demanded separation from India and later physical integration of all Naga inhabited areas of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Subsequently, NSCN entered into ceasefire with the Indian army in 1997, after much bloodshed and suffering a series of setbacks. On the contrary, insurgency in Assam, with huge student support and radical left, is linked to the exodus of Muslim refugees from East-Pakistan in 1930s. Insurgent movements in Assam became weakened through organizational splits, and capture or death of its leaders. Insurgency in Mizo hills led by Mizo National Front (MNF) in 1960s began with the outbreak of devastating famine, directing their protest at Assam and Union Government. Mizo insurgency died with the grant of statehood for Mizoram in 1986. Insurgency in Tripura led by indigenous tribes was directed against the influx of Bengalis from East-Pakistan. Recently, the Government of Tripura declared a virtual absence of armed insurgency in the state. In Manipur, the United National Liberation Front, advocating for social reform programme was the first separatist insurgent that later split and underwent changes ^[7].

Unlike other Northeastern states, currently, ethnic insurgency movement in Manipur is amplified than ever before. The main ethnic insurgency groups are the Meeteis, the Nagas, the Kukis, the Zomis, the Hmars, Muslim underground outfits and several other factional ethnic insurgent groups. Both the valley and the hills are infested with ethnic based insurgents of several militia groups. Some of these insurgents are well equipped with sophisticated weapons and control swaths of the state's territory. Warfare, planting bombs at public places and private individual homes, assassinations, kidnapping, and mafia-style extortion operate in the state of Manipur. In the year 2017, Manipur alone accounted for about 54% of the total violent incidents in the entire region of Northeast India ^[8].

While the inevitable consequence of entrenched insurgency movements in the state is the imposition of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958, AFSPA in turn has acted like a springboard for mushrooming growth of insurgents. Manipur under AFSPA (1958) is heavily militarized with security forces equipped with heavy guns and weapons spreading all over civilian places-streets, markets, agricultural fields, worship and educational places. Violence related to counter insurgency and fake encounters occur in public places and individual private homes. During the decades old insurgency-security related conflict, insurgents put up covert/overt fights with security forces. Since AFSPA (1958) was launched in the state, brutal deaths, extra-judicial and secret killings, executions, disappearances, loss of innocent life in indiscriminate firing, killings in fake encounters, custodial torture, forced displacement, rape and sexual violence committed by security forces with full impunity have become routine ^[9]. The loss of countless number of innocent lives in extra-judicial killings led to the forming of Extra Judicial

Execution Victim Families Association spearheading for justice.

Terrorism and Unrelenting Violence

Throughout the 1990s, Manipur witnessed horrors of unrelenting violence that could symbolise Hobbes' vision of societal collapse where life is harsh, brutish, and short, as Britain experienced in 17th-century. Manipur from the early '90s to late 90s endured brutal eruptions of violence during the infamous Kuki-Naga conflict, followed by the Kuki-Paite clash. The conflict displaced thousands, turned neighbourhoods into enemies, both communities into refugees, children into orphans, women into widows and men as widowers. The conflict was marked by brutal killings, beheadings, rapes, and the destruction of hamlets and villages ^[10]. A similar pattern emerged in the ongoing Kuki-Meetei conflict, accompanied with violent aggression that began on May 3, 2023, bringing large-scale unprecedented devastation--overnight displacement and homelessness of thousands of people, tragic deaths of innocent people, disappearance of students, journalists, and civilians exacerbating an already fragile socio-political landscape. Unlike the Kuki-Naga and Kuki Paite conflicts, during the current Kuki-Meetei conflict, ethnic militias used enhanced destructive capabilities such as drone-bombs and missiles to attack civilian population. Both the conflicting parties lost lives, livelihoods, and forced the common people in severe distress while the displaced victims are forced to live in wretched conditions. Recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic inflicted significant income shocks on many households, their economic struggles have been further worsened by the ongoing conflict and economic downturn, which have led to widespread job losses, livelihood disruptions, and economic stagnation. Owing to the conflict, the state lost over Rs.800 core revenue. The conflict brought down Manipur's export items-hand-woven textiles, medicinal plants and food items by almost 80% ^[11], causing retail inflation rate at 9.5%, highest among all Indian states. During the conflict, Manipur experienced world's longest internet shutdown. The conflict also created a dire situation for the state's educational system, affecting educational aspirations of thousands of young students. The two conflicting groups, once neighbours and organically interdependent, have become deeply polarised, with a broken dialogue. Though two years of violent aggression have subsided, with countless number of street protests against collective state failures-state police, and central security forces to contain the violence, violent frozen conflict continues to cast a shadow over the state.

Corruption, Underdevelopment and Discontentment

The Swedish economist and sociologist, Gunnar Myrdal introduced the concept of 'soft state' ^[12] to refer to the weak state apparatus in South Asian countries including India. According to Myrdal, post-independent India has struggled with weak policy implementation, hindered by corruption, nepotism, inefficiency, and a lack of enforcement, preventing meaningful reforms from taking place. Rather than empowering the poor, political democratization has instead reinforced the interests of the ruling elite. This has contributed to a rise in violence, crime, law violations, corruption, and the criminalization of politics. The "soft state" syndrome in Manipur is most evident in chronic poor governance and fragile state institutions, marked by a lack

of accountability, corrupt and ineffective political leadership, economic stagnation, inadequate infrastructure, deficiencies in education, healthcare systems, and an excessive reliance on police and security forces for governance. Furthermore, weak judicial operations, ineffective law enforcement, and the absence of the rule of law continue to exacerbate these systemic issues.

Primarily an agrarian economy based on traditional methods, the state has too little industry to provide employment, income and overall economic development for its population. Over the years, the state has shown progressive economic decline. Among all Indian states, Manipur ranked the second highest incidence of poverty of people living below poverty line at 47.9% as against the all India average of 29.8% ^[13]. This implies that nearly half the population faces acute crisis of lack of purchasing power, live without enough food, proper housing conditions, education, jobs, and health care facilities. Adding up, currently, among all Indian states, Manipur is the third state with the highest unemployment rate at 22.9% ^[14]. This further implies that the people of Manipur have become poorer than they were in the past, especially early 1980s. In the state, employment opportunities are accessible primarily to those with strong social, cultural and economic connections^[15]. The scenario of massive unemployment in the state implies the structural collapse of employment opportunity for youth population constituting a reservoir of untapped productive potential bottled up in frustration, estrangement and become easy targets of anti-social activities.

In the state, bribery has become deeply ingrained in governmental departments, turning into an unwritten ritual that hinders efficiency and accountability. Corrupt officials, driven by personal gain, deliberately stall administrative functions or obstruct duties unless bribes are paid, leading to systemic delays or complete non-performance. This pervasive corruption has fuelled widespread cynicism among the general public, eroding trust in governance. Allegations against dishonest officials often go unpunished, reinforcing a culture of impunity. The ripple effects of this bribery-driven system are evident in the failure to develop good infrastructure such as roadways, transport and commutation facilities, persistent delays in welfare projects, and the neglect of critical sectors such as education, healthcare, and public distribution system. As corruption tightens its grip, the ability of governance to serve the people continues to weaken, deepening systemic inefficiencies and public frustration. This paves the way for an authoritarian leadership whose legitimacy thrives on support from illegitimate sources. Furthermore, these practices illustrate the extent of the misappropriation of public funds, including unauthorized expenditures, collusive tendering, and the circumvention of procurement regulations, ultimately signalling a complete administrative breakdown within the state. What's more, daily function of state institutions such as the bureaucracy, police, judiciary, and legislature become increasingly opaque, eroding accountability to the public. As a result, state agencies are frequently perceived as entities that exploit and manipulate the law. With huge mistrust from general public, the state faces legitimacy crisis with little autonomy in its administration. One serious consequence of such soft state system is to allow to flourish various insurgent groups to freely operate in the state, posing the greatest challenge to

the democratically elected state leadership. This in turn promotes corruption and the threat of armed violence that routinely influence decisions about governance of the state. Manipur has witnessed recurring socio-economic political challenges, fuelling public dissatisfaction and frequent protests, strikes, and economic blockades. Civil society groups and student organizations often spearhead these movements, with state politics spilling onto streets and marketplaces, often disrupting the state's economic lifeline the Ima Keithel (Mother's Market). Unfortunately, protests often turn violent, leading to loss of lives, livelihoods, and property. Notable incidents include the 2000 *Malom Massacre*, where 10 civilians, including an 18-year-old student, were killed by security forces of Assam Rifles, sparking widespread protests led by iconic Irom Sharmila. In 2001, Manipur erupted in fury after a ceasefire extension agreement with Naga insurgents, resulting in 14 youth killed in police action. In 2004, outrage surged when a young woman was raped and killed in a staged encounter, prompting Manipuri Mothers to protest naked at the *Kangla Fort*. Five years later, in 2009, another fake encounter, killing a youth and a pregnant bystander, led to closure of public institutions and educational shutdowns affecting 300,000 students. More turmoil followed in 2015 over Inner Line Permission, where protests led to the deaths of a 16-year-old student and nine others, paralyzing public institutions for months ^[16]. Manipur remains in a cycle of frozen conflict, violence and civil unrest.

Economic Blockades: A Routine Human Rights Violation

Even National Highways that connect Manipur to the rest of India are entangled in political muddy politics. For decades, these highways have frequently been blocked by armed factional militia groups, who extort exorbitant taxes and often obstruct the flow of essential goods and services, including lifesaving medicines. Manipur is linked to the rest of India and Myanmar via National Highways NH-2 and NH-37. Of the two, NH-2 serves as the state's primary lifeline, with hundreds of vehicles transporting essential consumable and non-consumable goods daily from different parts of India. Due to the state's mountainous and hilly terrain, movement of both commodities and people is largely restricted to NH-2, as other routes remain inaccessible. This vulnerability of insurmountable difficult transport and commutation has been systematically exploited by armed militias and civil society organizations representing various ethnic groups inhabiting the hills. The ongoing No Free Movement Crisis in hilly districts of the state serves as a stark example of the challenges faced by the general population of the state. These crises often reflect narrow, parochial ethnic aspirations that have far-reaching consequences for the entire state.

Manipur's Paradoxical Relation with Southeast Asian Neighbour-Myanmar

Geographically, Manipur is a tiny state having an area of 22,456 sq. km. Approximately 90% of Manipur's geography is covered by hills and mountains, while 10% comprise valley terrain. Next to Mizoram, Manipur shares the longest international border of 398 kms with Myanmar. A significant portion of the hilly and mountainous border between Myanmar and Manipur is porous, making it relatively easy for individuals on either side to cross

illegally. This indicates a systematic absence of state presence across large stretches of the border. As a result, the Manipur-Myanmar border has become a conduit for large-scale illegal migration of Myanmar origin seeking shelter/setting up villages mostly in the hilly and mountainous terrain of Manipur. The ongoing civil unrest and economic-political instability in Myanmar, coupled with illegal arms and drug trade operating across the porous border continue to pose a challenge to Manipur's political stability ^[17]. The situation remains complex, with ethnic conflict, and security concerns deeply intertwined.

Narco-Trade and Arms Smuggling: A Parallel Economy in the Moreh Border

Geopolitically, Manipur has maintained significant inland trade relations with Myanmar since time immemorial. Its early history vividly reflects these connections, underscoring a longstanding exchange of goods and services. Manipur imported gold, precious stones, and agarwood from Myanmar, while also contributing construction expertise, including techniques for building houses, bullock carts, ponies, and fishing nets. Manipur played a crucial role in transferring agricultural innovations, such as irrigated farming using buffaloes, as well as silk production techniques, to Myanmar. Going by the current trading relations between Manipur and Myanmar, the mother's market in Manipur is flooded with various items imported from Myanmar and other parts of Southeast Asia. The Indo-Myanmar border, particularly Moreh town located in Manipur's Tengenoupal district is a significant cross border commercial hub—a thriving active informal economy for the local population. Almost 99% of all land-based trade between India and Myanmar is officially transacted through Moreh town. However, Moreh town, beyond its commercial significance, is a notorious hub for illicit activities, serving as a key transit point for smuggling illegal arms and weapons, drugs, and contrabands. The town facilitates trafficking routes, bringing heroin from Myanmar's Golden Triangle into India, while outbound smuggling supplies precursor chemicals, exotic wildlife, and flora to countries of Southeast Asia and China. Manipur has emerged as a crucial hub in the Golden Triangle's narcotics trade—a perilous network connecting Southeast Asia's drug-producing regions to global markets. Overlapping illegal networks operate under the watch of security forces, notably the Assam Rifles, which patrol the Indian border ^[18].

Drug-Trade and HIV/AIDS: Manipur's Silent Crisis

Corruption among political elites, business persons, alongside their illicit nexus with armed insurgents enables these illegal activities, with security forces' involvement not entirely ruled out. This entangled nexus of drug trade and armed violence has turned Manipur into a narcotics hotspot, exacerbating the region's law enforcement challenges, further compounded by the soft state system. During the late 80s, the state witnessed high rise in HIV infections that became epidemic proportion in the 2000s. The epidemic is interconnected to narcotic drug trade. HIV infection rate among the IDUs had increased at an alarming rate from 2% to 3% in 1989 to >50% in 1991 and 64% in 2000 ^[19]. The severity linked with the HIV/AIDS pandemic remains a problem to the state. Soon, the socio-economic havoc played by HIV in Manipur began to take a heavy toll on its population, which the epidemiologist termed a generalized

epidemic with a strong IDUs and HIV link. Equally alarming is the increasing evidence that non-injecting sexual partners of IDUs users and their children are becoming infected with HIV. IDU is common among the deaths due to drug overdose and HIV in Manipur^[20]. These critical issues were among important deliberations highlighted during several rounds of discussions between India and Myanmar, held in New Delhi in January 1994, September 2006, and February 2007^[21]. These deliberations, addressed a broad range of issues and significantly enhanced mutual understanding between both nations. In particular, the deliberations focused on cross border security, cross-border insurgency, HIV/AIDS, narcotics, small arms proliferation, drug trafficking, and effective border management. These issues were brought to the forefront, long term implication of bilateral relations between Myanmar and India and its implications on Northeast and Manipur in particular.

India's Act East Policy in Retrospect

Southeast Asia comprising eleven countries-Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, East Timor, Philippines and Indonesia is located between the Indian sub-continent and China. Hence, the mainland portion of Southeast Asia is also popularly known as Indo-Chinese peninsula. After the cold world war ended (1947-1991), with the collapse of Soviet Union, China was perceived to be the potential hegemonic power in the region. This perception and concern was shared across widely among the Southeast Asian nations and India. Coupled with these developmental concerns, increasing wave of global interaction and India's adoption of liberalised economic policies in the beginning of 90s compelled the Government of India to Look East^[22]. Additionally, strong, stable and independent Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) would imply stability in India's eastern flank. It is the geopolitical shift and India's changed political economic

dynamics that culminated in India's Look East Policy.

Initiated by India's former Prime Minister, P.V Naramsimha Rao in 1991, the key aspirations of Look East Policy has a number of strategic relations with countries of Southeast Asia in the area of political, military, trades, investments, science and technology, human resources, infrastructure development and tourism. In 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party Government made a renewed commitment to Look East Policy and provided further impetus by eventually translating Look East Policy to Act East Policy, which focuses not just on Southeast Asian countries but also on the broader Asia-Pacific region^[23]. Key aspirations of Act East Policy aimed at strengthening economic ties, boosting strategic and security cooperation such as defence partnerships, military exercise, maritime cooperation to maintain regional stability and enhancing connectivity-including infrastructure projects such as India-Myanmar Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multi-Model Transit Transport Project to accelerate linking India's Moreh border to Mae-Sot in Northern Thailand via Bagan in Myanmar^[24]. Additionally, in 2004, India signed Inter-Governmental Agreement on Asian Highway Network initiated by the United Nations Social Commission for Asia and Pacific^[25]. The Asian Highways-AH1 and AH2 are an ongoing Asian Highway project to connect India through Northeast Indian states with India, Myanmar, Thailand and Indo-China and become a part of the Trans Eurasian Highway linking South Asia, and China with Europe.

The ASEAN is a zone of economic opportunity. India's trading relations with ASEAN countries in various fields including trade and investment can be noted from 1990s. The trading relations of commodities with ASEAN nations include a number of items. As noted in Table 1 and Table 2^[26], there is a large and rapidly growing imports and exports taking place between India and ASEAN.

Table 1: Trade figures in respect of ASEAN region for the period of 2016-2023 (April-March) are as under
Figures in USD Billion

India's trade with ASEAN	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
EXPORT (USD Billion)	30.96	34.20	37.47	31.55	31.49	42.32	44.00
%Growth	23.19	10.47	9.56	-15.82	-0.19	34.43	3.95
IMPORT (USD Billion)	40.62	47.13	59.32	55.37	47.42	68.08	87.57
%Growth	1.77	16.04	25.86	-6.66	-14.36	43.57	28.64
TOTAL(USD Billion)	71.58	81.34	96.80	86.92	78.90	110.4	131.57
TRADE BALANCE (USD Billion)	-9.66	-12.93	-21.85	-23.82	-15.93	25.76	-43.57

Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Department of Commerce, Government of India

Table 1 depicts steady growth of India's exports to ASEAN from 2016-17 to 2018-19 but experienced a decline in 2019-20, followed by stagnation in 2020-21. However, 2021-22 saw a strong rebound and growth continued as noted in 2022-23. India's imports followed a similar trend, growing consistently until 2018-19, then a marginal decline is noted in 2019-20. But a significant increase is noted during the periods-2021-2023., reflecting increasing trade activity. India's total trade with ASEAN increased significantly over the years, peaking at \$131.57 billion in 2022-23. But India also experienced consistent trade deficit with ASEAN, indicating India's imports exceeded exports.

Table 2 shows country wise trading relations between India with Southeast Asia. As indicated in the table, among all Southeast Asian nations, Singapore remains India's largest ASEAN trading partner, yet, India faced trade deficit with

Singapore as India's import percentage stands higher than that of its export value. Indonesia saw the highest import growth (48.4%), leading to a sharp increase in India's trade deficit, while Vietnam recorded a decline in exports (-11.84%), impacting India's trade balance negatively. Thailand saw a minor dip in exports but a strong import growth (12.10%), increasing the trade deficit. India maintains almost balanced trade relations with Cambodia, while it has an impressive trade balance with Brunei. When it comes to global trade, ASEAN accounted for 9.76% of India's global exports and 12.27% of imports in 2022-23. Further, the data shows that while absolute trade volumes increased, ASEAN's share in India's total trade declined slightly over the years. Yet, despite mixed experience, ASEAN remains a critical trade partner and diversification of exports and addressing the trade imbalance could help

India optimize its trade strategy. Among all ASEAN, Myanmar offers better trade balance prospects making it

potential focus area for increasing exports.

Table 2: Country-wise trade figures for ASEAN Region (Values in US\$ million)

Country	Export (USD Million)				Import (USD Million)				Total Trade Balance (USD Million)		
	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	Growth (%)	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	Growth (%)	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Singapore	8675.50	11150.61	11992.94	7.55	13304.92	18962.19	23595.35	18.20	-4629.42	-7811.58	-11602.41
Indonesia	5026.21	8471.51	10024.30	18.33	12470.17	17702.83	28820.41	48.40	-7443.96	-9231.32	-18796.11
Malaysia	6057.68	69995.04	7156.16	2.30	8373.05	12424.2	12734.94	2.40	-2315.37	-5429.16	-5578.78
Vietnam	4999.64	6702.67	5909.16	-11.84	6120.66	7438.52	8794.73	4.00	-1121.02	-735.85	-2885.57
Thailand	4237.59	5751.30	5709.81	-0.72	568.27	9332.59	11193.36	12.10	-1444.68	-3581.29	-5483.55
Philippines	1457.30	2107.24	2094	-0.62	572.47	729.12	959.59	7.70	884.83	1378.12	1134.56
Myanmar	772.56	893.03	807.00	-9.63	526.79	1001.87	954.74	-7.00	245.77	108.84	-147.74
Cambodia	168.86	198.37	220.43	11.12	39.35	94.88	146.02	25.00	129.51	103.49	74.41
Brunei	62.91	43.16	69.48	60.99	329.25	394.44	303.99	-14.70	-266.34	-351.28	-234.51
LAO PD RP	27.34	14.65	16.98	15.90	1.70	0.80	74.30	490.80	25.64	13.85	-57.32
Total Trade with ASEAN	31485.58	42327.58	44000.42	3.95	47420.63	68081.43	87577.42	19.20	-15935.10	-25753.90	-43577.00
India's Global Trade	291808.50	422004.40	450958.40	6.86	394435.90	613052.10	714042.50	12.60	-102627.40	-191047.70	-263084.10
% Share	10.79%	10.03%	9.76%	---	12.02%	11.11%	12.27%	--	15.53	13.481	16.56

Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Department of Commerce, Government of India

India's trade relations with ASEAN have evolved from a focus on "Look East" to a comprehensive strategic partnership, with significant growth in trade and investment. While, India faces a trade deficit, India is making several efforts to diversify trade and improve competitiveness in the region. India is also making enormous efforts to improve connectivity with ASEAN through projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) trilateral highway, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport project, and the Asian Trilateral Highway to connect Moreh in Manipur to Thailand via Myanmar. Furthermore, as far as India's policy towards Southeast Asian countries is concerned, Myanmar figures prominently. According to some observers, since 2000, Indian products-particularly medicines, have made their presence felt in the markets of Myanmar, bilateral trade has risen and investments have increased overtime. Trade and commerce between India and Myanmar have been rapidly growing in the recent years. Currently, after Thailand, China and Singapore, Myanmar is the 4th largest trading partner with India. . Major items that India imports from Myanmar are wood, pulses, charcoal, ginger, turmeric roots, nuts, etc. while Myanmar imports iron, steel, pharmaceutical products, machinery and mechanical appliances and their parts. Besides, Indian companies are involved in oil and gas natural resource trade, hydropower projects in Myanmar, bilateral projects in infrastructure, telecommunications, hydroelectric generation, and education ^[27].

Manipur's Geo-Strategic Position: Leveraging for Development

Among all North-Eastern states, Manipur stands as the sole gateway for India's trade relations with Myanmar-the gateway to other regions of Southeast Asia. This strategic advantage positions Manipur as a key player in fostering economic and cultural ties with Southeast Asian nations and East Asian nations as well. Manipur benefits from a substantial market in Southeast Asia for a diverse range of products derived from its rich bio-resources. These include agro-horticultural, sericulture and floricultural products. Manipur is renowned for its medicinal and aromatic plants. Notably, Loktak Lake and the agricultural fields of Manipur are home to approximately 430 medicinal plant species, 140 fish species, along with snails, mussels, and prawns. Additionally, Manipur serves as a hub for eco-friendly,

handcrafted bamboo and cane products-including house construction materials, musical instruments like flutes and drums, and decorative items such as table lamps, flower pots, vases, rice trays, mats, folding screens, winnowing fans, carry bags, and various types of baskets. Other notable bamboo-based products include pen stands, walking sticks, incense sticks, and furniture such as sofa sets, chairs, tables, and stools. The region also produces fibre-rich delicacies like bamboo shoots (green gold), handloom and handicraft goods of diverge range, and premium-quality fruits, nuts, and spices-including ginger, bay leaf with rich eugenol content, brahmi, dalcini, long pepper, smilez, turmeric, tussar and much more ^[28].

With its unparalleled natural beauty and dynamic socio-cultural traditions, Manipur continues to enchant visitors from around the world. Manipur is one of India's most captivating tourist destinations ^[29], earning various illustrious titles such as the *Switzerland of the East*, *Land of Jewels*, and *Shining Pearl in the Himalayan System*. The state boasts breath-taking natural beauty, with its mesmerizing landscape of undulating blue-green mountain ranges, lofty hills, pristine forests, and verdant valleys adorned with glistening water bodies. Among its many gems is the vast Loktak Lake, a serene freshwater expanse, and Keibul Lamjao National Park, the world's only floating national park, home to the rare and graceful Sangai, the dancing deer. Other natural wonders include the stunning Dzuko Valley, Singda Dam, exotic wild orchids, refreshing waterfalls, and meandering streams and rivers that weave through the hills and valleys, all enveloped by fresh, unpolluted air. Beyond its scenic splendour, Manipur boasts a rich and vibrant cultural heritage, shaped by diverse traditions, dance forms, and indigenous sports. The state is recognized as the birthplace of Polo and is home to the martial art Thang-Ta, both of which add to its distinctive identity. Manipur's calendar is filled with unique festivals, each a testament to its deep-rooted traditions, including Hiyang Tanaba (a ceremonial boat race), Lai-Haroaba (a seasonal festival honouring forest deities), Cheiraoba (New Year celebrations), Yaoshang (Holi), Kang-Chingba (Ratha Yatra), Durga Puja, Sirohi-Lily Festival, Sangai Festival, Gaan-Ngai, and Kut Festival. These celebrations come alive through enchanting folk dances, mesmerizing, and soulful music, accompanied with soft, rhythmic instrumental melody. Collectively, Manipur's rich biodiversity, exquisite

craftsmanship, cultural legacy, and intricate ecosystem provide immense opportunities for strengthening economic and cultural ties with Southeast Asian countries.

Conclusion

Manipur is rich in both human potential and natural resources, offering immense possibilities for growth and prosperity. The Act East Policy holds great promise for the state's economic development, yet its true success hinges on resolving deep-seated social and political challenges that perpetuate political turmoil. The state's persistent civil strife and turmoil reflect numerous facets of a soft state-ranging from entrenched corruption within political leadership and dishonest officials to governance failures, a thriving narco-economy, illegal arms trade, cross-border illegal migration, insurgency and ethnic violence. These profoundly challenging sociological issues, compounded by widespread cynicism among the general public, have come to symbolise a society grappling with disillusionment. To harness the full potential of the Act East Policy, Manipur urgently needs strong, disciplined, and visionary leadership-one that is unwavering in its commitment to progress and the well-being of its people. Only through resolute governance and transformative leadership can the state truly capitalise on India's strategic Act East Policy.

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