

The Positioning of Manipur in India's "Act East Policy"

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Abstract: With North East India (NEI) positioned as one of the main actors under the revamped "Act East" Policy (AEP) of India, a key pillar of India's foreign policy initiative; the state of Manipur is placed at an advantageous position to contribute towards the envisioned policy. Fighting against the drawbacks due to violence and various insurgent movements that impeded the growth and development of the state, Manipur now stands at a critical juncture to use the policy, not only to develop its state in particular but also become a key actor in promoting the success of the policy. Positioned as the gateway to South East Asia and beyond, Manipur needs to fully exploit its geo-political and strategic position to promote the development of the state. Therefore, this paper seeks to study the significance of Manipur in India's "Act East" Policy and analyze as to how the state can promote the 3Cs of the "Act East" Policy that is Commerce, Connectivity and Culture envisioned by the Indian government to enhance and improve the relationship with the South East Asian countries and beyond, that can bring development to the state alongside enhancing the policy of the government.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Nestled in the north-eastern corner of the country surrounded by Nagaland to its north, Assam to its west and Myanmar to its east, the state of Manipur is bestowed with thick lush forest and natural wealth alongside carrying the pride of possessing the world's only floating islands locally known as the 'Phumdis'¹. The state also has the rare and unique 'Shirui Lily' canvassing the Shirui Kashong peak² in the state, which also bears the tag of being the state flower of Manipur. The state is also home to the endangered Sangai deer (brown-antlered deer), endemic to the state and found in Keibul Lamjao National Park, largely seen over the floating biomass – the Phumdis.³ It is also the only state in the country to have the distinction of having an all-women club of Polo players. However, due to its past struggles and history, the state has been identified more with the violence associated with it due to the struggles taking place with ethnic conflict being the root cause, the various insurgency movements and violent outbursts that followed due to the fight for independence, the drug abuse and its aftermath due to the porosity of the borders and the continuous state of corruption, lack of transparency and accountability and deteriorating administration. Therefore, despite its rich resources and strategic position, the state has continued to fall short of its ability to position itself as a strategic player in the affairs of the country, both domestically and internationally.

But despite the setbacks, the state has been showing slow but remarkable progress in shedding its disadvantages and working to promote sustainable growth and development which can be attested with its improved performances in various indexes of the country examining the status of development across the country. Herein, the state, at this critical juncture, is positioned in a very strategic and advantageous position which if carefully exploited by the state can garner benefits and gain the resources that the state is in dire need of. The revamped policy of "Act East" from the "Look East Policy of India", which has put the north-eastern states as one of the key players of the policy, puts Manipur in a very prominent position due to its proximity to Myanmar, which the government of India considers to be the gateway to the South East Asian countries and beyond: the very tenet on which the success of the policy depends due to the fact that it aims at enhancing the political, economic, cultural and strategic relationship with the South East Asian countries and beyond encompassing the whole of the Pacific regions.

Manipur, India's 'Gateway to the East' through Moreh town, is the only feasible land route for trade between India and Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries,⁴ continues to be the state that has effective trade relationship mostly informal, with Myanmar courtesy the border haats that these two countries share at their borders of Moreh and Tamu respectively. Despite the effort initiated by India to open the trade routes encompassing the other north eastern states of India, Manipur will continue to be the main transit point due to its advantage of having trade relationship with Myanmar and the familiarity that it possesses as the relationship goes way back even before the inception of the Look East Policy of India, and the reality that if Myanmar is the gateway to South East Asia and beyond then Manipur is the gateway to the very gateway of South East Asia i.e.

Myanmar. Apart from the economic relationship, Manipur also possesses a huge opportunity of utilizing the AEP to shape itself as a market in the field of medical and education sector, the two sectors which already has a base in the state. With medical tourism becoming one of the key earners for the country and education continuing to be a key maker for growth and development, Manipur is positioned in a favorable circumstance which needs to be carefully realized and exploited although at the earliest.

Medical Tourism: Putting the egg in Manipur's Medical Basket

The important dictum, "Health is Wealth", stands tall till date and will continue to do so even years down the line not forgetting to factor in its rising significance due to the onset of climate change, the ever increasing rise of non-communicable diseases and the anti-microbial resistant bacteria and viruses that has begun to wreak havoc worldwide. Hence, affordable and efficient medical care availability has become the order and demand of the day. It has become an undeniable fact that the demand for efficient and affordable care has become of the key necessity. Manipur, acknowledged for producing many medical practitioners, professionals and caretakers among others and possessing recognized medical institutions with state-of-the-art facilities being invested upon, therefore needs to hammer on this sector. The Government of Manipur needs to carefully grow this sector by investing carefully and properly in this sector. Developing a state-of-the-art facility in the North-Eastern region, which continues to face physical connectivity and infrastructural constraints with the rest of the country, will enable the patients of the region not to look far for necessary and critical treatments. The people of Manipur will also need not struggle going to outside destinations to avail world class medical care.⁵ It will also allow the patients from neighbouring country like Myanmar and Bangladesh to come for their treatment in the state, which they have done so since the past many years due to its affordability in comparison with its neighboring countries like Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia among others. Manipur has per capita one of the highest concentrations of Health Manpower among the North-Eastern States (NES) and has good doctor to population ratio standing at 1 doctor per 1635 population,⁶ without accounting to AYUSH doctors in the state. The state is also one of the biggest producers of nurses per capita probably the highest after Kerala.⁷ The state has multi-specialty hospitals like the Shija Hospital that garners to a good number of Myanmar patients including over 20 cases of heart surgery, kidney, liver or cornea transplant. The hospital, since the opening of the border crossing from 08 August 2018, has attracted 1800 Myanmar medical tourists with VISA and 226 Myanmar patients have undergone major operations including heart surgeries, hip replacement, brain tumor and majority for state of the art stone solutions in the urinary and biliary system. Patients have also started coming to Manipur for kidney transplant, cosmetic surgeries etc.⁸ According to the border officials, the majority of the people that came to Imphal via the introduction of visas through the land border between India and Myanmar⁹, came on medical visa. Of those who came on tourist visas, the majority obtained outpatient (OPD) services in Imphal hospitals.¹⁰ There are other top-notch private hospitals such as Raj Medicity, Mother's Care Children Hospital and Jivan Hospital among others, coming up to cater to the growing demands of the people.¹¹ The potential of medical tourism will be a key enabler therefore in improving the economic status of the state while simultaneously enhancing the status of the state as a key medical provider catering to both domestic and foreign patients coming into the state for treatment under affordable services.

The draft Manipur Tourism Policy of 2011, by the Department of Tourism, Government of Manipur, laid out the strategy for improving the medical sector to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the sector. It held that it would accord the status of "Industry" to the health care facilities under the Industrial Policy of Manipur, appoint well known and reputed doctors as brand ambassadors to promote and establish trust of patient-tourists coming to Manipur for treatment purposes and among others to develop health care visa to facilitate easy, hassle free approach for medical tourists. There is the need to ensure that seamless but secure mode of cooperation is established among the key actors to ensure the benefits out of medical tourism are exploited sustainably. Taking into cognizance the strategic importance of the state in relation to the AEP, the government of India should facilitate the smooth and proper approval of medical tourists to apply for health visas to ensure that harassment at the border facility is avoided. The security at the borders also needs to be enhanced to provide seamless and disruption free entrance at both sides of the border. There is a need to set up a permanent institutional infrastructure at the border to meet the day to day demand of the foreign visitors not only from Myanmar but also other South East Asian countries due to the proximity of the countries and more economical mode of transportation in relation to India.

India's medical tourism is through Non-Residential Indians, patients from countries with underdeveloped facilities and patients from developed countries because of long waiting list. Health care is a major service that Manipur can sell to neighbouring states and countries. Health visa needs to be issued to the Myanmar nationals to visit Manipur which is not being done till now.¹²

The promotion of medical tourism will also promote the growth of both formal and informal sectors that would provide economic earning sources to the people of the state as when people come for treatment they also look for other services aside from medical treatment as such. Most often, the hospitality sector provides

such services. Hence, there is a need to interlink both medical, wellness and leisure tourism to provide attractive tourist packages to gain tourists visiting the state for such reasons. As such, the government should concentrate on providing seamless connectivity infrastructure in terms of both physical and information or outreach and availability. Simultaneously, the government of India should put the completion of the Trilateral Highway as the highest priority as a huge portion of India's development and growth is at stake and attempt to finish the project at the earliest. Adding to it, there should be continuous engagement with the various players both within and outside the country to ensure that grievances of any degree are dealt with effectively.

The Indian medical tourism industry is growing at 18% CAGR year on year and was expected to be worth 9 billion by 2020.¹³ The country offers a complete bouquet of healthcare services at an affordable price to the world. Highly skilled doctors and medical professionals, world class hospital infrastructure, cost-effective treatment and personalized care are some of the reasons for the fast growth of medical tourism in India. Patients are choosing a destination which offers the complete package of quality treatment, ease of communication and travel as well as competitive pricing. Cost of treatment in India is approximately 40 % less than that in any developed western countries without compromising on quality of care.¹⁴

The other egg in the Basket: The Education Sector:

In the School Education Quality Index 2019 developed by NITI AAYOG to evaluate the performance of States and Union Territories (UTs) in the school education sector with an aim to bring an 'outcomes' focus to education policy by providing States and UTs with a platform to identify their strengths and weaknesses and undertake requisite course corrections or policy interventions, Manipur attained the overall top rank among the smaller states¹⁵ showing the potential to reap greater returns. The state further has a good number of technological and medical institutions that can be developed to garner to both local and foreign students. However, it is pertinent to develop these institutions and bring it to a level of credibility that can attract both the students from home and abroad. The state should therefore create an environment conducive for the growth of these institutions, try to attract investment and work towards placing itself in a good position in the various educational ranking indices. Being the second largest producer of nurses, the state should invest in developing and upgrading the various nursing institutions to attract more admissions for educating the healthcare workers and become a key exporter of these workers in and beyond the country. The government of India at the higher level should work towards reaching agreements with wider number of countries to recognize each other's academic degrees and diplomas to enable smooth transition of services from one country to another given the transactional nature of human resources required for different qualifications by different countries for different reasons.

In order to achieve such transition, there is a need to have a surgical mode of achieving these laid out targets. One of the biggest factors that continue to be an impediment for the state is the leaving of capable and efficient workers and specialist from the state. There needs to be an overhaul of the whole system and ensure a transparent and accountable mode of administration that will enable effective utilization of the resources available and promote education tourism as a key driver of growth in the state.

The state has per capita one of the highest concentrations of health manpower among the north-eastern states. The state has two tertiary health care centers (Two medical colleges RIMS and JNIMS and their attached hospitals), 7 District Hospitals (against 9 districts in the State).¹⁶ The upper hand of the state lies in the cost benefit of living conditions in comparison with other cities. This can be integrated with providing education to the foreign students to come and apply for their higher studies from neighbouring countries which would allow the governments of the countries to work towards creating an enabling environment for the student community. Apart from creating physical infrastructure, the state government should have a complete makeover of how the state functions. The tagging of the state as the "bandh state" or the fact that violence and chaos emanated from the state in the past does not bode well for inviting the various sectors to promote growth and development. The need to overhaul the system of rebranding the state as peaceful and cooperative state and promoting the information regarding the benefits available will depend to a huge extent on how the state is able to portray itself. Hence, the state should invest properly in its 'image creation' department. The government should therefore work together not only with the government bodies but also with the civil societies of the state to ensure that the objectives and enticing prospects are achieved.

Promotion of Tourism:

Due to its wealth of flora and fauna, Manipur is described as a 'flower on lofty heights', 'a jewel of India' and 'Switzerland of the East' and hence its breath taking scenic beauty makes it a tourist's paradise.¹⁷ It consists of a rich number of tourist sites unique to the state that has the potential to attract a sizeable number of tourists. Apart from housing the world's only floating national park and the last natural habitat of the brown-antlered deer (Sangai) the dancing deer of Manipur¹⁸, the state capital houses the Imphal War Cemetery which commemorates the memories of the British and Indian soldiers who died during World War II.¹⁹ These are but

many of the tourist spots found in the state. However despite the scenic attractions, Manipur has failed to pique the interests of tourists both domestic and international, ranking 28/30 in both parameters in the survey titled "2019 India State Ranking Survey."²⁰ Despite boasting of unique tourist attractions, challenges such as limited connectivity, lack of promotion, safety and security concerns²¹ has become a roadblock for states like Manipur to exploit to the fullest the advantage of having scenic and unique tourist spots. The state therefore needs to adopt attractive brand ambassadors such as that undertaken by its neighbouring states to promote active tourism in order to dispel misinformation and ignorance regarding the state, adopt attractive tourism policy and packages by creating better advertisement content and additionally take up the task of educating and exposing the locals as to how to treat and deal with tourists properly through workshops and seminars so as to open up the opportunity of inviting more people. By educating the local population and exposing them with regards to having sustainable tourism business will allow the state to have better coordination and cooperation to ensure the success of tourism initiative.

Apart from active and normal tourism, the state also needs to work on promoting cultural and pilgrimage tourism. The spread of Buddhism from the country to the rest of the South East Asian countries and across the world is a known and acknowledged fact. And every year thousands of Buddhists pilgrims from different countries of South East and East Asia visit the various Buddhist Shrines and temples, the most famous among them being Bodh Gaya.²² Buddhists consider Bodh Gaya as an important pilgrimage place due to the belief that Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism achieved enlightenment here and it also provides an opportunity of congregation of Buddhists from all over the world and remember the foundation of their religion.²³ While the cost of traveling via the air route from the capital to Bodh Gaya is expensive, the transit route from Myanmar to Uttar Pradesh via Imphal is considered to be more economical. The Buddhist organisations in Manipur have also shown their interest in providing facilities to ensure safe transit for the pilgrimage.²⁴ However, there continues to be inaction from the governments both at the Centre and the state to initiate legal and formal agreements to promote this system of connectivity. The promotion of this system will allow the countries across the regions to forge a friendly relationship which will enable forging of strong bonds. It will also encourage trade and travel from both sides. It is therefore the need of the hour to capitalize on such opportunity and have an effective and smooth transport facility during the pilgrimage annually via Imphal which can pave the way for other mode of cultural exchange not only in Manipur but also other states in the North Eastern parts of the country which already share similar and common trait of tradition and beliefs with the ASEAN countries. Such string of relationship can serve as the base through which other form of relationship can be exploited.

The sector can prove to be a trump card in terms of generating revenues and attracting investments for the state. What the state needs to realize is the need to capture both domestic and foreign tourists alike towards the attractions of the state. The state despite its huge wealth in terms of tourists' spots continues to perform poorly.²⁵ Thus, there is a need for the state to seriously work efficiently in promoting this sustainable revenue generating sector. A huge portion of the success will hinge on the way it portrays and maintains itself as a hospitable and peaceful service providing state and this will depend on the interoperability and effective coordination of the different ministries and departments within the government working together alongside each other and with each other. A continuous improvement of the services, filling the loops and gaps of the services, presence of effective Redressal mechanism and continuous engagement with the actors involved in the sector both formal and informal alike will bode well for the state.

Connectivity and Peace: The Key to Reality

The success of the aforementioned aims and objectives however will depend hugely on how well the states and countries are connected through various mode of transportation. And in relation with Manipur, the road connectivity will play a bigger role due to its proximity to Myanmar via land. Despite rolling out of grandeur projects to develop the road sector, it is a reality that the quality of roads especially in India remains to be one of the poorest among the world. It is also a reality that India has a poor record of finishing any projects on time case in point: the Trilateral Highway Project aimed to connect India-Myanmar-Thailand. While the latter two countries have already completed their part of the projects, India is still behind in completing the project. Also the absence of a coherent and astute institution for entry facilities at the borders in Moreh hinders smooth and effective functioning of travelling facilities. The border checking facility at Moreh should be constantly upgraded with State of the Art facilities to meet the changing needs and demands of the situation. Furthermore up gradation of securing the borders and providing peaceful transportation system should also be at the top priority. The state should also adopt strict measures to deal with any anti element that disrupts the mode of business. By doing this, the state can reap the maximum benefit of the policy.

II. CONCLUSION:

The need to have an effective mode of functioning that is both accountable and transparent rest on the political will and cooperation of the whole society. Manipur has been positioned in a very strategic place in relation to the AEP. The scars of insurgency and the ethnic violence have for so long marred the status of the state despite its huge potential in developing and promoting sustainable growth. Therefore, at this juncture, the state and the people in the state has to work together tirelessly to ensure that the opportunity does not slip out of its hand and also create a path for future generations to follow and be placed at the highest in terms of governance and development in the country. The time is now and the time to "ACT" is now.

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³ WWF, "Brow-Antlered deer", available at https://www.wwfindia.org/about_wwf/priority_species/brow_antlered_deer/, accessed on 01 May 2020.

⁴ Ankita Sharma, "Manipur: Moreh in Manipur is the gateway to South-East Asia", available at www.investindia.gov.in/state/manipur, accessed on 10 April 2020.

⁵ Surendranath Sharma, "Manipur's dream of Medical Tourism", E-PAO, 10 July 2013, available at http://e-pao.net/epPageExtractor.asp?src=travel.Manipur_dream_of_Medical_Tourism_by_Surendranath.html.., accessed on 17 October 2021.

⁶ As per World Health Organisation, the recommended doctor to population ratio is 1:1800.

⁷ "Health Manpower", Directorate of Health Services, Govt. Of Manipur, available at http://www.manipurhealthdirectorates.in/?page_id=239, accessed on 20 March 2020.

⁸ Shija Hospitals & Research Institute (SHRI), "Medical Tourism in Manipur", 25 November 2019, Facebook, available at <https://m.facebook.com/shijahospitals/posts/271194965533063>, accessed on 03 March 2020.

⁹ India and Myanmar agreed for land border agreement

¹⁰ Pratim Ranjan Bose, "Patients from Myanmar through Imphal hospitals", *The Hindubusiness Line*, 25 October 2018, available at <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/patients-from-myanmar-throng-imphal-hospitals/article25324559.ece/amp/>, accessed on 01 March 2020.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Dr. Kh. Palin, "Can Manipur become medical value travel destination of South East Asia?", *E-Pao*, 16 December 2011, available at http://e-pao.net/epPageExtractor.asp?src=travel.Can_Manipur_become_medical_value_travel_destination_of_South_East_Asia.html.., accessed on 01 May 2020.

¹³ Amit Sharma, "India's rise as hub of medical tourism", *Deccan Herald*, 07 June 2019, available at <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.deccanherald.com/amp/opinion/panorama/india-s-rise-as-hub-of-medical-tourism-738603.html>, accessed on 01 June 2020

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ PIB, Delhi, "NITI Aayog releases School Education Quality Index (SEQI), Kerala, Manipur and Chandigarh top in overall performance, Haryana, Meghalaya, Daman & Diu show most improvement in the first edition of Index", 30 September 2019, available at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1586699>, accessed on 03 March 2021.

¹⁶ Directorate of Health Services, Government of Manipur, "Welcome to Directorate of Health Services", available at <http://www.maipurhealthdirectorates.in/>, accessed on 03 March 2021

¹⁷ IBEF, India's Brand Equity Foundation, "About Manipur : Information on Bamboo, Tourism Industry, Economy & Geography", 09 February 2021, available at <https://www.ibef.org/states/Manipur.aspx>, accessed on 03 March 2021.

¹⁸ Government of Manipur, "Keibul Lamjao National Park", available at <https://bishnupur.nic.in/tourist-place/keibul-lamjao-national-park/>, accessed on 03 March 2021.

¹⁹ Imphal East District, Government of Manipur, "WAR CEMETERY", available at <https://imphaleast.nic.in/tourist-place/war-cemetery/>, accessed on 03 March 2021.

²⁰ Manav Thadani and Karan Kapoor, *2019 India State Ranking Survey*, (in association with World Travel and Tourism Council India Initiative, p.04.

²¹ Ibid, p.05.

²² The Sangai Express, "Buddhists' Council Manipur ready to help pilgrims", 09 May 2009, available at <https://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=42,8147,0,0,1,0>, accessed on 06 March 2021.

²³ BBC, "Pilgrimage: Bodh Gaya", available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zw9whyc/revision/1#:~:text=Bodh%20Gaya%20links%20%Buddhists%20with,the%20foundation%20of%20their%20religion.>, accessed on 06 March 2021.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Manipur ranks 23rd in the State/UT-Wise Domestic and Foreign Tourist Visits During 2018&2019, available at, "*STATE/UT-WISE DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN TOURISTS VISITS USING DURING 2018&2019*", available at <https://tourism.gov.in>FiguresPDF>, accessed on 18 October 2021.