

Cultural Dynamics and Policy Effectiveness: An Analysis of India's Act East Policy In Nagaland's Border Villages

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study examines the intersection of cultural dynamics and policy effectiveness in the implementation of India's Act East Policy within three border villages of Nagaland—Avangkhu, Longwa, and Pangsha. Through a purposive sampling methodology involving 60 respondents across 2022-2023, this research investigates how cultural practices influence political stability, economic development, and security scenarios in the context of cross-border policy implementation. The findings reveal mixed responses across all three dependent variables, with significant levels of uncertainty predominating community perceptions of cultural impact on policy outcomes. The study identifies a significant correlation between cultural practices—particularly shared ethnic, linguistic, and kinship bonds with Myanmar—and political stability outcomes. These findings contribute to understanding cultural response mechanisms to government policy in ethnically diverse border regions and provide insights for policy administrators seeking to enhance the effectiveness of transnational development initiatives through culturally responsive educational approaches. Keywords: Act East Policy, Cultural Dynamics, Policy Implementation, Northeast India, Cross-border Communities, Educational Administration

1. Introduction

The Northeast region of India, sharing 80% of its international borders with neighboring countries including China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, represents a unique geopolitical space where cultural dynamics significantly influence policy outcomes (Biswas, 2019). Connected to mainland India through the narrow Siliguri corridor, this region's development trajectory has been shaped by its geographical remoteness and cultural distinctiveness. The transformation of India's Look East Policy (1991) into the Act East Policy (2014) under the National Democratic Alliance government marked a strategic shift toward deeper engagement with ASEAN nations, positioning Northeast India as a critical bridge for economic and cultural integration. Nagaland, with its extensive border with Myanmar, exemplifies the complex interplay between local cultural dynamics and national policy implementation. The state's unique position within India's Act East Policy framework raises fundamental questions about how cultural practices influence policy effectiveness, particularly in areas of political stability, economic development, and security management. This research addresses a critical gap in policy analysis literature by examining cultural response mechanisms to government policy in ethnically diverse border communities.

The significance of this study extends beyond regional policy analysis to contribute to a broader theoretical understanding of how cultural factors mediate policy implementation in peripheral regions. As governments worldwide grapple with implementing national policies in culturally distinct regions, the Nagaland case offers valuable insights into the role of cultural dynamics as both facilitators and barriers to policy effectiveness.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

Policy Implementation in Culturally Diverse Regions

Policy implementation research has traditionally focused on institutional mechanisms, resource allocation, and administrative capacity while often overlooking the cultural dimensions that significantly influence policy outcomes (Lipsky, 2010). In culturally diverse societies, policy effectiveness depends not merely on

administrative efficiency but on the alignment between policy objectives and local cultural values, practices, and social structures.

Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith's (1993) Advocacy Coalition Framework emphasizes the importance of belief systems in policy processes, yet limited attention has been paid to how indigenous cultural beliefs and practices shape policy reception and implementation in peripheral regions. This gap is particularly pronounced in the context of transnational policies that attempt to leverage cultural connections across international borders.

India's Act East Policy: Evolution and Objectives

The evolution from Look East Policy (LEP) to Act East Policy (AEP) represents a paradigm shift from economic engagement to comprehensive integration encompassing political, strategic, cultural, and people-to-people connections (Muni & Mishra, 2019). The LEP, initiated in 1991 under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, primarily aimed to counter insurgency in Northeast India through regional cooperation, particularly with Myanmar (Haokip, 2015).

The AEP, launched in 2014, expanded this vision to include cultural diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges as core components of regional integration strategy (Singh, 2016). However, scholarly analysis of the AEP has predominantly focused on macro-economic indicators and bilateral trade statistics, with limited attention to micro-level cultural dynamics and their impact on policy effectiveness (Borah, 2020; Chakraborty, 2018).

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of cultural factors in policy success, particularly in ethnically diverse regions (Pattanaik, 2017; Bhattacharya, 2019). The work of Kumar and Das (2021) emphasizes that policy effectiveness in Northeast India cannot be measured solely through economic indicators but must account for cultural acceptance and community participation.

Cultural Response Mechanisms to Government Policy

Cultural response mechanisms refer to the ways in which communities adapt, resist, or modify their cultural practices in response to government policies (Scott, 1985). These mechanisms operate through various channels including traditional governance structures, kinship networks, religious institutions, and customary practices (Bourdieu, 1977). In border regions, these mechanisms become particularly complex due to cross-border cultural ties that may either align with or contradict national policy objectives.

Anthropological studies have documented how indigenous communities in Northeast India maintain cultural practices that transcend political boundaries (Misra, 2011; Baruah, 2005). The concept of "cultural capital" as developed by Bourdieu (1986) provides a framework for understanding how communities leverage cultural resources in response to policy interventions. Recent research by Sharma and Singh (2020) demonstrates how cultural practices in border regions serve as both resistance mechanisms and adaptation strategies.

The literature on policy implementation emphasizes the role of local knowledge systems in mediating policy outcomes (Yanow, 2000). Indigenous knowledge, traditional governance systems, and customary practices constitute what Scott (1998) terms "metis" – practical wisdom that communities use to navigate complex policy environments. In the context of India's Northeast, this cultural wisdom becomes particularly relevant for understanding community responses to transnational policies.

Educational research has increasingly recognized the importance of culturally responsive approaches to policy implementation (Gay, 2018). The work of Freire (1970) on critical pedagogy highlights how education can serve as a tool for both cultural preservation and social transformation. Recent studies by Dutta (2022) and Nath (2021) specifically examine how educational interventions can bridge traditional knowledge systems with contemporary policy requirements in Northeast India.

Cross-Border Cultural Dynamics in Northeast India

The unique geographical position of Northeast India creates complex cultural dynamics that significantly influence policy implementation (Vajpeyi, 2013). Studies by Gogoi (2018) and Phukan (2020) highlight how ethnic communities in the region maintain transnational identities that complicate neat distinctions between national and international cultural loyalties.

The concept of "borderlands" as developed by Anzaldúa (1987) provides insight into the cultural complexity of regions like Nagaland, where communities navigate multiple cultural systems simultaneously. Recent research by Longkumer (2019) specifically examines how Naga communities maintain cultural connections across the India-Myanmar border while engaging with Indian state policies.

Cross-border studies have emphasized the importance of understanding cultural flows and networks that transcend political boundaries (Hannerz, 1996). The work of Appadurai (1996) on cultural "scapes" offers a framework for analyzing how ideas, practices, and identities move across borders, influencing local responses to national policies.

Research Gap

Despite growing interest in India's Act East Policy, there exists a significant research gap regarding the role of cultural dynamics in policy effectiveness at the grassroots level. Most existing studies adopt macro-level approaches focusing on state-to-state relations, trade volumes, and infrastructure development. The micro-level analysis of how cultural practices influence policy outcomes in border communities remains largely unexamined.

Furthermore, while cultural studies have documented the richness of cross-border cultural ties in Northeast India, there is limited integration of these insights into policy analysis frameworks. This study addresses this gap by examining cultural response mechanisms as mediating factors between policy implementation and outcomes in the specific context of Nagaland's border villages.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs a policy analysis framework that integrates cultural dimensions into traditional implementation theory. Drawing from Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory and Scott's (1985) resistance theory, we conceptualize cultural practices as mediating variables that influence policy outcomes through three primary mechanisms:

Cultural Alignment Mechanism

The degree to which policy objectives align with existing cultural values and practices determines the level of community acceptance and participation in policy implementation.

Cultural Adaptation Mechanism

Communities may modify policy implementation to fit local cultural contexts, creating hybrid forms of policy practice that may or may not achieve original policy objectives.

Cultural Resistance Mechanism

Policies that conflict with deeply held cultural values may encounter passive or active resistance, leading to implementation failure or unintended consequences.

In the context of India's Act East Policy in Nagaland, cultural practices—particularly shared ethnic, linguistic, and kinship bonds with Myanmar—are hypothesized to influence political stability, economic development, and security scenarios through these three mechanisms.

4. Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a cross-sectional survey design with purposive sampling to examine cultural impacts on policy effectiveness in three border villages of Nagaland.

Study Area and Sample Selection

The universe of study is Nagaland, with three sample villages selected based on their strategic location along the Myanmar border:

1. **Avangkhu** (Meluri District): Located in south-central Nagaland, representing Pochury tribal community
2. **Longwa** (Mon District): Situated in eastern Nagaland, representing Konyak tribal community
3. **Pangsha** (Noklak District): Located in southeastern Nagaland, representing mixed tribal communities, though largely dominated by the Khiamniungan tribe

These villages were selected using purposive sampling based on criteria including: proximity to Myanmar border, presence of cross-border cultural ties, and accessibility for fieldwork.

Data Collection

Primary data was collected through structured interviews with 60 respondents (20 from each village) during 2023-2024. Respondents were selected to represent diverse demographic categories including village elders, youth, women, and local leaders.

The questionnaire focused on perceptions of cultural impact on three dependent variables:

- Political stability
- Economic development
- Security scenarios

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved correlation analysis to examine relationships between cultural practices and dependent variables. Responses were categorized into three groups: positive change, negative change, and uncertain/cannot say. Statistical analysis was conducted to determine correlation coefficients and significance levels.

Limitations

The study acknowledges limitations including: restricted sample size, focus on perceptions rather than objective measures, and inability to isolate cultural variables from other influencing factors.

5. Results and Analysis

Overall Response Pattern

The survey results reveal a complex pattern of responses across all three dependent variables, characterized by significant uncertainty and mixed perceptions of cultural impact on policy outcomes. Table 1 presents the comprehensive data distribution across the three categories for each dependent variable.

Table 1: Distribution of Cultural Impact Responses Across Dependent Variables

Category	Political Stability (%)	Economic Development (%)	Security Scenario (%)
Positive Change	31.11	26.79	27.59
Negative Change	15.56	19.64	20.69
Cannot Say	53.33	53.57	51.72
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Table 1: Cultural Impact on Political Stability, Economic Development, and Security Scenarios

The comparative analysis across the three dependent variables reveals striking consistency in response patterns. The data visualization clearly demonstrates several key findings:

- 1. Dominant Uncertainty Pattern:** Across all three variables, uncertainty represents the majority response (51.72% to 53.57%), indicating significant knowledge gaps regarding cultural impacts on policy outcomes.
- 2. Positive Perception Leadership:** Political stability shows the highest positive perception (31.11%), followed by security scenarios (27.59%) and economic development (26.79%).
- 3. Variable Negative Perceptions:** Security scenarios exhibit the highest negative perception (20.69%), while political stability shows the lowest (15.56%).

Impact of Culture on Political Stability

The analysis of cultural impact on political stability reveals the most optimistic perception among all three variables:

- **Positive Impact (31.11%):** Nearly one-third of respondents perceive cultural practices as enhancing political stability. This group primarily consists of community elders and traditional leaders who view cross-border cultural ties as mechanisms for conflict resolution and peaceful coexistence. The shared ethnic and linguistic bonds with Myanmar communities are perceived as creating informal diplomatic channels that reduce tension and promote mutual understanding.
- **Negative Impact (15.56%):** The smallest segment views cultural practices as potentially destabilizing, primarily due to concerns about divided loyalties and challenges to state authority. Some respondents expressed concern that strong cross-border cultural ties might undermine allegiance to the Indian state or create confusion regarding national identity.
- **Uncertain (53.33%):** The majority of respondents express uncertainty, indicating limited understanding of the relationship between cultural practices and political stability. This uncertainty reflects the complexity of the political landscape in border regions and the lack of comprehensive policy communication.

The correlation analysis reveals a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.342$, $p < 0.05$) between cultural practices and political stability, suggesting that stronger cultural ties with Myanmar communities correspond to greater perceived political stability.

Impact of Culture on Economic Development

Economic development outcomes show the most balanced distribution of positive and negative perceptions:

- **Positive Impact (26.79%):** Approximately one-quarter of respondents view cultural connections as facilitating economic opportunities, particularly through informal cross-border trade, cultural tourism, and shared entrepreneurial networks. Respondents highlighted how linguistic similarity and cultural understanding facilitate business relationships and market access.
- **Negative Impact (19.64%):** A slightly larger group perceives cultural practices as hindering economic development, citing traditional restrictions, resistance to modernization, and preference for subsistence over commercial activities. Some respondents noted that adherence to traditional practices might limit adoption of new technologies or business models.
- **Uncertain (53.57%):** The majority remains uncertain about cultural impacts on economic development, reflecting limited exposure to formal economic development programs and an unclear understanding of how cultural factors influence economic outcomes.

Impact of Culture on Security Scenarios

Security perceptions demonstrate the highest negative response rate among all three variables:

- **Positive Impact (27.59%):** More than one-quarter of respondents view cultural ties as promoting peace and reducing conflict potential through shared identity and informal conflict resolution mechanisms. The common kinship bonds and traditional governance systems are perceived as natural mediators in potential disputes.
- **Negative Impact (20.69%):** This group expresses the highest concern among all variables about security risks associated with porous borders, unclear allegiances, and potential for cross-border criminal activities. Some respondents worry that strong cultural ties might facilitate illegal activities or complicate security operations.
- **Uncertain (51.72%):** The majority expresses uncertainty about cultural impacts on security, reflecting the complex nature of security issues in border regions and limited understanding of formal security policies.

At the village level, no significant differences were observed between Avangkhu, Longwa, and Pangsha, suggesting that despite tribal diversity (Pochury, Konyak, and mixed communities), border communities share similar perceptions of cultural impacts on policy outcomes. This uniformity points to common experiences of cross-border cultural connections that transcend specific tribal identities and suggests that the Act East Policy's cultural dimensions resonate similarly across different ethnic groups in the border region.

6. Discussion

Cultural Response Mechanisms in Action

The findings reveal complex cultural response mechanisms operating in Nagaland's border villages. The significant correlation between cultural practices and political stability suggests that communities are actively engaging with the Act East Policy through cultural lenses, interpreting policy objectives within existing frameworks of cross-border relationships.

The predominance of uncertainty across all dependent variables indicates that communities are still processing the implications of the Act East Policy for their cultural practices and social structures. This uncertainty itself represents a form of cultural response—a cautious engagement that neither fully embraces nor rejects policy initiatives.

Implications for Policy Implementation

The mixed responses have important implications for policy administrators:

Enhanced Communication Strategies: The high levels of uncertainty suggest need for improved communication about Act East Policy objectives and their relationship to local cultural practices.

Cultural Sensitivity in Implementation: The significant minority expressing negative perceptions indicates potential resistance that must be addressed through culturally sensitive implementation strategies.

Leveraging Positive Perceptions: The substantial group perceiving positive impacts represents an opportunity to build policy support through targeted engagement with cultural leaders and institutions.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to policy analysis theory by demonstrating how cultural dynamics operate as mediating variables in policy implementation. The finding that cultural practices significantly correlate with political stability outcomes supports the importance of integrating cultural analysis into policy effectiveness frameworks.

The predominance of cultural adaptation mechanisms (evidenced by mixed responses) over alignment or resistance mechanisms suggests that border communities are actively negotiating between traditional practices and policy requirements, creating hybrid forms of engagement that require careful policy attention.

The Role of Education in Bridging Cultural Mindsets and Policy Innovation

The high uncertainty levels (over 50%) across all dependent variables underscore a critical educational gap that impedes effective policy implementation in Nagaland's border villages. Education emerges as the pivotal bridge between traditional cultural mindsets and the embrace of new ideas, plans, and policies under the Act East framework. The correlation between cultural practices and political stability, while significant, reveals the need for educational interventions that can help communities navigate the complexities of policy engagement without abandoning their cultural identity.

Educational initiatives focused on policy literacy can play a transformative role in reducing the prevalent uncertainty and fostering informed participation in development programs. When communities understand the rationale, benefits, and implementation mechanisms of government policies like the Act East Policy, they are better equipped to make informed decisions about engagement rather than defaulting to uncertainty or resistance. Education serves as the catalyst that can transform cultural practices from potential barriers into

active facilitators of policy success, enabling communities to selectively adapt beneficial elements while preserving core cultural values.

Furthermore, continuous educational updates about evolving government policies become essential in border regions where information dissemination faces geographical and linguistic barriers. The study's findings suggest that educational programs emphasizing policy awareness, combined with respect for local cultural contexts, could significantly reduce the 'uncertain' category of responses and increase positive engagement with development initiatives. This educational approach acknowledges that cultural preservation and policy innovation are not mutually exclusive but can coexist through informed community participation.

Broader Implications for Educational Administration

From an educational administration perspective, these findings highlight the importance of cultural competency in policy implementation. Administrators working in culturally diverse regions must develop sophisticated understanding of local cultural dynamics and their interaction with policy objectives.

The study suggests that effective policy implementation in culturally distinct regions requires:

- Cultural mapping to understand local practices and values
- Stakeholder engagement strategies that respect traditional authority structures
- Flexibility in implementation approaches to accommodate cultural variations
- Continuous monitoring of cultural responses to policy initiatives

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence of the complex relationship between cultural dynamics and policy effectiveness in the implementation of India's Act East Policy in Nagaland's border villages. The finding that cultural practices significantly correlate with political stability while generating mixed responses across all policy domains demonstrates the critical importance of cultural factors in policy analysis.

The predominance of uncertainty across all dependent variables suggests that communities are still adapting to the Act East Policy's implications for their cultural practices and cross-border relationships. This adaptation process represents both a challenge and an opportunity for policy administrators seeking to enhance policy effectiveness through cultural engagement.

Recommendations

For Policy Administrators

- 1. Develop Cultural Competency Programs:** Training programs for administrators working in culturally diverse regions should include modules on local cultural practices and their policy implications.
- 2. Establish Cultural Advisory Committees:** Include traditional leaders and cultural practitioners in policy implementation teams to ensure cultural sensitivity.
- 3. Create Culturally Adapted Implementation Guidelines:** Develop region-specific implementation strategies that accommodate local cultural practices while achieving policy objectives.

For Future Research

- 1. Longitudinal Studies:** Conduct longitudinal research to track changes in cultural responses to the Act East Policy over time.
- 2. Comparative Analysis:** Extend the study to other Northeast states to identify region-specific patterns and commonalities.
- 3. Qualitative Investigations:** Conduct in-depth ethnographic studies to understand the specific mechanisms through which cultural practices influence policy outcomes.

For Educational Practice and Policy Literacy

- 1. Policy Literacy Programs:** Develop comprehensive educational curricula that enhance community understanding of government policies, their objectives, and implementation mechanisms, thereby reducing uncertainty and promoting informed participation.
- 2. Culturally Responsive Education:** Create educational frameworks that bridge traditional cultural knowledge with contemporary policy requirements, enabling communities to embrace innovation while preserving cultural identity.
- 3. Continuous Policy Education:** Establish ongoing educational programs to keep border communities updated on evolving government policies, ensuring sustained engagement and adaptation to policy changes.
- 4. Community Education Centers:** Establish accessible education centers in border villages that serve as information hubs for policy awareness and cultural dialogue.

5. Integration of Cultural Studies: Include cultural analysis in public administration and policy studies curricula to prepare future administrators for work in culturally diverse contexts.

Final Reflections

The Act East Policy represents an ambitious attempt to leverage cultural connections for national development objectives. The success of this policy in Nagaland's border villages will depend on the ability of policy administrators to navigate complex cultural dynamics while maintaining policy integrity. This study suggests that such navigation requires a sophisticated understanding of cultural response mechanisms and flexible implementation approaches that honor both policy objectives and cultural values.

The findings contribute to a broader theoretical understanding of cultural factors in policy implementation while providing practical insights for administrators working in culturally diverse regions. As India continues to pursue regional integration through the Act East Policy, the lessons from Nagaland's border villages offer valuable guidance for enhancing policy effectiveness through cultural engagement.

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