

S.E.A.View

# Asean and north-east India – so near and yet so far

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Mention “Mawlynnong”, and chances are it won't ring a bell for most people. Yet, this nondescript village tucked away in India's remote north-east has been listed by the likes of BBC Travel and Lonely Planet as Asia's cleanest village.

India's north-east is also home to the world's wettest place (Mawsynram village in Meghalaya state), the world's largest river island (Majuli in Assam state, with an area of around 880 sq km) and the world's only floating national park (Keibul Lamjao National Park in Manipur state).

Despite the superlatives, India's north-east region – a 262,179 sq km region comprising eight states – is still relatively unknown to most people from Asean, even though it is closest geographically to South-east Asia and shares an approximately 1,600km border with Myanmar.

The region is now back in the spotlight as a result of efforts by New Delhi to reinvigorate its age-old ties with Asean via its Act East policy. Earlier this year, Asean heads of state attended the Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi and participated in a summit to mark the 25th anniversary of Asean-India dialogue relations. The north-east region is geographically a natural gateway to Asean. As the crow flies, places such as Aizawl in Mizoram state would be closer to Bangkok than some other parts of India, say, Jaipur or Kanyakumari.

So, when recently it was announced that the Assam state government, in conjunction with the central government, was working on a plan to connect Guwahati in Assam with Asean cities such as Singapore and Hanoi, it should have come as no surprise.

And yet the irony is that despite being next door to South-east Asia, India's north-east region can currently be reached by Asean travellers only via cities such as Indian capital New Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai or Bangalore.

There are many benefits to be gained from closer ties between the north-eastern states of India and South-east Asia.

Tourism is a low-hanging fruit which can be plucked easily. The state governments in the region could pool their resources with private operators to work out tour packages for visitors from Asean. This would involve marketing the north-east aggressively in South-east Asia and further loosening visa requirements for nationals from Asean countries.

Tourism and people-to-people ties between north-east India and Asean countries are in many ways easy to promote, given the many similarities in food and culture, not to mention religion, specifically Buddhism. For instance, Nampkhe village in upper Assam is home to the Tai Phake people, who are believed to have migrated from southern China and are devout Buddhists. Sikkim state's Buddhist roots would be a draw for visitors from Asean.

There is also huge potential in areas such as horticulture, forestry, food processing and skills training. Singapore has already taken the lead in this respect and has entered into a memorandum of understanding to set up a skills development centre in Guwahati city in Assam. The centre will train up to 400 students a year in “beauty and wellness, retail services, hospitality operations (housekeeping) and food and beverage services”.

However, there are quite a few challenges that need to be overcome before north-east India can really become a bridge between India and Asean.

First, major infrastructure projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway have been running behind schedule. That highway is expected to be completed only by next year.

The state governments in north-east India will have to crank up the tourism infrastructure – such as roads, good-quality hotels and more public restrooms – to attract more visitors to this breathtakingly beautiful part of the country. International safety standards should be maintained, especially with regard to boat cruises on the mighty Brahmaputra river and boating in the many lakes spread across the region.

Second, the north-eastern states will have to work in unison, given the fact that the region has only around 3 per cent of India's total population and 8 per cent of its land area. Any activity (including the launch of regular flights with Asean countries) cannot be economically profitable in the long run unless they pool their resources.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has already stated that “the north-east can be the new engine of India's growth”. Last month, the government of Assam organised the Global Investors' Summit, a big boost for economic investment opportunities in the state.

Tourism is one area the north-east states – and India generally – can certainly do more to encourage. Young people from the north-east often find employment in the hospitality sector in other parts of India, given their good English-speaking skills. With an increase in Asean visitor numbers, job creation alone would be a boon to India.

Given their geographical contiguity and cultural similarities with Asean members and in keeping with India's Act East policy, the north-eastern states and New Delhi stand to gain from forging closer ties with South-east Asia. But for that to happen, they will have to raise their game and put their money where their mouth is. It is one thing to talk about the north-east region being a land bridge to Asean, but another thing for that to happen. More can be done with that fundamental first step – to simply connect.

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