

## **Handloom Sector of North East India: a new silk route for Act East Policy**

**Dr Alka Lalhall Assistant Professor**

*Dept. of Management Sciences Mahatma Gandhi Central University, Bihar*

---

### **Abstract**

*The idea of development is a conscious action, a desire for decentralized and coordinated mobilization of resources. The progression from 'Look East Policy' to 'Act East Policy' of India is an attempt to develop and channelize resources and create an extended neighborhood rooted in cultural similarities. North east India is a gateway to ASEAN countries. Keeping this at the foresight, the Act East Policy is a strategic attempt to crystallize and create a socio-economic, global aspiration for the world. However, this transcendental approach will have to overcome limitations of poverty, malnutrition, lack of social security and ethnic conflicts to name a few. At first instance Act East Policy seems to neglect the political ramifications and appears as a naïve plea that brutally ignores the deprivation that the states of north east have been facing for very long. North East India has had a rich tradition of material culture. The Act East Policy on a positive note can give a gasp of breath to the craft of handloom industry which has its own history in the north eastern states. It can be a facelift to the sorry state of affairs. This paper looks at the prospect of north east India emerging as the new Silk route of trade between nations, with handloom industry at its core. The north east India has inherent strength in the rich legacy of handloom manufacturing that still needs to be tapped. The paper also looks at the opportunity of heartening resurgence and rejuvenation of the handloom industry which can definitely make north east India to live up to its new name 'Asha Lakshmi'. The isolated states of north east India can be developed as a catchment area of trade which could give impetus to the Act East Policy. The research is primarily based on secondary data and aims to move from academic professionalism to a practical reality of handloom industry as a social force of integration, historical continuity of tradition and sustainable development; the much needed spur for activation of Act East Policy and inclusion of North East India in this process.*

**Keywords:** *Handloom Industry, MSMEs, Act East Policy, North East India, Sustainable development, Material Culture*

---

### **The Idea of Development in light of Act East Policy**

“An adequate understanding of the new countries of the ‘third world’ demands that one pursue scientific inquiry across any fenced off academic field into which it may happen to wonder” (Geertz, 1963, p. 153).

Development has become a global ambition. As the society begins to take a modern form, the idea of development has to take shift from its colonial roots. Development has taken a shift from Occidentalism. The new approaches to development strive for “large scale change in desired direction by utilizing the resources available....” and “making necessary institutional changes to achieve it” (Bernstein, 1973). The issues of development in India are not just limited to economic growth but are deeply entrenched in the problems of social inequality, cultural variations and have far reaching political ramifications. India in the last few years has been focusing on the pressing challenges like poverty, economic inequality, malnutrition and the like. The initiative is not to bring in a linear change; rather, there is an attempt to internalize an inclusive model (Panda & Majumder, 2013). To compete at a global scale the country has embraced a novel approach of creating competitive markets and meeting the basic necessities at the same time. In an attempt to reach on equal footing with the world’s fastest growing economies India has on several occasions hit rough patches. However, the transition from Look East policy to Act East Policy is a galvanizing initiative of the government to initiate mutually benefiting relationships with the South and South East Asia and Asia Pacific region, which has been much neglected in the past.

The Indian trade relationship although has been growing with the ASEAN, East Asia and Asia Pacific region since the transition of the look east policy, but the only beneficiaries through this have been the states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. They are reaping the benefits of being coastal states as the trade mainly flows through the sea route. The North East Region (NER) on the other hand despite sharing the land borders with ASEAN has not been able to benefit much since the continental route for trade has been largely neglected (Rajkumar, 2016).

There is a need to understand the significant geographical position of the NER as a promising gateway

to ASEAN, East Asia and Asia Pacific nations. It shares a common landscape of both material and non material culture. Weaving comes naturally to the indigenous people of the NER. The craft of handloom weaving is one such part of shared material culture in the region. Handloom has a ritualistic and cultural significance in the region. There are commonalities between the motifs and patterns woven on the handloom products. This landscape of shared culture creates conditions of the much needed technological sophistication and communication to boost the handloom produce of the region (Northeast Window Bureau, 2017). Various studies indicated that the handloom industry in this region has suffered a great deal of negligence because of lack of economic and political will. The main focus of this article is to review the popular understanding of the Act east policy and its implication on the NER among the academicians and policy makers. The article also attempts to throw some light on the prospectsof handloom industry in juxtaposition to the Act East Policy.

The current scenario of the Handloom industry in the NER is an uneven patchwork of benefits poorly distributed across the region. The socio political instruments have failed to provide a ground breaking innovation in the industry. The Act East Policy in this regard could be a revolutionary referent to extend India's diplomatic presence in ASEAN region and to strengthen ties with not only the South East Asian countries but also create an extended neighborhood in the Asia Pacific region. Within the national boundaries the policy galvanizes to change the discourse of development in the NER of the country with culture, connectivity and commerce at its heart (Das, Das, & Paul, 2016). The government has been striving hard to fix developmental models to bring about equitable growth and sustainability. Act East policy is one such effort to bring about profitable gains to the country through efforts of trade and commerce. In the process, India also aims at emerging as a significant international force in the Asian region. However, caught in the paradigm shift in the macro-environment of trade and commerce, the developmental theories and models may become obsolete. The fundamental frame of these models and theories are western in approach and on several occasions they are reduced to intellectual engagements. The Act East policy makes promising claims to dismantle the defunct idea of development. It is not just a political endeavor limited only to blueprints and planning on paper. Rather, this policy is pregnant with the promise of offering a plethora of socio economic changes within and outside the national boundaries. It provides a comforting vision of new world order where India with its neighbors in the Pacific region engage in a mutually benefiting relationship without political feud. With stacks of data on development policies from all around the world and instances of failure in implementation, the Act East Policy could be a momentous step in achieving the definitive developmental ambition, provided it internalizes the lessons from other successful as well as unsuccessful models of development both nationally and internationally.

### **The Seven Sister States and Handloom**

Act East Policy amidst all this sounds like a naïve plea which completely ignores the vast cultural diversity and deprivation which the NER has been facing. The socio economic problems prevailing in the NER pose a real challenge to the Act East policy. Therefore, the development of handloom industry can be a facelift for the states of North East that could provide an impetus to Act East policy. Caught in the deadlock of rigid developmental structures the aim should be to make the handloom industry of this region self sufficient and the main driver of trade and commerce. As of now, this could be a difficult aim to attain as the handloom in the NER is chiefly driven for household consumption and a part time occupation. In light of the innumerable limitations and challenges faced by the handloom industry in the region, be it the deepening wage differential or the overtaking of handloom by power loom (Devi, 2013), attempts need to be made to look at possible solutions as to how trade and commerce of India with its ASEAN and South Asian counterparts can be anchored in the handloom industry.

The North East India calls for an inclusive development where the diversity and the rich legacy of handloom industry are tapped. There has to be a careful elimination of replicating week development models. The precocious Act East policy can serve as a thrust to economic and institutional development of the states. The North Eastern states can become the powerhouse of handloom manufacturing.

Baring few, almost whole of the ethnic population of North East India are adept in the craftsmanship of weaving. It is a part of their ethnic heritage and each state of North East India has its own unique patterns of cultural significance reflected in their weaves. All the tribes in the north east region are known for their expertise in the handloom weaving, the *Apatanis*, of Arunachal Pradesh, the *Garos* of Meghalaya, the Assamese of Sualkuchi village of Assam, are some of the best craftsmen in handloom weaving (Kumar & Kaur, 2018). The simple white, red, blue and black colors spun from a household loom are dominated by motifs of human figures, geographical patterns and lines. An account of various handloom products and the type of loom used for weaving in the different states of North East is shown in table I given below

**Table I**  
An account of Handloom Weaves and the loom used in the states of North-East India

State	Handloom Product	Type of Loom
Assam	Muga Silk	Lion Loom, Throw shuttle loom, tribal loom
Meghalaya, Arunachal, Manipur, Nagaland and Assam	Eri Silk	Lion Loom, Throw shuttle loom, Fly shuttle loom
Nagaland	Shawl (The Tsung Kotepsu shawl, The Lotha Naga shawl)	Throw shuttle loom, fly shuttle loom
Manipur	Haophesoi sarong woven, Changkhom shawl, Mareipan shawl, Pheingao shawl	Lion Loom, fly shuttle loom
Tripura	Risa- Rignai	Lion Loom, fly shuttle loom, tribal loom
Sikkim	Thara (Lapcha weaves)	Throw shuttle loom

Source: (Debroy, 2016)

- Muga Silk: Known for its exclusive properties such as, sharp golden colour, high tensile strength and the capability of absorbing UV rays. Assam, India is the only producer of this category of silk and produces 125 meters of Muga silk every year.
- Eri Silk: Also referred to as non-violent silk, because of the fact that during its extraction processes the pupae inside the cocoon is not killed. This exquisite variety of silk is known for its skin friendliness.
- Tsung Kotepsu & Lotha Naga Shawl
- Haophesoi sarong
- Changkhom shawl & Pheingao shawl
- Risa- Rignai
- Thara

The textile industry of India comes next to agriculture in generating employment, it benefits 45 million people directly and over 60 million people indirectly (India Brand Equity Foundation, 2017). Identified mostly under the unorganized sector, the handloom is not an occupation but a part of long lived history and daily life of the ethnic tribes of the North East. According to the third Household Census 2013, out of 23.7 Lakh household looms in the country, 15.1 Lakh household looms belong to the north east region, accounting for almost 65 per cent of the total handlooms in the country. Despite this, the major export centers of handloom are concentrated in Tamil Nadu (Karur), Panipat (Haryana), Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh) & Kannur (Kerala) (Handloom Export Promotion Council, 2019).

The government of India has been working towards bringing a 360 degree turnaround in the handloom industry throughout the nation. The aim is to make the industry sustainable. This becomes all the more challenging since, handloom industry is largely unorganised and rural based. The handloom industry faces a dearth of educated and innovative weaver and is greatly relied on the traditional knowledge passed from one generation to another. This is one reason why many of the government policies and schemes have not been able to directly reach them. Just like agriculture the handloom industry has often been branded as rural sector of employment which does not include young population of the area. There have been several review articles discussing the plight of handloom weavers and the challenges faced by them. The *Banarasi sarees*, the *Ikat* prints, the *Bagru* prints have made their strong hold in the popular consumer culture, however there is a dearth of demand and poor market awareness towards North Eastern handloom products. The power looms for example in Surat damage the market hold of the handloom sector as the handloom lacks in the uniformity of quality and cannot achieve economy of scale. The organized powerloom and mill industries offer cheaper products with uniform quality. In spite of the threat from the mammoth powerloom machinery, the handloom industry has been able to survive because of the institutional efforts of the government schemes.

- NER Textile Promotion Scheme: Initiated in project mode to promote capacity building, infrastructural facilities and providing marketing support to textile industry in the north east region.
- Handloom Mark: To recognize and guarantee the authenticity of hand-woven handloom products.
- Indian Handloom Brand: Creating a handloom brand with an aim to positioning the handloom weave and spread awareness about the organic and environment friendly characteristics of handloom products.

➤ **Comprehensive Handloom Cluster Development Scheme:** Focused on the development of mega handloom clusters with at least 15000 looms per cluster, aimed at an integrated effort towards infrastructural development, procurement of raw material and marketing of raw material, synergistically. Despite more than 65 percent of the country’s handloom concentrated in the North East, the one mega cluster identified in the region, Sivasagar, Assam has only 6 green field projects as opposed to 14 running in the Trichy & Virudhunagar in Tamil Nadu (Das & Das, 2011).

### **The EX-IM Overview of Handloom and Textile**

India stood as the second largest exporter of handloom products with a total value of US\$ 353.9 million. As per a report published by the Handloom Export Promotion Council, the export of handloom products in 2016-17 declined to US\$ 360 million from US\$ 367 million in 2015-16, marking a decline of 2 per cent in dollars.

Textile industry has always taken a front stage for establishment of industrialization, be it Britain, parts of North America or Japan, the nations have heavily relied on export of textile. The competition in the world market for textile export and its demand increases with every passing year. China has maintained the apex position in the world economy as the largest textile and handloom exporter while India has sluggishly made its way to the number three position competing largely with China, the UK and the US.

**Table II**  
*World’s top 5 leading textile exporters*

Country	Value of Export (\$US bn)
China	110
European Union	69
India	16
United States	14
Turkey	11

Source: (The Statistics Portal, 2019)

The focus of Indian handloom and textile export has been America and Europe, while the Asian continent and the Pacific region have never been the primary targets. The top five export destinations of handloom of India are the US with a total of US\$ 93.1 million, followed by the UK valued at US\$ 26.1 million, Spain with US\$ 21.2 million, Italy with US\$ 18 million, and Germany with US\$ 17.8 million. The following table represents the leading export destinations of handloom products of India in the year 2017-18. It’s worth noting that the ASEAN nations and the South Asian and Pacific nations have been ignored to a great extent. The primary goal of the Act East policy is to mint the Asian region as an economic destination of trade and commerce. Therefore efforts have to be made to target these nations as a market for handloom products from the North East states.

**Table III**  
*The leading destinations of export for Indian Handloom*

Country	Value (US\$ mn)	Share (percent)
The US	93.1	26.3
The UK	26.1	7.4
Spain	21.2	6.0
Italy	18.0	5.1
Germany	17.8	5.0
UAE	16.7	4.7

France	16.3	4.6
The Netherlands	13.7	3.9
Australia	11.6	3.3
Japan	11.6	3.3

Source: (Handloom Export Promotion Council, 2019)

The ambition of the Act East policy for India to emerge as the hub of culture and commerce in the Asian region could be realized if efforts be made to bring ASEAN and pacific nations as prospective destinations.

### **The Way Forward**

In the wake of Act East policy the states of North East, India could receive the much needed thrust in the handloom sector. The Act East policy strives to strengthen the cultural diversity and create a global capital rooted in Asian identity. The effect of act east policy can be a significant boost to the handloom industry and in turn the Act East policy could benefit in realizing its goals through handloom. It will uplift the economic conditions in the region and also make cultural investment possible. In such a scenario it becomes important to look at the roots of handloom industry in the NER. The diverse range of handloom products can be used as markers of ethnic consciousness and religion which has often been the reason for social unrest. The sense of opening up of trade for the global economy has to be induced in the household driven handloom sector. The physical connectivity projects like India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral highway and Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport projects under the Act East policy could be the key drivers of trade and commerce of handloom in the NER envisaged by the present article. A craft which is largely domesticated and labour intensive, driven mainly by women, has all the possibilities of emerging beyond the national boundaries as a significant product for trade and export in the Asian continent, provided it is given the right direction through the Act east policy.

The prospects of Act East policy can bring a large scale commoditization of the product thereby homogenizing the arbitrary demand and supply ratio of handloom products from the North East and also celebrating the ethnic culture of weaving.

However, the region still needs exclusive attention from the government and the Act east policy could be the much needed ray of hope to revive and rejuvenate the handloom of the NER. There is a need to stir and create market demand. The NER primarily suffers from a myopic view where it completely ignores the creation of customer base and relies on the home consumption. It requires an impetus calling for a larger cooperation between the governmental and nongovernmental machineries. Laila Tyabji, the founder of Dastakar NGO has taken an initiative to work with rural artisans and include them in main stream apparel industry (The Economic Times, 2015). More of such efforts are needed to boost the market share of indigenous handloom products from the NER. If marketed appropriately, the north eastern handloom products could create a niche market for themselves owing to their ethnicity and intricate designs. They could also be positioned as eco friendly products among the environmentally conscious consumers as handloom in the NER is largely organic and uses natural dyes, making it thereby, a potentially elite market product (Kumar & Kaur, 2018).

The Prime Minister of India Mr. Narendra Modi, while addressing the twelfth India-ASEAN summit declared that “a new era of economic development, industrialization of trade has begun in India, externally India’s ‘Look East Policy’ has become ‘Act East Policy’” (Sasi, 2014). While the policy aspires to ‘Act’ in the interest of creating a new world order resilient to doldrums of market, it has its own limitations rooted in the country of origin. While India aims at expanding its economic and strategic position in the Asian continent, it is yet to overcome the problems of poor infrastructure, economic instability, social unrest and disparity between planning and implementation of schemes.

The government schemes and policies, or the market strategies cannot be a one size fits all solution for the seven sister states. Although there are ethnic commonalities between the handlooms in the seven states yet, the weaves and products of the different ethnic groups have their own inherent uniqueness which needs to be addressed and acknowledged differently. Different state products need to be identified as geographical indicators and authenticated by handloom mark. The weavers need to be educated and made aware of the benefits that they could reap from the opening of the international market through the Act East policy. Apart from various policy implementations, the AEP should aim to create a culturally inclusive market which grows on the lived traditions of the society. The caricatures of various policies should be executed on ground level. AEP is like a multi model project which will ensure India’s stake in global market. The country should ensure that the NER is not left behind, betwixted between India and other nations. Weaving is a tangible heritage of India. Commodification and branding of art involved in weaving will uplift its present condition. Each household in NER can be

developed as a potential supplier creating economic stability in the region. A lot of onus lies on the AEP and NER handloom sector can serve as an instrument of connecting the dots across the countries sharing a history of culture and tradition.

### References

- [1]. Bernstein, H. (1973). Introduction: Development and the Social Sciences. In *Underdevelopment and Development* (pp. 13-28). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- [2]. Das, G., Das, S. C., & Paul, U. (2016). Look east policy: Economic engagement with ASEAN and East Asian countries. In G. Das, & C. J. Thomas, *Look East to Act East Policy: Implications for India's Northeast* (p. 19). New York: Routledge.
- [3]. Das, R., & Das, A. K. (2011). Industrial Cluster: An Approach for Rural Development in North East India. *International Journal of Trade, Economics and Finance*, 2(2), 161-165.
- [4]. Debroy, M. (2016, March 24). Top Handloom Products from NE India. Retrieved March 1, 2019, from [www.nelive.in](http://www.nelive.in): <https://www.nelive.in/north-east/fashion/top-handloom-products-ne-india>
- [5]. Devi, C. V. (2013). HANDLOOMS FOR LIVELIHOOD IN NORTH-EAST REGION: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS. *Journal of Rural Development*, 32(4), 427-438.
- [6]. Geertz, C. (1963). The integrative revolution: primordial sentiments and civil politics in the new states.
- [7]. Old societies and new states: The quest for modernity in Asia and Africa, 105-157.
- [8]. Handloom Export Promotion Council. (2019). The Handloom Export Promotion Council. Retrieved March 4, 2019, from [www.hepcindia.com](http://www.hepcindia.com): <https://www.hepcindia.com/>
- [9]. Handloom Export Promotion Council. (2019). TOP 10 COUNTRIES. Retrieved March 2019, from [www.hepcindia.com](http://www.hepcindia.com): <https://www.hepcindia.com/top-10-countries/>
- [10]. India Brand Equity Foundation. (2017, March). Textile Industry & Market Growth in India. Retrieved March 4, 2019, from [www.ibef.org](http://www.ibef.org): <https://www.ibef.org/archives/detail/b3ZlcnZpZXcmMzcxMTAmMTEy>
- [11]. Kumar, A., & Kaur, S. (2018). INDIAN HANDLOOM INDUSTRY: POTENTIAL AND PROSPECTS. Export-Import Bank of India.
- [12]. Northeast Window Bureau. (2017, September 1). Weaving in the Northeast: A Traditional Occupation.
- [13]. Retrieved March 5, 2019, from [thenortheastwindow.com](http://www.thenortheastwindow.com): <http://www.thenortheastwindow.com/2017/09/weaving-northeast-traditional-occupation/>
- [14]. Panda, S., & Majumder, A. (2013). A REVIEW OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES IN INDIA. Icssr & Fellow, Postdoctoral.
- [15]. Rajkumar, F. (2016). Look east policy and the continental route: a reality check. In G. Das, & C. J. Thomas, *Look East to Act East: Implications for India's Northeast* (p. 143). New York: Routledge.
- [16]. Sasi, A. (2014, November 13). 'Look East' has become 'Act East Policy', says PM Modi at ASEAN summit. Retrieved March 2019, from [indianexpress.com](http://indianexpress.com): <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/look-east-has-become-act-east-policy-pm-modi-at-asean/>
- [17]. The Economic Times. (2015, March 12). Handicrafts, and handloom from North East at Dastkar Fest.
- [18]. Retrieved March 2019, from [economictimes.indiatimes.com](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com): <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/sme-sector/handicrafts-and-handloom-from-north-east-at-dastkar-fest/articleshow/46538633.cms>
- [19]. The Statistics Portal. (2019). *Value of the leading 10 textile exporters worldwide in 2017, by country (in billion U.S. dollars)*. Retrieved from [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com): <https://www.statista.com/statistics/236397/value-of-the-leading-global-textile-exporters-by-country/>