शोधामृत

(कला, मानविकी और सामाजिक विज्ञान की अर्धवार्षिक, सहकर्मी समीक्षित, मूल्यांकित शोध पत्रिका)

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Bridging Tweets and Traditions : Exploring Cultural Dialogue Between Northeast India and Southeast Asia on X

Abstract : This study examines the way in which social media platform X (old Twitter) functions as an efficient space of cultural exchange between Southeast Asia and Northeast India, within the broader geopolitical context of India's Act East Policy. geographically situated at a cultural crossroads, Northeast India has traditionally had historic, ethnic and cultural relationships with most Southeast Asian nations. With old-fashioned diplomacy more and more mixing with web-based types of communication, sites such as X have begun to emerge as key spaces for facilitating cross-border engagement and appreciation—particularly on cultural fronts.

Referring to Discourse Analysis and Netnography, this research is attempting to know how state officials (e.g. Ministry of External Affairs, ICCR etc.), cultural organizations, independent artists and even grass root artists are employing X to market products such as local fests, linguistic heritage, common heritage and indigenous knowledge. It also examines how aspects such as tweet threads, hashtags and X-spaces are utilized to narrate stories of cultural identity, engage with Southeast Asian publics, and fashion something akin to a collective memory throughout the region.

The researchers note that X is making it possible to create what might be referred to as "micro-cultural

A Peer Reviewed, Refereed and Indexed Half-Yearly Research Journal of Arts, Humanity & Social Sciences

diplomacy," wherein even 280-character tweets can be used as tools of soft power. These brief encounters, even though informal, seem to contribute significantly toward solidifying interpersonal relationships. This is serving to reinforce the broader cultural narratives of Northeast India, which often fail to receive the due attention. This changes the perception of the region from a remote periphery to a cyber link between India and Southeast Asia.

Keywords : Digital Diplomacy, Cross-Border Cultural Exchange, Online communities, Netnography.

Introduction : In the digital era, diplomacy runs over more than the behind-closed-doors talks, and official communiques consist of working as a conversation over social media and engagement with the public and telling stories during happening. This new era of diplomacy displays what is known as digital diplomacy where social media platforms like X formerly known as Twitter involved forming international perceptions, soft power strategies, and cultural penetration for the diplomacy database. It is found that social media is not only for talking because it is an area and a medium to participate in geopolitical where transnational relations and cultural identities are negotiated, and there is a retention and authentication process for belonging through the practice.

Encompassed in these global shifts, India's Act East Policy reflects a planned effort to rethink its traditional relationships and diplomacy with neigh-boring Southeast Asian countries. As reshaped by Singh, while the policy was originally modeled on the regional integration approach favored under the auspices of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in the early 1990s as the Look East Policy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi rejuvenated the policy in 2014 as the Act East Policy featured a broader emphasis beyond economic cooperation to culture and people-to-people connectivity. Specifically, the policy framework also situated Northeast India as both a geographic bridge and a cultural bridge for a comparable expression—a bridge-head to the ASEAN. Still, the region's engagement has often been viewed through the viewpoint of security or development, with limited attention to its cultural agency and potential for regional diplomacy (Baruah, 2020).

Geographically and culturally located at the intersection of South and Southeast Asia, Northeast India shares deep civilizational linkages with countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos. These ties include shared ethnic communities, religious beliefs (such as Theravāda Buddhism), linguistic similarities, trade routes, and festivals (Goswami, 2019). Despite this rich heritage, the region has historically remained marginalized in both national discourse and foreign policy conversations, often portrayed as peripheral or "inward-looking" due to conflict, underdevelopment, and limited infrastructural connectivity (McDuie-Ra, 2015).

Nevertheless, X, like other digital platforms, has recently sprung up as one

of the key spaces for transforming this narrative. Users from Northeast India are engaging global audiences and reconnecting with their Southeast Asian peers through tweet threads, visual storytelling, live event coverage, and even through curated hashtags. This transcends what formal diplomacy can achieve. These are what this paper terms micro-cultural diplomacy. These are digital efforts – informal and routine – undertaken by ordinary people, which cumulatively work towards wider diplomatic and cultural goals.

Social media diplomacy, particularly cultural diplomacy on X, is being employed by a diverse set of actors: official government handles (e.g., @MEAIndia, @IndiaInASEAN), cultural bodies such as ICCR, think tanks like RIS, and even regional influencers and digital artists. Recent examples include Assam's Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma congratulating Singapore's Prime Minister while emphasizing cultural-economic ties (IndiaTodayNE, 2024), and Cultural storytellers highlighting traditional festivals such as Nagaland's Hornbill Festival or advocating for eco-tourism destinations like Ziro Valley and Majuli Island. Hashtags such as #ActEast, #NortheastIndia, and #NamasteThailand reveal an intentional effort to construct a digital bridge that links the region's natural and cultural heritage with wider regional aspirations.

Also, digital storytelling from Northeast India also challenges prevailing stereotypes about the region. For instance, tweets highlighting the fashion, music, and traditional crafts of tribal communities counteract homogenized perceptions of Indian identity that often exclude Northeast representations (Thounaojam, 2022). Platforms like X allow underrepresented voices, such as independent Naga and Manipuri artists, to amplify their cultural expressions in a global conversation. In doing so, these digital interactions become not just cultural expressions but acts of soft power and political presence.

From a methodological stand point, this work draws on netnography and discourse analysis to examine selected tweets and interactions between December 2023 and May 2024. The analysis includes both state-generated narratives and user-led content to capture the full spectrum of cultural exchange happening through X. By doing so, the paper attempts to trace the emergence of a digital ecology that facilitates a reimagination of Northeast India—not as an isolated periphery, but as a cultural and strategic node in India's Southeast Asian engagement.

Research Objectives :

- To examine how X is utilized as a digital space for cultural exchange between Northeast India and Southeast Asia in the context of India's Act East Policy.
- To analyze the role of both state and non-state actors in constructing and circulating cultural narratives through digital storytelling on X.

Research Questions :

- How does the social media platform X facilitate cultural exchange and soft

diplomacy between Northeast India and Southeast Asia?

• What role do state and grassroots actors play in shaping and disseminating cultural narratives on X in relation to the Act East Policy?

The paper is structured as follows. Section II provides a review of the literature on digital diplomacy, India's Act East Policy, and Northeast India's cultural connections with Southeast Asia. Section III outlines the methodological frame work, particularly the use of netnographic methods and discourse analysis to collect and analyze Twitter data. Section IV presents the findings from the collected tweets, categorizing them thematically across domains such as soft power projection, cultural representation, and regional symbolism. Finally, Section V offers a critical discussion and conclusion, reflecting on the implications of digital diplomacy for India's regional policy, cultural identity, and the evolving role of social media in foreign affairs.

Review of literature : Digital Diplomacy, Cultural Representation, and Civilizational Connectivity : Digital diplomacy that has witnessed the emergence of sites such as X (formerly Twitter) has transformed the way the states negotiate, speak and exercise their soft power into the international arena. Traditional diplomacy that entails formal sitting-room type of meetings and communiqués has been substituted by one that is public and instant. Through social media diplomacy, actors also have the capacity to draw upon emotion and visual imagery of national identity, a new

departure from previously (Cerf, 2020; Tsinovoi, 2020; Møller et al., 2024). Governments and diplomats utilize Facebook, Weibo and X in order to promote policy, crisis manage and bridge foreign publics through calculated narratives. Also what we see is that the success of such resources is not uniform in every context, we see that third world countries specially struggle to be heard within global discourse which is noted by (Perdani et al., 2024; Luqiu Yang, 2020).

This is part of broader changes in culture representation on digital plat forms. Social media produces a large arena for sharing and recontextualization of cultural symbols, in support of the development of communities and articulation of identity on very group and individual levels (Vytkalov et al., 2024). Meanwhile however such virtual arenas are not without problems. We witness the digital divide that continues to affect whom one is included, how culture is represented, and what stories are told in order of priority (Mihelj, Leguina, Downey, 2019). Although we do see the arrival of immersive media and algorithmic promotion that open space for more cultural access, also we witness that what may introduce homogeneity and stereotyping if not well thought through (Windhager et al., 2019; Anastasovitis Roumeliotis, 2024).

In relation to India's Act East Policy, these are developments that hold very strongly to Northeast India a region with historical cultural, ethnic and linguistic connections with Southeast Asian nations. Such communities as the

Tai-Ahom and Khasi having a history of civilizational continuity beyond nation states are seen through practices in common in Buddhism, weaving, language families and ecological wisdom (Verghese, 1998; Reddy et al., 2007; Das Anglong, 2015). Through celebration of festivals such as Namaste Thailand Festival and Mekong-Ganga Cooperation India asserts its strength under the people to people engagement frame work of the policy (Tasung, 2024; Singh, 2023).

Towards a Synthesis : A Digital-First Reimagination of Northeast India :

Together, the literature on digital diplomacy, internet-enabled cultural representation, and regional civilizational connectivities implies an emerging convergence: One where digital techno-logy is not merely involved in statecraft, but in the formulation of cross border cultural identity. Visual story telling, hashtags, and participatory media have transformed how in countries like Northeast India that framed their contrib-ution to global diplomacy not only as strategic agents, but as cultural agents that cut across boundaries.

Research Gap : In spite of the vast amount of research literature on digital diplomacy and cultural connectivity at our disposal today, we still have a vast research gap which examines grass roots, user centered modes of diplomacy which emerge out of what can be labeled as peripheral areas such as Northeast India. What research is currently being conducted is primarily into high-level diplomatic engagement and institutional

actors which automatically excludes the role of ordinary people artists, students, grassroots creatives who make a contribution towards what I would call soft diplomacy by means such as X. This research attempts to bridge that gap through an examination of how micro cultural diplomacy unfolds through the utilization of hashtags, images, and unofficial handles on X during the time of India's Act East Policy. Again here, we redefine Northeast India's role in cyberspace as participant, rather than spectator, in the engagement with Southeast Asia.

Methodology : This study employs qualitative methods like netnography, discourse analysis, and purposive data sampling. Netnography is am essential tool for diving into online communities and understanding cultural expressions on digital platforms. It offers valuable insights into how people behave online and the meanings they attach to their actions within specific contexts (Kozinets, 2020). Discourse analysis helps us see how language, visuals, and symbols influence narratives and power dynamics in the realm of digital diplomacy and communication tied to various cultures and practices (Gee, 2014; Zappavigna, 2021). Purposive data sampling is a non-random approach that picks participants based on traits that align with the research goals (Palinkas et al., 2015).

X was selected as the digital platform because of its engaging nature, hashtag-driven conversations, and its popularity among both institutions like

the Ministry of External Affairs and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, as well as grassroots participants such as artists, students, and cultural organizations from the Northeast. These characteristics make X an ideal choice for netnographic research, providing access to real-time interactions and cultural expressions.

The study draws methodological inspiration from earlier work on digital diplomacy by Manor (2019) and hashtag-driven discourse communities by Sauter and Bruns (2015). These studies highlight the significance of social media environ-ments in grasping new forms of public diplomacy. Data collection spanned six months, from December 2023 to May 2024, intentionally timed to align with major cultural diplomacy events like the Namaste Thailand Festival, regional summits, and exchanges between India and ASEAN countries. Data were collected using X's Advanced Search feature, which enabled targeted filtering of tweets related to specific hashtags: #ActEast and #NortheastIndia. These hashtags not only highlighted cultural diplomacy content but also served as tools that shaped conversations and fostered thematic micro-publics around shared geopolitical and cultural issues, as theorized by Bruns and Burgess (2011). While many researchers rely on the Twitter API or data scraping tools, some scholars argue that platform-native tools like Advanced Search are particularly effective for qualitative analysis, especially when the focus is on interpretive depth rather than large-scale

predictions (Ahmed et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2015). This tool caters to the thematic and contextual needs of netnographic and discourse analysis by offering rich, traceable content (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). About 250 tweets were carefully selected based on their relevance to the research goals. The chosen tweets featured a blend of official content from government accounts, promotional material from cultural institutions, and user-generated posts from independent creators and community organizations. Posts were included if they clearly connected to themes of cultural exchange or identity representation, contained visual or symbolic elements, and showed some level of user engagement (likes, retweets, or replies). While most of the sample consisted of English-language tweets, non-English content was also considered when it could be understood through the platform's auto-translation or inferred context.

Although the study provides valuable insights into emerging forms of cultural diplomacy, it also acknowledges certain limitations. The use of platform-native tools like Advanced Search, while great for qualitative depth, restricts access to historical data beyond the specified timeframe and may miss some tweets due to indexing issues. Moreover, the lack of direct interviews or ethnographic participation with content creators limits the ability to grasp the intent or reception behind digital expressions. Another challenge we face is the heavy reliance on English and content

that's been translated by x's auto translation feature, which often overlooks the subtle nuances found in local dialects. All gathered data was publicly available and used in line with the platform's terms of service. We made sure not to retrieve any personal or private information, and user identities were kept anonymous unless they were associated with verified institutions or public figures. We took great care to interpret cultural representations with respect, steering clear of stereotypes and extractive narratives.

Analysis and Findings : By examining a range of content from official communications to user posts, several key themes emerged.

Hashtags as Digital Gateways to Regional Identity ; Between December 2023 and May 2024, hashtags like #ActEast, #NortheastIndia, #Namaste-Thailand, and #IndiaASEAN appeared frequently. They showcased distinct ways people engaged online. These hashtags were not just for tagging; they acted as tools for shaping identity, showcasing heritage, and facilitating soft diplomacy.

Government accounts, particularly the Ministry of External Affairs and ICCR, used #ActEast to promote messages about cultural diplomacy, state visits, and scholarship announcements. These posts framed Northeast India as both a symbolic and geographic link to Southeast Asia. In contrast, #Northeast India provided a space for individuals—students, artists, and community-led pages—to share festival images, traditional attire, rituals, and crafts. It felt more personal and proud, reflecting how locals wanted their culture to be seen.

A Platform for Micro-Level Cultural Engagement : The #NamasteThailand tag mainly appeared in ICCR's outreach work, focusing on performances, yoga events, and art shows designed to connect with Thai audiences. While these posts were officially made, they reached a wider audience due to regular users liking, sharing, or commenting. This engagement suggests that online diplomacy is no longer just top-down; it has become participatory. These tweets often featured short clips, visuals, and colorful content that evoked emotional connections across borders.

Rather than grand statements about policy, this content functioned as cultural diplomacy on a smaller scale—through daily visuals and artistic expression.

Echoes of Indigenous Connection : Another notable aspect was how some posts highlighted shared indigenous roots. For example, a few threads drew direct connections between Tai-Ahom traditions in Assam and similar practices among Tai groups in Thailand or Laos. Though these posts were few, they generated strong engagement—especially from Southeast Asian users and diaspora communities.

This indicates a growing cross-border cultural consciousness online, driven not by diplomats but by activists, academics, and community voices.

Visuals and Vernacular Touches : Much of the communication unfolded through pictures—showing people in traditional

garb, temples or places of worship, folded hands during rituals, etc. These were visual cues that served as cultural bridges despite differing languages of the users. Users would also add vernacular text, bilingual captions, or translated hashtags, thus giving these posts an aura of inclusivity.

Conscious decisions to juxtapose Indian and Southeast Asian elements went a long way towards creating a shared visual vocabulary. It was less about perfect grammar and more about shared symbols and emotions.

Participation from Marginal Voices : While government bodies framed the big-picture narrative around Act East, the more grounded perspectives came from NGOs, younger creators, and community members. These people tweeted about local festivals, concerns about cultural erasure, and environmental activism, often through their own hashtag campaigns.

Their presence added layers of meaning and even challenged the idea that diplomacy only happens at the official level. Clearly, platforms like X let voices from the grassroots shape how Northeast India is viewed through a global lens.

Conclusion and Recommendations : The study shows that X will increasingly act as a platform to facilitate cultural conversations and soft diplomacy between the two regions. As a result, the ideas of cultural heritage and national identity can flow freely across countries. The Ministry of External Affairs and ICCR employ the X factor for the Act East policy.

What stood out was how hashtags like #ActEast and #NamasteThailand are not just mere words but carry a lot of meaning. Look at how the posters depict models, and consider how the events depicted in the photographs were planned. Note that festivals and tribal traditions are not just a lifestyle issue but an integral part of indigenous knowledge. X is not only another channel of information exchange but also an immense digital public space where cultural diplomacy is being built and influenced by ordinary people.

The following should be done to enhance this type of cultural exchange: First, Northeastern creators would benefit from media training to better express their culture. The government and other cultural bodies can support them through small grants, training, and exposure. To ensure success, the two partners must work together to run public campaigns that feature common themes in nature, folklore, and spirituality. Moreover, the comments and trending topics by Indian users should also be constantly monitored on various internet platforms by the Act East policy experts. Therefore, Chinese diplomacy may become more people-centric in the future because of such real-time feedback. Moreover, there is a need to boost collaborations between policy makers and academic researchers concerning the impact that transient postings on X have on public opinion and global policies.

The study's scope had limitations on what it could achieve. Firstly, the tweets under review had to be in English or could be translated using an auto-translator. This implies that much valuable information from other native languages was excluded. The researchers did not interview the users who posted the content, so the intention and emotion were largely speculative. Perhaps, they were unfairly or prematurely silenced because X's algorithm determines what goes viral. Future studies can further compare how cultural diplomacy works on other social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, or even the newer ones, such as Threads and Mastodon. The study might also benefit from the input of Southeast Asian diaspora communities to understand how regional identities are negotiated across borders and platforms.

To sum up, the platform has ceased to be merely a tool for announcements. Now, a new battlefield has emerged there: everyday users wielding the power of short posts and likes are already participants in current diplomatic processes. Additionally, the region acts as a cultural bridge between India and Southeast Asia, thus giving an added dimension to the Act East Policy.

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