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The India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway: A Road to Trade in Culture and Religion

Amarjiva Lochan

Department of History, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Correspondence: amarjiva@history.du.ac.in

Abstract

In the twenty-first century, connectivity projects have emerged as key instruments of diplomacy and regional integration. The India–Myanmar–Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway, a flagship initiative under India's "Act East" policy, is envisioned as a transformative corridor that will link Moreh in Manipur, India, to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar. This paper examines both the strategic-economic significance and the socio-cultural implications of the project. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach, relying on secondary sources such as government documents, think-tank reports, and scholarly commentaries. The findings show that while the highway promises to enhance trade, commerce, and political cooperation between India and ASEAN, its completion has been hindered by political instability in Myanmar and project delays, with a revised operational deadline of 2027. More importantly, the highway may facilitate cultural exchanges, Buddhist pilgrimages, and tourism, but it also risks commodifying indigenous traditions, unsettling religious balances, and altering the cultural fabric of sensitive borderland communities. By situating the project within broader debates on connectivity and cultural transformation, this paper highlights the double-edged nature of such infrastructure: a catalyst for integration and prosperity, yet a potential disruptor of established socio-cultural orders.

Keywords: International Relations; Cultural Exchange and Connectivity; Qualitative Analysis; Southeast Asia–India

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Introduction

Connectivity has become a defining paradigm of twenty-first-century geopolitics. For India, the aspiration to link more closely with Southeast Asia is central to its Act East Policy, which aims to foster economic integration and revitalize civilizational ties. Among the flagship projects of this policy, the India–Myanmar–Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway holds a prominent place. Once completed, it will connect Moreh in India’s Manipur state to Mae Sot in Thailand through Myanmar, offering a land-based corridor that complements maritime routes in the Bay of Bengal (Chatterjee, 2025; Indian Embassy Thailand, n.d.).

The origins of the highway date back to the early 2000s, when it was visualized as a “highway of opportunity and friendship” capable of moving goods, services, people, and ideas across borders (Lochan, 2018). In recent years, the project has faced significant hurdles, including construction delays, funding challenges, and, most critically, the political instability in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup (Economic Times, 2023). Despite these setbacks, policymakers frame the highway as a “game-changer” for regional trade and India–ASEAN integration (ORF, 2023).

While economic and strategic narratives dominate existing discourse, this paper argues that the IMT Trilateral Highway must also be studied as a cultural phenomenon. Infrastructure is not merely a material artefact; it reshapes identities, facilitates new forms of exchange, and potentially disrupts existing socio-religious landscapes (Lochan, 2018). As seen in Thailand’s northern highlands, new routes can accelerate religious conversions, dilute indigenous practices, and transform community dynamics (Lochan, 2018). Similarly, the IMT corridor could bring unprecedented opportunities for pilgrimage and cultural tourism but also expose fragile traditions to the pressures of globalization.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill a critical gap in literature by addressing the socio-cultural dimensions of the IMT Trilateral Highway and its strategic relevance. Using a qualitative approach based on secondary sources, the paper analyses both the promises and perils of connectivity in this age of integration.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, non-experimental research design to examine the socio-cultural dynamics of the India–Myanmar–Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway. Recognizing that infrastructure projects of this scale are not only physical or economic undertakings but also deeply socio-culturally embedded phenomena, the research adopts a descriptive and analytical approach. Given the ongoing construction

of the highway and security constraints in certain regions, direct, long-term ethnographic fieldwork across all three countries was not feasible. Consequently, the study relies on a triangulation of secondary data sources to construct a multi-dimensional analytical narrative.

Observational and Presented Data: The foundational material is derived from a presentation at the ICSSR-NRCT Joint Seminar in Bodh Gaya, India (Lochan, 2018). This source provides photographic evidence, anecdotal observations from the Mae Sot region, and an initial conceptualization of the trade-offs between economic connectivity and cultural integrity.

Government and Media Reports: Up-to-date information on the highway's progress, strategic objectives, and funding is drawn from official sources and reputable media outlets. Reports from the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) and analyses published in *The Economic Times* (2023) and *The Indian Express* (2023) provide insights into project delays, revised timelines, and regional implications.

Academic Literature: The study is theoretically framed by scholarship in regionalism, economic geography, and critical development studies. Works such as those by Raile Rocky Ziipao (2015) on infrastructure development in North-East India offer a critical lens through which to interrogate top-down development models. Concepts of governmentality and the political dimensions of infrastructure inform the analysis of the underlying assumptions of the highway project.

Case Study Approach: Mae Sot, Thailand's border town, is employed as a focused case study. As a primary trade gateway and a destination for migrants and refugees from Myanmar, Mae Sot exemplifies the socio-economic and cultural dynamics likely to emerge along the highway corridor (Lochan, 2018). By examining the town's evolving social, economic, and religious landscape, the study extrapolates potential trends, challenges, and impacts of enhanced connectivity across the entire route.

Analytical Framework: The methodological approach allows for a predictive and interpretive inquiry. While it does not claim to provide definitive empirical conclusions for the entire corridor, it critically synthesizes available evidence to highlight potential risks, gaps, and policy implications. Comparative insights from other cross-border connectivity projects in Southeast Asia supplement this analysis, offering a broader context for evaluation (Chatterjee, 2025; Indian Express, 2023).

Ethical Considerations: Ethical concerns are confined to the accurate, transparent, and responsible use of secondary sources. Institutional ethics clearance was not required as no primary data from human or animal subjects was collected.

Nonetheless, the study acknowledges that political sensitivities in Myanmar and other regions may introduce biases into publicly available sources.

Limitations: The principal limitation of this research lies in its dependence on secondary sources and evolving project updates. The dynamic political and security situation in Myanmar constrains field-based research, and as such, the socio-cultural implications discussed herein remain interpretive and predictive. Empirical validation will be necessary in future studies once the highway becomes fully operational.

Results/Findings

The findings of this study are derived from a synthesis of observational data, media reports, and academic literature concerning the IMT Trilateral Highway and its impacts, with a specific focus on the Mae Sot border region. The results are presented in three thematic categories: 1) the infrastructural and economic realities of the highway; 2) the emergent social landscape in key border nodes; and 3) the observable shifts in the religious and cultural domain.

Infrastructural and Economic Realities

The primary finding is that the IMT Trilateral Highway, while progressing, faces significant material and political obstacles that contradict the seamless vision of its proponents. The project is a cornerstone of India's "Act East" Policy and is intended to anchor broader regional economic frameworks like BIMSTEC and the EWEC (Lochan, 2018). India is financing and constructing critical and complex sections within Myanmar, including the 149.70 km Tamu-Kyigone-Kalewa (TKK) road, featuring 69 bridges, and the 120.74 km Kalewa-Yagyi road (The Economic Times, 2023). However, project completion has been severely delayed. Initially targeted for 2021, the new projected deadline is 2027, a delay attributed primarily to the post-2021 civil war in Myanmar, which has rendered key sections of the route in the Sagaing Region and Chin State active conflict zones (Chatterjee, 2025; The Indian Express, 2023).

Economically, the highway's promise of enhanced trade is beginning to manifest, albeit distorted. Mae Sot, Thailand's border town, has solidified its role as a central trade hub, a function accelerated by the recent completion of the road connecting it to the Thai interior (Lochan, 2018). This increased connectivity has facilitated not only formal trade but has also made the town notorious for a thriving black market in gems, teak, illicit drugs, and human trafficking. Photographic evidence confirms the physical reality of cross-border movement, with images of Indian-registered vehicles present deep inside Thai territory near signposts for Bangkok,

indicating that overland vehicular transit is already occurring even before the highway's official completion (Lochan, 2018).

The Emergent Social Landscape at the Border

Observational findings from Mae Sot reveal the emergence of a new and troubling social landscape directly linked to its role as a highway node. The influx of capital, transient populations (traders, drivers), and vulnerable migrants has spurred the growth of a predatory service and entertainment economy. The town's landscape is now dotted with newly established bars, nightclubs, and establishments described as "comfort houses" that reportedly employ "*Hilltribe minor girls*" in the sex trade (Lochan, 2018). This finding points to a direct link between the new infrastructure and the rise of social problems, including sexual exploitation and the commodification of vulnerable individuals.

The traditional social fabric appears to be under significant strain. The visual evidence contrasts the historic culture of the region, such as the Mon settlements along the Ping River, with the modern, often illicit, commercial activity now defining the town (Lochan, 2018). The presence of a large Burmese migrant and refugee population in Mae Sot creates a pool of disenfranchised individuals with limited legal rights and economic opportunities, making them particularly susceptible to exploitation within this new highway-driven economy. The map presented in the foundational research, "*The Route eroding socio-culture properties*," graphically represents this finding, suggesting that the highway's path is coterminous with a zone of social and cultural degradation (Lochan, 2018).

Shifts in the Religious and Cultural Domain

The most striking findings relate to the highway's role as a conduit for religious and cultural change. The region is predominantly Buddhist, a fact policymakers hoped to leverage into a "*Buddhist circuit*" for cultural diplomacy. However, the findings indicate that the highway is a highly effective corridor for Christian missionary activity. There is evidence of a coordinated and well-funded influx of international missionaries into the Mae Sot area, including from the United States, Europe, Africa, and, significantly, from the predominantly Christian state of Mizoram in India (Lochan, 2018).

The methods of these groups are direct and assertive. A newsletter from a group named "*Mission to Burma*" details a campaign to distribute thousands of religious tracts, explicitly targeting "*Buddhist youth and older folk in front of shrines*" (Lochan, 2018). This action constitutes a direct public challenge to the local faith at its most

sacred sites. Furthermore, these missionary activities are often coupled with social welfare projects, such as building facilities for orphanages and operating health clinics like the Mae Tao Clinic. Notably, "No local Thai operating for these dots" was observed, suggesting these services are run by external organizations, potentially creating dependency and leveraging material aid for religious conversion (Lochan, 2018).

Finally, there are findings of cultural commodification and dilution. A poster for a "*Bollywood Masala Charity Nite*" in northern Thailand illustrates how a complex foreign culture is represented through a simplified, commercialized lens (Lochan, 2018). It points to a trend where authentic cultural exchange is superseded by superficial representations, potentially eroding local cultural identity and replacing it with a globalized monoculture.

Discussion

The IMT Trilateral Highway: A Double-Edged Sword of Connectivity

The India–Myanmar–Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway, spanning approximately 1,360 kilometers from Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar, is heralded as a transformative infrastructure project to enhance regional connectivity and economic integration. Official narratives portray the highway as a catalyst for development, promising increased trade, investment, and cultural exchange among the three nations (The Indian Express, 2023). However, beneath this optimistic veneer lies a complex tapestry of socio-economic, cultural, and political challenges that necessitate a critical examination.

The State-Centric Development Paradigm

At its core, the IMT Highway embodies a high-modernist, state-centric approach to development. This paradigm assumes that large-scale infrastructural projects can serve as panaceas for regional underdevelopment, disregarding the nuanced realities of borderland communities (Ziipao, 2015; Roluahpuia, 2022). The official discourse positions the highway as a linear progression from underdevelopment to modernity, with success measured through quantitative metrics such as trade volumes and foreign direct investment (Lochan, 2018). This perspective often marginalizes the lived experiences of local populations, reducing them to mere abstractions within a broader geopolitical strategy.

However, as the findings indicate, the project's implementation has been impeded by the very complexities it seeks to simplify. The ongoing civil conflict in Myanmar, characterized by ethnic insurgencies and political instability, has disrupted

construction efforts, particularly in regions like Sagaing and Chin (The Indian Express, 2023). These areas, long embroiled in struggles for autonomy and self-determination, illustrate the limitations of a top-down development model that fails to account for borderlands' political and social dynamics.

Informal Economies and the Shadow Trade

While the official narrative emphasizes formal economic activities, the findings reveal that the IMT Highway has inadvertently strengthened informal and illicit economies. In Mae Sot, Thailand, the influx of infrastructure has facilitated the expansion of black markets dealing in gems, teak, drugs, and human trafficking (Hill & Menon, n.d.). These activities are not peripheral anomalies but integral components of a complex borderland economy that operates beyond state control.

Hill and Menon (n.d.) note that economic corridors in Southeast Asia can amplify existing informal networks when infrastructure projects prioritize efficiency over local governance. The highway's design, focusing on high-speed freight transport, has inadvertently enhanced the logistical capabilities of criminal networks, creating a "*corridor of efficiency*" that serves both legitimate businesses and illicit actors equally (Lochan, 2018). It underscores the necessity of integrating governance, rule of law, and local economic development into infrastructure planning to mitigate the unintended proliferation of shadow economies.

Social Disruption and Exploitation in Mae Sot

Mae Sot serves as a microcosm of the broader social impacts of the IMT Highway. The town has witnessed a surge in exploitative industries, including nightclubs, bars, and "*comfort houses*" that prey on vulnerable populations, particularly women and girls (Lochan, 2018). This surge is not coincidental but a direct consequence of unregulated hyper-connectivity, where the rapid movement of capital and transient populations creates fertile ground for exploitation.

The transient nature of the population, coupled with the anonymity afforded by a bustling border town, has eroded traditional social structures that might have provided protection, such as family networks and community-based religious institutions (Lochan, 2018). In this vacuum, exploitative capitalism thrives, commodifying human bodies and deepening social fragmentation. (Hill and Menon (n.d.) The findings suggest that the IMT Highway, in its current form, acts as a

powerful solvent, dissolving the social cohesion of communities and replacing it with impersonal market dynamics.

Cultural and Religious Transformation

Perhaps the most insidious impact of the IMT Highway is its role in cultural and religious transformation. The findings indicate that the highway has facilitated the spread of evangelical Christianity, challenging indigenous belief systems and cultural practices (Lochan, 2018). This phenomenon is not merely a matter of religious conversion but a broader process of cultural erosion, where traditional worldviews, social structures, and moral compasses are undermined.

The coupling of proselytizing efforts with the provision of material aid, such as building bathrooms and running clinics, operates on a principle of exchange: material support in return for spiritual compliance (Lochan, 2018). In regions characterized by poverty and state neglect, this offer is often difficult to refuse, leading to a gradual replacement of indigenous cultural institutions with foreign-funded, faith-based organizations. This process constitutes a form of cultural violence, seeking to delegitimize and erase rich heritages that have provided meaning and resilience for generations.

Bypassing Local Communities: A Critical Development Lens

Synthesizing these interconnected impacts through a critical development lens, the IMT Trilateral Highway is a textbook example of a top-down, state-centric project that systematically bypasses the people it is ostensibly meant to serve. The concept of "bypassing," as Ziipao (2015) articulated, encapsulates the exclusionary dynamics inherent in such development models.

Economic bypassing is evident in the highway's design, which favors high-speed corridors for long-haul freight over the integration of local economies. Without a dense network of feeder roads and investment in local market infrastructure, the highway remains a tantalizing but inaccessible symbol of modernity for rural communities (Ziipao, 2015). This design deepens the divide between the connected and the unconnected, creating new geographies of inequality.

Political bypassing is reflected in the lack of participatory planning processes that include the voices of diverse ethnic communities, tribal councils, and local civil society organizations. The absence of local consultation and ownership in the planning stages has led to a development model that views local people as objects to be managed rather than active agents with rights and agency (Ziipao, 2015). This disempowerment creates a dangerous vacuum, where external actors with their own agendas can fill the

void, as evidenced by the proliferation of exploitative industries and religious proselytizing in border towns like Mae Sot. (Roluahpuia, 2022).

Cultural bypassing is perhaps the most profound form of exclusion, where indigenous cultures and belief systems are devalued in favor of a homogenized, globalized culture. The superficial presentation of "*Indian culture*" through events like Bollywood festivals reflects a preference for easily commodified cultural products over authentic traditions' complex realities (Lochan, 2018). This process leads to what anthropologists term "*acculturative stress*," where local populations experience a breakdown in intergenerational knowledge transmission and a profound sense of identity crisis (Ziipao, 2015).

The IMT Trilateral Highway, as currently conceived and implemented, exemplifies a development paradigm that prioritizes state-centric goals over the well-being and agency of local communities. While the project holds potential for economic integration and regional cooperation, its trajectory risks entrenching social inequalities, cultural erosion, and political exclusion. To realize its transformative potential, the IMT Highway must evolve from a top-down infrastructure project to a participatory development initiative that genuinely engages with and empowers the communities it aims to serve. It requires a paradigm shift that recognizes the complexities of borderland realities and integrates local knowledge, governance, and cultural preservation into the planning and implementation processes.

Conclusions

The India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway is a project of immense ambition and complexity. While it is undeniably a strategic asset for India's "Act East" Policy and holds the potential to stimulate significant economic growth across the region, this paper has argued that its current trajectory poses a grave threat to the socio-cultural and religious integrity of the communities along its path. The prevailing narrative, focused on trade and geopolitics, has largely ignored the profound human consequences of carving such a powerful corridor through one of Asia's most culturally diverse and politically sensitive regions.

This study has sought to answer its primary objective by demonstrating that the negative impacts are not merely hypothetical. Through the case study of Mae Sot, Thailand, we can observe these forces already at play: a burgeoning black-market economy that thrives on exploitation, the degradation of the social fabric through the rise of illicit services, and the influx of powerful, external religious forces that directly challenge and seek to dismantle indigenous belief systems. The highway, envisioned

as a road to prosperity, also functions for proselytization, commercialization, and cultural contestation.

The contribution of this work lies in its effort to shift the analytical focus from the macro to the micro, from the state-centric to the community-centric. It validates the urgent need for anthropological and historical research, as called for in the project's early assessments (Lochan, 2018), to understand the complex realities on the ground. The findings here advance the field by applying a critical development lens, informed by scholarship on India's northeast (Ziipao, 2015), to a transnational context, highlighting how top-down infrastructure projects can disenfranchise local populations and lead to unintended, destructive outcomes.

The conclusions drawn from this analysis are not a call to abandon the project, but an urgent plea for its re-imagination. Future research should prioritize longitudinal ethnographic studies in communities along the IMT corridor to track changes in social structures, economic well-being, and religious demography over time. Policy-oriented research is desperately needed to develop models for inclusive development that empower local communities as active participants and primary beneficiaries, not passive bystanders. Mechanisms must be created to safeguard cultural heritage, regulate outside influences, and ensure that the economic benefits are distributed equitably. If the Trilateral Highway is to become an actual "highway of friendship" and not a corridor of conflict and cultural loss, then the people who live along its path must be placed at the very center of its purpose.

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