

SPEECH OF DR. NAJMA HEPTULLA, THE HON'BLE GOVERNOR OF MANIPUR AS CHIEF GUEST AT THE INAUGURAL FUNCTION OF INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NORTH EAST INDIA AND MYANMAR: ETHNIC AND CULTURAL LINKAGES ON 28TH SEPTEMBER, 2016 AT MANIPUR UNIVERSITY, CANCHIPUR.

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Distinguished Delegates from India and abroad,
Members of the Print and Electronic Media,
Distinguished Invitees,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I consider myself privileged to be here with you all at the Inaugural function of an “International Conference on North East India and Myanmar: Ethnic and Cultural Linkages”, organized by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, in collaboration with Manipur Central University, Manipur.

At the outset, let me compliment the Organizers for their efforts in organizing this Conference and also thank them for inviting me to do the honours. I deeply appreciate the objective of the Conference which is broadly to strengthen the cultural relation between India and its neighbour Myanmar. The two countries are the land of magnificent cultures. The bilateral relations between India and Myanmar are based on deep rooted cultural, religious and neighbourly association between the people of the two countries. The common heritage of Buddhism and the philosophy of compassion, tolerance, non-violence and peace have laid strong foundations for this relationship. I am also very happy to know that the Conference has been planned to discuss the proximity of ethnic and cultural relation of the people of North East India and Myanmar. I extend my warm welcome to all the delegates who have come from different parts of the country and abroad.

North East India is on the threshold of a historical leap forward under the new development policy of Look East or Act East of the Government of

India. North East India has the locational advantage with Myanmar the point of convergence as well as the linking route between India and the other South East Asian countries. This is the right and appropriate time that Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi in collaboration with Manipur University, Imphal, is holding an International Conference on the theme - "North East India and Myanmar (Burma) : Ethnic and Cultural Linkages". The people of North East India and Myanmar have broadly similar Indo-Mongoloid/Tibeto-Burmese physical features while their languages belong to the Tai and proto-Australoid speech family. Myanmar shares a border of 1640 kms with North East Indian States. Geo-topographically North East India and Myanmar fall in the same geographical zone, they are connected by land routes since ancient times. Being a neighbour, Myanmar played a significant role in the spread of Indian culture, trade, commerce, philosophy, custom, religious practices and belief system through land to South East Asian Countries. There have been movements of ethnic people from India to Myanmar and vice-versa since ancient times and strong people to people contact giving rise to ethnic and cultural linkages. Records have shown that Singphos and the Tai groups such as the Ahoms, Khamtis, Phakes, Aitons, Tarungs and the Khamyangs moved to North East India from Shan State of Yunnan and Myanmar. In the same way Nagas, Kukis, Mizos and the Lushais entered North East India from Myanmar. The people collectively known as Chins by the Burmese live along the border of North East India and Myanmar. Similarly, there are still a good number of Naga tribes inhabiting western Myanmar adjacent to the State of Nagaland. It is believed that the Khasis of Meghalaya also migrated to India from Myanmar. All these people still maintain their languages, traditions, arts, crafts, life styles as well as traditional religious practices. Thus, there have been constant cultural relations between North East India and Myanmar.

In the modern era, a factor which greatly influenced the cultural tie between the North East India and Myanmar was the British conquest of Myanmar in the 3rd Anglo-Burmese War of 1885. In the post war period, during the colonial rule, Myanmar and North East India had developed strong people-to-people contact. As a result, groups of people from Manipur and other parts of North East India migrated and settled in Myanmar. Even today, a strong Tamil community of Indian origin is based in Myanmar.

If we look from a broader perspective, the ethnic composition of North East India is complex and unique. This is mainly because of the extensive migration of various ethnic groups from the surrounding East and

Southeast Asian regions in the ancient times. There had also been raids and invasions by many invaders from Burma on the one side and from the Indian plains on the other. Such invasions left an abundant number of races, religions and languages. Consequently, this contributed to North East India becoming a storehouse of nationalities. It can be easily inferred from the languages spoken or the myths created that the ancestors of many ethnic-tribal groups in the region hailed from far-flung regions. A large number of tribal groups living in North East India are descendants of those who migrated here centuries ago from countries like - Mongolia, Tibet, China, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. Some people refer to the region as 'Mongoloid India' and culturally it is a part of the Southeast Asian Cultural canvas. A study of cultural history of North East India would also suggest that there had been cultural contacts between the region and China in the ancient times. However, such contacts between the either sides were not vast and official. Such relations were mainly a kind of people-to-people contact, exchange of ideas and feelings.

One aspect of culture which testifies close linkage between North East India and Myanmar are the musical instruments found on both sides. The Burmese are very fond of musical instruments and they can be classified into: (1) Drums - one headed drum, pot drum, two headed drum, big drum, short drum, horizontal sitou, bjo and rattle (2) Bells - jingle bell, hung bell, hallow bell, cymbal, mellifluous bell, timing bell (3) rods - iron rod, brass rod, rod made of wooden block and stone rod (4) Conch shell (5) Hollow bamboo (6) Hne and (7) Flute trumpet. Similar types of musical instruments are also common in the North East part of India.

The cultural bond between North East India and Myanmar extends to the field of literature. Early Burmese literature were influenced by Indian epics such as the Ramayana which has various versions in the South East Asian countries. The Myanmar literatures were primarily of a religious nature and a good number of them were found inscribed on stones. These inscriptions were traced back mostly to the pagan period of the 11th century A.D. During the Pagan period, King Aniruddha adopted Theravada Buddhism as State religion. The literatures of that period were mainly concerned with the Jataka tales as told by the Buddha to his disciples. The Burmese also constructed some significant Hindu temples besides making sculptures of both Hindu and Buddhist deities. Further, the deep rooted cultural affinity between North East India and Myanmar is reflected in the identical designs and colours of the textiles decorated with glass, birth motive

feather and cowries. Another common feature is the use of red colour to symbolize bravery and also the frequent use of black as back ground or in combination with other colours. The textiles found on both sides have intricate designs showing human and animal figures.

I am indeed very happy to know that several measures have been undertaken under the aegis of the “Look East Policy”, now “Act East Policy” to deepen the linkages between North East India, Myanmar and South East Asia. First amongst these measures has been the proposal to build the “Trans-Asian Highway”. Let it mark the opening of the cultural highway also.

In very recent times there has been political and diplomatic visits. India’s External Affairs Minister visited Myanmar and the President of Myanmar visited India and very soon the Myanmar Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi will be visiting India. There are very positive movements supported by cultural dialogue which will be very good and very fruitful results are expected. I have visited Myanmar twice and visited Mandalay and other places and had a very good experience of my visit.

I hope that the Conference will look into the different aspects of the North East cultural traditions and their evolution through time and come up with ideas to keep pace with the changing environment. I believe that cultural relations run deeper than any other relations among the peoples as there were no strict concepts of geographical frontiers in the ancient times. Further, the Conference will bring out the best ethnic and cultural relations between North East India and Myanmar. I am also hopeful that the Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies could be involved substantially in our endeavour to fulfil our objective.

I wish the Conference a grand success and hope it will generate better understanding and take the relationship between India and Myanmar as well as other South East Asian countries to another level.

Thank you.

Jai Hind.