



Borderland Realities: Understanding Trade, Culture, and Community at Pangsau Pass

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Abstract: North-East India—particularly the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Assam—shares deep historical and cultural ties with its Southeast Asian neighbour, Myanmar (formerly Burma). One of the key corridors facilitating this connection is the Pangsau Pass in Arunachal Pradesh, situated at the crest of the Patkai Hills along the India-Myanmar border. For generations, this route has served as a vital passage for cross-border trade and cultural exchange. It remains one of the most accessible entry points to Myanmar from the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. Cross-border movement of people and goods in this region dates back to the pre-independence era of India. However, modern border regulations—particularly in Arunachal Pradesh’s Changlang District—impose certain restrictions. To accommodate the hill tribes living near the border, both governments have implemented special provisions allowing limited cross-border movement. Under these terms, residents within 16 kilometers of the international boundary are allowed to travel without a visa, provided they obtain special permits (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2010). The recent transformation of the historic Ledo-Stilwell Road into Indian National Highway-153 has significantly boosted informal trade through Pangsau Pass. This development has led to the emergence of the Pangsau Pass border market as a crucial meeting point for people from Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Myanmar. The market fosters a unique atmosphere that transcends social boundaries and strengthens bonds among communities with diverse cultural backgrounds. It plays a key role in promoting economic development by facilitating the exchange of goods, creating employment opportunities, and encouraging cultural tourism. In this way, the market supports India’s broader ‘Act East’ policy, aimed at enhancing regional cooperation, economic integration, and human development. This paper explores how everyday life and shared experiences in the borderlands are reflected in local narratives and how the Pangsau Pass market serves as a powerful symbol of peaceful coexistence. Through the exchange of commodities, marketplace interactions, and cultural communication, the market becomes a microcosm of cross-border harmony. The study draws on field data collected from the Pangsau Pass area, with a focus on the Singpho and Tangsa tribes residing on both sides of the

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border. Observations from the three-day Pangsau Pass International Festival provide key insights into how socio-cultural relationships, expressive behaviors, economic needs, and survival strategies all contribute to sustaining cordial relations between India and Myanmar.

Keywords: Border trade, everyday life, pangsau pass, cultural exchange

Introduction

Trade is a natural economic activity, the transaction of goods/ products or the exchange of things to earn and meet needs. It is the flow of commodities from producers to consumers. The commodities can flow between persons, human groups, and countries. The exchange of things can take place in kind or cash. If such an exchange of goods is done on the border or in the vicinity of it by the people living therein, it is known as border trade.

Border trade is “over-land trade” via the “exchange of commodities” by the people living along both sides of a border. Goods produced near the border area get a market nearby across the border. This form of trade is witness to the transaction of surplus goods, mainly agricultural and horticultural products, between the people of two adjacent borders. Usually, border trade exists among the villages on both sides of the boundary line within one day’s walk. Likewise, trading is done at regular intervals at suitable places of the international boundary. In this way, the border becomes a place of meeting instead of the line of separation. People mostly trade in handmade products, and the barter system is standard in this kind of trade. The trade markets take place on a daily or a weekly basis on the border. While people usually trade in goods produced by themselves in their respective habitats, the border trade also includes the sale and purchase of those commodities made at production centres in the mainland of their respective countries. In this type of border trade, people not living in border areas can also take part. Border trade with all the factors mentioned earlier is conspicuously observed in the *Pangsau Pass* border market.

Pangsau - the field

India and Myanmar are geographically proximate countries with strong historical, cultural, and economic linkages. In India, the India–Myanmar border is the international border between India and Myanmar, 1,643 km in length, with Myanmar sharing the boundaries of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram. Arunachal Pradesh is the largest state in North-East India. It lies between latitude 20°28’N and 29°30’N and longitude 91°30E and 97°30E. *Pangsau Pass* on the Indo-

Myanmar border of Arunachal Pradesh is an identified area where inter-border trade occurs, and cultural exchange between the border inhabitants of both nations is seen. Situated on the crest of the Patkai Hills on the India-Myanmar border, the *Pangsau Pass* offers one of the most accessible routes to Myanmar from the two states, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

Cross-border movements of men and materials existed between the two countries even before India's Independence, the pre-colonial era. History is a testament to the fact that the Tai-Ahom people migrated from Yunnan Province of South China through the Patkai range in 1228 AD and ruled Assam for six hundred years. The foothills of Patkai, surrounded by the nine hills '*deo-kai-rong*', were under the jurisdiction of the Ahom kingdom. During the Ahom administration in Assam, other Tai groups like Tai Khampati, Tai Khamyang, Tai Phake, Tai Turung, and Tai Aitons also migrated from South-East Asia through the hilly terrain of the Patkai hills and settled in Assam. Even the current border between India and Myanmar was marked by the British East India Company way back in 1826 through the Yandaboo Treaty with the king of Ava in Myanmar.

During World War II (1939-1945), India's North-East frontier and the Patkai Hill range of the Himalayas had an important role. By 1945, the face of the Patkai had durably changed. The Second World War had been a concentrated period of change at all levels – social, cultural, military, political, administrative, religious, economic' (Guyot-Réchar, 2018). At that time, the existing Ledo Road of Assam was reconstructed as



North-East India shares a border with Myanmar in the eastern direction (Source: Geo Currents).

Stilwell Road (1,726 km) for the Allied Army, led by Americans, for the supply of food and military hardware up to Kunming province, Chinese border through Myanmar. In 1967 Burma and India signed a boundary treaty which delimited their common frontier. The India–Myanmar border now has the Free Movement Regime (FMR), which allows people living along the border to travel 16 km across the boundary without visa restrictions.

The border narratives of state and community can reinforce border culture and everyday culture with the actual picture of the *Pangsau* border. People living in the easternmost district of Changlang, Arunachal Pradesh, are Tangsa, Tutsa, Nocte, Chakma, Singpho and Yobin. The district has five Sub-Divisions: Changlang, Manmao, Jairampur, Bordumsa and Miao. Nampong Block of Jairampur covers three Circles: Nampong, Jairampur and Rima-Putak. These three circles house the last town of India on the India-Myanmar border near *Pangsau Pass*, where Tangsa*, Singpho* and Wanchos* are the dominant tribes. Tribal Communities, namely Khamtis*, Tangsas, and Singphos, act as intermediaries between the different groups of traders in *Pangsau*. People from Assam also take an active part in the trading. During the colonial period, the British encountered resistance from the Tangsas and Singphos in opening trade routes through their respective areas. Therefore, they followed the policy of fostering friendship with the tribal people. The British continued the Ahom system of payment of *posa** in cash to the tribal communities for getting their support and cooperation.

Objectives

The paper tries to focus on three issues, (i) assessment of the role of *Pangsau* market and *Pangsau Pass* International Festival (PPIF), (ii) the need for reopening of historic

Tangsa* - The Tangsas a native to Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh and inhabit in a part of Tinsukia District of Assam, in north-eastern India, and across the border in Sagaing Region, parts of Kachin State, Myanmar.

Singpho*- The Singpho tribe is the tribe who inhabit parts of India, China and Northern Myanmar. In India Singpho Tribe is in the state of Arunachal Pradesh in the district of Lohit and Changlang and in Assam. The Singpho are the same people as those called the Kachin in Burma and the Jingpo in China. They speak the Singpho dialect of the Jingpo language.

Wanchos* - The Wancho are Naga indigenous people inhabiting the Patkai hills of Longding district of Arunachal Pradesh shares international border with Myanmar.

Khamti* - The Tai-Khamtis are a major tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The Tai-Khamti inhabits in the district of Namsai.

*Posa** - A type of taxation

Stilwell Road, and (iii) the impact of shared culture of both countries as the *Pangsau* border communities identify the existence of ethnic similarities across the border. The researcher tries to established the above-mentioned arguments through her extensive field visits carried out during 2019 and first two months of 2020.

Border trade at *pangsau* and *pangsau pass* international festival (PPIF)

Pangsau Pass has become the fourth Himalayan pass to open for trade formally. However, it remained there on a small scale. This trade is an important step toward normalizing the relationship between India and Myanmar and is expected to bring prosperity to the local people of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (Claude Arpi. 2016). Border trade through *Pangsau Pass* along the Indo-Myanmar border in Arunachal Pradesh has been since established and continuing. The people of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam have been emphasizing the need to “formally reopen” trade through *Pangsau Pass* to all neighbouring Southeast countries.

The formal border trade with Myanmar through *Pangsau Pass* will transform North-East India’s economy by reducing the trade time and distance involved. Myanmar has established an administrative and immigration post as well as market complex on the border with India. There is no custom post at *Pangsau* from Myanmar. However, the customs station is located at Tenai, 160 km from *Pangsau Pass*. The Govt of India, with the participation of the State Govt of Arunachal Pradesh, has facilitated border trade with Myanmar with the establishment border trade centre at Nampong. The Union Minister (State) of India for Minority Affairs (2012-14), Mr Ninong Ering, stated that the Centre gives full support to develop Nampong as the international hub for trade and commerce, being India’s gateway to ASEAN. But the Customs



Boundary gate between India and Myanmar with the traders from both the countries (Field visit in 2019).

Station at Nampong and the Trade and Commerce department (Govt of India) are almost dysfunctional due to less border trade from Myanmar. The matter has been discussed with the governments of India and Myanmar for meaningful and consistent trade, which will economically benefit the people of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Myanmar, will give ample scope for the border trade to grow.

According to the Dept of Trade and Commerce, Government of Arunachal Pradesh the volume of informal trade activities in *Pangsau Pass* has increased manifold recently due to conversion of the erstwhile Ledo-Stilwell Road into NH-153. The Second World War fame 'Stilwell Road' which passes through Myanmar from Nampong and Jairampur, Arunachal Pradesh (India) to Kunming, China via Myanmar is being used by the Myanmar traders even today. Currently, the informal trade is organized twice a month, on every 15th and 30th day of the month and sometime changed to thrice on 10th, 20th and 30th of the month in the form of a carnival or *bazaar* under the supervision of the district administration and the Para-Military forces. The local population of both sides has proximity to each other on racial, social, cultural, lingual and religious terms, which help and encourage congenial development of trade and commerce in the region (<http://aruntrade.gov.in/index.html>). To bring the people of North-East and Myanmar together at the *Pangsau Pass* border area of Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar, a trade festival in Nampong is celebrated every year (did not take place in 2021 and 2022 due to Covid-19 Pandemic). The door of famous *Pangsau Pass* that connects the last town of Arunachal Pradesh, Nampong, and Myanmar was opened for three days during the festival. During these three days, the area becomes a global village breaking all social barriers. The border gate is opened for the *Pangsau Pass* festival and for the market days. During the festival days, not only buyers and sellers but the tribal population of either side also mingle. This could become a major tourist destination for people of India and other countries to get an opportunity to take a glimpse of life across the border without a passport and visa.

It has been observed that most of the goods brought for sale by Indian traders are not readily available in Myanmar. As a result, these goods are sold at significantly higher prices to Myanmar traders. Essential commodities such as salt, eggs, instant noodles (like Maggi), utensils, wooden furniture, sacks of potatoes and onions, bags of rice, and edible oils are in high demand. When comparing the prices of goods in India to the prices at which they are sold to Myanmar traders, there is a notable difference. For example, a sack of salt that costs Rs 250 in India is sold for Rs 1,000 to Myanmar traders. Similarly, other goods are marked up considerably. Eggs, for instance—a tray of 30 eggs priced at Rs 220 in India—is sold for as much as Rs 1,000 to Myanmar traders (Field visit, 2019).

During fieldwork conducted at the Pangsau Pass border market, insights were gathered through informal interviews and participant observation.

Case Study: Cross-Border Trade and Cultural Exchange at Pangsau Pass

Informant: Mr. S. Tikhak (59 yrs)

Location: Pangsau Pass border market

Date of Interaction: 20 July, 2019

According to Mr. S. Tikhak, a local resident and regular market attendee, trade across the Indo-Myanmar border is a two-way process. “Not only do Indian traders bring goods to sell,” he explained, “but many Myanmar traders also come over with items from their side to sell in the market.” Based on Mr. Tikhak’s account, the goods brought by Myanmar traders primarily consist of traditional and locally sourced food items such as dried fish, local herbs and vegetables, spices (like cardamom), smoked tea in a bamboo tube, Burmese swords, Burmese coffee, ethnic jewelry, local Myanmar beverages, electronic goods, shrimp paste, dried fish, Burmese rice cakes, biscuits, noodles, CD of Myanmarese film, flat umbrella mostly used in south east Asian countries, melamine dinner sets, unbreakable coffee mugs, kitchen appliances made in Myanmar. In addition to food items, other products like low-cost shoes, gum boots, traditional Myanmar clothing are also sold. Food stalls offering various food are one of the attractions of the people of both the countries. A highlight among these is the sticky rice, a staple in Myanmar cuisine, which is especially popular in the border regions and frequently purchased by locals from Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. “The sticky rice from their side is famous here,” Mr. Tikhak noted, “and people wait for market days to buy it.”

In addition to food products, Myanmar traders also bring traditional clothing—particularly women’s dresses and ethnic garments—which are well-received in the local Indian markets. These items, according to Mr. Tikhak, are valued not just for their utility but also for their cultural uniqueness. Men roam around wearing lungis (a traditional male attire), trying to sell their products. Women and children can be seen with bright patches of thanaka on their faces—a yellowish-white cosmetic paste made from ground bark. This is a common sight in Myanmar and makes it easier to distinguish people based on their country of origin.

This case demonstrates how cross-border trade is not solely an economic transaction but also a site of cultural exchange and mutual dependency. The goods exchanged carry cultural significance, and the market itself becomes a shared space of interaction between communities divided by political boundaries but united by everyday practices and needs. The account of Mr. S. Tikhak underscores the lived realities of borderland communities and their adaptive strategies in maintaining both livelihood and cultural continuity.

At the informal market in *Pangsau*, we observed that alongside regular currency transactions, a small-scale barter system of commodity exchange continues to persist. This is despite the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) directive (RBI/2015-16/230 dated November 5, 2015), which officially discontinued the traditional barter system for Indo-Myanmar border trade. According to the notification, all trade along the border was to transition fully to conventional currency-based transactions starting December 1, 2015.

The RBI circular also proposed an alternative mechanism for settling transactions. It allowed dealers to make payments in any permitted currency, in addition to using the Asian Clearing Union (ACU) system. Under the ACU, traders can settle trade payments through their respective central banks. However, the challenge of currency settlement remains a significant barrier. Both India and Myanmar continue to face difficulties in conducting bilateral trade using their national currencies—the Indian Rupee and the Myanmar Kyat. This issue is particularly evident in the *Pangsau* border market, where the lack of a stable and mutually accepted currency settlement mechanism continues to hinder smooth trade operations.



(a) Transaction with barter system and (b) Myanmar's Kyat (Field Visit in 2019)

Exploring the *pangsau pass* international festival (PPIF)

The famous *Pangsau Pass* Winter Festival, rechristened as Pangsau Pass International Festival (PPIF), generally organized in January, transcends beyond geographic boundaries. Participants tend to come from across all borders, including the tribal people of Myanmar.

The three-day *Pangsau Pass* International Festival (PPIF), from 20th to 22nd January 2020, began in Nampong, Arunachal Pradesh, after the inauguration by the Chief Guest, Mr. Moe Kyaw Aung, Ambassador, Myanmar. Mr. Aung termed the event a historic one for establishing a strong bond between India and Myanmar, having high similarities in culture, tradition, and religion. He also mentioned that such festivals facilitate the exchange of culture, and trade produces and upholds bonhomie to maintain the age-old friendship. The Deputy Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Mr. Chowna Mein, the guest of honor, said that the myriad beauty of culture and exploring the enigma of enchanting Arunachal Pradesh through this festival would bring light to South-East Asia and the world.

In a personal interview, the Minister said that they are trying to reopen the historic Ledo-Stilwell Road and bring the people of India and Myanmar to the international border. A border *haat* (market) was established and inaugurated in 2020 during the *Pangsau Pass* International Festival jointly by the Govts of India and Myanmar. A unique cultural show representing the tribal dance forms from Arunachal and Myanmar was showcased. Trade stalls were arranged on the grounds of both the countries. The annual festival aims to build a stronger relationship between the neighboring countries. The cultural carnival has cut through the social barriers inspiring the secluded region to celebrate the ethnic existences that strongly bond all the tribes with diverse cultures and religious backgrounds. While talking about Myanmar and its connection with Arunachal Pradesh and the people, we observed and experienced that the Tangsa community plays a major role in bringing the people of both sides together due to the similarity in language and culture.

The *Pangsau Pass* International Festival (PPIF) was last celebrated in 2020. It could not be held in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and has remained dormant since then. This year (2025), after a four-year hiatus, the festival is being celebrated once again from January 20 to 22. The Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh inaugurated the event, highlighting the historical and cultural significance of the region. He remarked that from the sacred migration routes of our ancestors to the historic Stilwell Road, this area has long served as a vital link connecting Northeast India with Southeast Asia.

Ledo road – Burma road - Stilwell Road: Historic gateways to Southeast Asia

The Ledo Road was an overland connection between India and China built during World War II to enable supplies to China and aid the war against Japan. The Ledo Road was renamed as Stilwell Road after General Joseph Stilwell of the U.S. Army



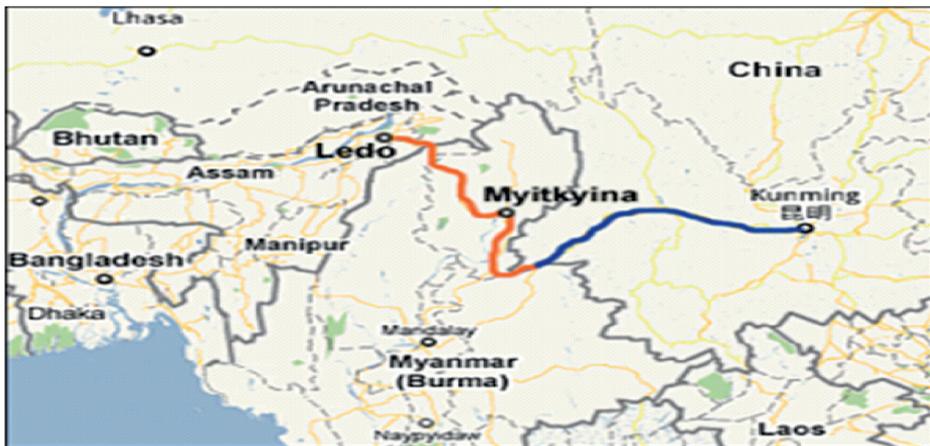
(a)



(b)

(a) Food stall in PPIF, Arunachal Pradesh (2020) (b) Pangsau Border Market, Myanmar (2020) (Field visit)

in 1945. The Road has a strategic link from Ledo (Assam) – *Pangsau Pass* (Arunachal Pradesh) – Myitkyina (Myanmar) – Bhamo (Myanmar) – to Kunming (China).



Stilwell Road from Ledo to Kunming (Source: BBC)

After Burma (Myanmar) was liberated, the Ledo Road gradually became inaccessible due to breakage, landslides, and broken bridges. Travel into the region was restricted for long years for various reasons. Since the improvement of relations between India and Myanmar, travel has improved significantly, and trade and tourism have begun at *Pangsau Pass*. Stilwell Road from Ledo to *Pangsau* is motorable, but

beyond Myanmar, it is in deplorable condition. Nowadays, Indian vehicles are not permitted to cross the border at *Pangsau*. One must hire two-wheelers driven by local Myanmar people to go to the *Pangsau* market. On the way to the border market, we crossed the international boundary by hiring motorbikes on the Myanmar side.

Across the international border, thousands of people from either country use historic Stilwell Road every day. Opening the Ledo-Stilwell Road would improve trade, people's relationships, and the cultural exchange of the border inhabitants. Local people from Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, mostly Singphos and Tangsas have been constantly urging the Government of India to consider reopening the Stilwell Road. Growing public opinion for the reopening of the historic road is experienced during the field visit to various parts of eastern Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Socio-political leaders like the Deputy Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh Chowna Main said, '*Reopening the Stilwell Road will deepen the age-old cultural linkage and act as a catalyst for cross-border trade. He also stressed that the North-East Region is the gateway to the ASEAN countries, and the reopening of the road will ease travel, cut distance for people living on both sides of the border and promote cross-border trade* (Business Standard, Feb 16, 2020)'. People of Arunachal Pradesh appealed to the Government of India (New Delhi) to consider prioritizing the restoration of the historic road as it would be mutually beneficial for both India and Myanmar.

One of the previous Ministers of Arunachal Pradesh, Mr C C Singpho, said '*Reopening the road would usher in a new era in the region's economic scenario and facilitate the growth of tourism, movement of security forces and cultural exchanges* (The Telegraph, Nov 30, 2002)'

Members of 'Singphoo Development Society', an apex socio-ethnic body of Singphos in Changlang District, strongly demanded the reopening of the Ledo-Stilwell Road for the betterment as well as the development of North-East India.

Reopening the historic Stilwell Road has been in public discussion in the North-Eastern region of India for quite some time. In the recent past, it has gained momentum as the public, including traders, have expressed their deep desire to reopen the Stilwell Road to develop India's remote, isolated, and relatively backward region. The Stilwell Road can considerably reduce transit time and transportation costs in the India-China trade. Besides trade and commerce, the reopening of Stilwell Road would strengthen the tourism industry, benefiting both the North-Eastern Region, Myanmar, and Kunming (China) and would give a major thrust to the Act East Policy of India.

Reiterating the idea of building a road link and extending trading activities to South-East Asian countries through North-East India proposed in the 19th century

appears to be like the current initiative of the Govt of India under the “Look East” and “Act East” policy. Nearly 150 years ago, this initiative was undertaken but never got materialized due to geopolitical factors (Sharma, 2005).

In 2013, a Member of Parliament from Assam, Mr Birendra Prasad Baishya, raised a question in the House of Parliament regarding the reopening of the Ledo-Stilwell Road, but the answer given by the concerned Minister was, ‘the matter was not under consideration’ (see appendix). The bureaucrat assisted administration including defense opts for continuing of closure of the potential road.

Shared culture: Foundations of collective identity

The communities residing in North-East India can act as a bridge between India and ASEAN countries due to their racial similarity (Mongoloid) represented by physical features, cultural similarities—textiles, food habits, material culture, dialects, and languages with the people across borders. If we look at the lower body garment of the female folk of all the Tai Mongoloid (Wrap around) residing in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Assam, it is the same. Wrap around sells in the *Pangsau Pass* border market are cheaper than that of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and adjoining states. Therefore, the textiles of Myanmar are in more demand in these states. Even in the shops on the Indian side of the border, fabric and other products of Myanmar are available with the signboard written as ‘Myanmar Products are available here’. Even the traders of Myanmar come to the remote villages of various ethnic groups like Singphos, Tangsas, Tai Khamtis, Wanchos and Tai Aitons of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh through Moreh (Manipur) and stay with the villagers during their visits.

The indigenous technique of processing tea—known as *Phalap* in the Singpho language and *Phalap-khah* in the Tangsa language—involves producing organic smoked tea in bamboo tubes. This traditional method is widely practiced by communities living along the Myanmar border and remains a significant part of their cultural heritage. Organic smoked tea prepared in this way is available at the Pangsau market and holds immense potential for international export due to its unique flavour and traditional value.

Historically, tea cultivation among the Singphos dates back centuries. It was the Singpho King Bisa Gam who first introduced tea to the British officer Robert Bruce, highlighting its deep roots in the region’s history. In an interview conducted in the village, Bisa Nong Gam (85-year-old) a brother of King Bisa Gam—shared insights into the health benefits of this traditionally produced tea. He emphasized that *Phalap* is believed to have medicinal properties, including anti-cancer and anti-diabetic effects.

According to him, diabetes is virtually unknown among the Singpho people, which he attributes to their regular consumption of this indigenous tea.

In the domain of parallel culture, cross-border marriages take place in the villages on the periphery of the international border. Tangsa and Singpho people regularly visit Myanmar on Pansau Market days for trading. A few narratives were collected regarding the marital relations of Tangsa and Singpho people with those of the Myanmar tribes. In a Singpho village named Inthem in Assam, a boy married a Myanmar girl in the late 70s. She visited her maternal house on foot through the ups and downs of hilly jungle area of Patkai Hills. Sri Kunjum Tikhak, a village headman of Tikhak village of Nampong, Arunachal Pradesh, narrated stories of marital relationship of Tangsas and Myanmar. He said, '*Pangsau* market is the meeting ground for the boys and girls of both the countries. Nowadays, people have mobile phones to stay connected across border. They have the memory to rethink the history of migration. Youths of the present generation are trying to revive their own culture and tradition, trying hard to understand the root of their origin.

Similarities in dialect and language (Sino Tibetan language) are strong cultural traits for the easy mingling of the people of both countries. Likewise, religion is also one of them. Buragohain mentioned that since the Buddhist Tai brought their religion from Myanmar and no such Buddhist orders exist in the region, they must look to Myanmar for cultural sustenance. As Myanmar gradually became politically separated from India, keeping regular contact with their parental Buddhist sangha in Myanmar became difficult. In the early days, they travelled to and from Myanmar by the eastern land route. After independence in 1947, this line was almost cut off due to political reasons. Still, a few people, including Buddhist monks, travel over the Patkai route and maintain contact. However, other developments like the rise of insurgency in Myanmar and in the North-East region have led to the total closure of the route (Buragohain, 1999), including that of Ledo-Stilwell Road. In 1953, the then Chief Minister of Assam, Bishnu Ram Medhi, invited the Burmese Buddhist monks to Assam so that the people of this multi-religious and multi-ethnic land could get some enlightenment through the Buddhist teaching of non-violence and peace. A ten-member team came to Assam under the aegis of the Burmese Buddha Shasana Mission, of which Ven U Gunawantha Mahathera (Known as Vante Baba in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh) was a distinguished member. He stayed back with the people of Assam. On his arrival at Assam, he stayed at Inthem and Momoung villages of the Tinsukia district. In 1962, he shifted permanently to Mounglang, which is 6 km away from Ledo in the Tinsukia district and established a Buddhist monastery named Mounglang Khamti Buddhist

Monastery. He was conferred the title of 'Agga Maha Saddhamma Jyotika Dhvaja' by the Govt of Myanmar in 1994 for his dedicated service to the people beyond his native country and thus building a friendship bridge between the two countries through the Buddhist practice of peace and non-violence. He was most revered monk in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. His disciples and a few others in the nearby villages learnt the Burmese language, and it became easy to contact their immediate neighbours who visited India through *Pangsau Pass*. The Buddhist monks in the border areas know the language of Myanmar.

Conclusion

Pangsau Pass Border trade is strategically vital in the context of the cross-cultural situation between India and Myanmar having potential for socio-economic development. Border relations have recently improved with growing trade ties. The border trade seems to offer an excellent opportunity for the development of the North-Eastern region of India. The entire infrastructure of roads, railways, communication and other facilities need to be revamped. Similarly, hotels, restaurants and resorts will be required in the border areas of both countries. The 'Act East policy' through the Stilwell Road would reinforce cross-border trade in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and the whole of North-East India. The Assam Government has opened the Act East Policy Affairs Department in the year 2017 to ensure the implementation of the Policy. Marital relations between the communities of both countries would lessen the border conflict and help lead to a congenial atmosphere across the border. In light of the current context, it is imperative to take the following steps:

- (i) Fully revive and reopen the historic Ledo-Stilwell Road, which serves as the shortest land route from India to China via Myanmar. This strategic move could transform the region into a major trade hub in Southeast Asia by formalizing the existing informal border trade;
- (ii) Foster a conducive and inclusive environment that respects and supports ethnic communities, thereby helping to reduce radical activities; and
- (iii) Promote sustainable people-to-people relations that encourage peace, mutual prosperity, social harmony, and long-term socio-economic development.

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Appendix

Question for Members of Parliament in 2013, Rajya Sabha, Unstarred Question Q NO.43 Reopening of Stilwell Road on December 05, 2013

Will the Minister of External Affairs be pleased to state:

- (a) whether the Central Government envisaging the Look East Policy, proposed reopening as well as improvement of the historical Stilwell Road connecting Ledo, in Assam with Kunming, Yunnan in China through Myanmar to enhance possibilities of North East-Kunming Trade corridor; if so, the details thereof and if not, the reasons therefor; and
- (b) the details of measures being taken by the Government and achievements made till date towards the promotion of trade and commerce, particularly with the neighbouring countries along with Northeastern parts of India since the declaration and inception of Look East Policy?

Answer

Minister of State, Ministry of External Affairs: Shri E. Ahamed

- (a) Government attaches high priority to promoting connectivity between India and Myanmar. It is also a major pillar of the Government's "Look East" Policy. In the endeavour, the Government has taken several initiatives to open land routes to Myanmar, including the Trilateral Highway Project, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, the Rhi Tiddim Road Project and the Imphal - Mandalay Bus Service. These projects would enhance cross-border trade, tourism and people-to-people contacts. **The matter of reopening Stilwell Road is not under consideration.**
- (b) Government has taken a number of measures to facilitate trade and commerce between Myanmar and the northeast of India. These include (i) facilitating and expanding border trade by increasing the list of tradable commodities to 62; (ii) signing of a Border Trade Agreement with Myanmar under which border trading points are established in Moreh

(Manipur)-Tamu (Myanmar) and in Zowkhathar (Mizoram)-Rhi (Myanmar) in 2004; (iii) upgrading border trade to normal trade at the Moreh-Tamu and Zowkhathar-Rhi border trading points in 2008. (iv) constitution and regular meetings of India-Myanmar Border Trade Committee; (v) decision for setting up of border 'haats' at 10 locations on the India-Myanmar border; (vi) setting up of an Integrated Check Post at Moreh; (vii) proposal for introduction of Mandalay-Imphal Bus Service; (viii) participation of Indian delegation, including business persons, led by the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Manipur in 'Regional Investment and Business Summit' in Monywa in May 2013 (ix) organisation of 'Manipur Handloom and Handicraft Exhibition' at Mandalay; and (x) visit of a composite Myanmar delegation to Imphal and Dibrugarh, led by Mandalay and Sagaing Chief Ministers in November 2013, to attend the 9th North East Business Summit.