

# INDIA'S EAST AND NORTHEAST

## *Development and Socio-political Striations*

*Editor*

**Dr. Aditya Kant Ghising**



**Bharti Publications**  

---

New Delhi- 110002 (INDIA)

**Copyright © 2025, Editor**

**Title:** India's East and Northeast: Development and Socio-political Striations

**Editor :** Dr. Aditya Kant Ghising

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission. Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

First Published, 2025

ISBN: 978-93-49566-69-9

Published by :

**Bharti Publications**

4819/24, 2nd Floor, Mathur Lane

Ansari Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110002

Phone: 011-46172797, 011-23247537, 9899897381

E-mail : [bhartipublications@gmail.com](mailto:bhartipublications@gmail.com)

Website : [www.bhartipublications.com](http://www.bhartipublications.com)

Printed in India, by S.P. Kaushik Enterprises, Delhi

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in the book are the contributing author(s) and not necessarily of the Publisher and Editor. Contributing Author(s) is themselves are responsible for any kind of plagiarism found in their paper or chapter and any related issues with paper or chapter.

# *Preface*

The discourse on the development of India's eastern and northeastern regions, and particularly the assimilation of the latter into the Indian mainstream in various forms, has focused on the linkages between the past, the present and the future. In academia, post-colonial literature centered on migration, socio-economic realities, the 'place' of the 'periphery' in India's nation building, as well as the role of historical events in shaping the present, shape the perspectives on development in these regions. Understanding, and more importantly, analyzing the inter-connections between these issues remains vital in any endeavor aimed at making sense of the other realities in these regions, which may pertain to security (both human and geopolitical), connectivity (physical as well as mental), and socio-economic and cultural growth. The inspiration for this edited volume has been my experience as a scholar of international relations, along with my brief stint as a project assistant at the North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd., in Assam, where I observed first-hand, the economic potential of the northeastern states' resources, both natural and artificial. It has since inculcated in me, a sense of positivity with regard to the region in terms of the viability of cross-border markets, innovation and idea-sharing cutting across communal and political lines, along with the potential of its micro, small and medium enterprises, if approached correctly. Perhaps, this potential needs to be explored further, interrogated systematically and harnessed by all stakeholders of development in India's eastern and northeastern regions.

It is with this mind that this present volume focuses on analyzing India's eastern and northeastern regions through the lens of development and socio-political striations, as they exist in these regions. I hope the readers find the analyses in this volume useful in contributing to their own understanding of these regions. Each chapter provides unique insights into these domains and represent a myriad of scholarly backgrounds.

**Dr. Aditya Kant Ghising**  
(*Editor*)

## *Acknowledgement*

I thank my parents, well-wishers and friends for their constant support and blessings. This volume would not have seen the light of day if it were not for the authors who have meticulously crafted their individual chapters, each addressing a specific theme. I am also deeply indebted to my Professors and mentors as well as my colleagues for sharing their ideas and knowledge on east and northeast India. Their invaluable suggestions have been crucial in shaping the outcome of this book. My deepest gratitude also to Bharti Publications for their support, advice, assistance and professionalism in bringing this volume to life. Last but not least, I am thankful to my students for their curiosity and interest in developmental and societal issues.

# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Acknowledgement</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Abbreviations</i>	<i>vii-ix</i>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1-4</b>
Dr. Aditya Kant Ghising	
<b>2. Partition's Long Shadow: Development, Nationalism, and Insurgency in Northeast India</b>	<b>5-18</b>
Ningombam Athoibi Devi	
<b>3. Challenges and Prospects of Higher Education in Northeast India: A Study</b>	<b>19-34</b>
Ratan Saha	
<b>4. India's Relations with ASEAN Countries in the 20th Century: A Study of Northeast India and Myanmar</b>	<b>35-48</b>
Dr. Antarwell Warjri	
<b>5. Immigration, Land Rights and Identity: The Development from Class Identity to Ethnic Identity in the Assam Valley</b>	<b>49-68</b>
Ayan Das	
<b>6. The Northeastern Region as the Fulcrum of India-ASEAN Relations: Implications on the Geopolitical Equations of China, Bangladesh and Myanmar</b>	<b>69-83</b>
Mohor Chakraborty	
<b>7. Government policies in East and Northeast India: Assessment of Impact and Effect</b>	<b>84-105</b>
Kajol Biswakarma	
<b>8. The Strategic Significance of North Bengal in the Development of North East India: A Historical Perspective</b>	<b>106-114</b>
Suditya Kant Ghising	

- 9. From Isolation to Integration: Opportunities and Challenges in Unlocking Northeast India-ASEAN Connectivity** 115-131  
Dr. Tanima Kayal
- 10. The Chicken's Neck: The China Factor and India's Geostrategic Security** 132-145  
Dr. Minu Sinha Ratna
- 11. Bridging Borders: Economic & Strategic Synergy Between Northeast India and Southeast Asia** 146-166  
Dr. Pulakesh Sarkar

# *Abbreviations*

ADC	Autonomous District Council
ADMM Plus	ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus
AEP	Act East Policy
AFSPA	Armed Forces Special Powers Act
AIFTA	ASEAN-India Free Trade Area
AIIMS	All India Institute of Medical Sciences
AISHE	All India Survey on Higher Education
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
BBIN	Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal
BCIM	Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar
BEZ	Border Economic Zone
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BPTA	Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BSF	Border Security Force
CMEC	China-Myanmar Economic Corridor
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
EAS	East Asia Summit
EIA	Ecological Impact Assessment
EU	European Union

FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HIRA	Highways, Inland Waterways, Railways, Airlines
ICCR	Indian Council for Cultural Relations
ICP	Integrated Check Post
IIIT,	Indian Institute of Information Technology
IIM	Indian Institute of Management
IISER	Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research
IIT,	Indian Institute of Technology
IMBEX	India-Myanmar Bilateral Army Exercise
IMT	India-Myanmar-Thailand
IT	Information Technology
ITI	Industrial Training Institute
KMMTTP	Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project
KNF	Kuki National Front
LAC	Line of Actual Control
LBA	Land Boundary Agreement
LEP	Look East Policy
MDONER	Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region
MEA	Ministry of External Affairs
MOVCD	Mission Organic Value Chain Development
MW	Megawatt
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NDCA	Northeast Development Coordination Authority



NE	North East
NEC	North East Council
NEFA	North East Frontier Agency
NEIDS	North East Industrial Development Scheme
NEP	National Education Policy
NESIDS	North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NH	National Highway
NIT	National Institute of Technology
NNC	Naga National Council
NSCN	National Socialist Council of Nagaland
NSD	National School of Drama
NW	National Waterway
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PMGSY	Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institutions
ROK	Republic of Korea
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SHG	Self-Help Groups
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
SULFA	Surrendered ULFA
UGC	University Grants Commission
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Assam
USA	United States of America



# 1

## Introduction

*Dr. Aditya Kant Ghising\**

The northeastern region of India, comprising the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura and Sikkim, is one which has found a rather unique space in the development discourse of India. Ever since the pre-colonial era, this region has had its own characteristic nature of governance, sustenance as well as modes of production and social cohesion, which was different from what would later emerge as the 'mainstream' or the 'mainland' of India. This includes the colonial administration's policies with regard to the North-East Frontier Tracts, which later became the North-East Frontier Agency and culminated in the creation of Arunachal Pradesh. Therefore, upon the arrival of the colonial powers in the Indian subcontinent, particularly the British, the northeastern region's destiny in India's nation-building started to take shape. According to some estimates, India's northeastern region accounts for approximately 7.9 percent of its total land area, yet it is home to over 75 percent of the languages from four major language families which include Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian, the latter of which includes a small community of Tamil speakers in the Moreh District of Manipur. In terms of governance, one finds many similarities between the colonial administration's policies and those of independent India, towards the region, especially in areas that are considered to be sensitive from a strategic perspective.

---

\* Assistant Professor & Head, Department of Political Science, City College (affiliated to the University of Calcutta), Kolkata, West Bengal

The idea of an 'Inner Line Permit' (ILP) which dates back to the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (popularly known as the Inner Line Regulation, 1873) may be considered as an example of this. This applied initially to the frontier tracts which now make up Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland. In 2020, the ILP system was introduced in Manipur as well. This regulation (of 1873) also introduced the idea of 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' areas in the region. Following independence, the Indian government substituted the term 'British subjects' with 'Citizens of India' in 1950 and re-introduced the ILP system, with the objective of protecting the indigenous cultures, languages, customs as well as people from outside interference. However, eventually, a sense of 'otherization' has taken roots within various communities in the region, which has further fueled the 'core-periphery debate' in the discourse on development and security. The northeastern region remains one of the most common references in this regard, not only within India but also in South Asia.

It was only after India's liberalization in the 1990s that a serious economic need was felt to engage with her Southeast Asian neighbours, which was symbolized in the 'Look East policy'. In policy-making circles, it was realized early on that in order for India to effectively pursue this objective, the northeastern region would be the most suitable 'gateway' given its land boundaries with the Southeast Asia, via Myanmar, which no other part of India possessed. Accordingly, a number of agreements were reached between India and Myanmar, mainly aimed at improving connectivity and fostering people-to-people ties based on economic exchanges and engagements across the shared border. However, even after the rechristening of the 'Look East Policy' to the 'Act East Policy' along with the associated updating of priorities, one may observe that the region's potential has not been realized. One of the reasons for this, as the existing literature suggests, is the intricate nature of the northeastern region's uniqueness. This intricacy can take the form of topography or anthropology, strategy or politics, culture or religion, language or customs depending on the state and be mutually exclusive or inclusive depending on the context. This poses a challenge in properly formulating a development-centric policy for the region. For its development, many policies have been introduced over the decades since India's independence

but these have generally regarded the 'northeast' as an umbrella identity, which may explain why most of the policies have not translated to fruitful gains on the ground. This book is an attempt at bringing together diverse perspectives on society, history and security of India's east and northeastern regions. They represent an academic account of the ongoing synergies and divergences in development policies and societal mobility in these regions.

The chapters deal with specific themes and present insightful ideas on pertinent issues of India's northeastern region. *Partition's Long Shadow: Development, Nationalism, and Insurgency in Northeast India*, focuses on the impact of the Indian subcontinent's partition on the development trajectory of the northeastern states. It studies the initial shaping of the 'periphery' narrative of the region and discusses the impact of migration and insurgency. *Challenges and Prospects of Higher Education in Northeast India: A Study* analyzes the challenges and prospects of higher education in northeast India. Chapter 4 studies India's relations with ASEAN countries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a focus on northeast India and Myanmar. *Immigration, Land Rights and Identity: The Development from Class Identity to Ethnic Identity in the Assam Valley* focuses on issues pertaining to immigration, land rights and identity with the objective of understanding the social transition from class identity to ethnic identity in the Assam valley. *The Northeastern Region as the Fulcrum of India-ASEAN Relations: Implications on the Geopolitical Equations of China, Bangladesh and Myanmar* explores the northeastern region as the fulcrum of India-ASEAN relations and its implications on the geopolitical equations with China, Bangladesh and Myanmar. *Government policies in East and Northeast India: Assessment of Impact and Effect*, highlights various policies adopted by the Government of India with regard to the socio-economic development of the northeastern region and the impact of these policies on bringing about reforms on the ground. *The Strategic Significance of North Bengal in the Development of North East India: A Historical Perspective* provides an account of the strategic significance of North Bengal in the development of North East India. Through the lens of a historical perspective, this chapter provides valuable insights on the synergy of development between North Bengal and the northeastern region of India. *From Isolation to Integration: Opportunities and Challenges in Unlocking Northeast India-ASEAN Connectivity* explores the opportunities

and challenges in unlocking the potential areas in northeast India-ASEAN connectivity. The discourse points towards the need for integrating the northeastern economy more closely with the economies of Southeast Asia through an exploration of possible challenges and prospects in achieving the same and this chapter makes a valuable contribution in this regard. *The Chicken's Neck: The China Factor and India's Geostrategic Security* discusses India's security dynamics towards the eastern frontier and highlights the historical and geopolitical themes associated with the Siliguri Corridor. *Bridging Borders: Economic & Strategic Synergy Between Northeast India and Southeast Asia* provides an additional analysis of the prospects for connectivity between India's northeastern region and Southeast Asia. It highlights the potential areas for trade and investment in the region and examines the security considerations of connectivity.

The chapter contributors represent a wide network of scholars and intellectuals and their insights provide valuable information to the readers on pertinent themes of east and northeast India.

# 2

## **Partition's Long Shadow: Development, Nationalism, and Insurgency in Northeast India**

*Ningombam Athoibi Devi\**

### **Abstract**

*The partition of India in 1947 not only redrew political boundaries but also profoundly influenced the socio-political and economic landscapes of the Indian subcontinent. This paper examines the long-term ramifications of the sub-continent's partition on development, nationalism, and insurgency in Northeast India, a region marked by its cultural diversity and geostrategic location. The abrupt severance of economic and cultural linkages with East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) disrupted traditional trade routes, exacerbated economic marginalisation, and fuelled grievances rooted in perceived neglect by the central government. The influx of refugees compounded these disruptions, further strained local resources and altered demographic dynamics, heightening ethnic tensions. Simultaneously, the partition reinforced a perception of Northeast India as a peripheral region, both geographically and politically, intensifying its alienation from mainstream Indian identity. This alienation contributed to the rise of insurgent movements, as ethnic communities sought to assert their political autonomy and protect their cultural identities. Through a multidisciplinary approach, this paper explores how the Partition set the stage for protracted conflicts in the region, shaped the trajectory of nationalist sentiments, and influenced development policies. By analysing historical, political, and economic dimensions, the study*

---

\* Junior Research Fellow, Department of History, Manipur University, Imphal, Manipur

*underscores the enduring legacy of Partition in shaping the challenges and aspirations of Northeast India.*

**Keywords:** *Partition of India, Northeast India, Development and marginalisation, Nationalism and identity, Insurgency and Conflict.*

## Introduction

*"Partition was a political process which continued to unfold long afterwards, and indeed continues to unfold even today."*

Joya Chatterji used these words to demonstrate that India's partition was not the end of the nation's woes<sup>1</sup>. The partition of the country was conceived along communal lines- a separate nation for the Muslims was created in the form of Pakistan. At the same time, India emerged as a secular state with a Hindu majority. However, creating a separate nation based on communal lines was not the end of communal issues. While discussing the oversights and carelessness that went into deciding the final line of partition in the Radcliffe Award, Chatterji argues that no amount of care or sensitivity put into the effort would have seemed rational or fair to the inhabitants of the borderland. She makes this observation in connection to the exchanges; both cultural and economic, that take place among the inhabitants of this border region. This observation reveals, in many ways, the complexities of the issues created by partition. Contrary to the theory that borders are peripheral to the nation-state, geographically and politically, Chatterji argues that the state took particular interest in its border policy more so as the newly created borders of partition came to separate two unfriendly states. partition gave rise to fresh problems of state expansion and control.

The partition of the subcontinent on the eastern frontier was particularly complex as this region was home to various ethnicities with diverse cultures and multiple religious practices. Certain groups in the northeast of India, being racially, linguistically, and culturally distinct from the dominant mainland culture, have put up strong resistance against the attempts of the Indian state to consolidate state expansion in

---

1 The demand for a separate nation by the Muslim leaders was met by Partition. However, the Partition process did not come to an end in the immediate aftermath of the creation of boundaries. See: Joya Chatterji, 'The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947-52', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, Feb. 1999, pp. 185-242.



the region. This paper attempts to understand two key issues in the borderland- development and 'competing nationalisms' or insurgency movements in official terminology.

### **Development in the Borderland- Dams and India's Act East Policy**

In the years after the partition, the Indian state had to deal with extending state control in the frontier regions. The lack of development in the area has often been related to political troubles. The states in the North-East lag behind the national average in industrial capacity. The North-East region emerged as a primary focus of development policies in the closing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, these development policies were not necessarily conceived with the interests of the local inhabitants as a priority<sup>2</sup>. Development projects have been the subject of much criticism. They have either focused on creating an expanded regional bureaucracy or constructing roads. The creation of an inflated bureaucracy is interpreted as an attempt by the central government to develop local vested interests. Similarly, the focus on the construction of roads, as in the case of Arunachal Pradesh, gives more importance to national security concerns than the needs of the local people. The northeastern states enjoy a 'special category' status because central finances meet as much as 80 percent of the expenditures as opposed to the general category states, which receive only 50 percent central fund transfers for spending.

Sanjib Baruah argues that the nation's security concerns have guided the Indian state's approach to development policies in Arunachal Pradesh<sup>3</sup>. Even if the elected representatives of the people of Arunachal Pradesh support these projects, Baruah argues that the development schemes do not represent the

- 
- 2 The case of construction of roads in Arunachal Pradesh discussed later on the paper shows that local needs were not taken into account in this process. Ironically, the case seems to echo the colonial construction of communication systems for resource extraction purposes.
  - 3 Baruah, S. (2005). *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*, Oxford University Press. Udayon Misra takes a similar stand and argues that the initial approach of the Indian state towards the region was 'a highly centralist approach based on security concerns and a mono-cultural integrationist discourse'. See: Udayon Misra, *India's North East: Identity, Movements, State, and Civil Society*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 3. Deppak K. Mishra has taken a similar stand in Deepak K. Mishra, 'Developing the Border: The State and the Political Economy of Development in Arunachal Pradesh' in David N. Gellner ed., *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia*, Duke University Press, 2013, pp. 141-162.

people's will. For him, these projects result from the Indian state's attempt to extend control over this frontier space and incorporate it into the Indian national space. He traces the Indian state's interest in the region's development to the defeat of India in the Indo-China war of the 1960s. Following this defeat, the policy of the Indian state was driven by concerns of national security from external and internal enemies. The internal enemies were identified as the subnational groups of the region that were beginning to exert their autonomy.

Arunachal Pradesh has been the focus of state-sponsored development projects in the form of power-generating projects and road constructions. The state accounts for a hydroelectric potential of 50,000 MW out of 148,000 MW in the country. The central government has been eager to utilise this potential; development projects have been taken up even though the people inhabiting the region have not yet been fully integrated into the capitalist economy. The area is also home to various rare plant and animal species. According to Baruah, development policies in the region have reduced the state's autonomy to a cosmetic quality.<sup>4</sup> The states are forced to depend on the centre for financial grants for development policies, further restricting their autonomy.

In the case of Assam, Arupjyoti Saikia notes that the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries began to draw attention as a potential source of hydropower generation by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> A survey was conducted in 1919 to assess the potential for hydropower generation, but these ideas were never implemented during the colonial period. Only in the closing decades of the 20th century did the independent government of India undertake hydroelectricity generation. As the intensity of floods in the Brahmaputra valley worsened in the 1950s, the Assamese elite's solution to this flood problem was technological intervention in the form of embankments and multipurpose dams. Discussions around building water storage dams as a protective measure against floods soon included the prospect of power generation. In 2001, the Central Electrical Authority identified a potential of 63,000 megawatts

---

4 Discussion in the ongoing paragraph are from Baruah, *Durable Disorder*.

5 Saikia, A. (2013). 'Ecology, Floods and the Political Economy of Hydropower: The river Brahmaputra in the 20th century', *Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Occasional Paper: Perspectives in Indian Development*, New Series 22, pp. 1-46.

(MW) for the Brahmaputra river basin; the region has since been recognised as the nation's potential 'future powerhouse.' Saikia observes that in a neo-liberal economy, the construction of these dams has been handed out to private interests who do not consider the implications for the peasantry. On the other hand, anti-damn movements have been organised around the impact on the life of the peasants and the communities who depend on the river for their livelihood.

The construction of big dams are often a source of criticism from environmentalists, scholars and civil society activists. The big dams of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have been identified as the reason behind devastating floods in the two states.<sup>6</sup> Anti-dam movements argue that the development projects are implemented without considering the impact of these projects on the lives of the people and the ecological implications of their construction. Hiren Gohain observes that large-scale dams in the upstream Brahmaputra and its tributaries have, in recent years, caused widespread floods in the Assam valley. Gohain reiterates some of the issues raised by the critiques of this dam project- the release of vast volumes of water during the rainy season and the storing up of water during the dry season. Both create risks of floods and crop destruction. This contrasts the initial concern for dams to act as flood regulators. The dams are also being built on a seismically unstable spot, which exposes the floodplains to risk in a seismic event. These projects have displaced thousands of individuals and the rehabilitation projects have been inadequate, to say the least. Gohain compares the impact of the dam-building projects on the inhabitants to a government waging war against its people.

India's Act East Policy of 2014 began as the Look East Policy in 1991 with an aim for closer economic integration between India and the neighbouring Southeast and East Asian countries, through the Northeast region. The objective of the Look East policy was closer economic, political, and, consequently, cultural integration between India and the Southeast Asian countries in which the Northeast acts as the connecting link. India's decision to look East was guided by unfriendly relations with her north-west neighbour Pakistan, a lack of strategic allies, and

---

6 Hiren Gohain, H. (2008). 'Big Dams, Big Floods: On Predatory Development', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 43, no. 30, 26 Jul.- 1 Aug, pp. 19-21.

a dire need for Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs).<sup>7</sup> Thongkhohal Haokip argues that India sought to cultivate friendlier relations with her Eastern neighbours in such a scenario. Haokip observes that India has moved from a policy of isolation of the North-East to a policy guided by the importance of opening up the region to foreign investments. Development projects have been carried out with the hopes that a flourishing economy and infrastructural development would veer the youths away from separatist and secessionist ideology.

Baruah observes that North-East India has historically shared economic and cultural links to Southeast Asia; the policy aims to utilise this Southeast Asian connection. He suggests that the historical link of North-East India to Southeast Asia could be cultivated by encouraging the creation of an economic region somewhat akin to the European Union (EU). Both Baruah and Udayon Misra argue that the sense of alienation felt by the ethnicities of North-East India has forced the people to turn towards the culture and civilisation of Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup> A revisionist historiography has recently emerged in the North-East that emphasises its cultural affinity to Southeast Asian cultures. This change in the academic realm may be regarded as an indication of the internalisation of the cultural distance between the region and the 'mainstream' Indian culture.

Policymakers stress the possibility of bringing peace to the region through development projects. Such notions seem simplistic as a brief discussion of the insurgent movements in the area shows the complexity of these movements. Sub-nationalist demands in Assam arose from a growing sense of cultural insecurity in the face of migration. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), a group with the professed aim of liberating Assam from the 'colonial' control of Assam by the Indian government, has been critical of development policies in the region. The share of the local people in tea estates is, for instance, tiny. Development has not been the liberating harbinger of peace. Many insurgent movements arose in opposition/competition to an already existing demand for a separate homeland.<sup>9</sup>

---

7 Thongkhohal Haokip, T. (2015). *India's Look East Policy and the Northeast*, SAGE Publications.

8 Baruah, *Durable Disorder* and Misra, *India's North East*.

9 The case of the Kukis that arose in opposition to the Nagas, discussed in the next section.

## **Sub-nationalism and the Nation: Insurgency and counter-insurgency in the Northeast**

In the post-colonial period, various groups in the Northeast asserted competing nationalisms, often based on ethnic identities, in competition to the 'pan-Indian nationalism.' Some of these demands are for separate statehood, while others make a more conservative demand for an autonomous region within the Indian dominion. Academic discourse has termed these demands sub-nationalism, whereas the Indian government has tended to view them as insurgency movements. Prasenjit Biswas and Chandan Suklabaidya identify the Indian nation as a 'nation-from-above,' i.e., a nation created by bringing together autonomous units by a state.<sup>10</sup> The formation of the Indian state preceded the consolidation of Indian nationalism, leaving little space for competing national symbols of the different units. Biswas and Suklabaidya interpret the tensions between the nation and the minority nationalisms as arising from this inherent contradiction in forming the Indian state. They argue that these insurgency movements represent 'nations-from-below' as a counter to this hegemonic discourse. To come back to Chatterji's remark with which we started this paper, we can see these developments as a continuation of the partition process in a convoluted fashion.

### **1. Nagaland**

As the British discussed the power transfer with the Indian nationalist leaders, the Naga leaders asserted their independence. They rejected the idea that they should become part of independent India. The Naga National Council (NNC), under the leadership of A. Z. Phizo, declared their independence on 14 August 1947, one day before the declaration of Indian Independence. The NNC's declaration of independence was based on their stand that the British never ruled the more significant part of the Naga Hills, had never been part of India, and that including the Naga Hills in India should be voluntary. The NNC argued that the Indians had never conquered the Nagas; it was the British who conquered them; therefore, upon British withdrawal, they should be allowed to form their independent state. These early demands were reiterated in the

---

10 Biswas P., and Suklabaidya, C. (2007). *Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India: An Analysis*, SAGE Studies on India's North East, p.159.

coming decades even as the leadership of the sub-nationalist movement started to witness splits and factionalism.

Misra thinks that the Naga perception of freedom and independence was different from that of the leaders of the Indian national movement because they were never part of the freedom struggle. Sajal Nag rejects this view that the roots of the secessionist movements in the North-East lie in their absence from the Indian freedom struggle.<sup>11</sup> He argues that such historiography reinforces 'the ideas that colonial administrators had drilled into the minds of the tribals instead of examining or countering it.'

In the 1950s, the Indian state regarded the Naga issue as a law and order problem arising from manipulations by foreign governments, especially China.<sup>12</sup> It was not treated as a political issue. A separate state of Nagaland was created in 1963 to pacify the Nagas. Elections were held in 1964, through which the central government established an interest group among the Nagas, and the NNC was subsequently weakened. Baruah observes that the very name Nagaland with the English suffix 'land' denotes the cultural distance from the dominant Hindu culture of India and the adjustments that the Indian state has had to make with the sub-nationalist demands. When discussions were held for the creation of the new state, various groups opposed the adoption of this name. As opposed to this, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya were names that pronounced their affinity for Indian culture.

A more militant outfit, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), separated from the NNC and 'affirmed its commitment to a sovereign, independent Nagaland which would be "socialist" and Christian in character' in its manifesto released in 1980.<sup>13</sup> They adopted the slogan 'Nagaland for Christ.' The NSCN split into the Issac-Muivah faction and the Khaplang faction in 1988. Despite these divisions, the NSCN has retained the NNC's demand for autonomy and reiterated that they had never been part of India. The NSCN takes a more radical stand and calls for the unification of all the Nagas, demanding a greater Nagaland comprising the Naga-inhabited districts of

11 Nag, S. (2002). *Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Subnationalisms in North-East India*, Manohar, p.20.

12 Misra, *India's North East*. The NNC did seek help from China and Pakistan.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Manipur and large areas of Upper Assam. This has, in turn, led to much hostility between the NSCN and other insurgent groups of the North-East. One such group is that of the Kukis, who now demand a separate homeland spearheaded by the Kuki National Front (KNF). Some of these insurgent groups have successfully created a parallel government and taken up issues of social reformation while also enjoying popular support. The Indian government launched village reorganisation schemes to root out this local support. These movements enjoy some form of legitimacy among the local people and their demands are an ideological offensive to the state-building project of the Indian government.

Initially, Nehru's approach to the Naga problem was guided by the belief that more autonomy would help to resolve the aspirations for sovereignty. But the Nagas continued to demand independence, against which the Indian government had to send in the army. While deploying the army, Nehru repeatedly stressed the need to act cautiously to avoid alienating the Nagas. The deployment of the military raised concerns for human rights violations. In an attempt to weaken the support base of the insurgent groups, village reorganisations were carried out in the Naga and Mizo Hills by the Indian state; the Americans in Vietnam have also carried out such reorganisations during the Vietnam War. Phizo and the Naga groups tried to mobilise international opinion around the Naga issue. The Indian state had to counter this ideological offensive. The struggle between the contesting nationalisms was both military as well as ideological. Nag argues that the non-resolution of the Naga issue meant that Nehru's approach had been unsuccessful.<sup>14</sup> Yet the policy of the Indian government towards minority nationalisms continues to be guided by this principle of the 'carrot of autonomy with the stick of military measures.'

## 2. Assam

Unlike the case in the Naga Hills, Assam was involved in the independence struggle ever since the Assam Association merged with the Indian National Congress in 1926. Historically, the region had been an immigrant destination, but this process was exacerbated after partition when Hindu Bengalis from the

14 Nag, S. (2009). 'Nehru and the Nagas: Minority Nationalism and the Post-Colonial State', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Article, vol. 44, no. 49, 5 Dec, pp.48-55.

newly created East Pakistan migrated to Assam. Sub-nationalist political mobilisation in Assam was organised around the Assamese language in the nineteenth century, much before the rise of pan-Indian nationalism.<sup>15</sup> Later, it was mobilised for development projects like building refineries for crude petroleum produced in Assam. Still, in the Assam Movement of 1979-85, sub-nationalist mobilisation inculcated the growing anxiety in the Assamese public against immigration; the Assamese fear of 'minoritisation' in their homeland. The Assam movement was centred on the question of illegal immigration from Bangladesh; it demanded the disenfranchisement of these illegal immigrants. The movement was brought to an end by the Assam Accord signed by the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and the leaders of the movement.

The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) gained importance in the late 1980s in the aftermath of the Assam Movement. It was founded in 1979, almost simultaneously with the Assam Movement. ULFA described India's relationship with Assam as colonial and demanded that multinational and India-owned tea estates in Assam do more for the development of the state. Misra argues that this 'colonial thesis' has some substance because the region was trapped in an extractive economic relationship with the Indian state. Baruah has interpreted their rise to importance as the growth of critique of the state's development policies. The rise to prominence of ULFA, a more radical and assertive organisation, in the period after the Movement, has been traced by Baruah to the Assamese perception that the Indian government has abandoned their interests. On the other hand, Misra traces the rise of separatist politics in Assam to the differences that arose in the post-independence period between the leaders of Assam and the central Congress leadership. The differences were in the influx of refugees, financial autonomy, etc. Misra argues that the seed for separatism had been planted in the prejudice of the central leadership towards Assam in these crucial years.<sup>16</sup> The Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the Chief Minister of Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi, had disagreements over the issue of refugee rehabilitation.

---

15 Baruah, S. (2000). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Oxford University Press.

16 Misra, *India's North East*, p.21.



ULFA was organised as a military outfit armed with modern weapons and trained cadres. Their professed aim was to liberate Assam and distance themselves from the immigration issue, which was the primary concern in the Assam Movement. The late 1980s witnessed militant nationalism headed by this organisation. However, this was controlled in the 1990s due to two counter-insurgency operations launched by the central government, namely, Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino. The state government was dismissed, and President's Rule was established in Assam in 1990. The use of the military, especially in the absence of an elected state government, reduced the credibility of the Indian government in the eyes of the Assamese public. The deployment of the army raised concerns about human rights abuse. The operations employed military tactics and persuasion politics, urging many of the erstwhile insurgents (members of ULFA) to surrender. The surrendered militants (also called SULFA or surrendered ULFA) were given financial and political favours. SULFA members were allowed to retain possession of arms. They have been accused of widespread extortions and invoking terror among the public against whom the state refused to take any action.

The Indian state's response to the sub-nationalist challenge posed by ULFA was either sending in the military, or persuasion tactics. Baruah argues that it has not shown engagement with the ideological challenge of such sub-nationalisms.<sup>17</sup> According to Nag, the failure to accord the almost century-long struggle of the tribals of the Naga and the Lushai Hills against British expansion the status of freedom struggles alienated the tribals further. In Assam, smaller ethnic groups who felt alienated by the Assamese sub-nationalist struggle put forward their sub-nationalist claims. The Bodos are one such group demanding an autonomous council. All states in the North-East face the issue of insurgent movements with most demanding a separate or autonomous state and identifying the Indian state as the common enemy. Misra argues that the interests of the region's political actors are tied to the continuing existence of insurgent groups, as their very presence allows the political powers to demand more funds from the central government.

---

17 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

## Memory and the Nationalist Demands

The competing nationalisms of Southeast Asia put forward different claims to memory and history that are crucial to the nation-making process. The Nagas created a history of themselves that had nothing to do with India; this history was critical to putting forward their claim of independence. Sajal Nag discusses a case where the dead body of the poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam, became the site of contestation between two nation-states- India and Bangladesh.<sup>18</sup> The poet, who was an Indian citizen by birth, was buried in Bangladesh (through some collusion between the Indian and Bangladeshi authorities) in a hurried manner before his family members could arrive to take him back to India for burial. Bangladesh appropriated the mortal remains of the poet to create a national monument of its own. Nag observes that national heritage and historical legacy symbols are an essential part of the nation-building process. In the case of South Asia, most of these symbols were inherited by India, which left little for Pakistan and Bangladesh. Bangladesh usurped the opportunity provided by the poet's death to create a national monument.

The convoluted picture of competing nationalisms and sub-nationalisms in the North-East and the issue of underdevelopment of the region reinforce each other in the discussions of the national leadership. The contestation around memorials between nation-states has trickled down to the competing nationalisms in the state. Jangkhomang Guite looks at the role of official memory sites in shaping the relationship between different ethnic groups and vice versa, as in the case of Manipur.<sup>19</sup> Ethno-nationalism in Manipur of a masculine character has been created around the dominant Meitei community and, in the process, actively marginalises the other minority communities.

Returning to Chatterji's remark, the new nation-states that emerged from the partition of the Indian Subcontinent exercised

18 Nag, S. (2006). 'Two Nations and a Dead Body: Mortuarial Rites and Post-Colonial Modes of Nation-Making in South Asia', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 41, no. 50, 16-22 Dec, pp.5183-5190.

19 Guite, J. (2011). 'Monuments, Memory and Forgetting in Postcolonial North-East India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Article, vo. 46, no. 8, 19 Feb, pp.56-64.

contestations in various fields. Various insurgency groups in the North-East have been accused of coordinating with Pakistani intelligence; many of them continue to operate out of bases in Bangladesh. The heavy-handed response of the Indian state against insurgent groups can be located in the anxiety of the post-colonial states to retain control over the territories of the erstwhile colonies. The developments since independence, which include the creation of a separate nation organised along communal lines (Pakistan), the assertion of autonomy by minority groups (Nagas being the foremost), replacement of the communal thesis of nation formation and its replacement by one organised around linguistic lines (Bangladesh), nationalisms aroused by fears of mineralisation (Assamese) and the other competing nationalisms that arose in the closing decades of previous century only goes to affirm Chatterji's observation that partition is a continuing process.

## References

- Baruah, Sanjib. 2005. *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*. Oxford University Press.
- . 2000. *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. Oxford University Press.
- Biswas, Prasenjit, and Chandan Suklabaidya. 2007. *Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India: An Analysis*. SAGE Studies of India's North East.
- Chatterji, Joya. 1999. "The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947-52." *Modern Asian Studies* 33 (1): 185-242.
- Gohain, Hiren. 2008. "Big Dams, Big Floods: On Predatory Development." *Economic and Political Weekly* 43 (30).
- Guite, Jangkhomang. 2011. "Monuments, Memory and Forgetting in Postcolonial North-East India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 46 (8).
- Haokip, Thongkhohal. 2015. *India's Look East Policy and the North East*. SAGE Publications.
- Mishra, Deepak K. 2013. "Developing the Border: The State and the Political Economy of Development in Arunachal Pradesh." In *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia*, by David N. Gellner. Duke University Press.
- Misra, Udayon. 2014. *India's North East: Identity, Movements, State, and Civil Society*. Oxford University Press.

- . 2000. *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*. Indian Institute of Advanced Studies.
- Nag, Sajal. 2002. *Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Subnationalism in North-East India*. Manohar.
- Nag, Sajal. 2009. "Nehru and the Nagas: Minority Nationalism and the Post-Colonial State." *Economic and Political Weekly* 44 (49).
- Nag, Sajal. 2006. "Two Nations and a Dead Body: Mortuary Rites and Post-Colonial Modes of Nation-Making in South Asia." *Economic and Political Weekly* 41 (50).
- Saikia, Arupjyoti. 2013. "Ecology, Floods and the Political Economy of Hydropower: The river Brahmaputra in the 20th century." *Nehru Memorial Museum and library, Occasional Paper: Perspectives in Indian Development*.

# 3

## Challenges and Prospects of Higher Education in Northeast India: A Study

*Ratan Saha\**

### Abstract

*Higher education is essential for India to become a knowledge-based society in the twenty-first century. The nation's human capital is based on the quality of its higher education. Because some inherent challenges hinder the development of this region, the current study aims to examine the situation of higher education institutions in the Northeast and emphasize the actions taken by these institutions to improve quality. Higher education is one of the cornerstones of any country's success in the modern era. Higher education is essential for India to become a knowledge-based society in the twenty-first century. It generates a wide variety of labor needed for industry, agriculture, administration, and other services. In India, particularly in the Northeast, higher education institutions have encountered several difficulties. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Mid-Day Meals, National Literacy Mission, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (Right to Education) Act, 2010, and other initiatives have been put into place by the Indian government since independence in order to accomplish the objectives of education at all educational levels. Higher education has also garnered a lot of attention in tandem with this. In higher education, reform programs such as the National Education Policy (NEP) represent significant turning points. The current paper's objectives are to examine the state and significance of higher education in Northeast India, the role that life skills play in*

---

\* Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Political Science, Raiganj University, West Bengal

*promoting lifelong learning and attaining high-quality education, and the problems and challenges that the region's higher education system faces.*

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Northeast, India, Challenges, Development.

## Introduction

Even though India has one of the biggest higher education systems in the world, there are notable geographical differences that make it difficult for everyone to have equal access to high-quality education.<sup>1</sup> It is crucial to draw attention to Northeast India's distinct educational circumstances in addition to the larger framework of India's higher education system. The area, which is made up of eight states and is sometimes referred to as the "Seven Sisters," offers a range of possibilities and difficulties in the field of higher education.<sup>2</sup> The eight states that makeup Northeast India—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura—offer a distinctive educational environment marked by a wealth of cultural variety and intricate socioeconomic difficulties. In the past, the area has encountered several challenges in building a robust system of higher education.<sup>3</sup> The ability to read and write is known as literacy, and the Census of India defines literacy as the capacity to comprehend and write in any language. Since education is a crucial component of a nation's development process, literacy is typically regarded as one of the indices of educational progress. As a result, literacy and education have been prioritized in India's development process. There has been some improvement in the nation's educational system since independence. It should be mentioned that the number of elementary schools rose from 2.09 lakh in 1951 to 5.73 lakh in 1994, and the literacy rate rose from 18.3 percent in 1951 to 65.37 percent in 2001. Similarly, the number of universities increased

---

1 Chakraborty, A., Sarkar, S. N., & Mete, J. (n.d.). Challenges and Opportunities in Higher Education in Northeast India. Untapped Horizons: Educational Tourism in North-East India, 128-137.

2 Taba, P. (2023, September). Challenges and Prospects of Higher Education in Northeast India: A Comprehensive Analysis, International Journal of Novel Research and Development (IJNRD), 8(9), d278-d286. Retrieved from IJNRD.ORG.

3 Chakraborty, A., Sarkar, S. N., & Mete, J. (n.d.). Challenges and Opportunities in Higher Education in Northeast India. Untapped Horizons: Educational Tourism in North-East India, 128-137.

from 27 to 169 during the same period.<sup>4</sup> According to Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the role of universities is not merely to produce technically proficient and professionally educated individuals, but also to instill in them the trait of empathy, which allows people to treat one another with a democratic spirit.<sup>5</sup> In addition to enabling economic independence, it should equip students for more fulfilling and meaningful roles in both life and the workplace.<sup>6</sup> Goal 4 of India's 2015 adoption of the 2030 objective for Sustainable Development, which calls for "inclusive and Ensuring equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities" by 2030, reflects the global aim of education development. Higher education is defined as education that lasts for at least three years after completing at least nine months (full-time) ten years of schooling, or twelve years or an equivalent amount of time. General, vocational, professional, or technical education (AISHE) are all possible forms of this education.<sup>7</sup>

Since India's independence, higher education has been increasingly significant.<sup>8</sup> Within the broader framework of India's higher education system, significant developments have also occurred in the Northeast. As an illustration of higher education, universities often provide a broad choice of courses, including chances for postgraduate study. Other schools, on the other hand, could concentrate more exclusively on teacher training programs and vocational courses.<sup>9</sup> The government's 2020 National Education Policy, for instance, sets high standards

- 
- 4 Lyndem, B., & De, U. K. (2004). Education in North East India: Experience and Challenge. Concept Publishing Company. Retrieved from [https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Education\\_in\\_North\\_East\\_India.html?id=oHJlnkDG8IMC&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Education_in_North_East_India.html?id=oHJlnkDG8IMC&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false)
  - 5 Paul, F. A. (2021). Higher Education in North East India: Trends, Opportunities and Challenges. Sovima: IQAC Tetso College.
  - 6 (2020). National Education Policy. Government of India: Ministry of Human Resource Development. Retrieved from [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English\\_0.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf)
  - 7 Daimary, P. (2024, October). Challenges And Prospects of Higher Education in Achieving Quality Education and Lifelong Learning in Northeast India: A Comprehensive Analysis. International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT), 12(10), c62-c68.
  - 8 Konwar, N., & Chakraborty, S. (2013). Higher Education Scenario of the North-Eastern India. Parsipex - Indian Journal of Research, 2(3), 78-80.
  - 9 (2020). National Education Policy. Government of India: Ministry of Human Resource Development. Retrieved from [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English\\_0.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf)

for the advancement of higher education, such as encouraging interdisciplinary research, creating a thriving research ecosystem, and utilizing technology to improve learning<sup>10</sup>.

Northeast India, which is made up of the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, is 26,2279 square kilometers in size (or 8% of India) and has 4,57,72188 people living there (or 3.76% of India) according to the 2011 census. The British colonial government officially designated the North-East as the boundary area. Since some inherent challenges are impeding the region's growth, the current study aims to examine the state of higher education institutions in the Northeast and highlight the actions these institutions have taken to enhance quality. Thus, the purpose of this article is to identify the particular possibilities and problems that are present in the North-East higher education system. This study also aims to determine ways to raise the degree of faculty participation in North-East upper secondary institutions.

### **Significance of Higher Education in North-East India**

The pertinent question in this case is whether the effects of this growth have been distributed evenly throughout the nation and have benefited every segment of society, or if there are differences based on factors like gender, caste, economic standing, and religious affiliation. The North-East region, which includes the seven states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura, is a significant geographical area within this incredibly diversified nation. Some natural drawbacks, such as poor infrastructure, a harsh climate, and hilly terrain, limit the region's ability to develop.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the area has abundant natural riches and biodiversity. The literacy rates in several of these states are greater than those in other regions of the nation. The region has enormous potential for economic growth because of skilled people and resources that can use local resources, including tea, lumber, tourism, coal, oil, and organic resources.<sup>12</sup> It should

---

10 (2020). National Education Policy. Government of India: Ministry of Human Resource Development. Retrieved from [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English\\_0.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf)

11 Kaushal, T. (2016). Challenges of Higher Education in North Eastern States.

12 Boruah, P. J. (2018). Problems and Future Prospects of Higher Education in North East India, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, 7(2), 09-12. Retrieved from [www.ijhssi.org](http://www.ijhssi.org).



go without saying that the development of qualified human resources requires high-quality higher education. Building a knowledge infrastructure for people's self-empowerment and overcoming the limitations of natural resources are two benefits of high-quality higher education, particularly in the Northeast.<sup>13</sup>

### North-East Indian Perspective

Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, and Sikkim are the eight states that make up northeastern India. The states in the region differ greatly from one another in terms of economic development, terrain, culture, and demographic composition. According to the 2001 census, the area had a total population of 3.89 crore. Except for Tripura, practically other states saw a faster population increase than the national average throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Except for Assam and Tripura, all of the region's states have much lower population densities than the national average. Along with natural expansion, population migration is seen as a significant influence in this region.<sup>14</sup> As a result, even though the area is intended to be tribal, more non-tribal people are living there than tribal people. There are misunderstandings about the hilly northeast, which is frequently explained in terms of topography. A significant portion of the land in this area is made up of the Brahmaputra, Cachar, Imphal, and Agartala plains. Similarly, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Mizoram, Sikkim, and Manipur—all of which are often considered “troubled areas”—are rather tranquil, with the exception of Manipur, Assam, and Nagaland. However, the majority of the problems are seen from a security standpoint. This region covers 2,55,083 square kilometers, or just 7.95% of India's total land area. This area is home to 3,15,47,314 people or 3.5% of India's total population. With the exception of Assam and Tripura, which each have a population density comparable to the national average of 273 people per square kilometer, the area is not highly inhabited, with less than 100 people per square kilometer. Numerous Scheduled Tribes with various dialects, languages, and cultural practices predominate in the northeastern states. There are about

13 Paul, F. A. (2021). Higher Education in North East India: Trends, Opportunities and Challenges. Sovima: IQAC Tetso College.

14 Nandi, G. C. (2017). Regional Variation and Development Perspectives: A Study of North East India, International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR), 4(2), 556-564. Retrieved from [www.ijrar.org](http://www.ijrar.org)

ninety-nine tribes in the region with a population of 81,42,624 and 12.02% of India's total tribal population (1991); most states in the area, except Assam and Tripura, have more than 70% of the tribal population. There are more dialects.<sup>15</sup> According to the 2011 census, this area is home to 3.78% of the country's population. It covers around 7.98% of the country's land and includes India's 5,483-kilometer international boundary. These eight states account for 3.37% of the nation's agricultural land and 34.5% of its bamboo cultivation (Perspective: North East Infra in Focus, 2021).<sup>16</sup> Institutions of higher learning were founded in the area only recently. For instance, Guwahati University was founded in 1943, although Guwahati's first institution, Cotton Institute, was founded in 1991. In places like Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay, whose universities were established in 1857—nearly a century earlier—this occurred considerably later. Many of these states have better literacy rates than other regions of the nation, despite the region's late adoption of higher education. As of 2020, 54 federal universities, 416 state universities, 125 deemed universities, 361 private universities, 7 institutes under state legislatures, and 159 institutions of national importance, such as IIMs, AIIMS, IITs, IIITs, IISERs, and NITs, make up India's more than 100% university population.<sup>17</sup>

### Objectives

1. To study the higher educational scenerio of North- East region of India.
2. To study the current status of higher education in North East India.
3. To study the problems and challenges faced in pursuing higher education in Northeast India.

### Methodology

The study has chosen an analytical technique of inquiry based on the literature review and the data gathered from many sources. The study is based on secondary sources of data gathered from

---

15 Biswas, N. B. (2006). Education in North-East India. Delhi: Shipra Publications.

16 Perspective: North East Infra in Focus. (2021, November 19). Retrieved from <https://www.civildaily.com/sansad-tv-perspective-north-east-infra-in-focus/>

17 Paul, F. A. (2021). Higher Education in North East India: Trends, Opportunities and Challenges. Sovima: IQAC Tetso College.

reputable publications, research journal articles, and well-known websites, including the All-India Survey of Higher Education, Analysis of Budgeted Expenditure on Education, and the Government of India's higher education system. The primary focus of the study is on higher education in the northeastern states of India.

### **Scenario of Higher Education in North-East India**

Education and development processes are linked and interact. The education sector influences economic and social development by bringing about changes in technology through the systematic application of scientific and other knowledge, which results in their division and differentiation into skills for specialized work and specialized knowledge, as well as in terms of values and attitudes to provide the necessary incentives to increase productive efficiency. Social structures, policies, and goals also exert their influence in education, just as they do in other fields.<sup>18</sup> Higher education for a nation's human resources is critical to its growth and social transformation. Higher education will serve as the primary driver of our nation's social, economic, and political development. A well-educated populace with applicable information, attitudes, and skills is critical for economic and social progress in the twenty-first century. Higher education institutions were founded very late in the North Eastern area. There were sixteen colleges by 1947, the majority of which were in Assam. While Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras universities were founded about a century earlier in 1857, Guwahati University was the first to be founded in 1948. Due to challenging geographic circumstances, many students had limited access to higher education, and Gauhati University was unable to draw students from outlying regions of the region. North-Eastern Hill institution, the region's second institution and a central university, was established in 1973 in Shillong, Meghalaya. Currently, Northeast India has 83 institutions, including Central, State, Deemed, and Private institutions. The Assam government is establishing a huge number of model colleges around the state.<sup>19</sup>

18 Biswas, N. B. (2006). Education in North-East India. Delhi: Shipra Publications.

19 Das, R. K. (2023). Higher Education in North –East India, Issues and Challenges. International Journal of Science and Social Science Research [IJSSSR], 1(3), 250-259.

**Table 1: Number of Universities in North-East India**

Name of States	Central University	State University	Private University	Deemed University	Total
Assam	2	18	8	1	29
Arunachal Pradesh	1	1	8	1	11
Manipur	3	3	5	0	11
Meghalaya	1	0	9	0	10
Mizoram	1	0	1	0	2
Nagaland	1	0	4	0	5
Tripura	1	2	1	0	4
Sikkim	1	2	8	0	11
Total	11	26	44	2	83

**Source:** UGC Annual Report 2022-23 (Welcome to UGC, New Delhi, India)

During the period 2022-23, there were 11 Central Universities, 26 State Public Universities, 44 State Private Universities, and 2 Institutions Deemed to be Universities in North-East Region by State.

**Table 2: Number of Colleges in North East India (State-wise)**

Name of States	No. of Colleges		Total
	2(f) & 12B	2(f) (Not included under Section 12(B))	
Assam	311	26	337
Arunachal Pradesh	12	3	15
Manipur	66	5	71
Meghalaya	30	12	42
Mizoram	27	2	29
Nagaland	36	14	50
Tripura	31	0	31
Sikkim	4	7	11
Total	517	69	586

**Source:** UGC Annual Report 2022-23 (Welcome to UGC, New Delhi, India)

The number of institutions that were registered with AISHE rose from 903 in 2017-18 to 1168 in 2021-2022. A total of 265 new universities, representing a 29.35% growth, were registered on

the AISHE site between 2017-18 and 2021-22. Section 2(f) and 12B of the UGC Act listed 153 institutions of national importance: 16 state open universities, 1 state private open university, 1 central open university, 53 central universities, 423 state government universities, 391 state private universities, 6 institutions created under state legislature acts, and 91 deemed universities in 1956. Northeastern India is home to these 83 academic institutions. In addition, the number of colleges has grown dramatically, rising from 39,050 in 2017–18 to 45,473 in 2021–2022. In 2021–2022, 1,677 new colleges were registered. At the all-India level, 6423 (16.45% increase) were registered throughout the 5-year term, which runs from 2017-18 to 2021-22.

Figure 1: Number of Universities in North-East India

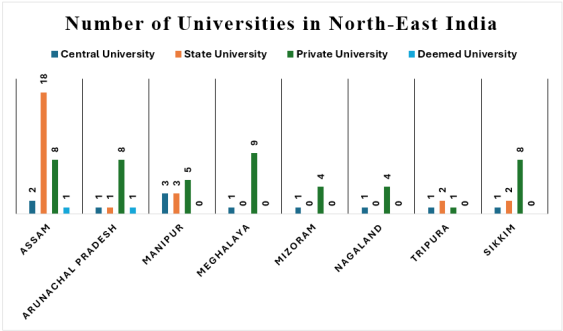
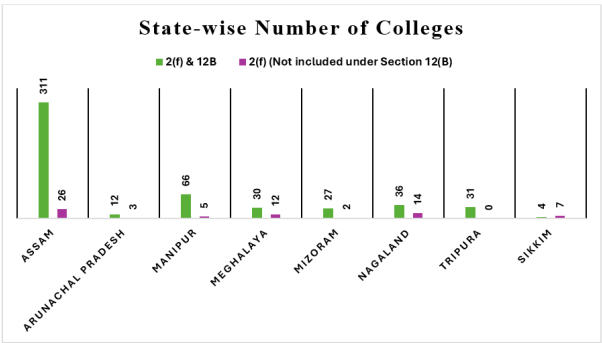


Figure 2: Number of colleges in North East India (State-wise)



Central Universities in Northeast India

This study investigated the websites of 11 central institutions from eight Northeast Indian states, as shown in Table 3. This report presents some information regarding central universities

in the North-East Indian states. There are 56 central universities in India, with 11 of them located in the eight states of North East India.

**Table 3: Universities in North East India**

No.	University	State	Location	Centralised	Established	Specialisation	Website
1.	Rajiv Gandhi University	Arunachal Pradesh	Itanagar	2007	1985	General	www.rgu.ac.in
2.	Assam University	Assam	Silchar	1994	1994	General	www.aus.ac.in
3.	Tezpur University	Assam	Tezpur	1994	1994	General	www.tezu.ac.in
4.	Central Agricultural University	Manipur	Imphal	1993	1993	Agriculture	www.cau.ac.in
5.	Manipur University	Manipur	Imphal	2005	1980	General	www.manipuruniv.ac.in
6.	National Sports University	Manipur	Imphal	2018	2018	Sports	www.nsu.ac.in
7.	North Eastern Hill University	Meghalaya	Shillong	1973	1973	General	www.nehu.ac.in
8.	Mizoram University	Mizoram	Aizawl	2000	2000	General	www.mzu.edu.in
9.	Nagaland University	Nagaland	Lumami	1994	1994	General	nagalanduniversity.ac.in
10.	Sikkim University	Sikkim	Gangtok	2007	2007	General	www.cus.ac.in
11.	Tripura University	Tripura	Agartala	1987	1987	General	tripurauniv.ac.in

## Challenges of Higher Education in North Eastern States

### 1. Research and Development

Due to the inadequate number of higher education institutions, there is a deficiency in place-based research and development activities. Despite the existence of several such initiatives, they have not yielded work that accurately captures the region's natural resources, their exploration, protection, and intended commercialization.<sup>20</sup> The lack of facilities and infrastructure limits research prospects in the Northeastern states, making it difficult for the area to conduct research at the global level. The region's notably low enrollment in PhD programs serves as an illustration of this (Taba, 2023).<sup>21</sup>

### 2. Values and Principles

Education should prioritize values like honesty, freedom, and ethics to ensure its long-term sustainability. This will lead to the development of dedicated and self-sufficient learners.

### 3. Faculty Shortages

The lack of competent and experienced faculty members is arguably the biggest issue facing North-East Indian higher education institutes.<sup>22</sup> Since the availability of certified or well-trained instructors is a necessity for excellent education, the quality of teachers determines the quality of education. The majority of skilled instructors are also not interested in working in this area because of the absence of adequate infrastructure, better communication, better input, and a high teacher-to-student ratio (Paul, 2021).<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the majority of faculty members are paid on a contract or one-time basis,

---

20 Kaushal, T. (2016). Challenges of Higher Education in North Eastern States. *International Education & Research Journal [IERJ]*, 2(12), 66-67. Retrieved January 12, 2025.

21 Taba, P. (2023). Challenges and Prospects of Higher Education in Northeast India: A Comprehensive Analysis. *International Journal of Novel Research and Development (IJNRD)*, 8(9), d278-d286. Retrieved from IJNRD.ORG.

22 Daimary, P. (2024). Challenges And Prospects of Higher Education in Achieving Quality Education and Lifelong Learning in Northeast India: A Comprehensive Analysis. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 12(10), c62-c68.

23 Paul, F. A. (2021). Higher Education in North East India: Trends, Opportunities and Challenges. Sovima: IQAC Tetso College.

which occasionally gives the impression that they are not fully committed to their jobs.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. Traditional Curriculum

The antiquated curriculum of India's higher education system, which emphasizes theoretical knowledge over real-world application, is another major issue. Course frameworks in North-East India frequently don't relate to issues that arise in the actual world. Students frequently lack the real-life skills necessary for their employment, despite the knowledge that is taught in the classroom.<sup>25</sup>

#### 5. Shortage of Vocational Courses

Even though India has a large number of universities, the curriculum does not include enough vocational courses. These schools primarily provide traditional academic programs, neglecting the importance of vocational training and practical skills.<sup>26</sup>

#### 6. Lack of Clear Educational Goals

Despite the rise in enrollment, many college students experience aimlessness as a result of unclear learning objectives. When education lacks clear objectives, students may become frustrated and find it difficult to apply what they have learned.<sup>27</sup>

#### 7. Language Problem

Languages, some of which are well-developed and others of which are archaic, predominate in the northeastern region of

---

24 Daimary, P. (2024). Challenges And Prospects of Higher Education in Achieving Quality Education and Lifelong Learning in Northeast India: A Comprehensive Analysis. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 12(10), c62-c68.

25 Daimary, P. (2024). Challenges And Prospects of Higher Education in Achieving Quality Education and Lifelong Learning in Northeast India: A Comprehensive Analysis. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 12(10), c62-c68.

26 Taba, P. (2023). Challenges and Prospects of Higher Education in Northeast India: A Comprehensive Analysis. *International Journal of Novel Research and Development (IJNRD)*, 8(9), d278-d286. Retrieved from IJNRD.ORG.

27 Taba, P. (2023). Challenges and Prospects of Higher Education in Northeast India: A Comprehensive Analysis. *International Journal of Novel Research and Development (IJNRD)*, 8(9), d278-d286. Retrieved from IJNRD.ORG.



India. There are almost 300 dialects in certain states.<sup>28</sup> There are differences in the languages of the states.<sup>29</sup> Even yet, the number of books available in the native language for higher education is rather small. Because of this, the majority of higher education institutions have decided to use English as their primary language of instruction, which is occasionally inappropriate in the multilingual setting of a globalized society (Daimary, 2024).<sup>30</sup> Because there aren't enough educational resources available in their mother tongue, many people are discouraged from going to college.<sup>31</sup>

## 8. Insufficient Number of Institutions

Students go to other locations outside of the region to pursue higher education since the Northeastern region of India has enough institutions to match the demand. Because of this, students from this area frequently encounter a lot of issues from fraudulent operators and other questionable groups.<sup>32</sup>

## 9. Lack of Teaching Credibility

Teachers' quality determines the quality of education. A quality education requires the availability of sufficient and skilled instructors. Good instructors like to work at well-established institutions and universities with good input, an efficient communication system, a decent teacher-to-student ratio, better physical and research facilities, etc. High-qualified educators are therefore reluctant to work in private universities.<sup>33</sup>

---

28 Kaushal, T. (2016). Challenges of Higher Education in North Eastern States. *International Education & Research Journal [IERJ]*, 2(12), 66-67. Retrieved January 12, 2025.

29 Paul, F. A. (2021). Higher Education in North East India: Trends, Opportunities and Challenges. Sovima: IQAC Tetso College.

30 Daimary, P. (2024). Challenges And Prospects of Higher Education in Achieving Quality Education and Lifelong Learning in Northeast India: A Comprehensive Analysis. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 12(10), c62-c68.

31 Taba, P. (2023). Challenges and Prospects of Higher Education in Northeast India: A Comprehensive Analysis. *International Journal of Novel Research and Development (IJNRD)*, 8(9), d278-d286. Retrieved from IJNRD.ORG.

32 Kaushal, T. (2016). Challenges of Higher Education in North Eastern States. *International Education & Research Journal [IERJ]*, 2(12), 66-67. Retrieved January 12, 2025.

33 Kaushal, T. (2016). Challenges of Higher Education in North Eastern States. *International Education & Research Journal [IERJ]*, 2(12), 66-67. Retrieved January 12, 2025.

## 10. Teachers as mentors

The epidemic has had a significant impact on instructors' and pupils' mental health, which requires attention. Teachers and students must be in regular communication. Teachers now serve as mentors in addition to being educators. In this new era, instructors must become actual mentors to their pupils, providing them with ongoing support and encouragement. Teachers must assist and encourage their pupils in order to maintain a continuous connection with them. They must also get an education and have a relationship with their parents.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

According to the aforementioned research, the North Eastern states have several higher education-related issues, but the area also offers a wealth of higher education prospects. Due to a dearth of high-quality education in Delhi and Bangalore, the majority of students go there for both fundamental higher education requirements like graduation and higher education pursuits like research, according to a 2010 study by the Indian Chamber of Commerce. In North-East India, higher education is at a turning point when important issues coexist with exciting chances to influence the region's future. The distinct sociocultural environment, characterized by linguistic variety and a rich legacy, offers opportunities for development as well as challenges. A number of crucial issues need to be addressed by stakeholders if higher education is to fulfill its promise as a catalyst for regional development. The Northeast's vibrant and industrious youth have many chances to catch up to the rest of the world thanks to the region's distinctive history, culture, abundant biodiversity, and natural resources. The Indian education system is extremely important, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, announced by the Indian government on July 29, 2020, aims to address and reform it. It suggests reforming and restructuring every element of the educational system. NEP 2020 aims to reduce dropout rates and achieve a 100% gross enrolment ratio by 2030 by promoting universal access and a positive attitude toward education at all levels, from preschool to secondary. A key factor in accomplishing this objective may be education, particularly higher education. In the past ten years, the Northeast

---

34 Paul, F. A. (2021). Higher Education in North East India: Trends, Opportunities and Challenges. Sovima: IQAC Tetso College.

has seen a significant increase in the number of institutions. To see a noticeable improvement in the calibre of higher education, the federal and state governments must immediately upgrade the facilities of these establishments and recruit qualified, skilled instructors. In the end, changing northeast India's higher education system necessitates an all-encompassing strategy that tackles linguistic obstacles, upgrades facilities, updates curricula, promotes industrial cooperation, and involves communities. Stakeholders may build an educational ecosystem that not only maximizes individual potential but also makes a substantial contribution to regional development by taking advantage of these improvement possibilities.

## References

- Chakraborty, A., Sarkar, S. N., & Mete, J. (n.d.). Challenges and Opportunities in Higher Education in Northeast India. *Untapped Horizons: Educational Tourism in North-East India*, 128-137.
- Daimary, P. (2024, October). Challenges And Prospects Of Higher Education In Achieving Quality Education And Lifelong Learning In Northeast India: A Comprehensive Analysis. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 12(10), c62-c68.
- Hana, P. (n.d.). *Sociology of Northeast India Part I*. Arunachal Pradesh: Institute of Distance Education Rajiv Gandhi University. Retrieved from [www.ide.rgu.ac.in](http://www.ide.rgu.ac.in)
- Kaushal, T. (2016, December). Challenges of Higher Education in North Eastern States. *International Education & Research Journal [IERJ]*, 2(12), 66-67. Retrieved January 12, 2025
- Konwar, N., & Chakraborty, S. (2013, March). Higher Education Scenario of the North-Eastern India. *Parsipex - Indian Journal of Research*, 2(3), 78-80.
- Ahuja, R., & Yadav, S. (2020). Indian Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities. *Journal of Educational Planning and Administration*, 34(4), 5-18.
- Biswas, N. B. (2006). *Education in North-East India*. Delhi: Shipra Publications.
- Boruah, P. J. (2018, February). Problems and Future Prospects of Higher Education in North East India. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, 7(2), 09-12. Retrieved from [www.ijhssi.org](http://www.ijhssi.org)
- Das, R. K. (2023, October-December ). Higher Education in North –East India, Issues and Challenges. *International Journal of Science and Social Science Research [IJSSSR]*, 1(3), 250-259.

- Lyndem, B., & De, U. K. (2004). *Education in North East India: Experience and Challenge*. Concept Publishing Company. Retrieved from [https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Education\\_in\\_North\\_East\\_India.html?id=oHJlnkDG8IMC&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Education_in_North_East_India.html?id=oHJlnkDG8IMC&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false)
- Nandi, G. C. ( 2017, June). Regional Variation and Development Perspectives: A Study of North East India. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR)*, 4(2), 556-564. Retrieved from [www.ijrar.org](http://www.ijrar.org)
- National Education Policy*. Government of India: Ministry of Human Resource Development. Retrieved from [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English\\_0.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf)
- Paul, F. A. (2021). *Higher Education in North East India: Trends, Opportunities and Challenges*. Sovima: IQAC Tetso College.
- Perspective: North East Infra in Focus. (2021, November 19). Retrieved from <https://www.civildaily.com/sansad-tv-perspective-north-east-infra-in-focus/>
- Taba, P. (2023, September ). Challenges and Prospects of Higher Education in Northeast India: A Comprehensive Analysis. *International Journal of Novel Research and Development (IJNRD)*, 8(9), d278-d286. Retrieved from IJNRD.ORG

# 4

## India's Relations with ASEAN Countries in the 20th Century: A Study of Northeast India and Myanmar

*Dr. Antarwell Warjri\**

### **Abstract**

*The Association of South East Asian Nations was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok by the five founder countries- Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Presently, the ASEAN has ten member countries. The aims and objectives of the association are to accelerate the economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the region through joint endeavors in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of South East Asian Nations and to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries in the region. India's relations with ASEAN countries began when India attained Independence but it was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that these relations improved. The North-Eastern region of India lies in such a strategic location that it can act as a key player in the 'Act East Policy' of India by collaborating with ASEAN, which will be vital for the economic development of the region. Act East Policy holds a prime place in India's new proactive policy, as it is meant to boost commerce, connectivity, and cultural ties with ASEAN. Myanmar is the only ASEAN nation to share a land boundary with India showing*

---

\* Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Williamnagar Government College, Williamnagar: Meghalaya

*both the regions' critical importance in India's foreign policy. The trade between India and ASEAN is mostly in manufacturing products and is restrictive towards agricultural products. For developing better business ties between ASEAN and North East, a priority should be placed on upgrading the economic corridors. The trade groups in India, especially in the North Eastern region have shown keen interest in reopening this strategic roadway because of its enormous economic potential. Besides airways and railways can be good ways to connect to the neighbouring countries of the region. Tracing the cultural linkages between people of the North Eastern Region and ASEAN, Issues in sub-regional economic cooperation, expansion of Markets, the establishment of the cross-border value chain, and promotion of sub-regional cooperation among the ASEAN members are the main themes of the study.*

**Keywords:** Relation, Act East Policy, Treaty, Business, Border, Foreign Policy, Look East Policy.

## Introduction

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok by the five founder countries- Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The ASEAN region today has a population of about 500 million and a total area of 4.5 million square kilometers with ten member countries viz. Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia. The aims and objectives of the association are as follows:

- i. to accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through joint endeavors in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of South East Asian Nations;
- ii. to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries in the region.

The principles of the association are mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations, the right of every state to lead its national existence free from external interference, settlement of

disputes by peaceful means, renunciation of the threat or use of force and effective cooperation among nations<sup>1</sup>.

North Eastern Region covers Seven Sisters of India: Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Tripura, Assam, Manipur, and Mizoram covering a huge area of 55 ,2, and 511 square kilometers. These states have been attracting young travelers and explorers from ASEAN countries for its different tribal and ethnic groups, religions, festivals, and fabulous landscapes. The 'Seven Sisters' of India have vast religious, ethnic, and cultural diversities and have rich, assorted, and interesting tribal cultures and traditions. The Northeastern region has an estimated population of 45 million and is surrounded by around 4500 km of the international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal. The region possesses immense potential in India's relations with South Asian countries and organizations such as ASEAN.<sup>2</sup> It is connected to 'mainland' India by a 22 km wide link known as Siliguri Corridor (chicken's neck). The distinct geographic position, surrounding international borders and proximity to the ASEAN countries can help in transforming the Northeastern region into an economic corridor connecting the ASEAN countries with India.

India is a major partner of ASEAN and actively engages in the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Dialogue Forum to enhance trade and cooperation with ASEAN countries. Northeast India can be a pivot in enhancing this engagement. About 2.81 billion people live in the areas which have a shared border between India and Southeast Asia. This is roughly 40% of the world population. With 98% of northeast India's periphery lying between South and Southeast Asia, the region has the potential to transform into the principal gateway to international trade, increasing the scope of trade between India and the ASEAN countries. Myanmar is the only ASEAN nation to share a land boundary with India showing both the regions' critical importance in India's foreign policy.

---

1 The European Parliament, Overview: Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004\\_2009/documents/fd/04\\_asean-generalin/04\\_asean-generalinfo.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/fd/04_asean-generalin/04_asean-generalinfo.pdf)

2 Job, T., (2024). "North-East India: A Gateway to South-East Asia" in International Journal of All Research Education and Scientific Methods, Vol. 12, Issue 2 February. pp. 423-432

The northeastern region of India lies in such a strategic location that it can act as a key player in the 'Act East Policy' of India by partnering with ASEAN which will be vital for the economic development all players involved. The Act East Policy holds a prime place in India's new proactive approach, as it is meant to boost commerce, connectivity, and cultural ties with ASEAN. The trade between India and ASEAN is mostly in manufacturing products and is restricted to agricultural products. For developing improved business ties between ASEAN and the northeast, a priority should be given on upgrading the vital economic corridors. Trade groups in India, especially in the northeastern region have shown keen interest in reopening the dormant strategic roadways because of their enormous economic potential. Development of airways and railways can be a good way to connect to the neighbouring countries of the region. The northeastern region has immense potential to grow and ties with the ASEAN countries can be beneficial if proper administrative support and border trade facilities are in place.<sup>3</sup>

### **India's Relations with ASEAN Countries**

To deepen the relations between India and ASEAN countries, India's Ministry of External Affairs, with cooperation from ASEAN nations took the initiative of organizing the India-ASEAN Car Rally. The proposal for the rally was first mooted by former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the ASEAN-India Summit in Bali, Indonesia to bring India closer to the South-East Asian group. The rally organized from time to time, aims to create relations among ASEAN countries.

The Narendra Modi regime gave priority to the neighbours and regions by adopting the Policy of Neighbourhood First. This was followed by the invitation to the SAARC countries in the oath ceremony of the Indian Prime Minister. The Indian establishment took a new turn by forging enhanced and strong ties with the countries of East and Southeast Asia with the adoption of the Act East Policy, replacing the Look East policy adopted during the regime of Narshimha Rao in the decade of nineties. India's Act East Policy focuses on the extended neighbourhood in the Asia-Pacific region. The policy which was originally conceived as an economic initiative, has gained political, strategic, and cultural dimensions including the establishment of institutional

---

3 Ibid. pp. 423-432



mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation. India has upgraded its relations to strategic partnerships with Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Australia, Singapore, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and forged close ties with all countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

### India's Northeast and Myanmar: An Analysis

India's relations and cultural linkages with Southeast Asia date back to antiquity. Culture is something that is not time bound and does not recognize borders. The easiest way for India and Myanmar to have a closer relationship is to cultivate cultural linkages including cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts. The culture of Myanmar was enriched by India. After the end of the Cold War India officially launched its 'Look East Policy' (LEP) in response to increased globalization and regionalization as well. In Myanmar, performances by Indian cultural troupes have been organized on a regular basis since 1997. The Myanmar Cultural Minister, U Sin Win visited India from January 24 to February 2, 2000, at the invitation of the Minister of Culture and Tourism. The two ministers signed the India-Myanmar Cultural Agreement, which would provide the framework for further cultural exchanges between the two countries. A bilateral cultural co-operation agreement was signed in 2001 and was followed up with a cultural exchange program, during 2004- 2006. Between November 28 and December 07, a 15-member cultural troupe from Myanmar visited India's northeastern region, particularly Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam. This was organized by the Union Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region in coordination with Indian Embassy at Yangon, the Myanmar Embassy in New Delhi, the Indian Council for ICP.

Cultural Relations (ICCR), the North Eastern Council (NEC), and the northeastern state governments.<sup>4</sup> Various cultural troupes have exchanged visits and performed in both countries in 2009-10. In November 2009, a 13-member student group from Myanmar attended SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) cultural festival in India.<sup>5</sup>

4 Ratna, K.C., & Mahapatra, S.K., (2013). "India and Myanmar: Exploring New Vista of Relationship", World Focus, vol. 34, No.10, P. 30.

5 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report, 2007-2008 <https://www.mea.gov.in>

In January 2010, the Embassy organized the annual 'Indian Film Festival' at Yangon. This event has become a highlight of the Yangon cultural calendar. A 15-member theater group from Myanmar went to participate in the South Asian Theater Festival organized by ICCR and NSD in March 2010. A *Quwalli* Group from India performed in Yangon and other cities in January 2011. A number of events were also organized in Yangon with the support of ICCR to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore during the year, including a dance drama, seminar, artist's camp, film festival, etc. All the events were very well received by the Myanmar public and media. Thus, it may be argued that cultural relations between India and Myanmar have stood the test of time. Furthermore, India's Buddhist heritage binds the people of the two countries. Minister of External Affairs Shri Salman Khurshid visited Myanmar from 14-16 December 2012. He inaugurated the International Conference on Buddhist Cultural Heritage, which was jointly organized by India and Myanmar. The External Affairs Minister also unveiled the 16-foot replica of the Sarnath Buddha statue gifted by the people and government of India and installed in the precincts of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. He then opened an exhibition on Buddhist cultural Heritage. After the end of Cold -War, New Delhi has seen Myanmar as an important 'land-bridge' on its path to the consolidation of ties with East and Southeast Asia. Myanmar thus fits very well into India's regional plans.<sup>6</sup>

First, it improves sub-regional economic cooperation among the members. Relations between India and Myanmar have been growing during the past few years with cooperation in all sectors, particularly in those of trade and commerce. Myanmar's economy is primarily agricultural, with agricultural activity employing nearly two-thirds of the population and contributing about 45 percent of the total GDP. The main export commodities comprise agricultural, marine, and forest products, minerals, and gems. Myanmar imports mainly consumer goods and raw materials and capital goods for industrial use. Myanmar, a member of ASEAN, has become a major link between India and ASEAN countries. In this regard, India's northeastern region, particularly Manipur ought to become the center of thriving and

---

6 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report, 2008-2009 <https://www.mea.gov.in>

integrated economic space linking two dynamic regions with a network of highways, railways, pipelines, and transmission lines crisscrossing the region.<sup>7</sup> The Indian government is giving a renewed push to road connectivity with Southeast Asia. The India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) highway starts from Moreh in Manipur on the India-Myanmar border and runs via Tamu (Myanmar) to Mae-Sot in Thailand. The project will require about 78 km of new roads and the upgrading of existing 400 km of roads. In Phase 1, India has the responsibility of building 78 km of missing links, upgrading 58 km of existing roads, and possibly improving a further 132 km. Thailand has taken on the responsibility of upgrading a total of 192 km in this phase and another 100 km under Phase 2. The idea of the trilateral highway was conceived at the Trilateral Ministerial Meeting on Transport Linkages in Yangon in April 2002. The 1,360-km IMT highway was initially scheduled to be completed by 2015 and extended to 2020 According to an official from India's MEA.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from bilateral relations, India is also engaging Myanmar through ASEAN and BIMSTEC. India's engagement with Myanmar through ASEAN began in 1997 when it was admitted as its full dialogue partner and in the same year Myanmar became its full member. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) set up in 1997 and one on which the Modi government has put a lot of emphasis is another important forum through which India is actively engaged with Myanmar. Fearful of sanctions from European Union and the United States, Myanmar wants to develop close relations with India for economic reasons. India is one of Myanmar's major trading partners and the fourth-largest market for its goods. Bilateral trade between India and Myanmar has grown nearly eight-fold in recent years. India's policy of engagement with Myanmar has furthered India's foreign policy objectives in a significant way. India has responded promptly and effectively to assist Myanmar in humanitarian relief operations following natural calamities like Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the earthquake in Shan State in 2010, and Cyclone Komen in 2015. It is expected that relations between the two countries

7 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report, 2009-2010 <https://www.mea.gov.in>

8 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report, 2011-2012 <https://www.mea.gov.in>

will continue to improve during 2017 and beyond in spite of regional and sub-regional developments.<sup>9</sup>

India's northeastern region is one of the pockets that do not seem to have profited in the changed economic environment. In other words, trade across the Indo-Myanmar border is perceived as not merely a two-country affair but a medium for closer economic ties even with counties to the east and southeast of Myanmar. India's northeast is among the most endowed states in terms of natural resources, including several critical minerals that it possesses, and has substantial potential for generating one of the preferred low-carbon forms of energy, viz. hydroelectricity. Besides, it sits at the doorstep of East Asia, the region with which India is increasing its economic ties.

The region is unique in terms of the opportunities it offers. While it is an industrial desert where almost all immediate consumables are imported from outside the region, the Northeast is the focal point of trade within a vast area. There is a need to plug into the growing trade with ASEAN countries particularly in items such as bamboo and wood products, ores and rubber products, horticulture, etc. At the same time, it is imperative to integrate IT facilities in promoting infrastructure for trade with the ASEAN countries. There is an urgent need to promote interaction with neighbouring countries for the enhancement of cross-border trade and investment.<sup>10</sup>

The progress of the Indo-Myanmar border trade is slow and is carried out in goods domestically produced in India. The informal trade between Myanmar and India through Moreh takes place in goods both domestically produced in Myanmar and goods originating in third countries such as China, Korea, Japan, etc. Various forms of restrictions in the border trade, law and order situations and multiple check-posts on the national highway are impeding the progress of border trade. It may also be worth noting that border trade between India and Myanmar has created a large number of employment opportunities among the economically active people living on both sides of the border as well as in different parts of Manipur

Secondly, it improves the role of the provincial governments in forging sub-regional cooperation. In a bid to increase the

9 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report, 2015-2016 <https://www.mea.gov.in>

10 Ibid <https://www.mea.gov.in>

trade volume between India and Southeast Asian countries, the Ministry of DoNER and the Government of Manipur has come up with a proposal of setting up 'Border Haats' (border markets for cross border exchange of goods.) viz. Kongkan Thana in Ukhrul district of Manipur and Aungci of Myanmar; New Somtal of Chandel in India and Thenjen of Myanmar and Behiang district of India and Khenman of Myanmar.<sup>11</sup>

Third, it improves the role of the market in forging sub-regional cooperation. India is the largest market for Myanmar's exports. India is Myanmar's 4<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner after Thailand, China, and Singapore, and its second-largest export market after Thailand, absorbing 25 percent of its total exports. India is also the seventh most important source of Myanmar's imports. The Indian government has air, land, and sea routes to strengthen extensive trade links with Myanmar and establish a gas pipeline. While the involvement of India's private sector has been minimal, both governments are proceeding to enhance cooperation in agriculture, telecommunications, information technology, steel, oil, natural gas, hydrocarbons, and food processing. The bilateral border trade agreement of 1994 provides for border trade to be carried out from three designated border points in India's northeastern region, one each in Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland. India's northeastern states and Myanmar should be the main target markets of many products manufactured in the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) to once again make India's northeastern states and northern Myanmar a natural economic zone, which they historically were, providing a sustainable economic lifeline to the northeastern states.

However, this would require enormous fast-paced infrastructure development on the Indian side of the border with Myanmar. On February 13, 2001, India and Burma inaugurated a major 160-kilometer highway, called the Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road, built mainly by the Indian Army Border Roads Organization and aimed at providing a major strategic and commercial transport route connecting South Asia and Southeast Asia. It was termed a significant event in view of India and Myanmar sharing a 1643 kilometer long common border along India's four states- Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland

11 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report, 2016-2017 <https://www.mea.gov.in>

and Arunachal Pradesh. The strategic importance of Myanmar in the Indian Ocean and adjoining littoral states has made India initiate active naval cooperation with Myanmar. In recent times, India and Myanmar naval cooperation is growing and forging ahead.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of trade relations, India's imports from Myanmar are primarily agricultural and forest-based products (especially beans and pulses) and the main exports to Myanmar are primary and semi-finished steel and pharmaceuticals. The balance of trade is heavily in favour of Myanmar. India is engaged in several river and land-based projects in Myanmar. The India-Myanmar gas pipeline project is another area where India is deeply involved in Myanmar. India recently signed three important agreements with Myanmar, comprising of exploration of natural gas, satellite-based remote sensing, and promotion of Buddhist studies in Myanmar. New Delhi is also looking for cooperation with Myanmar in IT, automobile, textiles, and agro-based industries. In this regard, the lack of memorandums of understanding between the designated banks on both sides, the restriction imposed on exports as well as on items in barter trade, and cross-border insurgency are being cited as major obstacles in two-way trade. As of now, only 22 items are allowed to be exported and imported under the free trade agreement signed between India and Myanmar. They include mustard seeds, pulses and beans, fresh vegetables, fruits, and soya beans. On the other hand, India exports textiles, shoes, medicines, woolen, and engineering goods to Myanmar. These items have significant consumer demand in Myanmar. Major issues of concern to both countries are cross-border insurgency, narcotics trade, border posts, border fencing border trade and. On cross-border militancy, while India faces insurgency problems in its northeastern states of Nagaland, Manipur, and parts of Mizoram across the Myanmar borders, Myanmar to faces an insurgency from Naga (Khaplang group) from the Indian side. In this regard, both armies have agreed to strengthen the mechanism to exchange intelligence along the international border to check cross-border crimes. India and Myanmar are considering a series of initiatives for the expansion of border trade between the two countries. India has given its approval for the signing of a proposed agreement with Myanmar for the avoidance of

---

12 Ibid <https://www.mea.gov.in>

double taxation and the prevention of fiscal evasion with respect to Income taxes.<sup>13</sup>

There are three key factors that are compelling India to develop a proactive relation with Myanmar. First, the 'Act East Policy' is to reach out to the broader ASEAN group; second, a coordinated effort is being made with Myanmar to develop its northeast region that has been neglected over the decades and; third, India is evolving a strategic policy for managing Chinese influence over Myanmar. Under India's Act East Policy, the trilateral highway between India, Myanmar, and Thailand plays a major role in reaching out to the Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia and Singapore. So is the Trans-Asian railway that is being planned to connect New Delhi with Hanoi in Vietnam. A deep economic relationship with Myanmar in India's view would give a tremendous boost to the development of its northeast region. The planned infrastructure development of roads, rail, and waterways are all steps in this direction.

Fourth, it improves the scope for the establishment of a cross-border value chain. India has opened two immigration check posts along the borders with Myanmar, a reflection of its growing closeness with the eastern neighbours. The first Border Trade Agreement was signed in Delhi in January 1994 and was implemented in April 1995 with the opening of a cross-border point between Moreh (Manipur, India) and Tamu (Sagaing Division, Myanmar). Subsequently, both governments agreed to open four checks posts which will help in checking the border trade and making it official, curb the illegal trade of goods and monitor the activities of various insurgent groups between India and Myanmar. In a gazette notification, the home ministry said the central government has designated Zorinpui land check post in Lawngtlai district of Mizoram as an authorized immigration check post for entry into or exit from India with valid travel documents for all classes of passengers to or from Myanmar. In a separate notification, the ministry said the central government designated Kawrpuchhuah land check post in Lunglei district of Mizoram as an authorized immigration check post for entry into or exit from India with valid travel documents for all classes of passengers to Myanmar. Zorinpui was selected for a new land custom station along the Indo-Myanmar Border in Mizoram for

13 Chetty, A.L., (2010). "India -Myanmar Relations Growing Engagement", World Focus, Vol.6, No.7, p. 454.



the Kaladan multi-modal project. The remote Zorinpui is 287 km away from Sittwe Port in Myanmar. An agreement on Zorinpui was included in the joint statement issued during the visit of then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Myanmar in May 2012. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Myanmar for two days from September 5, and 6, 2017, the first bilateral visit to the neighbouring country. India shares a 1,643-km-long border with Myanmar which touches Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram.<sup>14</sup>

Fifth, it improves the status and role of physical connectivity for the promotion of sub-regional cooperation. India-Myanmar relation is deeply rooted after Burma's independence from Great Britain in 1948. For many years, Indo-Burmese relations were on a firm footing due to cultural links, flourishing commerce, mutuality of interests in regional affairs, and the presence of a vibrant Indian community in Burma. The Indo-Myanmar relations from 1948 to 1952 could be considered friendly and cordial when Myanmar became independent, with good rapport between Prime Minister Nehru and Prime Leader U Nu, and like India, Myanmar was a member of the non-aligned movement. The relationship turned frosty from 1962 to 1988 under General Ne Win, as Burma chose a policy of isolationism, expelled ethnic Indians, refused to be in the Commonwealth of Nations, and withdrew from NAM. Since 1988 till today, primarily due to India adopting a more realistic and pragmatic policy toward Burma, the relationship has overall been on the upswing.<sup>15</sup>

However, India- Myanmar relations once again deteriorated in 1995, when New Delhi conferred the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for promoting international understanding on Aung San Suu Kyi, the high-profile Burmese dissenting leader. To keep the momentum high, India- Myanmar foreign secretary meeting was held in Yangon in August 2000. The two countries agreed to strengthen the infrastructure and step up border security to promote border trade. The two countries signed a protocol to establish regular bilateral ministerial consultations and agreed to cooperate in projects related to infrastructure development,

14 Lall, M., (2006) "Indo- Myanmar Relations in the Era of Pipeline Diplomacy, Contemporary Southeast Asia", *A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* vol.28, No. 3 pp. 424-426.

15 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Annual Report, 2005-2006 <https://www.mea.gov.in>



energy supply, and information technology. India and Myanmar are leading members of the Bay of Bengal Initiatives for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) with Myanmar being the lead country for the energy sector. Since its inception in 2000, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, along with other member countries such as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, Myanmar assists India in nurturing and expanding its influence and ties amongst Southeast Asian nations in various ways. The Forum on Regional Economic Cooperation among Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) has provided scope for increased regional integration among India's neighbors toward greater economic prosperity. Myanmar is being increasingly viewed as a gateway to India's 'Act East' policy. India is making all concerted efforts to strengthen its relationship with Myanmar to achieve its stated objective. Indo-Myanmar relationship as a result is witnessing an unprecedented upswing in the recent years.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

The ASEAN was able to accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through joint endeavours in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of South East Asian Nations and to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries in the region. The people of the northeast region possess immense potential in India's relationship with South Asian countries as well as Southeast Asia. It is connected to mainland India by a 22 km wide link known as Siliguri Corridor (chicken neck). The distinct geographic position, surrounding international border, and proximity to the ASEAN countries can help in transforming the Northeastern Region into an economic corridor connecting the ASEAN countries. The ASEAN members have benefited the people of the Northeast Region in the cultural linkages, economic cooperation, cross-border issue etc.

---

16 Kumar, P., (2013) "India- Myanmar Economic Relations: A Road to Heal the Political Relations", *World Focus*, vol. 34. (No. 10), p. 20

## References

- ASEAN. n.d. *The Founding of ASEAN*. <https://asean.org/the-founding-of-asean/>.
- Chetty, A. Lakshamana. 2010. "India –Myanmar Relations Growing Engagement." *World Focus* 6 (7): 454.
- Kumar, Pramod. 2013. "India- Myanmar Economic Relations: A Road to Heal the Political Relations." *World Focus* 34 (10): 20.
- Lall, Morie. 2006. "Indo- Myanmar Relations in the Era of Pipeline Diplomacy, Contemporary Southeast Asia", A vol.28, No. 3 pp. 424-426." *Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 28 (3): 424-426.
- Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. n.d. *Annual Report: 2001-2002*. <https://www.mea.gov.in> .
- MOSPI; Government of India. n.d. *Annual Report: 2002-2003* . <https://mospi.gov.in>.
- Ratna, Keshab Chandra, and Sushanta Kumar Mahapatra. 2013. "India and Myanmar: Exploring New Vista of Relationship." *World Focus* 34 (10): 30.
- . 2013. "India and Myanmar: Exploring New Vista of Relationship." *World Focus*, 30.
- Tasung, Job. 2024. "North-East India: A Gateway to South-East Asia." *International Journal of All Research Education and Scientific Methods* 12 (2): 423-432.

# 5

## **Immigration, Land Rights and Identity: The Development from Class Identity to Ethnic Identity in the Assam Valley**

*Ayan Das\**

### **Abstract**

*The Assam valley is a region located between the hill ranges of the eastern Himalayan range of Assam, in north-eastern India. After occupying this region, the colonial state wanted to generate more revenue for its economic interest. As a part of this, the colonial administration accused traditional practice of shifting cultivation of tribal people for the abundance of wastelands in the Assam Valley. Throughout the nineteenth century, due to the pressure of the land revenue policy of the colonial government, tribal people gradually shifted to sedentary agriculture. However, due to the abundance of wastelands in the Assam Valley, the colonial administration encouraged the immigration of landless peasants from Eastern Bengal. This not only led to massive demographic change but posed a threat to the land rights of the tribal population. In this context, tribal people and Immigrant peasants faced against each other for their land rights. While tribal people wanted to protect their land for their livelihood, in contrast, Immigrant peasants were eager to gain more land for their economic interest. This confrontation over economic interest led to the formation of the class identity of both communities, which ultimately developed the ethnic identity. This formation of ethnic identity also influenced the political*

---

\* Ph.D. Scholar, Department of History, Vidyasagar University, West Bengal

*arena of Assam Valley during the colonial and post-colonial periods. In this article, this process is focused on detail.*

**Keywords:** *Wastelands, Shifting Cultivation, Immigration, Land Rights, Class Interest, Ethnic Identity.*

## **Introduction**

During the colonial period, the local administration of the Assam Valley introduced a new land revenue collection and proprietorship system, which gradually changed the socio-economic scenario of the Assam Valley. In this context, agriculture became the major occupation of the inhabitants of the valley including Plain Tribes, which made agrarian land as valuable to them for their livelihoods. However, due to the abundance of cultivable wastelands in the sparsely populated region, the colonial administration encouraged immigration into the valley, which brought the immigrant agricultural population to this region. This situation not only impacted the demography but also the issue of land rights, which led to the confrontation between immigrants and the Indigenous population. The conflict over land between the Indigenous and Immigrant populations developed their class identity, which shaped their ethnic identity and also influenced politics during both the colonial and post-colonial periods. This article discusses the issue of rights over land and the formation of class identity. Besides, the development of ethnic identity as the result of this process and its effect on the political scenario are focused on. In this article, the condition of Immigrant Bengali Muslim peasants and the Plain Tribal community is chosen to discuss the overall scenario.

## **Research Questions**

This article raises several questions. The first question is how colonial land policy shaped the demographic patterns of the Assam Valley and the socio-economic position of different communities. The second question is how this socioeconomic interest shaped the class identity, which developed into the ethnic identity of Immigrant peasants and the Plain Tribal population. The third question is how this identity formation impacted the political scenario of the Assam Valley. The fourth question focuses on the role of ethnic-cum-class identity in the relationship between several communities. This paper will delve into answering these questions as part of the discussion.

## Background of Change

Before discussing the overall scenario, it is necessary to focus on the background and intention of the colonial administration's introduction of the land revenue policy. While the British East India Company occupied Assam Valley in 1826, this region was devastated due to the Burmese invasion<sup>1</sup>. So, it became the obligatory task of the colonial administration to revive the production sector for its economic interest. The colonial administration introduced the *Ryotwari* or *Mouzarawaree* system of land revenue collection by replacing the previous *Khel* system. Under this new land revenue system, the land was considered the subject under the personal proprietorship. In this context, besides *Rupit* i.e. agrarian land, *Basti* or homestead and *Faringati* i.e. higher land included under taxation<sup>2</sup>. With the introduction of this policy, the colonial state wanted to include more land under wet rice cultivation to increase tax collection. In this context, it can be noted that the colonial state was influenced by the Labour Theory of Property of English philosopher John Locke and the viewpoint of Malthus, which advocated the right of personal property and the establishment of private proprietorship over landed property to expand cultivation for develop agrarian production. These theories influenced the colonial administration's approach to land use in the Indian Subcontinent<sup>3</sup>. However, despite these initiatives, there was an abundance of cultivable wastelands in the Assam Valley during the early days of colonial rule, which was also depicted in the Mill's report of 1853. As a result, Mill advocated granting wastelands for cultivation in his report, reflecting the mercantilist approach of the colonial administration of land use<sup>4</sup>. This attitude of the colonial state made the pave of the mentioned process in the later period.

- 
- 1 Wilcox, Lieutenant R. (1832). Memoir of a Survey of Assam and the Neighbouring Countries, Executed in 1525-6-7-8, *Asiatic Researchers*, Volume 17, pp.314-469
  - 2 Letter No.76 ½, 13th November 1849, in Selections from The Records of the Bengal Government: Volume XI; pp.60-67
  - 3 Locke, J. (1823). *Two Treatises of Government: In the Former, The False Principles and Foundation of Sir Robert Filmer, and His Followers, Are Detected and Overthrown: The Latter, Is an Essay Concerning the Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government*, London.
  - 4 Mills, A.J. Moffatt. (1984). Report on *The Province of Assam*, Guwahati, Publication Board, Assam, pp.15-16

## The Practice of Shifting Cultivation

From the early days of the colonial rule, the administrators of the Assam valley were eager to expand sedentary cultivation in pursuit of their own economic interests. Several tribes of the valley including Bodo, Rabha and Lalung practiced shifting cultivation and engaged in dry rice cultivation. One may find a mention of this in Mills' report of 1853. Additionally, in Hodgson's 1847 writing, the Bodo people of the Assam valley are described as erratic cultivators engaged in shifting cultivation during the mid-nineteenth century. Besides that, Hodgson indicates the absence of the concept of private proprietorship over the landed property among the Bodo people of the Assam Valley in his writing<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, similar conditions of different tribes of the Assam valley like Rabha, Lalung and Mikir are also described during this time<sup>6</sup> by other early colonial writers such as William Robinson and Haliram Dhekial Phukan,

## Impact of Colonial Policy

The colonial administrators seem to have regarded the practice of shifting cultivation as one of the main reasons behind the abundance of wastelands in the Assam valley<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, as a part of the policy of discouraging the traditional practice of shifting cultivation of tribal people for their own economic interests, the colonial administrators imposed taxation on the tribal people at a personal level. As a result, imposing taxation on higher land i.e. *Faringati* became an important instrument for colonial administration, through which it included more land under the sedentary wet rice cultivation. In most cases, tribal people practiced dry rice cultivation on the higher land as part of shifting cultivation. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's letter to Mills in 1853 also shows that the level of taxation on the settled peasants of the Assam valley was also very high. Besides that, it is also noteworthy that the colonial policy of collecting taxes

5 Hodgson, B.H. (1847). *Essays the First; On the Kooch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes*, Calcutta, Baptist Mission Press, p.154

6 Robinson, W. (1841). *A Descriptive Account of Asam, Gowhatti, Gowhatti Government Seminary*

7 See: *The Colonization of Waste-lands in Assam: Being a Reprint of the Official Correspondence Between the Government of India and the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Together with Comments and Criticisms on the Scheme and Its Reception by the Government of India*, Calcutta, The Indian Daily News Office, 1899.

in cash created a problem for the cash-strapped peasants of Assam valley. This led them to start cultivating other cash crops besides rice. In this case, opium became the most lucrative crop for the peasants of the valley, including the tribals<sup>8</sup>. Due to the pressure of the colonial land revenue policy, peasants gradually associated with their land for paying taxes. Through this way, agricultural land under private ownership became an integral part of the rural society of the Assam Valley.

### **Continuation of Shifting Cultivation**

During the 1860s, most of the tribal people of the Assam valley associated with their traditional practice of shifting cultivation. According to Hunter's account, in 1879, while a section of the tribal population engaged with sedentary cultivation, the rest of them still practised shifting cultivation. For example, the Cachari i.e. the Bodo people of the Assam valley (Goalpara and Kamrup districts) have been described as purely agriculturists. Hunter observes that the Cachari peasants of these districts established agrarian settlements and cultivated rice and mustard. Additionally, they worked as seasonal labourers in the tea plantations in northern Assam and returned to their village during the winter, for rice cultivation. This is in contrast to the Cachari people of the Eastern Dooars, who were nomadic cultivators and still practised shifting cultivation. From this, it can be estimated that during this time, a section of tribal people lived in the wild and hilly terrain of the Assam valley and practised shifting cultivation<sup>9</sup>.

### **Impact of Forest Policy**

A major blow to the peasants' traditional practice of shifting cultivation came through the imposition of colonial forest policy during the late nineteenth century. It was here that the colonial administration began protecting the forests of the Assam valley, especially the *Sal* forests of the Goalpara and Kamrup districts to ensure a supply of high-quality timber for making railway track sleepers and the tea packaging industry<sup>10</sup>. This policy of

8 Guha, A. (1991). *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*, Calcutta, K.P. Bagchi & Co., pp.282-285

9 Hunter, W.W. (1879). *A Statistical Account of Assam: Volume Two*, London, Trubner and Company, pp.36-37, 117-119

10 Mann, G. (1875). *Progress report of forest administration in the province of Assam for the Year of 1874-75*, Shillong, Assam Secretariat Press, pp.74-80

the colonial administration went against the traditional practice of shifting cultivation of tribal people of the valley because they used fire to clear forests as part of their traditional practice of shifting cultivation. In this case, the colonial administration was against this practice since it was regarded as an obstacle to the protection of valuable trees of the forest tracts. Accordingly, in the Forest Administration report of Assam of 1874-75, concern is expressed about protecting valuable trees from fires caused by the jhum cultivation practised by tribal communities in the wild terrain. This concern is particularly directed towards the finest quality Sal trees found in the forests of Eastern Dooars<sup>11</sup>. As a result, the colonial administration started to convert open forests to state forests as depicted in the administrative reports of Assam of 1893-94 and 1896-97. Besides that, the colonial Forest Department took legal steps to protect forests from fire, mostly caused by the activities of local villagers<sup>12</sup>.

### Transformation of Livelihood

Various policies of the colonial administration led to a transformation of the tribal people of the Assam valley from nomadic cultivators to sedentary peasants. For example, in the writing of Sidney Endle, the Bodo people of the Assam Valley are described as permanent cultivators, who lived in rural settlements and each family owned a portion of agricultural land<sup>13</sup>. Similarly in the census report of 1891, it is reported that tribal communities like Rabha and Lalung also engaged in sedentary cultivation<sup>14</sup>. In particular, in the census reports of Assam of 1911 and 1921, it is noted that the Lalung people of the Nowgong district migrated from hilly terrain to riverine lowland and engaged in sedentary agriculture.<sup>15</sup> This shows the transformation of tribal people from nomadic cultivators

11 *Ibid.* pp.41-42

12 See: Report on Administration of Province of Assam for 1893-94; pp.78-80; Report on Administration of Province of Assam for 1896-97; pp.83-84

13 Endle, Rev. S. (1911). *The Kacharis*, London, Macmillan & Company Ltd., pp.13-20

14 See: *Census of India, 1891*; Assam: Volume I-Report; pp.221-234

15 Lloyd, G.T., (1923) *Census of India, 1921, Volume III: Assam, Part I-Report*, Shillong, Government Press, Assam; p.144; Mullan, C.S., (1932) *Census of India, 1931, Volume III: Assam, Part I-Report*, Shillong, Assam Government Press ; pp.221-222



to sedentary agriculturists, which indicates the nature of contemporary economic background of the Assam valley. In this context, it can be said due to the transformation of tribal people into sedentary peasants, they became more connected to their land, both financially and emotionally. Besides that, in several records, like the written account of Hunter and the census report of 1881, it has been reported that tribal peasants of the Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong districts worked as seasonal labourers in the tea plantation of Upper Assam and they returned to their village in winter, while the crop ripened<sup>16</sup>.

This shows that economic change in the Assam valley under the colonial regime opened few financial opportunities to the tribal people of this region. However, several challenges also emerged for the tribal peasants in this changing background. For example, several reports noted that tribal peasants borrowed money from local Marwari merchants to pay land revenue. They cultivated mustard as a part of the loan condition. The interest rate was one maund per rupee i.e., 37 per cent per annum, which was very high. Besides that, in the Goalpara district, where the Zamindari system was introduced for land revenue collection, tribal peasants faced financial exploitation from the Zamindars<sup>17</sup>. From this, it can be said that after engaging in the contemporary economic processes, tribal people faced several problems that threatened their social status. However, during the late nineteenth century, their land rights did not face any threat. Scholars such as Amalendu Guha argue that the market of land did not develop in the Assam valley during this time<sup>18</sup>. As a result, credit was generally extended on the standing crop or debtor's labour power instead of mortgage of land. However, it can be observed that after the change of their status in the new economic scenario, tribal peasants faced several challenges in the changing context, which became more severe in the later period.

---

16 Hunter, W.W. (1879). *A Statistical Account of Assam: Volume One*, London, Trubner and Company, p.35

17 Guha, A. (1984). *Socio-Economic Conditions of Goalpara District During the Zamindar Period*, (In Assamese: জমিদাৰকালীন গোৱালপাৰা জিলাৰ আৰ্থ-সামাজিক অৱস্থা), Bhabani Books, Guwahati, 1984, reprint 2019, pp.41-50

18 Guha, A. (1980). 'Assamese Agrarian Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: Roots, Structures and Trends', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Volume XVII, No.1, (1980); pp.35-94

### Abundance of Wastelands

It has been understood that there was an abundance of wastelands in the Assam valley. In the district gazetteer of the Goalpara district of 1905, it is noted that despite the engagement of local Bodo people in sedentary agriculture, there were abundant wastelands in Eastern Dooars<sup>19</sup>. Besides that, in administrative reports of Assam from 1892-93 to 1898-99, the abundance of wastelands in other districts of the Assam valley and leasing out of wastelands for special cultivation, especially tea cultivation is noted<sup>20</sup>. As a result, the colonial administration took the initiative to establish agrarian settlements in wastelands, especially in riverine lowlands for its economic interest. Several official reports note that the colonial administration took the initiative to establish settlements in the Assam Valley, including the Eastern Dooars, in the late nineteenth century<sup>21</sup>. During this time, the colonial administration considered the tribal population of the Chotanagpur region suitable for establishing agrarian settlements in the valley. Accordingly, they were brought into this region as tea plantation labourers. For example, in a memorandum dated the 24<sup>th</sup> of September 1898, the Chief Commissioner of Assam states that in the Goalpara district, the authorities established a colony for the Santhal people in 1880 under the directive of Sir Steuart Baylay to start cultivation in uncultivated lands. Within seventeen years, from 1896 to 1897, 4,867 bighas<sup>22</sup> of land had been cultivated by the Santhal settlers. In this memorandum, he further notes that some Bodo and Rabha individuals had established their residences and cultivated land within the Santhal colony. However, there was still an abundance of wastelands in the Assam valley, as reported in official reports<sup>23</sup>.

---

19 See: Assam District Gazetteers, Volume III: Goalpara; pp.32-33

20 See: Report on Administration of Province of Assam for 1892-93; pp.75-77; Report on Administration of Province of Assam for 1893-94; pp.37-38; Report on Administration of Province of Assam for 1896-97; pp.42-43; Report on Administration of Province of Assam for 1898-99; pp.72-74

21 Assam State Archive, Revenue Department, File No.248R of 1875; Assam State Archive, Revenue Department, Nos.108-132 of 1914

22 In this regard, 1 *bigha* is equal to 0.33 acre.

23 See: The Colonization of Waste-Lands in Assam, 1899, pp.42-47

## Call for Immigration

Under these circumstances, the colonial administration considered Muslim peasants of Eastern Bengal suitable for establishing agrarian settlements in the riverine lowlands of the Assam valley. For example, in the memorandum dated the 24<sup>th</sup> of September, 1898, the Chief Commissioner of Assam posited that Muslim peasants from Eastern Bengal, particularly those from Sylhet, were the most suitable candidates for establishing settlements in the region because of their ability to engage in cultivation in the riverine lowlands, which was already demonstrated in the Cachar valley and hilly regions of Tripura.<sup>24</sup> In this case, the emergence of jute as a lucrative cash crop in the Indian economy also played a major role. During the late nineteenth century, the demand for processed jute products experienced a notable surge, primarily driven by the packaging and military sectors. Against this background, Calcutta emerged as the epicentre of the jute industry, supplanting Dundee in the early twentieth century<sup>25</sup>. In the Calcutta-centric jute industry, the interest of the British investors was associated. So, the colonial government directed its attention towards wastelands, particularly riverine lowlands, as potential sites for expanding jute cultivation. Besides that, British investors and the merchant class were eager to establish agrarian settlements in the riverine lowlands of the Assam valley to expand jute cultivation. For example, during the meeting between the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and the Chief Commissioner of Assam on 29<sup>th</sup> of April 1897, the members of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce expressed their support for the establishment of agrarian settlements and the expansion of jute cultivation in the Brahmaputra Valley. Besides that, in this meeting, the Chief Commissioner opined that the riverine lowlands of the Nowgong district, which were wastelands during this time, were suitable for cultivating rice and jute<sup>26</sup>. So, for the financial interest of both the colonial state and British investors, the colonial administration encouraged the establishment of agrarian settlements in the riverine lowland of Assam Valley to expand jute cultivation. As a result, the colonial

24 The Colonization of Waste Lands in Assam, 1899, p.48

25 McLeod, C.C. (1916). 'The Indian Jute Industry', *Scientific American Supplement*, (September 30); pp.218-219

26 See: The Colonization of Waste Lands in Assam, 1899, pp.34-36

administration actively promoted the immigration of landless agrarian labourers from Eastern Bengal into the Brahmaputra valley, as they possessed valuable expertise in jute cultivation.

### **Immigration of Landless Peasants**

From the early decades of the twentieth century, landless peasants emigrated from Eastern Bengal to the Assam valley. They established their settlements in the riverine lowlands of the Assam valley, especially in Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong districts. From the 1910s, there was a gradual increase of immigrant peasants from Eastern Bengal in the Brahmaputra Valley<sup>27</sup>. In this context, influential local landholders of the Assam valley and Zamindars of the Goalpara district played a significant role in encouraging this immigration for their economic interests. The Marwari merchants also served as the primary source of capital for immigrant peasants to cultivate jute. The Land Revenue Report of the Assam Valley Division of 1922 shows that Muslim cultivators established their settlements in the riverbed region of the lower Assam valley and received financial help from such landowners and Zamindars of the Goalpara district for cultivation. The report specifically mentions the Raja of Gauripur and the estate of Bijni, who provided financial help to the peasants of the riverbed region during the flood of 1922<sup>28</sup>. This continuous immigration of landless peasants led to a gradual demographic change in Assam valley from the 1920s<sup>29</sup>. In the census report of 1931, demographic change related to the massive immigration of peasants was reported and concern was expressed about the socio-cultural scenario of the Assam valley due to demographic shift<sup>30</sup>. Under such circumstances, the right over agricultural land became the major issue in the politics and society of the Assam valley.

---

27 *Report on The Land Revenue Administration of the Assam Valley Division For The Year 1921-22*, Shillong, Assam Secretariat Press, 1922, pp.4-5

28 *Report on The Land Revenue Administration of the Assam Valley Division For The Year 1922-23*; Shillong, Assam Secretariat Press, 1923, pp.2-4

29 Desai, S.P. (1930). *Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of the Kamrup District, 1928*, Shillong, Assam Government Press, pp.7-16

30 Mullan, C.S. (1932). *Census of India, 1931, Volume III: Assam, Part I-Report*, Shillong, Assam Government Press, pp. 44-45

## Threat to Land Rights of Tribal Population

Land rights became an important issue for the tribal people of the Assam valley because it was intrinsically associated with their livelihood. During this time, tribal people became solely sedentary cultivators, who lived in permanent rural settlements and associated with their agricultural land. But, along with this newly developed status, tribal peasants faced several economic challenges like oppression from local zamindars and financial exploitation from Marwari merchants. In the Goalpara district, where the Zamindari system was introduced for land revenue collection, tribal peasants faced financial exploitation. For example, in a petition dated the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1913, filed by the Mech and Rabha tenants of the Parbartijor estate of Goalpara district, complaints were made about estate mismanagement and extortion by zamindars. In this petition, they complained that different illegal cess or *abwabs* were imposed on tribal peasants of this estate. Despite acknowledging the mismanagement, the district administration failed to address the tenants' issues<sup>31</sup>. This indicates the plight of tribal peasants in the Goalpara district, who transitioned to sedentary cultivation. Notably, one of the signatories of this petition was Kalicharan Brahma, known as the father of the Bodo identity. In other districts of the Assam valley, the tribals faced mistreatment from the colonial administration and mauzadars. For example, in a petition dated the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 1925, some Mech community members appealed to the deputy commissioner of the Kamrup district regarding the exclusion of their ancestral lands from the Barapeta reserve under the Kamrup district<sup>32</sup>. Similarly, another official report of 1939 noted that local mauzadar established immigrant peasants in the tribal-inhabited region to gain more revenue<sup>33</sup>. From this, it can be understood that in the new economic system, tribal peasants

31 See: Assam State Archive, Revenue Department, File No.483-491 of 1913, Petition from Kalicharan Brahman and the raiyats of Karipara pargana, parbatijor, Goalpara alleged illegal and exorbitant exactions by the zamindars and praying for fixing a uniform rate within the pargana and subsequent withdrawal of the said allegation.

32 See: Assam State Archive, Revenue Department, File No.10/25 of 1925, Ama Mech & other of Barpeta district Kamrup

33 See: Assam State Archive, Revenue Department, File No.4509R of 1939, Petition filled by C.R. Boro for protection of Kacharies against the immigrants.

faced financial exploitation and their rights over ancestral land came under threat. But, the major challenge to the land rights of tribal peasants originated from the demographic change due to massive immigration. The large-scale immigration of landless peasants from Eastern Bengal to Assam valley, supported by the colonial administration for economic reasons, significantly altered the demographic landscape of the region. This influx also created challenges to the land rights of the indigenous population in the region. In several records, the conflicts between indigenous and immigrant peasants over land rights have been noted<sup>34</sup>. As a result of such conflicts, tribal people feared losing their ancestral land to immigrant peasants. Besides that, Marwari merchants became a threat to the land rights of tribal peasants. In several records, it is noted that due to indebtedness, tribal peasants lost their land to Marwari moneylenders and these moneylenders eventually emerged as landowners in rural Assam. In most cases, these moneylenders sold these lands to immigrant peasants, which led to the transfer of tribal people's ancestral land to immigrant peasants<sup>35</sup>. This created fear of losing land among the tribal people. As a result, they began to organise around land rights.

### Condition of Immigrant Peasants

On the other hand, migrant peasants, who migrated from eastern Bengal, also demanded more land to establish settlements. These peasants were mostly landless agricultural labourers, and their livelihoods evolved with agriculture. They primarily established agrarian settlements in the riverine lowlands of the Goalpara and Kamrup districts. However, due to regular floods, many of them established their settlements on higher land, which created the background of the tussle with the indigenous population.<sup>36</sup> While most worked as sharecroppers or agricultural labourers under big landowners, some emerged as big landowners who owned huge amounts of agricultural land. In official reports, it is

34 See: Assam State Archive, Revenue Department File No.IV-351/40 of 1940, Petition from Srijut Narendra Brahma and others of certain villages in 5th circle side in the matter of maintenance of a line between immigrants and themselves in the locality Goalpara.

35 See: Assam State Archive, Revenue Department, File No.IV-319/40 of 1940, IV-319/40 Sale of land by Marwaris to Mymensing in the west side of Tezpur in Naharbari Mouza.

36 See: Report on The Land Revenue Administration of the Assam Valley Division For The Year 1921-22, (1922); pp.2-4

mentioned that landless labourers also worked as sharecroppers under the big landowners from the immigrant background and even these landowners lent money to immigrant peasants. As a result, big landowners from the immigrant community became powerful in the agricultural economy of the Assam valley, especially in lower Assam<sup>37</sup>. However, despite economic exploitation, the influential landowners became natural leaders to the landless peasants of their community. Due to the economic conditions in their homeland, immigrant peasants migrated from eastern Bengal to the Assam valley in search of fertile land and established settlements to sustain their agriculture-based livelihoods. However, massive immigration and regular floods in riverine lowlands created problems for a large section of the immigrant peasants to gain suitable land for agriculture. As a result, they sought more fertile lowlands for their livelihood. They also travelled to areas in the interior of the Assam valley to search for fertile wasteland as depicted in the census report of 1931<sup>38</sup>.

### **Conflict over Livelihood**

The issue of livelihood, which was related to land rights, led to conflict between immigrant peasants and the indigenous population, especially the tribal people. During this time, the tribals emerged as sedentary cultivators, who engaged in the cultivation of several crops like rice and mustard. On the other hand, immigrant peasants from eastern Bengal, mostly landless peasants, formed an agricultural community in the Assam valley. They were experts in cultivating rice and jute in riverine lowlands and played a major role in expanding agricultural activities and the development of agricultural production in the Assam valley. However, the right of occupation over land became an issue of conflict between the two communities. While tribal peasants wanted to protect their land for their livelihood, in contrast, immigrant peasants were eager to gain more land for economic interest. In this context, it is necessary to note that despite both groups belonging to the same social class in the contemporary socio-economic hierarchy, they confronted each other over their livelihoods. Most tribal people were small-

37 Debates of the Assam Legislative Council 1926 (February-March Session), Volume VI, No.2, Shillong, Assam Secretariat Printing Press, 1927

38 Mullan, C.S. (1932). *Census of India, 1931, Volume III: Assam, Part I-Report*, Shillong, Assam Government Press, pp.50-53

scale peasants, while most immigrant peasants were landless agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, or small farmers. Despite their similar economic conditions, land rights became a key issue in defining the relationship between the two communities. The economic interest including land rights consolidated both groups as the class, which helped to form the class identity of both groups in the changing circumstances.

### **From Class Identity to Ethnic Identity**

The continuous demographic change in the Assam valley led to conflict over land rights and there were growing allegations against immigrant peasants for encroaching the land of the indigenous population. In this context, the colonial administration introduced the line system in the Assam valley in 1920 to stop this conflict and protect the land of the indigenous population<sup>39</sup>. However, this step did not satisfy any group. While immigrant peasants demanded to remove the line system, in contrast, indigenous people, including tribals of the plain lands wanted to restrict immigration to protect their ancestral land. During this time, growing indebtedness among tribal peasants and losing their land to Marwari moneylenders made the overall scenario more severe. In this situation, official reports indicated the handover of the land of indebted tribal peasants to immigrant peasants through Marwari merchants, which made tribal people more dissatisfied<sup>40</sup>.

The tribal peasants appealed to the administration to protect their land. Realising the importance of the situation, the colonial administration issued restrictions on the handover of agricultural land owned by the tribal population, especially in the tribal-inhabited region of the Assam valley<sup>41</sup>. However, the situation remained unchanged. In this background, the conflict over land rights was gradually associated with ethnic identity. In this case, linguistic and religious divisions became important in the conflict scenario. In the Assam valley, all immigrant peasants from eastern Bengal were Bengali-speaking and eighty-five

39 Assam State Archive, Revenue Department, File No. I-143/28 of 1928, Question of lines between immigrant and Assamese and other questions; Assam Legislative Assembly Debates of 1941, (1942), Shillong, Assam Secretariat Printing Press; pp.1402-1404

40 Assam Archive Files, Revenue File No.51 of 1934

41 Assam Archive Files, Revenue File No.265-288 of 1929



percent were followers of Islam. In contrast, most tribal people followed animism during this time and every tribal community had their language and culture. For example, as per the Census of India 1931, the Bodo, who were one of the major tribes of the Assam valley, identified Bodo-Kachari as their mother tongue and followed their traditional cultural practices during this time.<sup>42</sup> Therefore it can be said that initially, economic interests helped in consolidating these groups as a class, and cultural differences including language and culture cemented this division further. This process ultimately led to the formation of ethnic identity, which was closely associated with class identity.

### **Formation of Political Activity of Tribal People**

Given these circumstances, the class interest of small peasants and agricultural labourers shaped the ethnic identity of both communities i.e. immigrant Bengali peasants and tribal people of the Assam valley. Both communities were eager to claim their rights over agricultural land, which also left impact on the formation of the political activity of these two communities. From the 1920s, the tribal people started to organise their political organisation. In 1929, a group of representatives from the Bodo people of Goalpara submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission regarding their several political and economic demands. In this memorandum, one of the major demands was protecting the ancestral land of the Bodo population of the Goalpara district<sup>43</sup>. Among these representatives, the most notable person was Kalicharan Brahma. However, besides Bodo, other tribal people also formed their organisations to raise their voices to protect their land rights. For example, in 1940, Sadau Lalung Sanmilani passed a resolution against the block system of settling immigrants in tribal areas<sup>44</sup>.

In this case, it is necessary to mention that Lalung were the most important tribal community of the Nowgong district and during the first half of the twentieth century, the community witnessed massive demographic changes due to large-scale immigration from East Bengal, in turn encouraged by the agricultural policy

42 Mullan, C.S., (1932), Census of India, 1931, Volume III: Assam, Part I-Report; pp.220-221

43 Memorandum dated 4th of January 1929 by the Bodo community of Goalpara district to the Simon Commission. Retrieved from ranchhai.blogspot.com

44 Assam Archive File, Revenue File No.IV-297/40 of 1940

of the colonial state<sup>45</sup>. As a result, it can be argued that due to the massive demographic change in the Nowgong district, the land rights of the Lalung people came under threat, which was reflected in this resolution. Other tribes such as Miri, Mikir and Deuri also formed their organisation as part of protecting their economic rights. As part of this process, the Tribal League was formed in 1933, which acted as the voice of the tribals residing in the plain areas of the Assam Valley. From the early days of the formation of the Tribal League, the organisation raised its voice to protect the economic rights of tribal people of this region<sup>46</sup>. In the assembly election of 1937, the Tribal League emerged victorious and assembly members from tribal communities like Rupnath Brahma and Rabi Chandra Kachari raised their voices to protect the rights of tribal people<sup>47</sup>.

### Political Consolidation of Immigrant Peasants

The immigrant peasants also began to organise politically, focusing on land rights. In this case, most of this community were landless agrarian labourers or small farmers. Therefore, it can be said that the economic interests of agricultural labourers and small peasants played important role to form the distinct identity of immigrant peasants, which is associated with religious and linguistic identity. To the immigrant peasants, their religious identity was closely associated with the economic interest of the peasantry<sup>48</sup>. In this scenario, their plan to acquire land remained unfulfilled due to the line system, and they also faced oppression from wealthy landowners and Marwari moneylenders<sup>49</sup>. Even while establishing agrarian settlements by clearing wastelands, they faced several life-threatening challenges like floods and attacks from wildlife. Despite all these

45 Mullan, C.S. (1932). Census of India, 1931, Volume III: Assam, Part I-Report, Shillong, Assam Government Press, pp.49-52

46 Pathak, S. (2010). 'Tribal Politics in the Assam, 1933-1947', Economic and Political Weekly, Volume 45, Number 10, 6 March, pp.61-69

47 Brief History of the First Session of the Assam Legislative Assembly, which began on 7 April 1937, Dispur, Assam Legislative Assembly Secretariat, 2015 (In Assamese: ১৯৩৭ চনৰ ৭ এপ্ৰিলৰ পৰা আৰম্ভ হোৱা অসম বিধানসভাৰ প্ৰথম অধিবেশনৰ চমু ইতিবৃত্ত, দিসপুৰ, অসম বিধানসভা সচিবালয়, ২০১৫)

48 Dutta, B. (2017). Pakistan Movement and Communalization of Peasants in Colonial Assam, *Vidyasagar University Journal of History*, Volume V, (2016-2017); pp: 107-118

49 Assam State Archive, Revenue File No. IV/59 of 1931

challenges, they played the most important role in expanding agricultural activities and developing agrarian production, especially rice and jute production in the Assam Valley<sup>50</sup>.

However, despite this, as their demands were not fulfilled, they began to organise based on their economic demand, and in this regard, they gradually associated with the Muslim League. Communal politics in the Assam valley started with the militant movement of immigrant Bengali peasants for land rights<sup>51</sup>. In the assembly election of 1937, several members were elected from the immigrant peasants community in several Mohammedan reserved seats of lower Assam. Among them, the most notable was Maulavi Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, who was vocal about the rights of the immigrant Bengali peasant community in the Assam Assembly. Besides that, other members including Matiur Rahman Mia and Abdur Rouf also expressed concern about the rights of Immigrant peasants in the assembly<sup>52</sup>.

### Politics over Land Rights

From the starting days of the Assam Assembly, the debate over the line system cleared the viewpoint of the tribal people and immigrant peasants. While elected tribal representatives such as Rupnath Brahma and Rabi Chandra Kachari supported the continuation of the line system to save the land rights of tribal people, in contrast, representatives from the immigrant peasant community including Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani and Matiur Rahman Mia demanded the removal of line system to open more wastelands for landless agricultural labourers<sup>53</sup>. It became clear that both groups wanted to secure the economic interests of their communities. However, this issue was not resolved. Rather, this confrontation became severe through the introduction of the 'Grow More Food' policy under the Saadulla-led Ministry, which indirectly opened more wastelands for Immigrant landless peasants to establish agrarian settlements<sup>54</sup>. Besides the Indian National Congress, this policy was also opposed by

50 See: Report on The Land Revenue Administration of the Assam Valley Division For The Year 1928-29; p.29

51 Dev, B. J. & Lahiri, D. K. (1985). Assam Muslims, Politics & Cohesions, Delhi, Mittal Publications, pp.23-28

52 Brief History of the First Session of the Assam Legislative Assembly, 7 April 1937, pp.9-10

53 See: *Assam Legislative Assembly Debates of 1937*

54 See: Assam Legislative Assembly Debates of 1942

tribal representatives of the assembly, despite the participation their representatives such as Rupnath Brahma in the Saadulla-led Ministry.<sup>55</sup>

This conflict over land rights gradually turned to communal confrontation. Immigrant peasants began to organise in support of the Muslim League's Pakistan resolution, based on establishing their right over the fertile wasteland, which further intensified communal tensions in the Assam valley<sup>56</sup>. While the Muslim League leaders such as Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani demanded to include Assam valley in Pakistan to secure the economic demands of immigrant peasants, tribal leaders like Rupnath Brahma opposed this to protect the land rights of tribal people. Against this backdrop, after independence and partition, Assam province excluding the Muslim-dominated Sylhet district was incorporated into India.<sup>57</sup>

### Post-Colonial Scenario

Despite its political domination in the political scenario of Assam valley, the Indian National Congress did not take any effective steps to solve the problem of the tribal people of this region. As a result, most of the tribal population gradually withdrew from supporting Congress and started to create their political organisation like the Plain Tribal Council of Assam in 1967<sup>58</sup>. On the other hand, despite being aware of the contempt towards them, the migrant farmers had no choice but to support the Congress for their safety for a long time<sup>59</sup>. Besides that, tension

55 Assam Legislative Assembly Debates of 1944, (1945), Shillong, Assam Secretariat Printing Press; pp. 841-844

56 Assam State Archive, Abstract of Intelligence Assam Police, 1944 and 1945, File No. 18 of 1944-45; pp.17-19; Assam State Archive, Abstract of Intelligence Assam Police, 1946 and 1947, File No. 14 of 1946-47; pp.16-25; National Archive of India, External Affairs Department, File No.39-NEF/47 of 1947, Report of a Clash between Police and immigrants near Barpeta Kamrup District, Assam

57 Goswami, P., (2012). *The History of Assam: From Yandabo to Partition, 1826-1947*, Hyderabad, Orient Blackswan Private Limited; pp.276-278; Nag, Sajal, (1990) *Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationality Question in North-East India*, New Delhi, Manohar Publications; pp.154-157

58 Dash, J. N. (1989). Udayachal Movement in Assam-Case of Socio-Political Identity for the Bodos, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Volume 50, No. 3, (July - September 1989); pp. 335-342

59 Nath, M. K. (2021). *The Muslim Question in Assam and Northeast India*, New York, Routledge, 2021, pp.59-64

related to land rights between immigrant Bengali peasants and tribal people continued after the independence, which led to bloody conflict between the two communities in later periods. This bloody conflict left a long-lasting impact on the politics and society of the Assam valley, which created a turbulent situation in its history after independence.

## Conclusion

It may be concluded that under the colonial regime, due to the pressure of land revenue policy, tribal people gradually shifted to sedentary agriculture. However, to fulfil economic interests, the colonial state encouraged the immigration of landless peasants from Eastern Bengal to the Assam Valley, which started conflict over land rights. This conflict over land rights developed the class identity of both Tribal people and Immigrant Peasants, which shaped their distinct ethnic identity. However, due to differences in ethnic identities, this conflict over land rights turned into an ethnic-cum-communal conflict, which gradually turned violent during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

## References

- Allen, B. C. 1906. *Assam District Gazetteers, Volume III: Goalpara*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Press.
- . 1902. *Census of India 1901, Volume IV, Assam: Part I-Report*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Press.
- Dash, Jitendra Narayan. 1989. "Udayachal Movement in Assam-Case of Socio-Political Identity for the Bodos." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 50 (3): 335-342.
- Desai, S. P. 1928. *Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of the Kamrup District*. Shillong: Assam Government Press.
- Dev, Bimal J., and Dilip K. Lahiri. 1985. *Assam Muslims, Politics & Cohesions, Delhi*. Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- Dutta, Binayak. 2016-2017. "Pakistan Movement and Communalization of Peasants in Colonial Assam." *Vidyasagar University Journal of History* 5: 107-118.
- Endley, Reverend Sidney. 1911. *The Kacharis*. London: Macmillan & Company Ltd.
- Gadgil, Madhav, and Ramachandra Guha. 1992. *This Fissured Land*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gait, E. A. 1892. *Census of India, 1891, Assam: Volume I-Report*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office.

- Guha, Amalendu. 1980. "Assamese Agrarian Society in the Late Nineteenth Century: Roots, Structures and Trends." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 17 (1): 35-94.
- . 1991. *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*. Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co.
- Hunter, W. W. 1879. *A Statistical Account of Assam: Volume One*. London: Trubner and Company.
- Lloyd, G. T. 1923. *Census of India, 1921, Volume III: Assam, Part I-Report*. Shillong: Government Press, Assam.
- Malthus, Reverend T.R. 1836. *Principles of Political Economy Considered with A View to Their Practical Application*. London: William Pickering.
- Mann, Gustav. 1875. *Progress report of forest administration in the province of Assam for the Year of 1874-75*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Press.
- Marriott, R. G. 1928. "Sleeper Woods and Sleeper Supply in India." *Empire Forestry Journal* 7 (1): 76-83.
- McLeod, C. C. September 30, 1916. "The Indian Jute Industry." *Scientific American Supplement* 218-219.
- McSwiney, J. 1912. *Census of India, 1911, Volume III: Assam, Part I-Report*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office.
- Nath, Manoj Kumar. 2021. *The Muslim Question in Assam and Northeast India*. New York: Routledge.
- Pathak, Suryashikha. 2010. "Tribal Politics in the Assam, 1933-1947." *Economic and Political Weekly* 45 (10): 61-69.

# 6

## **The Northeastern Region as the Fulcrum of India-ASEAN Relations: Implications on the Geopolitical Equations of China, Bangladesh and Myanmar**

*Mohor Chakraborty\**

### **Abstract**

*The North- Eastern Region (NER) of India is situated in the eastern most part of the country and presents an excellent geo-strategic location as it shares international borders with China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Bhutan. It is also known as the gateway to India's Eastern and South Eastern neighbors. As part of its ASEAN equations, India has elevated its much-cherished 'Look East Policy' into a more proactive 'Act East Policy' in 2014 to engage in an efficient and constructive manner with its South-East Asian neighbors. Though the NER remains neglected in terms of physical infrastructure, connectivity and economic development, the region abounds in natural resources and has enormous potential to transform into a trade hub for India – ASEAN relations. The economic development of the NER can present an excellent opportunity for the ASEAN countries to invest in India and possibly integrating such relations into their regional economic system. This regional nexus between India and the ASEAN will have the capacity to modify the geopolitics of the South Asian region. Of late, India's neighbors such as China, Bangladesh and Myanmar have displayed quite an ambivalent attitude towards India in their various*

---

\* Assistant Professor & Head, Department of Political Science, Chitta Mahato Memorial College, Purulia, West Bengal

*foreign policy actions and diplomatic moves. This paper seeks to analyze whether the NER can act as a significant bastion for India-ASEAN relations and act as a bulwark against India's eastern antagonistic neighbors. India can definitely count on the NER for accentuating its diplomatic overtures in the southeastern region at a time when its eastern neighbors are adept at creating tensions along with fomenting instability along the Indian borders.*

**Keywords:** NER, India, ASEAN, Geopolitics, Diplomacy.

## Introduction

The North Eastern Region (NER) comprises of the seven 'sister states' of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Nagaland along with a 'brother state' of Sikkim. The region is landlocked barring the western niche where it is connected with the 'mainland' of India via a 22 km narrow Siliguri corridor (also known as the 'Chicken's neck' in security parlance) which runs down to the state of West Bengal adjacent to the Bay of Bengal. Geographically speaking, the NER forms the lower ranges of the mighty Himalayas and possesses an undulating terrain compared to the flat plain lands and plateaus of the Indian mainland. The NER shares international borders of 5182 km with China (1395 km in the north), Bangladesh (1596 km in the south-west), Myanmar (1640 km in the east), Nepal (97 km in the west) and Bhutan (455 km in the north-east). The demographic orientation of the NER includes the presence of myriad ethno-cultural groups each having their own social and political identity. These ethnic groups are characterized by stark differences with the mainland Indian culture and ethos. During the colonial rule, these ethnic groups were allowed autonomy in their day-to-day activities. The British had demarcated certain territories commonly known as 'excluded tracts' which were meant exclusively for the tribals in the region and also restricted their entry into the mainstream Indian cultural milieu. After gaining independence in 1947, the Government of India also followed the footsteps of their British predecessors. There were autonomous councils in various regions of the NER each of which were controlled by a tribal chieftain. Each council possessed a separate cultural identity; it did not interfere with the outside social world, it preserved its own sanctity and was immune from any kind of external hues and influences.



## Background of India-ASEAN Relations

Historically, the Southeast Asian region shared a cultural affinity with India's Northeast. Traces of ancient Indian religions such as the Sanatan Dharma, Buddhism and other animistic spiritual practices can be found in Southeast Asian countries even today. The NER was also a part of the Ancient Silk Route, which comprised of the southwestern and lower southeastern routes extending up to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in the eastern periphery. Besides culture, commercial relations between Southeast Asia and the NER have dated back to the third century A.D. Through the trade relations, it was observed that Indian ideas, artistic and creative styles and modes of political organization were imbibed into the socio-cultural set up of the Southeast Asian nations (Ghosh, Chaudhury 2021)<sup>1</sup>. During the Cold War, apart from participating in the conferences as part of the Non-Aligned Movement, India did not engage in much trade or cultural exchanges with the Southeast Asian nations. As a result of colonialism, western cultural influences dominated the Indian political set up for a long period of time. India, in spite of being non-aligned looked up to the west and the Soviet Union in a calculative way (as exemplified by the import of the PL-480 food grains from the United States of America and military and economic support from the Soviet Union) so as not to fall prey into the proxy games of the superpowers of that era. Besides, the Kashmir standoff with Pakistan had engulfed two decades of diplomatic attention of the Indian strategists and political establishments. In addition to these, border skirmishes and the 1962 war with China along with the birth of Bangladesh were prominent regional events which captured India's attention during the Cold War years. Therefore, during those years, India did not possess the time and diplomatic urgency to renew or rekindle its relationship with the Southeast Asian nations. Even when the Association of the South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in 1967, India did not proactively participate or engage in its regional policy dialogues. India at that time was more engaged in improving its own socio-economic condition

1 Ambar Kumar Ghosh and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury. "The Role of India's Northeast in the Regional Cooperation Architecture." Observer Research Foundation. June 30, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-role-of-india-s-northeast-in-the-regional-cooperation-architecture#:~:text=The%20Northeast%20has%20close%20cross,greater%20opportunities%20for%20regional%20interaction.>

after the disastrous effects of colonialism and the two devastating wars with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965). It was also earnestly protecting its own borders from possible external threats from its neighbors. In the post-cold war era, the fall of the Soviet Union created a vacuum in India's approach towards its domestic and foreign policy priorities, resulting in a modification of its inward looking economy into one which was more open and export-oriented.

After opening up its economy in 1991, India felt the need to actively engage with the ASEAN in order to kick-start its own slow-paced economy. By then, many east and southeast Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore had achieved the status of 'tiger economies'. This was owing to their high rates of economic success and rising Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ratio. India started to engage with the dynamic ASEAN members through the Look East Policy (LEP) in the early 1990s in the hope of a successful regional economic integration and security architecture to boost its economic and defence requirements in the post-cold war era. The LEP was later elevated into a more vibrant Act East Policy (AEP) in 2014 under the Narendra Modi government. The AEP is an inclusive strategic policy initiative which focuses on all aspects including economic, military, political, cultural and technological angles. India was also able to secure two Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) in 2010 and 2014 with the ASEAN. Since then the relationship with the ASEAN has gained a new meaning and guidance in the Indian diplomatic trajectory. In this context, this chapter will analyze how the states of the NER despite their economic vulnerability can act as major hubs of connectivity with the ASEAN countries and how this equation has implications on the geopolitical power plays of China, Bangladesh and Myanmar vis-à-vis India in the South Asian region.

### **Gateways to ASEAN: India's Assam & Arunachal Pradesh Compared to China's Yunnan**

Geographically and economically, Assam is the largest state in the NER. It shares international borders with Bangladesh and Bhutan. It has the largest GDP compared to the other northeastern states. In the financial year 2019-2020, Assam's GDP rose by 13.3% on an average basis compared to that of the

other northeastern states (Government of Assam, 2024)<sup>2</sup>. Besides this, Assam remains the single most satisfactory contributor to the GDP of the region, securing a 61% turnout at constant prices for the financial year 2017 (Asian Development Bank, 2021)<sup>3</sup>. It is also the main hub for raw materials of various successful industries and value chains which contribute not only to the economic well-being of the NER but also to the countries of South East Asia. Assam exports the largest quantity of tea to Vietnam and Malaysia among the other northeastern states, estimated at Rs 852832 and at Rs 58163823 (Government of Assam, 2024)<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, Assam possesses a list of successful industries which are a source of significant export of raw materials. Table 1 illustrates the list of successful industries of which Assam is the epicenter and it also incorporates some of the vital services which are crucial in the NER.

**Table 1: Successful industries of Assam**

Tea
Agriculture and Agro-based Industries
Bamboo based industries
Mineral based
Plastics
Cement and textiles
Medicinal and aromatic plants
Sericulture
Forest-based products
Handicraft and handloom
Tourism
Information & Technology
Higher Education

**Source:** Report of The Government of Assam, Department of Industries and Commerce, Transport, Public Enterprises & Asian Development Bank, March 2021.

- 2 Government of Assam, Export and Import of Assam, 2024, <https://industries.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/export-and-import-of-assam>.
- 3 "Assam as India's Gateway To ASEAN." Asian Development Bank, March 2021, <https://www.adb.org/publications/assam-india-gateway-asean#:~:text=The%20geostrategic%20location%20of%20Assam,%2475%20billion%20economy%20by%202025>
- 4 Government of Assam, Export and Import of Assam, 2024, <https://industries.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/export-and-import-of-assam>

According to this data, all the above industries and services are extremely crucial to India- ASEAN relations as a lot of items are exported through Assam in the form of raw materials to the Southeast Asian nations. In the arena of electronic goods, export to the ASEAN stands at 15% compared to exports to Bangladesh which stand at 25% (Asian Development Bank, 2021)<sup>5</sup>. Within these industries, a majority of them travel through the Bangladesh route by accessing the port of Chattogram. Assam also has a plethora of inland waterways which act as export channels within the Indian territory. However, out of the 12 National inland waterways of Assam, only NW2 and NW16 are currently operational. Despite all these industries and services, at present Assam's share in India's export to the ASEAN remains very low. One may draw a comparison here with the Yunnan province in China which also shares borders with Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. Yunnan is also extremely inaccessible owing to its difficult terrain and geological uncertainties. However, China, especially in the Deng Xiaoping era had restructured and transformed its economy into an open sector. As a result, various initiatives were rolled out to increase connectivity between Yunnan and the broader Southeast Asian region. Yunnan was viewed as a strategically significant province which had the potential to capitalize and exploit the vibrant markets of the ASEAN. Hence, the Chinese government introduced a range of infrastructure development projects to increase connectivity between Yunnan and the countries of the ASEAN.

In 2008, an expressway of 1900 km was constructed between Kunming (Yunnan's capital) and Bangkok (Thailand's capital) through the territory of Laos. Yunnan is also a part of the regional integration of the Mekong sub region (a sub-plan of the Belt and Road Initiative of China) which connects and incorporates Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia. In this project, an inclusive sub regional master infrastructure plan was devised covering sectors such as transport, energy, telecommunications, environment, human resource development, tourism, trade and agriculture. The Chinese State Council in 2015 had approved the establishment of the Yunnan Dianzhong New Area in Kunming which has become

5 "Assam as India's Gateway To ASEAN." Asian Development Bank, March 2021, <https://www.adb.org/publications/assam-india-gateway-asean#:~:text=The%20geostrategic%20location%20of%20Assam,%2475%20billion%20economy%20by%202025>

a hub for upcoming and new industries such as equipment manufacturing, electronic information and biological products. The government of Yunnan has also channeled in diplomatic support for its projects by initiating cross-border cooperation from Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar. Thus, Chinese economic influence looms large over the region.

For India to emerge as a successful player in its ASEAN saga, Assam needs to make use of its connectivity and ramp up its diplomatic initiatives much like the Chinese government has done with Yunnan. In the current scenario, accessing the ports of Bangladesh has become an uncertainty owing to the regime change in Dhaka. The interim government of Mohammad Yunus has expressed considerable dismay over the long-standing relationship of India and Bangladesh which has led to an anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh. Therefore, accessing the ports of Bangladesh as a viable connectivity route to the greater ASEAN region may not be feasible for Assam as of now. Under such circumstances, India has to spur diplomatic engagements with neighboring Myanmar in ensuring access to the roads and highways and ports for enhancing its connectivity with the Southeast Asian nations. Assam's national inland waterways must be transformed so that it can link with the vibrant eastern ports of the Indian coastline the nearest being that of West Bengal in case political instability in Myanmar increases. In addition, the civil aviation industry in northeast India needs to be further enhanced for better connectivity and seamless transportation of goods across borders. This can be a novel idea to curb political high handedness and ensure economic partnerships with military-ruled countries such as Myanmar. Achieving this would attract airspace fees and open the gates for foreign investment in a cash stripped economy. This will not only ensure a diplomatic spillover of ties to the economic realm but also place Myanmar as a buffer zone vis-à-vis an all-encompassing Chinese presence. Myanmar must be a diplomatic priority of India as other than Bangladesh only Myanmar can provide a shorter route to the larger Southeast Asian region. In addition, the Indian-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral highway passes through Assam. India and Thailand share a satisfactory trade volume with Thailand becoming India's fifth largest trading partner after Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam. In 2022, bilateral trade between them

reached \$17.70 billion (Hazarika, Sharma 2022; 70)<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, finding ways to harness the booming Thai markets through Assam must be a top economic and strategic priority of the Indian government against a rising Chinese economic upsurge in Southeast Asia. Goods travelling by road all the way to the ports of West Bengal will prove uneconomical as it will raise transportation and input costs thereby hiking the prices of the goods meant to be exported to the ASEAN countries. Compared to that, China will export at a cheaper cost and shall remain as the main economic powerhouse in the region. India needs to undertake systematic infrastructure development projects in Assam as the state has the potential of becoming a key resource provider to the vibrant markets of the ASEAN. If this is achieved, the looming Chinese threat can be kept at bay and India can leverage its relations with ASEAN vis-à-vis China.

Arunachal Pradesh lies at the eastern corner of the India. It shares a border with three countries namely Myanmar, China and Bhutan. India and China share a contested relationship as far as the territory of the state is concerned. In China, Arunachal Pradesh is known as Zangnan and is considered a part of South Tibet (Pattnaik, 2021)<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, Arunachal Pradesh forms the seat of Theravada Buddhism which is regarded as a vital wing of Buddhism practiced in Southeast Asia and Tibet. Arunachal Pradesh is also home to many monasteries including the Tawang Monastery which holds cultural affinities with Tibet. Many parts of Arunachal Pradesh are characterized by rigid and undulating topography and therefore, the Indian administration must devise new ways of developing the state. A Buddhist Council for Southeast Asian countries must be established and provisions must be made so that delegates from all the ASEAN countries may visit the state every year to uphold common cultural affinities and traits.

---

6 Hazarika, O., and Sharma, C.K. (2022). "The "China Factor" in the Northeast Component of India's Act East Policy: Implications for Security, Connectivity, Commerce." *International Journal of China Studies*, Vol.13, No.2, June, p.70.

7 Jajati, Pattnaik, "Geo-Economic Significance of Arunachal Pradesh.", *Diplomatist*, March, 2021, Available at [https://diplomatist.com/2021/03/02/geo-economic-significance-of-arunachal-pradesh/#:~:text=Kibithoo % 3 A % 20 Geo % 2 D Economic % 20 Corridor % 20 to, Sichuan % 20 and % 20 Yunnan % 20 of % 20 China](https://diplomatist.com/2021/03/02/geo-economic-significance-of-arunachal-pradesh/#:~:text=Kibithoo%20A%20Geo%20Economic%20Corridor%20to,Sichuan%20and%20Yunnan%20of%20China)

From a business perspective, the Kibithoo corridor located at the Anjaw district of Arunachal Pradesh offers shorter route to Tibet as well as southwestern China (Pattnaik, 2021)<sup>8</sup>. Many strategists believe that if India can transform the Kibithoo land corridor into a gateway to the Chinese markets, the aggressive overtones and army incursions from China into Arunachal Pradesh can be countered to some extent. Doing so would also lead to new economic linkages between India and China which could alter their bilateral political relationship. Therefore, even if on a geographical note, Arunachal Pradesh seems inaccessible in terms of wider economic integration, cultural and economic prospects of the state cannot be underestimated. Additionally, the hydropower sector of the state possesses tremendous potential to evolve into a major regional power industry which can contribute towards generating collaborative ventures with the Southeast Asian economies. Apart from power, the handloom and tourism industry of the state as well as a shared cultural heritage add to the prospects of economic collaboration between and the Southeast Asian nations. Such possibilities need to be explored on a priority basis if integration with the ASEAN economies is to be achieved, while keeping the China threat at bay.

### **Tripura and Meghalaya as Gateways to ASEAN: Strategic Hedging Against Bangladesh**

Tripura shares s border with Bangladesh on three sides, namely north, west and south. On the eastern side, it shares a border with its neighboring state Mizoram. The state is one of the smallest among the NER and it is quite isolated and hilly in its geographical features. Given its border with Bangladesh and its landlocked positioning, it shared a positive and vibrant relationship with Bangladesh earlier. During the Sheikh Hasina administration in Bangladesh, Tripura engaged in a multi-sectoral trade relationship with Bangladesh and served as a vital link to Southeast Asia. In the power sector, Tripura was a major hub of providing electricity to Bangladesh. India supplies

8 Pattnaik, Jajati. "Geo-Economic Significance of Arunachal Pradesh.", *Diplomatist*, March, 2021, Available at <https://diplomatist.com/2021/03/02/geo-economic-significance-of-arunachal-pradesh/#:~:text=Kibithoo%3A%20Geo%2DEconomic%20Corridor%20to,Sichuan%20and%20Yunnan%20of%20China.>

500 MW of power to Bangladesh, 100 MW of which comes from Tripura (Ali, 2019)<sup>9</sup>.

Tripura is also the leading rubber growing state in the NER as it accounts for nearly 50% of the rubber production in the region. Tourism is also a leading sector in which Tripura has performed well vis-à-vis its other northeastern counterparts. According to the report from the Central Statistical Office, Tripura stands at number three achieving a 9.45% of growth rate in the tourism sector behind Sikkim and Mizoram (Banik, 2018)<sup>10</sup>. The state also holds immense potential in the food-processing sector. Agro-export zones have been set up at Agartala but currently they more are focused on exporting within domestic boundaries. During the earlier regime of Bangladesh, initiatives were taken to connect the two ports of Bangladesh, Ashuganj and Chattogram with the inland waterways of Tripura to enable stronger connectivity with the greater ASEAN region. However, India's relations with Bangladesh have entered into a wave of uncertainty. Bangladesh's anti-India rhetoric has heightened following the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus. Under such circumstances, it remains to be seen how far Tripura is able to act as the connecting link to the ports of Bangladesh for extending out to Southeast Asia.

The Maître Setu and the Agartala- Akhaura railway services are currently pending projects between India and Bangladesh. Although the recent political alteration in Bangladesh has delayed the projects, India remains hopeful of completing them. Additionally, given the performance of Bangladesh's economy, it shall be in need of foreign investments once a new government comes to power. In other words, Bangladesh can benefit from such projects with India. However, if the unrest in Bangladesh continues, Tripura has to seek alternatives for connecting to Southeast Asia. There is a noticeable lack of infrastructure for transportation of rubber and food products to the ASEAN economies. Robust aviation services or digital marketing platforms for agro-based industries with demand

9 Ali, S.S. (2019). "Tripura to become gateway of southeast Asia, says Modi." *The Hindu*. February, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/tripura-to-become-gateway-of-southeast-asia-says-modi/article26224673.ece>

10 Banik, S. "ASEAN and NER with Special Reference to Tripura, India." *International Journal of Management Studies*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18843/ijms/v5iS5/09>



in ASEAN countries must be explored. Doing so would ensure investment generation in Tripura, which will further supplement its economic growth and improve its socio-economic condition within the NER.

The state of Meghalaya shares a border with Bangladesh in the south and west and is well known for its cultural vibrancy. At the Asian Confluence meet in Shillong, Bhutan had participated in a cultural exchange meet where the culture and festivals of the local Khasi tribes were discussed at length. In order to maintain good relations with the ASEAN economies, such collaborative cultural events with the Southeast Asian countries must be held annually. This will enhance the possibility of cross-cultural interactions with a focus on people-to-people relations. In terms of road connectivity, at present, Meghalaya has highways meant for connecting with cities within the NER. For instance, the highway from Dam Cherra Khaise Punjee till NH127B in Srirampur in Assam is one of the reliable roads connecting the states. Bypassing Bangladesh, there is a need to establish an integrated transport corridor with the neighboring states of Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland in order to integrate with the highways of Myanmar. Furthermore, India has to open diplomatic channels to capitalize on the road infrastructure through Myanmar as it has the hopes of connecting with the ASEAN in the near future.

### **Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland as Gateways to ASEAN – Effects on Myanmar**

Manipur also has an excellent geo-strategic location to further India's relations with East and Southeast Asia. The state has a vibrant tourism sector, along with active promotion of sports, handlooms and palm oil cultivation. The Narendra Modi government has expressed great hopes of Manipur being a fine gateway to the ASEAN countries. These hopes have been bolstered through a railway connectivity project with Myanmar in the Imphal-Moreh section. Besides this, currently forty National Highways are on the list of the Government which aim at linking Manipur with the East Asian region. Recognizing the potential of Manipur in India-ASEAN relations, the Ministry of Development of North East Region (MDONER) has stated, "if Northeast is India's land-bridge to Southeast Asia; Manipur is

the main gateway to Southeast Asia” (Ramachandran, 2023)<sup>11</sup>. The Moreh-Tamu border crossing in the Manipur-Sagaing Region in Myanmar and the Zokhawthar- Rikhawdar border crossing in the Mizoram–Chin state (in Myanmar) are the historical entry points to Southeast Asia from South Asia. The Indian government is of the opinion that several trading agencies are proactive on both sides of the Indo-Myanmar border which makes the trans-regional connectivity of the Act East Policy a success. However, the internal disturbances in Manipur along with the ongoing political instability in Myanmar have weakened the connectivity-enhancing initiatives across the region. The much discussed India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral Highway project has also been halted due to the ongoing disturbances.

For ensuring connectivity across the Myanmar border, India needs to undertake the routes through the less volatile regions of Myanmar such as the northwestern parts of Barmar, Chin and Sagaing as these areas are in a dry zone due to which insurgent groups do not rely on these areas for their guerilla operations. In the wake of the political instability in Myanmar, the Indian government at first thought of fencing the Indo-Myanmar border due to reports of infiltration by the insurgent groups. However, the Manipur government had requested the Centre for dropping such an idea due to the geo-strategic implications of such a move. The Central government has instead become more vigilant and has stationed sufficient Border Security Forces (BSF) for border safety in the area. The Indian government must explore other diplomatic avenues such as back channel diplomacy or enhancing Track II diplomacy to ensure hassle free connectivity links via Myanmar to the wider Southeast Asian region.

Mizoram, another neighboring state of Manipur is rich in flora and fauna and is known for its bamboo cultivation. The state is also widely known for its tourism sector. Similar to Manipur, Mizoram’s infrastructure is also intertwined with Myanmar. Mizoram has an excellent human resource base which can be utilized for its linkages with the ASEAN. The state has a 92% English speaking population which can easily connect with the

---

11 Ramachandran, S. (2023). “As Manipur Burns, India’s Connectivity Plans in Southeast Asia Go Up in Smoke.” *The Diplomat*, July 27. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/as-manipur-burns-indias-connectivity-plans-in-southeast-asia-go-up-in-smoke/>

education sector of the ASEAN countries. Digital connectivity in the education sector can ensure proper networking with the ASEAN countries. Coming to Nagaland, it is vulnerable to the geopolitical dynamics and strategic complexities of the region. The state must also focus on areas such as gender development, economy and environment and for all these developments, a comprehensive long term strategic planning with Myanmar must be at the forefront.

## Conclusion

The NER is a vital strategic node capable of altering the geopolitical waves of the South and Southeast Asian regions. A strong and economically prosperous NER can have a lasting impact on the ASEAN countries and on the strained relationships with China, Bangladesh and Myanmar. A strong India-ASEAN relationship can strengthen the Indian land and maritime boundaries, both of which are currently under Chinese strategic interests. Looking at Bangladesh, it can be observed that Bangladesh needs to make its economy stable via long-standing trade linkages with India's NER. Although the current situation is volatile, a mature Bangladesh will need to engage with the NER to increase its prospects. On the other hand, a radical Bangladesh has the potential to engage with China and create tensions across the borders of the NER. Chinese support will ultimately give rise to conditioned loans based on lease agreements and the Bangladeshi ports shall end up remaining under Chinese control. Thus, Bangladesh-NER nexus can bring immense potentialities for the NER in its ASEAN undertakings. Coming to Myanmar, a thorough reset in Indo-Myanmar relations needs to be initiated as all the vital strategic routes pass through Myanmar. If Bangladesh remains volatile and hostile towards Indian projects along with a recalcitrant China, then Myanmar can be the NER's last resort as far as road infrastructure, land links and maritime routes to the ASEAN are concerned. For all these to materialize, the NER must evolve at a growing pace and make more efforts to connect to the ASEAN region. An all-inclusive multipronged approach of the NER towards the ASEAN must be a priority of the Indian government. In other words the much anticipated acronym for development across the NER- 'HIRA' (H-Highways, I-Inland Waterways, R-Railways, A-Airlines) by the Indian Prime Minister

will remain a lip service unless adequate mechanisms are undertaken to make the acronym a huge success in the coming years. Hence diplomatic channels, back channels, increasing connectivity within the NER and spurring digital connectivity across the borders will have the potential to solidify the Indian-ASEAN relations in a politically volatile South Asia.

## References

- Ali, Sajjad Syed. 2019. *Tripura to become gateway of Southeast Asia, says Modi, The Hindu*. February. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/tripura-to-become-gateway-of-southeast-asia-says-modi/article26224673.ece>.
- Asian Development Bank. 2021. "Assam as India's Gateway To ASEAN." March. <https://www.adb.org/publications/assam-india-gateway-asean#:~:text=The%20geostrategic%20location%20of%20Assam,%2475%20billion%20economy%20by%202025>.
- Banik, Sanjib. 2018. "ASEAN and NER with Special Reference to Tripura, India." *International Journal of Management Studies* 59-66.
- Business Standard. 2022. *Manipur to be linked with Myanmar, Thailand, to be gateway of East Asia : PM*. February 22. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/elections/manipur-will-be-gateway-of-east-asian-counties-prime-minister-modi-122022200739\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/elections/manipur-will-be-gateway-of-east-asian-counties-prime-minister-modi-122022200739_1.html).
- Chasie, Charles. 2024. "Nagaland in Act East Policy." *The Morung Express*. December. <https://morungexpress.com/nagaland-act-east-policy>.
- Ghosh, Kumar Akbar, and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury. 2021. "The Role of India's Northeast in the Regional Cooperation Architecture." *Observer Research Foundation*. June 30. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-role-of-india-s-northeast-in-the-regional-cooperation-architecture#:~:text=The%20Northeast%20has%20close%20cross,greater%20opportunities%20for%20regional%20interaction>.
- Government of Assam. 2024. *Export and Import of Assam*. <https://industries.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/export-and-import-of-assam>.
- Hazarika, Objia, and Kumar Chandan Sarma. 2022. "The "China Factor" in the Northeast Component of India's Act East Policy: Implications for Security, Connectivity, Commerce." *International Journal of China Studies*, Vol.13, No.2, June 2022 63-78.
- Jayaswal, Rajeev. 2024. "Govt looks to make North East export hub for Bangladesh, Asean." *The Hindustan Times*. April 04. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/govt-looks-to-make-north-east-export-hub-for-bangladesh-asean-101712170723858.html>.
- Pant, Harsh V., and Sreeparna Banerjee. 2024. "Can ASEAN and India bring peace to Myanmar?" *Observer Research Foundation*. October 30. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/can-asean-and-india-bring-peace-to-myanmar>.

- Pattnaik, Jajati. 2018. "Arunachal Pradesh: India's tri-junction to the east." *The Arunachal Times*. November 27. <https://arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2018/11/27/arunachal-pradesh-indias-tri-junction-to-the-east/>.
- Ramachandran, Sudha. 2023. "As Manipur Burns, India's Connectivity Plans in Southeast Asia Go Up in Smoke." *The Diplomat*. July 27. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/as-manipur-burns-indias-connectivity-plans-in-southeast-asia-go-up-in-smoke/>.
- Research Centre for Eastern and North Eastern Regional Studies, Kolkata. 2016. "Mizoram: A Gateway to Southeast Asia? What needs to be done?" *The Calcutta Journal of Global Affairs*.
- Roche, Elizabeth. 2024. "India Emerges as ASEAN's Hedging Bet Against China at Laos Summit." *The Diplomat*. October 14. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/10/india-emerges-as-aseans-hedging-bet-against-china-at-laos-summit/>.

# 7

## **Government policies in East and Northeast India: Assessment of Impact and Effect**

*Kajol Biswakarma\**

### **Abstract**

*East and Northeast India, with their multiple cultural, economic, and strategic value, have undergone a change of focus for development in the last few decades. Historically overlooked, these areas are at the heart of India's growth story today, owing to their geographic significance and unexploited manpower. Recurring governments have launched projects such as the Act East Policy, North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme (NESIDS), and North East Industrial Development Scheme (NEIDS) which aim to tackle deep-seated problems like lack of connectivity, economic disparities and socio-political instability. This study evaluates the socio-economic and environmental impacts of these policies on infrastructure, trade, education, health, and local industries. Analysis of the achievements emphasizes, among others, increased cross-border trade, better rural access and support for organic farming. But, problems such as slow implementation, environmental contamination, and unequal distribution remain. Examples of programs, like Ayushman Bharat and PMGSY, have potential, but need further localization and community involvement to carry them over the long term. Results highlight the need for ecologically sound, equitable policies that focus on local needs*

---

\* Former student of Rabindra Bharati University, West Bengal

*and local control. This paper argues that although progress has been made, realization of the powerful potential of East/Northeast India requires comprehensive, multi-stakeholder solutions compatible with the socio-economic and cultural framework of the region.*

**Keywords:** Act East Policy, rural connectivity, socio-economic development, environmental challenges.

## Introduction

East and Northeast India is an important, though historically neglected, region of the Indian subcontinent. The area comprises eight northeastern states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipal, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, Sikkim) and with eastern states (West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Odisha). Rich in biodiversity, mineral resources, and ethnic diversity, these regions also serve as India's frontier with neighbouring countries like China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh but, they are one of the least developed areas of the state, who still struggle with insurgency, inadequate infrastructure, and slow industrial developments.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, the area has suffered a lack of input in national developmental agenda, geographic isolation and socio-political factors making its problems more difficult.<sup>2</sup> Aware of this, the government has taken several steps to reduce the development gap, including in connectivity, trade, education, healthcare, and cultural integration. Policies, e.g. the Look East Policy (1991), which has since been renamed Act East Policy (2014) show the strategic significance of the area as a bridge to Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup>

This paper also critically assesses the effect of such policies, its successes, shortfalls and future directions.<sup>4</sup> The objective of the research is to offer a general picture of the role that the government actions have played in reshaping the socio-economic pattern of East and Northeast India.<sup>5</sup>

- 
- 1 Das, S. (2020). Regional Development in India: Challenges and Opportunities, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.14.
  - 2 Geographic isolation and socio-political challenges stem from factors such as terrain, insurgency, and lack of infrastructural development.
  - 3 The Look East Policy, launched in 1991, was renamed the Act East Policy in 2014, emphasizing proactive engagement with Southeast Asia.
  - 4 This research examines the impact of policies aimed at improving connectivity, trade, education, and healthcare in the region.
  - 5 The study highlights the role of government policies in addressing socio-economic disparities and fostering regional integration.

## Historical Context of Government Policies in the Region

The historical development of East and Northeast India is inseparable from its strategic and political importance. The Eastern and Northeast part of India has experienced many socio-economic and political problems since the country's independence, leading it to an array of policy measures. The establishment of the North Eastern Council (NEC) in 1971 by means of a parliamentary Act was a landmark step. As the nodal agency of the economic and social development of the eight northeast states, the NEC has been instrumental in the creation of connectivity, infrastructure development and equity. This step is a key step for the integration of the region into the national mainstream and balanced regional development.<sup>6</sup>

Earlier, the emphasis was mostly on law and order, because insurgency and ethnic conflict created difficulty for states such as Nagaland, Manipur and Assam. Policies such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) who ostensibly sought to combat insurgency, often also alienated the local population.<sup>7</sup> As the government increasingly recognized the importance of inclusive growth, its attention gradually relaxed for a development-focused agenda.

The Look East Policy of the 1990s marked a turning point, as it sought to position the Northeast as India's bridge to Southeast Asia. This was then succeeded by the Act East Policy, which tried to improve regional accessibility and regional connectivity and integrate the region in the framework of global trade networks.

## Key Policies and Programs in East and Northeast India

### 1. Act East Policy

The Act East Policy, in extension of the Look East Policy (1991), helps increase connectivity, trade and cultural exchanges between the northeastern states of India and ASEAN countries.<sup>8</sup> It emphasizes cross-border infrastructure, economic integration, and cultural exchanges. All of these initiatives are necessary to

---

6 India Institute of Public Administration. "ASHTALAKSHMI." *India Institute of Public Administration*, [www.iipa.org.in/cms/public/page/ASHTALAKSHMI](http://www.iipa.org.in/cms/public/page/ASHTALAKSHMI).

7 Baruah, S. (1999) *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 76.

8 Singh, R. P. (2020). *India's Act East Policy and Northeast India: Building Bridges to ASEAN*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2020, p. 45.



build more regional awareness and cooperation. Their objectives are set up sustainable relationship between Indian and ASEAN countries through festivals, exchange programs, and mutual cultural activities. Through the policy's focus on soft power coupled with economic objectives regional integration enjoys a comprehensive dimension. Key initiatives include:

**India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway:** In this large-scale initiative, Moreh in Manipur is linked to Mae Sot in Thailand to allow trade and people-to-people interaction.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, aiming to link Northeast India and Southeast Asia, such an initiative could open up the space for regional economic cooperation and integration. It will allow the unimpeded flow of good, services and people across borders thus integrating regional economies and encouraging the growth of tourism. Moreover, the project expands security cooperation among participating states by increasing legal cross-border transfer. Quality of roads are being improved, and pending sections are being completed for constant transport. The effort is also viewed nonetheless of a crucial element in India's strategy to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the region.

**Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project:** In this project, Kolkata is connected to the city of Sittwe Port (Myanmar) and onward to Mizoram via road, and water way and encourages uninterrupted movement of goods and services.<sup>10</sup> It is intended as an alternative to trade route to Southeast Asia, circumventing the crowded Siliguri Corridor. The project is not only to facilitate the continuous flow of goods and services but also to ensure India's strategic role in the Bay of Bengal area. In addition, it creates economic linkages between the Indian states of the East and Myanmar which in turn lead to regional employment creation and regional development. The project is seen as a major step in complementing India's maritime connectivity policy. Efforts are being directed at solving operational problems and enhancing the efficiency of cargo movement over this corridor.

**Border Haats:** India's border markets with Bangladesh and Myanmar facilitate trade and support economic intercourse.<sup>11</sup>

9 Das, S, and Roy, N. (2018). Cross-Border Connectivity in South and Southeast Asia. Kolkata: Eastern Press, p.112.

10 Chakraborty, A. (2017). Infrastructure and Regional Cooperation in Asia. New Delhi: Concept Publishing, p.78.

11 Sen, A. and Choudhury, T. (2015). Border Trade and Regional Cooperation in South Asia. Kolkata: Orient Blackswan, p.94.

They allow local communities to exchange materials which helps in business activities and social interactions across the borders. The success of these haats has stimulated further discussions regarding their possible extension and cross-border trade. These border haats serve as a legal instrument to facilitate small scale trade, which helps in curbing illegal activities and fostering confidence among groups residing in border areas. The growing prosperity has resulted in better standards of the region and stronger relations with India's neighboring countries. Additional haats projected to be built along with the improvement of infrastructure at the existing ones.

These initiatives seek to realize Northeast India as an important trade artery and as a hub of regional integration and to facilitate cultural sharing between Southeast Asian countries. They highlight, among other things, India's strategic goal of turning the region into a Southeast Asian outcroppings, which will be expected to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) as well as work partnerships, in the areas of tourism and agriculture.<sup>12</sup> These initiatives help integrate Northeast India into the emerging economic zone that links South and Southeast Asia. The construction and progressive work on these initiatives is critical to advancing India's political and economic engagement with ASEAN countries.

## 2. North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme (NESIDS)

NESIDS launched in 2017 fills the critical infrastructure absences (health, education and connectivity).<sup>13</sup> It focuses on:

**Healthcare:** Developing rural health centers and district hospitals to provide accessible healthcare. Mobile health clinics have been introduced in remote areas, ensuring healthcare delivery to underserved populations (Roy and Das 87).<sup>14</sup> Through this initiative, healthcare services have become more accessible by cutting down the time and cost needed for remote communities to travel to far-off hospitals. Besides, this scheme has continued progress to specialized health camps and diagnostic centers to

12 Singh, R. P. (2020). India's Act East Policy and Northeast India: Building Bridges to ASEAN. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 47.

13 Mukherjee, S. (2019). Special Infrastructure Initiatives for India's Northeast, New Delhi: National Book Trust, p. 123.

14 Roy, N. and Das, S. (2018). Healthcare Challenges in Remote Regions of India. Guwahati: Assam Publications, p.87.

meet the urgent medical needs. In addition, measures have been taken to provide tele-healthcare solutions, so that individuals in marginalised communities could consult experts in urban centres. Also, maternal and child healthcare is targeted to reduce mortality rates and improve women's and children's health in these rural areas. Community health volunteers have graduated in large numbers leading to an increase in the coverage of basic health care services at the community level. Also, working alongside local NGOs has enhanced the level of awareness concerning health matters and preventive care among the people.

**Education:** Giving educational institutions contemporary technologies, such as smart classrooms and training in vocational skills with the intention of maximizing employability in youth. Efforts have been focused at first on obtaining greater access to education for tribal and underrepresented groups (Das 65).<sup>15</sup> To improve the quality of education in government schools, teacher training programs have been implemented. In addition, under NESIDS, increased stipends for tribal students have led to higher enrolment numbers in secondary and tertiary education. Activities are underway for the construction of buildings for technical education infrastructure such as polytechnics and ITIs. There have also been centers set up for career counselling for students. To tackle the issue of inaccessible remote areas, mobile education vans have been introduced to ensure equal access to education for learners

**Connectivity:** Strengthening transportation networks to reduce the isolation of remote areas. Projects carried out by NESIDS covered, among others, the construction of new roads and for that of rural roads to promote economic activity and social inclusion.<sup>16</sup>

For instance, given NESIDS, new bridges and so on have been constructing in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland which are changing local economies through accessing new opportunities of markets and services (Mukherjee 125).<sup>17</sup> With this scheme development of local airports has also done a lot towards

15 Das, A. K. (2018). *Education and Development in India's Northeast: Challenges and Opportunities*. Guwahati: Northeast Press, p.65.

16 Chakraborty, S. P. (2019). *Infrastructure Development in India's Remote Areas*. New Delhi: Kalina Publications, p. 132.

17 Mukherjee, R. K. (2020). *Regional Connectivity and Development: Case Studies from Northeast India*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, p.125.

connectivity and tourism. This scheme has also contributed immensely to the local tourism and connectivity with the development of many local airports. Better transport links promote trade and commerce, attract investments, and provide better education and health opportunities. Moreover, the increase in tourism has created jobs in these areas, which has been an advantage to local people. Infrastructure investments under NESIDS are thus playing a key role in overall development of the underserved area. The improved gadgets have also facilitated states to work together more, creating regional integration. Moreover, with these developments come increased accessibility to remote areas for travellers alike; thus further cementing this region as a hot spot for domestic and international tourism alike.

### 3. North East Industrial Development Scheme (NEIDS)

NEIDS encourages industrialization of the area by providing financial assistance such as capital subsidies, transport subsidies, and tax holidays (Sen 98).<sup>18</sup> This scheme prioritizes:

**Agro-based industries:** Organic farming, food processing, and tea production. By leveraging the region's natural resources, NEIDS has catalyzed the growth of sustainable industries that support local economies.<sup>19</sup> It has also expedited the setting up of value-added processing units, leading to higher returns for producers. Additionally, it has advocated for environmentally friendly practices in these sectors, enhancing the overall environmental sustainability of the region. The establishment of farmer cooperatives has strengthened the negotiating power of domestic producers as well. Also, the growth of agro-based sector has a huge potential to attract local and foreign buyers enhancing the market.

**Traditional crafts:** Handloom weaving and bamboo-based industries providing preservation of indigenous craft and employment. Special emphasis has been given to linking these sectors with global supply chains in order to improve their marketing reach (Das 70).<sup>20</sup> Through the use of e-commerce platforms, the demand for products from these artisans

18 Sen, S. K (2017). Industrial Growth in Northeast India: Policies and Outcomes. Guwahati: Assam University Press, p. 98.

19 Choudhury, T. (2016). Agricultural Policy and Economic Development in Northeast India. Kolkata: Eastern Book House, p. 105.

20 Das, S. R. (2019). Indigenous Crafts and Their Role in Economic Development. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.70.

has significantly grown. Artisans are now being trained using innovative capacity-building techniques so they can upgrade their skills and embrace modern design trends. The incorporation of sustainable materials has further enhanced the global appeal of the products. This support has also allowed for the revival of old skills, trades, and practices that assist in keeping cultural heritage alive. Consequently, these artisans attracted more tourists interested in bringing home true or authentic souvenirs, which has spurred growth in tourism and the crafts industry, helping not only the local economies but also the artisans themselves. Modern innovations, greater international recognition, and the broader market have helped preserve the identities and legacies of these crafts.

**Industrial parks:** Buildings such as the one provided in Byrnihat, Meghalaya, elicit investment and entrepreneurship. These industrial centers are engines of local job creation and economic diversification.<sup>21</sup> Such parks have created a fertile ground for innovation, which invited the establishment of new high-tech industries and startups. Furthermore, the industrial parks have brought in professionals from other regions of the country, thus facilitating the movement of people and knowledge. The industrial parks have also encouraged growth of other economic activities such as logistics and retailing and even tourism. These parks are attracting foreign investments, and in the process, aiding in the development of infrastructure in the vicinity. In addition, cooperation with firms has allowed the parks to become industrial R&D centers, which, in turn, fostered the growth of new industries. Local citizens are trained through training centers set up in the parks so that they can secure jobs. Moreover, the industrial parks have simplified the process for entrepreneurs seeking funding by bringing in banks and venture capitalists, thus promoting economic growth. The synergy of infrastructure, incentives, and human capital development has resulted in the enviable productivity of the local enterprises, making them capable of competing in the international market. NEIDS has not only attracted additional investments in the area, but also enabled micro/small enterprises to compete in wider markets. Collaborative initiatives between the government and private sector under NEIDS have further strengthened industrial

---

21 Roy, S. and Sen, M. (2018). Industrial Parks and Regional Growth in Northeast India. Guwahati: North East Press, p.145.

growth (Mukherjee 128).<sup>22</sup> This has enabled entrepreneurs to make informed risks through mentorship and guidance in the early days of business formation. In addition, there is also an opportunity for networking as well as inter-business collaboration, local and international. The sustainability focus within the program has also helped organizations adopt new technologies and practices that are seen to be eco-friendly and are able to comply with international standards. Moreover, the encouragement of innovation and adoption of new technologies has enhanced the competitiveness of local industries. Therefore, NEIDS is aiding to make the region an industrial center. Because of the availability of government schemes, youth, especially those from rural areas, have been motivated to exploit available opportunities. These businesses are competing for markets well beyond their region, which is beneficial for the economic development of this area. Additionally, NEIDS helps in creating an entrepreneurial culture, which is valuable for the economic diversification of the region beyond the main economic activities. It is extremely important as it creates new jobs, especially for the younger population. Although SMEs are growing faster and using high-tech thanks to the incubators and accelerators, the environment is getting more competitive. The grant funding from both government and private sources has allowed these enterprises to expand operations and create jobs.

#### 4. Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY)

PMGSY has dramatically enhanced rural road access in the Northeast, constructing more than 12,000 km of roads (Choudhury 110).<sup>23</sup> Roads have enabled market access, healthcare access, and schooling for previously disconnected villages, which have changed lives and ways of life. The second phase of PMGSY is to rehabilitate old pavements to overcome seasonal constraints and provide transportation throughout the year (Das 68).<sup>24</sup> The enhanced accessibility to markets has drastically increased the sales of agriculture produce and has subsequently improved profits for the farmers. Some roads have also linked distant areas to government services so that

22 Mukherjee, A. *Private Sector Collaboration in Northeast India's Industrialization*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2019, p. 128.

23 Chakraborty, S. P. *Infrastructure Development in India's Remote Areas*. New Delhi: Kalunga Publications, 2019, p. 110.

24 Das, A. K. *Improving Rural Infrastructure in India: The Case of PMGSY*. Guwahati: Northeast Press, 2020, p. 68.

health and education can be accessible at the right time. There was also a great reduction in the economic and social isolation of these areas which, in turn, improved the infrastructure of roads and Access to these opportunities was previously very limited. Community participation and cooperation have also increased as the local population usually takes part in the building of roads. Consequently, there has been more economic activity in the region and new small scale business and trade are developing alongside these new roads. All of this is made possible by the new and improved roads that also boost tourism and enable people to explore new areas, making it a new source of income as well.

## 5. Other Significant Programs

### **Mission Organic Value Chain Development (MOVCD):**

Activating organic farming to make the region a center of organic products. States such as Sikkim have used this mission as a springboard to become leaders in organic agriculture (Roy 99).<sup>25</sup> MOVCD has also created market channels for organic producers and guaranteed them fair producer prices for their commodities (Sen and Choudhury 97).<sup>26</sup> Eco-friendly goods boost the farmers' lifestyle, not to mention the impact it has on the region. This has improved the reduction of the region's carbon footprint, alongside improving soil health. Additionally, it has facilitated relationships between local farmers and world organic companies, boosting exports and the region's global market. These have aided small farmers in accessing training and resources more easily as local cooperatives and farmer groups have become critical participants in the program. The MOVCD campaign's success has resulted in many farmers using organic farming practices because of the increased profits, and a change in culture. Certification processes have also become simpler, allowing more producers to profit from premium markets.

**National Bamboo Mission:** The object of this project is to use the abundant bamboo raw material resources in the Northeast to promote an industry and product-based bamboo-based activities. Training and development efforts for artisans and the creation of bamboo processing workshops have strengthened

25 Roy, P. *Organic Agriculture in Northeast India: A Policy Overview*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 99.

26 Sen, S. K. and Choudhury, T. *Sustainable Development through Organic Farming in Northeast India*. Kolkata: Eastern Book House, 2018, p. 97.



the craft's contribution to the regional economy (Mukherjee 130).<sup>27</sup> These programs have provided local craftsmen with the necessary training to produce quality bamboo products which, in turn, provides them with more income opportunities. In addition, investments in bamboo-based industries have generated further jobs and strengthened local economies. The project has also focused on sustainability considering that bamboo is one of the most renewable resources and thus has double-edged benefits of economic growth with environmental benefits. Increased demand for bamboo products has placed the Northeast on track to become a player in the world market for sustainable goods.

**Hydropower Projects:** Plenty of these water resources of the area have been drawn to produce energy, as exemplified by the Subansiri project in Arunachal Pradesh. Action is being taken to offset the environmental consequences of these projects by using advanced technology community engagement (Singh 55).<sup>28</sup> Applications for fish-friendly turbines and sediment management strategies continue to reduce negative ecological impacts. Local communities are now also being considered at a level where their needs and grievances are addressed, thereby making sure they also receive the benefits of these initiatives. Monitoring systems that monitor the health of the ecosystem have been established to be sure that water quality and nuances are maintained. It also includes compensatory afforestation programs in the affected areas to restore the ecological balance. Ongoing technological innovation and local cooperation can help make these energy projects more sustainable, and help strike a balance between development and environmental protection.

## Impact and effect of Government Policies

### (i) Economic Impact

#### Enhanced Cross-Border Trade

The Act East Policy and related transborder activity has greatly contributed to the increase in trade activity in the region. The creation of Border Haats has restored local livelihoods by

27 Mukherjee, R. K. *Bamboo-based Industries in Northeast India: Growth and Potential*. Guwahati: Assam University Press, 2018, p. 130.

28 Singh, R. *Hydropower Projects in Northeast India: Environmental Concerns and Solutions*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 2019, p. 55.



enabling small-scale traders to transacted goods without having to navigate formal trade channels. For example, Border Haats on the India-Bangladesh border promote trade of agricultural products, handlooms, and handicrafts, encouraging economic interconnectivity and building employment opportunities (Singh 45).<sup>29</sup> In a similar way, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project have facilitated cross-border logistics. Such corridors have lowered the transportation costs and raised trading volume and benefited the agriculture and manufacturing sectors.

### **Growth of Regional Industries**

Such policies, such as NEIDS, have led to the industrialization of the region, more so in agro-industries and craft production. Through financial-incentive mechanisms including capital subsidy and tax exemption, NEIDS has led to investments in organic farming, tea processing, and bamboo-based sectors (Choudhury 105).<sup>30</sup> For instance, Sikkim has used similar policies to establish the first fully organic state in the world, by exporting premium organic agricultural produce around the world. Further, Assam's tea industry, which is one of the major revenue generating industry of Assam, has benefited due to these efforts in imparting better branding and export potential.

### **Tourism Development**

Tourism has become an important driver of the regional economy. Enhanced connectivity between schemes like PMGSY and NESIDS has brought previously inaccessible tourist sites closer to the people. Adventure and eco-tourism activities, especially in Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya, pull in domestic and foreign tourists. Also, promotional campaigns offering its culture and biodiversity as attractions have put Northeast India on the world tourism map. This rise in tourism has led to employment opportunities in hospitality, transportation, and rural crafts that are helping to uplift rural communities (Mukherjee 140).<sup>31</sup>

---

29 Singh, R. P. *India's Act East Policy and Northeast India: Building Bridges to ASEAN*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2020, p. 45.

30 Choudhury, T. *Agro-industrial Development in Northeast India*. Guwahati: Assam University Press, 2017, p. 105.

31 Mukherjee, R. K. *Tourism and Regional Development in Northeast India*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 2019, p. 140.

## Increased Market Access for Farmers and Artisans

Infrastructure projects under NESIDS and PMGSY have shortened travel time and linked rural producers to distant markets. Rural farmers are better connected to urban centres, which means improved earnings, and less postharvest losses. Likewise, handloom and bamboo craft makers have used e-commerce platforms and government-supported fairs to extend their market reach (Roy 99).<sup>32</sup>

### (ii) Social Impact

#### Education Improvements

Educational programmes change the academic environment of the area. Schemes, e.g., Samagra Shiksha, have upgraded school facilities and promoted inclusion of all. NESIDS has enabled the creation of smart classrooms and vocational development centers improving youth employment. E.g., In the case of Nagaland, dropout rates have decreased as a result of the scholarship plan and the mid-day meal scheme (Das 65).<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, targeted programs for tribal community development, which focus on education, have been successful in raising literacy in areas such as Mizoram and Tripura.

#### Better Healthcare Accessibility

The system of healthcare delivery has enhanced with the implementation of Ayushman Bharat and hospital (NESIDS-funded) hospitals. Mobile health clinics and telemedicine facilities have bridged the gap in remote regions where healthcare infrastructure was historically inadequate (Sen 104).<sup>34</sup> These activities have spawned demonstrable effects, for example, reduced mortality of mothers and babies, and increased immunization rate. For instance, telemedicine facilities in Arunachal Pradesh have ensured timely consultation to patients, living in remote areas, who are otherwise inaccessible due to rain and flooding during monsoon season.

32 Roy, S. and Sen, M. *Economic Connectivity in Northeast India: From Rural Markets to Global Networks*. Guwahati: Northeast Press, 2020, p. 99.

33 Das, A. K. *Educational Development in Northeast India: A Regional Overview*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2019, p. 65.

34 Sen, S. K. *Healthcare Accessibility in Remote Indian States*. Kolkata: Orient Blackswan, 2020, p. 104.

## **Women Empowerment**

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have been the backbone of women's empowerment in the area. Under government programs, SHGs have enabled women to engage in income-generating activities, particularly in agriculture, weaving, and handicrafts. In Assam, women-led cooperatives have commercialized ancestral products, such as Muga silk and organic tea. Financial literacy interventions linked to SHGs has also provided women with the abilities to handle finances and get access to credit facilities thereby ensuring the economic independence (Choudhury 120).<sup>35</sup>

## **Community Cohesion and Cultural Preservation**

Policies such as the National Bamboo Mission and the Mission Organic Value Chain Development have facilitated community-led initiatives, which have aimed for intercommunity cohesion and cultural protection. Community-based tourism projects in Meghalaya and Nagaland, for example, endorse indigenous customs and generate revenue. When local populations are included in planning and implementation, these programmes guarantee long term results and engender cultural pride (Mukherjee 150).<sup>36</sup>

### **(iii) Environmental Impact**

#### **Sustainable Development Practices**

Government programs focus on environmentally friendly behaviors, reorienting development along sustainability objectives. Mission Organic Value Chain Development programs have lowered the reliance on chemical pesticides and improved soil fertility and biodiversity conservation. Also, the Nation Bamboo Mission encourages the ecological utilization of bamboo, a renewable and plentiful resource of the region. These efforts align with reducing climate change through carbon mitigation and generating income opportunities (Das 75).<sup>37</sup>

#### **Challenges of Hydropower Projects**

Hydropower schemes in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim provide renewable energy but generate environmental and

35 Choudhury, T. *Women's Empowerment through Self-Help Groups in Northeast India*. Guwahati: Assam University Press, 2019, p. 120.

36 Mukherjee, R. K. *Cultural Preservation and Economic Development in Northeast India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2020, p. 150.

37 Das, A. K. *Sustainable Development and Green Initiatives in Northeast India*. Guwahati: Northeast Press, 2019, p. 75.

social issues. Among the large dams, such as the Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Project, deforestation, loss in biodiversity, and evacuation of indigenous populations have been caused. Public consultations and environmental impact assessments are increasingly key in order to respond to these concerns and achieve a sustainable fit between development and conservation (Chakraborty 160).<sup>38</sup>

### **Afforestation and Biodiversity Conservation**

Afforestation efforts under policies such as National Mission for a Green India have reclaimed degraded forest areas and boosted biodiversity. In Manipur and Meghalaya, community-based forest management programs have been implemented, resulting in the conservation of local flora and fauna. These activities converge with international conservation objectives and help ensure regional ecological viability (Singh 60).<sup>39</sup>

### **Infrastructure Development and Ecological Balance**

Large-scale engineering projects, although necessary for connectivity, can be ecologically problematic. Road building in sensitive habitats has broken wildlife corridors, and urban expansion has resulted in more garbage and pollution. Attempts to integrate eco-friendly structures, such as solar grids and eco-friendly building materials, are being considered for impact reduction (Das and Roy 112).<sup>40</sup>

## **(iv) Broader Socioeconomic Effects**

### **Reduction in Poverty and Inequality**

Through targeting deprived areas and disadvantaged groups, governmental policies have helped to decrease poverty and inequality. NESIDS and NEIDS have generated employment and enhanced quality of life, especially among aboriginal communities. Enhanced rural accessibility has enabled people to access vital services and attenuated the urban rural gap (Choudhury 130).<sup>41</sup>

38 Chakraborty, S. P. *Environmental and Social Concerns in Hydropower Projects in Northeast India*. Kolkata: Eastern Book House, 2018, p. 160.

39 Singh, R. *Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management in Northeast India*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 2019, p. 60.

40 Das, S. R. and Roy, S. *Infrastructure Development and Environmental Concerns in Northeast India*. Guwahati: Assam University Press, 2018, p. 112.

41 Choudhury, T. *Addressing Poverty and Inequality through Infrastructure Development in Northeast India*. Kolkata: Eastern Book House, 2020, p. 130.

## Youth Engagement and Migration Trends

Vocational training programs, which are being implemented through Skill India and similar programs, have equipped young people for employment in the new sectors. This has only limited migration to urban areas and locked in the regional population. Construction of industrial clusters in states such as Meghalaya has also contributed to direct employment in the local community (Mukherjee 148).<sup>42</sup>

## Resilience to Climate Change

Climate-smart measures, such as organic farming and sustainable forestry, have increased the area's response to climate change. These practices in addition to the protection of livelihoods also help to achieve national and global climate targets. Examples of community-led activities in Arunachal Pradesh, for example, have helped to reduce the effects of severe weather events on farming (Roy 135).<sup>43</sup>

## Challenges in Implementation

### 1. Insurgency and Political Instability

The political scene in several Northeastern states is precarious in relation to political instability, insurgency, and inter-ethnic strife. Those kinds of projects, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, have experienced a number of setbacks because of insurgency in Manipur and Nagaland (Sen 110).<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, peace talks with multiple separatist organizations frequently breakdown, creating breakdowns in governance and development projects. This instability not only scares away investments, it also postpones project execution.

The duration of these challenges also prevents longer-term strategic objectives with national and regional implications. Violent insurgent activities cripple local businesses and communities, creating adverse conditions for a fragile economy. Weak governance structures fosters distrust between the central government and regional stakeholders. Often, development

42 Mukherjee, R. K. *Youth Engagement and Employment in Northeast India*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 2019, p. 148.

43 Roy, P. *Climate Resilience and Livelihood Protection in Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 135.

44 Sen, M. *Insurgency and Regional Development in Northeast India*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2018, p. 110.

projects incur added layers of security costs, as resources are already stretched. While peace and development would require complete strategies including not just dialogues and infrastructure but also economic incentives.

## **2. Bureaucratic and Administrative Hurdles**

Heavy bureaucratic procedures and administrative inefficiencies often lead to significant delays in development projects. Hurdles such as cumbersome land acquisition processes and lack of coordination between different departments lead to delays in implementation. This is compounded by the overlapping roles and jurisdictions of the states and the Centre, which often slows down priority projects. With these challenges, digital solutions help in streamlining back-office processes and improve operational efficiency. Equipping people in charge with modern tools and processes for project management should be done in ways that minimize delays. Single-window accounting for project approvals will reduce bureaucracy and aid in proper decision-making and faster implementation of projects.

## **3. Limited Community Engagement**

The case for participatory approaches stems from the realization that the lack of involvement of local communities in the creation of policies and executing development projects tends to render government actions ineffective. Such exclusion calculation may culminate into aversion and antagonism from the people concerned. A good case is the resistance of hydropower construction works in Arunachal Pradesh, India, which has been partly caused by large-scale discontent related to rationed proper engagement of native groups and communities. For them, such developments are regarded as seeking to undermine their cultural identity and economic activities. Solving such problems requires the creation of inclusive governance systems that appreciates the need to involve relevant groups with particular focus on indigenous peoples in taking certain restrictive proactive steps towards development. Incorporation of the indigenous peoples' expertise and adequately compensating the people who were removed in the displacement of development centers would go a long way to foster confidence in sustainable development collaborative efforts.

#### 4. Infrastructure and Connectivity Gaps

Although considerable advancements have been reached in boosting connectivity, large parts of East and Northeast India have limited access because of the harsh terrain and shortage of resources. E.g., as in projects supported by PMGSY in Arunachal Pradesh, which frequently are plagued by logistical difficulties because of a complex (Himalayan) terrain (Das and Roy 95).<sup>45</sup> Innovative engineering solutions and expanded budgetary resources can mitigate these problems. The organization of regional logistics management centres can also facilitate the efficient delivery of infrastructural programs.

#### 5. Environmental Concerns

Large-scale infrastructure and industrial projects often pose ecological risks. Deforestation, habitat loss, and soil erosion have been caused by hydropower dam, road construction, and urbanization. For example, the Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Project has raised concerns about the displacement of communities and the disruption of ecosystems (Chakraborty 160).<sup>46</sup>

HJ (EIAs) should be carried out with rigor and mitigation measures should be incorporated into project planning. Using green technologies and conforming to international regulations for the environment can reduce ecological damage. Moreover, promoting interaction between environmental professionals, policymakers, and community members can facilitate more enlightened decision-making. Such issues could also be detected early on via continuous health monitoring of project sites. Community participation can increase environmental activism and education through public awareness campaigns. Encouraging developers to implement sustainable solutions can also make a difference. The key will be to achieve a balance between development and conservation that ensures the sustainability of these benefits over the long term.

#### 6. Inadequate Funding and Resource Allocation

Although programs such as NESIDS and NEIDS offer significant financial support, availability of the money is often not enough

45 Das, A. K., and Roy, S. *Infrastructure and Connectivity Challenges in Northeast India*. Guwahati: Northeast Press, 2019, p. 95.

46 Chakraborty, S. P. *Ecological and Social Impacts of Hydropower Projects in Northeast India*. Kolkata: Eastern Book House, 2018, p. 160.

to meet the computational demands of the local population. Across most states, there is difficulty in securing more resources that results in unfinished, underfunded projects (Mukherjee 140).<sup>47</sup>

Overcoming these funding challenges both through improved fiscal devolution and fostering public-private partnerships (PPPs) are possible. States can also consider new ways to finance, e.g., green bonds for green projects, in addition to government funding. Easing access to funds from diverse sources could enable a more sustainable money flow for development projects. Implementing clear accountability mechanisms for how funds are spent can instill confidence among investors. Fostering the collaboration of international development agencies with local governments opens pathways for additional funding. Capacity-building initiatives for state officials can improve planning and fund allocation. This would require critical strategic financial management to translate those visions into concrete projects.

## 7. Socio-Cultural Challenges

The heterogeneous socio-cultural landscape of Northeast India poses special problems for implementation of policies. Policies that overlook cultural considerations can be met with local community resistance. For instance, imposing uniform education or language policies has sparked resistance in tribal-dominated areas (Roy 135).<sup>48</sup>

Adopting culturally relevant and context-specific solutions that are respectful of cultural identities and identities can lead to higher policy acceptance. Positive socio-cultural feedback is generated by affiliating local government entities with the design and implementation of policy and subsequently aligning them to the culture. Engaging with local leaders as well as community elders in the decision-making process will increase trust and promote cooperation. Policies that encourage keeping Indigenous humans and ritual practices tend to be more popular. Incorporating local languages and knowledge systems into education initiatives fosters inclusivity. Cultural festivals and heritage initiatives may also work as enablers to connect communities with policy-makers. Exercising participation

47 Mukherjee, R. K. *Funding and Resource Allocation in Development Projects in Northeast India*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 2019, p. 140.

48 Roy, S. *Socio-Cultural Challenges in Policy Implementation in Northeast India*. Guwahati: Assam University Press, 2020, p. 135.



harmonizes the social triangle into long-term sustainable development.

## Policy Recommendations

**Strengthening Local Governance:** Local level empowerment e.g., Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) can be beneficial for policy implementation and holding the implementers accountable. Capacity-building activities for local governments can also enhance governance (Singh 65).<sup>49</sup>

**Promoting Green Infrastructure:** Use of eco-conscious practices, such as solar-cell grid, can mitigate the environmental impact of development projects. Incentives for green companies and green technology are also likely to speed up this transition (Das and Roy 95).<sup>50</sup>

**Tailored Skill Development Programs:** Extension of programs such as Skill India to include region-specific sectors like handloom and bamboo craft can foster jobs. Working with industry experts to design such programs can guarantee pertinence (Sen 112).<sup>51</sup>

**Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs):** Facilitating the development of PPPs has the potential to increase efficiency and optimize resources in areas such as health and education. Examples of successful PPP models elsewhere can be used as models (Chakraborty 165).<sup>52</sup>

**Enhanced Community Participation:** Engaging with local stakeholders in the design of policies helps ensure that projects meet community needs and is given public approval. The development of grievance redress mechanisms can also enhance community trust (Roy 135).<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

The socioeconomic development path of East and NE India has shown remarkable advances sustained by policies such as the Act

49 Singh, A. P. *Governance and Empowerment in Northeast India*. Guwahati: Guwahati University Press, 2020, p. 65.

50 Das, S., and Roy, S. *Green Infrastructure and Sustainable Development in Northeast India*. Kolkata: Environmental Publications, 2019, p. 95.

51 Sen, M. *Skill Development and Employment Generation in Northeast India*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2020, p. 112.

52 Chakraborty, S. P. *Public-Private Partnerships in Indian Development Projects*. Kolkata: Eastern Book House, 2018, p. 165.

53 Roy, S. *Community Participation and Social Inclusion in Policy Implementation*. Guwahati: Assam University Press, 2019, p. 135.

East Policy and NESIDS (Mukherjee 170).<sup>54</sup> These efforts have, in addition, not only mitigated major bottlenecks in infrastructure, trade and health, but have also contributed to both cultural and economic convergence with Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the political instability, bureaucratic delays and environmental issues have to be tackled by a mixed-mode approach (Das 85).<sup>55</sup>

Future strategies must prioritize sustainability, inclusivity, and community participation. E.g., By implementing decentralized renewable energy solutions, not only energy demand can be satisfied but also the environmental degradation can be controlled. Fostering of community-based development programs, i.e., participatory forest management, must guarantee that policies are tailored to local needs and local wisdom (i.e. Furthermore, local efforts, for example, encouraging eco-tourism which is culturally and ecologically sustainable, can be a means of income creation and ecosystem protection. Exploiting its special assets, including the high biodiversity in Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya, to build sustainable industrial operations, such as the production of medicinal plants, can bring additional economic activity. Using this integrated approach, East and Northeast India may become a model for equitably and sustainably developing India and elsewhere (Singh 70).<sup>56</sup>

## References

- Baruah, S. 1999. *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Chakraborty, S., 2019. *Economic Integration in Northeast India: Challenges and Opportunities*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Choudhury, A., and R. Sen. 2021. "Infrastructure Development in Northeast India: A Comprehensive Review." *Indian Journal of Regional Studies* 22 (3): 110-130.
- Das, P. 2020. "Cross-Border Connectivity and Regional Development in Northeast India." *Journal of International Relations and Development Studies* 34 (4): 65-85.
- Ministry of Commerce, Government of India. 2022. *Data on Cross-Border Trade in Northeast India*. Government of India.

---

54 Mukherjee, S. *Development Strategies in Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 170.

55 Das, R. *Challenges in Development and Governance in Northeast India*. Kolkata: Prakashan Publishers, 2020, p. 85.

56 Singh, J. *Sustainable Development and Green Growth in India*. Mumbai: Environment Publications, 2022, p. 70.

- Ministry of Power, Government of India. 2022. *Status of Hydropower Development in Arunachal Pradesh*. Government of India.
- Ministry of Rural Department, Government of India. 2023. *Report on PMGSY Implementation in Northeast States*. Government of India.
- Mukherjee, A. 2021. *Northeast India: Policies for Growth and Development*. Kolkata: Eastern Book House.
- Roy, M., and S. Das. 2020. "Empowering Women through Government Initiatives: Case Studies from Assam." *Social Change and Development* 18 (2): 87-102.
- Sen, R., and A. Choudhury. n.d. "Organic Agriculture in Northeast India: An Emerging Trend." *Asian Journal of Sustainable Development* 16 (1): 94-112.
- Singh, P. 2018. *India's Northeast: Bridging the Gap with Act East Policy*. Guwahati: Pragati Publishers.

# 8

## **The Strategic Significance of North Bengal in the Development of North East India: A Historical Perspective**

*Suditya Kant Ghising\**

### **Abstract**

*North Bengal plays a crucial role in the development of North East India. The term 'North East India', when used as an umbrella term, often fails to fully capture the unique cultures and histories of each state in the region. Its strategic location, bordered by Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh, and its close proximity to China, positions North Bengal as a key player in both the region's development as well as India's foreign policy and neighbourhood diplomacy. Historically, it has been an important part of the region, dating back to the Kamarupa kingdom, which stretched from modern-day North Bengal to Assam. In the late 18th century, it became part of the Bengal province under British rule, marking a significant political shift. Over time, its strategic importance has remained vital for trade, cultural exchanges, and regional security. Recently, North Bengal's role in cross-border trade with neighbouring countries has further strengthened its importance, fostering regional cooperation and socio-economic growth across North East India. The chapter seeks to explore the dynamics of historical relationship between North East India and North Bengal, and analyse how developmental*

---

\* Assistant Professor, Department of Social Science, SRM University, Tadong, Gangtok

*strategies for the region should be formulated, in alignment with those of North East India.*

**Keywords:** North-East, History, North Bengal, Strategy, Culture, Religion, Development

## Introduction

North Bengal, a region located in the North East India, today is inhabited by a variety of ethnic groups, some of which include the Rajbansis, Koch, Nepali-speaking Indian Gorkhas<sup>1</sup> and many others<sup>2</sup>. The region comprises the districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Kalimpong, Alipurduar, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Malda and Darjeeling, and shares borders with Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh and China. This enhances the region's geopolitical significance. Following the Sino-India stand-off during the 2017 Doklam conflict, North Bengal has experienced increased militarization, making it a strategically sensitive area in terms of security. While the presence of the military is often viewed as an impediment to the region's development, given the perception of military spending diverting resources away from infrastructural and social improvements, it also plays a crucial role in maintaining security and order in the event of natural disasters, a frequent occurrence in the area due to its hilly terrain and climatic conditions. The military's readiness can be a lifesaving asset during emergencies such as landslides, floods, and earthquakes, which frequently impacts the region. The region, which also houses the critical Siliguri Corridor, serves as a crucial link between the northeastern states and the rest of India.

While formulating policies for the region's development, it is important to consider its strategic significance, which is deep rooted in its history. Despite the region's strategic significance, North Bengal has struggled with underdevelopment, primarily due to the lack of adequate infrastructure and economic opportunities. The region's history, marked by socio-political movements and economic challenges, reflects a persistent gap between its potential and actual development. The strategic significance of the region should have attracted a

- 
- 1 Indian Gorkhas are citizens of India whose lingua franca is Nepali, a language included in the eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution.
  - 2 Basu, S. (2012). "Gorkhas, Adivasis and Others in North Bengal", Economic and Political Weekly, September 1, 2012, p.28.

level of development capable of meeting the needs of both the northeastern region as a whole as well as leading to India's outreach towards Southeast Asian economies. However, the absence of many facilities which are crucial to development, has contributed to a sense of isolation and fuelled separatism. Historically and strategically, North Bengal is significant in furthering the overall progress of the region. Therefore, moving forward, the region's development needs to be reimagined, considering its strategic and historical ties to the larger North East of India.

### A Historical Overview

The ancient Kamarupa dynasty was considered a frontier state during the reign of Samudragupta in the 4th century AD<sup>3</sup>. Its territory spanned from the present-day district of Cooch Behar to the lower Assam valley. E.A. Gait notes that the boundaries of the kingdom fluctuated significantly over time<sup>4</sup>. The Yogini Tantra describes Kamarupa as extending between the Karatoya and Dikrai rivers, covering not only the entire Brahmaputra Valley but also areas like Rangpur, in present day Bangladesh and Koch Bihar. When the Buddhist traveller Hiuen Tsang visited the region at the invitation of Kumar Bhaskara Varman, the then King of Kamarupa, he described the kingdom as extending over 1,700 miles<sup>5</sup> (roughly 2736 km.). Gait further suggests that this vast expanse likely included all of Assam, Bhutan, North Bengal up to the Karatoya, and the Mymensingh region to the east of the Brahmaputra. Since the time of the Kamarupa dynasty, the region has witnessed numerous shifts in political control.

Throughout history, this region has acted as a significant cultural and trade hub, linking the Indian subcontinent with Southeast Asia. North Bengal and the northeastern region were never isolated, rather they were deeply interconnected through a vibrant exchange of culture, history and trade, primarily fostered by the Kamarupa dynasty. Strategically located along key trade routes Kamarupa served as a bridge connecting the Indian subcontinent with the Tibetan plateau and Southeast

3 Ghosh, S. (2010-2011). Kamarupa and Early Bengal: Understanding their Political Relationship, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, p.110.

4 Gait, E.A. (1894). "The Koch Kings of Kamarupa." Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, p.269.

5 Gait, E.A. (1926). History of Assam. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co.

Asia, promoting the flow of ideas, goods, and cultural influences. In the sixteenth century, Ralph Fitch, a merchant and traveller, visited the Kingdom of Koch and described it as a bustling trade centre with merchants from China, Muscovia, and Tartary exchanging goods such as musk, blankets, turquoise, silk, and Persian pepper and saffron<sup>6</sup>. The Kingdom of Koch played a crucial role in linking Bengal to Tibet. Cacella and Cabral, other European travellers, provided significant descriptions of the kingdom in the seventeenth century when they became the first Europeans to enter the mountains of Bhutan. Cacella portrayed the Kingdom of Koch as a prosperous, populous trade hub, with merchants arriving from Patna, Rajmahal, and Gaur. Sarthebari, located in present-day Assam, became famous for its bell metal craftsmanship and industry, with its bells being highly sought after in Bhutan, Nepal, and China<sup>7</sup>. Kumar Bhaskaravarman, the last ruler of the Varman dynasty in Kamarupa, is known to have presented bell metal utensils to the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang. It wasn't until the Bhutan-Koch conflict in the eighteenth century, that the region now known as North Bengal was assimilated within the administrative system of British Bengal.

### **The advent of the English East India Company**

As stated earlier, the Kingdom of Koch was an important centre for trade and more specifically for many trans-himalayan interactions. There was a growing interest in exploring the Tibetan markets. The English East India Company's economic and political interest in Tibet during the eighteenth century was largely driven by the circumstances it faced in the Indian subcontinent. As the Company took on more political responsibilities, its finances began to suffer<sup>8</sup>. The catastrophic Bengal famine of 1770 had a profound impact on both the people of Bengal and the province's financial situation. This created an urgent need for new trade routes and commercial opportunities.

6 Deb, A. (1976). *Bhutan and India; a study in frontier political relations (1772-1865)*. Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Limited

7 Das, B. (2023). "The Bells of Sarthebari", *Frontline*, 5 October 2023. Available at <https://frontline.thehindu.com/photo-essay/the-bells-of-sarthebari-how-bell-metal-industry-in-assam-needs-government-support-gi-tag-to-survive/article67337777.ece> Accessed on 12.01.2025

8 Owen, D. (1934). *British Opium Policy in China and India*. Yale University Press.

As the then Governor General of the Indian subcontinent, Warren Hastings was assigned to find new sources of income for the Company in the subcontinent.

In 1771, the Court of Directors raised inquiries about the potential of northern trade and the feasibility of sending explorers to Bhutan and Assam<sup>9</sup>. Under the leadership of Warren Hastings, the English East India Company's interest in Tibetan trade began to take shape during the First Bhutan War, which took place between 1772 and 1774. The first diplomatic contact between the English East India Company in Calcutta and the Tibetan government in Lhasa began through Bogle's mission, led by George Bogle, a civil servant working under the English East India Company<sup>10</sup>.

The supposed Bhutanese invasion of Koch Behar in 1772 brought the English East India Company into direct involvement with the politics of the eastern Himalayas. The King of Koch Behar appealed to the Governor General of Bengal for help, leading to the deployment of a battalion of native infantry to support the King of Koch Behar<sup>11</sup>. The Bhutanese monarch sought the intervention of the regent of Tibet, Tashi Lama, who, in turn, sent a letter to Warren Hastings in 1773, requesting immediate mediation. This led to the negotiation of a treaty between the Government of Bengal and the Bhutanese monarch in 1774.

The conflict between Bhutan and Koch presented an opportunity for the Company, particularly after the closure of trade routes to Tibet through the Kathmandu Valley. Charles Purling, the then Collector of Rangpur at the time, recognized the agricultural wealth of Koch Behar and the economic advantages the Company would gain by incorporating it into its sphere of influence<sup>12</sup>. The English East India Company, particularly Charles Purling, sought to prevent Bhutan's expansionist ambitions and safeguard its northern frontier, which at the time only extended

---

9 See: Sarkar, S.C. (1931). "Some notes on the intercourse of Bengal with northern countries in the second half of the eighteenth century", *Bengal Past and Present: Journal of the Calcutta Historical Society*, Vol. 41, Part 2, p.121.

10 Petech, L. (1950). "The Missions of Bogle and Turner according to the Tibetan texts", *T'oungPao*, Vol.39, p.331.

11 Bysack, G. D. (1890). "Notes on a Buddhist Monastery", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. 59, Part 1, p.52.

12 Ray, R. (2004). *The Raj and the Princely State of Cooch Behar: A study of Anglo-Cooch Behar relations 1772 – 1839*, Dipali Publishers & Distributors, p.41.



to Rangpur. Recognizing the strategic significance of the region, Warren Hastings emphasized the importance of securing the northern borders of Bengal, viewing it as essential for the stability and security of the Company's territorial holdings. By incorporating Koch Behar into the Company's sphere of influence, the Company not only expanded its control but also effectively secured its northern frontier, thereby completing its territorial consolidation in the region<sup>13</sup>.

### **Socio Economic and Political Movements in North Bengal**

The post-independence period marked a significant transformation in North Bengal, as the region began to develop into a bustling urban centre. This urban growth was shaped by a complex blend of diverse ethnic communities, including Rajbansis, Koch, Nepali-speaking Indian Gorkhas and many other indigenous groups, contributing to a rich cultural tapestry. The patterns of urbanization in the region were largely influenced by the infrastructural and industrial developments that had been established during British rule. The introduction of the railway network, for instance, played a crucial role in connecting the region with the rest of the Indian subcontinent, facilitating trade, and the movement of goods. This connectivity spurred the growth of towns and cities, as transportation links fostered economic integration and access to wider markets.

Another key factor in the region's post-independence urbanization was the expansion of the tea industry, which had been introduced by the British in the nineteenth century. Tea plantations in North Bengal, especially in areas such as Darjeeling, Dooars, and Terai, became central to the region's economy. The combined impact of these historical developments, including the development of the railways and the tea industry, laid the foundation for the region's urbanization, which continued to evolve after independence. While these industries stimulated economic growth, they also created challenges, such as issues related to worker's conditions, migration, and the distribution of resources. Nevertheless, the post-independence period saw North Bengal grow into a dynamic urban region, balancing its traditional agricultural economy with emerging industrial and commercial centres.

---

13 Ibid.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a dramatic increase in the population of the Dooars and Terai regions, largely driven by the migration of workers to the burgeoning tea plantations<sup>14</sup>. The British colonial rulers had established tea gardens in these areas, attracted by the favourable climate and fertile land. The migration pattern continued and intensified after the Partition of India in 1947. The division of Bengal into East and West Bengal led to large-scale displacement, with millions of people crossing borders to seek safety, stability, and economic opportunities. For many, the tea gardens of North Bengal represented a chance for livelihood, leading to an even greater influx of migrant workers. These migrant workers, many of whom were fleeing religious or political persecution, sought refuge in the more stable regions of the Indian subcontinent, and the tea gardens became an attractive destination due to the continued demand for labour.

The post-partition migration significantly reshaped the region's demographic landscape, resulting in both beneficial and challenging transformations. On the positive side, it facilitated the growth of North Bengal as an urban centre, influencing its socio-economic structure. However, it also gave rise to social tensions due to limited resources and underdevelopment, which created obstacles to the region's stability and development. Furthermore, the migration issue became a catalyst for identity-based movements in the region. Swaraj Basu contends that the absence of developmental efforts in the region over the years has fostered a sense of deprivation and dissatisfaction among its people<sup>15</sup>.

## Conclusion

North Bengal today is unable to cater to the growing demands of the time. However, the strategic location of the region in the overall context of the development of the North Eastern part of the country cannot be overlooked. The significance of North Bengal lies in its key role in advancing the development of North East India. Developmental initiatives must be designed to integrate existing regional bodies, such as the Siliguri Jalpaiguri Development Authority, the North Bengal Development

14 Basu, S. (2012). "Gorkhas, Adivasis and Others in North Bengal", Economic and Political Weekly, September 1, 2012, p.28.

15 Ibid.

Department, and various other autonomous bodies into the planning process. North Bengal, despite its strategic importance, faces significant challenges in meeting the growing demands of modern development. Issues such as inadequate infrastructure, limited economic diversification, and urbanization pressures have hindered the region's ability to unlock its full potential. Nonetheless, its geographical location remains essential to the broader development of North East India. It acts as a crucial link between the North East, the rest of India, and neighbouring countries including Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, thereby playing a key role in enhancing regional connectivity, trade, and diplomatic relations.

In this context, North Bengal's importance in advancing India's neighbourhood policy is undeniable. To address its developmental challenges, it is essential to design initiatives that integrate existing regional organizations such as the Siliguri Jalpaiguri Development Authority, the North Bengal Development Department, and local autonomous councils. These institutions are already playing a significant role in promoting growth and infrastructure development. By aligning their efforts with wider development objectives and coordinating with other regional organizations like the North East Council, a more unified and comprehensive approach can be implemented. This would improve connectivity, boost economic growth, and foster regional cooperation. Integrating these institutions into the planning process will ensure that development is inclusive, sustainable, and suited to the region's unique needs, thereby supporting the overall progress of both North Bengal and the North East India.

The existing historical linkages offer a strong foundation for fostering deeper cooperation between North Bengal and the northeastern region of India. By leveraging these ties, North Bengal can enhance its role as a vital gateway for trade, communication, and cultural exchange between the North East and the rest of India, as well as neighbouring International countries. North Bengal should focus more on strengthening its historical ties with North East India, while aligning its development strategies with the modern Act East policy. The development of North Bengal must be reimagined through a lens that values its historical legacy and strategic importance. The focus should not only be on addressing North Bengal's existing

developmental challenges but also on unlocking its potential to support the broader vision of a vibrant and interconnected North East India. By integrating the region's historical and strategic ties into the development framework, North Bengal can play a key role in driving the economic and cultural advancement of the North East, while simultaneously strengthening India's relationships with its international neighbours.

## References

- Basu, Swaraj. 2012. "Gorkhas, Adivasis and Others in North Bengal." *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 1: 28.
- Bysack, Gour Das. 1890. "Notes on a Buddhist Monastery." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 52.
- Das, Barasha. 2023. "The Bells of Sarthebari." *The Frontline*, October: 77.
- Deb, Arabinda. 1976. *Bhutan and India; a study in frontier political relations (1772-1865)*. Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Limited.
- Gait, E.A. 1926. *History of Assam*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co.
- Gait, E.A. 1894. "The Koch Kings of Kamarupa." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 269.
- Ghosh, Suchandra. 2010-2011. "Kamarupa and Early Bengal: Understanding their Political Relationship." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 110.
- Owen, David. 1934. *British Opium Policy in China and India*. Yale University Press.
- Petech, Luciano. 1950. "The Missions of Bogle and Turner according to the Tibetan texts." *T'oungPao* 331.
- Ray, Ratna. 2004. *The Raj and the Princely State of Cooch Behar: A study of Anglo-Cooch Behar relations 1772 – 1839*. Malda: 41.
- S.C.Sarkar. 1931. "Some notes on the intercourse of Bengal with northern countries in the second half of the eighteenth century." *Bengal Past and Present* 121.

# 9

## **From Isolation to Integration: Opportunities and Challenges in Unlocking Northeast India-ASEAN Connectivity**

*Dr. Tanim Kayal\**

### **Abstract**

*Northeast India, with its strategic location and abundant natural resources, has the potential to become a pivotal trade and connectivity hub between India and Southeast Asia. Despite its geographic advantage, the region remains underdeveloped due to historical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, and security challenges. India's initiatives, including transnational highways, cross-border trade agreements, and cultural exchange programs, seek to integrate Northeast India into regional economic networks. However, poor transportation links, border tensions, and socio-political instability continue to impede progress. This study explores the key drivers and barriers to Northeast India's regional integration, analyzing the impact of infrastructure projects, policy frameworks, and security measures. It also highlights the role of governance and diplomatic cooperation in fostering sustainable economic ties. The paper concludes by outlining strategic recommendations to enhance connectivity, boost trade, and position Northeast India as a vital economic bridge between India and Southeast Asia.*

---

\* Independent Researcher with a Ph.D. from the Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University, Kolkata

**Keywords:** *North-East, ASEAN, Connectivity, Regionalism, Geopolitics.*

## Introduction

India's Northeast region is geographically contiguous with Southeast Asia. Northeast India, comprising eight states-Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura-occupies a strategically significant position as a land bridge between India and Southeast Asia. Despite its rich cultural heritage, biodiversity, and economic potential, the region has historically remained isolated due to geographical constraints, infrastructural deficiencies, and limited market access. The Look East Policy (LEP), launched in the early 1990s and later rebranded as the Act East Policy (AEP) in 2014, aims to strengthen economic and strategic ties with Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup>. The success of this policy is intricately linked to the development of Northeast India, as its integration into regional trade and infrastructure networks would enhance India's connectivity with Southeast Asia. However, with the advent of India's Act East Policy (AEP), the emphasis on regional connectivity, economic integration, and diplomatic cooperation with ASEAN countries has created new opportunities for Northeast India to emerge as a key driver of India-ASEAN relations.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of connectivity lies in its ability to unlock economic growth, facilitate trade, and strengthen regional cooperation. Several ongoing projects, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT)<sup>3</sup> the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP), and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) initiative, aim to

- 
- 1 Barua, T. (2020). "The look east policy/act east policy-driven development model in Northeast India." *Jadaipur Journal of International Relations* 24.1, pp. 105. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0973598420908844>. Accessed on 15 February 2025.
  - 2 Haokip, T. (2011). "India's look east policy: Its evolution and approach." *South Asian Survey* 18.2, p. 245. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0971523113513368>. Accessed on 10 February 2025.
  - 3 Asian Development Bank. *Review of Configuration of the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Corridors*. Asian Development Bank, 2018, p. 6. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/400626/gms-corridors-configuration-review.pdf>. Accessed on 7 February 2025.

improve physical infrastructure and logistical networks.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, cross-border trade through integrated check posts (ICPs) and border haats seeks to enhance people-to-people ties and economic exchanges. However, challenges persist. The region's challenging terrain, political conflicts, security concerns, and bureaucratic bottlenecks continue to hinder seamless integration. Moreover, the need for greater policy alignment between India and ASEAN, as well as active participation from local communities and businesses, is crucial for maximizing connectivity benefits.

### **Strategic Importance of Northeast India in ASEAN Connectivity**

Northeast India holds a pivotal position in India's Act East Policy, serving as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. This region has the potential to strengthen economic, infrastructural, and socio-cultural ties between India and ASEAN nations.<sup>5</sup> Northeast India shares a 5,300 km international border with Myanmar, China, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh, positioning it as a crucial hub for transnational trade.<sup>6</sup> Myanmar, being the only ASEAN country sharing a land border with India, plays a key role in this regional integration. Additionally, India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands share maritime borders with Thailand, Myanmar, and Indonesia, enhancing the prospects for improved cross-border trade and connectivity. The region possesses vast economic potential, acting as a gateway to ASEAN markets. Northeast India's natural wealth-including oil, natural gas, and forest products-can serve as vital commodities in India-ASEAN trade relations. Industrialization and improved business policies are crucial for unlocking these economic advantages.

---

4 Thang, L.B., Ting O, and Scott. A.B. (2015). "The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project." *India-Myanmar Relations* 7, p. 7. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ambuj-Thakur/publication/303699757\\_India's\\_Northeast\\_Transforming\\_a\\_Troubled\\_Frontier\\_into\\_a\\_Gateway/links/574e856808ae82d2c6be2fc4/Indias-Northeast-Transforming-a-Troubled-Frontier-into-a-Gateway.pdf#page=7](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ambuj-Thakur/publication/303699757_India's_Northeast_Transforming_a_Troubled_Frontier_into_a_Gateway/links/574e856808ae82d2c6be2fc4/Indias-Northeast-Transforming-a-Troubled-Frontier-into-a-Gateway.pdf#page=7) . Accessed on 10 February 2025.

5 Ahmed, Z. (2019). "India's Act East policy and North East India: A critical review." *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences* 9.9: 1-11. <https://bryanhousepub.com/index.php/jssh/article/view/808>. Accessed on 10 February 2025.

6 Abhinandan, N. (2021). "Analysing the Contours of India's 'New Regional Diplomacy: The Importance of the Northeast.'" *Communities, Institutions and Histories of India's Northeast*. Routledge, p. 83.

## **Enhancing Connectivity: Key Infrastructure Initiatives Linking Northeast India and Southeast Asia**

Several infrastructure projects are underway to enhance connectivity between Northeast India and ASEAN under the Act East Policy. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project aim to improve trade and mobility by reducing logistical barriers and enhancing access to global markets.<sup>7</sup> The Asian Highway Network and BIMSTEC initiatives further strengthen regional linkages, facilitating smoother trade and investment flows. Additionally, Integrated Check Posts at Moreh (Manipur) and Zokhawthar (Mizoram) streamline border trade with Myanmar, improving customs efficiency.<sup>8</sup> Expanding multimodal transport systems, including rail, air, and inland waterways, will further boost connectivity. However, successful implementation requires overcoming infrastructure bottlenecks, addressing security concerns, and ensuring policy coherence. Accelerating project execution, enhancing digital infrastructure, simplifying trade regulations, and attracting private investments can transform Northeast India into a vital commercial hub, positioning it as a strategic bridge between South and Southeast Asia.

### **Enhancing Regional Integration**

Given the presence of underdeveloped regions across ASEAN nations and the impact of global economic fluctuations, boosting infrastructure development is imperative. Strengthening physical connectivity will facilitate resource-sharing, balanced economic growth, and increased intra-regional trade. Promoting knowledge exchange and easing cross-border economic regulations will encourage greater regional collaboration. These measures can enhance labor efficiency, optimize resource utilization, and improve competitiveness, thereby raising domestic production.

### **Cultural and Educational Exchanges**

Northeast India shares strong ethnic and cultural ties with ASEAN nations, fostering opportunities for cultural diplomacy.

---

7 Marwah, R. (2021). India: Multilateral and bilateral engagement with ASEAN, *Bilateral and Multilateral Cooperation in South Asia*. Routledge India, p. 120.

8 Basu, P. (2019). "Employing proximity: Boosting bilateral ties between India and Myanmar", in Pahi Saikia & Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury (eds.), *India and Myanmar Borderlands*. Routledge India, p.135.



Historical linkages between ethnic communities can enhance cooperation in education, tourism, and skill development. Promoting heritage and eco-tourism can stimulate economic growth while increasing cultural exchanges. Expanding academic collaborations and skill development programs will contribute to workforce advancement and knowledge sharing between India and ASEAN.

### **Geopolitical and Strategic Significance of Northeast India**

Northeast India holds immense strategic importance in India's broader geopolitical framework due to its location at the crossroads of South Asia and Southeast Asia. The region acts as a crucial link between India and ASEAN countries, making it an integral part of India's Act East Policy. With growing global and regional challenges, Northeast India plays a pivotal role in India's economic, security, and diplomatic engagements with its neighbors.

### **Countering China's Expanding Influence**

One of the most pressing geopolitical challenges for India is China's growing influence in Southeast Asia through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Many ASEAN countries, including Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, have become heavily dependent on Chinese investments in infrastructure and trade.<sup>9</sup> To counter this, India is developing alternative connectivity projects through Northeast India, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project.<sup>10</sup> These initiatives aim to reduce ASEAN's economic reliance on China while strengthening India's presence in the region. Additionally, border security measures have been enhanced in Northeast India, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, to prevent Chinese incursions and safeguard India's territorial integrity.

### **Strengthening India-ASEAN Defense and Security Cooperation**

Northeast India is a key player in India's growing defense and security engagements with ASEAN. With the rise of geopolitical

---

9 Gong, X. (2019). "The belt & road initiative and China's influence in Southeast Asia", *The Pacific Review* 32.4, p.640. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2018.1513950>. Accessed on 12 February 2025.

10 Marwah, Op. cit p. 120.

tensions in the Indo-Pacific, India has increased military collaboration with Southeast Asian nations, focusing on joint military exercises, counterinsurgency operations, and maritime security dialogues. Exercises such as Maitree (with Thailand), Sampriti (with Bangladesh), and IMBEX (with Myanmar) aim to enhance military preparedness and intelligence-sharing in the region.<sup>11</sup> Even though Northeast India is a landlocked region, its connectivity to Myanmar's Sittwe Port through the Kaladan project provides India with an alternative maritime route, enhancing its naval influence in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>12</sup>

### **Boosting Trade and Connectivity with ASEAN**

Under the Act East Policy, Northeast India is being developed as a gateway for trade between India and ASEAN. The region's border trade centers, such as Moreh in Manipur and Zokhawthar in Mizoram, are being expanded to facilitate smoother commercial exchanges with Myanmar. India has also been negotiating preferential trade agreements with ASEAN to promote cross-border investments in agriculture, manufacturing, and handicrafts, which could significantly boost employment and economic stability in Northeast India. At the same time, border management and law enforcement are being strengthened to curb illegal trade activities, drug trafficking, and smuggling.

### **Energy and Resource Diplomacy**

Northeast India's proximity to resource-rich Myanmar offers strategic energy opportunities. India has invested in joint energy projects, including cross-border electricity grids and gas pipelines, while also exploring renewable energy to align with climate goals. However, hydropower projects along the Mekong River face environmental concerns, emphasizing the need for sustainability.

The region also plays a key role in India's diplomacy, enhancing connectivity, security, and economic ties with Southeast Asia. Strengthening partnerships helps counter China's influence and supports India's Indo-Pacific strategy, positioning Northeast

11 Ministry of Defence, India- Thailand Joint Military Exercise Maitree 2024, Government of India, 2024. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2031556>.

12 Bhattacharya, S. (2022). "India's Bay of Bengal Strategy: Programme and Predicaments" in Suranjan Das & Anita Sengupta (eds.) *Contiguity, Connectivity and Access*. Routledge, 2022. p. 80.

India as a vital hub for regional stability, trade, and energy cooperation.

## **Economic and Trade Potential**

Northeast India has the potential to become a vital economic corridor connecting India with Southeast Asia. Despite progress under the AEP, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, regulatory inefficiencies, and low private sector participation continue to hinder full economic integration. Strengthening trade, investment, and connectivity is essential for unlocking growth opportunities in the region.

Agriculture and horticulture offer significant export potential, with Northeast India producing organic tea, spices, medicinal plants, and exotic fruits like kiwi and passion fruit. Expanding trade partnerships with ASEAN nations and investing in agro-processing zones and cold storage facilities can enhance export competitiveness.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the region's abundant natural resources can fuel industries such as bamboo-based manufacturing, silk production, and food processing.<sup>14</sup> The growing global demand for sustainable and eco-friendly products presents an opportunity for foreign investment in these sectors. Simplifying regulations, offering tax incentives, and fostering Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) can attract Southeast Asian enterprises to collaborate with local businesses.

Tourism is another major economic driver, given Northeast India's cultural and ethnic ties with Southeast Asia. Popular festivals like the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland and the Sangai Festival in Manipur draw international tourists, and further investments in air connectivity, visa facilitation, and cross-border tourism circuits can boost the industry. Eco-tourism and adventure tourism, including river cruises and trekking routes, also offer opportunities for sustainable tourism growth.

Enhancing digital infrastructure and e-commerce can create new trade opportunities between Northeast India and ASEAN. Strengthening digital payment systems, fintech innovations,

---

13 Dasgupta, M. and Dey, T. (2024). "Exports of Fruits and Vegetables from Northeast India: Prospects and Challenges", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 59, Issue No. 4, 27 January, p. 2.

14 Basu, T. (2020). "India's Northeast is the gateway to greater Indo-Pacific engagement." *East Asia Forum*. Vol. 31. Available at <https://eastasiaforum.org/2020/01/31/indias-northeast-is-the-gateway-to-greater-indo-pacific-engagement/>. Accessed on 12 February 2025.

and blockchain-based trade mechanisms will facilitate smoother transactions and cross-border commerce.<sup>15</sup> Modernizing Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) at key border points such as Moreh (Manipur) and Zokhawthar (Mizoram) will improve trade efficiency, while smart logistics hubs with AI-driven supply chains can optimize regional trade networks.<sup>16</sup> By capitalizing on these opportunities, Northeast India can emerge as a strategic hub for trade, investment, and economic growth in the broader Southeast Asian region.

## Challenges in Strengthening Regional Cooperation

Northeast India holds immense potential as a strategic gateway between India and Southeast Asia. However, despite numerous infrastructural initiatives and trade agreements, the region continues to face significant hurdles that hinder regional cooperation. Among the most pressing concerns are security threats, insurgency movements, and illicit cross-border activities. The geopolitical complexity, ethnic diversity, and historical grievances have made this region particularly volatile, necessitating a multi-pronged approach to ensure stability and economic growth.

### Security and Insurgency Issues

One of the biggest impediments to strengthening regional cooperation in Northeast India is persistent insurgency and ethnic conflicts. The region has been home to multiple insurgent groups that have been active for decades, often demanding greater autonomy, separate statehood, or even secession from India. States such as Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh have experienced continued militant activities, including extortion, kidnappings, bombings, and attacks on infrastructure projects. Insurgent groups such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), and People's Liberation Army of Manipur (PLA) have historically opposed large-scale infrastructure projects, fearing that increased government control and

15 Majumdar, S.K., Sarma, A.P. and Majumdar, S. (2020). "E-commerce and digital connectivity: unleashing the potential for greater India-ASEAN integration." *Journal of Asian Economic Integration* 2.1, p. 65.

16 Sinha, R. (2021). *Linking Land Borders: India's Integrated Check Posts*. Centre for Social and Economic Progress, 2021, p. 22. [https://csep.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/WP\\_Linking-land-borders-ICP-1.pdf](https://csep.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/WP_Linking-land-borders-ICP-1.pdf). Accessed on 13 February 2025.

economic development would weaken their influence.<sup>17</sup> These groups have frequently targeted roads, bridges, railways, and trade centers, making it difficult to execute major connectivity projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway or the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project. Although peace accords and ceasefire agreements have been signed with several insurgent factions, the enforcement and monitoring of these agreements remain challenging. Splinter groups continue to engage in armed violence, disrupting trade and investment in the region. The ongoing instability discourages private sector participation and deters both domestic and foreign investors from setting up industries in the Northeast.

### Cross-Border Crimes and Security Threats

The porous borders of Northeast India with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China have long posed significant security threats, enabling a surge in cross-border crimes such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and human trafficking. The region's close proximity to the infamous Golden Triangle—one of the world's largest drug-producing areas—has made states like Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland key transit points for heroin, methamphetamines (Ya Ba), and synthetic drugs flowing from Myanmar into India.<sup>18</sup> The impact of this trade is devastating, not only fueling addiction crises among local youth but also strengthening organized crime syndicates and insurgent groups that thrive on drug money.<sup>19</sup> Alongside this, the persistent demand for illegal arms among various militant outfits in the region has turned Northeast India into a hotspot for arms smuggling. Weapons originating from China and Myanmar often find their way into underground black markets, exacerbating insurgency and violence. Furthermore, human trafficking networks exploit the weak border security,

17 Waterman, A. (2021). "Normalcy restored? The lingering drivers of insurgency in Northeast India", in M. Raymond Izarali, Dalbir Ahlawat (eds.) *Terrorism, Security and Development in South Asia*. Routledge. pp. 102-103

18 Sarkar, R. (2024). "Golden Triangle Amphetamines in India: The Indo-Bangladesh Border as an Alternative to the North-East Corridor", *India Quarterly* 80.3, pp. 346-347. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/09749284241264037>. Accessed on 13 February 2025.

19 Sahu, A. (2022). "Increased drug trade in Golden Triangle: Security implications." *Monohar Parrikar Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis*. <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/increased-drug-trade-in-golden-triangle-security-implications/>. Accessed on 13 February 2025.

targeting vulnerable women and children from economically weaker backgrounds in Northeast India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. Many victims are lured under false promises of employment and a better future, only to be trapped in forced labor, prostitution, or domestic servitude in India and Southeast Asia. Despite efforts to curb these crimes, the lack of effective law enforcement, corrupt border controls, and difficult terrain continue to hinder security operations, making it imperative for regional cooperation and stronger border management strategies to tackle these growing threats. The region's fragile security environment has directly impacted economic growth and infrastructure development. Numerous projects aimed at enhancing connectivity and trade with Southeast Asia have suffered from delays due to militant disruptions, bureaucratic hurdles, and land acquisition challenges.

### **Challenges in Strengthening Regional Infrastructure and Connectivity in Northeast India**

Northeast India holds immense potential for regional economic integration with Southeast Asia. However, its geographical, infrastructural, and security-related challenges hinder the region's progress in connectivity and trade. These challenges not only slow down development but also restrict the effectiveness of India's Act East Policy. Below are some of the major obstacles that need to be addressed for the region to realize its full potential.

The rugged terrain of Northeast India poses a significant challenge to infrastructure development. The region is covered with dense forests, mountains, and rivers, making road and railway construction expensive and time-consuming. Frequent landslides, floods, and soil erosion further disrupt transportation and trade routes, particularly during the monsoon season. Additionally, the lack of flat land makes it difficult to expand road and railway networks, limiting connectivity within the region and with neighboring Southeast Asian countries.

Northeast India's integration with Southeast Asia faces a range of interconnected challenges, including geographical constraints, poor infrastructure, security concerns, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and environmental vulnerabilities.<sup>20</sup> The region's mountainous terrain and frequent natural disasters make

---

20 Haokip, T. (2015). "India's look east policy: Prospects and challenges for Northeast India." *Studies in Indian Politics* 3.2, p.200.

transportation networks fragile, leading to high construction costs and project delays. Despite efforts under the Act East Policy, key infrastructure projects, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, have suffered from slow execution due to funding gaps, land acquisition issues, and security risks. Additionally, the lack of multimodal logistics hubs, cold storage facilities, and seamless inland waterway connectivity hampers trade efficiency, increasing transportation costs and reducing competitiveness.

Security concerns, including insurgencies, border conflicts, and cross-border smuggling, further disrupt investment and trade, making the region less attractive for businesses.<sup>21</sup> The porous borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh facilitate illicit activities, including human trafficking and drug smuggling, which undermine economic stability. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, complex regulatory frameworks, and slow policy implementation delay much-needed infrastructure projects, while inconsistent state-level policies create hurdles for investors. Limited private sector participation, coupled with insufficient financial incentives and weak Public-Private Partnership frameworks, restricts economic growth.

Environmental concerns, particularly climate change, pose additional risks, as frequent floods, landslides, and deforestation affect infrastructure sustainability. Hydropower projects along major rivers, though seen as potential economic boosters, face strong opposition due to displacement concerns and ecological risks.<sup>22</sup> To overcome these challenges, a multipronged strategy is needed, including policy reforms to streamline regulatory processes, increased security cooperation, investment in climate-resilient infrastructure, and stronger public-private collaboration. By addressing these structural bottlenecks, Northeast India can emerge as a vital trade and connectivity hub, strengthening economic integration with Southeast Asia and maximizing the benefits of the Act East Policy.

---

21 Bhattacharya, R. (2018). *Northeastern India and its Neighbours: Negotiating Security and Development*. Routledge India, 2018, p. 25.

22 Das, Partha J. (2009). "Water and Climate Induced Vulnerability in Northeast India: Concerns for Environmental Security and Sustainability." WATCH Research Report 1, p. 1. [http://admin.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/WATCH\\_Research\\_Report\\_on\\_climate\\_and\\_disasters.pdf](http://admin.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/WATCH_Research_Report_on_climate_and_disasters.pdf). Accessed on 13 February 2025.

## **Institutional and Policy Challenges in Strengthening Regional Cooperation**

Despite the presence of major policy frameworks such as the AEP and regional groupings like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), Northeast India continues to face significant institutional and policy-related hurdles. These challenges slow down economic growth, infrastructure expansion, and trade integration with Southeast Asia. While government initiatives aim to enhance regional cooperation, inefficiencies in governance, lack of coordination, and financial constraints remain major obstacles.

One of the most persistent issues in Northeast India is the slow execution of infrastructure and trade-related projects due to bureaucratic delays and complex regulatory procedures.<sup>23</sup> Projects aimed at improving roads, railways, and industrial corridors often take years to get necessary approvals, leading to cost overruns and missed economic opportunities. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, designed to boost connectivity between Northeast India and Southeast Asia, has faced multiple delays due to land acquisition issues, environmental clearances, and administrative bottlenecks. Additionally, underutilization of allocated funds remains a significant issue, with many projects failing to utilize even 50% of the budgeted resources due to inefficient disbursement mechanisms.

The lack of coordination between central and state governments further complicates development efforts. While the central government formulates large-scale economic and trade policies, state governments often struggle with on-ground implementation due to resource constraints and political differences. Land acquisition issues, particularly in tribal areas, result in lengthy delays for crucial projects such as highways, border trade posts, and industrial zones. Moreover, inconsistencies in state taxation policies and regulatory frameworks discourage investors and hinder regional integration. These mismatches create uncertainty for businesses and make long-term investment planning difficult.

Limited access to finance is another major barrier to economic growth in the Northeast. Despite government incentives,

23 Barua, T. pp.101-102.



businesses struggle to secure funding due to inadequate banking infrastructure, stringent loan conditions, and high credit risks. The region accounts for less than 2% of total credit disbursement in the country, highlighting a severe financial gap. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), which play a crucial role in the regional economy, often face difficulties in obtaining loans due to limited collateral and financial literacy. Foreign and domestic investors are hesitant to invest in Northeast India due to policy instability, frequent changes in trade regulations, and security concerns. Although the North East Industrial Development Scheme (NEIDS) 2017 was introduced to boost industrial growth, only 30% of the allocated funds have been utilized due to bureaucratic hurdles and cumbersome application processes.<sup>24</sup>

Cross-border trade remains underdeveloped despite Northeast India's proximity to Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, and China. High tariffs, restrictive regulations, and inadequate infrastructure create significant barriers for businesses. Logistics costs remain high due to the lack of integrated transport networks and multimodal logistics hubs. For example, the India-Myanmar border trade post at Moreh has the potential to become a major commercial hub but remains underutilized due to poor customs infrastructure, inadequate storage facilities, and security concerns.<sup>25</sup> The export potential from Northeast India to Southeast Asia is estimated at \$10 billion annually, but actual trade volumes remain below \$2 billion, largely due to policy and logistical constraints. Particularly in the last decade, the NER's average annual export to Myanmar was about US\$ 2.36 million, whereas the average annual import from Myanmar was US\$ 1.88 million.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, despite India's participation in regional economic initiatives such as BIMSTEC, the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA), and the BBIN framework, Northeast India has struggled

24 Bijukumar, V. (2019). "New 'Developmental State and Enduring Ethnic Anxieties in Northeast India", *Parliamentary Studies*, p. 46. <https://ipaffairs.org/en/journal-of-parliamentary-studies/>. Accessed on 15 February 2025.

25 Das, R.B., and Bordoloi, A.K. (2015). "Opportunities of Border Trade in North East India: With Special Reference to Indo-Myanmar Border Trade." *World Journal of Research and Review* 1.1, p.4.

26 Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), "Expansion of North East India's Trade and Investment with Bangladesh and Myanmar: An Assessment of the Opportunities and Constraints" RIS Report, October 2011, p 57. [https://mdoner.gov.in/contentimages/files/RIS\\_Border\\_Trade\\_Report\\_final.pdf](https://mdoner.gov.in/contentimages/files/RIS_Border_Trade_Report_final.pdf). Accessed on 17 February 2025.

to fully leverage these partnerships.<sup>27</sup> Weak policy execution, inadequate infrastructure, and bureaucratic inefficiencies have hindered the region's integration into regional supply chains. To address these challenges, a comprehensive set of reforms is required. Establishing a Northeast Infrastructure Development Authority could help fast-track project approvals, improve coordination between central and state governments, and harmonize trade regulations. Financial reforms aimed at expanding banking access and incentivizing private sector investment are essential to overcome funding limitations. Digitalization of trade and customs processes would further streamline cross-border transactions, reducing logistical inefficiencies. Strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation within BIMSTEC and AIFTA frameworks could enhance regional trade flows and unlock the economic potential of Northeast India. By addressing these systemic issues, the region can emerge as a critical trade and investment hub, strengthening its role in India's Act East Policy and fostering deeper economic integration with Southeast Asia.

### **Strategic Policy Recommendations for Enhancing Northeast India's Role in Regional Integration**

Northeast India has the potential to be India's gateway to Southeast Asia, but infrastructure bottlenecks, security challenges, and policy inefficiencies hinder its growth. A multi-dimensional strategy focusing on connectivity, trade facilitation, security, private sector involvement, and governance reforms is essential to transform the region into a hub for regional cooperation and economic growth.

#### **i Accelerating Infrastructure Development for Seamless Connectivity**

Northeast India's regional integration is hindered by underdeveloped transportation and logistics. Delays in projects like the IMT Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Transit limit trade potential. Fast-tracking stalled projects, improving road, rail, air, and water connectivity, and establishing logistics hubs are essential. Leveraging Bangladesh's Chattogram and Mongla ports can reduce costs and enhance market access.

---

27 Panda, J P., (ed.). (2022). *India-Japan-ASEAN Triangularity: Emergence of a Possible Indo-Pacific Axis?* Taylor & Francis, pp. 80-81, 301-305.

## **ii Establishing Cross-Border Economic Zones to Boost Trade and Investment**

Northeast India's proximity to Southeast Asia offers opportunities for cross-border trade. Developing SEZs at key border points like Moreh and Zokhawthar, simplifying customs, and expanding border haats can boost economic exchanges. Encouraging ASEAN investments in agriculture, handicrafts, and manufacturing will further enhance regional trade integration.

## **iii Strengthening Security and Stability for Sustainable Economic Growth**

Security threats, insurgencies, and border conflicts hinder Northeast India's economic growth. Illicit trade and trafficking worsen these challenges. Strengthening border infrastructure, surveillance, and intelligence-sharing with Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan is crucial. Maritime security in the Bay of Bengal and community-driven conflict resolution can ensure stability and long-term growth.

## **iv Increasing Private Sector Participation to Drive Economic Growth**

Northeast India's economic potential remains untapped due to high costs, poor infrastructure, and limited policy support. Boosting investment requires Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in infrastructure, tourism, and manufacturing. Expanding eco-tourism, supporting startups, and enhancing digital infrastructure will drive sustainable growth and attract businesses.

## **v Strengthening Policy Coordination for Seamless Implementation**

Northeast India's economic growth is hindered by weak policy coordination, slow projects, and trade inefficiencies. Establishing a Northeast Development Coordination Authority (NDCA) will improve efficiency, while stronger inter-agency collaboration and ASEAN economic diplomacy will enhance integration. A comprehensive strategy focusing on infrastructure, trade, security, and private sector growth is crucial. Fast-tracking key projects and cross-border hubs will position the region as a key trade and connectivity hub in the Indo-Pacific, driving economic growth and partnerships.

## Conclusion

Northeast India's strategic location and rich natural resources position it as a vital economic corridor linking India with Southeast Asia. The region holds immense potential for enhancing trade, connectivity, and regional cooperation under the Act East Policy. Infrastructure projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, and the expansion of border trade posts are crucial for unlocking economic opportunities. However, persistent challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, bureaucratic inefficiencies, security concerns, and weak policy coordination, continue to hinder progress. To bridge these gaps, a multi-pronged approach is necessary. Accelerating infrastructure development, streamlining trade policies, enhancing private sector participation, and strengthening institutional frameworks will be key to fostering long-term economic growth. Additionally, improving cross-border logistics, promoting digital trade, and leveraging regional partnerships like ASEAN and BIMSTEC will enhance Northeast India's role in regional value chains. Sustainable development strategies, such as eco-friendly tourism and agro-processing industries, can further drive economic prosperity while preserving the region's unique cultural and ecological heritage.

By addressing these challenges and capitalizing on emerging opportunities, Northeast India can transform from an isolated frontier into a dynamic hub for trade and connectivity. Strengthening its integration with ASEAN will not only boost economic growth in the region but also reinforce India's strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific. A well-coordinated and inclusive development strategy will be crucial in realizing the full potential of Northeast India as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia, fostering greater economic integration and regional stability.

## References

- Barua, Taz (Tonmoy). "The Look East Policy/Act East Policy-Driven Development Model in Northeast India." *Jadaupur Journal of International Relations* 24.1 (2020).
- Basu, Pratinashree . "Employing Proximity: Boosting Bilateral Ties between India and Myanmar." Saikia, Pahi and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury. *India and Myanmar Borderlands: Ethnicity, Security and Connectivity*. Routledge, 2020.
- Bhattacharya, Rakhee. *Northeastern India and Its Neighbours: Negotiating Security and Development*. Routledge, 2015.
- Bhattacharya, Subhadeep. "India's Bay of Bengal Strategy: Programme and Predicaments." Das, Suranjan and Anita Sengupta. *Contiguity, Connectivity and Access: The Importance of the Bay of Bengal Region in Indian Foreign Policy*. London: Routledge, 2022.
- Das, Rishi Bhargav and Anjan Kumar Bordoloi . "Opportunities of Border Trade in North East India: With Special Reference to Indo-Myanmar Border Trade." *World Journal of Research and Review* 1.1 (2015): 4-11.
- Haokip, Thongkholal. "India's Look East Policy: Prospects and Challenges for Northeast India." *India's Look East Policy: Prospects and Challenges for Northeast India* 3.2 (2015): 1-14.
- Panda, J. P. *India-Japan-ASEAN Triangularity: Emergence of a Possible Indo-Pacific Axis?* . Taylor & Francis, 2022.
- Sarkar, R. "Golden Triangle Amphetamines in India: The Indo-Bangladesh Border as an Alternative to the North-East Corridor." *India Quarterly* 80.3 (2024): 346-347.
- Waterman, Alex. "Normalcy Restored? The Lingering Drivers of Insurgency in Northeast India." Izarali, M Raymond and Dalbir Ahlawat. *Terrorism, Security and Development in South Asia: National, Regional and Global Implications*. Routledge, 2021.

# 10

## The Chicken's Neck: The China Factor and India's Geostrategic Security

*Dr. Minu Sinha Ratna\**

### Abstract

*The Siliguri Corridor, often referred to as the 'Chicken's Neck', is a geostrategic location in India that has the potential to act as a deterrent to India's national security and its locational status in the South Asian region. China's presence in the region both as a hard power and as a soft power is a security dilemma for India. The guarantee of India's national security in the South Asian region – Indian Ocean region depends on limiting the influence of both China and other extra-regional powers. With China breathing deep down its neck India needs to address the concern with more agility and promptness to secure its land and people.*

**Keywords:** *Chicken's Neck, Geostrategic location, India, China, South Asia.*

### Introduction

The contemporary scenario in the South Asian region, particularly with India growing as an emerging economy in terms of GDP and power stature in global politics and 'failed states' like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan, is making the region more vulnerable, multidimensional and complex. With

---

\* Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Vivekananda College for Women, Kolkata

a growing shift in focus of great power politics, the region has gained significant attention in recent times. South Asia has now emerged as an important geostrategic region and has attracted competition for new frontiers in great power politics. In terms of regional politics India has few crucial geostrategic locations that makes it vulnerable in terms of national security and defense strategy. The Siliguri Corridor notably referred to as Chicken's Neck is one such geostrategic location that has the potential to act as a deterrent to India's national security and may create the weak link due to its locational status in the South Asian region. With China breathing deep down its neck India needs to address this concern with more agility and promptness to secure its land and people.

### **Geographical connections and connectivity**

Geographical location of the Chicken's Neck makes it highly vulnerable from strategic point of view. It is the only land link between the Northeast and the rest of India. Besides, not only regarded as a gateway to the North Eastern Region it is also a connecting frontier to Southeast Asia through Myanmar. Moreover the Northeast shares its porous and sensitive borders with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The region's only connection to mainland India is the narrow Siliguri Corridor, often referred to as the "Chicken Neck", which constitutes merely two percent of its overall boundary leaving the rest ninety-eight percent of its borders as international, significantly isolating the region from the rest of the country.

Geographically the Chicken's Neck, a 60-kilometre long and 22-kilometre wide stretch running for the greater part through West Bengal has Bihar's Kishanganj at one extremity and Siliguri at the other. The districts of Bengal that overlap with it are Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling; Coochbehar and Alipurduar districts that run contiguous to it. The Chicken's Neck, has of late become cause for heightened security concerns given the political turbulence in neighbouring Bangladesh and its recent skirmishes with India over the construction of "agreed upon" fences. Sharing a large part of its border with Bangladesh at its current state after the exit of Hasina government, Nepal and volatile situation in Bangladesh cannot be downplayed. Further China's presence in the region both as a hard power and as a soft power is a security dilemma for India which it needs to address to strengthen its national security.



Figure 1. The 'Chicken's Neck' is the central transit point between India (West Bengal-Darjeeling, Sikkim, and seven North-Eastern States) Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh in South Asia and through Myanmar to South East Asia.

(Source: The Border Lens: October 17, 2024).

### Geopolitical-Geostrategic significance of the Chicken's Neck

The Siliguri Corridor is crucial to the South Asian region and India-China relations due to its locational positioning connecting it to the global power structure scenario. Geopolitically the region is highly vulnerable due to the presence of international boundary disputes particularly along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) crisscrossing the Himalayan Range very tough to monitor at great heights. Adding to this tough terrain is the presence of demographic combinations, ethnic diversity and cultural mosaic of North East States that creates the socio-economic background of trade and transit, impacting the corridor. The Chicken Neck is the central transit point between India (West Bengal-Darjeeling, Sikkim, and North-Eastern States) Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh in South Asia and through Myanmar to South East Asia.

The geostrategic interception of the corridor is highly significant. Located in the southernmost foot of the Himalayas with Bhutan in the north, Nepal on the northwest, Bangladesh to the south-west and having the overarching Chumbi Valley, the Tibetan territory which lies between Sikkim and Bhutan, and sharing the regions borders with China makes the region highly



vulnerable and porous along the territorial borders. In between all this India-China shares the most hostile relationship, years of mistrust and conflict over the border question.

### **History of India-China border disputes**

The border disputes between India-China is interwoven in history. Both the countries share a long uninterrupted chequered history of western occupation, humiliation and exploitation at the hands of the western imperialists. This led to the development of nationalist forces and the desire to gain independence which culminated with the consolidation of free India as a nation from British imperialism in 1947 and the birth of People's Republic of China in 1949. The Indo-Chinese relation during the 1950s was based on mutual respect and cooperation when India recognised China in 1949 as a nation state on international platform and Nehru's attempt to revolutionize international relations by his foreign policy of Non-Alignment. Moreover the Panchsheel Agreement in 1954 between India and China created the optimism of maintaining the regional balance of power politics.<sup>1</sup>

But this balance was very soon disrupted and challenged with Chinese policy of taking back its historical possession particularly Tibet. The 1950 invasion and takeover of Tibet is the starting point of straining of relationship between India and China. Though India recognized China's historical sovereignty over Tibet but it still had socio-cultural and economic interest embedded in its socio-political history, a legacy handed over by the British rule. Later with granting political asylum to Dalai Lama in 1959, with the outbreak of massive revolt against Chinese aggression in Tibet, the souring of relationship had already set in with China alleging India of meddling in its domestic affairs.<sup>2</sup>

The contentious issue between both the countries was for defining borders in the northeast and the northwest because territoriality is the pertinent character of a modern state and China sought this validation through its historical conception of boundaries by moving south of the MacMahon Line which

---

1 See Banerji, A.K.(2007), "Borders" in Jayanta Kumar Ray (ed.), *Aspects of India's International Relations, 1700 to 2000: South Asia and the World*, Pearson Education India, pp. 173–256

2 See Brecher, M. (1979), "Non-alignment under stress: The West and the India-China border war", *Pacific Affairs*. 52 (4): 612–630.

was established by the 1914 Shimla Accord between British India and Tibet as the official border and denying China its sovereign territorial rights.<sup>3</sup> When India gained independence it inherited all the territorial agreements including the legitimacy of McMahon line and denied any compulsion to come to the negotiating table regarding border disputes with China. On the other hand, China under no circumstances accepted any prior bilateral agreement which denied its historical territoriality.<sup>4</sup>

Two security issues that created the security dilemma along the McMahon, firstly was the discovery of the Chinese road by Indian troops connecting Xinjiang and Tibet (Xinjiang-Tibet Highway) through Aksai-Chin in 1957 and secondly the imposition of martial law in Tibet in 1959. This was not only a blatant violation of India's territoriality marked by the international borders but also caused armed tension in the region. Aksai-Chin became the bone of contention that led to the war of 1962 as India claimed it to be the part of Ladakh Union Territory (devised in 2019, formerly a part of Kashmir).

Amidst international war scenario generated due to Cuban Missile crisis and involvement of two superpowers the third front was opened by China in Asia taking into consideration the warlike hot atmosphere that favoured its timing of meddling in the affairs. It was a military escalation of border disputes between both the countries with China opening two border fronts in Aksai Chin west of Nepal and NEFA (North East Frontier Agency) also known as Arunachal Pradesh, located towards Bhutan's east.

The outcome of the Indo-China war of 1962 was not favourable. India had lost the war and though China announced a unilateral ceasefire and soon afterward withdrew from most of the invaded areas, but it retained control of about 14,700 square miles (38,000 square km) of territory in Aksai Chin, and (parts of Arunachal Pradesh). The area still remains a point of contention between the two countries, at present administered by China and claimed by India.<sup>5</sup> Besides the McMahon Line that stretches between

3 Maxwell, N. (1999), "Sino-Indian Border Dispute Reconsidered," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 10, 1999.

4 Gupta, K. (1971), "The McMahon Line 1911-45: The British Legacy," *The China Quarterly*, July – September, 1971.

5 Guha, R. (2011), "An Asian Clash of Civilisations? Revisiting the Sino-Indian Conflict of 1962", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 46, Issue No. 44-45, November 5.

Tibet and Assam runs along the eastern border of Bhutan until it reaches the Brahmaputra valley where the river emerges from its Tibetan course and enters into the Assam Valley. Herein lies the other disputed territory south of McMahon Line in the area formerly known as North-East Frontier Agency which became a Union territory of Arunachal Pradesh, India on 29th January 1972 and now established as a state of India on 20 February 1987.

From geostrategic point of view it shares international borders with Bhutan in the west, Myanmar in the east, and a disputed 1,129 km with China's Tibet Autonomous Region in the north at the McMahon Line.<sup>6</sup> China had occupied some regions of Arunachal Pradesh in 1962 war but later withdrew forces. The conflict ended when China unilaterally declared a ceasefire on 20 November 1962, and simultaneously announced its withdrawal to its pre-war position, to the effective China-India border or Line of Actual Control.<sup>7</sup> This at present stands as a contentious land between India and China because Arunachal Pradesh is claimed in its entirety by China as South Tibet whereas India claims Arunachal Pradesh as its integral territory.

### **Subsequent conflicts between India and China**

The two Asian giants have always been at loggerheads at strategic points over the frontiers. Once Nehru suggested, "the physical boundary is perceived as the furthest extension of a strategic political interest by parties on both sides of it."<sup>8</sup> The contentious Sino-Indian border is divided into three areas: the western sector around Ladakh; the middle sector made up of the boundary between India's Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand states with Tibet; and the eastern sector consisting of the boundary at Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim, flanked by Nepal in the west and Bhutan in the east. In 1967 Indo-China war, both the countries were again engaged into conflicts to gain strategic position on the eastern flank known as the Nathu la and Cho La clashes when the advancing Chinese forces were pushed back by the Indian Army and were forced to withdraw from Sikkim,

6 Noorani, A.G. (2010) India-China Boundary Problem, 1847-1947: *History and Diplomacy*, OUP: India, pp.168-210

7 Garver, John W. (2006). "China's Decision for War With India in 1962," in Robert S. Ross and Alastair Iain Johnston (eds.), *New Directions in the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, pp 86-130

8 Walcott, S. M. (2010), "Bordering the Eastern Himalaya: Boundaries, Passes, Power Contestations" *Geopolitics*, 15(1), pp.62-81

then a protectorate of India and later it became a state of India after its annexation in 1975.

The claims and counter claims to control the Chumbi Valley was seen as a major cause of heightening of tensions between the two countries. These skirmishes indicated China's "claim strength" in the region and India's "strengthened combat performances" after the humiliating defeat in the 1962 war which proved that frontiers are to be protected and secured despite all kinds of international agreements of friendships, treaties and understandings.<sup>9</sup>

### **India-China Entanglement over Chumbi Valley threatening Siliguri Corridor**

The eastern sector has become most vulnerable after the 1962 war and later skirmishes heightened the border disputes between both the countries. According to defence analysts the actual understanding is based on the premise that Line of Actual Control has defined the approximate borders between India-China-Bhutan in the eastern sector over the past hundred years. There is no mutually accepted international boundary agreement between India-China and Bhutan-China because China lays claims on the Anglo-Chinese Convention 1890 as per which the Sikkim-Tibet border was agreed upon. Ironically, Sikkim and Bhutan were neither invited to nor are signatories to the convention. Similarly the Shimla Accord of 1914 between British India and Tibet as the official border in which China was not a signatory and as such is denied by China.

All ancient treaties or conventions concluded by British India has become areas of strategic concern for both the countries as China has always been selective in attending and accepting these. These conventions did not prevent China from starting confrontation at Nathu La in 1967. Similarly China and Bhutan have also formally agreed to maintain status quo with respect to the disputed areas pending final settlement. Notwithstanding the Indo-Bhutan Treaty of Friendship in 1949 and revised in 2007, this status quo has not been disturbed until June 2017, when Chinese intrusion took place into the Doklam Plateau. Moreover the legality of the agreements is downplayed whereas the physical possession of strategic areas along the Line of

---

9 Fravel, M. T. (2008), *Strong Borders Secure Nations: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*. Princeton University Press. Pp.173-221

Actual Control is highlighted which has resulted in jostling of positions in higher altitudes along the border-frontiers to gain strategic position as conflicts might occur either by design or default. As such the strategic location of Chumbi Valley (Tibet) and Doklam Plateau (Bhutan) stands at the centre line of fire between India-China border disputes.<sup>10</sup>

The Chumbi valley, belonging to Tibet now a part of China, is sandwiched between two Himalayan states Sikkim to the west and Bhutan to the east. Walcott considers China's Chumbi Valley and India's Siliguri Corridor to its south among "strategic mountain chokepoints critical in global power competition". Moreover the Chumbi Valley intervenes between Sikkim and Bhutan south of the high Himalayas, pointing towards India's Siliguri Corridor like a "dagger" looking for an opportunity to pierce through the defence in the least possible time and posing a possible threat perception for India's national security. At the strategic level, it gives the China a launch pad to choke India's vital lines of communications running through the Siliguri Corridor to the North East. Given the existing road communication, limited deployment space, this strategic location can provide China the manoeuvring position in the region and probability of border skirmishes or a limited war cannot be ruled out.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 2: Tibet's Chumbi Valley pointing towards India's Chicken's Neck between Nepal in the northwest, Bangladesh in the southwest and Bhutan in the north.

(Source: The Tribune: July 01, 2017)

10 Panag, Lt. Gen H.S. (2017), "India-China standoff: what is happening in the Chumbi Valley?", *Newslandry*, July 8, 2017. Available at <https://www.newslandry.com/2017/07/08/panag-india-china-sikkim-bhutan>

11 *Ibid.* p.8

Doklam is strategically located close to the Siliguri Corridor, which connects mainland India with its north-eastern region. The Doklam Plateau is an approximately 90-100 square km plateau with average altitude of 4,000-4,500 meters, located in Western Bhutan. Being a part of Bhutanese territory it protrudes north into the Chumbi Valley with India (Sikkim) to the north-west, west and south-west and Tibet to the north, east and south-east. The trijunction of India, Bhutan and Tibet is on the north-western edge of the Doklam Plateau where the Batang La and Doka La post of India is located and north-west of which along the borders are the Indian defences of Sikkim.

According to de facto position or LAC India and Bhutan consider that the tri-junction is located at Batang La where as China claims the entire plateau as the tri-junction is at Mount Gyemo Chen in south-east Sikkim. This lies around 8 km further south of Batang La, the present tri-junction, and the claim covers the entire area of the Doklam plateau.<sup>12</sup>

Any shifting of the tri-junction south will not only make Doklam Chinese territory, but their boundary would then rest on the Jampheri ridge, the highest mountain ranges in this area which moves southwards for 40 km through Bhutan, before reaching the border with India, on the northern edge of the Siliguri corridor. This status quo was held till June 2017 when the Doklam Crisis occurred with Chinese intrusion in the Bhutanese territory of Doklam, an area patrolled and protected by India since Bhutan is considered as India's core security concern in the Himalayan range. Meanwhile Bhutan issued a statement underlining that the construction of the road inside Bhutanese territory was a direct violation of the 1988 and 1998 agreements<sup>13</sup> between Bhutan and China and affected the process of demarcating the boundary between these two countries, and urged a return to the status quo as before 16 June 2017.

What is more threatening is the fact that despite various mechanisms in place such as the Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement (BPTA) of 1993, Establishment of a Working

12 Panda, A. (2013), "Geography's Curse: India's Vulnerable 'Chicken's Neck'", *The Diplomat*, November 08, 2013 Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2013/11/geographys-curse-indias-vulnerable-chickens-neck/>

13 See: Das. B. (2017), "The Strategic Lifeline: Securing the Siliguri Corridor amid Chinese expansion", *The Border Lens*, October 17, 2024, Available at <https://www.borderlens.com/2024/10/17/the-strategic-lifeline-securing-the-siliguri-corridor-amid-escalating-chinese-expansion/>

Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs in 2012 and a Border Defence Cooperation Agreement in 2013, still Chinese intrusion in the region has escalated the problem to greater proportions. Even earlier in 2005 India and China had signed an Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question (2005) which was a culmination of a previous Agreement signed in 2003 "Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation".<sup>14</sup> This Special Representative mechanism had been set up to explore from the political perspective of the overall bilateral relationship in the framework of a boundary settlement. This agreement provided a political solution whereby India agreed to designate Changgu of Sikkim state as the juncture for border trade market and China agreed to designate Rengyinggang of the Tibet Autonomous Region as the juncture for border trade market. Both sides also agreed to Nathu La as the entry-exit point for communication and trade. Any disturbance is going to impact the economics of scale in the region harming trade, commerce and lives of the people.

The Doklam Crisis brought the Chinese close to the doors of Indian borders and its close proximity to Siliguri Corridor created the much anticipated defence tactical pressure on India. Naturally this trade-communication route is a piece of vital strategic defence and a question of top national security, a priority that has to be guarded at any cost. Hence the threat to Chicken's Neck has become perpetual security problem with China continuing its overt actions of road and airstrip construction activities on its side of the border. Defence analysts are suspecting that this could provide manoeuvring position to China to rapidly mobilize troops to break the Chicken's Neck thereby jeopardise India's efforts to resupply the region in times of war considering the fact that this has only single railway line connecting the region to North East states. Moreover the increased Chinese presence in the Chumbi Valley in Tibet, is a mere stones throwaway from the Siliguri corridor which

---

14 Prime Minister's Office (June 24, 2003) Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation between The Republic of India and The People's Republic of China. Available at <https://archive.pib.gov.in/release02/lyr2003/rjun2003/24062003/r2406200318.html>



necessitates the safeguarding of this sensitive strategic region. But Chinese de facto attempt to push the boundaries have escalated the already entrenched mistrust. On June 15, 2020, the Galwan Valley in Ladakh along the LAC witnessed a historic moment when India's military and China's PLA were engaged in a standoff in Pangong Tso (resource rich river). Twenty Indian armed personnel lost their lives at the hands of the Chinese troops including the Commanding Officer of 16th Bihar Regiment in this standoff. According to Nirupama Rao, the former Foreign Secretary of India, "the incident represents a watershed in India's relations with China and marks the end of a 45-year chapter which saw no armed confrontation involving loss of lives on the Line of Actual Control (LAC)".<sup>15</sup> The events in Galwan Valley is a wakeup call for India as China's overarching presence both in the western sector (Ladakh) and eastern sector (Siliguri Corridor) is creating strategic advantage which must be counterbalanced.

### **Shifting Political Dynamics: India's Response**

In the process to gain strategic leverage roads and its connectivity has emerged as a geopolitical mechanism and an instrument of power struggle in the region. Particularly with China launching its Belt and Road Initiative-BRI in 2013 (earlier known as One Belt One Road) project to ensure regional connectivity and global reach at the same time.<sup>16</sup> This project consisting of two segments: the Silk Road Economic Belt that will be connecting China with Europe through Central Asia and Maritime Silk Road that also connects China's coast to the Mediterranean and Africa. Doklam became the core of strategic space for road initiative to capture this historical Silk Route. China's growing involvement in Myanmar through the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) has also enhanced its weight in the region. China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean Region through infrastructural investments in countries such as Srilanka and Maldives and openness of these countries

15 Rao, N. (2020). "Galwan: Postscript to a tragedy", *The Hindu*, June 19, 2020. Available at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/galwan-postscript-to-a-tragedy/article31863515.ece>

16 Wong, T. (2023). "Belt and Road Initiative: Is China's Trillion-Dollar Gamble worth it?", BBC: October



to Chinese investments has raised concern for encirclement of India by means of String of Pearls strategy.<sup>17</sup>

Political shifts in neighbouring countries of South Asia has also created major concerns for India's geostrategic and security dynamics. China's increasing presence in Rangpur Division of North Bangladesh, expanding influence in eastern Nepal through infrastructural projects and recent conflicts in Myanmar and political turmoil in Bangladesh with exit of Sheik Hasina's government has added to security concerns in India. Further India's strained relation with Srilanka, Nepal and Bangladesh has posed challenges for India's leadership in the region. Even the traditional foe, Pakistan has developed closer proximity with China and investment flows in the form of infrastructure development projects such as the China- Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a major BRI project which crosses through Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) has aggravated the paramount bone of contention between both the countries.

To check Chinese advancement in the region and address geostrategic imperatives India made way for the Asian Highways II Project (funded by Asian Development Bank) which passes through the North-Eastern States of India following the National Highway and stretches from the Indo-Myanmar border at Moreh in the State of Manipur via Imphal-Kohima (Nagaland)-Dimapur-Nagaon-Jorabat (Assam)-Shillong-Dawki-Tamabil upto Indo-Bangladesh border in the State of Meghalaya. An initiative undertaken by the Narendra Modi Government's Act East Policy (2014) which was an up gradation of Look East Policy (1992) to counter China's growing regional power and area of influence with infrastructure diplomacy.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

India has taken two prolonged approach: firstly to modernise the Siliguri Corridor's infrastructure and open up all clogged trade and transit routes and AH II project is the most ambitious attempt in this direction, secondly India is developing alternative

---

17 See Kumar, D. (2024). "India vs China: The String of Pearls and Belt & Road", *The Times of India*, January 27, 2024. Available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/everything-under-the-sun/india-vs-china-the-string-of-pearls-and-belt-road/>

18 Ministry of Road Transport & Highways, "*Asian Highways Project*", Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 09-September-2011, Available at <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=75869>

land and sea route like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project in Myanmar and connectivity through the Chittagong port to Tripura moving onwards to Myanmar, Thailand, and South East Asia. To counter Chinese initiatives of infrastructure diplomacy which challenges India's regional dominance across South and South East Asia, India has taken a leading role in BIMSTEC for promoting alternative regional cooperation in relation to SAARC in South Asia which is fraught with ambiguities. Moreover the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement signed in 2015 is designed to facilitate smooth cross-border vehicle movement eliminating trade obstacles and building an economic corridor that connects Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal through roadways to generate economic flows, trade and commerce in the region.

The Doklam incident has exposed India's border insecurities and geostrategic sensitivity to Chicken's Neck, which has increased manifold. The standoff that escalated for 72 days had little to do with this barren stretch of Himalayan plateau rather it was the strategic location of Chicken's Neck that demanded immediate defensive response. The fragility of the corridor itself emerged as one of vital security checkpoints to be secured and connectivity ensured by building infrastructures and communication link through roadways. As such critical infrastructure projects, rail-road connectivity, trade and transit, commercial space and economic viability was being strengthened by the Indian state to secure the checkpoints of connectivity not only for the North East, South Asia but further to South East Asia through Myanmar and ASEAN countries. Closing the gaps in defence security must be the top priority of the Indian State. Hence securing the frontiers either in the western flank or in the eastern front is a necessity, better avoided rather becoming a liability in the near future.

## References

- Banerji, Arun Kumar. 2007. "Borders ." In *Aspects of India's International Relations, 1700 to 2000: South Asia and the World*, by Jayanta Kumar Ray, 173–256. Pearson Education, India.
- Brecher, Michael. 1979. "Non-alignment under stress: The West and the India-China border war." *Pacific Affairs* 52 (4): 612-630.
- Chellaney, Brahma. 2006. *Asian Juggernaut: the Rise of China India and Japan*. Harper Collins Publishers India.

- Chomsky, Noam. 2006. *Failed States: the Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy*. Metropolitan books, USA.
- Fravel, M. Taylor. 2008. *Strong Borders Secure Nations: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*. Princeton University Press.
- Garver, John W. 2006. "China's Decision for War With India in 1962." In *New Directions in the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy*, by Robert S. Ross and Alastair Iain Johnston, 86-130. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Guha, Ramchandra. 2011. "An Asian Clash of Civilisations? Revisiting the Sino-Indian Conflict of 1962." *Economic and Political Weekly* 46 (44-45).
- Gupta, Karunakar. n.d. "The McMahon Line 1911-45: The British Legacy." *The China Quarterly* 1971.
- Maxwell, Neville. 1999. "Sino-Indian Border Dispute Reconsidered." *Economic and Political Weekly*.
- Neville, Maxwell. 1970. *India's China war*. Pantheon Books.
- Patil, D. K. 1991. *War in High Himalayas: The Indian Army in Crisis, 1962*. C. Hurst & Co. Publishers.
- Sali, M. L. 1998. *India-China Border Dispute: A Case Study of the Eastern Sector*. APH Publishing.
- Walcott, S. M. 2010. "Bordering the Eastern Himalaya: Boundaries, Passes, Power Contestations." *Geopolitics* 15 (1): 62-81.

# 11

## **Bridging Borders: Economic & Strategic Synergy Between Northeast India and Southeast Asia**

*Dr. Pulakesh Sarkar\**

### **Abstract**

*Northeast India (NEI), often referred to as India's gateway to Southeast Asia, holds immense potential as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. Strategically positioned at the crossroads of transnational trade and connectivity, NEI is central to India's Act East Policy (AEP) and the broader Indo-Pacific vision. However, despite its vast natural resources, cultural diversity, and geopolitical significance, the region has struggled with economic stagnation, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-political instability, limiting its role in regional and global trade networks. India's economic engagement with Southeast Asia has grown significantly, with India-ASEAN trade surpassing \$130 billion in 2023, yet NEI's contribution remains marginal. Historically, the region's fragmented economy, weak market integration, and poor connectivity have hindered its development. Border trade with Myanmar, for instance, remains under \$100 million annually, highlighting the need for modernization and regulatory reforms. Strengthening infrastructure, trade policies, and investment incentives is essential to unlocking NEI's full economic potential. This chapter explores the economic and strategic dimensions of NEI's integration*

---

\* Assistant Professor and Head, Department of Political Science, Ramakrishna Mission Residential College (Autonomous), Kolkata, West Bengal

*with Southeast Asia. It examines historical challenges, policy shifts, and emerging opportunities under AEP, while proposing a roadmap for regional economic and security cooperation.*

**Keywords:** *Northeast, Development, Growth, Geopolitics, Investment.*

## **Introduction**

A well-integrated Northeast economy is a prerequisite for sustainable development and regional stability. Establishing a Northeast Economic Union (NER Economic Union) can harmonize trade and investment policies, foster internal cohesion, and create a seamless economic zone attractive to businesses. Additionally, enhancing connectivity through projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway will facilitate smoother trade flows and economic linkages with Southeast Asia.

Beyond economic integration, security cooperation and stability are vital for ensuring long-term growth. Given NEI's porous borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh, insurgencies and illicit trade remain persistent threats. Strengthening border security, intelligence-sharing, and defense partnerships with ASEAN nations will help secure trade corridors and boost investor confidence. Furthermore, fostering people-to-people ties through educational collaborations, cultural exchanges, and tourism initiatives can strengthen diplomatic and economic relations with Southeast Asia. By leveraging its strategic location and natural resources, Northeast India can transition from a historically neglected frontier to a dynamic economic powerhouse, serving as India's vital link to the Indo-Pacific region.

## **Understanding Northeast India's Underdevelopment**

Northeast India, despite its immense natural wealth and strategic location, continues to face significant economic underdevelopment. The region remains disconnected from mainstream economic growth due to a combination of geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, policy gaps, and socio-political instability. To unlock its true potential, there is an urgent need for a shift in the development approach, emphasizing internal economic integration before establishing

broader connections with East and Southeast Asian economies.

One of the primary challenges hindering the Northeast's progress is its geographic and infrastructural limitations. The region is linked to the rest of India by the narrow Siliguri Corridor, which severely restricts trade and movement, increasing transportation costs.<sup>1</sup> Poorly developed road networks, inadequate railway connectivity, and underdeveloped air transport further isolate the region. Despite sharing international borders with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China, trade remains minimal due to inefficient border infrastructure and bureaucratic constraints, which prevent the full realization of cross-border economic potential.<sup>2</sup>

Economic fragmentation also poses a significant challenge, as the eight states of the region function in isolation rather than as an integrated economy. Each state follows distinct trade regulations, land ownership laws, and industrial policies, making business operations complex and discouraging private sector investment. The heavy dependence on government subsidies and centrally sponsored schemes has created a welfare-driven economy rather than one that is self-sustaining. Without a unified regional economic strategy, Northeast India struggles to develop industries that can compete on a national or international level.

The socio-political landscape of the region adds to its economic woes. Insurgency, ethnic conflicts, and border disputes have historically created an unstable environment, discouraged investors and disrupted economic activities. Illegal trade and smuggling, facilitated by porous borders, further weaken formal economic structures. Additionally, the migration of skilled labor from the region to other parts of India has resulted in a severe brain drain, leaving behind a workforce that lacks the technical expertise required for industrial and technological advancement.

To overcome these challenges, Northeast India must first strengthen its internal economic framework before fully integrating with East and Southeast Asian economies. A well-

- 
- 1 Patel, R.P. (2016), "India-Bangladesh Connectivity: Implications for India's North East Development." *Journal of North East India Studies*, Vol.6, No.1.
  - 2 Sarma, Atul, and Saswati Choudhury, eds. *Mainstreaming the Northeast in India's Look and Act East Policy*. Springer, 2017. p. 279.

connected, economically unified Northeast will be better equipped to participate in international trade and investment. Prioritizing infrastructure development, harmonizing economic policies across states, fostering private sector growth, and ensuring political stability will lay the foundation for sustainable development. Once internal economic cohesion is achieved, the region can serve as India's gateway to Southeast Asia, playing a vital role in regional trade and economic cooperation.

### **Trade and Investment Potential of Northeast India**

Northeast India shares an international border of over 5,400 kilometers with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan.<sup>3</sup> Despite this geographic advantage, trade volumes between the region and Southeast Asia remain relatively low due to infrastructural and policy limitations. Opportunities for economic integration include: Agriculture and Agri-Processing: Northeast India is rich in organic products such as tea, spices, and horticultural goods that have strong demand in Southeast Asian markets. Handicrafts and Textiles: Indigenous crafts, including silk from Assam and bamboo products from Manipur and Tripura, can find lucrative markets in ASEAN countries. Tourism and Cultural Exchange: Shared cultural heritage with Southeast Asia, particularly with Myanmar and Thailand, can boost eco-tourism and spiritual tourism.

### **The Northeast Renaissance: A Story of Potential, Transformation, and Growth**

Northeast India is endowed with immense strengths that position it as a key region for economic growth and regional integration. One of its biggest assets is its highly literate and skilled workforce, with many states surpassing the national literacy average. The region has a large English-speaking youth population, making it well-suited for employment in IT, BPOs, tourism, and service industries.<sup>4</sup> Many young professionals from the Northeast have already made a mark in sectors like hospitality, aviation, healthcare, and retail across India.

In addition to human capital, the region is rich in natural resources, including vast reserves of oil, gas, coal, and minerals.

3 Majumdar, M. (2020), "India-Myanmar border fencing and India's east policy." *India Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No.1, pp. 58-72.

4 Brunner, Hans-Peter, (2010), *North East India: Local economic development and global markets*. SAGE Publications Ltd, p. 50.

Assam is a major producer of crude oil, with the Digboi, Duliajan, and Bongaigaon refineries contributing significantly to India's energy security.<sup>5</sup> Meghalaya, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh have large coal, limestone, and uranium deposits, offering opportunities for industrial expansion. Furthermore, Arunachal Pradesh alone has an estimated 40,140.5 MW of hydropower potential, making the northeast a potential hydropower hub for India.<sup>6</sup>

The region is also one of the world's major biodiversity hotspots, home to over 8,000 plant species and 850 bird species, making it ideal for eco-tourism, wildlife conservation, and herbal medicine industries. Manipur's biodiversity includes 4,000 angiosperms, 430 medicinal plants, 34 edible fungi, 500 orchids, 54 bamboo species, 40 endemic rice cultivars, 160 fish species, 21 migratory aquatic birds, and diverse butterflies across various altitudes.<sup>7</sup> Its fertile lands support a strong agricultural sector, particularly organic farming, tea plantations, and bamboo-based industries. Sikkim has already achieved 100 percent organic farming, setting an example for sustainable agricultural development.<sup>8</sup> The region is also famous for its handloom and handicraft industry, producing globally admired textiles such as Muga and Eri silk from Assam, Naga shawls, Manipuri textiles, and Mizoram's Puandum fabric. With better branding and market access, these traditional industries have significant growth potential.

Tourism is another major strength of the northeastern region, given its stunning landscapes, unique tribal cultures, and adventure tourism potential. The tea gardens of Assam, the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland, and the Tawang Monastery in Arunachal Pradesh make it a promising global tourism destination.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the region's strategic location as

5 Barua, P. C. (1992), *Planning and development of Assam*. Mittal Publications, p. 16.

6 Thakur, J. (2020), "Exploring the hydropower potential in India's Northeast." *ORF Issue Brief* 341, p. 2.

7 Singh, E., Kumar, J., Singh, N.K.S., and Singh, N.R., (2009), "Biodiversity conservation and natural resources in North East India-with special reference to Manipur." *NeBio* Vol.1., No.1, pp. 42-47.

8 Meek, D. and Anderson, C.R. (2020), "Scale and the politics of the organic transition in Sikkim, India." *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* Vol.44, No.5, pp. 653-672.

9 Burman, P. D., Cajee, L. and Laloo, D.D. (2007), "Potential for cultural and eco-tourism in North East India: A community-based approach." *WIT Transactions on Ecology and the Environment* 102, p. 717. <https://www.witpress.com/eliibrary/wit-transactions-on-ecology-and-the-environment/102/17308>. Accessed on 1 March 2025.



India's gateway to Southeast Asia provides opportunities for trade and connectivity. Sharing international borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, and China, the northeastern region is central to India's Act East Policy (AEP), which promotes economic integration with ASEAN countries.

Another unique advantage of the region is its strong community-based governance systems, which ensure inclusive and participatory development. Traditional institutions such as Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), Panchayati Raj institutions, and village councils in Nagaland and Manipur play a significant role in local governance and grassroots decision-making.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the region's progressive social structures, matrilineal traditions (especially in Meghalaya), and cultural diversity contribute to its egalitarian and inclusive development approach.

With its skilled workforce, resource wealth, biodiversity, cultural industries, strategic location, and strong governance, northeast India has the potential to become a major hub for trade, tourism, and industrial growth. If supported by policy initiatives and infrastructure development, the region can unlock a new era of economic prosperity and global integration, transforming into a key driver of India's growth story.

### **Northeast India's Journey to Economic Renaissance: From Look East to Act East**

The articulation of the Look East Policy (LEP) in the early 1990s marked a turning point in India's engagement with Southeast Asia.<sup>11</sup> The policy aimed to strengthen India's economic and strategic ties with ASEAN nations. However, in its initial decades, the northeastern region remained peripheral to LEP's implementation. For decades, northeast India remained a hidden gem, rich in culture, natural resources, and potential, yet trapped in the constraints of geopolitical isolation. Bordered by multiple countries but connected to the rest of India through a narrow corridor, its development was often viewed through the lens of security rather than opportunity. Roads remained unbuilt, investments scarce, and trade corridors underutilized.

10 Hassan, M. S. (2008), *Building legitimacy: Exploring state-society relations in Northeast India*. Oxford University Press.

11 Dash, S. (2023), "Look-Act East Policy and the Northeast Region." In *Cultural Dimensions of India's Look-Act East Policy: A Study of Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, pp. 275-331.

However, a silent transformation began in the 1990s when the LEP reimagined the region not as a remote outpost but as a strategic gateway to Southeast Asia. This shift in perspective set the stage for an ambitious agenda: to break economic barriers, enhance regional connectivity, and create a thriving trade hub. The restructuring of the North Eastern Council (NEC) in 2005 reinforced this vision, making economic interdependence a central priority rather than an afterthought.<sup>12</sup>

Today, as infrastructure projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project take shape, northeast India stands at the precipice of a new dawn.<sup>13</sup> Roads and railway networks are expanding, border trade routes are being revived, and investment opportunities are gradually materializing. The region's hydropower potential, tourism industry, organic agriculture, and artisanal crafts are gaining national and global recognition. Yet, challenges persist—logistical hurdles, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and slow policy execution continue to hinder full-fledged economic integration. In order to truly emerge as India's economic bridge to ASEAN, the northeastern region must not only embrace external trade but also modernize its traditional industries, empower its skilled workforce, and establish a robust digital and financial ecosystem. As the hidden gateway awakens, the region has the chance to redefine its destiny—not as a forgotten frontier, but as a prosperous, interconnected economic powerhouse at the heart of Asia's growth story.

With the launch of the Act East Policy (AEP) in 2014, the northeastern region has been placed at the center of India's regional connectivity and trade strategy.<sup>14</sup> This shift highlights a new development paradigm focused on economic integration and infrastructural expansion. Key elements of this paradigm include:

- 
- 12 Kokho, K. "Economic and Development Policies in the North Eastern Region and the Current Condition." *Northeast India and Japan*. Routledge India, 2021, pp. 53-76.
  - 13 Marwah, R. "India: Multilateral and bilateral engagement with ASEAN." *Bilateral and Multilateral Cooperation in South Asia*. Routledge India, 2021, pp. 115-127.
  - 14 Barua, T. (2020), "The look east policy-act east policy-driven development model in Northeast India." *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*. Vol. 24, No.1, pp. 101-120.

## **Unifying the NER Economy as a Precondition for Growth**

**Interstate Connectivity:** Before linking NER with Southeast Asia, internal economic integration is crucial. This requires improving road, rail, and digital connectivity among the eight northeastern states. **Harmonizing Policies:** Creating a common economic framework for trade, investment, and industrial development across the NER can ensure a coordinated growth strategy. **Strengthening Regional Trade Hubs:** Cities like Guwahati, Imphal, and Agartala should be developed as commercial centers for trade with Myanmar, Bangladesh, and beyond.

## **Infrastructure as the Backbone of Integration**

Several major infrastructure projects are redefining the region's role in regional trade: **Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP):** Enhances connectivity between Mizoram and Myanmar's Sittwe Port. **India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway:** Expected to boost trade and transport links with ASEAN markets. **BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) Motor Vehicle Agreement:** Aims to facilitate seamless movement of goods and people in the region.<sup>15</sup> However, delays in implementation and maintenance of these projects pose a challenge, requiring greater investment and political will.

The future of northeast India lies in its ability to balance economic growth with sustainable development, ensuring that infrastructure expansion and industrialization do not come at the cost of its rich biodiversity and indigenous cultures. As the region continues on its path of economic resurgence, the success of the Act East Policy will depend on its ability to harness local strengths, attract global investments, and solidify its role as India's gateway to Southeast Asia. If executed effectively, this transformation will not only uplift the region but also position India as a dominant player in the emerging Indo-Pacific trade landscape.

## **A Roadmap for Regional Unity and Global Connectivity**

Nestled in India's eastern frontier, northeastern India is on the cusp of an economic resurgence, shedding its historical limitations and embracing a future of regional cohesion and

---

15 Thang, Lian Bawi, Ting Oo, and Alec Blyth Scott. "The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project." *India-Myanmar Relations*, Institute of Social Science, Conference Report, 2015. p. 7.

global integration. For decades, the region has been economically compartmentalized, its potential stifled by geographical barriers, administrative restrictions, and infrastructural shortcomings. Despite its vast natural wealth and skilled workforce, the region's economic progress has been hindered by limited intra-regional connectivity, logistical inefficiencies, and trade restrictions such as the permit system. These obstacles have not only fragmented the local markets but also restricted seamless trade, investment, and industrial expansion. However, the time has come to break down these barriers and foster an integrated economic framework that unlocks the northeastern region's true potential.

By harmonizing agricultural production with specialized regional strengths, the states can develop complementary industries—grain surplus from Assam's floodplains can meet demand in hill states, while exotic organic produce, medicinal herbs, and high-value spices from the uplands can find expansive national and international markets. Additionally, by establishing synergized plantation industries in tea, bamboo, rubber, and floriculture, the region can move beyond subsistence farming and create robust industrial networks. This internal economic integration will not only enhance trade efficiency and employment opportunities but also serve as a launchpad for international commerce, positioning northeast India as a critical trade corridor to Southeast Asia under the Act East Policy. With enhanced connectivity, infrastructural advancements, and strategic policy interventions, northeast India is set to transform into a thriving economic powerhouse, bridging its rich heritage with a modern, innovation-driven future that promises sustainable prosperity and global relevance.

### **Strategic Synergy in Northeast India: Geopolitical Significance and Security Considerations**

Northeast India is not just a landlocked region; it is a strategic gateway that connects India to Southeast Asia and beyond. This region, comprising eight states, shares international borders making it one of India's most geo-strategically sensitive areas. It serves as a buffer zone against growing Chinese assertiveness while offering India an opportunity to strengthen its AEP by enhancing connectivity, trade, and security cooperation with

ASEAN nations.

Over the past few decades, northeast India has faced multiple security challenges, including cross-border insurgencies, illicit trade, human trafficking, and drug smuggling. Additionally, China's expanding Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and other neighboring countries poses a strategic dilemma for India.<sup>16</sup> To address these concerns, India has increasingly prioritized the security and infrastructural development of the northeastern region, integrating it into its broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

### Geopolitical Challenges and Strategic Imperatives

**Countering China's Expanding Influence:** China's growing presence in Myanmar and Bangladesh through its BRI infrastructure projects—including deep-sea ports in Kyaukpyu (Myanmar) and Chittagong (Bangladesh)—has enhanced Beijing's strategic foothold in the region.<sup>17</sup> This presents a direct challenge to India's interests. To counterbalance this influence, India has accelerated infrastructure projects, such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, to provide an alternative to China's dominant economic corridors.

Moreover, Beijing's repeated territorial claims over Arunachal Pradesh and military build-up along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) underscore the need for India to fortify border defense mechanisms (See map).<sup>18</sup> Strengthening military infrastructure, including advanced surveillance systems, airbases, and rapid response units, has become imperative to secure India's northeastern frontiers.

---

16 Deepak, B. R., and B. R. Deepak. "India and the Belt and Road Initiative of China: Historicity, Converging/Conflicting Interests and Responses." *India and China: Beyond the Binary of Friendship and Enmity* (2020), pp. 99-119.

17 Roy-Chaudhury, Shantanu. *The China Factor: Beijing's Expanding Engagement in Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, and Myanmar*. Routledge, 2022.

18 Joshi, Manoj. *Understanding the India-China Border: The Enduring Threat of War in High Himalaya*. Oxford University Press, 2022.



**Figure 1: Comprehensive Map of the Entire China-India Border<sup>19</sup>**



**Figure 2: Strategic Significance of Doklam and the Siliguri Corridor<sup>20</sup>**



The image contains a map labeled map-2, depicting a section of the India-China border region, specifically highlighting the Siliguri Corridor-a narrow stretch of land connecting mainland

19 Source: Joshi, Manoj. *Understanding the India-China Border: The Enduring Threat of War in High Himalaya*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

20 Source: Joshi, Manoj. *Understanding the India-China Border: The Enduring Threat of War in High Himalaya*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

India to its northeastern states. The map also includes parts of Bhutan and northeastern India, with key locations such as Nathu La, Gangtok, Kalimpong, Siliguri, and Doklam marked. A caption under the map states that China's proximity to this 'Chicken's Neck' (Siliguri Corridor) is considered a major national security vulnerability for India. This reflects concerns that in the event of military conflict, China's control over the Doklam plateau or surrounding areas threaten India's strategic access to its northeastern states.<sup>21</sup>

**Addressing Cross-Border Security Threats:** Northeast India has been historically affected by ethnic insurgencies and separatist movements, many of which have received external support from groups operating in Myanmar and China. Insurgent groups such as the NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland), ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), and Manipuri militant factions have exploited porous borders to engage in arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and extortion.<sup>22</sup>

To address these security concerns, India has strengthened counter-insurgency operations and bilateral cooperation with Myanmar under initiatives such as Operation Sunrise, which aims to neutralize militant camps along the Indo-Myanmar border. Additionally, the signing of the India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) has helped in cracking down on insurgent hideouts in Bangladesh.

**Maritime Security and Naval Cooperation:** Northeast India's strategic significance extends beyond land to the Bay of Bengal, where maritime security plays a crucial role in India's broader Indo-Pacific strategy. India's naval engagement with ASEAN nations has intensified through initiatives such as:

- i **MILAN Naval Exercises:** A biennial multilateral exercise involving ASEAN navies and the Indian Navy to strengthen maritime cooperation and regional stability.<sup>23</sup>

---

21 Joshi, Manoj, Op. cit.

22 Dutta, Sreeradha. "Security of India's Northeast: External Linkage." *Strategic Analysis* 24.8 (2000), pp. 1495-1516. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160008455301>. Accessed on 1 March 2025.

23 Kumar, Y. (2018), "MILAN 2018: Geo-Strategic and Geo-Political Context." *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, Vol. 13, No.2, pp.163-176.

- ii **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI):** A framework to enhance collaboration in maritime security, trade connectivity, and disaster relief with ASEAN nations.<sup>24</sup>
- iii **ASEAN- India Maritime Cooperation Agreement:** A proposed framework for joint patrols, anti-piracy operations, and humanitarian assistance in the Bay of Bengal.

India has also strengthened its naval presence through investments in Andaman and Nicobar Command, which serves as a forward base to project power across the Indian Ocean and secure sea-lanes that are vital for trade and energy security.

**Act East Policy: Security Diplomacy and Defense Cooperation:** India's Act East Policy has evolved from an economic engagement strategy into a multi-dimensional security framework, where defense diplomacy and strategic alignments with ASEAN nations play a central role. Some key defense cooperation initiatives include:

- i **Joint Military Training with Myanmar:** India provides military equipment, tactical training, and intelligence support to Myanmar's security forces to tackle cross-border insurgency.
- ii **India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol (Indo-Thai CORPAT):** Strengthening naval interoperability between the Indian Navy and the Royal Thai Navy to ensure maritime security.<sup>25</sup>
- iii **Strategic Partnerships with Vietnam and the Philippines:** India has supplied BrahMos supersonic missiles to Southeast Asian nations, reinforcing regional deterrence against China.

India's growing presence in ASEAN-led security forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ADMM-Plus (ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus) signals its commitment to regional stability.<sup>26</sup>

---

24 Upadhyaya, S (2023), "Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative-an opportunity to create new institutions for maritime governance." *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs*, Vol. 15, No.1, pp. 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18366503.2021.1959980>. Accessed on 2 March 2025.

25 Cogan, M.S. and Mishra, V. (2025), "India-Thailand Security Cooperation: Strengthening the Indo-Pacific Resolve." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, Vol.7, No.1, pp.36-56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797020906651>. Accessed on 2 March 2025.

26 Kipgen, N. (2020), "India-ASEAN relations: the initiatives, successes, and challenges." *India Review*, Vol.19, No. 3, pp.207-222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2020.1754012>. Accessed on 4 March 2025.



## Strengthening Internal and Regional Connectivity in Northeast India and Southeast Asia

For northeast India to unlock its full geostrategic and economic potential, it is essential to enhance infrastructure, digital connectivity, and trade corridors. The region, despite being landlocked, holds immense potential as a gateway between India and Southeast Asia. However, the lack of robust transport networks and inadequate economic integration has hindered its development. By investing in well-planned roadways, railways, waterways, and digital networks, northeast India can transition from an isolated region to a thriving hub of commerce and connectivity. Several landmark projects have been introduced to bridge this gap, facilitating regional integration and economic expansion.

The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project is a crucial initiative aimed at linking northeast India with Myanmar via the Bay of Bengal. This project provides an alternative trade route that bypasses the congested Siliguri Corridor, ensuring greater accessibility. The project consists of a maritime route from Kolkata to Sittwe Port in Myanmar, followed by inland water transport along the Kaladan River to Paletwa, and a road link from Paletwa to Zorinpui in Mizoram.<sup>27</sup> This multi-modal approach is expected to reduce transportation costs, boost trade efficiency, and strengthen India's economic and strategic presence in Myanmar. Furthermore, this initiative aligns with India's Act East Policy by facilitating trade with ASEAN nations through better connectivity.

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is another vital infrastructure project designed to establish direct road connectivity between northeast India and Southeast Asia. Spanning over 1,360 kilometers, this highway connects Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar.<sup>28</sup> This ambitious project is expected to create seamless movement of goods and people, reducing travel time and logistics expenses

27 Thang, Lian Bawi, Ting Oo, and Alec Blyth Scott, Op. cit.

28 Banerjee, S. (2024), "India and China's Competing Infrastructural Engagements in Southeast Asia: Case Studies of Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam." *India and China in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, pp.115-142. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6903-2\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6903-2_6). Accessed on 4 March 2025.

while enhancing trade opportunities. By expanding market access for northeast India's agricultural and industrial products, the highway is set to revolutionize cross-border commerce. Additionally, this improved connectivity is expected to boost tourism by making travel between India and Southeast Asian nations more accessible. However, infrastructure delays, security concerns, and regulatory challenges need to be effectively managed to ensure the timely completion of the project.

Border Haats, or traditional cross-border markets, have emerged as significant trade points along India's borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar. These markets allow local communities to engage in cross-border trade without complex customs regulations, promoting economic resilience. By facilitating the exchange of locally produced goods such as agricultural products, handicrafts, bamboo items, and textiles, Border Haats generate employment and boost rural economies. Additionally, they help curb illegal trade and smuggling by providing a structured and transparent trading mechanism. Strengthening and expanding these Border Haats will further enhance bilateral ties between India and its neighboring countries while promoting sustainable trade practices.

The Northeast Industrial Development Scheme (NEIDS) was introduced to promote industrialization and attract foreign investments in the region. This initiative offers various incentives such as capital investment subsidies, transport and freight reimbursements, and GST exemptions for businesses setting up operations in northeast India. By fostering the development of special economic zones, industrial parks, and export hubs, NEIDS aims to transform the region into a competitive manufacturing center. The scheme encourages investments in agriculture-based industries, bamboo and handicrafts, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and technology-driven sectors. If successfully implemented, NEIDS has the potential to create substantial employment opportunities while positioning northeast India as a major contributor to India's export market.<sup>29</sup>

The future of northeast India's economic growth is closely tied to

---

29 Suresh. N and Anitha, G. (2020), Unveiling Abundant Opportunities for Advancing Cultural Tourism in India's North Eastern States - An Empirical Perspective, *International Journal of Management (IJM)*, Vol.11, No.2, pp. 413-424. <https://iaeme.com/Home/issue/IJM?Volume=11&Issue=2>. Accessed on 6 March 2025.

its ability to integrate with South and Southeast Asian markets. By prioritizing connectivity projects, trade facilitation, and industrial expansion, the region can emerge as a key economic powerhouse. However, to fully realize these opportunities, India must ensure timely execution of infrastructure projects, address security challenges along trade routes, and strengthen diplomatic engagements with ASEAN nations. Furthermore, the active participation of local communities is essential to ensure that these initiatives lead to inclusive growth and long-term prosperity. With sustained efforts and strategic investments, northeast India can become a thriving economic corridor, benefiting both India and the larger Indo-Pacific region.

The region is emerging as a critical geopolitical frontier, where security, trade, and connectivity converge. To secure its interests, India must adopt a comprehensive strategy that integrates defense diplomacy, infrastructural development, and economic initiatives. Strengthening regional cooperation with ASEAN, reinforcing border security, and enhancing maritime collaborations will not only counterbalance China's influence but also position Northeast India as a gateway to a thriving Indo-Pacific region. For India, the success of the Act East Policy depends on how effectively it transforms the northeastern region of India from a periphery into a strategic and economic powerhouse, reinforcing its role in regional security while unlocking new opportunities for growth and prosperity.

### **Step Forward Towards Integrating the Northeast Economy with East and Southeast Asia**

For Northeast India to emerge as a dynamic economic and strategic player in the broader Indo-Pacific region, the first step must be fostering internal economic integration. The establishment of a NER Economic Union can harmonize trade regulations, taxation policies, and industrial development strategies across the eight states. Currently, Northeast India operates as a fragmented economy, with diverse regulatory frameworks creating barriers to intra-regional trade and investment. By developing a unified economic zone with common market policies, the region can encourage free movement of goods, services, and labor, paving the way for a more competitive and self-sustaining economy. A well-integrated Northeast will be better positioned to engage in larger trade agreements with Southeast Asian economies under India's Act East Policy.

The next crucial step is to accelerate infrastructure development, which is the backbone of economic connectivity. Despite significant progress, key projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, rail connectivity to Myanmar, and multimodal transport corridors still face delays due to logistical and regulatory challenges. Prioritizing their timely completion is essential to ensure seamless movement of goods and people. Expanding air connectivity between key Northeast cities and Southeast Asian hubs such as Bangkok, Hanoi, and Yangon can further bridge the gap. Additionally, improving rural roads and last-mile connectivity within Northeast India will facilitate smoother integration with larger economic corridors, enabling even remote regions to benefit from regional trade.

Boosting cross-border trade is another essential aspect of Northeast India's integration with Southeast Asia. Establishing Border Economic Zones (BEZs) near key transit points in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan can encourage investment in industries such as textiles, handicrafts, and agro-processing. These zones can serve as manufacturing and export hubs, allowing businesses from Northeast India to directly access Southeast Asian markets. Simplifying customs procedures, reducing bureaucratic red tape, and ensuring faster clearance at border checkpoints will enhance trade efficiency. Encouraging the use of local currencies in border trade transactions can also reduce dependence on third-party currencies, making trade more accessible for small businesses.

A significant driver of economic growth in the Northeast will be enhancing private sector participation. Large-scale investments from ASEAN businesses in key sectors such as tourism, manufacturing, agro-processing, and IT can accelerate job creation and boost productivity. By creating special economic incentives for foreign investors, such as tax benefits and infrastructure support, the region can attract multinational corporations looking to establish a foothold in India's eastern frontier. Promoting Northeast India as a startup hub with direct access to Southeast Asian markets will also encourage innovation and entrepreneurship, reducing the region's dependency on government-funded projects.

To strengthen trade and commerce, digital and financial integration must be prioritized. Setting up cross-border e-commerce platforms can help small and medium-sized

enterprises (SMEs) from Northeast India tap into ASEAN markets. Digital payment integration and fintech collaborations with Southeast Asian banks will simplify transactions, encouraging greater cross-border economic participation. By expanding internet penetration and digital literacy, even rural entrepreneurs can connect with buyers in countries like Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Digital financial services such as mobile banking and digital lending can empower local businesses and improve financial inclusion across the region.

As economic engagement deepens, expanding security cooperation with ASEAN nations becomes imperative. Strengthening defense ties through joint military exercises, intelligence-sharing, and maritime security initiatives will help address common security threats such as border insurgencies, illegal trade, and cyber threats. The Indo-Pacific security architecture increasingly recognizes the strategic importance of Northeast India, making its role in regional stability more critical. By enhancing security collaboration with Myanmar and Thailand, India can ensure that economic projects remain safeguarded from disruptions caused by insurgencies and cross-border tensions.

The final pillar of Northeast India's integration into the East and Southeast Asian economic framework is increasing people-to-people connectivity. Educational collaborations between Northeast universities and ASEAN institutions can facilitate student exchange programs, research partnerships, and scholarships. Hosting cultural festivals, trade fairs, and tourism collaborations will help foster stronger socio-cultural bonds between Northeast India and its Southeast Asian neighbors. Promoting visa relaxation policies and simplifying travel procedures can boost tourism, making the region a preferred destination for Southeast Asian travelers. Additionally, encouraging language training in Thai, Burmese, and Vietnamese in Northeast India can improve business and diplomatic engagement with ASEAN nations.

A resurgent Northeast India, well-integrated with East and Southeast Asia, has the potential to become a powerhouse of economic and cultural exchange. By advancing internal economic cohesion, enhancing trade connectivity, encouraging private investment, and strengthening security and cultural ties, the region can redefine its future. Through a strategic blend

of policy reforms, infrastructure advancements, and cross-border collaborations, Northeast India can transform into a vibrant economic corridor, acting as India's gateway to the East and unlocking unprecedented opportunities for growth and prosperity.

## Conclusion

Northeast India is on the brink of a major transformation, holding immense potential to become India's gateway to Southeast Asia. Despite its vast natural resources, cultural richness, and strategic location, the region has struggled with economic stagnation due to poor infrastructure, limited market access, and socio-political instability. However, with India's AEP and growing regional connectivity initiatives, there is an unprecedented opportunity to integrate Northeast India into the broader Indo-Pacific economic and strategic landscape.

A well-integrated Northeast economy is a prerequisite for sustainable growth and global engagement. Currently, the region operates as a fragmented economic entity, with different states following varied trade policies and industrial regulations. Establishing a NER Economic Union with harmonized trade and investment policies can foster internal cohesion and create a seamless economic zone that is attractive for businesses and investors. This, in turn, will allow the region to take full advantage of transnational trade agreements, such as the India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement and regional connectivity projects like the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicles Agreement.

Infrastructure remains the backbone of economic integration. While significant progress has been made, including the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, much remains to be done. In 2023, the total trade between India and ASEAN exceeded \$130 billion, but Northeast India's contribution remained marginal. Modernizing border trade centers, developing industrial corridors, and improving logistical efficiency will be key to unlocking greater trade potential. For instance, India's border trade with Myanmar at Moreh-Tamu is currently valued at less than \$100 million annually, whereas enhanced connectivity and streamlined regulations could push this figure into the billions. Beyond trade and infrastructure, private sector participation must

be encouraged to drive innovation and job creation. Currently, over 70% of the region's workforce is engaged in agriculture, yet productivity remains low due to outdated farming techniques and inadequate market linkages. Establishing Special Economic Zones focused on agro-processing, textiles, and bamboo-based industries could generate employment and boost exports. Additionally, expanding Northeast India's IT, tourism, and renewable energy sectors can further integrate the region with Southeast Asian economies, creating new opportunities for youth employment and entrepreneurship.

Security and stability are equally critical in ensuring economic progress. The porous borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh have long been a source of insurgency and illegal trade. Strengthening defense cooperation, intelligence sharing, and border management will help create a safer environment for economic activities to thrive. Furthermore, people-to-people connectivity through educational exchange programs, cultural festivals, and tourism initiatives can strengthen diplomatic and economic ties with ASEAN nations.

To truly realize its potential, Northeast India must shift from being a subsidy-dependent region to a self-sustaining economic hub. This requires a multi-pronged approach that includes policy reforms, infrastructure investment, security cooperation, and private sector engagement. A well-integrated Northeast will not only serve as a commercial bridge between India and Southeast Asia but will also contribute to regional stability, economic prosperity, and India's larger Indo-Pacific strategy. By strategically leveraging its resources and location, Northeast India can transition from a historically neglected frontier to a thriving economic powerhouse that plays a crucial role in India's growth story and regional geopolitics.

## References

- Barua, Prafulla Chandra. *Planning and development of Assam*. Mittal Publications, 1992.
- Brunner, Hans-Peter. *North East India: Local economic development and global markets*. 2010: SAGE Publications Ltd., n.d.
- Hassan, M. S. *Building legitimacy: Exploring state-society relations in Northeast India*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Kumar, Yogendra. "MILAN 2018: Geo-Strategic and Geo-Political Context." *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 13.2 (2018): 163-176.

Majumdar, Munmun. "India-Myanmar border fencing and India's act east policy." *India Quarterly* 76.1 (2020): 58-72.

Meek, David and Colin R. Anderson. "Scale and the politics of the organic transition in Sikkim, India." *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* 44.5 (2020): 653-672.

Patel, Rajendra Prasad. "India-Bangladesh Connectivity: Implications for India's North East Development." *Journal of North East India Studies* 6.1 (2016).

Sarma, Atul and Saswati Choudhury. *Mainstreaming the Northeast in India's Look and Act East Policy*. Springer, 2017.

Suresh, N. and G. Anitha. "Unveiling Abundant Opportunities for Advancing Cultural Tourism in India's North Eastern States - An Empirical Perspective,(IJM), Vol.11, No.2, pp. 413-424." *International Journal of Management* 11.2 (2020): 413-424.

Thakur, Jaya. "Exploring the hydropower potential in India's Northeast." *ORF Issue Brief* 341 2020: 2.

Upadhyaya, S. "Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative-an opportunity to create new institutions for maritime governance." *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs* 15.1 (2023): 1-11.