

Prospects and Problems of Start-Ups in North-East India

Masum Gulgulia* &
Soma Roy Dey Choudhury**

Abstract

This paper explores the prospects and problems faced by the startups in North East India, a region known for its rich cultural diversity and unique geographical characteristics. Despite significant potential driven by abundant natural resources and a growing entrepreneurial spirit, startups in this region encounter various challenges that hinder their growth and sustainability. Through a combination of descriptive and exploratory research methods utilizing secondary data sources, this study identifies key factors influencing the startup ecosystem. These include infrastructural deficiencies, limited access to funding, bureaucratic hurdles, internal conflicts and socio-political instability. By analyzing existing literature, reports, and case studies, the paper provides a comprehensive overview of the startup landscape in North East India. Tables have been used to analyze the data. It has been found from the study that border trade is one of the major prospect of startups as the North-East region is of strategic importance for the country on account of the fact that nearly 98 percent of its borders form India's international boundaries and the government is also giving priority to the startups with the help of various initiatives such as Start-up India, MUDRA Yojana, Make in India etc so that the youths of this region may earn their own livelihood without being much dependent on the government for jobs.

Keywords: *Startups, Innovation, DPIIT, Present Status, Prospects, Challenges*

* Research Scholar, Department of Commerce, Assam University, Silchar

** Associate Professor, Department of Commerce, Assam University, Silchar

Introduction

India is a country with a vast population and a large number of youth reside here. Similarly, North-East India is no exception, as the majority of its population consists of young males and females. However, compared to the rest of India, industrialization is limited in this region, and that is why people of this region have to depend on central government jobs, state government jobs, or other service sectors. Therefore, startups are an important area of study. The present generation is inclined toward startups and the government is also prioritizing the young generation to earn their own livelihood instead of being dependent on the government for jobs, as the focus is on creating more job creators than job seekers to address the problem of unemployment.

Understanding this need, the Government of India started the Startup India program in January 2016. On 16th January, 2016, the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, inaugurated the “Start-up India” initiative at Vigyan Bhawan in New Delhi. Startup India is a major initiative by the Government of India aimed at fostering a startup culture and creating a robust, inclusive ecosystem for innovation and entrepreneurship across the country. Startup India will be beneficial because India has a young population that can contribute to economic growth and innovation, which is important for the country's future development.

The northeastern states, known as the seven sisters, are rich in natural resources like forests, oil, tea, and water but lag behind the rest of India due to resource limitations. Despite being among the least visited parts of India, this region is experiencing rapid development, driven by its natural beauty and the unique cultural heritage. The north-eastern region of India which is renowned for its rich cultural diversity and abundant natural resources, remains one of the nation's most underdeveloped areas in terms of industrialization. The North East of India remains a hidden paradise, highly desired by trekkers, wildlife enthusiasts, and nature admirers. Comprising eight interconnected states including Sikkim this region is celebrated for its fresh and scenic environment, rich natural resources, and diverse cultures and communities. Despite its significant potential, the region's economic growth has been hindered by a range of structural and

infrastructural challenges. Against this background, the rise of startups in North East India provides a hopeful opportunity for economic growth and innovation.

North East India- A Glimpse into few Statistics

The North East of India constitutes the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, flanked by hills and with the mighty Brahmaputra River slashing a central path between its north and south. The western side of the North East is connected to the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent by a narrow land corridor, sometimes referred to as the Siliguri Neck or Chicken's Neck.

Demographic Profile of North-East India

Total Population	45772188
Male	23361207
Female	22410981
Urban	8403283
Urban Male	4290486
Urban Female	4112797
Rural	37368905
Rural Male	19070721
Rural Female	18298184
Literacy Rate	78.50%
Human Development Index	0.73

Source: Census of India, 2011

Geographic Information

Arunachal Pradesh	Meghalaya	Sikkim
Assam	Mizoram	Tripura
Manipur	Nagaland	Total (Eight)

Source: Yadav and Kumar (2016)

The region accounts for 7.9 percent of the total land space of the country. The region is of strategic importance for the country on account of the fact that nearly 98 percent of its borders form India's international boundaries.

International Boundaries

North	China
South West	Bangladesh
North West	Bhutan
East	Myanmar

Source: Yadav and Kumar (2016)

The region shares a 5,484 km international border with Bangladesh (1,880 km), Myanmar (1,643 km), China (1,346 km), Bhutan (516 km), and Nepal (99 km).

Significance of the study

This study on startups in North East India is crucial and significant for several reasons. Firstly, the North-Eastern region of our country is home to abundant natural resources and this region of the India has a rich cultural diversity which are the great prospects for startups to grow, but there has been a notable lack of study and research focused specifically on this region or we can say almost no study has been made on the startups of North-Eastern. Another major significance of the study is that the North-east region of India also shares international boundaries and so this region is of strategic importance for the country as 98 percent of its borders form international boundaries of India.

Despite the region's tremendous potential, startups in North East India face challenges that hinder their growth. This research aims to indentify these issues such as regulatory hurdles, infrastructural gaps and skill shortages. By illuminating these issues, the study will empower policymakers to craft targeted support mechanisms and informed policies These measures can create a more conducive environment for startups, ultimately fostering sustainable economic development and harnessing the region's entrepreneurial potential.

Literature Review

Patel (2019) examined the opportunities and challenges faced by Startup India. It revealed that large population, connectivity due to growth in Indian telecom industry, change in the mindset of the working class, innovation in society due to largest youth population are the opportunities but poor revenue generation, financial constraints and lack of infrastructure are the challenges faced by the start-ups in India. Bairwa and Chand (2019) examined the issues of startups in India. The study revealed that financial resources, skilled workforce, supporting infrastructure, branding, regulations and market awareness are the issues faced by Indian startups. Kumar and Aquil (2024) examined the challenges such as an unorganized Indian market, inadequate infrastructure, unclear policies and risk aversion. Mishra (2017) examined the opportunities and challenges of start-up in India. The study revealed that the government initiatives like Make in India and Digital India are the opportunities but social, financial, sustainability, regulatory issues as challenges. Rao (2017) examined the opportunities, challenges, problems and action plans of startups in India. It was found that the large population, mobile penetration, and financial inclusion were the opportunities. The challenges include complex regulations, lack of mentoring, funding and infrastructure. The action plans may include tax exemption on capital gains, credit guarantees, faster exit for startups etc. Kumar and Shobana (2023) examined the challenges and efforts of entrepreneurship education in North East, India. The opportunities include the region's abundant natural resources, cultural diversity and tourism whereas some of the challenges include risk aversion, infrastructural gaps, limited finance. Efforts include government initiatives, training and financial support for women entrepreneurs. Das (2023) investigated the challenges of entrepreneurship in north-east India. Secondary sources of data were used in the study and it revealed that some of the major problems faced by the entrepreneurs of NE region include lack of central help, infrastructure, market, funding, man-made and natural disasters and ethnic conflicts the entrepreneurs of the NE region fails.

Research Gap

The research gap lies in the absence of detailed studies specially examining the unique prospects and problems for startups in North East India. While there is substantial research on startups in India as a whole, there is a clear need for focused investigations that delve in the various specific challenges faced by the startups in North East India. The study on the prospects and problems of startups in North East India aims to address a significant research gap. Despite the region's rich natural resources, cultural diversity, and strategic international borders, there is a notable lack of comprehensive research focused specifically on startups in this area.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- i) To study the present status of startups in North East India
- ii) To study the prospects and problems of startups in North East India

Research Methodology

This research aims to explore the prospects and problems of startups in the North-East Region (NER) of India. To achieve this objective, the study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design. The descriptive approach is utilized to present the characteristics and current status of startups in the region, while the exploratory approach is employed to identify the challenges and opportunities these startups face.

The study is based entirely on secondary data collected from a variety of reliable sources. A thorough literature review was conducted, including online and printed articles, research papers, and journals. It covers all the eight states of the North-East Region, collectively referred to as the "Seven Sisters" (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura) along with Sikkim, which is often called the "Brother" state.

The North East region of India holds significant strategic importance due to its unique geographic location, sharing approximately 98% of its borders with international countries such as China, Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal. This

positioning makes the region a critical gateway for trade, cultural exchange, and geopolitical stability. Tables were used to organize and present numerical data effectively.

The data was critically interpreted to understand the demographic and geographic context of the North-East Region. This helped in identifying the factors contributing to or hindering the growth of startups in the region. The study also evaluated the impact of government initiatives, policies, and support systems on the startup ecosystem.

This research is particularly relevant as the North-East Region faces a significant industrialization gap compared to other parts of India. By focusing on the potential of startups to create jobs and reduce dependency on government employment, the study aims to provide valuable insights for policymakers, entrepreneurs, and researchers. This structured methodology ensures a comprehensive understanding of the prospects and problems of startups in North-East India.

Data Analysis

Present Status of Startups in North East India

If it is to be asked someone to describe India's startup map, they would likely mention cities like Delhi, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Mumbai, and others. These big cities are known for their strong networks and infrastructure, attracting investors and talented individuals from around the world. However, the Northeast region of India is also developing its own startup ecosystem. With support from state governments that encourage entrepreneurship and provide spaces for business innovation, startups in the Northeast are growing steadily.

In recent times, small towns and cities across India are also becoming hubs for entrepreneurship. This trend is fueled by the country's vibrant startup culture and supportive environment. Currently, small towns and cities in India are increasingly becoming focal points for entrepreneurship.

To understand the diverse characteristics and rich ecosystem of the states of North East, let's explore some key facts:

1. Assam alone produces nearly half of India's tea that is almost 50% of the tea production in India is being produced by Assam alone.
2. Arunachal Pradesh is known for producing unique types of natural silks like Mulberry, Eri, Muga, and Oak tasar.
3. Manipur hosts one of India's largest cottage industries.
4. Meghalaya provides strong support through various state and central government organizations.
5. Mizoram stands out for its extensive bamboo production, covering about 57% of its land, which makes the state as one of the giant producers or manufacturer of Bamboo in India.
6. Nagaland has English as one of its official languages, contributing to its high literacy rate of 80.11% with most of the people residing in Nagaland speak in English.
7. Sikkim leads in the production of giant cardamom in India.
8. Tripura ranks as India's second-largest producer of natural rubber.

Major Thrust Areas of Business and Industry in North East India (State Wise)

Table No. 1

States	Identified Areas
Arunachal Pradesh	Power, Agriculture and Forest Based Industries, Mineral Based Industries, Tourism and Textile
Assam	Tea, Power, Cement, Limestone, Medicinal Plants, Agriculture and Horticulture
Manipur	Handloom, handicrafts, Khadi and Village Industry, Sericulture, Food Processing, Bamboo Processing and Tourism
Meghalaya	Horticulture, Agriculture and Food Processing, Cement, Mining, Tourism, Dairy and Livestock, Hydroelectric Power, Handlooms, Handicrafts and Steel Processing

Mizoram	Sericulture, Bamboo, Agriculture, Horticulture, Khadi and Handloom, Tourism, Food Processing, Minerals and Stones
Nagaland	Agriculture and Allied Industries, Bamboo, Horticulture, Sericulture, Handicrafts, Handlooms and Tourism, Minerals and Mining
Sikkim	Agriculture, Agro Processing, Tourism, Handlooms and Handicrafts, Minerals, Tea, Hydro electric Power, Minerals, Tea, Horticulture and Sericulture
Tripura	Power, Natural Gas, Food Processing, Tea, Rubber, Bamboo, Handicrafts, Handloom, Tourism, Sericulture, IT and Medical Plants

Source: North East Vision 2020 and Italian Trade Commission (ITC), 2011

The startup ecosystem in Northeast India is nascent but promising, supported actively by state governments across all eight states. More than 900 startups in the region, recognized by DPIIT, have collectively generated over 8,800 jobs, with 42% having at least one female director. Recognizing the immense potential, Startup India organized ASCEND (Accelerating Startup Calibre & Entrepreneurial Drive) workshops across seven Northeastern states in November 2022. These workshops aim to foster entrepreneurship and accelerate growth within the startup ecosystem of the region. The following is the tabular representation showing the growth of startups in Northeast India following the launch of Startup India as a national initiative.

Table No. 2: Growth of Startups in North East India since the Launch of Startup India

State	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Assam	9	34	67	67	119	188	154	638
Manipur	-	4	7	6	12	37	18	84
Tripura	-	-	2	7	23	12	24	68
Nagaland	1	4	2	2	5	7	3	24

Meghalaya	-	-	2	5	-	9	8	24
Arunachal Pradesh	-	-	2	2	-	4	4	12
Mizoram	-	-	2	1	1	2	2	8
Sikkim	-	1	-	2	1	3	1	8
Total	10	43	84	92	161	262	214	866

Source- Startup India

From the above table we can clearly understand the growth of startups in Northeast India from 2016 to 2022 across various states. Assam has shown consistent growth, leading with 638 startups by 2022. Manipur and Tripura also demonstrate steady increases, reaching 84 and 68 startups respectively by 2022. Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Sikkim have also contributed to the region's startup ecosystem, collectively totaling 866 startups by 2022.

Prospects for Startups in North East India

Despite various challenges, the startups in North East India still have access to several opportunities to develop their businesses. Here are some key opportunities:

1. **Cultural Diversity and Indigenous Knowledge:** The North Eastern region is rich in diverse cultures and traditional knowledge. Startups can use this cultural diversity to inspire unique business ideas and promote innovation.
2. **Natural Resources and Agro-based Industries:** The region's abundant natural resources provide opportunities for ventures in agriculture, horticulture, and eco-tourism. Startups can use these resources sustainably.
3. **Handicrafts and Handloom Industries:** The North Eastern states are renowned for their exquisite handicrafts and handloom products. Startups can use these skills of local artisans with the help of marketing, management, and design to build successful startups.
4. **Tourism and Hospitality:** The region's scenic landscapes, cultural festivals, and diverse cuisine offer potential for growth in tourism and hospitality. Startups can support the

development of professionals in hospitality and tourism operations.

5. **Changing Mindsets:** Many people, especially the youth, are moving away from traditional job-centric mindsets. There is growing interest in establishing startups, driven by advancements in technology and innovation. This shift has led to the emergence of numerous startup ventures across the North-eastern region of India.
6. **Immense Indian Population-** The large population of the country offers great opportunities for startups that are expected to convert a large unemployed population into a working population. Currently, India is enjoying demographic dividend since, over 65% of India's population is under 35 years old, presenting a significant advantage.
7. **Innovation and Transformation-** Talented and innovative future entrepreneurs present significant opportunities for startups to address various emerging business challenges.
8. **Hydroelectric Power Generation-** The North East region, with its plentiful water resources and mountainous terrain, holds substantial potential for hydroelectric power generation.

Government Support to Improve the Startup Ecosystem:

The Indian Entrepreneurship Foundation (IEF) stands as India's pioneering collaborative network for small-scale entrepreneurs, focusing on the education and empowerment of businesses across various sectors. Similarly, the Meghalaya Institute of Entrepreneurship is dedicated to promoting enterprise development and enhancing the skills of individuals in the state.

The Northeast Entrepreneurship Fellowship fosters entrepreneurship in the Northeastern region through networking, and training local entrepreneurs. The presence of prestigious institutions like IIM and NIFT in the region is expected to significantly contribute to establishing the Northeast as a key hub for resources and educational opportunities.

Several government and semi-government initiatives exist to support startups. They include:

Start-Up India- It offers three-year tax exemptions and compliance relaxations aimed at reducing government regulations and bureaucratic hurdles.

MUDRA Yojana- It enables startups to obtain loans from banks to establish, expand, and stabilize their businesses.

SETU (Self-Employment and Talent Utilization) Fund- The government has allocated Rs.1,000 crore to create opportunities for self-employment and new jobs, particularly in technology-driven sectors.

E-Biz Portal- The government introduced the e-biz portal, which consolidates 14 regulatory permissions and licenses into a single platform to expedite clearances and enhance the ease of doing business in India.

Royalty Tax- The Indian government has lowered the royalty tax for businesses and startups from 25% to 10%.

Problems for Startups in North East India

The northeast region is one of the least industrially developed areas in the country. Despite having abundant resources and a strong need for industrial growth, it has not developed at a sufficient pace. Some of the challenges faced by the startups in the northeast are:

1. **Inadequate Funding-** Lack of sufficient funding hampers startups. The northeast struggles with low per capita income and poor savings rates, leading to weak capital formation and hindering startups..
2. **Industrialization Challenges-** Proper industrial development requires entrepreneurial skills, which are lacking in the northeast. Despite the area's rich natural resources, industrial growth is slow due to this skill gap.
3. **Inadequate Infrastructure-** The northeast region lacks essential infrastructure such as transportation, power, and communication. Without a strong infrastructure foundation, the region cannot effectively utilize its resources for sectoral growth.
4. **Lack of Credit Facilities-** Credit facilities are hard to find in the northeast because many areas lack banking services. As a result, banks do not provide financial support to the startups and small businesses.

5. **Risk Aversion:** Establishing startups involves taking risks, which goes against the cautious nature of many educational systems. Encouraging students to accept failure and uncertainty poses challenges for the startups.
6. **Limited Awareness and Mindset:** One of the major challenges in North East India is the lack of knowledge and a mindset supportive of startups and entrepreneurship. The region has traditionally relied on government jobs and lacks a strong entrepreneurial culture.
7. **Territorial Conflicts:** There are existing inter-state and international territorial conflicts within the Northeast that are often based on historical border disputes and different ethnic, tribal or cultural affinities. Example; Assam- Mizoram Border Dispute.
8. **Natural Calamities-** Natural calamities, like floods, pose significant challenges for startups in North East India. Frequent flooding disrupts business operations, damages infrastructure, and hampers transportation. Such challenges deter investors and hinder long-term growth, making it difficult for startups to thrive

Findings

The study reveals several key insights into the region's startup ecosystem. Startups in sectors such as construction and engineering, agriculture, handicrafts, and technology show a significant potential due to the region's rich cultural heritage and natural resources. There is a growing entrepreneurial spirit among the youth, driven by a desire to create impactful and sustainable businesses, with various government initiatives and scheme providing financial aid, tax benefits, and infrastructure support. The government initiatives include Start-up India, MUDRA Yojana, Make in India etc so that the youths of this region may earn their own livelihood without being much dependent on the government for jobs.

It has been found from the study that Assam has the highest number of DPIIT recognized start-ups and the most women-led start-ups, while Sikkim, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh have the fewest number of start-ups.

It has been found from the study that the number of start-ups in each state is increasing, as evidenced by a linear trend line showing a consistent rise in the number of start-ups from the year 2016 to 2022. The study reveals that although there are many DPIIT registered start-ups in North-East India, but only a few are currently functioning effectively.

Suggestions

1. **Improving Infrastructure-** Invest in developing robust physical infrastructure, including better transportation networks, reliable power supply, and high-speed internet connectivity. This will create a more conducive environment for startups to operate and grow.
2. **Enhancing Access to Funding-** Establish more venture capital funds and angel investor networks focused on North East India. Provide incentives for investors to support local startups. Additionally, create government-backed grants and loans specifically for startups in this region.
3. **Streamlining Regulatory Processes-** Simplify and expedite the registration and compliance processes for startups. Reduce bureaucratic red tape and provide clear guidelines to make it easier for entrepreneurs to navigate the regulatory landscape.
4. **Building Entrepreneurial Ecosystems-** Set up more incubators and accelerators to provide startups with mentorship, resources, and networking opportunities. Encourage collaboration between universities, research institutions, and the private sector to foster innovation.
5. **Promoting Skill Development-** Implement training programs and workshops to enhance the skills of aspiring entrepreneurs and their teams. Focus on areas such as business management, marketing, technology, and financial literacy to equip them with the necessary tools for success.
6. **Encouraging Collaboration and Networking-** Facilitate platforms for startups to connect with industry experts, potential partners, and customers. Organize regular events, such as startup fairs, hackathons, and pitch competitions, to promote interaction and knowledge sharing.

By implementing these suggestions, North East India can create a more vibrant and supportive ecosystem for startups, unlocking their potential to drive economic growth and innovation in the region.

Conclusion

The startup ecosystem in North East India shows great potential due to the region's unique cultural diversity, abundant natural resources, and growing entrepreneurial spirit. Opportunities abound in sectors such as tourism, agriculture, handicrafts, and technology, supported by government initiatives. However, challenges like poor infrastructure, limited funding, bureaucratic hurdles, internal conflicts and security concerns hinder growth. Addressing these issues through improved infrastructure, better funding access, regulatory reforms, and socio-political stability is essential. With the right support and strategic interventions, the region has the potential to become a thriving startup hub, driving economic growth and integration with the broader Indian economy.

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