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A DECADE OF PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

KEY INSIGHTS FROM NORTHEAST INDIA





Author Note

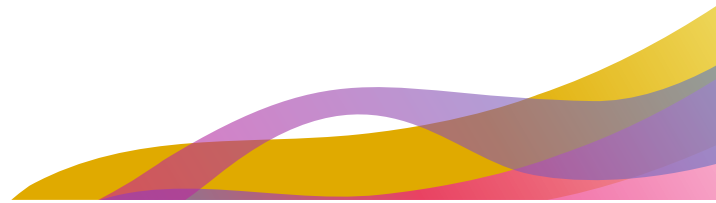
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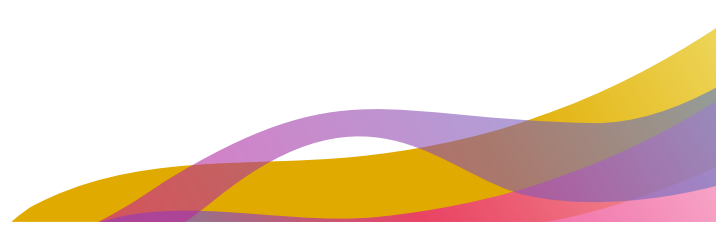




Abstract

Northeast India is imbued with much significance due to its strategic geopolitical location. However, since independence, the neglectful approach of earlier governments has pushed the region into the nation's peripheries. A change in terms of development and peace has been visible in the region over the last decade. Based on this context, this paper examines how the Northeast has overcome its past issues and emerged as a central figure in India's growth narrative. By analysing recent developments and government policies, the study illustrates the region's progress from a troubled periphery to an influential core in the national quest for peace and prosperity.

Keywords: Act East Policy, Development, Insurgency, Northeast India,

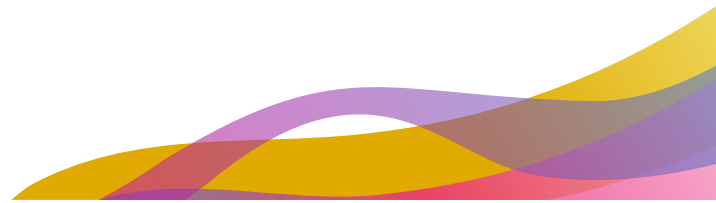




Introduction

The Northeast region of India has emerged as a forerunner in promoting the Viksit Bharat initiative, shedding its previous image as a distant frontier. The region is not just catching up but actively leading toward national peace and prosperity, leaving behind multidecade long issues such as insurgency and poor infrastructure. Since 2014, Northeast India has become a core focus of the Central Government's policy framework. Be it the adoption of the Act East Policy or recognising and celebrating the contributions of tribal heroes from the region, the government has shown that the Northeast is no longer neglected. The earlier government's stepmotherly attitude was replaced by the current Government's Northeast-centric approach, viewing the region as Asta Lakshmi—an area with immense growth potential.

If we assess the situation historically, this was not the case a decade ago. The region has been severely affected by insurgency to the point where insurgents seem to operate as a parallel authority in many areas. Rampant abductions, extortions, and killings continue unabated, leading to the frequent paralysis of normal life. As a result, socio-economic initiatives are increasingly hindered, and an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty pervades the region (Nayak and Bhattacharya, 2013). So, the region was completely sidelined from the mainstream due to the wider prevalence of insurgency-induced violence. The earlier governments could not improve the situation and hence the region's growth potential remained unexplored until recently. Based on this context, this paper attempts to grasp how a region marred by violence and lack of development rebounded and is now leading the Viksit Bharat journey.




Brief Overview of Northeast India Pre-2014

Northeast India is rich in natural resources, but policy paralysis has left the region among the poorest in India. Key development indicators, such as road infrastructure, banking services, healthcare access, and power consumption, fall below the national average (Singh,2016). Moreover, the region's rich natural and human resources remain underutilised due to geopolitical issues and worsening law and order, severely impacting infrastructure development. Past neglect by the central government and ongoing insurgency has led to significant infrastructure deficiencies, hindering the flow of goods and limiting the benefits of globalisation. Consequently, the region has seen minimal Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), receiving just \$950 million between January 2000 and March 2011 (Nayak and Bhattacharya, 2013).

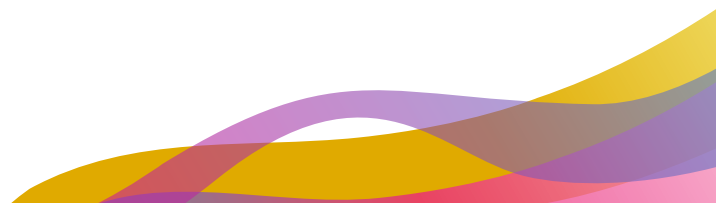
The region was also known for all wrong reasons. A study in 2012 revealed people's perceptions of the region. It has been stated that about 52% of the respondents have a 'negative' perception of this region, with their immediate recall of it as "a region riddled with insurgency and most unsafe place in the country". 87% of the respondents can't name all the states of North East India.

Post-independence, infrastructure development in the Northeast of India has been severely hindered by a lack of strategic planning and political will. Geopolitical challenges further exacerbated the region's connectivity issues, with key infrastructure like inland waterways and the Stilwell Road falling into neglect. Essential projects, including roads, bridges, and petroleum refineries, often required popular agitation to prompt action. For example, the Dhola Sadiya Bridge, a result of the Assam Agitation and a clause of the 1985 Assam Accord, took 33 years to complete, highlighting the prolonged struggle for vital infrastructure improvements in the region (Kakoty,2020). Similarly, other significant infrastructure projects like the Bogibeel Bridge of Assam, announced in 1997, took 21 years to complete. Pakyong Airport of Sikkim, announced in 2008 was completed in 2018.



The region faces significant challenges due to subsistence agriculture hampered by poor infrastructure, including inadequate roads and markets. High vulnerability to natural calamities such as floods, landslides, and soil erosion has led to unstable agricultural productivity, compounded by the limited use of modern inputs like irrigation and fertilisers. This situation creates a vicious cycle of low input, low productivity, and low income, contributing to agrarian distress. Declining growth rates since the 1980s have not been sufficient to generate necessary surpluses for investment or employment. Despite the region's potential for diverse agricultural products—ranging from fruits and vegetables to spices and plantation crops—the lack of agro-processing and marketing facilities has resulted in resource wastage and unfulfilled economic potential. Utilising the region's abundant natural resources, favorable climate, and rich human capital to break this cycle and transform weaknesses into opportunities remains a pressing challenge (Barah, 2007). Along similar lines, Singh (2011) underscores a critical issue in northeastern India: the processing of fruits and vegetables is severely underdeveloped and often overlooked. Despite significant market potential and profit opportunities in fruit and vegetable-based products, the rural population shows limited interest in this sector. The lack of processing and storage facilities, coupled with inadequate infrastructure, leads to substantial wastage of produce.

From an era of prolonged insurgency and crippled development to a decade of peace and prosperity, the region is witnessing major transformations. This all started in 2014 with the right intention, as evidenced by the BJP manifesto. The BJP 2014 election manifesto promised to emphasise the region's infrastructure development and to deal with insurgent groups firmly (Bharatiya Janata Party 2014). With the right intention, after coming into power in 2014, the BJP-led government has introduced a sea of regional changes by adhering to the poll promises. The following section will provide a detailed account of this transformative journey.



Methodology


This paper is an empirical and analytical study based on both primary and secondary sources. This study relies on data from different ministries concerning Northeast India, newspaper reporting, party manifesto, and others for primary sources. In terms of secondary sources, it uses journal articles and policy papers. One potential limitation of this methodology is the possibility of bias and varying reliability in the sources. To address this, the study will focus on presenting consistent results and outcomes across both primary and secondary data sources, thereby minimising bias and enhancing reliability.

Key Findings

After a close assessment of available sources, it has been found that in the last ten years, the government has taken up major initiatives to curb insurgency issues and bring development to the region. The major finding on the decadal growth of the region can be discussed in the following way-

1. From Disturbed Area to Developed Area

The region was marred by the presence of insurgency-induced violence for decades. There has been a sigh of relief in this trend since 2014 as the government adopted a new approach to the region that emphasises the 'divine' nature of Northeast India as opposed to the previous divisive stance. Numerous peace accords have been successfully signed in the past decade. These agreements are designed to bring an end to many long-standing disputes in the region. Key accords, like the Bodo Accord and Bru-Reang Agreement, resolved long-standing conflicts. The UNLF peace accord on 29 November, 2023, signifies the end of a six-decade-long armed movement, a significant step for peace and stability in Manipur. Similarly, the recently signed peace deal with the pro-talk faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) marks a historic turning point, promising enduring peace for the state. Another such attempt is the most recent MoU signed on 2 September 2024 with the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), which ended a 35-year-long conflict in the state.

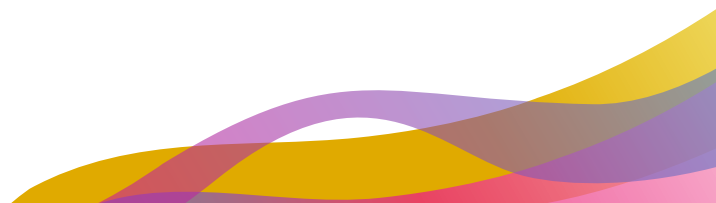


In terms of impact, these accords have resulted in significant improvements in the security situation of the Northeast. Due to 12 agreements signed by the current Government in North-East India over the last ten years, 10 thousand militants left their arms and joined the mainstream. Most of the surrendered militants are youth who now have the opportunity to contribute to national progress. They are empowering themselves through financial support provided by the central government as part of these agreements.

Due to improved security, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has been reduced from a large part of the North East, fulfilling the long-standing and sentimental demand of the North Eastern states. Disturbed Area Notification under AFSPA was completely removed from Tripura and Meghalaya. In addition, compared to the year 2014, there is a reduction of 76% in extremist incidents in the year 2022. Similarly, the casualties of security personnel and civilians have come down by 90% and 97%, respectively in 2022 as compared to 2014. Such a shift signals the penetration of the Central Government's consistent and coordinated efforts on the ground.

2. Embracing an Era of Development

Since 2014, a new era of change and economic upliftment for the northeastern region has steadily been in progress. The government has not just delivered on its promise of bringing peace and prosperity to the region but also made the region the topmost priority in every policy decision. In this direction, introducing the Act East Policy in 2015 is a crucial step that actively contributes to a transformative shift, marking a substantial change in the prospective role of the North-East region. To enhance connectivity with neighbouring countries, the government has sanctioned many projects. For example, around Rs.550 Crore was invested under the Inland Water Transport (IWT) component of the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) for connectivity with Myanmar. In addition, the Agartala-Akhaura Rail Link between India and Bangladesh, inaugurated on November 2023, is another impetus to the Act East Policy.



Another push towards developing the region comes in the form of 10% gross budgetary support for expenditure on development works in North East India, which has been increased by **179% from Rs 36,108 crore in 2014-15 to Rs 1,00,893.23 crore in 2024-25** (see figure 1). Additionally, in light of the assessment that the NE Region has a significant developmental backlog, a new scheme, Prime Minister's Development Initiative for North East (PM-DevINE), was announced in the Union Budget 2022-23 with a total outlay of Rs. 6,600 crore from 2022-23 to 2025-26.

Budget Allocation to NER (In Rs. Crore)

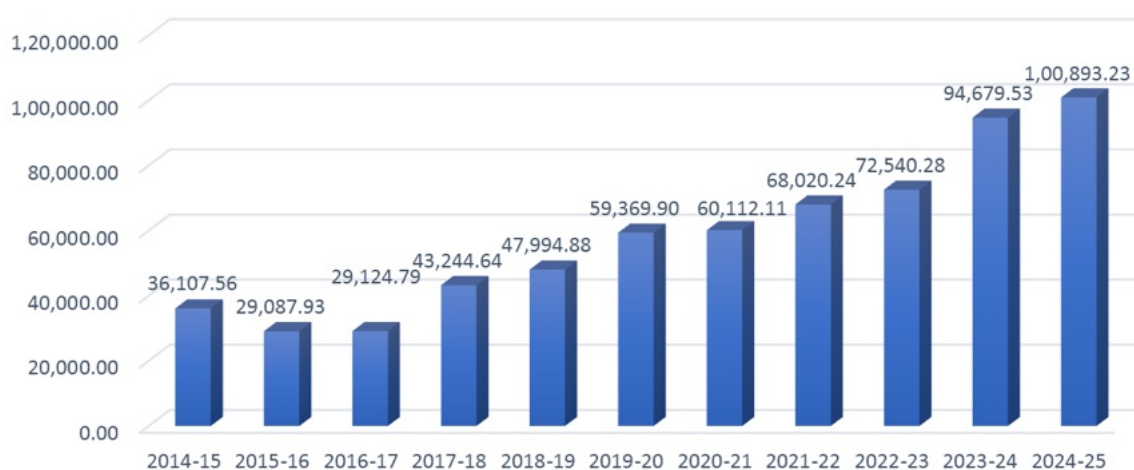


Figure 1: Budget allocation to NER in the last ten years

The government also worked to ensure the region would no longer stay underdeveloped. In this context, the region achieved many targets. For instance, all 8 Northeastern states achieved 100% household electrification under Saubhagya Yojana. Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram have achieved Har Ghar Jal status regarding household tap water connection. Moreover, due to efforts under the Swachh Bharat Mission, all the Northeast villages are now defecation-free. The farsighted approach of the current government also led to the emergence of Northeast India as an education hub with the establishment of many premier institutions. Whether it is the establishment of the first **National Sports University in Manipur, setting up the first AIIMS and first IIMC** in the region, or inaugurating seven cancer hospitals in Assam in a single day, the past ten years have been the epitome of development in the

Northeastern region, reflecting the government's steadfast commitment to fostering the region's advancement and ensuring its development.

In terms of development, generating employment opportunities has been a core focus in the region as it has a history of lack of employment opportunities. In the last decade, initiatives of the Central Government have generated employment avenues for youth in the region. Many curated initiatives have been adopted, such as the Uttar Poorva Transformative Industrialization Scheme, 2024 (UNNATI – 2024) for ten years from the date of notification, along with eight years for committed liabilities at a total cost of Rs.10,037 crore. This has major potential in generating employment in the coming times and boosting industrialisation in the region. In the Northeast region (NER), the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme employed over 71 lakh individuals in 2021-22 and more than 63 lakh in 2022-23. Additionally, under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Urban Livelihoods Mission, aimed at reducing poverty among urban poor households, 23,519 skilled candidates were placed and 8,653 beneficiaries received support for establishing individual or group micro-enterprises as of February 2023.

3. Enhancing Connectivity

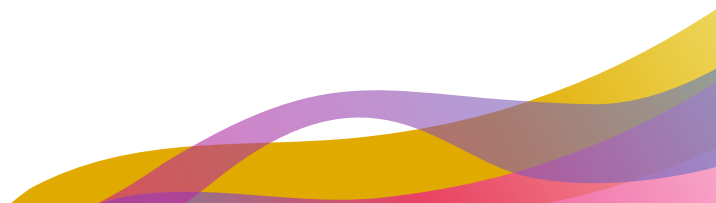
The region's growth was stalled earlier due to a lack of connectivity and poor infrastructure. The current government took major initiatives to bridge the gap in connectivity and make it closer to other parts of India. In this direction, the North Eastern Special Infrastructure Development Scheme (NESIDS) for Roads, introduced on 1 April 2022, merges the previous North East Road Sector Development Scheme (NERSDS) and the road component of the old NESIDS. Since then, 11 projects have been sanctioned under NESIDS (Roads) with a total estimated cost of Rs. 625.34 crore. Previously, under NESIDS and NERSDS, 77 projects were approved with a total cost of Rs. 3525.31 crore; of these, 26 projects costing Rs. 1206.26 crore are complete, while 51 projects worth Rs. 2319.05 crore are underway. Similarly, the total length of National Highways (NHs)



constructed in the North Eastern Region (NER) during the last ten years is 9,984 km, with an expenditure of Rs.1,07,504 crore.

In the last ten years, the government has invested Rs. 81,000 crores in railways, Rs. 48,000 crores in road connectivity, and 5196 km long roads constructed in the Northeast under the Bharat Mala project. Under the UDAN scheme, eight new airports have been constructed, and 71 new air routes have been established in the last ten years. Northeast India connected with the Vande Bharat Network on 29 May 2023 with the first Vande Bharat Express connecting Guwahati to New Jalpaiguri. Northeast India has seen a dramatic expansion in inland waterways in the last decade, growing from just one waterway in 2014 to 20 in 2024. Furthermore, many Northeastern states were first connected to the Broad Gauge Network. For instance- the capital of Arunachal Pradesh was connected in 2015, and the capital of Tripura was connected to Train Services in May 2016, Mizoram was connected with the Broad Gauge network of Indian Railways at Bhairabi in May 2016, and Manipur was connected with Broad Gauge Indian Railways Network on 16 May 2023.


Since 2014, the government has actively enhanced the connectivity across all eight states. For instance, Assam's connectivity is exemplified by the Bogibeel and Dhola Sadia Bridges. These engineering marvels not only link regions but also stimulate economic ecosystems. Regarding impact, the Bogibeel Bridge has significantly reduced train travel distance between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh by 80%, fostering economic growth and attracting industrial investments. It has particularly spurred economic activities in flood-prone districts like Lakhimpur and Dhemaji, prompting the Assam government to inaugurate projects worth Rs.1220.21 crore in Dhemaji district in 2022. This bridge has become a lifeline for lakhs of people not only in Assam but also in Arunachal Pradesh. Similarly, the Sela Tunnel project provides all-weather connectivity to Tawang and improves the ease of travel for the people.



4. Mainstreaming Northeast Indian Culture: An Inclusivist Approach

Once relegated as a periphery region of India, Northeast India's culture has become mainstream due to the calculated efforts of the current government. The current government's primary focus is on protecting and promoting the culture and heritage of Northeast India. Multiple cultural centres have been set up in different parts of the region to fulfil this goal. Two such centres, namely the North East Zone Cultural Centre (NEZCC) and the Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre (EZCC), were established at Dimapur and Kolkata, respectively. As per the North Eastern Council 2020 guidelines, promoting the region is one of the primary goals. From 2017 to 2021, 10 projects costing 34.60 crores and three tribal festivals worth 0.34 crores were sanctioned under this scheme. NEC has been supporting various festivals of the region, such as the Sangai Festival of Manipur, Behdienkhlam Festival of Meghalaya, and Hornbill Festival of Nagaland, etc. across the region to ensure greater participation of the people from various parts of the country.

People from Northeast India always have this feeling about being left out of its rich history from Indian history, which ultimately led to lesser awareness about the region among citizens of India. To address this problem, the current government has adopted a dedicated approach. In this regard, the government laid the foundation for setting up the Rani Gaidinilu Tribal Freedom Fighters Museum at Luangkao village in Manipur's Tamenglong district on 22 November 2021 to commemorate Rani Gaidinilu fought to free her people from the shackles of the British administration from a very young age. On another occasion, the foundation stone laid for the project aims to beautify Rang Ghar in Sivsagar to celebrate the rich legacy of the Ahom rule in Assam. In terms of impact, this project, by implementing tourist attractive infrastructure, is gaining national attention. Another major celebration on 25 November 2022 in Delhi is to observe the 400th birth anniversary of Lachit Borphukan, the legendary Ahom general known for his victory against the Mughals

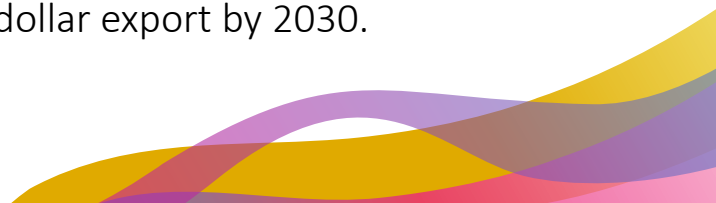



in the battle of Saraighat. Such a celebration has made a folk hero a nationally popular figure. Recently, another remarkable aspect of the Ahom dynasty received global recognition: the Moidams (Mound-Burial System of the Ahom Dynasty) of Choraideo have been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as the 43rd entry from India. Furthermore, as a part of cultural mainstreaming, many local foods in the region are also becoming popular. In this regard, Muga Silk, Tezpur Lesu, Joha Rice, Boka Chaul, Kaji Nemu, and Gamosa also got the GI tag.

As a result of the inclusivist approach, a remarkable shift in the number of tourists visiting the region was noticed in 2022. 118.45 lakh domestic and 1.04 lakh foreign tourists visited the North Eastern States in 2022. By 31 March 2024, Sikkim had welcomed 290,401 tourists, including 256,537 domestic visitors and 30,864 foreigners. Similarly, Mizoram State Tourism Department reported an influx of tourists in 2023, with over 1,96,000 visitors, including domestic and foreign travellers, compared to 1,32,000 travellers in 2022.

5. Revolutionising Agriculture Landscape

In Northeast India, after having immense potential due to the lacklustre efforts of earlier governments, the potential of agriculture has never been realised. However, a paradigmatic shift has been witnessed in the last decade. Considering the sustainability aspect, the current government introduced Mission Organic Value Chain Development for the North Eastern Region (MOVCDNER) in 2015-16. Under this scheme, Rs. 46,575/ha assistance is provided for three years. It has helped bring 1.73 lakh ha area under organic farming, benefiting 1.89 lakh farmers. During this period, 379 FPOs/FPCs were created, including 205 Collection, Aggregation, and Grading units, 190 Custom Hiring Centers, and 123 Processing units and Pack houses. 7 Brands have also been developed. The government has taken Sikkim as a model in the organic farming project. The Center has decided to put a high-quality testing lab in Sikkim to promote organic products of the state. It is expected that Sikkim will produce worth of 1-billion-dollar export by 2030.

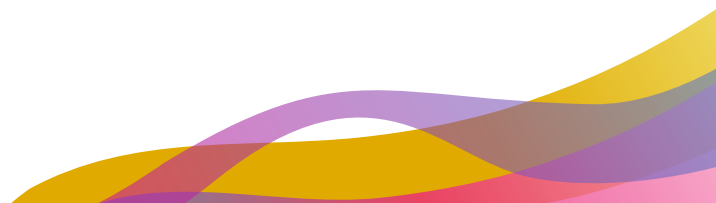




The establishment of FPOs is another thrust area that the present government is expanding in the region to benefit the framers. Under 'Formation and Promotion of 10000 FPOs under the Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, Govt. of India., **205 FPOs have been formed across NER covering 15,500 farmers.**

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of primary and secondary sources, we can assess that the current government's curated policies and initiatives can still impact the ground despite challenging circumstances in the region. A transformation in mindset has become evident, eliminating the once common questions like 'Where is Northeast India?' 'Is Northeast India a part of China?'. This new focus has replaced past neglect with a supportive approach, fostering a sense of hope and optimism among the people. The region, once overlooked, is now experiencing greater national and global recognition. Due to the handholding support of the Government, Northeast India has shredded its image of a troubled periphery and become a core of the Viksit Bharat journey.



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