

TOURISM IN NORTHEAST INDIA: CHANGING PATTERN FOR INDIAN TOURISM

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AUTHOR NOTE

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ABSTRACT

The tourism and hospitality industry in Northeast India is entering a phase of rapid transformation, fuelled by rising connectivity, policy focus, and renewed traveller interest in the region's natural beauty and cultural diversity. In this context, a recently released report by the hospitality consultancy HVS ANAROCK further highlights that branded hotel capacity in the region is set to nearly double by 2030. Based on this context, this paper will provide an in-depth analysis of the evolution of the tourism and hospitality sector in Northeast India and how central and state government policies, particularly after 2014, are enabling this shift. Moreover, this paper will also discuss the tourism policy of the respective states of Northeast India and how it is catering to the changing needs of tourists.

Keywords: Infrastructure, Northeast India, Tourism, Policy



INTRODUCTION

Tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors in India, contributing significantly to economic growth, cultural exchange, and employment generation. The rising middle class and growing disposable incomes have further fuelled the expansion of both domestic and outbound tourism, generated large-scale employment and boosted state economies. In recent years, India's tourism sector has witnessed rapid growth, with immense potential for job creation and foreign exchange earnings. According to government data, tourism is now the third-largest source of foreign exchange for India, contributing significantly to foreign exchange reserves and improving the balance of payments. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) estimated that the tourism sector generated 36.90 million direct employments and 47.72 million indirect employments, together accounting for 13.34% of total employment in the economy.

Within this evolving landscape of tourism and the hospitality industry of India, Northeast India occupies a unique and increasingly important position. Encompassing eight states, the region is endowed with unparalleled natural beauty, rich biodiversity, and a vibrant cultural dynamic. Its distinctive blend of wildlife, landscapes, heritage sites, and indigenous traditions offers immense potential to diversify and enrich India's tourism narrative.

Traditionally, Indian tourism has been concentrated in well-established circuits such as Rajasthan, Kerala, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, etc. However, shifting patterns of travel, rising disposable incomes, and the growing demand for offbeat destinations have brought the Northeast into focus. Tourist preferences are clearly



shifting. A recent feature in The New York Times ranked Assam as the world's 4th most-visited destination. Similarly, the Travel Trends Report 2025 by Skyscanner highlighted Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, as the top choice among Indian travellers. This shifting pattern is possible due to the Government of India's sustained investment in connectivity, infrastructure, and promotion of the region as part of the "Act East Policy" has further catalyzed this shift.

The Northeast is now increasingly seen not only as a domestic attraction but also as a gateway for cross-border tourism with Southeast Asia. Its strategic location, combined with ecological and cultural wealth, positions the region as a vital driver of India's tourism growth in the coming decades. To understand the growth of tourism along with a historical perspective from a governance and policy point of view, this paper is further divided into four major sections.

Tourism and Hospitality Sector in Northeast India: Pre-2014 Analysis

Tourism is an important and fastest-growing service sector industry that involves multi-dimensional activity with high potential for income and employment generation. It significantly contributes to the host country's economic development. However, the tourism and hospitality sector in Northeast India, before 2014, faced significant challenges despite the region's immense natural and cultural wealth.

The government has consistently worked since the 1990s to promote the North-East as a tourism hub, supported by initiatives like the North-Eastern Council. Known as India's gateway to Southeast Asia, the region is both culturally rich and ecologically vital, forming a key part of the Indo-Myanmar biodiversity zone. Nearly half of India's 450 tribes are concentrated here, making it a unique centre of ethnic diversity.



Despite its vast natural wealth and scenic beauty, the region remains relatively less known to much of India and the world. Recognised as one of the planet's major biodiversity hotspots, it is home to dense tropical rainforests covering over half its area, abundant wildlife, and largely hilly terrain.

Studies indicate that the North-East attracts a very limited share of total tourists in India. Poor connectivity has been a key challenge, with Guwahati's international airport serving as the main gateway. While the region holds immense potential to become a prime tourism destination, issues like insurgency, floods, landslides, and erosion have hindered growth. These recurring challenges not only disrupt daily life but also limit tourism's economic contribution. As a result, much of the region's tourism potential remained untapped for many decades since independence, leading the Ministry of Tourism to label it a "paradise unexplored" under its Incredible India campaign.

The overall perception of the region in the common public narrative was also unfavourable. A 2012 study 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 the most unsafe place in the country". 87% of the respondents can't name all the states of North East India. This perception has been reinforced by insurgencies and unrest across much of Northeast India. Within the region itself, the prolonged presence of insurgency has left a deep imprint on the public psyche. Fear and a pervasive sense of insecurity took hold amid frequent kidnappings, killings, threats, and extortion. Human rights violations have



occurred at the hands of both insurgent groups and security forces. Businesses and enterprises faltered under routine extortion, and despite high-profile business summits, few investors showed interest in the Northeast, even though the region is rich in resources and potential.

In terms of public health and safety in Northeast India was generally sound, though urban centres had begun facing stress from sanitation and facility gaps. These issues affected both residents and tourists, as towns functioned as key service hubs. Crimes against tourists were not a major concern, but negative media coverage had damaged the region's image. In terms of infrastructure, state and central agencies had made efforts to improve transport, communication, and basic amenities. However, development remained uneven and concentrated around popular tourist circuits, leaving many potential destinations underdeveloped. The approach adopted by earlier governments limited wider benefits and prevented lesser-known areas from gaining visibility and growth.

Some major problems of tourism development in the North-East included poor transportation facilities, lack of alternative routes to access different states and tourist destinations, weak marketing efforts, and boundary issues both between states and with neighbouring countries like China. Concerns over safety due to terrorism, along with social, political, and regional imbalances, also acted as serious constraints. Added to this was the outdated mindset of many domestic tourists, who viewed the region only as a tribal area. Together, these factors limited tourism growth and prevented the region from realizing its full potential.

Another major hurdle for tourism in the region was the restrictive



permit system. Indian citizens required an Inner Line Permit (ILP) to visit Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Mizoram, while foreign nationals needed Protected Area Permits (PAP) or Restricted Area Permits (RAP) with special approval for designated routes. Extending the validity of these permits was seen as essential to promoting tourism.

An overall analysis of issues affecting the tourism sector in Northeast India revealed that poor infrastructure and connectivity, coupled with rampant insurgencies, had hindered the region's growth potential for decades after Independence. A subtle shift in this trend began with the change in policy approach towards the region over the past decade. The following sections will discuss in detail the factors that have powered this shift in the Northeast's tourism scenario.

HVS ANAROCK Report: What it says about Northeast India

The tourism and hospitality industry in Northeast India is entering a phase of rapid transformation, fuelled by rising connectivity, policy focus, and renewed traveller interest in the region's natural and cultural diversity. Once considered a niche destination, the Northeast is now emerging as a significant growth frontier for India's hospitality sector. A recent HVS Anarock report titled "Northeast India: A Hidden Gem for Tourism Potential" highlights the region's immense potential, driven by improved infrastructure and the expansion of air and rail networks. Some key findings from the report are as follows-

- According to the report, branded hotel capacity in the region is set to nearly double by 2030, with over 3,000 new rooms in the pipeline.
- Assam will add nearly 2,000 rooms between 2025–2030, mostly in Guwahati; with Gangtok, it accounts for over 56% of Northeast India's



branded hotel inventory.

- Growth is supported by record air traffic of 11.2 million passengers in 2024 along with rapid progress in railway and highway projects.

- Air traffic grew at a CAGR of 10.6% between 2015–2024; if sustained, it will nearly double to 20.5 million by 2030, boosting tourism and hospitality.

- In 2024, Northeast India accounted for only 0.43% of Domestic Tourist Visits and 1.17% of Foreign Tourist Visits, showing untapped potential.

- State tourism policies are noted as growth enablers; for example, Doyni Polo Airport is highlighted in Arunachal Pradesh.

- Central government schemes and increased budget allocations are strengthening the region's strategic and economic role.

- Enhanced connectivity with better roads, rail, upgraded airports, new UDAN flights, and waterways will improve travel and open new destinations.

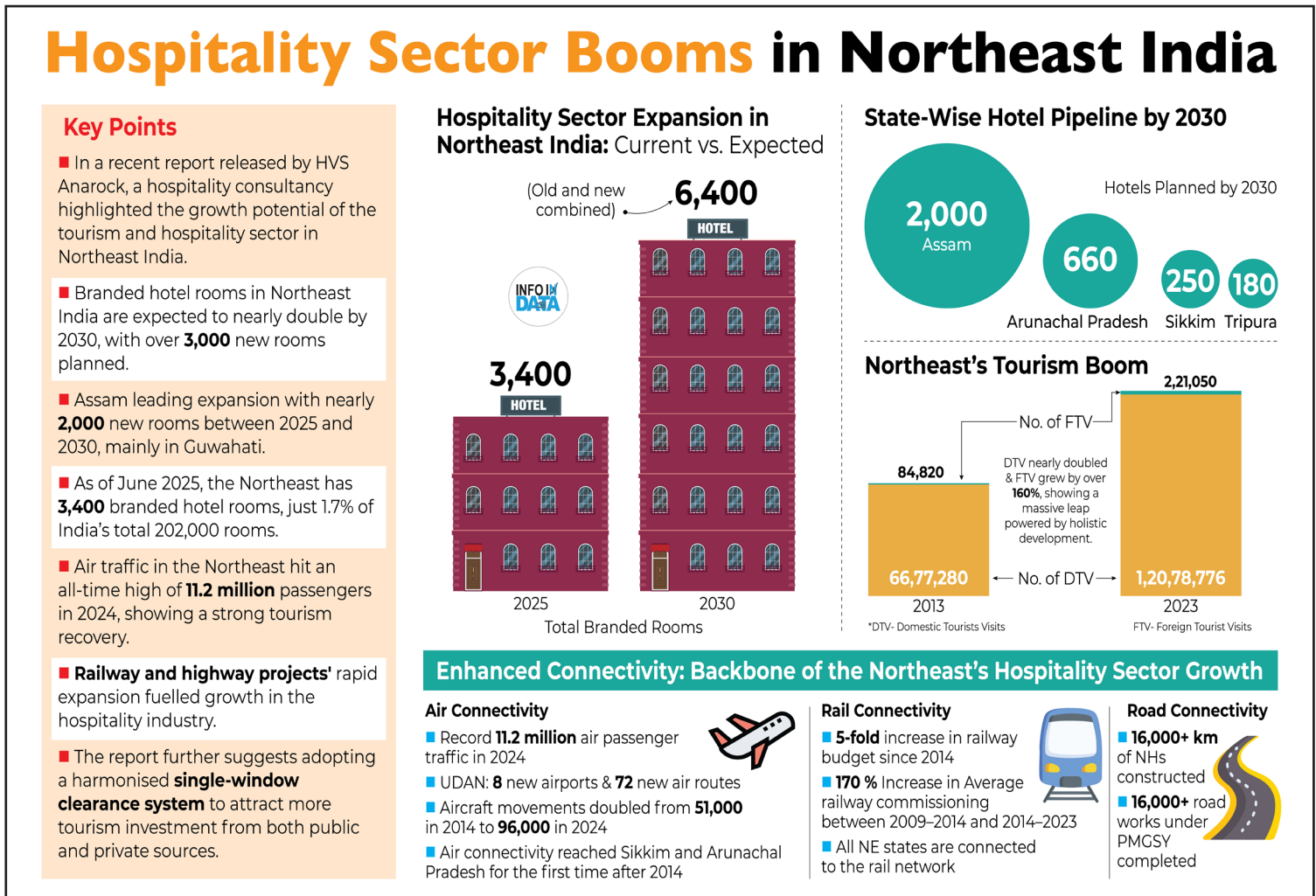
- The region has strong prospects for sustainable and experiential tourism: eco, adventure, wildlife, tea tourism, and more.

- Despite incentives, private investment remains limited due to inconsistent regulations, slow approvals, and perceptions of instability.

- The report recommends a harmonised single-window clearance system to attract more public and private investment.

- Lessons from Gujarat, Kerala, and Rajasthan show branding and governance can reshape economies, but best practices must be adapted to the Northeast's unique geography, ecology, and culture.

Figure 1: Brief Snapshot of the Report



Source: HVS ANAROCK, MDoNER, PIB

As the report unveiled the tourism potential of the region and the growth witnessed over the last decade, the next section of this paper will analyse the key factors that have made the growth of the tourism industry in Northeast India possible and positioned the region as a favoured travel destination.

Growth of Tourism Industry in Northeast India: Analysis of Key Factors

North-East India, blessed with natural beauty and rich biodiversity, lies at the heart of one of the world's most diverse biogeographic regions. With its wildlife sanctuaries, river islands, hill stations, and



cultural heritage, the region has immense potential for tourism-led growth and employment. Iconic destinations such as Kaziranga National Park, home to the world-famous one-horned rhinoceros, and Manas National Park with its wild buffaloes, draw global attention. Sanctuaries like Pobitora and Orang, along with rare species such as the golden langur and pygmy hog, further add to its charm. Unique attractions like the bird-mystery of Jatinga Hill, Majuli being the world's largest river island, and historic monuments like Rangghar and Karengghar, Moidams enrich the region's appeal. The temples of Kamakhya, Umananda, and Mahabhairavi, along with picturesque hill stations like Shillong, Tawang, Haflong, and Gangtok, offer spiritual and adventure tourism opportunities. Tea tourism, golf tourism, and water activities at serene lagoons such as Loktak also add variety. Culturally, North-East India is a vibrant mosaic of tribes and communities celebrating festivals like Bihu, Bathou, and Cheraw, making it a truly unique and enchanting tourist destination.

In the last decade, Northeast India has been witnessing a progression in terms of tourist visits, both domestic and foreign. This progression is powered by various factors. They are as follows-

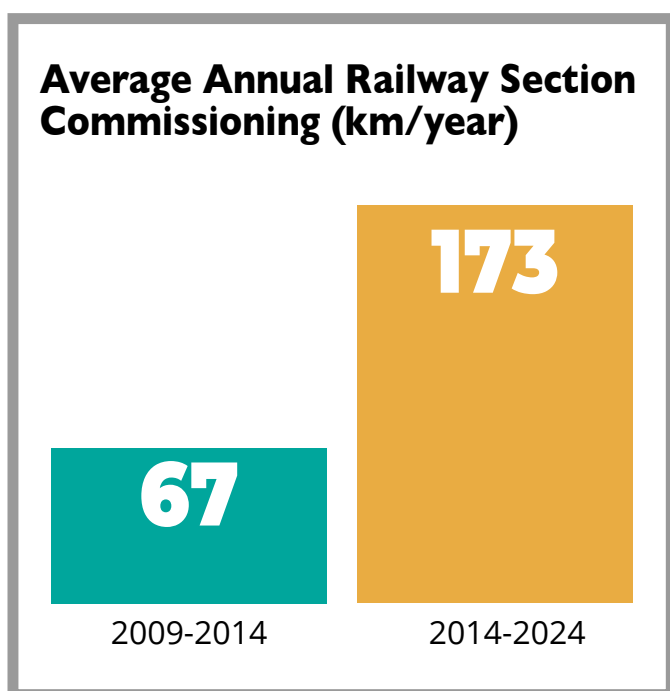
1. New Age Infrastructure and Multi-Modal Connectivity

As already discussed in the earlier section, the tourism sector of the region suffered earlier due to a lack of connectivity and poor infrastructure. The current government has taken major initiatives to bridge the connectivity gap and bring it closer to other parts of India. From railways to road infrastructure to engineering marvels, the government has been investing across diverse domains to ensure ease of living and commute in Northeast India. In this regard, the NESIDS scheme launched in 2017-18 to fund roads, bridges, and

other infrastructure not covered by other ministries, ensuring connectivity, market access, and security in NER. Under NESIDS (Roads & OTRI), a total of 1,691 projects worth Rs. 19,470 crore have been sanctioned.

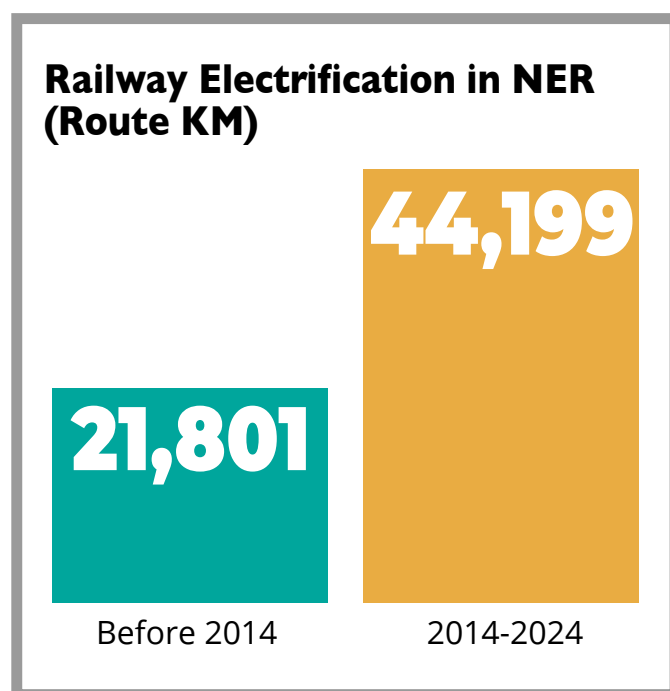
Since 2014, the railway budget allocation for the region has increased fivefold, reaching a cumulative Rs. 62,477 crore, including Rs. 10,440 crore for the current fiscal year. Railway projects worth Rs. 77,000 crore are currently underway, marking the highest level of investment the region has ever seen. In Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, and beyond, long-delayed projects are finally linking capitals to the national grid. In Tripura, the railway line has reached the borders, Meghalaya has seen its first railway station, while Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Assam push forward with new lines, electrification, and doubling works.

Figure 2: Average annual commissioning of railway sections in NER



Source: Ministry of Railways

Figure 3: Railways Electrification in NER

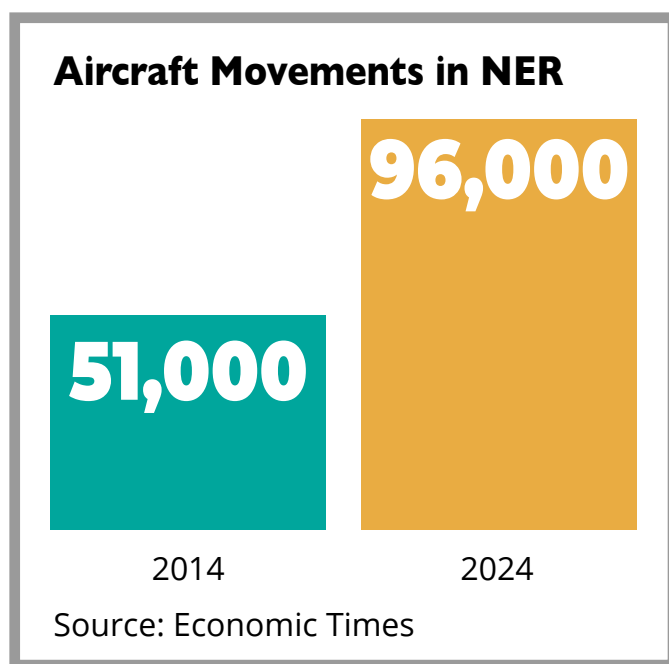


Source: Ministry of Railways

In the domain of railways, the average annual commissioning of railway sections increased by 158%. Moreover, Indian Railways electrified 44,199 route kilometres between 2014–2024, more than double the 21,801 kilometres achieved in the preceding six decades. In addition, 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, all North Eastern States have been connected with rail, except for Sikkim, where the work is in progress. Rail connectivity to four states of Northeast India, namely Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Mizoram, was provided after 2014.

Air connectivity has also expanded considerably. The number of airports in the region has doubled since 2014. Under the UDAN scheme, eight new airports have been constructed, and 72 new air routes have been operationalised over the past decade. , Under UDAN 3.0, launched in 2019 and UDAN 4.0 launched in 2020, special emphasis was placed on linking hilly terrains and the Northeast. The focus was not limited to India alone. The aim was to prepare the region for international routes that would connect it directly to Southeast Asia as a part of the Act East Policy.

Figure 4: Decadal Comparison of Aircraft Movements in NER





As shown in the figure above, aircraft movements have doubled between 2014 and 2024 in the Northeast, reflecting greater demand for air services in the region.

Road connectivity also underwent substantial progress. The total length of National Highways (NHs) constructed in NER is 16,207 km. Under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), 17,637 road works covering 89,436 km and 2,398 bridges have been sanctioned in the North Eastern Region. Of these, 16,469 road works spanning 80,933 km and 2,108 bridges have been completed, significantly improving last-mile connectivity in remote and rural areas.

Since 2014, the government has actively enhanced connectivity across all eight states. Waterways infrastructure also skyrocketed from only one inland waterway in 2014 to 20 designated waterways in 2024, securing the base for an enhanced logistics facility. , Additionally, the under-construction multi-modal logistics park in Jogighopa, Assam, will further enhance multimodal connectivity and ensure efficient cargo movement in the region.

The state-of-the-art infrastructure projects in the region further enhance connectivity, which was unimaginable a decade back. For instance, Assam's connectivity is exemplified by the Bogibeel and Dholā Sadia Bridges. These engineering marvels not only link regions but also stimulate economic ecosystems. In terms of impact, the Bogibeel Bridge has significantly reduced travel time from Itanagar to Dibrugarh from 24 hours to 5 hours, fostering economic growth and attracting more tourists. Similarly, the Sela Tunnel, the World's longest bi-lane tunnel above 13,000 feet, provides all-weather connectivity to Tawang, improving the ease of travel for the people.



2. Ensuring Peace and Security

When it comes to tourism, a key concern that crosses tourists and investors in the industry is the overall peace and security in the region. For many decades after independence, the area of Northeast India has undergone prolonged episodes of insurgency and violence. However, a major shift has been witnessed since 2014. Due to 12 agreements signed by the current Government in Northeast India over the last ten years, over 10 thousand militants laid down their arms and joined the mainstream society. Violent incidents have declined by nearly 70% between 2014 and 2024 compared to the previous decade. Along similar lines, 89% reduction in civilian deaths and 70% decrease in security forces deaths were noted in the last one decade as compared to the previous decade.

3. Targeted Approach of the Government towards Developing Tourist Sites

As discussed in the earlier sections, the popular tourist sites of Northeast India used to be more centred around Assam. However, the current government has broadened the horizons and developed many unpopular destinations into a vibrant tourist site. The earlier governments also took a few steps towards promoting tourism in the region. In this regard, the central and state governments in the Northeast launched initiatives in 2008 to boost industrial growth and investment while positioning the region as a key driver of the Look East Policy (LEP). That year, the NEC created the North Eastern States Tourism Forum (NEST) to coordinate state tourism strategies, including circuit consolidation and joint marketing.

If we analyse the post-2014 scenario, there are many curated schemes adopted by the central government towards promoting

tourism at the national level. Northeast India, as a region, is also getting wide attention in terms of project allocation and the redevelopment of tourist and heritage sites. In 2014-15 two specific schemes, namely Swadesh Darshan and PRASHAD, were launched nationwide to improve tourist convenience.

The Swadesh Darshan Scheme (SDS) aims to develop thematic tourism circuits across the country. 76 projects worth Rs. 5,290 crore were sanctioned under identified themes, of which 75 projects have been physically completed. This scheme has been revamped as Swadesh Darshan 2.0 (SD2.0) in 2023 to develop sustainable tourism destinations that take a tourist- and destination-centric approach. Under SD2.0, over the last two years, the Ministry has sanctioned 52 projects worth Rs. 2,108.87 crore.

Table 1:

PROJECTS IN NORTHEAST SANCTIONED UNDER SWADESH DARSHAN SCHEME

State	Circuit / Year	Project Name	Amount Sanctioned (Rs. crore)
Arunachal Pradesh	North-East Circuit 2014-15	Development of Bhalukpong- Bomdila and Tawang	49.77
Arunachal Pradesh	North East Circuit 2015-16	Development of Nafra- Seppa- Pappu, Pasa, Pakke Valleys- Sangdupota- New Sagalee- Ziro- Yomcha	96.72
Assam	Wildlife Circuit 2015-16	Development of Manas- Probitora- Nameri- Kaziranga- Dibru- Saikhowa	94.68
Assam	Heritage Circuit 2016-17	Development of Tezpur – Majuli – Sibsagar	90.98

Source: Ministry of Tourism (PIB)

State	Circuit / Year	Project Name	Amount Sanctioned (Rs. crore)
Manipur	North-East Circuit 2015-16	Development of Tourist Circuit in Manipur: Imphal- Khongjom	72.23
Manipur	Spiritual Circuit 2016-17	Development of Shri Govindajee Temple, Shri Bijoy Govindajee Temple – Shri Gopinath Temple – Shri Bungshibodon Temple – Shri Kaina Temple	45.34
Meghalaya	North East Circuit 2016-17	Development of Umium (Lake View), U Lum Sohpetbneng-Mawdian gdiang – Orchid Lake Resort	99.13
Meghalaya	North East Circuit 2018-19	Development of West Khasi Hills (Nongkhlaw-KremTiro – Khudoi & Kohmang Falls – Khri River- Mawthadraishan, Shillong), Jaintia Hills (Krang Suri Falls-Shyrmang- looksi), Garo Hills (Nokrek Reserve, Katta Beel, Siju Caves)	84.97
Mizoram	North East Circuit 2015-16	Development of Thenzawl & South Zote, District Serchhip and Reiek	92.26
Mizoram	Eco Circuit 2016-17	Development of Eco-Adventure Circuit Aizawl -Rawpuichhip – Khawhphawp – Lengpui – Chatlang- Sakawrhmutuaitlang - Muthee – Beratlawng -Tuirial Airfield – Hmuifang	66.37

Source: Ministry of Tourism (PIB)

State	Circuit / Year	Project Name	Amount Sanctioned (Rs. crore)
Nagaland	Tribal Circuit 2015-16	Development of Tribal Circuit Peren- Kohima- Wokha	97.36
Nagaland	Tribal Circuit 2016-17	Development of Mokokchung- Tuensang-Mon	98.14
Sikkim	North East Circuit 2015-16	Development of Tourist Circuit linking Rangpo (entry) – Rorathang- Aritar- Phadamchen- Nathang- Sherathang- Tsongmo- Gangtok- Phodong- Mangan- Lachung- Yumthang- Lachen- Thangu- Gurudongmer- Mangan- Gangtok- TuminLingee- Singtam (exit)	98.05
Sikkim	North East Circuit 2016-17	Development of Tourist Circuit Linking Singtam– Maka- Temi- BermoikTokel- Phongia- Namchi –Jorthang- Okharey- Sombaria- Daramdin- Jorethang- Melli (Exit)	95.32
Tripura	North East Circuit 2015-16	Development of Agartala - Sipahijala - Melaghar - Udaipur - Amarpur- Tirthamukh- Mandirghat– Dumboor- NarikelKunja- Gandachara– Ambassa	82.85
Tripura	North East Circuit 2018-19	Development of Surma Cherra- Unakoti- Jampui Hills- Gunabati - Bhunaneshwari- Neermahal- Boxanagar- Chottakhola- Pilak- Avangchaarra	44.83

Source: Ministry of Tourism (PIB)

Table 2:**PROJECTS IN NORTHEAST SANCTIONED UNDER SWADESH DARSHAN 2.0 SCHEME**

State	Year of Sanction	Experience	Sanctioned Cost (Rs. crore)
Arunachal Pradesh	2023	Unlock Nacho Expedition	14.02
Arunachal Pradesh	2023	Mechuka Cultural Haat	18.48
Arunachal Pradesh	2023	Mechuka Adventure Park	12.75
Assam	2023	Kokrajhar Wetland Experience	26.67
Assam	2023	Reimagining Cinnamara Tea Estate	23.88
Meghalaya	2023	Waterfall Trails Experience	27.84
Meghalaya	2023	Meghalayan Age Cave Experience	32.45
Mizoram	2024	Eco Resort Experience at Keilungliah, Zote, Ngur & Mualbuhvum, Champhai	38.85
Mizoram	2024	Heritage and Cultural Centre, Champhai	33.87
Nagaland	2023	Eco-Tourism Experience at Chumoukedima viewpoint	7.87
Nagaland	2023	Tribal Cultural Experience at Midway Retreat	21.56
Nagaland	2024	Adventure Tourism Experience at Jacob Village, Chumoukedima	32.54

Source: Ministry of Tourism (PIB)

State	Year of Sanction	Experience	Sanctioned Cost (Rs. crore)
Sikkim	2023	Eco-Wellness Experience at Yuksom Cluster	15.4
Sikkim	2023	Gangtok Cultural Village	22.59
Tripura	2024	Tripura Heritage Village & Sangeet Experience at Agartala (Phase-1 & 2)	48.94

Source: Ministry of Tourism (PIB)

The above two tables entail allocation to Northeastern states under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, both phases. In the first phase, out of the total 76 projects sanctioned across the country with an investment of Rs. 5,290 crore, the Northeast region has received 16 projects amounting to Rs. 1,309 crore. This translates to nearly 21 % of the total projects and 25 % of the total financial outlay being directed towards the Northeast. Importantly, while the overall national average stands at Rs. 69.6 crore per project, the per-project allocation in the Northeast is significantly higher at Rs. 81.8 crore. This indicates a strategic emphasis on ensuring greater resource intensity for each project in the region, underscoring the government's focus on addressing the developmental gaps and prioritising infrastructure and capacity-building in the Northeast to enhance the tourism sector.

Under the Swadesh Darshan 2.0, out of the total 52 projects sanctioned nationwide with an investment of Rs. 2,018 crore, the Northeast region has received 15 projects amounting to Rs. 371 crore. This represents nearly 29 % of the total projects and around 18 % of the total financial outlay.

Table 3:**PROJECTS IN NORTHEAST INDIA SANCTIONED UNDER CBDD (SWADESH DARSHAN SUB-SCHEME, 2024-25)**

State	Year of Sanction	Project Name	Sanctioned Cost (Rs. crore)
Arunachal Pradesh	2024	Bichom Dam Adventure & Eco-Tourism Project	9.9
Arunachal Pradesh	2024	Kibhito Frontier Tourism - Gateway to Serenity	4.96
Assam	2024	Panidhing Bird Sanctuary, Sivasagar	9.99
Manipur	2024	Development of Ancient capital of Manipur, Langthabal Konug	24.69
Meghalaya	2024	Mawphlang cultural & Heritage centre	24.87
Meghalaya	2024	Nartiang Spiritual & Cultural Centre	24.87
Nagaland	2024	Soulful Trails: The Impur Heritage Experience, Impur Village	24.94
Nagaland	2024	Development of Wings over Doyang: An Eco-Tourism Haven, Doyang Reservoir	10
Sikkim	2024	Echoes of Valor: The Gnathang Valley Experience, Gnathang Village	5
Sikkim	2024	Kabi Chronicles: A Journey through Unity and Heritage, Kabi, Mangan	24.96

Source: Ministry of Tourism (PIB)

The Challenge-Based Destination Development (CBDD) scheme, introduced as a sub-scheme under the Swadesh Darshan initiative, is designed to promote sustainable and inclusive tourism by encouraging states and Union Territories to compete for funding based on innovative project proposals. With a total allocation of Rs. 648 crore for 36 projects across the country, the scheme seeks to strengthen tourism infrastructure, diversify offerings, and enhance destination competitiveness. Out of this, the Northeast has secured 10 projects amounting to Rs. 164 crore, accounting for nearly 28% of the projects and 25% of the total funds. This reflects a significant emphasis on the region and ensures the Northeast's unique cultural and ecological assets are leveraged more effectively within the national tourism framework.

Another significant scheme launched in 2014-15 is "Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual, Heritage Augmentation Drive" (PRASHAD). This initiative provides financial assistance to the State Governments and Union Territory Administrations for the development of tourism infrastructure at identified pilgrimage destinations. Under the scheme, the Ministry of Tourism has sanctioned 54 projects at an estimated cost of Rs. 1726 crore.

Table 4:

PROJECTS IN NORTHEAST SANCTIONED UNDER PRASHAD SCHEME

State	Project Name	Sanction Year	Approved Cost (Rs. crore)
Arunachal Pradesh	Development of Parshuram Kund	2020-21	37.88
Assam	Development of Pilgrimage amenities at Kamakhya Temple	2015-16	29.8

State	Project Name	Sanction Year	Approved Cost (Rs. crore)
Meghalaya	Development of Pilgrimage Facilitation at Nongswalia Church, Nartiang Shakti Peeth, Aitnar Pool and Charantala Kali Temple	2020-21	29.29
Mizoram	Development of Infrastructure for Pilgrimage and Heritage Tourism at Chite Vang, Zuangtai, Reiek and Aizawl	2022-23	44.89
Mizoram	Development of Basic Amenities under PRASHAD, Vangchhia, Champhai District	2024-25	5.47
Nagaland	Development of Pilgrimage Infrastructure at Molungkimong, Noksen Church, Aizuto, Wokha and Kohima	2018-19	25.2
Nagaland	Development of Pilgrimage Tourism Infrastructure at Zunheboto	2022-23	18.18
Sikkim	Development of Pilgrimage Facilitation at Four Patron Saints, Yuksom	2020-21	33.32
Tripura	Development of Tripura Sundari Temple	2020-21	34.43

Source: Ministry of Tourism (PIB)

As shown in the table above, the Northeast accounts for 9 projects with an allocation of Rs. 258 crore, representing around 17% of the total projects and 15% of the total outlay. This reflects the region's

growing recognition as an important spiritual and cultural destination.

The Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI), launched by the Ministry of Tourism, was introduced to upgrade iconic tourist destinations into world-class attractions. The initiative emphasises creating a seamless end-to-end tourist experience by extending funding support to shortlisted proposals, strengthening every link in the tourism value chain, leveraging high-quality expertise for design and development, and ensuring sustainable models for operations and maintenance. Under this initiative, a total of 40 projects has been sanctioned nationwide with an overall outlay of Rs. 3,295 crore.

Table 5:

PROJECTS IN NORTHEAST SANCTIONED UNDER THE SASCI SCHEME

State	Name of Project	Amount sanctioned (Rs. crore)
Arunachal Pradesh	Siang Adventure & Eco-Retreat, Pasighat	46.48
Assam	Assam State Zoo Cum Botanical Garden, Guwahati	97.12
Assam	Beautification of Rang Ghar at Sivasagar	94.76
Manipur	Loktak Lake Experience	89.48
Meghalaya	MICE Infrastructure at Mawkhanu, Shillong	99.27
Meghalaya	Re-development of Umiam Lake, Shillong	99.27
Sikkim	Skywalk, Bhaleydhunga, Yangang, Namchi	97.37
Sikkim	Border Experience, Nathula	68.19
Tripura	51 Shakti Peethas Park at Banduar, Gomati	97.90

Source: Ministry of Tourism (PIB)



The above table shows the allocation of projects under SACSI to the northeastern states. The Northeast has secured 9 projects with a cumulative allocation of Rs. 789 crore, representing around 22% of the projects and 24% of the total financial outlay.

In addition to these, the Ministry of Tourism launched the 'Dekho Apna Desh' initiative in January 2020 to encourage domestic travel and showcase India's cultural and natural diversity. Similarly, the Capacity Building for Service Providers (CBSP) scheme is aimed at enhancing the skills and employability of individuals in the tourism and hospitality sector, with a special focus on empowering local communities, women, and tribal groups. Together, such initiatives are poised to further enrich and strengthen the tourism landscape of the North Eastern Region, ensuring that its unique heritage and potential are fully realised.

4. Look East to Act East: Transition in Governance Approach

When Prime Minister Modi came to office in 2014, India's long-standing "Look East Policy" was given a new urgency and transformed into the "Act East Policy." Through visits to Indonesia, Japan, Vietnam, Myanmar, and other key nations, PM Modi placed India's eastern engagement at the heart of foreign policy, emphasising not just economic links but also security cooperation and cultural ties. The policy broadened its scope to South East Asia, with the North East declared as its fulcrum. Built on the three pillars of culture, connectivity, and commerce, the Act East Policy positions the region as India's bridge to ASEAN and the wider Asia-Pacific.

Under this initiative, many projects have been taken up in NER. Key investments include the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport



Project (Rs. 550 crore) for alternative connectivity via Myanmar; development of National Waterways—NW-2 (Brahmaputra, Rs. 461 crore) and NW-16 with Indo-Bangladesh Protocol (Rs. 145 crore) with terminals, ship repair facilities, and navigation aids; and dredging works on Jamuna and Kushiara rivers in Bangladesh (Rs. 305 crore, cost-sharing with Bangladesh). The Eastern Waterways Connectivity Transport Grid, covering 5,000 km of navigable waterways, is also being developed to integrate trade with BBIN and ASEAN.

Additionally, projects under the Central Sector Scheme include floating terminals on NW-2 and NW-16 in Assam, Loktak Inland Water Transport projects in Manipur, IWT development on Khawthlangtuipui and Tuichawng rivers in Mizoram, and Gumti river linkage in Tripura, all aimed at boosting regional connectivity, trade, and cultural ties.

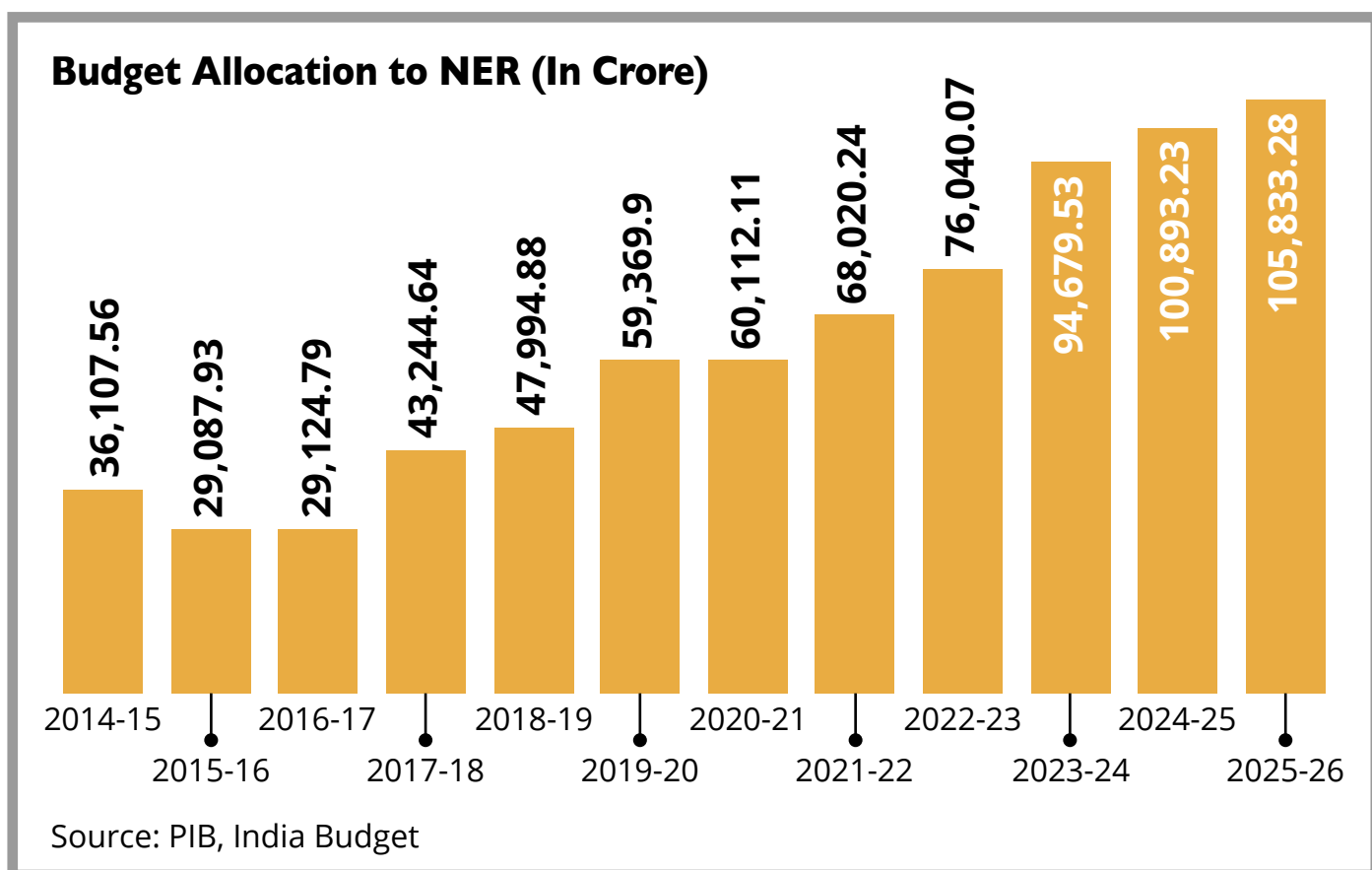
These projects have enabled new opportunities for eco-tourism, adventure tourism, river cruises, and cultural circuits that showcase the Northeast's unique biodiversity, ethnic traditions, and heritage. By linking the region's assets with ASEAN countries, the policy is helping to position Northeast India as a gateway for international tourists, encouraging investments in hospitality, infrastructure, and people-to-people exchanges.

5. Increased Budgetary Allocation to NER

A major push towards developing the region comes in the form of 10% gross budgetary support for expenditure on development works in North East India. 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.

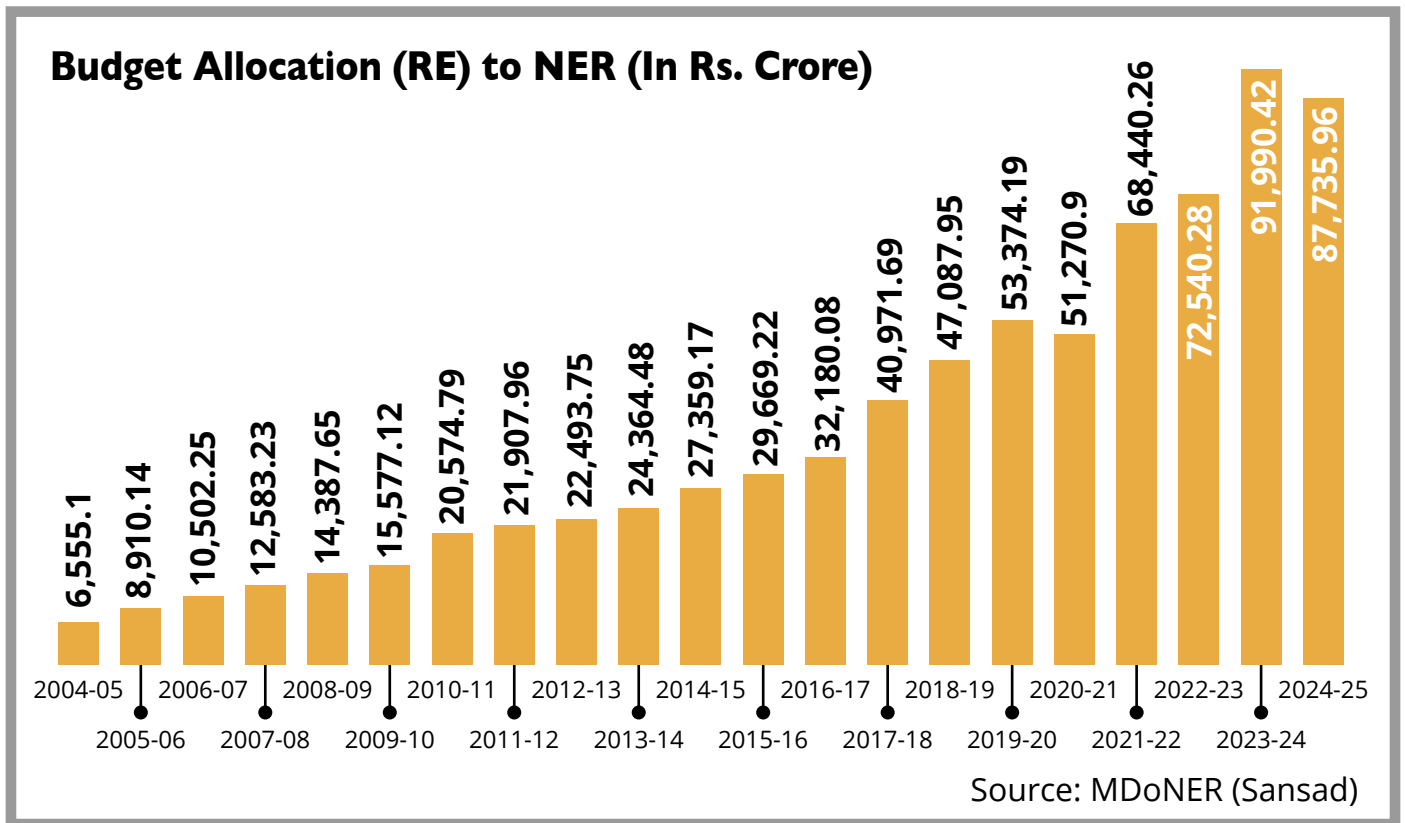
6,600 crore from 2022-23 to 2025-26.

Figure 5: Budget Estimate (BE) under 10% GBS to NER Since 2014-15



As seen in Figure 5, the Budget Estimates (BE) have grown from Rs. 36,107 crore in 2014–15 to Rs. 1,05,833 crore in 2025–26, an almost 193% increase over eleven years. The sharpest escalation is visible after 2018–19, where allocations moved from Rs. 49,984 crore to over Rs. 1 lakh crore within six years, more than doubling (+112%) in this short span. This significant surge demonstrates a conscious policy shift, ensuring greater fiscal priority for connectivity, infrastructure, and welfare projects in the NER.

Figure 6: Revised Estimate (RE) under 10% GBS to NER Since 2004-05



The above figure reveals that in terms of revised estimate under 10% GBS support, a 381% increase in allocation was witnessed from the period of 2004-05 to 2013-14.

6. Mainstreaming the Diverse Culture of Northeast India

Once considered a peripheral region of India, Northeast India has now moved into the cultural mainstream, thanks to the deliberate and sustained efforts of the current government. A central priority has been to safeguard and celebrate the region's unique culture and heritage. To advance this vision, several cultural centres have been established across the Northeast. Notably, the North East Zone Cultural Centre (NEZCC) in Dimapur and the Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre (EZCC) in Kolkata stand as important institutions dedicated to this cause. As per the North Eastern Council 2020 guidelines,



promoting the region is one of the primary goals. 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, Ziro Festival of Arunachal Pradesh etc. across the region to ensure greater participation of the people from various parts of the country.

A decade ago, many across the country might not have been able to name the eight diverse states that comprise Northeast India. Now, due to initiatives like the Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav and sustained government efforts, the region has taken its rightful place in the heart of every Indian. An important landmark in this direction was the laying of foundation stone for the Rani Gaidinliu Tribal Freedom Fighters Museum at Luangkao village in Manipur's Tamenglong district on 22 November 2021, honouring the legendary freedom fighter who, from a young age, resisted British rule to liberate her people. Similarly, efforts have been made to preserve Assam's cultural heritage: the foundation stone was laid for a project to beautify the historic Rang Ghar in Sivasagar, celebrating the rich legacy of the Ahom dynasty. This initiative, with its emphasis on creating tourist-friendly infrastructure, has drawn national attention. The government has also worked to bring the region's heroes into the national spotlight. A grand celebration was held in Delhi on 25 November 2022 to mark the 400th birth anniversary of Lachit Borphukan, the legendary Ahom general who defeated the Mughals in the Battle of Saraighat. The commemoration elevated him from a regional icon to a nationally revered figure. Adding to this recognition, a remarkable heritage of the Ahom dynasty recently achieved global



acclaim: the Moidams (the unique mound-burial system of the Ahoms) at Charaideo were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, becoming India's 43rd entry. 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, King Chilly, Boka Chaul, Kaji Nemu, and Gamosa also got the GI tag.

In addition, the frequent PM visits and ministerial visits to the region further brought the region into the national policy framework. Since 2014, PM Modi has made nearly 80 visits and Union Ministers have conducted more than 700 visits to the region. From embracing the vibrant ethnic attire of the Northeast to joining record-setting cultural festivities, PM Modi has consistently championed the region's unique heritage. In April 2023, during his visit to Assam, he took part in the historic Bihu celebration that entered the Guinness World Records with over 11,000 artists performing together. This year as well, he graced the Jhumoir Binandini programme, where 8,000 artists from the Tea Tribe and Adivasi communities of Assam showcased the traditional Jhumoir dance. Similarly, when PM Modi wore the Assamese Gamocha at the UN Headquarters lawn on International Yoga Day, he brought the cultural identity of Assam to the global stage.

As a result of the inclusivist approach, a remarkable shift in the number of tourists visiting the region was noticed especially post-COVID. In 2022, 118.45 lakh domestic and 1.04 lakh foreign tourists visited the North Eastern States. Many places in Northeast India emerged as popular tourist destinations in the list of tourists.

7. **State-Specific Tourist-Friendly Initiatives**

Adding to the momentum created through central government-sponsored schemes and allocations, the eight states of Northeast India are also advancing their tourism policies to cater to the evolving needs of travellers. For instance, the Meghalaya government launched multiple initiatives in 2025 to promote sustainable and community-led tourism in the state. From launching the OneConnect Meghalaya Tourism Helpline number to a robust pipeline of high-end hotels, the state is determined to attract visitors. In addition, Chief Minister's Meghalaya Homestay Mission to boost accommodation options, the Tourism Buddy Scheme to enhance safety and support at tourist spots, and the Meghalaya Film Tourism Policy 2025 to attract film productions. Other programs, such as the Agro Tourism Villa Scheme, aim to support local entrepreneurship through financial assistance for various tourism businesses.

Along similar lines, Assam's tourism policy is built around sustainable and inclusive growth, focusing on five key areas: river tourism, eco-tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, and tea tourism. The state, underscoring the potential of tourism as a key employment generator, is trying to expand its vision and horizon by developing lesser-known places as tourist sites.

Northeast Indian states are abundant in terms of Experiential tourism. Northeast India has steadily emerged as a hotspot for adventure tourism, catering to travellers seeking experiences beyond the ordinary. States like Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim offer trekking trails such as the Monpa trail and Dzongri Trek, while Meghalaya has become famous for caving in places like Cherrapunji and Mawmluh. Assam's mighty Brahmaputra River attracts adventure seekers for



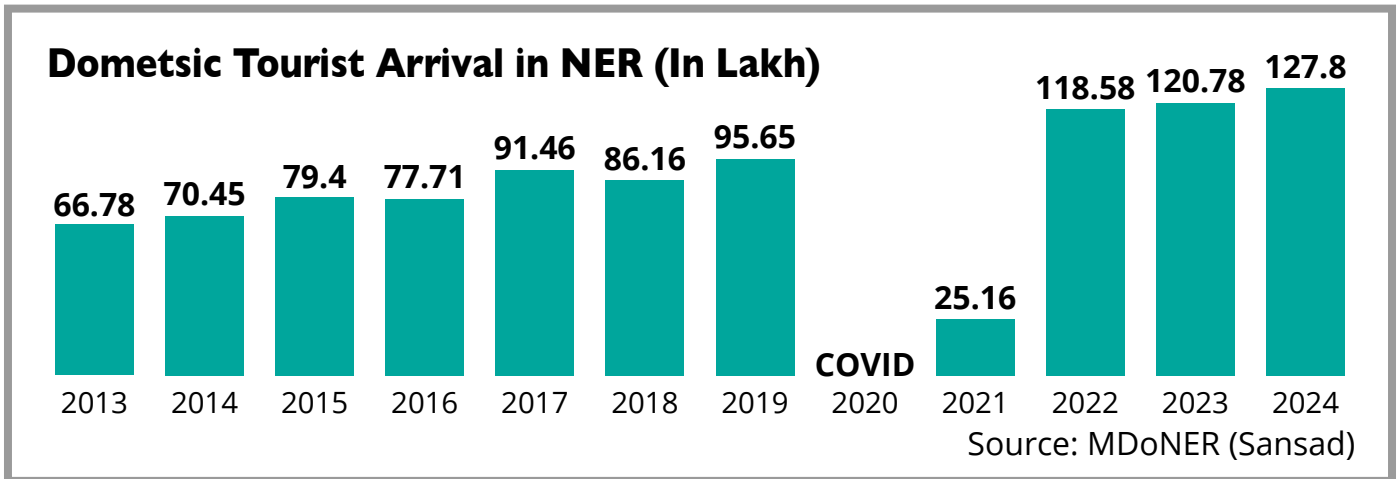
river rafting and kayaking, and Nagaland hosts vibrant tribal festivals where cultural immersion adds to the thrill of the journey.

Food and culinary experiences play a vital role in the tourism sector. The region of Northeast India is especially diverse when it comes to food, offering travellers a wide variety of options. At the same time, states across the region are thoughtfully curating their menus to enhance the food experience for different kinds of visitors. For example, in Shillong, tourists can find vegetarian-friendly restaurants such as Orange Roots, which offers an extensive menu catering to vegetarian and Jain preferences. On the culinary front, regional plant-based dishes also showcase the richness of the Northeast. These include Kelli Chana from Manipur, Zan (a millet-based porridge of the Monpa community) from Arunachal Pradesh, as well as Aloo Pitika and Khar from Assam. Together, these dishes highlight the region's ability to combine tradition, diversity, and inclusivity in its food culture.

Implications of Shifting Trends in Indian Tourism

Tourism patterns in India have undergone a marked transformation over the last decade, with the Northeast Region (NER) emerging as a significant beneficiary of this shift. The latest data reflects a sharp and sustained rise in both domestic and foreign tourist arrivals, alongside an increasing contribution of the region to India's overall GDP.

Figure 7: Domestic Tourist Inflow to NER



As shown in Figure 7, domestic tourist arrivals in the NER rose steadily from 66.78 lakh in 2013 to nearly 95.65 lakh by 2019, before the sector faced a steep decline during the COVID-19 pandemic (25.16 lakh in 2021).

However, the post-pandemic recovery has been extraordinary, with domestic arrivals surging to 118.58 lakh in 2022 and crossing 127.8 lakh in 2024. This trajectory highlights both the resilience of the region’s tourism ecosystem and the growing interest of Indian travellers in exploring the Northeast.

Figure 8: Foreign Tourist Inflow to NER

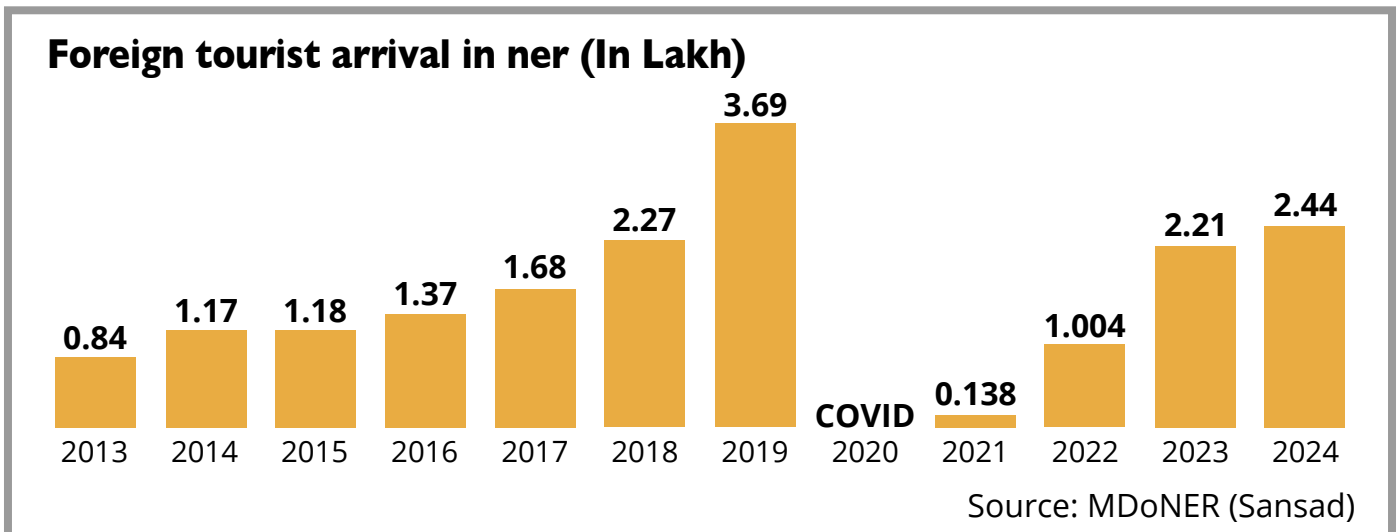
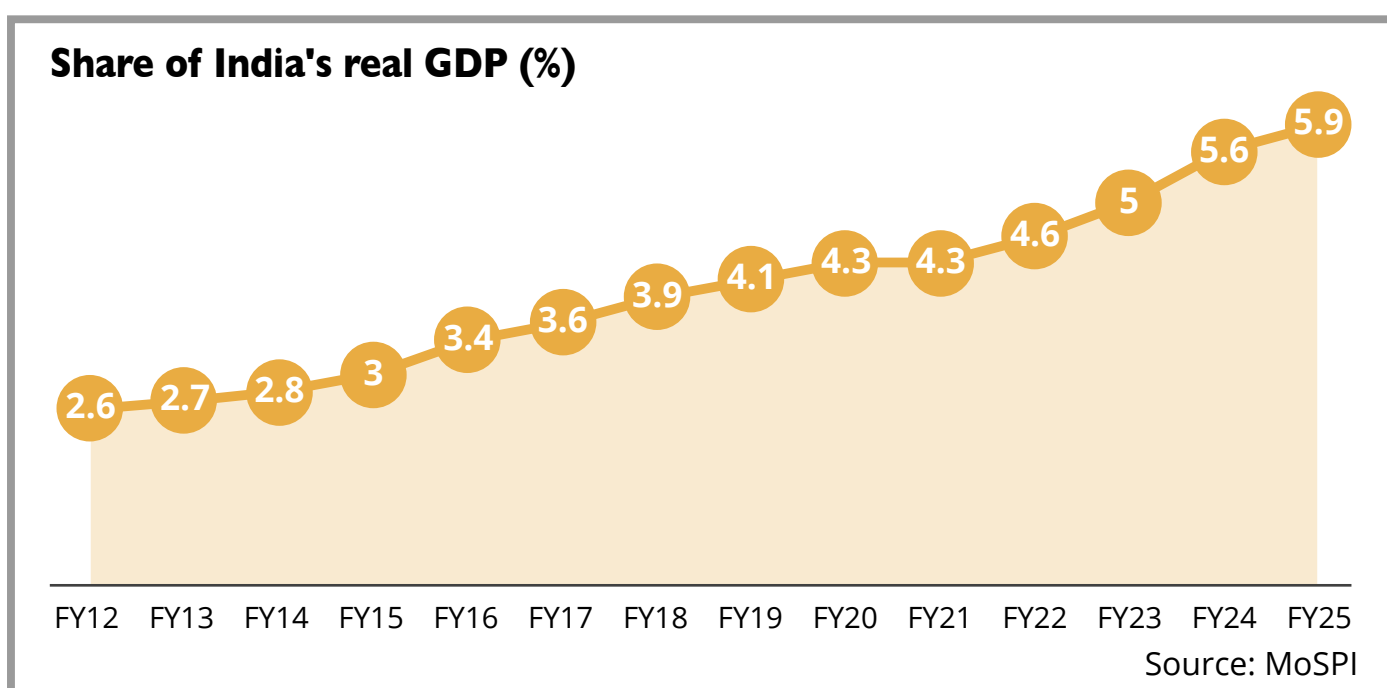


Figure 8 reflects similar dynamics for foreign arrivals. From 0.84 lakh in 2013, foreign tourist inflow nearly quadrupled to 3.69 lakh in 2019, indicating the Northeast's rising profile in global travel circuits. Despite the severe contraction during COVID-19 (0.138 lakh in 2021), recovery has been robust, reaching 2.44 lakh by 2024. This growth aligns with India's broader "Act East Policy" and the increasing integration of the region with Southeast Asia through infrastructure and connectivity projects.

Tourism growth in the NER is not an isolated trend; it has had visible economic spillovers. The figure below shows that the region's share in India's real GDP has risen from 2.6% in FY12 to 5.9% in FY25, which is more than doubled just over a decade. Tourism has been a catalyst here, generating employment in hospitality, transport, handicrafts, and local entrepreneurship, while also stimulating infrastructure development.

Figure 9: Northeast India Contribution to GDP





The growth trajectory indicates that the Northeast is no longer a peripheral tourist destination but is becoming central to India's tourism narrative. This shift has strong policy implications. Sustained investment in infrastructure, including roads, airports, and digital networks, will be critical to maintain momentum. Equally important is the adoption of sustainable tourism practices to balance ecological sensitivity with rising tourist inflows, especially in the fragile ecosystems of Arunachal and Meghalaya. Empowering local communities through homestays, skill training, and cultural preservation ensures that growth remains inclusive and rooted in the region's unique identity. Moreover, leveraging the Act East framework to integrate tourism circuits with neighbouring countries such as Bhutan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh will further expand inflows and make the region a vital part of cross-border tourism in South and Southeast Asia.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

The analysis of primary and secondary sources shows that the government's curated policies and initiatives continue to create impact on the ground, even amid challenges. A perceptible transformation in mindset has emerged. Gone are the days when questions like "Where is Northeast India?" or "Is it part of China?"

Today, Northeast India stands on the threshold of a tourism renaissance. A decade of purposeful investment in connectivity, peace and security, and destination development complemented by reform-minded state policies has begun to unlock a region long described as a "paradise unexplored."



Going forward, the task now is to turn momentum into a durable, high-value tourism economy and increase Northeast India's position in the overall tourist landscape of India. Smarter data, efficient branding along the lines of the Act East Policy can convert Northeast India into a popular tourist choice worldwide. The Northeast can become India's benchmark for inclusive, sustainable tourism by creating a balance between job creation, safeguarding ecology and showcasing a confident cultural identity to the world.

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