

# HINDRANCE OR SHIELD: REDISCOVERING INDIA'S NORTHEAST

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## ABSTRACT

*The Northeastern states of India, referred to as 'Seven Sisters' have always been an historical emblem of the cultural diversity of Indian Subcontinent. However, as history says, the establishment of the Indian civilization is said to be quite isolated for these indigenous citizens who have been rather separated from mainland. Due to the unsaid separation between states of the northeast and those of the mainland, the government decided to bring in policies that would help them come at par with the rest of the nation. The aftereffect of this was quite unprecedented and resulted in these areas falling more behind because of the strict geopolitical barriers that prevented them from getting involved in modernization of the country. It is thus important to question if the northeast region of India is losing opportunities instead of leveraging the government protection they get? Technology adoption has slowed down due to unique cultural dynamics. These cultural differences can make it harder to introduce and integrate new technologies. Additionally, many indigenous groups follow local governance practices rooted in customary laws and village councils. There can be some reluctance to adopt external technology systems that might seem to interfere with traditional authority. The government has provided minorities with reservations that would help them surge in line of education. However, interstate migration is one of the primary reasons that resources are purging towards the center. Limited access to land and other resources is the main reason that population is migrating to other regions. Overall, the dire in the straits is geopolitical situation of the region which can be reconciled with a few suggestive actions. They can invite technology, local parties can connect with mainstream national parties and local manufacturers could compete with other manufacturers. With simple but effective solutions they can become more connected to India than before.*

**KEYWORDS:** China, Geopolitics, India, Manipur, Myanmar, Northeast,

## INTRODUCTION

The Northeastern States of India, often referred to as the 'Seven Sisters' have always been an historical emblem of the cultural diversity of the Indian subcontinent. However, as history says, the establishment of the Indian civilization is said to be quite isolated for these indigenous citizens who have been rather separated from the mainland. Due to the unsaid separation between the states of the northeast and those of the mainland, the government decided to bring in policies that would help them come at par with the rest of the nation but the after effect of this was quite unprecedented and resulted in these areas falling more behind because of the strict geopolitical barriers that prevented them from getting involved in modernization of the country. It is thus important to question if the northeast region of India is losing opportunities instead of leveraging the government protection they get. This paper intends to explore the geopolitical significance of Northeast India, its challenges, and its role in India's broader regional strategy.

## THE STRATEGIC LOCATION IMPACTING GEOPOLITICS OF NORTHEAST INDIA

Northeast India, frequently mentioned as the "gateway to Southeast Asia", is a region rich in strategic importance, cultural diversity, and natural resources. Comprising eight states with distinct entity - Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura - the region holds a critical position in India's geopolitical framework. Situated at the convergence of South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, Northeast India plays a crucial role in India's security, foreign policy, and economic engagements with neighboring countries. This geographical location, along with its ethnic diversity, natural resources, and security concerns, makes the geopolitics of Northeast India a complex and crucial aspect of the broader geopolitical landscape of Asia.

Northeast India, vibrant but intricate part of the Eastern Himalayas, is of geo-strategic significance as it shares the vast majority of its borders with Tibet Autonomous Region/China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan, (also with Nepal) is connected to India by a narrow piece of land called the Siliguri corridor, referred to as the 'Chicken's neck', making it a point of concentration for India's national security and regional diplomacy. The region's proximity to China's Tibet autonomous

region, with its vast frontier areas, places it at the center of India's security concerns. The India-China border dispute, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, is one of the most contentious aspects of the region's geopolitics. The Chinese claim over the state, which it refers to as "South Tibet", adds a layer of complexity to the already delicate Sino-Indian relations. Additionally, the region's shared border with Myanmar makes it a key area for India's "Act East" policy, aimed at strengthening ties with Southeast Asian nations. Northeast India acts as the bridge between India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with trade, connectivity, and security cooperation at the core of this strategic vision. At the same time, Bangladesh also shares border with Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura. Till mid 2024 it was considered to be the safest border as ousted prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina was having close ties with Indian government. Since Hasina's exit from Bangladesh and uprising of protests and attacks on minorities, there is influx of refugees in the border states to take shelter illegally. Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh revealed that the government has identified a total of 5,457 illegal immigrants in the state and collected the biometric of majority of them despite the recent backlash in Manipur between two major ethnic groups (Northeast Rising, May 8, 2024). This in turn create a complicated situation for northeastern states as illegal and undocumented migrants will not only disrupt ethnicity but also create economic and social imbalance.

At present, Bhutan is the only country that shares safe border with India. Nonetheless, adjacent to Bhutan, presence of China always coerce India cautious. Due to these geographical state of affairs, Northeastern states become a focal point not only for India but also for the entire world as there are multiple countries having aggressive policies causing disturbance in northeast states of India. It is to be seen how long can India patiently handle and maintain peace at the cross-border and ensure safety to its own people and connect them with mainland for progressive growth and make them economically viable. To grow as a global economy, India needs to focus on development irrespective of its geographical differences.

#### **NAVIGATING THE SECURITY DIMENSIONS: STABILITY IN A FRAGMENTED WORLD**

Indian federation is conceptualized as a Centrifugal Federation (Assefa Fiseha, 2009, as cited in Behera, 2022) and it has been perceived that states in Centrifugal Federations would face frequent boundary disputes. The fascinating and complex geopolitical landscape of Northeast India is deeply influenced by security concerns, both internal and external. Internally, the region has been historically prone to ethnic conflicts, insurgencies, and demands for autonomy. The state of Nagaland, for example, has witnessed insurgency movements since the 1950s, and the situation in Manipur, Mizoram, and Assam has also been marked by similar struggles for ethnic and political

self-determination. These internal security challenges have often strained India's resources and divert attention from external threats. Northeast India is home to a multiple ethnic groups, including the Bodos, Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Manipuris, and Assamese, among others. The region's ethnic diversity, combined with historical grievances, has led to several insurgencies and separatist movements. These insurgencies often stem from demands for greater autonomy, independence, or protection of indigenous culture and resources. For example, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), operating in Nagaland, has long sought to establish an independent Nagaland. Similarly, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) has historically fought for an independent Assam. The Mizos fought for an independent state in the past, which led to the creation of Mizoram in 1987 after a peace agreement.

Manipur is home to several tribal groups including the Meitei, Nagas, and Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes. Meiteis are mostly Hindus and live in the Imphal valley, while Nagas and Kukis, who are mainly Christian, mostly reside in the hills where illegal poppy plantation is main source of income generation. They are often promoted by drug lords, having good connection with some locals within the region. Due to this nexus, the society is facing a major problem. These drug lords cross international territory between India and Myanmar since democracy was seized by Myanmar military. This military rule forces many drug lords to shift their base from Myanmar to Manipur hills and they keep instigating and raising the issue between two ethnic groups so that they can hide their illegal task under the disruption between two ethnicities. The immediate trigger to the recent violence in Manipur was a recommendation made by the Manipur High Court to the Bharatiya Janata Party government in the state to include Meiteis in the Scheduled Tribe category. It sparked concerns among several communities, especially the Kukis, as they are apprehensive that if the High Court order is implemented, they will lose land and jobs due to potential competition from the Meitei community. They fear that the Meitei community will buy land in the hills, where the Kukis have had exclusive rights until now. Adding to this was the Manipur government's plan to identify and evict illegal migrants from the hills. There is also unease among the Kukis that the central government's proposal for the introduction of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Chief Minister Biren Singh's plans to oust illegal migrants from the hills will have an unsettling impact on the tribal populations.

Meiteis comprise 51 percent of Manipur's population whereas they hold only 10 percent of the land in the state. On the other hand, Kukis and Nagas, who comprise 40 percent of the population, occupy 90 percent of the land. Due to their larger quantity, Meiteis have a larger share of representation in the legislative assembly, encouraging Meitei majoritarianism. Manipur shares a border with conflict-ridden Myanmar, which is

infamous for poppy cultivation and drug trafficking. Poppy grown in Manipur's hill areas feeds the drug trade and is an important source of livelihood for tribal groups living there. The state government's war on drugs has evoked resentment among the Kukis, who see it as a ploy to deprive them of their livelihood. Kuki-Meitei conflict requires a multifaceted approach, and the collective efforts of all stakeholders involved to bring normalcy to the regions.

Externally, the security concerns stem from the complex relationships with neighboring countries. The disputed border with China in Arunachal Pradesh, the ethnic links between the Naga insurgents and groups across the Myanmar border, and the influx of refugees from Bangladesh into Assam and Tripura contribute to the region's security challenges. The presence of insurgent groups in the borderlands of Myanmar, particularly along the India-Myanmar border, also necessitates robust counter-insurgency strategies and close cooperation with Myanmar's military regime. The insurgencies in the region have not only impacted internal security but also created challenges for India's foreign policy, particularly with neighboring countries like Myanmar, which have sometimes been accused of harboring insurgents. The Indian government has had to balance military action with peace talks, and efforts to address grievances through political solutions like the 1985 Assam Accord or the more recent Naga peace talks.

### **ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE: CROSS BORDER CHALLENGES OF AN INTERCONNECTED WORLD**

The economic geopolitics of Northeast India is another critical aspect of its importance. The region is endowed with abundant natural resources, including oil, natural gas, coal, and fertile agricultural land. These resources make it an attractive region for investment, but the underdeveloped infrastructure has long hindered its economic potential. The region benefits from the Look East and Act East policy, which emphasizes closer economic ties with ASEAN countries. Simultaneously, it has been observed that due to the "frequent closure of inter-state borders in the region", the inhabitants "could not benefit much from the international border trade as projected by the Act East Policy" (Haokip, 2023). However, in recent years, the Indian government has initiated efforts to improve connectivity, with projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway and the construction of new highways and railway lines aimed at boosting trade and economic integration. Given its proximity to Myanmar and Bangladesh, Northeast India can serve as a hub for trade with countries like Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia, facilitating the movement of goods and people. The presence of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and initiatives to promote manufacturing and exports can also spur economic growth in this strategically located region.

Northeast India's geopolitical importance is not confined to its relationship with India's immediate neighbors but extends to broader regional cooperation. India's growing interest in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is an example of how the region is being integrated into regional economic and security arrangements. BIMSTEC, which includes countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, offers significant opportunities for cooperation in areas such as trade, energy, connectivity, and disaster management. The active participation of Northeast India in this regional grouping further enhances its geopolitical relevance.

Additionally, the region plays a crucial role in the India-Bangladesh relationship. The historic land border agreement between the two countries, which resolved issues related to the exchange of land and enclaves, has paved the way for greater economic cooperation. Trade between India and Bangladesh has been facilitated through Northeast India, with key land border trade routes linking Assam and Tripura to Bangladesh. This not only enhances bilateral trade but also strengthens people-to-people ties between the two nations.

The India-Myanmar-Thailand highway which connects Moreh (Manipur) with Mae Sot (Thailand) via Myanmar will enable connectivity with other parts of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). India has already proposed extension of this highway to Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. In recent years, North-Eastern states have also been recognized as important stakeholders in the context of ties with South-East Asia. There are also plans to commence direct flights from Assam and Manipur to international destinations with a special focus on Southeast Asia. In July 2022, the North-Eastern India Festival was held at Bangkok. Tourism ministers of Mizoram, chief minister of Nagaland, deputy chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh, chief minister of Meghalaya attended the event for exploring economic synergies between the Northeast and ASEAN. There was an emphasis on strengthening tourist linkages between North-Eastern India and Southeast Asia. Historical linkages between the two, and the role of Buddhism in strengthening ties between them was also discussed. The region possesses immense economic potential. While the Northeast India has made some economic progress in recent years with industrial groups showing interest in establishing semi-conductor Units by Tatas which will boost the economic growth in forthcoming years. The start-up sector of the region have grown and many startups related to tourism, education and health sector are being focused. Additionally, the region's infrastructure bottlenecks—limited road and rail connectivity, inadequate power supply, and underdeveloped industrial bases—pose barriers to sustainable economic growth. While recent government initiatives such as the Bharatmala project (for national highways) and the Northeast Road Sector Development

Scheme are steps in the right direction, there is still a long way to go in terms of fully unlocking the region's economic potential.

Simultaneously, there has been an upsurge in tourism from rest of India to North-East. One of the important factors for this rise in tourism has been the increase in the number of flights between Guwahati and Delhi. Given its natural beauty, fascinating culture and diverse cuisine, there is potential for a further rise in tourism sector.

### **CHALLENGES AND THREATS : ADDRESSING RISK IN A COMPLEX POLITICAL SITUATION**

Despite its strategic significance, Northeast India faces several challenges that complicate its geopolitical role. The region's internal ethnic and political conflicts remain a persistent issue. The demand for autonomy and independence by certain groups, coupled with the challenges of integrating diverse ethnic communities, often results in unrest. For instance, the ongoing Naga peace talks, aimed at finding a resolution to the decades-long insurgency, are yet to reach a final agreement, leading to continued uncertainty in the region.

Northeast India shares a porous border with Myanmar, which has long been a source of cross-border insurgency and militancy. The region is a heaven for several insurgent groups, many of whom seek refuge in Myanmar's remote border areas. These insurgents often use Myanmar's hilly and rugged terrain to hide, making it difficult for Indian security forces to track and combat them. India has historically accused Myanmar of providing sanctuary to these insurgent groups, though the Myanmar government has been more cooperative in recent years. The situation has become more complicated due to the internal conflict in Myanmar, following the military coup of February 2021. The instability in Myanmar has led to an influx of refugees into India's northeastern states, particularly in Mizoram and Manipur, which has further strained relations. India has responded by engaging with Myanmar's military leadership, strengthening border security, and supporting the Myanmar government in its fight against insurgents. However, the situation remains delicate, and cross-border dynamics in Myanmar will continue to shape India's strategic posture in the region.

Bangladesh, India's eastern neighbor, shares a long border with several northeastern states, including Assam, Tripura, and West Bengal. The impact of illegal immigration, particularly from Bangladesh, also remains a significant concern in states like Assam and Tripura. The demographic changes caused by migration have strained local resources and contributed to ethnic tensions. This issue has triggered calls for stronger measures to secure the region's borders and regulate immigration, leading to political debates over citizenship laws and the protection of indigenous cultures. The issue of migration—both legal and illegal—has been a contentious topic in the region, particularly

with regard to the large influx of Bengali-speaking Muslims and Hindus from Bangladesh into Assam and West Bengal. This migration has led to demographic shifts and significant political ramifications. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government, particularly in Assam, has pushed for the National Register of Citizens (NRC) to identify and deport "illegal immigrants." This has sparked protests and political tensions, with accusations of marginalizing the region's muslim population and creating fear among communities that may be labeled as "foreigners."

On the other hand, Bangladesh has attempted to manage its own domestic challenges, including poverty and political instability, and has worked with India to address border issues and reduce the illegal flow of migrants. The 2019 India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement, which settled the border demarcation issues, was a significant step forward in bilateral relations but in recent years ousted PM Sheikh Hasina due to protest of students which turn out to be a national protest against Bangladesh PM brings an massive illegal migration issue on Northeast states border as India do not have fence on its border which may help to control illegal migration to some extent. Minorities are getting impacted in Bangladesh and this leads to protest in Mizoram, Tripura where hundreds of people gathered to show their anger in front of Bangladesh embassy though situation was managed by Local law enforcement agencies.

### **ECONOMY OF NORTHEAST**

The peaceful Northeast is always an attraction for tourists and nature lovers across the globe as the northeast has a lot of green belts where all types of natural habitats are available. In order to make this region thrive, the Indian Government is currently working on the 'HIRA model' where they improve Highways, Inland transportation, Railways and Airplanes. Government is improving infrastructure visible in the form of different projects like Siliguri corridor or the center of Manipur Jiribam Highway which connects Manipur with other states. Indian Government is building its ambitious 12500 megawatt Hydropower dam project in Siang for which they placed CAPF (Center of Armed Police forces) for the security of project. This was objected by some of villagers as they believed once the police forces are based in this region, they will never go out. This 12500 mega watt project may cater for the electricity need for the whole northeast region.

It's not only infrastructure but also the health facilities under Prime Minister's Development Initiative for Northeast Region (PM-DevINE) which was announced as a new Central Sector scheme, with 100% central funding in the Union Budget 2022-23 with initial outlay of Rs.1500 crore. The Union Cabinet on 12 October 2022 approved the Scheme with a total outlay of Rs. 6600 crores for the period from FY 2022-23 to FY 2025-2026. 35 projects worth Rs. 4857.11 crore have been sanctioned

under the Scheme up to 30.11.2024 (Ministry of Development of North-East Region, December 11, 2024).

Additionally, the unemployment rate in north-east India is 5.73%, which is higher than the national average of 3.4%. As per the historical trends and analysis, Assam has the highest rate of unemployment within the region and the third highest within the country. Assam govt with the help of central govt. was able to setup most prestigious premiere institute the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT-Guwahati). Recently IIT Guwahati hosted the grand finale of the Smart India Hackathon 2024 where IITs across the country participated and presented various innovative ideas (Northeast Now, December 12, 2024). This hackathon addressed a diverse range of themes, including space technology, heritage and culture, MedTech, biotech, healthtech, agriculture, food and rural development, smart vehicles, and transportation and logistics. Winners took cash prize of 1 lakh rupees. This hackathon gives a vision and hope amongst many students and entrepreneurs to setup their startups in variety of fields along with education which not only bring healthy economic opportunities but also makes a better human being.

There is another source of economics, the ILP (Inner line permit) which runs in four states of northeast India, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram through which they have generated around 20 crore rupees in the last few years. KSU (Khasi Students Union) asked Meghalaya govt to press central government to put ILP in place before putting railway network lines in state. KSU is worried that due to rail network there would be an increase in the flow of legal and illegal migrants which may disturb the balance of state. Therefore, they wish to implement ILP where everybody is accountable.

### **CRUCIAL ROLE OF ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY**

The Northeast is also ecologically sensitive, with vast forests, diverse flora and fauna, and unique landscapes. The region's rich biodiversity, especially in states like Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, makes it an important area for conservation. However, environmental concerns are often overshadowed by geopolitical and security issues. Deforestation, infrastructure development, and resource extraction all have significant environmental implications.

In the northeastern region, technology adoption has slowed down due to unique cultural dynamics. This area is home to many ethnic groups, each with its own traditions, languages, and lifestyles. In some cases, these cultural differences can make it harder to introduce and integrate new technologies. For example, solutions designed in urban areas often don't align with the needs or values of rural and indigenous communities, resulting in hesitation or limited use. Additionally, many indigenous groups in these states follow local governance practices rooted in customary laws and village councils. As a result, there can be some reluctance to adopt external technology

systems that might seem to interfere with traditional authority. For instance, technology-based governance models or outside initiatives may be met with resistance from community leaders if they believe these efforts threaten their independence or cultural heritage.

The government has provided minorities from these states with reservations in entrance exams that would help them surge in line of education. However, interstate migration is one of the primary reasons that resources are purging towards the center and limited access to land and other basic resources is one of the main reasons that the population itself is migrating to other regions. Culturally, the Northeast is home to a wide variety of indigenous communities, each with its own unique traditions, languages, and customs. The perception of threat is shared across the Northeastern region as indigenous people in the borderlands face the struggle of establishing and preserving the integrity of their cultural identity. The Hornbill Festival serves as an annual tourism promotion initiative by the Nagaland government and is recognized as the festival of festivals. This festival commence from December 1 and since then its almost 1.54 lakh which includes domestic, national and international tourist (Northeast Now, December 15, 2023). This not only promote to tourism in Nagaland and northeast but also a good source of revenue which help to economic growth. The region's cultural diversity offers immense potential for tourism, but it also poses challenges in terms of integration into the broader Indian national identity. The sense of alienation felt by some communities, particularly in Assam and Nagaland, has sometimes translated into demands for greater autonomy or independence. Several peace accords have also been signed in the last 9 years, as a result of which, most of the extremist groups have laid down their arms and became partners in the peace and development of the Northeast. The disturbed areas under Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) have been completely withdrawn from Tripura (2015) and Meghalaya (2018) and significantly reduced in Nagaland, Assam and Manipur (Research Unit, PIB).

### **CONCLUSION**

Overall, the dire in the straits is the geopolitical situation of the region which can be reconciled with a few suggestive actions. They can invite technology in their homes which will henceforth connect them with the rest of the country. Local parties can try to connect with the mainstream national parties and local manufacturers could try to compete with the rest of the manufacturers in the country. With simple but effective solutions they can become more connected to India than before. These solutions will allow them to feel a greater sense of belonging and integration within Indian society.

The geopolitics of Northeast India is shaped by its strategic location, complex security dynamics, economic potential, and the challenges it faces from both internal and

external factors. As India seeks to strengthen its position in the Indo-Pacific region, Northeast India will continue to play a pivotal role in its broader foreign policy and security strategies. The region's importance will only grow in the coming years, making it essential for India to address the challenges of ethnic conflict, infrastructure development, and border security. Moreover, fostering stronger ties with neighboring countries, particularly China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, will be crucial in ensuring peace, stability, and prosperity in this vital part of the country.

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