



## Northeast India: From Periphery to Pivot

*This editorial is based on “ [Frontier of progress: On the potential of the northeast](#)” which was published in The Hindu on 26/05/2025. The article brings into picture the Northeast’s strategic importance under the Act East Policy, highlighting the need for region-led, inclusive development amid ongoing conflicts, border disputes, and environmental concerns.*

For Prelims: [India's northeastern region](#), [Sela Tunnel](#), Operation Juniper, [India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway](#), [Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot](#), [Armed Forces Special Powers Act](#), [India State of Forest Report 2023](#), [Justice Chandrachud Committee](#), [Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission \(DAY-NRLM\)](#), [PM-DevINE Scheme](#)

For Mains: [Act East Policy](#), Significance of the Northeast Region in India’s Developmental Outlook, Key Issues Associated with India’s Northeast Region.

[India's northeastern region](#) exemplifies the nation's diversity through its rich cultural heritage and natural resources. The government is transforming the region with massive infrastructure investments—from the [Sela Tunnel](#) to the [Northeast Gas Grid](#). However, significant challenges persist, including **stalled peace processes in Nagaland, inter-state border disputes, environmental concerns** over hydroelectric projects, and social tensions fueled by immigration rhetoric. For the [Act East Policy](#) to truly succeed, India must integrate the Northeast into its mainstream economy and prioritize a **model of development that is led by the region itself**.



## What is the Significance of the Northeast Region in India's Developmental Outlook?

- **Strategic Geopolitical Pivot for India's Security and Foreign Policy:** The Northeast's geography as India's eastern frontier, sharing **porous international borders with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal**, positions it as a frontline region in countering Chinese influence and safeguarding territorial integrity.
  - The **2017 Doklam standoff (Operation Juniper)** near the tri-junction underscored the vulnerability of the Chicken's Neck.
  - The region's stability is thus **directly linked to India's Indo-Pacific ambitions** and border security imperatives.



- **Untapped Hydrocarbon and Renewable Energy Potential:** The Northeast's vast natural resource base—**comprising substantial oil and natural gas reserves alongside hydropower potential**—makes it pivotal for India's clean energy transition and energy security.
  - For example, The Northeast holds an estimated **7,600 million metric tonnes of oil equivalent(MMTOE)**, but only around 2,000 MMTOE has been **discovered so far**.
  - Arunachal Pradesh alone has over **50,000 MW of hydro potential**.
- **Cultural Diversity as a Catalyst for Regional Integration:** With over **135 tribes**, **Northeast India's ethno-cultural plurality** underpins its unique identity and provides India a distinct advantage in fostering cross-border cultural diplomacy with **Southeast Asia**.
  - Promoting **indigenous handicrafts, traditional festivals, and tribal art through initiatives like the North-East Festival** enhances local livelihoods and projects India's pluralistic ethos internationally.
  - For instance, the **2022 North-East Festival in Delhi featured 100 MSMEs**, significantly boosting handicraft exports and tourism.
- **Ecological Significance:** Situated in the **Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot**, the Northeast's rich forest cover (Arunachal Pradesh ranking second in India in terms of forest cover in **India State of Forest Report 2023**) and endemic species—**such as the Hoolock Gibbon (India's only ape), the One-Horned Rhinoceros, and the endangered Red Panda**—are vital for ecological balance and climate resilience.
  - The **region also hosts rare orchids**, over 850 bird species, and serves as a critical corridor for migratory wildlife, underscoring its importance in India's biodiversity and carbon sequestration efforts.
- **Economic Gateway for India's Act East Policy and Regional Trade:** The Northeast's connectivity projects such as the **India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway** and **proposed extensions to Cambodia and Vietnam** position it as a crucial hub linking India to ASEAN markets, supporting India's vision of becoming a **\$5 trillion economy**.
  - Strengthening transport and trade linkages can transform the region into a vibrant corridor for commerce and cultural exchange with East Asia.



## What are the Key Issues Associated with India's Northeast Region?

- **Ethnic Fragmentation and Enduring Insurgency Undermine Stability:** Persistent **ethnic fragmentation fuels violent insurgencies and inter-community clashes**, eroding governance legitimacy and disrupting developmental trajectories.
  - Lack of effective **reconciliation and political accommodation perpetuates a cycle of mistrust and insecurity**, deterring investments and social cohesion. The **ongoing conflict in Manipur exemplifies** how unresolved ethnic grievances destabilize the region and stall economic progress.
  - **Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA)** continues to be enforced extensively, reflecting persistent security challenges.

- **Infrastructure Deficiency Perpetuates Economic Isolation:** Geographical challenges coupled with inadequate multimodal connectivity **constrain the Northeast's integration with national and international markets.**
  - **Underdeveloped road, rail, air, and digital infrastructure** impede supply chains, health access, and disaster management, exacerbating the region's economic backwardness despite strategic initiatives like NLCPR and NESIDS.
  - The **digital divide further marginalizes rural populations** from mainstream opportunities.
  - For instance, **internet penetration at 43%, significantly below the national average of 55%. National Highway expansion reached 4,950 km (2014-23), yet rail connectivity remains underdeveloped.**
- **Porous Borders Amplify Security Risks:** The Northeast's extensive 5,182 km international boundaries **remain porous and inadequately surveilled**, facilitating illegal immigration, arms trafficking, and insurgent movements.
  - Inefficient fencing and coordination gaps compromise territorial sovereignty and fuel transnational insurgencies, **complicating diplomatic ties with Bangladesh and Myanmar.** This vulnerability remains a strategic concern for India's internal security architecture.
  - For instance, **Indo-Myanmar border fencing is incomplete**, allowing cross-border mobility (like [Rohingyas](#)).
- **Environmental Conflicts Expose Fault Lines:** Critics argue that aggressive pursuit of **hydroelectric and mining projects without robust environmental safeguards** has triggered local resistance, highlighting tensions between economic growth and ecological preservation.
  - For example, the [mega hydroelectric project, planned along the Siang River](#), has sparked outrage among indigenous communities fearing displacement, environmental degradation, and cultural erosion.
- **Land Scarcity and Inter-State Boundary Disputes:** Population pressures and unclear land ownership **exacerbate tensions and interstate boundary conflicts**, obstructing development projects and social harmony.
  - **Several commissions** have been set up to resolve the conflicts, but they have yielded little progress.
    - For example, in the **Assam-Meghalaya dispute**, Meghalaya rejected the **recommendations of the [Justice Chandrachud Committee report](#)**, even though Assam had accepted them. Similarly, in 2014, it was **Assam that disagreed with the proposed resolution.**
- **Human Trafficking and Drug Abuse Crisis:** The **Northeast region is a hotspot for human trafficking, particularly of women and children, due to its porous borders and strategic location.**
  - The trafficking networks are often **linked to broader transnational organized crime syndicates.** In addition, the region faces a growing **drug abuse crisis**, with **opioids and other narcotics being smuggled across the porous borders**, exacerbating public health and security concerns.
    - This [drug abuse crisis](#) is also fueling a rise in HIV cases, as the use of contaminated needles and unsafe drug practices spread the virus
  - For example, the **state of Manipur is witnessing an alarming rise in opium production**, contributing to both local addiction problems and broader regional security challenges.

## What Measures can India Adopt to Mainstream Northeast in Economic Push?

- **Strengthen Peacebuilding and Formalize Recognition for Indigenous Communities:** Implement **comprehensive peacebuilding initiatives involving local stakeholders, security forces, and civil society** to address insurgencies through dialogue, development, and trust-building.
  - Expedited the formal recognition of indigenous communities, **such as granting Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to deserving ethnic groups after verification (like**



**Mising, Motok, and Moran in Assam), following recommendations from Lokur Committee**

- The **Lokur Committee** recommended five criteria for identifying such communities, namely: **primitive traits, distinct culture, geographical isolation, reluctance to interact with the larger community, and overall socio-economic backwardness**
- **Strengthen Multi-Modal Connectivity and Digital Infrastructure:** Prioritize integrated development of **roads, railways, inland waterways, and airports** complemented by expansive digital networks to overcome geographical isolation.
  - Implement region-specific infrastructure corridors that **link local economies to national and ASEAN markets**, enhancing supply chain resilience and reducing transaction costs.
    - Integrate physical connectivity projects like the [National Infrastructure Pipeline \(NIP\)](#) with the [PM Gati Shakti Master Plan](#) to create seamless transport corridors.
  - **Digital inclusion must be accelerated through rural broadband and e-governance** platforms to bridge the urban-rural divide and foster innovation ecosystems.
- **Foster Inclusive and Participatory Governance Models:** Encourage decentralization by empowering local self-governments through enhanced convergence of the **Panchayati Raj Institutions with schemes like [Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission \(DAY-NRLM\)](#), building upon [PM-DevINE Scheme](#).**
  - This would enable **community-led development**, ensuring socio-cultural sensitivities are respected while integrating grassroots voices in mainstream economic planning.
- **Promote Sustainable and Eco-Sensitive Industrialisation:** Encourage green industries such as renewable energy, eco-tourism, organic agriculture, and forest-based **micro-enterprises that leverage the Northeast's ecological wealth without compromising biodiversity.**
  - Institutionalize rigorous [Environmental Impact Assessments](#) and incentivize circular economy practices, integrating sustainability with economic growth to balance development and conservation imperatives.
- **Develop Skill Ecosystems Aligned with Emerging Economic Sectors:** Launch specialized vocational and technical training hubs tailored to local strengths such as **agro-processing and healthcare.**
  - Create skill hubs linking the [Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana \(PMKVY\)](#) with the [Aspirational Districts Programme](#) focusing on Northeast states, to tailor vocational training in agro-processing, tourism, and digital skills.
  - Embed digital literacy and innovation-driven curricula to prepare the workforce for future-ready economic participation.
- **Institutionalize Cross-Border Economic Corridors and Sub-Regional Cooperation:** Leverage Northeast's strategic location by formalizing trade and cultural linkages with ASEAN countries through customs facilitation, logistics hubs, and free trade zones.
  - Strengthen frameworks like [BIMSTEC](#) and **India-Myanmar-Thailand highway projects to boost regional integration**, attract foreign investment, and create a transnational economic ecosystem that stimulates local manufacturing and services.
- **Promote Cultural and Heritage-Based Entrepreneurship:** Capitalize on the Northeast's rich cultural heritage by fostering creative industries—**handicrafts, textiles, music, and festivals**—linking them to global value chains.
  - Establish **incubation centers and digital marketplaces that empower artisans and cultural entrepreneurs**, creating sustainable livelihoods and enhancing India's soft power. Facilitate skill preservation alongside commercialization to maintain authenticity.
- **Advance Climate-Resilient Agricultural and Rural Livelihoods:** Adopt precision **agriculture, climate-smart farming, and value addition in horticulture and plantation** sectors to increase farmer incomes and sustainability.
  - Strengthen rural infrastructure such as **cold storage, logistics, and market access to reduce post-harvest losses.** Integrate traditional ecological knowledge with modern agri-tech to build resilient rural economies that reduce urban migration pressures.
- **Launch Comprehensive Anti-Drug Awareness and Rehabilitation Programs:** Address the rising drug abuse challenge in the Northeast by deploying multi-pronged strategies **combining community awareness, education, and strict enforcement against trafficking.**
  - Establish **rehabilitation and de-addiction centers tailored to the cultural context**

- of affected areas**, integrating traditional healing with modern therapies.
- Engage youth through skill development, sports, and counseling to offer alternatives to drug use and create resilient social frameworks that mitigate the impact of narcotics on families and communities.

## Conclusion:

To truly unlock the **Northeast's potential**, India must go beyond infrastructure and security-driven narratives. A sustainable future lies in embracing the region's unique identity while empowering its people through **3Ts: Trade, Tourism, and Training for Youth**. By placing the Northeast at the heart of India's growth story—**not just as a frontier, but as a fulcrum**—India can realize its Act East vision and foster a **more inclusive, secure, and vibrant nation**.

### **Drishti Mains Question:**

***"The Northeast is not India's periphery - it is a pivot."*** In the context of India's Act East Policy, Discuss how the Northeast can be transformed into a strategic hub for trade, tourism, and talent.

## UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

**Q. Consider the following pairs: (2013)**

Tribe - State

1. Limboo (Limbu) - Sikkim
2. Karbi - Himachal Pradesh
3. Dongaria Kondh - Odisha
4. Bonda - Tamil Nadu

**Which of the above pairs are correctly matched?**

- (a) 1 and 3 only
- (b) 2 and 4 only
- (c) 1, 3 and 4 only
- (d) 1, 2, 3 and 4

**Ans: (a)**