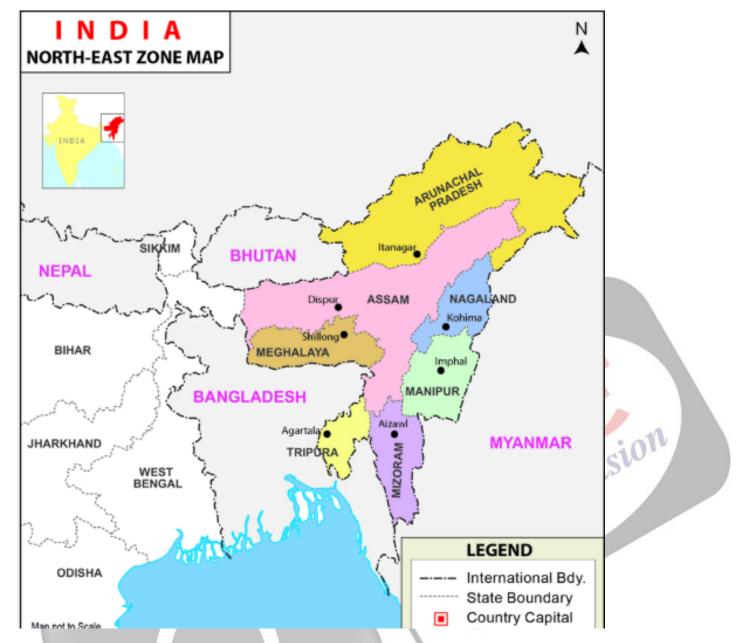# Bringing India's Northeast Region to Mainstream

This editorial is based on "How the Modi government has furthered integration of the North-East with rest of India" which was published in The Hindustan Times on 11/09/2025. The article brings into picture the inauguration of Mizoram's first railway line as a step towards bridging the Northeast's isolation and infrastructure deficit, while also highlighting the region's untapped potential, reflected in its mere 2.3% GDP share despite vast resources.

For Prelims: Mizoram's first railway line, ASEAN, Act East Policy, Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, Siliguri Corridor, Siang Upper Multipurpose Project , Hornbill Festival in Nagaland, North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme, Prime Minister's Development Initiative for North East Region, Sela Tunnel.

For Mains: Significance of Northeast India and Related Issues.

The **Indian Prime Minister** recently inaugurated **Mizoram's first railway line** that represents a crucial step in addressing the Northeast's decades-long infrastructure deficit and geographical isolation from mainstream India. While the **region has seen a 73% reduction in insurgency incidents** and significant progress in connectivity, it still faces persistent challenges including **ethnic tensions, economic underdevelopment, and inadequate integration with national markets.** The **Northeast's** contribution of merely 2.3% to India's GDP, despite covering 8% of the country's area**, highlights th**e untapped potential** that requires sustained policy intervention and investment.

INDIA
NORTH-EAST ZONE MAP

LEGEND
- ----- International Bdy.
- ------- State Boundary
- ▣ Country Capital

Map not to Scale

Why is the Northeast Region Crucial for India's Growth and Security?

- **Geopolitical Gateway to Southeast Asia:** The Northeast is India's crucial land bridge to the **ASEAN** and broader Indo-Pacific region, making it a cornerstone of the nation's **Act East Policy**.
  - Its strategic location, bordering countries like **Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China**, positions it as a vital hub for trade, connectivity, and diplomatic influence.
  - Recent projects like the **Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project** aim to provide an alternative route to the **Northeast via Myanmar's Sittwe Port**, reducing dependence on the narrow **Siliguri Corridor,** also known as the **"Chicken's Neck."**
- **Economic Catalyst for Regional Growth: The region holds vast untapped natural resources, particularly in hydropower, oil, and gas, which are critical for India's energy security and clean energy transition.**
  - Development schemes are focused on transforming the region's economy from a consumer to a producer.
  - The North East Gas Grid and the proposed 11,000 MW Siang Upper Multipurpose Project are examples of recent initiatives aiming to unlock its economic potential.
- **Biodiversity Hotspot and Ecological Treasure:** Northeast India is a part of the **Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot**, housing a remarkable diversity of flora and fauna.

- Its dense forests and unique ecosystems are vital for maintaining India's ecological balance and serve as a center for crop diversity and endemic species.
- **The region has about 50% of the flowering plant species in India** and is home to animal species like the **one-horned rhinoceros** and **Hoolock Gibbon.**
- **Cultural Mosaic and Soft Power:** With over **200 distinct ethnic groups and tribes**, the Northeast is a rich tapestry of cultural traditions, languages, and festivals.
  - This cultural diversity is a significant asset for India's soft power diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges with neighboring countries.
  - Festivals like the **Hornbill Festival in Nagaland** and the **Sangai Festival in Manipur** attract tourists and promote cultural understanding.
- **Security and Stability as a Strategic Imperative:** Given its location, the security and stability of the Northeast are paramount to India's national security.
  - The region's porous borders and ethnic complexities have historically led to insurgencies and cross-border issues.
  - However, the government has made significant progress, as evidenced by a decline in extremist violence and the signing of several peace accords, such as **the Bodo Accord of 2020** and **Karbi Peace Accord 2021** which have brought many militant groups into the mainstream.
- **Human Capital and Social Development**: The Northeast boasts a young and educated population with a **literacy rate** higher than the national average.
  - For example, **Mizoram recently achieved full functional literacy, becoming the first state in India to do so**, a testament to the focused social development efforts in the region.
  - The establishment of **digital and vocational training** centers aims to utilize this human capital to spur growth, aligning with initiatives like the **North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme (NESIDS)** and **Special Development Package** for Assam and Tripura.
    - The **Prime Minister's Development Initiative for North East Region (PM-DevINE)** announced in the Union Budget 2022-23 specifically aims to fund social development projects, **create livelihood activities for youth and women**, and fill sectoral development gaps.
- **Renewable Energy Hub: The Northeast, with its high rainfall and riverine networks, has immense potential for renewable energy, particularly small hydropower, solar, and biomass.**
  - Its vast biomass reserves, solar potential due to high solar insolation, and new initiatives in **floating solar projects** (such as **Assam's Bhurbandha Gaon Panchayat's floating solar project**) make it a testing ground for India's renewable mix.
  - As the region is highly vulnerable to climate change impacts, floods, landslides, and glacial meltwater variation, a renewable-driven growth trajectory offers both adaptation and mitigation benefits.
  - The **Northeast can thus function as a green energy corridor** to supply surplus power to the rest of the country while also aligning with India's NDC targets under the Paris Agreement.

What Challenges are Associated with India's Northeast Region?

- **Persistent Insurgency and Ethnic Conflicts: The region has a long history of insurgency driven by ethnic aspirations, demands for greater autonomy, and grievances related to socio-economic neglect.**
  - While violence has significantly declined, tensions and conflicts persist, often resurfacing along ethnic lines.
  - A recent example is the **Meitei-Kuki conflict** in Manipur, which escalated in May 2023, displacing over 70,000 people and resulting in widespread violence.
  - This particular conflict highlights the deep-seated ethnic divisions and the failure of existing governance models to prevent inter-communal strife, with accusations of government bias and inadequate security responses from both sides.
- **Infrastructure Deficit and Geographical Isolation:** Despite recent government initiatives, the region's rugged terrain and landlocked nature have led to a significant infrastructure deficit,

hampering economic integration with the rest of India.

- The lack of robust road, rail, and air connectivity inflates transportation costs and limits the flow of goods and services.
- For example, states like Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram have some of the lowest road densities in India, making large areas inaccessible.
  - This isolation is a key factor in the region's economic backwardness, which is why major projects like the Sela Tunnel and Bharatmala Pariyojana are crucial.

- **Economic Underdevelopment and Unemployment:** The Northeast suffers from a fragile economy heavily reliant on agriculture and the public sector, with **minimal industrialization and private investment.**
  - This results in high unemployment, particularly among educated youth, fueling discontent and social unrest.
  - The overall unemployment rate in the Northeast stands higher than the national average.
    - Several states show alarming figures. For instance, **Nagaland's youth unemployment rate is 27.4%.**
  - The government's **PM-DevINE** scheme aims to bridge this gap, but **without attracting significant private capital,** the economic situation remains precarious.
    - Also, **Special Development Package should be expanded from Assam and Tripura** to include other states of Northeast region.

- **Inter-State Border Disputes:** Many states in the Northeast share historical border disputes stemming from their **reorganization after independence.**
  - These conflicts, rooted in colonial-era boundary demarcations, often turn violent, as seen in the **deadly clash between police forces of Assam and Mizoram in 2021.**
  - While the Union government has initiated talks and mediation, these disputes remain a source of political instability and friction, hindering coordinated regional development and creating an atmosphere of mistrust.

- **Drug Trafficking and Cross-Border Crime:** The region's proximity to the **Golden Triangle**, a major global hub for opium production in Southeast Asia, makes it a key transit point for drug trafficking.
  - This **narco-terrorism not only funds extremist groups** but also creates a significant social problem with rising drug addiction among the youth.
  - In Manipur, for example, the **illicit cultivation of poppies** is a major source of conflict and income for militant groups.
    - The **porous borders make it incredibly difficult to curb this trade,** demanding enhanced surveillance and international cooperation with Myanmar and Bangladesh.

- **Environmental Degradation and Climate Vulnerability**: The Northeast is a biodiversity hotspot, but it's also highly vulnerable to climate change, with frequent floods, landslides, and erratic rainfall patterns.
  - **Deforestation for 'jhum' cultivation (slash-and-burn agriculture)** and illegal logging exacerbates soil erosion and habitat loss.
  - A 2023 report by the Cross Dependency Initiative ranked Assam as the **28th most vulnerable region globally** to climate-related damage to infrastructure, underscoring the severe threat to the region's stability and economy.
    - Also, the National Climate Vulnerability Assessment report from the **Department of Science and Technology** placed **60% of districts in Assam under the highly vulnerable category.**

- **Demographic Challenges and Illegal Migration:** The region has experienced significant demographic shifts due to **historical and ongoing migration**, particularly from Bangladesh.
  - This has fueled **fears among indigenous communities of losing their land, culture, and political representation,** leading to ethnic tensions and movements against "outsiders."
  - The implementation of the **National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam** was an attempt to address this issue. However, it remains a highly sensitive and unresolved matter, with political implications and potential for social unrest.

What Measures can India Adopt to Enhance Integration of Northeast Region?

- **Physical and Digital Connectivity Corridors: Expedite multimodal transport projects linking Northeast region (NER) with the rest of India and neighboring countries through highways, railways, and waterways.**
    - Complement this with high-speed digital highways through [BharatNet](#) and effective utilisation of [Digital Bharat Nidhi](#), ensuring last-mile broadband and satellite-based internet penetration.
    - Such connectivity reduces isolation, fosters economic exchange, and deepens socio-political integration.
        - Priority should be on seamless inter-state travel, logistics hubs, and cross-border trade routes. This creates a sense of inclusion through physical and virtual connectedness.
- **Cultural Bridging and National Mainstreaming:** Promote structured cultural exchanges between NER and other states by institutionalizing student exchange programs, festivals, and sports linkages.
    - Integrate local art forms, history, and indigenous languages into national platforms to create pride and visibility.
    - Establish NER cultural centers across metros to mainstream narratives beyond stereotypes.
        - Encourage media collaborations to project the region positively in national imagination. Such efforts generate psychological integration through shared cultural ownership.
- **Political and Administrative Decentralization:** Enhance governance legitimacy through greater devolution of powers to Autonomous Councils and Panchayati Raj institutions.
    - Institutionalize participatory mechanisms like citizen councils, grievance redress platforms, and digital governance tools tailored for remote areas.
        - Ensure regular interaction between central policymakers and grassroots leaders.
        - The **Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER) and North Eastern Council (NEC)** should play a catalytic role in facilitating this devolution by aligning central support with regional aspirations.
    - **Build trust by strengthening local administrative cadres from within the region. This decentralization improves state capacity and strengthens the social contract with the Union.**
- **Economic Clusters and Value Chain Integration:** Shift from raw resource extraction to region-specific industrial clusters in agro-processing, eco-tourism, handicrafts, and clean energy.
    - Connect these clusters with national and global value chains via dedicated NER Special Economic Zones.
    - Facilitate entrepreneurship by creating start-up incubators, venture funds, and skill hubs across state capitals. Promote branding of indigenous products as national assets.
        - Such inclusive growth reduces dependency and makes NER integral to India's economic story.
- **Security–Development Balancing:** Adopt a human-security centric approach where counter-insurgency is complemented by socio-economic development. Institutionalize community policing, dialogue mechanisms, and confidence-building with youth groups to reduce alienation.
    - Shift the emphasis from militarized presence to development-led stability through infrastructure, education, and livelihoods.
    - Border management should balance security with facilitation of legitimate mobility. Such calibrated security ensures peace dividends and greater integration.
- **Promoting Environmental Stewardship:** Leverage the ecological richness of NER through a green development model that prioritizes renewable energy, organic farming, and biodiversity-based livelihoods.
    - Establish eco-tourism circuits with strict sustainability standards. Position NER as India's hub for climate diplomacy and cross-border environmental cooperation with Southeast Asia.
    - This not only integrates the region economically but also places it at the heart of India's global climate commitments. Integration thus becomes identity-driven and future-oriented.
- **NER at Heart of Cross-Border Regional Diplomacy:** Institutionalize NER's role in India's Act East Policy by involving state governments directly in regional diplomacy.
    - Develop border townships as commercial gateways, enhancing people-to-people ties with Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan.

- Encourage local businesses to be partners in regional trade agreements. Promote NER as a convergence point of ASEAN connectivity initiatives.
  - This transforms peripheral geography into a strategic advantage, strengthening integration internally and externally.

Conclusion:

The Northeast stands as India's strategic gateway to Southeast Asia, a reservoir of natural resources, and a cultural powerhouse. Yet, persistent insurgency, connectivity gaps, and underdevelopment hinder its full potential. **A balanced approach of security, infrastructure, and inclusive growth is essential.** With sustained policy focus, **the region can transform into a green energy hub and economic catalyst**, firmly integrating with India's growth story.

> *Drishti Mains Question:*
>
> "The Northeast region of India is often described as both a geopolitical gateway and a developmental challenge. Critically analyze the significance of the region for India's strategic, economic, and cultural interests, while discussing the major challenges impeding its integration with the national mainstream.

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)

Mains

Q. What are the major challenges to internal security and the peace process in the North-Eastern States? Map the various peace accords and agreements initiated by the government in the past decade. (2025)

PDF Refernece URL: https://www.drishtiias.com/printpdf/bringing-india-s-northeast-region-to-mainstream