

Development initiatives in North East India

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Abstract: There are 28 states in India, and each one has unique geographical and meteorological characteristics. The most harsh topographical conditions can be found in India's northeast. Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Tripura are the 8 states that make up this region. Additionally, it is a region with a diverse array of tribes, ethnic groups, dialects, and religions. However, since independence, rebel movements have caused difficulties in this region. As a result of these states' hilly terrain and the difficulty of getting around, the development of India's north-eastern area has been hampered. However, the GOI has introduced a number of programmes and initiatives to improve and develop India's north-eastern region.

Key Word: North East Region, Infrastructure development, North East India, Regional Connectivity Scheme, NEC Vision 2020

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I. Introduction

The region of north-east India, often known as the "land of the seven sisters," is a geographical and political administrative division of the nation. The Northeastern Indian States are fortunate to have a variety of physiographic and ecoclimatic conditions and serve as the geographical "gateway" for a large portion of India's indigenous flora and fauna. According to Article 244 of the Indian Constitution, the sixth schedule of the constitution deals with the rules for the management of tribal territories in the north-eastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. The Northeastern region of the country is receiving significant infrastructure development funding from the Indian government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said, "For us, the North-East is not an endpoint but a gateway to security and development." Rajnath Singh, the defence minister, had previously said that the government's accelerated development initiatives in the region's north and northeast had changed the "look east" policy into a "act east" policy, resulting in all-around developments in the area and allowing all the states to increase trade with South East Asian nations. The northeast region's infrastructure development would be accelerated, according to him, under the Pradhan Mantri Gati Shakti Master Plan.¹ Peace and security are prerequisites for growth, as stressed by G Kishan Reddy, the Union Minister of Development for the North East Region. Numerous historic actions have been taken to enhance the security situation and the resulting stability in the region, and significant connectivity and infrastructure development projects are currently being carried out. Today, he said, there aren't any road blockades, demonstrations, curfews, or gunfire in the North East.² The ASEAN-India relationship can be strengthened by using the Northeast as an economic hub in India's Act East Policy and by using connectivity to link the other Cs into the 3Cs: commerce, culture, and community.³

Some Governmental Programs for the Development of Northeastern Infrastructure

Bharatmala Project: The second-largest NHAI highway project is Bharatmala. The Bharatmala Pariyojna is a centrally sponsored and funded Road and Highways project of the Government of India. It is an ecosystem of road development that includes development of tunnels, bridges, elevated corridors, flyovers, overpass, interchanges, bypasses, ring roads, etc. to provide shortest, jam-free, and optimised connectivity to numerous places. The Modi government's ambitious Bharatmala proposal calls for building a road from Gujarat to Mizoram along India's long west-to-east land border, linking it to a road network in coastal states from Maharashtra to Bengal, and otherwise "garlanding" the entire country.⁴ According to a study, the ambitious Bharatmala Project is only likely to be finished in FY28 after a six-year delay if the current pace of execution is maintained. Land acquisition is still a difficult sector. The cost of the project has already increased by a full 99 percent to Rs 10.63 lakh crore and is expected to rise by another 15-20 percent given the dramatic rise in input

costs and land prices, according to a report by rating agency Icria. The project has already exceeded its completion target of FY22. Only over 60%, or 20,632 km, of the 34,800 km of roadways have been awarded during the past seven years (through December 2021), and 23% of the project will be finished by March 2022, the agency noted.⁵

Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS)- UDAN: A regional connectivity initiative led by the Indian government is called UDAN (GoI). UDAN, whose full name is "UdeDesh ka Aam Nagarik," aspires to create smaller regional airports so that regular people have easier access to aviation services. This programme is supported jointly by the GoI and the state governments and is a part of the National Civil Aviation Policy (NCAP). In 2016, the Ministry of Civil Aviation established it as an RCS. The goal of the UDAN project is to use air transportation to link small and medium cities with major cities. To expand the local aviation industry. To offer the general public, including those in small communities, accessible, economically feasible, and lucrative air travel on regional routes.⁶ Four phases of the UDAN Scheme have received clearance to date: UDAN 1, UDAN 2, UDAN 3, and UDAN 4. In accordance with the plan, 98 airports, 33 heliports, and 12 aerodromes have been chosen. As of right now, 59 airports with more than 359 routes, 5 heliports, and 2 aerodromes offer air service. The UDAN also has services for seaplanes and helicopters.⁷ In order to further improve connectivity under RCS UDAN-3 Tourism, the Ministry of Tourism sought the Ministry of Civil Aviation and obtained the inclusion of tourism routes for enhanced connection of significant tourist destinations, including iconic locations. 31 tourist routes have been put into service as of this writing. Additionally, the Ministry of Tourism has granted preliminary approval for the addition of 28 new tourist routes, bringing the total number of approved Tourism RCS air routes to 59.⁸ According to Union Minister for Tourism G. Kishan Reddy, 18 routes are currently operational in the North Eastern Region (NER) as part of the RCS-UDAN programme to provide aviation connectivity.⁹

Kaladan Multimodal Project: In order to develop a multimodal mode of transportation for the transit of cargo from the eastern ports of India to Myanmar and to the north-eastern region of India through Myanmar, Myanmar and India collaboratively designated the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. This project, which links Sittwe Port in Myanmar to the Myanmar-India border, is anticipated to aid in the economic growth of India's North-Eastern States. It also serves as a detour around the Siliguri Corridor to reach the north-east of India.¹⁰ On January 10, 2023, Union Minister of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways Sarvanand Sonowal stated that the Myanmar project is developed and ready for operation. By providing a sea route for the products, the project, which will connect Myanmar and India's member border, is anticipated to aid in the economic growth of the North Eastern states. On the Mizoram border between India and Myanmar, it consists of a 109-kilometer road segment from Paletwa to Zorinpui and a 158-kilometer waterway segment along the Kaladan River from Sittwe to Paletwa. The cost of the crucial project has increased eight to nine times, according to authorities with the ministry of development of the North Eastern region (DoNER), as a result of the delay in completion caused by a number of factors.¹¹

India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT Highway): The highway connects Moreh in northeastern India with Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar; it was first envisaged about 15 years ago. The majority of the highway is finished, while certain portions are getting improvements. The highway is a component of India's Look East policy, which the government of Prime Minister Modi replaced in 2014 with the Act East programme in an effort to strengthen ties with ASEAN and increase trade within the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area. Additionally, the connectivity to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos is considered as a challenge to China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, progress on the highway has been sluggish because of a number of obstacles, including a shortage of trained human resources, money, and advisory services. To increase connectivity in the area, India is pressing for the quick construction and extension of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. Narendra Modi, the prime minister of India, also urged that the highway be extended to include Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, making the route's total length 3,200 km rather than the existing 1,400 km.¹²

Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Corridor: A corridor connecting China and India through Bangladesh and Myanmar is called the Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM). The corridor will link south-western China, eastern and north-eastern India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh to build a booming economic belt via roads, railways, planes, water routes, telecommunications networks, and energy pipelines. An initial estimate places the construction cost of the projected Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) at roughly \$22 billion. The fund might receive about 55% of its funding from various international development partners, with the remaining portion coming from the four governments and the private sector.¹³ Additionally, the construction of the Corridor has long-term security risks due to ethnic

insurgencies in Northeast India and Myanmar, as well as the Rohingya problem between Bangladesh and Myanmar.¹⁴ India's rural and poor North Eastern Region is traversed by the corridor, which is largely for economic cooperation (NER). Given the growing trade disparity between India and China and its security worries, India is undoubtedly hesitant to take the lead in the BCIM economic cooperation. Due to its weak industrial and economic conditions, the region can marginally profit from the corridor. The region's active involvement is essential to the corridor's efficient operation. Ironically, the area may continue to serve as a mere transit hub due to its sparse industrialization, lack of operational special economic zones, political unrest, shoddy road systems, etc. In order to access NER's hydrocarbon and mineral resources, BCIM plans to pursue collaboration in the energy industry. However, given its geostrategic location, the region, which is thought to be economically weaker than China's Yunnan province, is highly eager for active economic collaboration with BCIM economies. For the BCIM economies to successfully execute the corridor, a complementary trade strategy involving the area is anticipated.¹⁵

NEC Vision 2020: On May 13, 2008, at the NEC's 56th Plenary in Agartala, Tripura, the North Eastern Region Vision 2020 Document was presented by the NEC, accepted by all members of the council, and signed. Later, the Government launched it in New Delhi in July 2008. This Ministry then established seventeen subject groups with industry experts to create detailed action plans to implement the Vision 2020 Document. During a meeting conducted in Shillong on the 3–4 December 2008, these Groups suggested broad intervention areas and procedures for the development of the North Eastern Region. The concerned Ministries forwarded the topic groups' suggested action items for implementation. The Ministry has since urged the involved Central Ministries/Departments to develop pertinent socioeconomic projects and programmes in the area.¹⁶ During regular North Eastern Council meetings and periodic review sessions, ministries are also invited to discuss their development goals, successes, and current initiatives in the region. Although it is impossible to quantify in detail the progress made in the NER Vision 2020 implementation, significant infrastructure projects in the areas of roads, trains, airways, and power have been carried out, and telecom connection has also significantly improved. The Planning Commission's 12th Five Year Plan (2012–17) Document notes that greater plan investments and attention to infrastructure development have led to average GDP growth in the NE States of 9.8%, which was higher than the national average of 8% during the 11th Five Year Plan (2007–2012). The Vision 2020 is still being evaluated academically at this point.¹⁷

Digital North East Vision 2022: At the Radisson Hotel in Guwahati on August 11, 2018, Ravi Shankar Prasad, Minister for Electronics & Information Technology and Law & Justice, published the document titled "Digital North East Vision 2022." The Vision Document places a strong emphasis on utilising digital technology to improve living conditions and change people's lives in the north-eastern United States. The document identifies eight digital thrust areas, including digital payments, innovation and startups, cyber security, electronic manufacturing, digital infrastructure, digital services, and digital empowerment. For the North-eastern States, state-by-state implementation roadmaps for digital initiatives have been created. The Vision Document seeks to empower the people of the North-Eastern region through these.¹⁸ On this occasion, the first electronics manufacturing cluster in the northeastern region was also opened. The goals of the Digital North East Vision 2022 are to (a) connect all unconnected communities in the north-eastern region to high-speed broadband and mobile connectivity. (b) to establish a Disaster Recovery Center for the NER at the Guwahati Cloud-hub. (c) to make Common Service Centers available to all Gram Panchayats in North East States (d) Using digital technology, increase access to high-quality medical, educational, and agricultural services (e) to advance local crafts, handlooms, and art and culture (f) to create an innovation and startup centre for the North-east (g) to establish specialist cyber security labs, enable talent development through specialised trainings, and ensure a safe and secure cyberspace for the digital north east. IEC In order to empower the people of the north-eastern region, this Vision Paper has designated eight Thrust Areas. The following are some of these areas: I Digital Infrastructure; (ii) Digital Services; (iii) Digital Empowerment; (iv) Promotion of Electronics Manufacturing; (v) Promotion of IT and ITES (IT enabled services) & BPO Industries; (vi) Promotion of Digital Payments; (vii) Digital Innovation and Start-ups; and (viii) Cybersecurity.¹⁹

II. Conclusion

The Indian government has announced new sanctioned projects totaling Rs 1.6 lakh crore in order to improve the security and infrastructure of the northeast.²⁰ According to Eastmojo, while Arunachal Pradesh has received the highest amount of funding among the North Eastern States (trade 44000 crore), Assam has also received approval for projects worth rate 38000 crore, meghalay Rs 12500 crore, Manipur Rs 15499 crore, Mizoram Rs 6664 crore, Sikkim Rs 2000 crore, Tripura Rs 12426 crore, and Nagaland Rs 3235 crore.²¹ The good news is that India's North-East is progressively emerging from the shadows and being given more attention. When we take into account the infrastructure being created in China across the border and the multi-modal transportation hub involving India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, we see a substantial improvement in the

ability of the entire region to realise its potential. In addition to cross-border train connections, Manipur, Tripura, and Assam airports will offer direct international air service to the North-Eastern states. The International Air Connectivity Scheme (IACS) of the Ministry of Civil Aviation would allow these airports to have direct flights to and from Bangkok, Kathmandu, Dhaka, Mandalay, Hanoi, Kunming, and Chittagong. For this reason, upgrades are currently being made to the airports in the three northeastern states.²² For a traveller, the prospect of taking a train to explore Bhutan and Tibet or a road trip from India to numerous South-East Asian countries is enticing. For the inhabitants of the North-Eastern region, being able to take a direct flight from Imphal to Bangkok and other locations might be a fully positive experience. India's recent economic success is largely related to its emphasis on enhancing internal connectivity by developing new highways and airports. Having access to new markets is made possible by these infrastructure facilities. This is comparable to emerging from the dead into the light, from despair into hope, and from helplessness into optimism. The North-East is the new sunrise destination as a result of all these possibilities.

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