

## DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES IN NORTHEAST INDIA

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### Abstract

Northeast India is situated in a strategic location along India's eastern frontier, which is also endowed with rich natural resources. Such features hold tremendous potential for the growth and development of the region. However, Northeast India as a region has its own peculiar problems and challenges, which are characterised by the socio-economic isolation of the region from the rest of India, lack of infrastructure, violence, and poor governance, among others. Such characteristics have hindered the developmental process and inhibited unlocking the potentials of the region. India's security-centric approach to the ethno-political issues in the Northeast region as well as neglect in its neighbourhood policy has further hindered the development process in the region.

Over the years different approaches and strategies have been adopted to deal with the developmental problems and challenges of the Northeast region. However, many of them have proved to be short-sighted or have failed to achieve the desired results due to various factors. Moreover, the peculiar problems and challenges of the region require unique and out-of-the-box solutions to deal with such challenges. The key to ushering in real change and development in the region depends upon inputting the concerns and interests of the region in the developmental strategy and in India's neighbourhood policy. The focus should also be given to the potentials and opportunities that arise from its unique conditions.

**Keywords:** Underdevelopment, geographical isolation, developmental strategy, neighbourhood policy, Southeast Asia

### Introduction

Northeast India is situated in a strategic location along India's eastern frontier. It is located at the tri-junction of East, South and Southeast Asia. The geographical proximity to India's eastern neighbours along with the Northeast region's endowments in natural resources holds tremendous potential for its growth and development. However, the region is plagued with a plethora of problems and challenges which has hindered its development. Northeast India as a region has its own peculiar problems and challenges, characterised by geo-economic isolation from mainland

India, insurgency and poor governance, amongst others. Such characteristics have hindered the development process and inhibited the unlocking of the potentials of the region.

Northeast India as a region has distinct characteristic features which distinguish it from the rest of India. In terms of geographical location and ethnic composition, the region is much separated from the mainland India. In developmental aspects as well, the region lags far behind from the rest of India. The peripheral character of the region in geographic, economic and cultural aspects has thus, exacerbated the underdevelopment of the region. Moreover, policy formulation and execution that often lack reflection, realities and inputs of the peculiar needs of the region have impeded development process leading to continuance of political instability and poor governance. India's security-centric approach to the ethno-political issues in the Northeast region as well as the lack of integration of the region in India's "neighbourhood policy" has furthered the underdevelopment of the region.

Over the years, different approaches have been adopted to deal with the problems and challenges of the region. However, many of them have proved to be short-sighted or have failed to achieve due to the half-hearted efforts towards executing such policies. In order to usher in real change and development in the region, efforts must be made to fit in the concerns and interests of the region in the development strategy and in India's neighbourhood policy. The focus should also be given to unlocking the unique potentials and the comparative advantages that the region has. The peculiar problems and challenges of the region also require unique and out-of-the-box solutions to deal with it.

### **Northeast India: A Brief Profile and Background**

Northeast India is located at the easternmost part of India, which comprises the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, and Sikkim. The geographical area of the region is relatively small compared with the rest of India, occupying only around 8 percent of the total area of India. Situated in a strategic location, the region shares long international border with several neighbouring countries. The region is surrounded by Tibet Autonomous Region, China in the north, Myanmar in the east, Bangladesh in the south-west, Nepal in the west, and Bhutan in the north-west. The region is landlocked and connected to the rest of India through a narrow strip of land, known as the "Chicken's Neck"<sup>1</sup> or Siliguri Corridor, in Siliguri, which lies in the northern part of West Bengal. Because of its international boundary with Myanmar and the close proximity to India's eastern neighbours, Northeast India is considered as India's "Gateway to East" (Singh and Yumnam, 2011, p. 2). Thus, the geographical location of Northeast India is in such a way that the region is situated closer to many Southeast Asian countries than with the rest of India.

The characterisation of Northeast India as a distinct region is due to the specific geographical, political, and social aspects that they share and which distinguishes the region from the rest of India. Lying in India's eastern periphery, the topography of the Northeast region is different from the rest of the country. The Northeast region is largely hilly and mountainous, though plains and valleys are not uncommon. The region is enriched with a vast expanse of natural forest with a variety of flora and fauna. With its natural scenic beauty, and a potpourri of tribal cultures offering unique arts, handicrafts, and cuisines, Northeast India is a potential tourist hotspot. The social composition of the Northeast is also a melting pot of different ethnic communities. A large section of the population of the region is tribal, mainly concentrated on

hilly regions. The people have distinct ethnic and cultural characteristics, which are more similar to those of the people of Southeast Asia than with the rest of India. As such, Northeast India shares a certain ethnic, linguistic, and cultural heritage with its eastern neighbours. All of these have given the Northeast region a unique identity and distinct character. However, the geographical distance and the cultural differentiation of the region with the rest of India, coupled with remarkable developmental gaps have contributed to the peripheral nature and isolation of the Northeast region from the rest of India.

In various aspects of development, Northeast India falls far behind as compared with the rest of the country. The developmental deficit in Northeast India is mostly noticeable in the poor infrastructure, limited industrialization, connectivity and communication bottlenecks, and poor governance in the region. The topography of the region, complexity over identity, ethnic violence, and political instability, etc, has created hindrances to the developmental efforts in the region. Moreover, the geographical, economic, and cultural isolation of the region from the rest of India has further created hurdles in the development process. Thus, the distinct nature of the region along with its peculiar problems and challenges has necessitated special emphasis and policy approaches towards ensuring the development of the region.

### **Factors Responsible for the Underdevelopment of Northeast India**

The developmental gap between the Northeast region and the rest of India is mostly noticeable in the lack of industrialization and poor infrastructure in the region. One of the major factors responsible for this underdevelopment is the topography and weather conditions of the region which is characterised by its landlocked nature, the roughness of the terrain, frequent rainfall, landslides, etc, which adds to the time, costs, and upkeep of things. Moreover, political instability in the region characterised by insurgency-related violence, ethnic conflicts, kidnapping for ransom, economic blockades, and *bandhs* hampers the development process and also generates bad publicity, inhibiting investments in the region. Because of its long international border and the existence of various insurgent groups in the border regions, the Northeast region has also been considered strategic and sensitive from a security perspective. The risk associated with insurgency related violence along with the existence of various security restrictions has further deterred investments and growth of industries in the region. Moreover, there is also a lack of entrepreneurship among the people of the region. These conditions have isolated the region from industries, investments, economic hubs, and trade gateways and have led to the underdevelopment of the region.

A number of factors are responsible for the geographical isolation and detachment of the region from the rest of India, which has had an impact on the development process in the region. The partition of India had severed the means of transport and communication of the Northeast region with the country's heartland through erstwhile East Bengal, which is the present Bangladesh (Haokip, 2015, p. 98). Before the partition, Northeast India was well connected with present-day Bangladesh through a multimodal transportation networks including roadways, railways, and waterways, which linked the region with the rest of India. Following the partition, these traditional channels of transport and communication got disrupted. It also sealed Northeast India's access to land and sea routes for commerce and trade and its access to East and Southeast Asia through the Chittagong port in erstwhile East Bengal (*Vision 2020*, p. 1). Northeast India was left virtually isolated and landlocked from the rest of India except for a narrow connection

through the Siliguri Corridor, which has widened the distance between the region and mainland India and constrained the movement of goods and people (*Vision 2020*).

The Indian foreign policy of isolating the military junta in Myanmar and the virtual closure of the border with Myanmar further intensified the isolation of the region by cutting the ethnic-cultural ties and traditional trade relations that Northeast India had with erstwhile Burma. Apart from these, the popular movements which arose in the Northeast region compelled the Indian government to close off and tighten the guard over the international border areas in the Northeast region to prevent foreign threats and aids in such internal disruptions and to secure and defend the national boundary (Haokip, pp. 98-99). These conditions affected the economic, social, and political well-being of the region and had contributed to the geopolitical isolation of the region.

The nature of the social composition of Northeast India also creates certain complexities in the development process. The population of the region comprises a large majority of tribal's and other ethnic communities with a rich cultural heritage and ethnic ethos, which are quite different from the mainstream Indian society. As such, the inflow of people from outside the region for various reasons has created a fear psychosis amongst the locals based on a perceived threat to their land and culture. The monopoly of business establishments by non-locals, exploitation of resources from tribal lands, etc has contributed to the perceived threat and fear of "outsiders". Such apprehensions against "outsiders" were responsible for the emergence of the insurgency and indigenous movements in many parts of the Northeast region. The issue of 'us and them' still remains in light of recent demands in some Northeastern states for the implementation of the 'Inner Line Permit'<sup>ii</sup> system, which restricts the entry of 'outsiders' in these states. Such factors have inhibited investments and created an uncongenial atmosphere for setting up businesses and industries in the region.

Moreover, the prevalence of age-old ethnic schism within the Northeast Indian society has led to intra-state and inter-state conflicts in the region. The social margins based on ethnic lines are often the cause for conflict, militancy, and political instability in the region. Such divisive politics also defeats the avenues for any efforts towards the collective development of the region. As observed by Falguni Rajkumari ( in Das & Thomas eds., 2016, p. 150), 'interethnic schism, trust deficits and competing demands over territory have segregated the social and political space to such an extent that common economic interests are often overlooked.' Moreover, the policy of the Indian government in dealing with the ethno-political issues in the Northeast has been through a narrow state-centric security approach. Such condition has had an impact on the region's economic and political well-being. It has led to the weak economic and emotional integration of the region with mainstream India, which has furthered the isolation and underdevelopment of the region.

The failure of the Indian government and policymakers to formulate constructive "neighbourhood policy" was also responsible for the underdevelopment of the Northeast region. India's policy towards its neighbours is primarily dictated by security considerations. As observed by Sanjib Baruah (2003, p. 46), 'the partition of 1947 and the state of diplomatic relations between India and its neighbours turned Northeast India into a "sensitive border region" requiring special attention based on national security concerns.' Thus, as security concerns primarily dictated India's policy towards its neighbours, the needs and concerns of the Northeast were overlooked. Moreover, the peculiar nature of the geographic, political, and economic

situation of the Northeast region has made the development of the region contingent upon India forming a constructive relationship with its transnational neighbourhood (Patgiri & Hazarika, 2016). The absence of any such strategy to link the developmental concerns of the Northeast region in India's neighbourhood policy failed to provide the much-needed solution to overcome the peculiar predicaments of the region (Patrika & Hazarika). Moreover, finding solutions and resolving the numerous conflicts plaguing the region requires India to establish deeper and cooperative engagement with its neighbours (Baruah). Thus the failure to integrate the Northeast region in India's neighbourhood policy and the security-centric approach to such policy has led to the neglect of the development of the region.

Early on Government of India's development strategy for the Northeast had been through granting of concessions and special benefits under various central government schemes and policies and the direct transfer of funds by the central government, which has failed to pay the long-term economic dividends for ushering growth and development in the region. With the lack of industries and effective presence of a market economy in the region, a majority of the resources of the state governments in the region come from the transfer of funds by the central government (*Vision 2020*, p. 15). This has made the economy of most of the states in the region non-functional and dependent on the central government. Such conditions of static economic existence lacked the push factor for stimulating and accelerating growth and development in the region.

All of these have necessitated re-examination and evaluation of various approaches and policies adopted to deal with the problems and challenges of the region, and also call into question the development strategy that had so far been adopted for the region. The peculiar problems and challenges of the region call for unique and out-of-the-box solutions and necessary developmental strategy to adapt to the conditions of the region and the potentials it offers.

## **Suggestions for Accelerating Development in Northeast India**

### **1. Promoting Local Economy and Ensuring Participatory Development**

The economy of most Northeastern states is largely dependent on the transfer of resources from the central government and they act as mere consumers despite the huge economic potentials that the region possesses. Considering the topography and the natural vegetation of the region, the best approach to tap the potential of the region is to focus on developing industries based on local resources. Based on this criterion, Northeast India has a comparative advantage in agro-processing industries such as horticulture, sericulture, floriculture, organic farming, and bamboo-based industries, etc, besides industries based on indigenous and tribal handicrafts and handlooms. Northeast has increasingly witnessed the recent emergence of MSMEs (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises) and start-ups in these fields. The prevalence of Self Help Groups (SHGs) as a way of enterprising local resource-based industries in rural areas is also an increasing trend towards the development of entrepreneurial spirit in the Northeast region. There is also no dearth of talents from the region in the fields of sports, music, beauty and makeup, and Call Centres, etc. These potentials should be properly tapped and nurtured as it will help in creating productive employment opportunities and accelerate the development of the region.

An equally important factor for stimulating the growth and development of the region is the creation of an investment climate by strengthening the infrastructure and connectivity networks of the region. Augmentation of transport and communication networks, industrial



infrastructures, hospitality and related services, and banking and financial facilities are keys to facilitating the growth of industries and businesses. The government must give priority to speeding up the development of infrastructure in the region to attract businesses and investments, besides strengthening connectivity networks to open up and broaden the trade and economic potentials of the region.

Promoting the empowerment of the people and ensuring their participation in the development process would also ensure long-term dividends for development in the region. Sustained growth and development are possible only when the people are made active participants in the economic and political decision-making process. By taking into account the concerns and interests of the region, it would ensure a sense of belonging for the people in the developmental process. Empowerment of the people should also be ensured through their control over resources and decision-making in the allocation of resources. Thus, the people should be made partners in determining and adopting of the development strategy of the region. Only such efforts would bring sustained and genuine development in the region.

## **2. Providing Safe and Conducive Environment for Businesses and Promotion of Economic Regionalism**

Industrialisation and economic growth of the region require investments from businesses, companies, and entrepreneurs, which are found to be lacking from the Northeast region. However, systems like the Inner Line Permit and certain restrictions on acquiring property and settlement in tribal areas which are prevalent in many Northeastern states put restrictions on movement of people and establishment of businesses. Moreover, violence and instability also creates an unsafe and risky environment for businesses in the region. For the promotion of the growth and investments in the region, it is necessary to provide a safe and conducive environment for businesses. In order to dispel the psychological inhibition of potential investors and entrepreneurs to set up industry and make investments in the region, governments and civil societies should also make sustained efforts towards promoting the peace and stability of the region and to generate a pro-investment climate by dispelling apprehensions about the security situation in the region. Nevertheless, keeping in mind the sensitive nature of the ethnic problems in the region, efforts must be made to ensure that the land, resources, and the rights and livelihoods of people in the region are protected from exploitation and alienation. Businesses must also be mindful of local social realities and efforts must be made to prevent the monopoly of businesses by single entities.

Age-old ethnic schism has often led to inter and intra state conflicts between different ethnic groups in the Northeast. Such situations have hampered trade and economic engagement between neighbouring regions and between different states of the Northeast region, which has hampered prospects for cooperation and emergence of economic regionalism in the Northeast. Localism should give way to regionalism by enhancing inter-state connectivity and promoting trade and commerce within the region (Rajkumar, p. 150). It is only through such an approach for interdependence, cooperation, and partnership in developing a common plan for economic growth of the region that prosperity and development of the region would be ensured (Rajkumar).

### **3. Need for De-securitization of the Northeast Region**

Insurgency, ethnic violence, and political instability have racked the Northeast region for over a long time. The state-centric security perspective in dealing with such turmoil in the Northeast has proved to be a failure as it has paradoxically become itself a hindrance to development efforts in the region. It is high time that the state-centric security approach to dealing with the issues and challenges in the region is replaced with a people-centric development approach. The growth and development of the region must not be held hostage by the strategic and security interest of the nation. Instead, making the people genuine stakeholders in the political and economic processes would ultimately bring lasting solutions to the problems and challenges of the region. Thus, to ensure peace and stability of the Northeast, there is a need for the de-securitization of the region. Such efforts would improve the investment climate and promote the growth of industries, thus accelerating the development of the region.

There is also a need for the de-militarisation of India's border with its neighbours. It is through cross-border cooperation and sub-regional initiatives with the neighbouring countries that the Northeast could make full advantage of its geographic proximity with Southeast Asia. For example, the Stilwell Road which connects the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in India with China's Yunnan Province and North-western provinces of Myanmar has lots of prospects for connectivity and economic integration of Northeast India with East and Southeast Asia. However, India is reluctant to open it up because of security concerns. As such, the de-militarization of international borders in the Northeast region and ensuring connectivity and economic integration of the region with India's neighbours offers ample opportunities for unlocking the economic and geo-strategic potential of the region, and should thus be emphasised.

### **4. Transnational Approach towards Development of the Northeast**

Because of the Northeast region's geographical location and the existence of age-old ethnic-cultural ties with India's eastern neighbours, the transnational approach for ushering growth and development of the region holds tremendous potential. The geographical proximity of Northeast India with Southeast Asia provides avenues for strengthening connectivity and economic integration between them. Besides, the existence of age-old ethnic-cultural ties that the region has with Southeast Asia also comes as an added advantage towards enhancing engagement and building relationships with them. Moreover, considering the fact that Northeast India shares international borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar, strengthening relationships and engagement with these two countries will also help in overcoming the peculiar problems and challenges of the region as well.

A viable solution towards the Northeast's geographical isolation from mainland India lies in enhancing collaboration and engagement with Bangladesh. Bangladesh is an important country for ensuring connectivity for the landlocked Northeastern region with mainland India and for the promotion of Northeast India's trade and economic relations with the neighbouring countries. Instead of taking the detour through the "Chicken's Neck", a transport corridor through Bangladesh would enable a much shorter transit and better access to mainland India for the Northeastern region. The transit passage for people and goods through the corridor would boost trade and commerce for the region and help speed up the development and industrialisation of the region. As observed by Subir Bhaumik, India 'needs Bangladesh to help access its own Northeast before being able to use the region to connect to Southeast Asia'. Making use of the

port facilities in Bangladesh would also help boost trade prospects of the region with India's neighbours. Thus, New Delhi should focus on strengthening the Northeast region's connectivity and economic integration with Bangladesh before it looks further east.

Myanmar is also another crucial partner for India in efforts towards ensuring development in Northeast India. There are certain key factors that makes Myanmar a crucial part of India's efforts towards the development of Northeast India. The territorial boundary that Northeast India shares with Myanmar presents an opportunity to improve connectivity and deepen economic relations with Southeast Asian countries. Such efforts at enhancing connectivity and economic integration of the Northeast region with Southeast Asia depend upon building partnership and effective participation from Myanmar. More importantly, deepening security cooperation and joint border management with Myanmar is crucial to improve the security situation in India's troubled Northeast. Myanmar's support and collaboration is necessary to overcome the long-standing issue of insurgency in the Northeast, as well as in dealing with the problems of drug trafficking and arms smuggling in the region. Thus, a thrust for strengthening relationship between Northeast India and Myanmar is a crucial part of India's efforts towards ensuring development and stability in Northeast India.

Owing to its geographical proximity with the neighbouring Southeast Asia, there is a huge economic opportunity for Northeast India to help overcome its developmental trap. Improving connectivity and strengthening the economic integration of the Northeast region with Southeast Asia will enable the region to unlock its economic potential and enterprise. In this regard, Northeast India has a huge potential to develop as a transport corridor for trade and tourism. The region also has a huge potential to develop as a manufacturing hub and provider of skilled services to the neighbouring countries. To transform the potential into practice, infrastructural development, developing industry and enhancing the export capabilities of the region, etc, should be given top priority.

The sectors in which Northeast India have comparative advantage due to its geographical proximity with Southeast Asia are education, healthcare and tourism sector. With its numerous English medium educational institutions, Northeast India has the potential to become an educational hotspot for the neighbouring Southeast Asia, especially the less developed countries of Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Lao, and Vietnam. Strengthening vocational, technical, management, and business schools in the region will not only enhance the skills and productive capabilities of the region but would also make the region an attractive destination for students and entrepreneurs from the neighbouring countries. By acquiring the required skill and expertise in these fields, Northeast India also has the comparative advantage of becoming an exporter of services in IT, finance, management, etc, to these neighbouring countries.

There is also a huge potential for medical tourism in Northeast India especially from the neighbouring provinces of Myanmar and the bordering regions of Bangladesh as well. The geographical proximity of the region along with the existence of quality health professionals provides the prospects of developing an economically profitable healthcare industry catering to these neighbouring regions. In this regard, Manipur and Assam have the potential to emerge as a hub for healthcare services as the two states have the comparative advantage when it comes to accessibility, quality of health infrastructure, and availability of skilled manpower. However, in order to tap this opportunity, there is a need to improve infrastructure and connectivity networks in the region, besides enhancing the frequency of air travel and easing visa regimes.



In other aspects of cross-border tourism, the topographical feature of the Northeast region with an abundance of flora and fauna offers great prospects for developing nature, adventure, and eco-tourism. Due to ethnic linkages and cultural affinities with the people in Southeast Asia, there is scope for cultural tourism as well. The likes of the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland and the Sangai Festival in Manipur have witnessed the increasing participation of cultural groups and tourists from Southeast Asian countries. With Buddhism as a majority religion in many Southeast Asian countries and states like Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim in Northeast India having Buddhist presence, there is scope for religious tourism in these states. However, tourism and hospitality infrastructure in the Northeast region are still undeveloped. Developing infrastructure in terms of connectivity, hospitality services, and improving amenities at tourist places need to be prioritised to strengthen the tourism prospects of the region.

The integration of Northeast India in India's Look East Policy in its later phase has been part of a new approach towards solving the developmental deficit and isolation of the region. This approach had emphasised the opening up and unlocking the potential of the Northeast region through enhancing connectivity networks, promoting economic integration and socio-cultural reconnect of the region with Southeast Asia. Emphasis is given on the consideration of developmental needs of the Northeast region as an important element in India's foreign policy calculus. Eventually, Northeast India had come to occupy a central role in India's Look East Policy. With the shift from "Look East" to "Act East" Policy in 2014, the role of Northeast India and the consideration of developmental needs of the region have been given added emphasis in the policy. However, the vast potential of the region is still offset by infrastructure and connectivity bottlenecks along with inefficient policy implementation. A more spirited implementation of the policy and hastening the development of connectivity networks and infrastructure in Northeast India would ensure the region's effective participation in the Act East Policy. The "acting" part of the policy has to start from the Northeast region.

### **Conclusion**

The Northeast region of India continues to be caught up in a developmental trap. The hurdles in the developmental processes along with the issues and challenges that continue to grip the region have made it difficult to escape from the quagmire that it has caught up in. However the region does not lack actual potential, it just has to find a suitable way to unlock them. A more viable approach towards overcoming the developmental challenges in the region is to focus on unlocking the unique potentials and capitalising on the comparative advantages that the region has. However, unlocking the potentials of the region requires a qualitative change in terms of policies and approaches adopted in the developmental process as well as in India's policy towards its neighbours.

The key to accelerating the developmental process in the region requires strengthening infrastructure and connectivity networks in the region, besides creating productive employment opportunities. Sustained efforts should be made towards transforming the economies of the region from its present dependent nature to productive economic entities. Efforts should also be made to promote interdependence, cooperation, and partnership between the Northeastern states towards the goal of collective development of the region. However, such efforts require sustained efforts from governments and civil society towards the insurance of peace and stability in the region. Moreover, to usher in genuine and sustainable development in the region, there is a

need for the empowerment and involvement of the people of the region in the development process. A move towards such objectives should start with the replacement of the state-centric security approach with a people-centric development approach in the region.

The transnational approach to the development of the Northeast holds tremendous potential in regards to the region's considerable advantage in terms of connecting and engaging with India's neighbouring eastern countries. However, despite the potential, it has been offset by the various problems and challenges and the underdevelopment of the region. Despite its enormous potential for the Northeast region, India's Act East Policy has in actual practice seemed to have largely remained a policy initiative benefiting the rest of the country rather than the Northeast region. This shows that integration of the developmental needs of Northeast India in the Act East Policy has far from being achieved. Instead of just being rhetoric, the Act East Policy should become a viable strategy towards propelling the growth and development of the region.

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<sup>i</sup>The *Chicken's Neck* or Siliguri Corridor, is a narrow stretch of land of about 22 kilometers, located in the Indian state of West Bengal that connects India's Northeastern states to the rest of India, with countries of Nepal and Bangladesh lying on either side of the corridor. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siliguri\\_Corridor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siliguri_Corridor)

<sup>ii</sup> *Inner Line Permit* (ILP) is an official travel document issued by the concerned state government that allows an Indian citizen to visit or stay in a state that is protected under the ILP system for a limited period. The system is in force today in four Northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur.

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