

# The Geopolitics of Development: Interrogating the Indian Knowledge System in Northeast India

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## Abstract:

This paper mainly searches the intricate relationship between traditional knowledge systems and modern development policies in Northeast India. It contends that overlooking the region's massive diversity has resulted both economic advancement alongside major social and environmental challenges. Although the Indian state aims to integrate the region, its distinct cultural and historical identity frequently leads to discordant. Though often treated as a stereotype, the idea of “unity in diversity” underscores this tension, since the region’s many linguistic, tribal, and cultural affinities generate both strength and conflict. The approach of this study is mainly based on qualitative and literature-based ones. Most of the findings are of the analysis of secondary sources that includes academic papers, government reports, and news articles, focusing on Indian knowledge systems, regional development, and the political-social dynamics of Northeast India. As government reports and news releases, recent governmental initiatives have inserted new dynamism into the region. Large-scale infrastructural projects, such as the Sela Tunnel and the Bhupen Hazarika Bridge, along with industrial hubs like the Tata Group’s semiconductor plant in Assam, clearly indicates a significant shift towards economic development. This coincides with India’s Act East policy, seeking closer integration with East Asian trade and commercial economies. However, this top-down development often met clashes with indigenous knowledge systems of the region. For example, large hydroelectric projects have confronted protests from localities for fears of displacement and environmental damage etc. This shows that a fundamental conflict between a Western model of development and local, sustainable practices. Furthermore, inter-state border intricacies and deep-rooted social tensions continue to raise significant challenges, as seen in the ongoing conflict in Manipur.

**Keywords:** Indian Knowledge System, Northeast India, Act East Policy, Inclusive Development, Indigenous Knowledge

## Introduction

Widely regard as the nation’s “gateway to Southeast Asia,” Northeast India holds immense cultural, ecological, and geopolitical significance. Comprising the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, the region is home to more than 200 ethnic groups, each with its own language, traditions, and worldview. Its extraordinary diversity set it apart from other regions of India, yet it also gives rise to a complex socio-political landscape characterized by both resilience and conflict. Surrounded by Bhutan, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal its geographical location places the region at the center of cross-border engagement, making it not only a frontier of India but also a vital link to the larger Asian world. The region has historically existed on the margins of mainstream Indian developmental narratives. It was in the colonial rule that unsettled

indigenous political and economic systems, prevailed extractive and administrative policies over community-based governance. After Indian independence, integration of princely states into the Indian Union was accompanied by many a developmental policy that faced frequent treatment as a homogeneously entity to the Northeast, being overlooked its distinct cultural and historical ambits. The result shows a dual facet that the region is simultaneously seen as a space of opportunity strategically and as an area of perpetual instability. Governance and development had been further more complicated on the demands of autonomy by Insurgency movements and inter-ethnic rivalries.

In the past few decades, the Indian state has tried to transform this perception with heavy investment in infrastructure, industrial corridors, and regional connectivity projects under the Act East Policy. Landmark initiatives such as the Sela Tunnel, the Bhupen Hazarika bridge, and industrial hubs like Assam's semiconductor plant signal a significant thrust toward economic modernization. These projects target to integrate the region more closely with national and global commercial arena, forming it as a vital economic corridor. However, such kind of development leads crucial questions on sustainability, inclusivity along with cultural resonance.

The framework of the study theoretically draws from postcolonial development studies, which emphasize the tension between imposed, Western-centric models of progress and localized, indigenous modes of knowledge. Postcolonial theorists argue that state-driven modernity frequently mirrors colonial patterns of control, prioritizing economic growth and administrative efficiency over ecological sustainability and cultural particularities. The concept of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) similarly provides an alternative framework for understanding development. IKS emphasizes holistic, community-centered, and environmentally attuned practices that contrast sharply with extractive industrial projects. When applied to the Northeast, IKS highlights the value of tribal governance traditions, customary laws, and indigenous ecological practices as pathways toward more sustainable forms of development. Furthermore, the political sociology of the state offers insights into how policies in the Northeast often oscillate between integration and alienation. The state is not a neutral actor but a site of negotiation, conflict, and power struggles where multiple stakeholders' central authorities, state governments, local elites, and ethnic communities contest visions of progress. In this path, development is not merely an economic exercise but also a deeply political project, entangled with identity, sovereignty, and social justice.

This paper, therefore, lies in the intersection of traditional knowledge systems and contemporary development policies within these theoretical debates. It further argues that the failure to adequately account for the region's diversity risks undermining both economic progress and social harmony. By analyzing secondary sources including academic writings, government reports, and media accounts, the study critically envisages how far India's step of integration and development aligns or clashes with the unique cultural, social, and environmental realities of the Northeast.

### **The Tension between Indigenous Knowledge and Modern Development**

The study primarily focuses on the persistent tension between indigenous knowledge systems and modern development models in Northeast India. Over the centuries, communities across the region have fostered rich traditions of ecological stewardship, cultural knowledge and social organization that supported the resilience of both human and the natural world. More than an agricultural practice, shifting cultivation (jhum) exemplifies a worldview based on ecological balance, shared labor, and rotational land use aimed at maintaining soil fertility. Similarly, tribal governance based on customary laws shows that consensus-building, reciprocity, and local autonomy. Although policymakers often label these systems as "primitive"

or “inefficient,” they are, in fact, sophisticated bodies of knowledge that have been carefully adapted to fragile ecological and social contexts.

In contrast, the postcolonial Indian state has traced development routeway centered on industrialization, infrastructure growth, and commercial integration often in conflict with local life worlds. Under the Act East Policy, large-scale initiatives such as highways, hydroelectric dams, industrial parks, and transnational bridges are promoted, stimulating economic activity while simultaneously creating new ecological and social risks. For example, Hydroelectric projects in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, are presented as essential for energy security but have triggered resistance from communities concerned about displacement, cultural erosion, and environmental damage. As a consequence, development appears not as a neutral effort but as a contested arena in which indigenous perspectives are subordinated to national and global priorities.

This contradiction in the ideas is further intensified by the immense cultural and historical heterogeneity of the region. Many ethnic groups roughly more than 200 in number with different languages, culture, traditions, and legal systems, in the Northeast defies a uniform policy framework. As Mahadevan (2024) points out, state-led integration strategies often falter precisely because they underestimate this diversity, producing results that are at once developmental and destabilizing. Improved connectivity and industrial growth may expand opportunities, but they also aggravate ethnic rivalries, fuel inter-state territorial disputes, and heighten competition over resources. Thus, the paradox of development in the region lies in its simultaneous capacity to integrate and fragment.

The usually cited phrase “**unity in diversity**” encompassed such a paradox. Having celebrated as an earmark of India’s national identity, in the Northeast it clearly shows the only precarious and contested nature of pluralism among the different ethnic groups. Cooperation and solidarity among them can be inspired by the identities viz. Cultural, tribal, and linguistic when mobilized inclusively, but they can be seen an easily crystallized in the terms of boundary exclusion, distrust, and violence. The ongoing condition of unrest in Manipur displays this uncertainty, where neo-developmental aspirations intersect with entrenched ethnic divisions, making it clear that progress cannot be existed from identity politics.

Theoretically, this issue resonates with postcolonial critiques on development, which argue that state-driven modernization in societies of postcolonial period often recreates the exact colonial legacies of extraction and assimilation while marginalizing indigenous epistemologies. In Northeast India, the traditional governance systems and ecological practices under the pressures of technocratic, top-down planning are evidently eroded. Emphasizing on the views of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) advocating well harmony between human society and the nature, the study underscores the possibility of framing alternative models of development where diversity bears values rather than thinking it as a hurdle.

Ultimately, this paper is an expression and pronouncement of the fundamental challenge of development in Northeast India that lies not only in economic stagnation but also in the persistent failure to integrate indigenous knowledge into policy frameworks. Any kind of progress and development that ignores cultural sensitivity and ecological balance is an inherently unsustainable, generating cycles of displacement, social unrest, and environmental degradation. The path ahead, therefore, needs envisioning a developmental paradigm accommodating the region’s plurality while resisting the homogenizing impulses of centralized modernization.

### **Unity in Diversity: A Paradox**

The cliché of “unity in diversity” often celebrated as India’s strength, takes on a more complex character

in the Northeast. Linguistic, tribal, and cultural differences serve as both unifying forces and sources of division. While collective mobilization around identity can foster solidarity and resistance against external pressures, it can equally harden into boundaries that trigger exclusion, mistrust, and conflict (Baruah, 2020). This dilemma is merely evident in the ongoing ethnic crisis and violence in Manipur, where hopes and aspirations of the peoples for modernization are often collided with firmly rooted divisions, by revealing that politics based on identity remains an inseparable part from developmental trajectories. This paradox resonates with postcolonial critiques of development, which argue that modernization in formerly colonized societies often reproduces colonial patterns of extraction and assimilation (Escobar, 1995). In Northeast India, this is evident in the erosion of indigenous ecological and governance systems under the pressures of state-driven modernization. The challenge, therefore, is to recognize and integrate Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) which emphasize harmony between humans and nature as legitimate and valuable contributions to development planning (Singh, 2021).

### **Geopolitics and Development: Act East vs. the Belt and Road:**

India's developmental push in the Northeast must also be understood in a geopolitical context, especially in relation to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While India's Act East Policy seeks to strengthen connectivity with Southeast Asia through projects in its border states, China has advanced its own regional strategy through initiatives like the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), linking Yunnan province to the Bay of Bengal (Min, 2021).

These parallel reveals that India's infrastructural drive in the Northeast is not purely developmental but also strategic. Projects such as the Sela Tunnel or Bhupen Hazarika Setu enhance not only trade and mobility but also India's defense preparedness along sensitive borders with China and Myanmar (Das, 2023). Similarly, industrial projects such as the semiconductor hub in Assam reflect India's ambition to compete in global value chains where China already holds significant advantages (Chatterjee, 2024).

Yet, both India's Act East projects and China's BRI corridors face local resistance due to concerns over displacement, ecological degradation, and exclusion. Just as BRI projects in Myanmar and Sri Lanka have triggered protests, India's mega-projects in the Northeast often encounter skepticism from communities who fear that benefits may bypass local populations (Haokip, 2025). This reflects that not only acceptance on regional level and but also in geopolitical ambition is necessary and critical for the success of such initiatives.

### **Northeast India: Development, Identity, and Resistance:**

One of the defining tensions in Northeast India lies in the uneasy relationship between state-driven development models and the indigenous knowledge systems that have long shaped local societies. While the Indian state envisions the region as a strategic frontier for infrastructural expansion, energy security, and economic integration under policies such as the *Act East Policy*, these top-down initiatives often conflict with the cultural, ecological, and political realities of the region (Baruah, 2020).

The pursuit of large-scale infrastructure projects, such as hydroelectric dams, highways, and industrial corridors, represents a Western-centric developmental vision rooted in notions of industrial modernity and market integration (Escobar, 1995). For policymakers, these interventions promise connectivity and growth, but for local communities, they often threaten displacement, cultural erosion, and ecological vulnerability (Choudhury, 2022). The case of hydroelectric projects on the Brahmaputra and its tributaries in Arunachal Pradesh illustrates this clash. While dams are projected as crucial for addressing India's

rising energy demands, local communities argue that such interventions ignore the fragile ecology of the Eastern Himalayas an area prone to earthquakes, landslides, and floods (Vaghlikar & Das, 2010; The Wire, 2025). These fears are not merely environmental but also cultural, as rivers in indigenous cosmologies are seen as sacred entities integral to social identity and collective survival (Ramakrishnan, 1992).

This disconnect reflects a deeper epistemological divide between technocratic models of development and indigenous ecological knowledge. Practices such as shifting cultivation (*jhum*), floodplain farming, and community forest management are often dismissed as “primitive” or “inefficient” by state planners. However, research demonstrates that these practices embody sophisticated principles of sustainability, including rotational land use, biodiversity preservation, and collective resource management (Singh, 2021; ResearchGate, 2024). Sidelining these knowledge systems causes developmental policies to reproduce extractive and homogenizing colonial logics, which in turn erode the resilience of local communities.

### **Development and the Politics of Identity**

Beyond ecological concerns, development in the Northeast is deeply intertwined with identity politics and territorial disputes. The region’s multi-ethnic composition comprising over 200 distinct groups makes it particularly sensitive to projects that redistribute land, resources, or political authority. Ongoing inter-state border disputes, such as those between Assam and Mizoram or Assam and Nagaland, have frequently escalated into violence, often aggravated by state-driven projects cutting across contested boundaries (Hussain, 2023). Development in such context risks becoming a zero-sum game, where infrastructure and resource allocation are perceived as markers of ethnic dominance.

Another dimension of tension arises from anti-immigrant rhetoric, particularly directed against populations from Bangladesh and Myanmar. In states like Assam and Manipur, debates over migration, citizenship, and resource competition have been amplified by developmental policies that alter demographic and economic balances (McDuaie-Ra, 2016; Baruah, 2020). Rather than fostering unity, infrastructure expansion and industrialization can deepen social cleavages by reinforcing perceptions of exclusion and marginalization.

The ongoing conflict in Manipur since 2023 exemplifies this nexus of development, identity, and violence. Initially rooted in disputes over land rights, affirmative action, and migration, the crisis has spiraled into widespread ethnic clashes, displacements, and humanitarian suffering (Haokip, 2023). The violence illustrates that developmental initiatives insensitive to ethnic contexts can inadvertently provoke a broader political turmoil. Resultantly, what unfolds is not just an account of underdevelopment but a recognition that development and advancement, when separated from cultural and ecological awareness, can actively generate fragmentation.

### **Rethinking Developmental Frameworks**

These dynamics highlight the need to reimagine development in Northeast India beyond the narrow metrics of growth and connectivity. Integrating Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) with their emphasis on ecological balance, consensus-driven governance, and community well-being offers an alternative framework for sustainable development. By acknowledging traditional practices not as obstacles but as resources for policy, the state can address the epistemological gap between top-down planning and bottom-up lived realities (Singh, 2021).

Such an approach does not mean to reject the norm of modern infrastructure or industrialization but rather to implant them within a periphery of cultural and ecological adapted framework. Only the reconciliation of the regional diversity, fragility, and aspirations can develop and become a unified and integrated rather than divided forces in Northeast India.

## Conclusion

The experience of Northeast India underlines the inherent complex nature of balancing developmental imperatives with cultural and ecological sensitivities. On the one hand, the government's determination to integrate only the region into national and global economic frameworks is evident in the recent state-led initiatives such as infrastructural expansion, industrial hubs, and enhanced regional connectivity under the Act East Policy. These initiatives have the high potential to convert the regions into a strategic corridor by fostering economic dynamism and increasing participation in regional brisk trade and communication. On the other hand, there are frequent conflicts between the so called top-down model of development and the lived realities of indigenous communities, whose knowledge systems prioritize sustainability, reciprocity with nature, and collective well-being effectively.

The incessant local effort to resist mega-projects, border disputes, and ethnic conflicts underscores that only the determined economic growth cannot resolve the structural challenges facing in the region. Instead, developmental interventions risk exacerbating divisions when they fail to account for the region's historical marginalization, ecological fragility, and multi-ethnic composition. The ongoing conflict in Manipur exemplifies how developmental policies, when pursued without cultural sensitivity and participatory governance, can become flashpoints for violence and instability.

Therefore, it is incumbent that the fate of Northeast India for the time to come depends not on rejecting development but on reimagining it through a sense of plural, inclusive frameworks that value both modern infrastructure and indigenous knowledge systems. Embedding Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into policy-making can help to bridge the epistemological gap between state-centric planning and community-centered realities. By drawing on local ecological practices, consensus-driven governance, and cultural traditions, development can be reframed not as an imposition but as a collaborative process.

Finally, the challenge is to move far beyond a Western-centric growth model towards a more contextually grounded bright vision of progress one that acknowledges the Northeast's diversity not as a barrier but as a source of resilience and strength. It is only the reconciliation to the demands of economic integration with respect for cultural identity and environmental sustainability that can promote development in Northeast India and it would become genuinely transformative, fostering peace, inclusion, and everlasting.

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