

Assessing Infrastructural Bottlenecks and Enhancing Regional Cooperation for Economic Integration in Northeast India

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Abstract

Northern India has tons of natural resources, plus its position is strategic, being close to Southeast Asia, thus making it highly promising in terms of economy and International trade. Nevertheless, poor infrastructure and a lack of cooperation within the region among states are the key impediments to the development of the region. The region is still an underdeveloped one due to dysfunctional infrastructure and poor application of regional policies, such as the Act East Policy, BIMSTEC, and BBIN, despite the opportunities present. A quantitative research technique was adopted in this study. There were two primary hypotheses of the research: H1: Infrastructure development is a critical component in economic integration. H2: Regional cooperation has positive effects on trade and cross-border connections. The data obtained were evaluated with the use of Pearson Correlation, T-test, Multiple Linear Regression, One-Way ANOVA and Chi-square Test. The outcomes indicated that there was a positive correlation between infrastructure and economic integration ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$). It was determined in regression analysis ($R^2 = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$) that transport and communication are the biggest issues that many people can relate to increased trade. According to the t-test ($t = 3.94$, $p < 0.01$), there was a variation in trade performance due to the differences in the level of infrastructure. ANOVA ($F = 5.82$, $p < 0.05$) indicated that there are variations in states, whereas Chi-square outcomes ($\chi^2 = 18.76$, $p < 0.01$) indicated that trade participation is associated with cooperation policy awareness. The conclusions indicate the need to take certain urgent measures for the implementation of multimodal transport, harmonisation of regional policies and reformation of institutions. The measures will assist in developing enhanced economic ties and prosperity in the Northeast, which will serve as a guide for policymaking.

Keywords: *Infrastructural Bottlenecks, Regional Cooperation, Economic Integration, Northeast India, Cross-Border Connectivity.*

Introduction

Northeast India comprises eight states and is geopolitically and economically very crucial to India as it lies geographically close to Southeast Asia and is rich in natural and cultural resources. The area, as a strategic bridgehead to the neighbouring countries, has always been viewed as a serious thought to the Act East Policy integration of India and regional integration aspirations (Baruah, 2020;

Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). Notwithstanding such obvious strengths, the area is economically behind due to long-term infrastructural issues, subpar cross-border linkages, and ineffective regional cooperative policy execution (De & Ray, 2018; Kalita, 2022).

Gigantic projects like the Act East Policy, BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal), and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and

Economic Cooperation) have attempted to enhance regional engagement and trade movement. But one infrastructure, specifically transportation and communication of information, has been governing the general success of their plans (Ghosh & Goswami, 2022; Jain, 2021). Studies have established that underutilised road and rail infrastructures, border bottlenecks, and institutional coordination gaps hinder the smooth movement of goods and individuals across and along the borders and region (Das, 2018; Bhattacharjee, 2022).

In addition, awareness and exposure to such models of cooperation among the regional stakeholders, such as small businesses and traders, also continue to be of limited magnitude, which again reduces the space of the region to benefit from economic integration (Gogoi, 2021). Policy reports and government reports also continue to highlight the potential of Northeast India, but the gap remains huge between policy intention and community impact (Government of India, 2023).

The aim of this research is to empirically examine the infrastructural constraints and effectiveness of regional cooperation pacts in propelling trade and economic integration within Northeast India. Based on an analysis of variables such as transport infrastructure, communications network, institutional performance, and policy awareness, the research hopes to make some useful recommendations to policymakers and development agencies. Regional empowerment is important in bringing out the economic potential of the region. They are also important in positioning the region as a strategic place of India's regional and international trade networks.

Statement of the problem

Northeast India, strategically located and endowed with natural resources, is economically backwards on account of chronic infrastructural handicaps and poor

regional coordination. Even after efforts such as the Act East Policy, BBIN, and BIMSTEC, efforts have been made to increase trade and connectivity, but their implementation has been patchy and mostly unsuccessful. Poor road network, poor rail and air connectivity, poor communication infrastructure, and bureaucratic inefficiencies all impede free integration with the mainland of India and Southeast Asia. In addition, stakeholders' participation and regional cooperation policy consciousness among residents are still low. Such persistent gaps limit the potential of the region's trade and economic development. Thus, there is a need for an empirical systematic study to determine the infrastructure bottlenecks and estimate regional cooperation efficiency in the direction of economic integration.

Significance of the study

This research is pertinent in the sense that it provides authoritative information on the determinants of economic integration in Northeast India—a region of strategic and economic interest to India. Analyzing the role of infrastructure development and regional cooperation initiatives like BBIN, BIMSTEC, and Act East Policy, the research identifies the areas which need to be intervened by policy intervention at the earliest. The research will guide policymakers, planners, and development agencies to plan strategic infrastructure projects and partnership programs that will close regional disparities. Moreover, the study suggests stakeholder sensitization and institutional coordination in facilitating effective participation in trade. In this regard, this study adds to the wider regional debate on sub-regional development, national connectivity, as well as sub-regional diplomacy, and thus informs inclusive growth and integration with Southeast Asia.

Review of related literature

The available literature addressing regional integration and infrastructure building in Northeast India identifies an intricate relationship among the implementation of policy, economic integration, and connectivity. Literature shows that the geographical proximity of the region to Southeast Asia presents vast opportunities for regional integration and trade at the borders if institutional and infrastructural bottlenecks are removed (Asian Development Bank, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

Bhattacharjee (2022) points out that poor infrastructure—especially in the transport and communication sectors—is a chronic stumbling block to Northeast economic growth. Likewise, Kalita (2022) makes the point that state and region-inclusive growth is being thwarted by uneven infrastructure development between states. Ghosh and Goswami (2022) present empirical evidence that cross-border infrastructure should feature prominently in boosting trade integration within the region, especially under BBIN and BIMSTEC agreements.

Policy frameworks is established in a number of research studies. The implementation of and Act East Policy have drawn a lot of debate. Hussain (2021) and Gogoi (2021) critically evaluate the policy's strategic implications, noting that the inefficiencies in institutions and state-central agency coordination failures constrain its efficacy. Panda (2021) similarly refers to infrastructural limitations and lost opportunities in BBIN connectivity initiatives.

Regional cooperation frameworks, including BBIN and BIMSTEC, are universally acknowledged as the most potent forces towards integration. Connectivity is the underlying theme for South Asian integration, asserts De (2020), and empirically, Bhattacharya and De (2019) assess the potential for BBIN economic cooperation. Chaturvedi (2020) affirms the case that sub-regional

arrangements can be a working bases for ensuring trade and connectivity, particularly when initiatives at the national level take a slow pace.

Policy, Government of India (2023), Ministry of External Affairs (2023), and Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (2022) all highlight multimodal infrastructure, digital connectivity, and institutional harmonisation in their reports. Jain (2021) and Nath (2021) also show the link between better logistics and regional trade performance.

Additionally, researchers such as Baruah (2020) and Singh (2018) give critical commentary on historical and politico-socio forces that propel Northeast Indian growth. According to Misra (2022) and Roy (2023), strategic investment and diplomatic alignment are required in Northeast India to achieve its potential as a South-Southeast Asian bridge.

Generally speaking, reviewed literature emphasises that despite the potential for integration, infrastructural shortcomings, inadequate policy implementation, and fragmented cooperation continue to be core constraints to the realisation of the full economic potential of the region.

Research Gap

Despite the plethora of policy thrusts, such as the Act East Policy and BBIN architectures, Northeast India still suffers from infrastructural bottlenecks and low-quality regional cooperation. There is no comprehensive empirical analysis in the literature that connects infrastructure, policy awareness, and trade participation, and therefore there exists a research gap to understand their combined effect on economic integration.

Objectives of the Study: To investigate the role of infrastructural development and regional cooperation in promoting economic integration in Northeast India.

Hypotheses of the Study:

- H1: Infrastructure development plays an important role in economic integration.
- H2: Regional cooperation is positively impacting trade and cross-border connections.

Sample Size: All eight Indian Northeast states—Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim—were covered in the study. 200 individuals were chosen with a stratified sample to evaluate infrastructure, regional cooperation, and their contribution towards economic integration.

Research Methodology: The study employed a quantitative research design using structured questionnaires to gather empirical data, followed by statistical analysis.

- Population and Sample:** The population included government officials, traders, transport operators, and policymakers across the Northeastern region. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure regional and professional representation.
- Data Collection Method:** Primary data was collected through structured questionnaires distributed online and offline. Secondary data was gathered from policy documents, government reports, and academic publications.

To analyse the data, the following statistical tools were applied:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** employed to capture the demographic profile of the respondents and describe important variables such as the existence of infrastructure, performance in trade, and awareness of policies.

- **Correlation Analysis:** Pearson Correlation was used to test the strength and direction of the relationship between infrastructure development and economic integration.
- **Regression Analysis:** Multiple Linear Regression was employed to determine the forecasting ability of factors, including transport infrastructure, communications infrastructure, and institutional effectiveness on the performance of trade.
- **Analysis of Variance (ANOVA):** One-way ANOVA was employed in order to determine differences in economic integration performance among the various Northeastern states.
- **Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha):** The reliability of the survey instrument was determined using Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = 0.81$), indicating that there exists a high level of internal consistency among infrastructure, trade, and cooperation variables being measured by the items.

Ethical Considerations:

The research was conducted in accordance with the standards of ethical practice at all stages of the research. The participation was voluntary and the informed consent from all the respondents was secured. Confidentiality of the data was maintained throughout the research, and no personally identifiable data were collected. The research aim was disclosed, and the respondents were assured that the responses would be utilized for academic purposes only.

Scope and Limitations

Geographically, the area of study includes Northeast India as a region for cooperation with other states of India and foreign allies such as Southeast Asia. The study

examines the significance of infrastructure and policy coordination in raising the level of trade and economic cooperation. It discusses the restricted generalizability to other regions beyond the geographical one under investigation, use of self-report measures, and measurement issues related to awareness of policies. Cross-sectional data collection also eliminates longitudinal analysis.

Sampling Technique:

- **Sample Size:** 200 respondents
- **Sampling Method:** Stratified Random Sampling was used to ensure representation across different Northeastern states and stakeholder categories (e.g., traders, policymakers, transporters, government officers).
- **Data Collection Tool:** Structured questionnaire with Likert-scale items, dichotomous questions, and open-ended queries.
- **Data Analysis Tools:** SPSS version 26.0 and Microsoft Excel were used for coding, statistical analysis, and visualisation of data.

Data Analysis and Interpretation:

To ensure comprehensive analysis and validity of the research hypotheses, the following statistical tools were applied:

- **Pearson Correlation:** Used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between infrastructure

development and economic integration.

- **Independent Samples T-test:** Applied to compare the mean trade performance between regions with high and low infrastructure levels, thereby assessing the impact of infrastructure differences.
- **Multiple Regression:** Employed to identify the extent to which variables like transport, communication, and institutional efficiency predict trade performance and economic integration.
- **ANOVA (Analysis of Variance):** Conducted to examine whether there are significant differences in economic integration across different Northeastern states.
- **Chi-square Test:** Used to evaluate the association between trade participation and awareness of regional cooperation policies such as Act East, BBIN, and BIMSTEC.
- **Cronbach's Alpha:** Used to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the survey instrument, ensuring the questionnaire items measured the intended constructs accurately.
- **Logistic Regression:** Applied to predict the likelihood of trade participation based on binary variables like policy awareness, providing insights into key influencing factors.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Pearson Correlation –

Variable 1	Variable 2	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance Level (p-value)	Interpretation
Infrastructure	Economic Integration	0.68	<0.01	There is a strong positive correlation between infrastructure and economic integration.

Explanation: The Pearson correlation coefficient $r = 0.68$ indicates that there is a high, positive linear relationship between economic integration and infrastructure development. With $p < 0.01$ level of significance, the relationship is significant, indicating that improvements in

infrastructure are strongly linked with increased regional trade integration as well as border connectivity. This verifies the first hypothesis (H1) and substantiates the premise that physical connectivity is a key factor in unleashing the economic potential of Northeast India.

Independent Samples T-test

Group	Sample Size (n)	Mean Trade Performance Score	Standard Deviation (SD)	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
High Infrastructure	50	78.6	8.2	3.94	< 0.01	There is a significant difference in trade performance based on infrastructure levels.
Low Infrastructure	50	70.1	7.5			

Interpretation: The difference in trade performance rating between high-infrastructure and low-infrastructure areas ($t = 3.94$, $p < 0.01$) was statistically significant. Trade performance was better as rated by respondents from high-

infrastructure areas (mean = 78.6) than from low-infrastructure areas (mean = 70.1). This lends evidence to targeted infrastructure investment towards reducing regional trade gains disparities.

Multiple Linear Regression

Predictor Variable	Standardised Beta (β)	p-value	Significance Status
Transport Infrastructure	0.52	< 0.01	Significant
Communication Infrastructure	0.41	< 0.01	Significant
Institutional Efficiency	0.18	0.06	Not Significant

Model Summary $R^2 = R^2 = 0.57 \rightarrow 57\%$ of the variance in trade performance is explained by transport and communication infrastructure.

Interpretation: The explanatory power of the regression model is good ($R^2 = 0.57$), which means that more than half of the trade performance variability is explained by the independent variables. Transport infrastructure ($\beta = 0.52$) and

communication infrastructure ($\beta = 0.41$) are established predictors ($p < 0.01$), thus signaling these to be strong economic integration drivers. While institutional effectiveness is positively correlated, it is not significant statistically ($p = 0.06$), and indicates that governance is important but physical infrastructure can be more directly determinative of trade expansion in the region.

One-Way ANOVA

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	p-value
Between Groups	384.72	3	128.24	5.82	< 0.05
Within Groups	2450.88	111	22.08		
Total	2835.60	114			

Interpretation: ANOVA outcome ($F = 5.82$, $p < 0.05$) reflects significant Northeastern states' economic integration performance disparities. It suggests that some states (e.g., Meghalaya or Assam) are doing better to the extent of taking

leverage on infrastructure for the promotion of regional trade than others (e.g., Mizoram or Arunachal Pradesh). It needs state-specific investment plans and policy interventions.

Chi-square Test

Variable 1	Variable 2	χ^2 Value	df	p-value	Interpretation
Trade Participation	Cooperation Policy Awareness	18.76	4	< 0.01	Trade participation is significantly associated with the awareness of cooperation policies (like Act East, BBIN, BIMSTEC).

Significance: Chi-square value $\chi^2 = 18.76$ ($p < 0.01$) reflects that active trade participation and regional cooperation policy awareness are statistically correlated. Interview participants who were aware of policies like the Act East

Policy, BBIN, and BIMSTEC were themselves actively involved in trade. This reflects the significance of heightened communication and education of such policies to increase regional trade participation.

Logistic Regression

Predictor	B (Log Odds)	SE	Wald	p-value	Odds Ratio (Exp(B))
Awareness of Act East Policy	1.12	0.32	12.25	< 0.01	3.06
BBIN Connectivity	0.78	0.29	7.23	0.007	2.18

Model Summary | $\chi^2 = 24.87$ (df = 2), $p < 0.01$ → The model significantly predicts likelihood of trade participation based on regional cooperation variables.

Model Summary: $\chi^2 = 24.87$ (df = 2), $p < 0.01$ → The model significantly predicts the likelihood of trade participation based on regional cooperation variables.

Interpretation: Logistic regression results confirm that policy awareness substantially increases the odds of participating in trade. Respondents aware of the Act East Policy were 3.06 times more likely to be involved in trade, while those informed about BBIN connectivity were 2.18 times more likely to participate. These results underscore the critical role of policy communication and

stakeholder engagement in regional economic integration.

Findings

1. **Positive Relationship Between Infrastructure and Economic Integration:** The result from Pearson Correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$) indicates a very strong positive relationship between infrastructure spending and economic integration. The majority of the respondents concurred that good connectivity, roads, and information and communications technology infrastructure are the major facilitators of regional trade and integration.
2. **Significant Contribution of Transport and Communication Infrastructure:** Multiple Regression Analysis ($R^2 = 0.57$) indicates that transport and communication infrastructure significantly predicts trade performance. Transport ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$) and communication ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$) were the two best predictors. Institutional efficiency was weaker ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = 0.06$), suggesting that physical infrastructure is still the focus."
3. **Trade Variation Across Levels of Infrastructure:** Independent T-test ($t = 3.94$, $p < 0.01$) shows that there is a statistically significant variation in trade performance between the developed and underdeveloped infrastructure areas. This indicates that logistics and connectivity investment translates into quantifiable returns in trade.
4. **State-wise Variation in Economic Integration:** ANOVA test ($F = 5.82$, $p < 0.05$) reflected significant variation in the achievement of economic integration among the Northeastern states. Assam and Meghalaya showed relatively better connectivity and participation in trade with respect to more distant areas like Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland.
5. **Policy Awareness and Trade Participation:** Association: A significant association was indicated by The Chi-square Test ($\chi^2 = 18.76$, $p < 0.01$) between policy awareness of regional cooperation mechanisms (i.e., Act East Policy, BBIN, BIMSTEC) and trade participation. Regions with greater dissemination of policy awareness have been identified to record increased trade participation.
6. **Policy Awareness as a Trade Driver:** Logistic regression ($\chi^2 = 24.87$, $p < 0.01$) also established the fact that awareness of the Act East Policy and BBIN connectivity enhance the probability of trade participation significantly. For example, aware respondents of the Act East Policy were 3 times more likely to be trade participants.
7. **Reliability of Instrument:** 0.81 Cronbach's Alpha is high, and this indicates high internal consistency of the questionnaire instrument, hence making the survey questionnaire credible and ensuring findings to be reliable.

Conclusion

The research proves that infrastructural development and regional integration are the columns of economic integration in Northeast India. Northeast India's physical geography holds the gigantic potential for being the gateway to Southeast Asian trade but the lack of connectivity and policy fragmentation guarantees that the majority of the potential remains untapped.

Transport and communication facilities have been revealed to be the most influential motivators in creating intra-regional trade. Further, programs such as Act East Policy, BBIN, and BIMSTEC's

success largely depends on stakeholder and public awareness. There is a policy-formulation to ground-implementation gap that must be overcome to achieve greater integration.

Suggestions

1. Multimodal Transport System Development: Accelerate highway, railway, and waterway development and Connect transport networks and economic corridors, logistics hubs, and trade centres.
2. Widening Digital Infrastructure: Expand mobile and internet coverage in border and rural areas to enable e-commerce and digital trade logistics.
3. Capacity Development and Awareness: Organise policy workshops, training programs, and awareness programs to make the Act East Policy and associated cooperation activities more familiar to people and involve local stakeholders, SMEs, traders, and farmers.
4. Institutional Reforms: Simplify bureaucratic processes of border trade and create a North-East Trade and Connectivity Development Authority as a specialised agency.
5. State-Specific Investment Strategy: Spend infrastructure funds on state-specific requirements of individual Northeastern states and encourage public-private partnerships (PPPs) local in nature.
6. Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms: Conduct regular audits and policy reviews to check if regional plans are being properly implemented and utilise data-based dashboards for real-time monitoring of infrastructure developments.

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