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# Paradiplomacy at the Frontier: The Centrality of Assam in Advancing India–Bhutan Relations


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## Key Takeaways

- **Assam as the Strategic Nerve Centre of the India–Bhutan Frontier:** Assam's 267-km shared border with Bhutan, stretching across Udalguri, Tamulpur, Baksa, Chirang, and Kokrajhar districts, forms the core corridor of India's connectivity with the Himalayan kingdom. The state's proximity to the Siliguri Corridor ("Chicken's Neck") gives it immense strategic weight in India's eastern defence posture. Assam acts not only as a territorial buffer but also as a strategic stabiliser—a frontier where India's security, diplomacy, and regional integration converge.

- **From Insurgency to Security Cooperation:** A Recalibrated Border Relationship: Historically, the Assam–Bhutan border was once a base for insurgent groups like ULFA, NDFB, and KLO. The joint Operation All Clear (2003) marked a watershed in bilateral security cooperation, with Bhutan decisively acting against insurgents sheltered on its soil. Today, this security convergence has evolved into a shared strategic understanding, reinforcing mutual trust and transforming the border from a zone of tension into one of coordination and peace.

- **Economic and Infrastructural Convergence Through Connectivity Projects:** The upcoming Gelephu–Kokrajhar railway line, the Jogighopa Multi-Modal Logistics Park (MMLP), and border infrastructure upgrades (e.g., Darranga and Samdrup Jongkhar check gates) exemplify how Assam is becoming the logistical and economic hub of India–Bhutan trade. These initiatives anchor Bhutan's trade ambitions within India's larger Act East Policy, with Assam serving as the operational base linking South Asia to Southeast Asia.

- **Hydropower Interdependence as an Engine of Regional Growth:** Hydropower cooperation—anchored in projects like Punatsangchhu I & II, Tala, and Mangdechhu—reflects the deep energy interdependence between the two nations. Assam's integration into this grid, receiving 174 MW of electricity from Bhutan, is a step toward a transboundary green energy corridor in the eastern Himalayas. Such projects also strengthen Assam's role in energy diplomacy and sustainable development.

- **Paradiplomacy in Practice: Assam as a Subnational Diplomatic Actor:** The reciprocal visits between Assam's Chief Minister and Bhutan's King in 2024–25 mark a paradigm shift where subnational diplomacy supplements national foreign policy. Assam now operates as a frontline diplomatic stakeholder, facilitating people-to-people ties, trade initiatives, and cultural exchanges—mirroring the successful Tamil Nadu–Sri Lanka model of paradiplomatic engagement.

- **Cultural Continuity and Civilisational Linkages as the Foundation of Goodwill:** The shared Buddhist heritage—rooted in the Vajrayana and Tantric traditions—has long sustained cultural harmony across the Assam–Bhutan frontier. These historical, spiritual and trade linkages among the Monpas, Sherdukpens, and Bodo communities continue to provide a civilisational glue that underpins modern diplomacy. This

legacy remains a potent cultural capital that can be mobilised to deepen cross-border cooperation.

- **Ecological Collaboration and Conservation Diplomacy:** The Transboundary Manas Conservation Area (TraMCA) exemplifies successful ecological diplomacy. It connects Assam's Manas National Park with Bhutan's Royal Manas National Park, fostering joint patrolling, anti-poaching drives, and biodiversity monitoring. The initiative showcases how eco-cooperation can reinforce trust and peace along borders and serve as a replicable model for other frontier regions of India.

- **Assam's Expanding Role in India's Act East and Neighbourhood Policies:** Assam's developmental trajectory now aligns closely with India's Act East Policy and Neighbourhood First Policy, positioning it as both a geopolitical anchor and a trade gateway. With proposals for a defence corridor, the Assam Aerospace and Defence Manufacturing Policy 2025, and its increasing participation in BIMSTEC and regional connectivity projects, the state stands at the intersection of diplomacy, commerce, and strategic deterrence.

- **Future Imperatives: Institutionalising Assam's Paradiplomatic Role:** The growing complexity of cross-border projects calls for formal mechanisms—such as a dedicated Assam–Bhutan Affairs Department, a BIMSTEC Mini-Secretariat, and a Subnational Diplomacy Cell under DoNER. These structures would institutionalise Assam's role, ensuring policy continuity beyond political cycles and enabling the state to become a lasting bridge in India–Bhutan relations.

## Executive Summary

The brief explores the strategic, cultural, economic, and paradiplomatic significance of Assam in India–Bhutan relations. With a 267 km-long shared border across five Assamese districts, Assam forms the natural bridge connecting India with Bhutan — economically, strategically, and culturally. Historically, this frontier has witnessed both turbulence, such as insurgent sanctuaries in the 1990s, and cooperation, such as joint counter-insurgency operations like Operation All Clear in 2003.

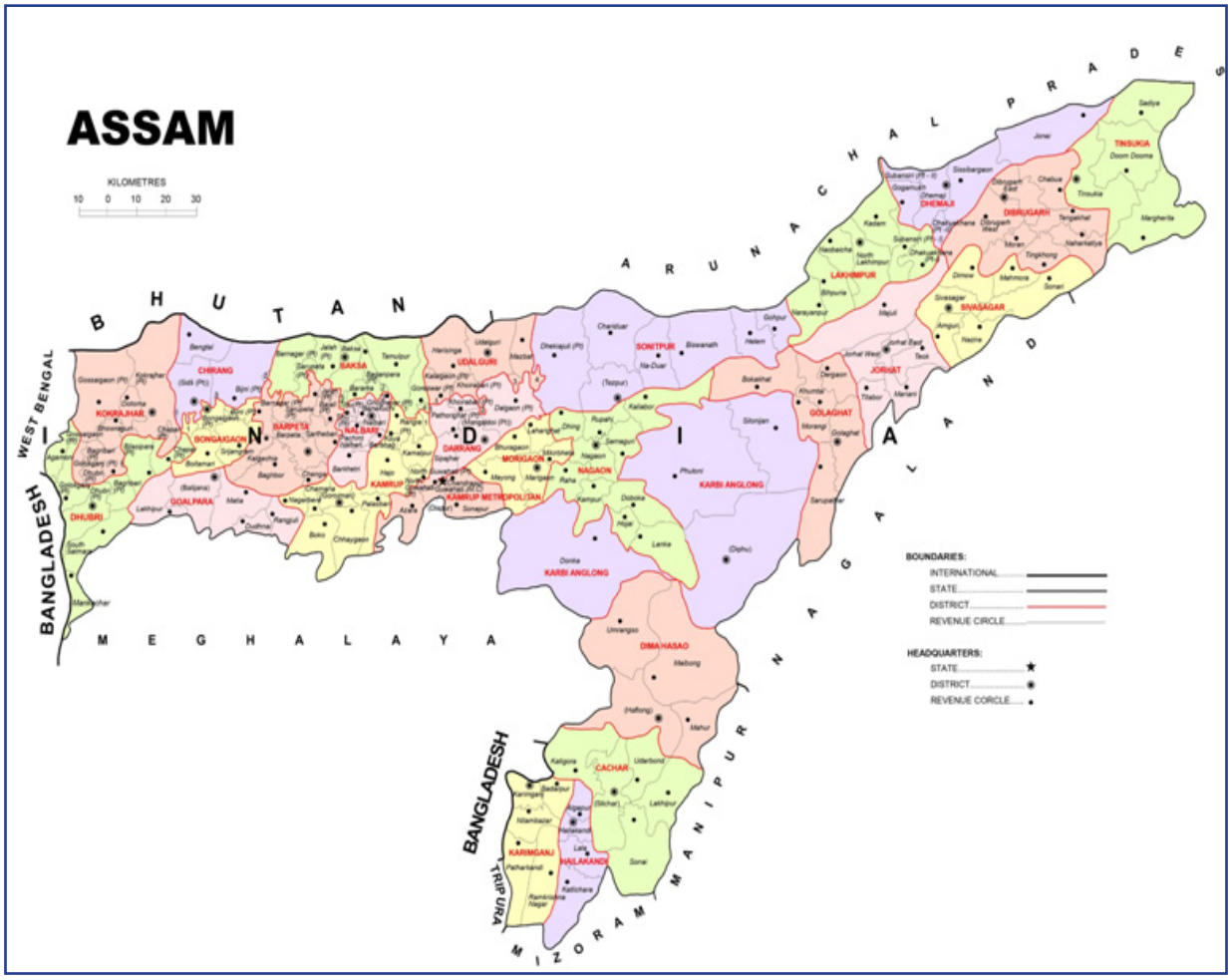
In the current era, Assam has re-emerged as the linchpin of India's neighbourhood and Act East policies, shaping sub-national diplomacy through initiatives like the Jogighopa Multi-Modal Logistics Park, the proposed India–Bhutan railway line, and energy cooperation via hydropower projects. The mutual visits between Bhutan's King and Assam's Chief Minister reflect this growing sub-state diplomacy, redefining the India–Bhutan dynamic beyond conventional diplomacy.

The brief concludes with specific policy recommendations to institutionalise Assam's role through dedicated structures for paradiplomatic engagement, enhanced institutional linkages like BIMSTEC and the Bhutan Consulate, and state-level coordination bodies under the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER).

## Introduction

Amidst the ongoing discourse on paradiplomatic phenomena, which encompasses various aspects of the contemporary era, from connectivity to boosting bilateral ties, the centrality of Assam in North Eastern India can be an interesting case study when it comes to issues about India-Bhutan relations. The Indo-Bhutan border in Assam is approximately 267 km and touches the five districts of Udalguri, Tamulpur, Baksa, Chirang, and Kokrajhar. The state of Assam has been a focal point for India-Bhutan relations, serving as a major transit point from a strategic perspective.

In the past, Assam-based insurgents have had their bases in the South-Eastern part of Bhutan just across the Indian border in Assam, which often acted as launchpads for their anti-India operations. This has often been countered by New Delhi, in cooperation with the Bhutanese regime, by neutralising these rebels. From 'Operation All Clear ' in 2003 to the proposed India-Bhutan railway line through Assam, the strides towards strengthening the bilateral relations between the two countries have eventually begun, where the strategic location of Assam has proved to be sacrosanct. This brief aims to explore the centrality of Assam in India-Bhutan relations by providing a comprehensive analysis of the topic, from its contemporary historical genesis to the current era.



## Overview of The India-Bhutan Border Dynamics In Assam: A Paradiplomatic Potential

Paradiplomacy, or sub-national diplomacy in simple terms, can be defined as the engagement of non-central governments in conducting diplomatic activities. The recent trends of paradiplomatic relations in India-Bhutan ties have proved to be a game-changer for the state of Assam, as many developmental initiatives from connectivity to trade lie at its juncture. This has brought a ray of hope for the state, considering the potential benefits that it would bring to the overall economic development of the state.

The dynamics of the India-Bhutan border in Assam encompass a blend of harmonious coexistence, substantial trade and economic engagement, and strategic relevance, particularly as Assam serves as an essential gateway for Bhutanese trade and developmental initiatives.

Although the border remains peaceful and is founded on enduring socio-cultural connections, it is also undergoing a transition towards commercial relationships and holds strategic importance for regional connectivity and development. Furthermore, it has the potential to become a key component of India's Act East Policy, thereby facilitating closer ties between the Himalayan South Asian region and Southeast Asia through Assam.

## Cross-Border Cultural Exchanges Between Assam & Bhutan

Culture, too, has played a significant role in fostering people-to-people cordial relations along the Indo-Bhutan border in Assam. This has primarily to do with the

syncretic outlook of the religious history of the region. In the past, the exchange of religious concepts and cultural traditions among Assam, Bhutan, and Tibet played a significant role in the intricate fabric of cultural syncretism within the area. The common Buddhist legacy of Vajrayana, also known as Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, fostered a spiritual bond that surpassed political frontiers.

From the economic perspective, too, the historical trade relations significantly impacted the societal structures of Assam, particularly with communities like the Monpas and Sherdukpens from present-day Arunachal Pradesh (formerly part of Assam as NEFA), who upheld amicable economic connections with the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan.

## A Paradiplomatic Analogy: Tamil Nadu & Sri Lanka

An analogy from the paradiplomatic perspective can be drawn from engagements between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, whose genesis lies in their socio-cultural history and geographical proximity. The state of Tamil Nadu possesses a rich and significant history of paradiplomacy with Sri Lanka, largely motivated by ethnic and cultural connections to the Sri Lankan Tamil community. Although the federal government in New Delhi is officially responsible for foreign policy, Tamil Nadu's subnational diplomacy has historically played a crucial role in shaping and influencing India's position regarding its island neighbour.

The state government of Tamil Nadu has functioned as de facto representatives for the "Tamil cause" in Sri Lanka, particularly during and in the aftermath of the Sri Lankan Civil War. The political pressure exerted by Tamil Nadu, especially after the conclusion of the conflict in 2009, has historically impacted the federal government's approach to Sri Lanka. This has resulted in India advocating for reconciliation, development, and substantial devolution of power to the Sri Lankan Tamils. While the promotion of Tamil rights continues to be a fundamental issue, Tamil Nadu's paradiplomacy has expanded to encompass economic, educational, and cultural exchanges as the state has become progressively engaged in drawing foreign investment, with its chief ministers undertaking trips abroad that focus on investment. Therefore, a similar model can be adopted in the case of Assam too, whereby its potential will be fully utilised as a major transit hub for carrying out subnational diplomacy.

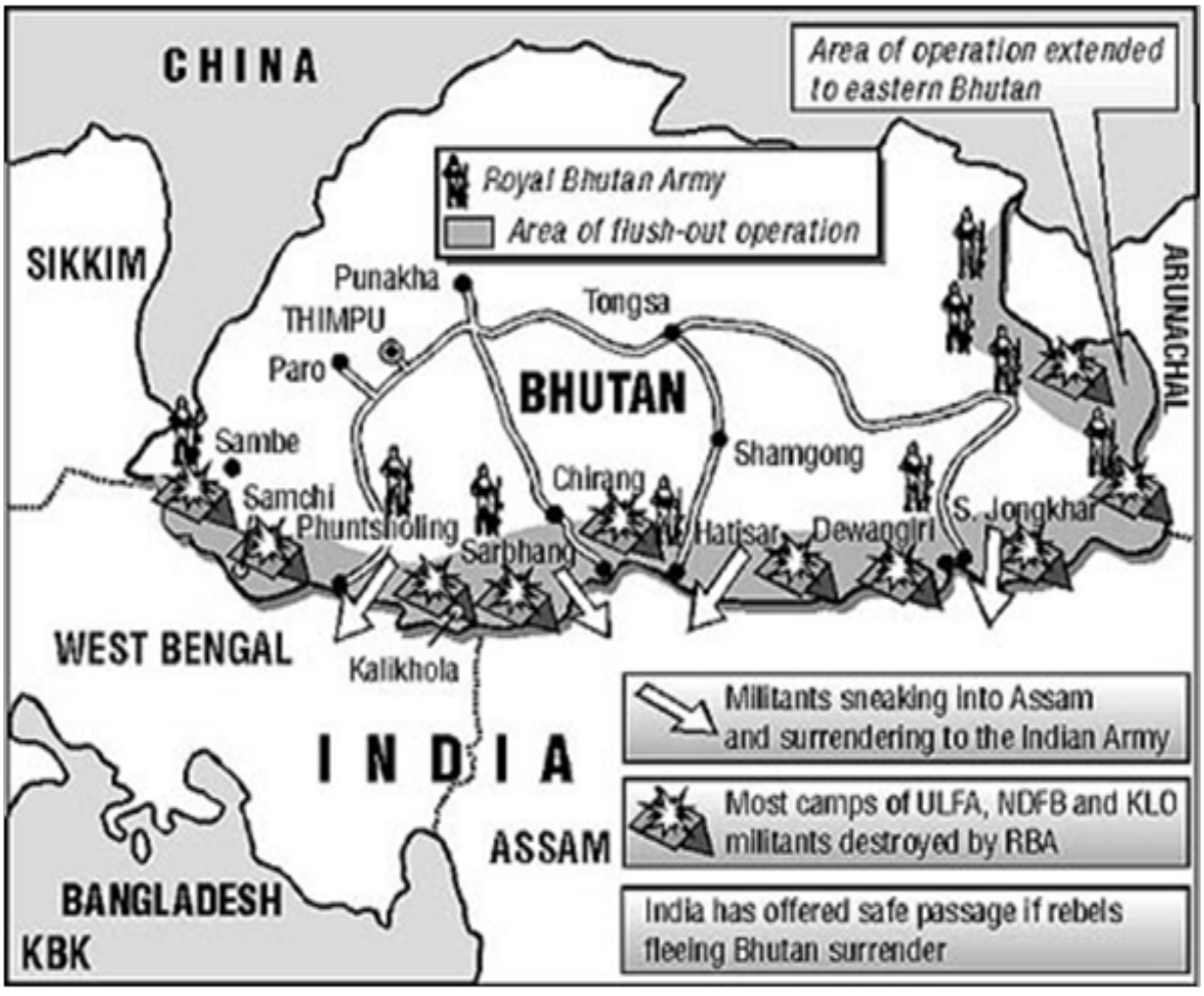
## Past Baggage: Countering Insurgency on the Assam–Bhutan Border

In 1990, India initiated Operations Rhino and Bajrang targeting separatist factions in Assam. Under persistent pressure, Assam-based militants moved their camps to Bhutan. By 1996, the Bhutanese government became aware of numerous camps established along its southern border with India. These camps were created by four Assamese separatist groups: the ULFA, NDFB, Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF), and Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO). Additionally, the

camps sheltered separatists from the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF). The purpose of these camps was to train militants and store equipment, while the dense jungles of the area facilitated the militants' ability to launch attacks into Indian territory.

Subsequently, India applied diplomatic pressure on Bhutan, offering assistance in expelling the rebel groups from its territory. Initially, the Bhutanese government sought a peaceful resolution, engaging in dialogue with the militant organisations in 1998. Five rounds of discussions were conducted with ULFA, three with NDFB, while KLO disregarded all invitations from the government. In June 2001, ULFA consented to dismantle four of its camps; however, the Bhutanese authorities soon discovered that the camps had merely been relocated.

KLO was also reportedly involved in the establishment of the Bhutan Tiger Force, the military branch of the Communist Party of Bhutan (Marxist–Leninist–Maoist), in collaboration with Nepalese Maoists. Furthermore, KLO, along with ULFA and NDFB, was allegedly implicated in the formation of another militant group, the Bhutan Gorkha Liberation Front, composed of ethnic Nepalese immigrants and refugees from southern Bhutan. This development reinforced the Bhutanese government's determination to proceed with the operation.



## Current State Of India-Bhutan Engagements

The diplomatic ties between the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan and the Republic of India have historically been strong, with both nations enjoying a "special relationship, which designates Bhutan as a protected state, though not a protectorate, of India. India continues to exert significant influence over Bhutan's foreign policy, defence, and trade. Bhutan stands as the primary recipient of India's foreign assistance.

### A. Economic Engagements

India has consistently been the largest and most significant trading partner for Bhutan since the inception of development plans. In 2020, the total trade with India was recorded at Nu (Ngultrum- Bhutanese Currency) - 94.89 billion (including electricity), representing 82% of Bhutan's overall external trade. When excluding electricity, the figure was Nu—67.18 billion, which constituted 77% of Bhutan's total trade. The total imports from India accounted for 87% of the overall import value, regardless of whether the electricity trade is included. Exports to India represent the India-Bhutan Agreement on Trade, Commerce and Transit, initially signed in 1972 and most recently revised for the fifth time in 2016, which establishes a free trade framework between the two nations. This Agreement also facilitates duty-free transit for Bhutanese exports to third countries. Bilateral trade is conducted in Indian Rupees, which is equivalent to the Bhutanese Ngultrum.

India serves as Bhutan's primary trade partner, functioning both as a source of imports and a destination for exports. Since 2014, trade between India and Bhutan has more than tripled—from USD 484 million in 2014–15 to USD 1,777.44 million in 2024–25, representing over

80% of Bhutan's total trade.t 90% of total exports when including electricity and 77% when excluding it.

## B. Military Ties: India As A Net Security Provider

One of the key aspects of India-Bhutan relations has been the prominence of India as the net security provider in the region. New Delhi has been providing training to Bhutanese security personnel through the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT). India has provided support to Bhutan in developing border infrastructure, including roads and bridges, to strengthen its defence capabilities. The majority of roads in Bhutan have been constructed by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) under Project 'DANTAK'.

## C. The Geopolitical Shadow: Dragon Behind

Bhutan's geographical position renders it a strategic buffer state for India, and its military partnership contributes to stability in the Eastern Himalayan region. The 2017 Doklam standoff underscored this relationship, as Bhutan backed India's stance against Chinese incursions in a territory it claimed. A news report from 2024 also claimed that China has established a minimum of 22 villages and settlements in areas historically regarded as part of Bhutan over the last eight years, with eight of these villages built near the strategically significant Doklam plateau since 2020. The eight villages located in Bhutan's western region near Doklam are strategically situated either within or on ridges that overlook a valley claimed by China, many positioned in proximity to Chinese military outposts or bases, according to the report. Among the 22 villages noted by observers and researchers, the largest is Jiwu, which is reportedly built on a traditional Bhutanese pastureland known as Tshethangkha, also located within the western sector.

## D. Assam As A Strategic Guard

The geographical location of Assam at the juncture of China and Bhutan is an important aspect from the security perspective of the region. The 2017 Doklam standoff further reignited the strategic vulnerabilities of the region, whose physical connection to the mainland revolves around the ' Chicken's Neck' or the ' Siliguri Corridor'.

The revised version of the Indo-Bhutan Treaty (1949) in 2007 further allowed Bhutan to independently procure arms, as long as it does not jeopardise India's national security. Furthermore, both nations committed to collaborating on security issues and ensuring that their territories are not utilised for actions detrimental to each other's national interests. The territory of Assam thus becomes an important factor from the security perspective, thereby making it one of the major frontiers to keep extra-territorial powers out of the region from intervening in India-Bhutan ties. The recent infrastructure push from the defence and security perspectives, such as the construction of the Bogibeel bridge and the Dhola Sadiya bridges in Assam, is seen by many analysts as a strategic move for smooth logistical movement in case of a future security/ geopolitical crisis. The same goes for the Sela Pass Tunnel in the state of

Arunachal Pradesh near the Bhutanese border.

It's noteworthy to mention here that Assam is currently working on the establishment of a defence corridor, with the state government actively collaborating with the central government to improve national security and promote economic development. In May 2025, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma held discussions with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh regarding the proposal, emphasising how the project aligns with the 'Make in India' initiative and its capacity to generate economic opportunities in the Northeast. Additionally, the state has developed the Assam Aerospace and Defence Manufacturing Policy 2025 to attract investments and has been in negotiations with the Defence Ministry to create the corridor.

## E. Hydrological & Ecological Cooperation

The Hydrological cooperation between India and Bhutan in hydropower commenced with the Chukha project, which has a capacity of 336 MW and was developed between 1986 and 1988. Following this, additional joint ventures were established, including Kurichhu (60 MW, 2001–2002), Tala

(1020 MW, 2007), and Mangdechhu (720 MW, 2019). At present, the Punatsangchhu-I (1200 MW, 2025), Punatsangchhu-II (1020 MW, 2025), and Kholongchhu (600 MW, 2025) projects are in the construction phase. A recent Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Druk Green Power and the Adani Group regarding the Wangchu project (570 MW) indicates a resurgence in activity, with plans for both run-of-the-river and reservoir designs, and a projected start date around 2027. From the paradiplomatic perspective, the state of Assam is all set to receive 174 MW from Bhutan Assam as Bhutan plans to synchronise two units of the Punatsangchhu II Hydroelectric Project, where both New Delhi and Thimphu are collaborating to ensure the commissioning of all six units of the Punatsangchhu II HEP by next year.

Another major feature along the Indo-Bhutan border in Assam has been the presence of transboundary ecological hotspots. Assam and Bhutan share a longstanding ecological collaboration aimed at transboundary conservation, sustainable resource management, and tackling common environmental issues. This partnership is especially crucial given the adjacent ecosystems, most notably the Manas National Park, which spans the border.

One of the major initiatives between Assam and Bhutan has been the Transboundary Manas Conservation Area (TraMCA), which serves as a prominent illustration of ecological collaboration, having been established in 2011 as a landscape-level initiative. The TraMCA connects India's Manas National Park with Bhutan's Royal Manas National Park. The management teams of both parks work together on joint patrols, share intelligence to fight poaching, and engage in coordinated monitoring of wildlife and their habitats. This partnership has also led to a remarkable rise in the tiger population across the landscape, culminating in a conservation award received in 2020. Data from 2018 indicated that the number of tigers had more than doubled since 2010.

## The Role Of Assam in the Paradiplomatic Engagements

### ► Assam CM's Visit To Bhutan

In December 2024, Chief Minister of Assam, Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma, on a state visit to Bhutan, signalled a ray of hope in strengthening the Indo-Bhutan ties. This visit came amid the 117th National Day celebrations at the invitation of Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk. This can be seen as a major paradigm shift in India's Neighbourhood First Policy as a CM of a state played a significant role in acting

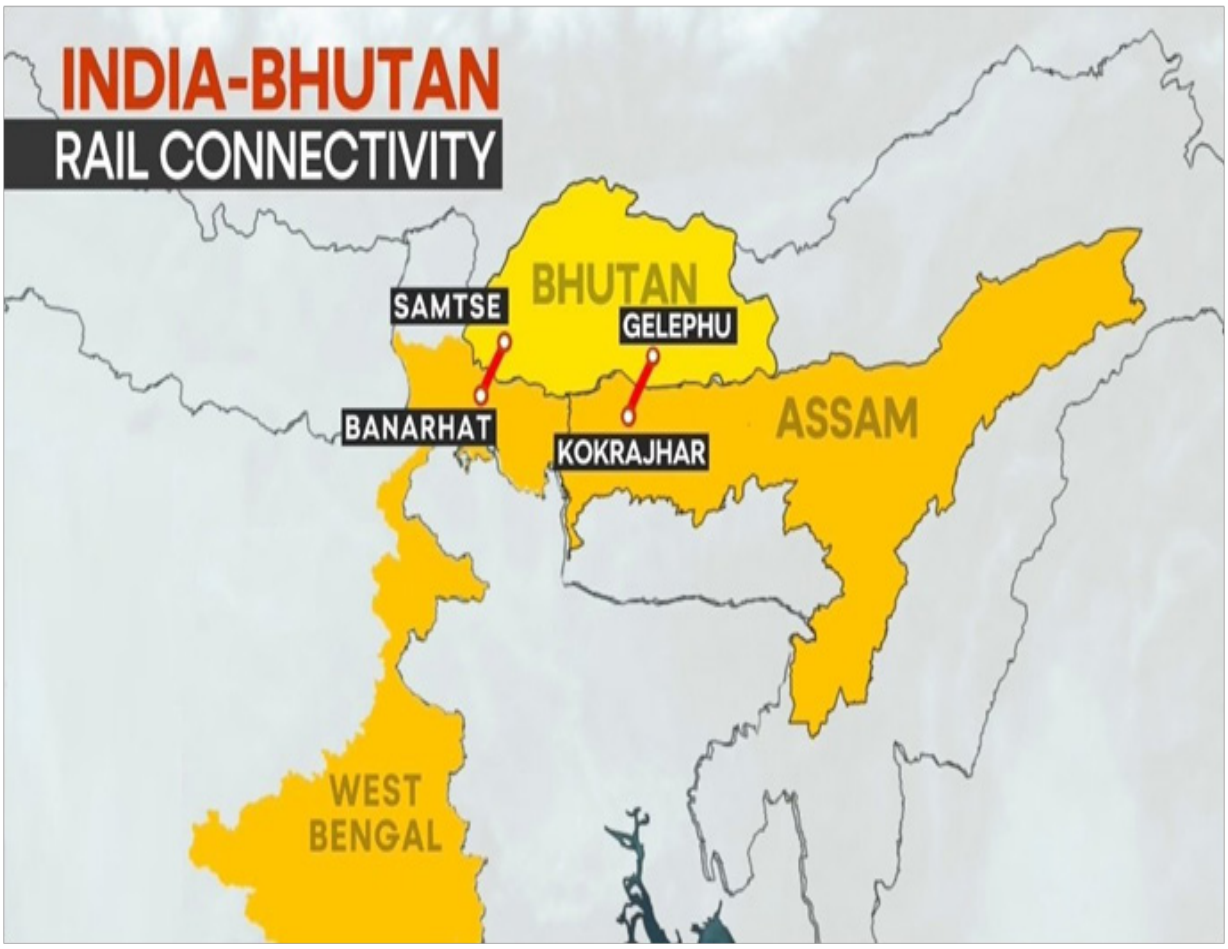
as the representative of New Delhi, thereby bringing Assam and Bhutan closer for a robust paradiplomatic engagement.

### ► Bhutan King's Visit To Assam

In April this year, Bhutan's king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, paid a state visit to Assam, thereby signalling a reciprocity with Sarma's visit to Bhutan in December 2024. The king's visit primarily focused on visiting the Jogighopa Multi-Modal Logistics Park (MMLP). This particular project is a strategic and transformative infrastructural initiative whose objective is to boost cross-border trade and commerce between the two countries, with Assam at its crossroads. The MMLP Project further aims to boost connectivity by linking it with Bhutan's emerging Gelephu mindfulness city. At present, the primary check gates along the Assam-Bhutan border are Darranga, which features the newly established Immigration Check Post, and Samdrup Jongkhar, which hosts an ICP in Bhutan. Additional gates that have recently reopened include those located in Dadgiri, Gelephu, Namlang, Panbang, and Samrang.

## Bhutan–Assam Rail Link: A New Corridor of Connectivity

In a recent move, New Delhi launched its first set of two rail connectivity projects, which will run from Gelephu in Bhutan to Kokrajhar in Assam. The other set is expected to run between Bhutan's Samtse and Banarahat in West Bengal. This initiative bears the cost of Rs 4,033 crore and is a consequence of the MoU, which was signed during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bhutan in March 2024.




It needs to be mentioned here that the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) is a planned Specialised Administrative Region in southern Bhutan, a brainchild of the Bhutanese king. This ambitious initiative is a unique creation of its own kind, as it seeks to offer an alternative path of development with traditional Bhutanese values at its core, focusing on spirituality and harmony. Its location will further prove to be a harbinger of robust economic development and people-to-people connections, where Assam is expected to get its due share of development, too.

## Policy Roadmap for Deepening India–Bhutan Ties Through Assam

To deepen and sustain India–Bhutan relations with Assam as the pivotal link, a structured and multi-layered policy framework is required. The following recommendations build upon existing developments discussed in the paper, integrating economic, strategic, ecological, and cultural dimensions into a coherent subnational diplomatic roadmap.

### A. Institutional Frameworks for Paradiplomacy

- Creation of an Assam–Bhutan Affairs Department under the Government of Assam should be prioritised. Mirroring the Department of Act East Policy, this body would exclusively coordinate bilateral projects, trade facilitation, tourism, and cultural exchanges

with Bhutan.

- This department can act as a liaison node between the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Royal Government of Bhutan, and Assam's local administrations, ensuring both policy alignment and operational agility.

## B. Strengthening Bhutan's Diplomatic Presence in Assam

- The Consulate General of Bhutan in Guwahati should be transformed into an active hub for multi-sectoral cooperation. This can include trade fairs, educational collaborations, and think tank exchanges, anchoring Guwahati as the permanent corridor for India–Bhutan engagement in the Northeast.
- A biannual Assam–Bhutan Dialogue could be instituted, inviting officials, entrepreneurs, academics, and civil society from both sides to discuss connectivity, ecology, and culture.

## C. Integrating BIMSTEC and Subregional Platforms

- Assam should host a Mini-Secretariat of BIMSTEC in Guwahati or Kokrajhar, reflecting its strategic position between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Such an office can coordinate cross-border projects linking India, Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh under BIMSTEC's regional connectivity and trade agenda.
- This would dovetail with India's Act East Policy, positioning Assam as both a physical and diplomatic gateway for subregional economic corridors.

## D. Economic Corridors and Connectivity Projects

- Fast-track the implementation of the Gelephu–Kokrajhar Railway Project and complementary logistics infrastructure at Jogighopa, ensuring smooth multimodal connectivity for Bhutanese goods to Indian ports.
- Integrate the Gelephu Mindfulness City with Assam's economic ecosystem through joint tourism, healthcare, and spiritual retreats, aligning Bhutan's spiritual economy model with Assam's cultural tourism potential.
- Establish cross-border industrial clusters in sectors like agro-processing, handicrafts, and renewable energy along border districts (Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar).

## E. Defence and Security Cooperation

- Institutionalise coordination between Assam Police, Indian Armed Forces, and the Royal Bhutan Army for intelligence-sharing and anti-insurgency efforts along the border.
- Support Assam's proposal for a Defence Industrial Corridor, aligning it with Bhutan's infrastructural needs and India's "Make in India"

defence manufacturing vision.

### F. Ecological and Hydropower Partnerships

- Deepen collaboration on transboundary river management and conservation, especially within the Manas biosphere. Joint ecological monitoring, community-based conservation programs, and sustainable tourism initiatives should be scaled up under TraMCA.
- Expand hydropower cooperation to ensure equitable power sharing and green energy trading, integrating Assam's grid infrastructure with Bhutan's generation capacity.

### G. Cultural and Educational Cooperation

- Facilitate student and researcher exchange programs between Gauhati University, Bodoland University, and Bhutanese institutions, focusing on Himalayan studies, sustainable development, and Buddhist philosophy.
- Establish an Annual Indo-Bhutan Cultural Week in Guwahati and Thimphu alternately, celebrating shared heritage through literature, art, and folklore.

### H. Administrative and Policy Coordination

- A dedicated Subnational Diplomacy Cell under DoNER can oversee and mentor state-level paradiplomatic engagements, with Assam as the model state.
- Develop a joint monitoring dashboard (digital platform) to track bilateral projects, investments, and cultural programs, ensuring transparency and continuity across political tenures.

## Conclusion

The state of Assam serves as a significant transit hub from a strategic standpoint in the context of India-Bhutan relations. The dynamics of the India-Bhutan border in Assam reflect a combination of harmonious coexistence, significant trade and economic interaction, and strategic importance, especially as Assam acts as a crucial gateway for Bhutanese trade and development projects.

While the border continues to be peaceful and is based on long-standing socio-cultural ties, it is also experiencing a shift towards commercial relationships and possesses strategic significance for regional connectivity and development. It can further prove to be a major arena of India's Act East Policy, thereby bringing in the Himalayan South Asian region closer to South East Asia through Assam.

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