



India's North-Eastern Region

Insurgency, Economic Development
and Linkages with South-East Asia

Nishchal N. Pandey

MANOHAR

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Institute of South Asian Studies

INDIA'S NORTH-EASTERN REGION

Insurgency, Economic Development and Linkages
with South-East Asia



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India's North-Eastern Region

*Insurgency, Economic Development
and Linkages with South-East Asia*

NISHCHAL N. PANDEY

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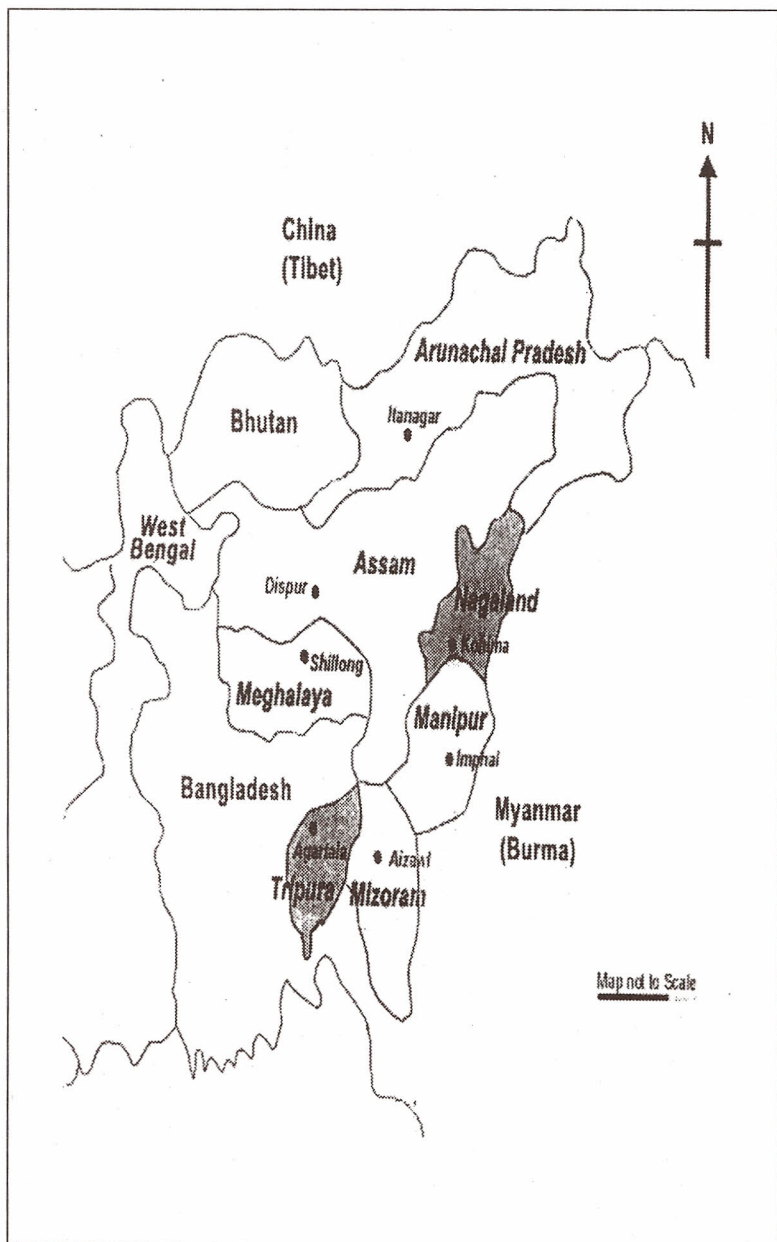
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Map of North-East India.

Foreword

Situated as a land-bridge between the two regions of South Asia and South-East Asia, the north-eastern states of India share a long history of kinship, religious, cultural and economic ties with parts of South-East Asia. The region is an inter-section of 200 different ethnic and tribal groups, with linguistic and ethnic similarities with communities in South-East Asia. Centuries ago, north-east India was populated from migrations from Myanmar, Mongolia, Tibet, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand.

Not much is known about this region. The few publications that have appeared recently on the region have focused mainly on security issues. As the Indian government's policy *vis-à-vis* the region moves gradually from the politico-strategic and security specific to a more pragmatic approach of building economic engagements, it is important to develop deeper understanding of the political, economic and infrastructure of the north-east Indian states and how these have affected the growth and development of the region. As the region straddles South and South-East Asia, it is also pertinent to understand how it has served as a link between the two regions. This study is essentially the outcome of a fruitful visiting fellowship offered by the Institute of South Asian Studies to Nishchal N. Pandey, a well-known strategic analyst from Nepal.

The volume examines the rich mineral resources, large agriculture bases, tea, timber and oil production, cheap labour force, vast tourism potential of the seven north-eastern states. The analysis points to a general climate favourable for large-scale industrialization. Strategically, these states have the ability to offer market access to such South Asian countries as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, along with the rest of India into Myanmar, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR of China), Thailand and other countries of South-East Asia. However, geo-political isolation, poor infrastructure, massive unemployment and decades of neglect by the central

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government has resulted in the emergence of many insurgents, resulting in bloody and long-standing conflicts, and contributing to the frustrations of the common people. Following a preliminary focus on the facts and figures of each of the seven states of the region in areas such as education, industry and natural resource, the book proceeds to explore the spectra of violence and conflict in four states of Nagaland, Assam, Manipur and Tripura which have been classified as 'low-intensity war-like situations'.

The volume then focuses, at length, on tourism potentiality, trade (especially border trade) and other commercial prospects with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and the TAR of China. The author stresses on the need to foster and nurture the bilateral relations with these countries to aid in the development of the north-east and in ensuring the success of India's 'Look East' policy.

In the concluding pages, India's dialogue partnership with the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, membership at the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, the Asia Cooperation Dialogue, Mekong Ganga Cooperation, the South Asian Free Trade Area and the Kunming Initiative are examined in the context of the north-east's central position in the cultural and ecological crossroads of South and South-East Asia and importance of the region's economic development in ensuring a win-win situation for both India and South-East Asia.

Much needs to and can be done in the region to bring about a more cooperative environment in north-east India. South-East Asia and India's north-east region share a common geography and a common destiny. The resolution of the problems and issues in north-east India would not only pave the way for closer intra-relations but will also strengthen ties between the north-east region and South-East Asia.

Acting Director
Institute of South Asian Studies

TAN TAI YONG

*Introduction**

North-east India, which comprises the seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura,¹ has known little else besides violence and underdevelopment in the past sixty years. The political and ethnic conflagrations, insurgencies, inter-state disputes, hostilities between the tribes and migrants, arms running and drug smuggling in the region have as their backdrop a matching picture of abysmal underdevelopment. The unending insurgencies and violent secessionist movements in almost all these states have turned this area of little less than 2,60,000 sq km into one of the most dangerous and volatile regions in South Asia—along with Jammu and Kashmir—with the result that there has been hardly any research on the enormous economic potentials of the region in terms of trade and investment, raw material production and export. No less important is its huge tourist potential and the fact that the region provides a transit route which could become a bridge to South-East Asian countries.

The region, with an area of about 2,55,168 sq km, represents 7.9 per cent of India's geographical area, is home to 3.8 per cent of the country's total population. The north-eastern states are rich

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in biodiversity and have a mix of various ethno-cultural and religious groups. It is, in the main, the issues of untapped potential due to a lack of infrastructure, basic location and resource deficits and, importantly, a long misunderstanding between the centre and the seven states that are squarely to blame for the frustrations of the common folk, which are led by ethnic groups and miscreants of every variety who fuel and exploit these bloody and long-standing conflicts. Geopolitical isolation, poor infrastructure and loss of economic opportunity have further fuelled these insurgencies. Most of these states possess rich mineral resources, large arable farms, tea, timber and oil production, a cheap labour force and a general climate which is conducive for large-scale industrialization. They are strategically placed for direct market access by South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and the rest of India into Myanmar, Tibet, Thailand and the rest of South-East Asia. Substantial economic benefits could arise from increased subregional trade with these countries. However, the development of this region is dependent on the optimal utilization of its resources. This can only be done by facilitating enhanced trade which, in turn, depends on infrastructure development such as roads and railways, power and communications.

The history of the north-east's isolation from the rest of India and, indeed, with the rest of South Asia can be traced back to the colonial period. Through the creation of backward tracts, excluded areas and partially excluded areas, the British had drawn an Inner Line marking the extent of revenue administration beyond which the tribal people of the region were left to manage their own affairs. Independent India followed the same mistaken policy. In 1947, the region was split up into smaller states and autonomous regions. These divisions were made to accommodate the wishes of the tribes and ethnic groups wanting to assert their subnational identity. Many of these divisions were done to appease one or the other insurgent groups, without doing the necessary research to understand and assess the implications of such divisions for the wider polity, economy, security and inter-cultural balance of the

INTRODUCTION

TABLE 1: POPULATION GROWTH AND DENSITY
IN THE NORTH-EAST

State	Area (sq km)	Population		Decadal Growth Rate (1991–2001)
		1991	2001	
Arunachal Pradesh	83,743	8,64,558	10,91,117	26.21
Assam	78,438	2,24,14,322	2,66,38,407	18.85
Manipur	22,327	18,37,149	23,88,634	30.02
Meghalaya	22,429	17,74,778	23,06,069	29.94
Mizoram	21,087	6,89,756	8,91,058	29.18
Nagaland	16,579	12,09,546	19,88,636	64.41
Tripura	10,492	27,57,205	31,91,186	15.74

region. Despite these measures, the north-east continues to rank far below the national average in terms of per capita income and other standard development indicators such as power, road lengths, hospital beds, drinking water and sanitation.

POPULATION

The north-east is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in Asia, and each state is also culturally and traditionally distinct from the others. The demographic position has greatly altered over the years, increasing the population pressure on urban areas. At the same time, the tribal zones continue to be flooded by an uncontrollable influx of migrants from Bangladesh, Bihar and some other states in India (see Table 1).

ECONOMY

All the states are categorized as 'special category states' whose development plans are almost entirely financed by the centre on the basis of 90 per cent grants and 10 per cent loans. But despite these autonomy packages and economic concessions, the violence has shown no signs of subsiding, or the states' income levels increased so as to raise agricultural yields, initiate industrialization, launch

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TABLE 2: STATE-WISE NET STATE DOMESTIC PRODUCT
(AT CURRENT PRICES)

State	2000-1	2001-2	2002-3	2003-4	2004-5
Arunachal Pradesh	1,595	1,729	1,896	2,160	2,246
Assam	28,262	30,674	33,516	35,700	38,624
Manipur	2,517	2,947	3,054	3,323	3,680
Meghalaya	3,338	3,699	3,976	4,349	4,754
Mizoram	1,635	1,777	2,027	NA	NA
Nagaland	3,427	3,864	4,458	NA	NA
Tripura	4,869	5,559	6,044	6,728	NA
Total of 7 states	45,643	50,249	54,971	NA	NA

Source: Directorate of Economics & Statistics of respective state governments.

massive rural electrification and poverty alleviation schemes which would certainly have weakened the insurgents' ability to rule over the hearts and minds of the people. To implement such schemes much would depend on Bangladesh providing easy transit facilities to and from the Indian heartland but that can only happen when both countries shed their rigid, military security mindset and pay more attention to ensuring economic benefits for the broader human security of their citizenry.

In today's era of globalization and liberalization, there has been a turnaround in the development paradigm from the 'top down' to the 'bottom up' approach, from people around development to development around people, from emphasis on the growth factor to concern for sustainable development.² Although the net state domestic product at current prices does show an annual increment, according to some estimates, 36 per cent of the people in the north-east live below the poverty line. In Meghalaya, for instance, 50-60 per cent of the households are living on less than 1 dollar a day (see Table 2).

The per capita income of the north-east region (NER) states is Rs. 12,407 which is well below the national average is Rs 17,978 (2001-2).

INTRODUCTION

The share of the secondary sector in the GDP at 15 per cent is much lower than the national average of 23.7 per cent (1999–2000). All the states in the NER have much higher levels of the population being below the poverty line (35.13 per cent) as compared to the national average of 26.1 per cent (2000–1).

The share of urban population in the NER is 14.6 per cent. The national average in this regard is 27.8 per cent (2001 Census). The region has one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country, with an unemployment rate close to 12 per cent, against the national average of 7.7 per cent (1999–2000). It also has one of the lowest gross per capita industrial outputs at around Rs. 3,313 (in Assam), which is much below the national average of Rs. 9,111 (2000–1). The average per capita domestic electricity consumption in the NER works out to 20.4 kwh against the national average of 75.2 kwh (1999–2000). The per capita credit-deposit ratio works out to 35 per cent in the NER against the national average of 66 per cent (2004–5).

AGRICULTURE

Primarily an agricultural area where most of the population is dependent on farm yield, the region's food production has for a long time been negatively affected by dependence on the vagaries of the monsoon rain, the lack of irrigation facilities, the adverse impact of the recent agricultural changes caused by population growth, the migration and health of the rural people in the region, crop diversification; land size and productivity, the diminishing returns from land use and land ceiling. *Jhum* cultivation, or the 'slash and burn shift', is the general agricultural practice in the region, especially in the hill tracts and is a primary feature of the agricultural scene in the north-east. The practice is to clear an area of verdant land by razing the natural vegetation to the ground, remove the debris, plough the land and sow crop seeds. Much of the food consumed in the states has to be imported. There is a realization now that the land tenure system among the tribals is responsible for the slow

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TABLE 3: FOOD GRAIN PRODUCTION IN
NER AS IN 2001

(in '000 tonnes)

Rice	Maize	Wheat	Millet	Jowar	Bajra	Ragi	Barley	Total food grain
5,464.10	237.00	107.00	38.90	1.70	1.70	3.60	6.40	5,860.4

Source: Draft Report of the Task Force on Development Initiatives for the NER, September 2005.

growth in agriculture. Nevertheless, by virtue of its diverse agro-climatic conditions, varied soil types and abundant rainfall, the region does have the promise of becoming an excellent sourcing point for high value and value added agro-based products for on-ward marketing, both within the country and abroad (Table 3).

INDUSTRY

The low level of industrial growth in the region can be attributed to a whole host of factors, such as the law and order situation, the small size of the local market, poor market access, poor infrastruc-

TABLE 4: LARGE AND MEDIUM INDUSTRIES IN NER
(AS IN 1999)

State	No. of units in 1999	Percentage
Arunachal Pradesh	17	9.55
Assam	129	72.48
Manipur	12	6.74
Meghalaya	10	5.62
Mizoram	1	0.56
Nagaland	7	3.93
Tripura	2	1.12
Total	178	100

Source: Draft Report of the Task Force on Development Initiatives for the NER, September. 2005.

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TABLE 5: TEA INDUSTRY OF THE NER

(in million kg)

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Production	846	854	826	857	830
Imports	14	17	22	7	25
Exports	207	183	201	173	190
Consumption	653	673	685	697	710

Source: Report of the Committee on Financial Sector Plan for NER, March 2006.

ture, etc. The central government has been trying to attract investors to the area and with this in mind, growth centres and IIDCs have been made tax-free zones (both income and excise) for ten years. Certain industries with a high-growth potential have also been given a tax-free status irrespective of their location in the north-east (Table 4).

The north-east is one of the world's largest tea-growing regions, with a 16 per cent share of the total tea produced in the world: it is also the largest producer and exporter of tea in India (55 per cent share). The subtropical climate of the region is favourable to tea cultivation. The tea industry employs nearly 7.4 lakh labourers and supports 9.4 lakh dependents.³ Being a labour-intensive industry, the tea industry requires a large number of workers right from the nursery stage to the final dispatch of the product for sale in the market. It is also one of the largest employers of women amongst organized industries in India, as women constitute nearly 51 per cent of the total tea workforce (Table 5).

EDUCATION

The literacy rate of the north-east is 68.4 per cent, which is higher than the national average. Arunachal Pradesh has the lowest literacy rate, 54.3 per cent, while Mizoram has the highest at 88.8 per cent (see Table 6). New educational development initiatives in the region (Table 7) have been aimed at bridging the gaps in basic minimum services, enhancing teacher training facilities,

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TABLE 6: LITERACY RATE IN THE
NORTH-EASTERN STATES

State	Literacy rate in %
Arunachal Pradesh	54.3
Nagaland	66.6
Manipur	70.5
Mizoram	88.8
Tripura	73.2
Meghalaya	62.6
Assam	63.3

Source: Census of India 2001.

TABLE 7: NUMBER OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Institutes	No.
Prim + UP	56,677
Sec + HS	7,716
Arts/Sc. College	497
Engg.	6
Medical	6
Universities	13
Polytechnics	18
ITIs	49
IIT	1

Source: Draft Report of the Task Force on Development Initiatives for the NER, September 2005.

encouraging tribal education and preparing state-specific holistic plans. But the overarching challenge has been to give employment to the educated youth.

NATURAL RESOURCES

The region is rich in biodiversity, hydroelectric potential, oil, gas, coal and limestone and forest wealth (Table 8). An Exim Bank study, titled *Prospects for Exports of Handicrafts from North Eastern Region (NER) of India* says that India's NER is a rich repository of

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arts and crafts which are eco-friendly and unique in craftsmanship, and a utility which has the potential to make the region a leader in handicraft exports.⁴ It is also one of the most geographically varied regions in India. Assam occupies the blooming lowlands of the Brahmaputra valley, Arunachal Pradesh occupies the densely forested but thinly populated foothills of the Himalayas, and is one of the major tourist attractions for Buddhists. Meghalaya, with its pine-clad hills and lakes, is famous as the wettest region of the world. Nagaland has a rich war history which can be of interest to researchers of history and strategic studies. The other three states— Manipur, known as the 'land of jewels', Mizoram and Tripura— comprise a fascinating area consisting of green valleys and lush hills with a variety of flora and fauna.⁵ However, despite a vast spread of cane and bamboo fields and other raw materials for handicraft items (woodcarving, stone carving, basketry, cane and bamboo work, pottery, hand embroidery, hand-block printing, artistic textiles, brass and metal craft and jute craft), exports of these items from the region have been insignificant.

TABLE 8: NER's NATURAL RESOURCES

Agro-forestry	<p>Accounts for 26 per cent of the forest cover of India.</p> <p>Largest producer of bamboo.</p> <p>World's single largest tea growing region (16 per cent share).</p> <p>Largest producer 55 per cent share and exporter of tea in India.</p> <p>Producer of premium quality jute and silk.</p> <p>Horticulture and herbal resources.</p>
Minerals	<p>India's oldest and major petroleum and natural gas source, with shares of 16 per cent and 8 per cent respectively of total production.</p> <p>Other major mineral resources include coal, limestone, dolomite.</p>
Hydel power	<p>The region is assessed to have the largest hydel power generation potential in the country (60,000 MW).</p>
River/waterways	<p>The river network provides cost effective transport for the movement of goods, notably to neighbouring countries and to Indian ports like Kolkata and Haldia.</p>

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Most analyses tend to point at the backwardness of the region as the root cause for the ethnic and tribal turmoil. However, the real question is: has the continuing underdevelopment contributed to the insecurity or is this lack of security itself standing in the way of development? As one of the emerging military and economic powers of Asia, India could make use of its vast resources and security services to put in place the vital infrastructure required to launching the north-eastern states as a corridor for effective market access and enhanced trade. The state governments too could develop their own internal revenue resources instead of relying entirely on central grants to meet their non-plan expenditures. Since the colonial days the region has been an exporter of raw materials. This can be developed as a strong bridge between South Asia and the South-East Asian countries as envisaged by the 'Look East Policy'.

The present study will investigate some of the crucial issues concerning the various aspects of security and economic development in India's north-eastern states and their wider implications for the region. The factors that have led to the present scenario of insecurity and underdevelopment will be closely examined. The study will take into account not only the British and post-colonial policies, but also the current administrative and financial arrangements, as well as the political reorganization of the region and how this has affected inter- and intra-regional connectivity, especially the flow of goods, services, technologies and capital.

Political power and economic resources have become the principal issues of dispute among the various ethnic groups in the north-east. The inequitable distribution of resources, wealth and jobs has firmly planted socio-political conflict in the region, coupled with the fact that certain insurgent groups want total separation of their respective states from the rest of India. This research will inspect how much the above factor(s) have led to the existing gloomy scenario, that has disallowed the state governments from meeting the challenges of poverty, disease, natural disasters and insurgency. The reasons for the states' failure—despite the increase

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in budgetary allocations—to facilitate infrastructural growth, attract outside investment, deepen the pro-poor orientation of the economic processes and curb violence will be discussed at length. Border trade and overall relations with neighbouring Bangladesh, Myanmar, Tibet Autonomous Region (China), Bhutan, the South-East Asian countries along with regional and subregional cooperation endeavours will be scrutinized in Chapter 3 the context of broadening and deepening the region's connectivity and interaction in a much wider periphery. Some suggestions will be given in Chapter 4 on how these links can be cemented so as to concretize the benefits accruing there from.

This study will also discuss whether ethnic or separatist insurgencies can be brought to heel through equitable economic development and industrialization in the north-eastern states. It will examine to what extent the turmoil in the states has impeded economic growth and, as a corollary, the extent to which these insurgencies have been fuelled by underdevelopment—that is—lack of infrastructure and the states' inability to meet the basic needs of the people.

Virtually all the seven states have been plagued by insurgencies of one kind or another, be they ethnic, casteist, separatist or a combination thereof. This study will concentrate on Nagaland, Assam, Manipur and Tripura, where the situation can be classified as 'low-intensity wars' and frame an illustration of their connections with other armed re-bellions in the region, as well as why measures to accommodate the people's demands have been ineffective.

NOTES

1. A bill was introduced in the Rajya Sabha (India's Upper House) in 1998 to include Sikkim in the north-east Council after which the increasing practice to include Sikkim in the 'north-east region'. However, this study shall stay with the original description of the region as being comprised of seven states.

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2. M.C. Behera, 2004.
3. While most of the tea labourers are traditional farmers, there are also roughly ten thousand first-generation tea planters in Assam known as 'Small Tea Growers', mostly concentrated in ten districts of Upper Assam. They contribute 15 per cent of the state's tea produce.
4. 'North-east a potential handicraft export major', Exim. http://www.domain-b.com/finance/banks/exim_bank/20051025_handicrafts.html (accessed on 12 January 2007).
5. Resource Centre for Indian Language Technology Solutions: http://www.iitg.ernet.in/rcilts.n_e.html (accessed on 12 December 2006).

The seven north-eastern states of India during the last six decades of isolation have braved enormous difficulties. Beginning with the impact of partition, liberation of Bangladesh, influx of people from outside and continuing conflicts based on caste, tribe, language, race and religion, there is also a flip-side to the bad governance and economic woes of the people of this region. Their geographical and cultural proximity with the South-East Asian countries make the area to be of enormous economic importance in the future.

This book argues how the region's trade with various neighbouring countries if facilitated and encouraged, and if efforts are made for greater convenience in international trade through the simplification of economic activities such as movement of goods, people and services across borders, the region can blossom to its full potential. But for this, the Centre has first to realize the urgent need to 'open-up' than to 'lock up' the area in order to provide 'security' to the people. One of the first studies of its kind, this volume highlights in detail the north-east's central position *vis-à-vis* Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the rest of South-East Asia.

Nishchal N. Pandey is a well-known academic and strategic analyst of Nepal. He was previously Executive Director of the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA), Kathmandu. After 8 years at the IFA, he was Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore. Currently he is a Consultant and an Honorary Fellow at the ISAS where he completed the present volume. Author of several books, he contributes regularly to news magazines and journals. He can be contacted at nina@ntc.net.np.

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