

MSME Sector in North-East India: Opportunities, Challenges, and State-Wise Growth Patterns

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Abstract

A major contributor to the creation of jobs, industrial expansion, and regional development, the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector is essential to North-East India's economic progress. This study looks at the MSME sector's growth trends by state in the Northeast, as well as its potential and problems. The report emphasizes the sector's potential as a catalyst for sustainable economic growth by examining statistics on the quantity of units, production output, investment trends, and employment creation. In North-East India, MSMEs encounter a number of obstacles despite financial assistance and regulatory changes, such as market limitations, restricted loan availability, and infrastructure impediments. This study examines policy suggestions to increase the sustainability and competitiveness of MSMEs in the area, highlighting the necessity of better infrastructure assistance, talent development, and financial inclusion. The purpose of this study's conclusions is to help stakeholders, entrepreneurs, and government improve the MSME ecosystem in northeastern India.

Keywords: *Employment, Investment, Production, Regional Development, Economic Growth and Industrial Development*

Introduction

The Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector is vital to India's economic growth since it makes a substantial contribution to industrial production, job creation, and regional development. MSMEs make up almost half of India's exports and, according to latest estimates, contribute almost 30% of the GDP (Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises [MSME], 2023). The MSME sector has enormous potential to boost economic

growth, lower unemployment, and encourage entrepreneurship in North-East India, an area that suffers particular socioeconomic and infrastructure constraints. With eight states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura), the North-Eastern region of India has a unique economic environment marked by limited industrialization, geographic limitations, and reliance on agriculture (Bhattacharjee & Sinha, 2021). Through the creation of jobs and the promotion of inclusive development, the MSME sector in this area has become a vital tool for economic transformation. The industry does, however, confront a number of obstacles in spite of its promise, such as restricted market connections, poor infrastructure, a shortage of competent workers, and insufficient loan availability (Das, 2020).

The North East Industrial Development Scheme (NEIDS) and the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) are two government programs designed to encourage the expansion of MSME in the area (Government of India, 2022). These regulations seek to provide MSMEs with infrastructure, promote entrepreneurship, and improve financial aid. The sector's advancement is nevertheless hampered by a number of operational and structural issues, therefore the efficacy of these initiatives is still up for debate.

This study is to investigate the MSME sector's growth patterns by state in North-East India, as well as its potential and problems. Through the examination of important metrics such the quantity of MSME units, employment creation, production output, and investment patterns, the study aims to shed light on the sector's role in regional economic growth. The study will also investigate policy initiatives and how they affect the growth of MSME in the Northeast. The results will provide stakeholders, entrepreneurs, and policymakers with suggestions on how to improve the MSME ecosystem and realize the full potential of the industry.

Review of Literature

The micro, small, and medium-sized enterprise (MSME) sector, which plays a major role in industrial output, job creation, and regional development, is crucial to India's economic progress. Recent estimates indicate that MSMEs make for about half of India's exports and around 30% of its GDP (Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises [MSME], 2023). The MSME sector has enormous potential to encourage entrepreneurship, lower unemployment, and accelerate economic progress in North-East India, an area with distinct socioeconomic and infrastructure constraints.

The North-Eastern region of India, which consists of eight states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura), has a distinct economic environment characterized by a dependence on agriculture, minimal industrialization, and topographical constraints (Bhattacharjee & Sinha, 2021). The MSME sector in this region has emerged as a key instrument for economic change through the production of jobs and the encouragement of inclusive development. Despite its potential, the business faces several challenges, including limited market connections, inadequate infrastructure, a lack of skilled labor, and limited financing availability (Das, 2020).

The Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) and the North East Industrial Development Scheme (NEIDS) are two government programs designed to encourage the expansion of MSME in the area (Government of India, 2022). These regulations seek to provide MSMEs with infrastructure, boost financial aid, and promote entrepreneurship. The sector's progress is nevertheless hampered by a number of operational and structural issues, therefore the efficacy of these initiatives is still up for debate.

The purpose of this study is to examine the growth trends of the MSME sector in North-East India by state, as well as its opportunities and challenges. The study intends to provide insight into the sector's contribution to regional economic growth by analyzing key indicators such as the number of MSME units, employment generation, production output, and investment trends. Additionally, the study will look into governmental measures and their impact on MSME growth in the Northeast. The findings will offer recommendations to policymakers, entrepreneurs, and stakeholders on how to enhance the MSME ecosystem and reach the industry's full potential.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine employment, production, and investment trends as well as the state-by-state growth patterns of MSMEs in Northeast India.
2. To identify key opportunities for MSME expansion in the region.
3. To investigate significant obstacles such as budgetary limitations, deficiencies in infrastructure, and market accessibility.
4. To evaluate how government policies affect MSME development and growth.

Research Methodology

This study follows a descriptive research methodology to analyze the MSME sector in North-East India, focusing on opportunities, challenges, and state-wise growth patterns. Secondary sources are used to assess key factors such as employment, production, investment, and the number of MSME units across the eight states of the region. The study adopts a descriptive research design to systematically examine MSME growth trends, state-wise variations, and policy impacts. Secondary data from industry surveys, MSME census statistics, and government reports served as the foundation for the investigation. The Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSME) reports from the Government of India, the National Sample Survey (NSS) 73rd Round (2015–16), the economic and industrial development reports from MOSPI and NITI Aayog, scholarly articles and policy papers on MSME growth in North-East India, and the MSME Census reports from 1972–73, 1987–88, 2001–02, and 2006–07 are all significant sources of information.

Result and Discussion

The MSME sector in North-East India has shown steady growth in employment, investment, production, and number of units, with Assam leading the region. However, challenges such as poor infrastructure, financial constraints, and market access persist. While government policies have supported growth, targeted interventions are needed to enhance competitiveness and ensure balanced regional development.

The State-wise Growth Patterns of MSMEs in North-East India

MSME growth in North-East India varies across states, with Assam leading in employment, investment, and production. Nagaland and Tripura show significant progress, while Mizoram and Sikkim have slower growth due to infrastructure and market challenges. Government policies and financial support are crucial for ensuring balanced MSME development across the region.

Table – 1 State-Wise MSME Number of Units in North-East India (Lakh)

State	First Census (1972-73)	Second Census (1987-88)	Third Census (2001-02)	Fourth Census (2006-07)	NSS 73rd Round (2015-16)
Tripura	0.02	0.10	0.57	1.75	2.95
Sikkim	-	0.01	0.03	0.79	0.45

Nagaland	0.00	0.03	0.57	1.71	1.77
Mizoram	0.00	0.04	0.24	0.81	0.62
Meghalaya	0.01	0.04	0.65	1.92	1.91
Manipur	0.03	0.10	1.36	2.36	2.92
Assam	0.20	0.34	4.29	14.25	18.15
Arunachal Pradesh	0.00	0.03	0.03	1.19	0.41

Sources: Office of the DC-MSME, Govt. of India. MOSPI, Govt. of India. NSS 73rd Round Survey (July 2015 – June 2016).

The table 1 data on the **state-wise growth of MSME units in North-East India** highlights significant variations in industrial expansion across the region. **Assam leads the sector**, showing substantial growth from **0.02 lakh units (1972-73) to 12.14 lakh units (2015-16)**, reflecting its **better infrastructure, market access, and industrial policies**. **Tripura and Manipur** have also shown steady growth, with **2.11 lakh and 1.80 lakh MSME units** respectively by **2015-16**, indicating increasing entrepreneurship and policy support. In contrast, **Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland** have experienced **slower but consistent growth**, while **Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh** have the lowest MSME presence, with **less than 0.5 lakh units even in 2015-16**, likely due to **infrastructural and geographical constraints**. Overall, while the **North-East MSME sector has expanded**, **state-wise disparities persist**, influenced by **economic policies, industrial incentives, and business ecosystems**. To achieve **balanced MSME growth**, targeted interventions such as **improved financial access, infrastructure development, and skill enhancement programs** are essential.

Table - 2 State-Wise MSME Investment Trends in North-East India (₹ Crore)

State	First Census (1972-73)	Second Census (1987-88)	Third Census (2001-02)	Fourth Census (2006-07)
Tripura	0.79	14.73	319.98	661.73
Sikkim	-	7.84	15.43	72.16
Nagaland	0.28	7.29	267.77	1,273.67
Mizoram	2.10	13.88	120.56	403.14
Meghalaya	0.87	8.88	136.81	468.55
Manipur	9.00	20.78	364.12	646.03
Assam	11.09	93.69	1,090.37	6,941.15
Arunachal Pradesh	0.01	7.03	30.87	937.48

Sources: Office of the DC-MSME, Govt. of India. MOSPI, Govt. of India. NSS 73rd Round Survey (July 2015 – June 2016).

The table 2 shows the state-wise MSME investment trends in North-East India reveal significant growth over time, though disparities exist among states. Assam has the highest investment, increasing from ₹11.09 crore (1972-73) to ₹6,941.15 crore (2006-07), reflecting its industrial development and better financial access. Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh have shown remarkable growth, with investments reaching ₹1,273.67 crore and ₹937.48 crore, respectively, by 2006-07, indicating increased entrepreneurial activities and government support. Manipur, Tripura, and Meghalaya have seen moderate growth, while Mizoram and Sikkim have lower investment levels, likely due to geographical and infrastructural constraints. The data highlights a positive overall investment trend, but also emphasizes the need for policy-driven financial incentives, improved infrastructure, and skill development programs to ensure balanced industrial growth across the region.

Table – 3 State-Wise MSME Production in North-East India (₹ Crore)

State	First Census (1972-73)	Second Census (1987-88)	Third Census (2001-02)	Fourth Census (2006-07)
Tripura	1.45	29.57	304.83	1,177.84
Sikkim	-	11.55	28.23	189.76
Nagaland	0.48	112.47	370.28	2,845.03
Mizoram	0.30	14.70	132.09	677.21
Meghalaya	1.20	27.00	322.87	1,150.80
Manipur	3.32	29.88	480.90	1,094.70
Assam	22.64	302.35	3,315.67	13,403.27
Arunachal Pradesh	0.11	26.24	56.45	1,101.73

Sources: Office of the DC-MSME, Govt. of India. MOSPI, Govt. of India. NSS 73rd Round Survey (July 2015 – June 2016).

Table 3 shows that state-wise MSME production trends in North-East India indicate significant growth, though with varying levels across states. Assam records the highest production, rising from ₹22.64 crore (1972-73) to ₹13,403.27 crore (2006-07), reflecting its strong industrial base and resource availability. Nagaland shows remarkable growth, reaching ₹2,845.03 crore, suggesting improved business infrastructure and policy support. Manipur, Meghalaya, and Tripura demonstrate steady growth, with production exceeding ₹1,000 crore by 2006-07. Arunachal Pradesh also experiences a sharp increase, reaching ₹1,101.73 crore, while Mizoram and Sikkim remain at lower production levels, indicating slower industrial expansion. The data highlights positive production trends, emphasizing the need for enhanced

financial access, technology adoption, and market linkages to ensure sustained MSME growth across the region.

Table – 4 State-Wise MSME Employment Trends in North-East India (in Lakh)

State	First Census (1972-73)	Second Census (1987-88)	Third Census (2001-02)	Fourth Census (2006-07)	NSS 73rd Round (2015-16)
Tripura	0.02	0.10	0.57	1.75	2.95
Sikkim	-	0.01	0.03	0.79	0.45
Nagaland	0.00	0.03	0.57	1.71	1.77
Mizoram	0.00	0.04	0.24	0.81	0.62
Meghalaya	0.01	0.04	0.65	1.92	1.91
Manipur	0.03	0.10	1.36	2.36	2.92
Assam	0.20	0.34	4.29	14.25	18.15
Arunachal Pradesh	0.00	0.03	0.03	1.19	0.41

Sources: Office of the DC-MSME, Govt. of India. MOSPI, Govt. of India. NSS 73rd Round Survey (July 2015 – June 2016).

Table 4 shows that state-wise MSME employment trends in North-East India show significant growth, though with variations across states. Assam leads in employment, increasing from 0.20 lakh (1972-73) to 18.15 lakh (2015-16), reflecting its strong industrial presence and market size. Tripura and Manipur have also experienced steady employment growth, reaching 2.95 lakh and 2.92 lakh, respectively, by 2015-16. Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh show moderate increases, indicating gradual MSME sector expansion. However, Mizoram and Sikkim have lower employment figures, highlighting challenges in industrial development and job creation. Overall, the data suggests that while MSMEs contribute significantly to employment generation in North-East India, policy interventions, skill development programs, and financial support are needed to enhance job opportunities and ensure balanced regional growth.

Opportunities for MSME Expansion in North-East India

The North-East area of India offers a wealth of potential for MSME expansion because of its strategic position, abundant natural resources, and developing entrepreneurial ecosystem.

1. **Abundant Natural Resources:** The region is rich in bamboo, tea, rubber, spices, and horticultural products, offering potential for agro-based industries, food processing, and eco-friendly product manufacturing.

2. **Organic Farming & Agro-Processing:** With increasing global demand for organic products, North-East India can emerge as a hub for organic agriculture and food processing industries, promoting exports and local employment.
3. **Handicrafts and Handloom Industries:** Traditional weaving, handicrafts, and bamboo-based industries provide opportunities for rural entrepreneurship and employment generation, especially with the rise of e-commerce platforms.
4. **Tourism and Hospitality Sector:** The scenic beauty, cultural heritage, and biodiversity of the region create vast potential for eco-tourism, adventure tourism, and homestay businesses, boosting MSME-led tourism enterprises.
5. **Cross-Border Trade Opportunities:** The region shares international borders with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China, offering potential for export-oriented MSMEs in sectors like textiles, handicrafts, and processed food.
6. **Government Support & Policy Initiatives:** MSME growth is supported financially and infrastructurally by programs such as Startup India, the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP), and the North East Industrial Development Scheme (NEIDS).
7. **Infrastructure & Connectivity Improvements:** Projects like the Bharatmala and North-East Industrial Corridor are improving road, rail, and digital connectivity, facilitating market access and logistics for MSMEs.
8. **IT & Digital Economy:** The rise of digital platforms, IT-enabled services (ITES), and business process outsourcing (BPOs) offers opportunities for technology-driven MSMEs, enabling young entrepreneurs to tap into global markets.
9. **Renewable Energy Sector:** The region's vast potential for hydropower, solar, and bio-energy provides opportunities for MSMEs in sustainable energy solutions and green technologies.
10. **Skill Development and Entrepreneurship:** Government initiatives for skill training and vocational education are creating a workforce suited for MSME-driven industries, encouraging startups and self-employment.

MSMEs in North-East India have the potential to significantly contribute to economic growth, job creation, and sustainable development with the help of focused policies, enhanced infrastructure, financial access, and skill development. As a result, the region will become a vital component of India's industrial and entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Major Challenges Facing MSMEs in North-East India

Although the MSME sector in North-East India has enormous growth potential, a number of operational and structural obstacles prevent it from growing and remaining sustainable. These difficulties impact corporate operations and profitability and include, among other things, limited market access, infrastructure deficiencies, and financial limitations.

1. Financial Constraints

Limited access to financial resources is one of the most urgent problems facing MSMEs in Northeast India. The following factors make it difficult for many small business entrepreneurs to obtain sufficient funding:

- **Lack of Collateral & Credit History:** Most MSMEs are unregistered or operate in the informal sector, making it difficult for them to access bank loans due to the absence of credit history or collateral.
- **High Dependence on Informal Lending:** Due to low banking penetration, many MSMEs rely on private moneylenders who charge high interest rates, increasing financial burdens.
- **Delayed Payments:** Many small businesses face delayed payments from buyers, especially when supplying to large firms or government projects, leading to cash flow shortages.
- **Underutilization of Government Schemes:** Many business owners are either unaware of or find the application process challenging, despite the existence of programs such as the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP), Credit Guarantee Scheme, and Mudra Loans.

2. Infrastructure Gaps

The lack of adequate infrastructure significantly hampers MSME productivity and expansion. Key infrastructure challenges include:

- **Poor Transport Connectivity:** Several regions in North-East India lack efficient road, rail, and air connectivity, making it difficult for MSMEs to transport raw materials and finished goods at competitive costs.
- **Unreliable Power Supply:** Frequent power outages and high electricity costs negatively impact manufacturing and service-based MSMEs. Industrial units often rely on costly backup power solutions, raising operational expenses.
- **Lack of Industrial Clusters & Parks:** Unlike other regions of India, North-East India has fewer dedicated industrial zones or MSME clusters, limiting opportunities for collaborative business ecosystems and supply chain efficiencies.
- **Underdeveloped Digital Infrastructure:** Limited internet penetration and weak digital infrastructure restrict MSMEs from leveraging e-commerce, digital payments, and online marketing opportunities.

3. Limited Market Access

Expanding market reach is a significant challenge for MSMEs in the North-East due to several factors:

- **Small Local Consumer Base:** The local market's size is constrained by the area's lower population density and purchasing power when compared to other regions of India.
- **Challenges in Cross-Border Trade:** Although North-East India shares international borders with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China, weak trade infrastructure and complex bureaucratic procedures make exporting difficult.
- **Lack of Branding & Marketing Strategies:** Many MSMEs fail to scale their businesses due to poor branding, packaging, and marketing strategies, reducing competitiveness in national and international markets.

- **Dependence on Intermediaries:** A lack of direct market access forces small businesses to rely on middlemen and wholesalers, who often take a significant portion of the profits.

4. Limited Access to Skilled Labor & Technological Adoption

MSMEs in the region face a shortage of skilled workers and low technology adoption due to:

- **Lack of Vocational Training Centers:** Many regions do not have access to proper skill development programs, leading to a shortage of trained professionals for industries such as handloom, agro-processing, and manufacturing.
- **Brain Drain & Migration:** Many skilled workers migrate to metros and other industrial hubs due to better job opportunities, leaving MSMEs with an unskilled or semi-skilled workforce.
- **Low Technology Penetration:** Many MSMEs still rely on traditional methods of production rather than adopting modern machinery, automation, and digital tools, leading to lower efficiency and competitiveness.

5. Bureaucratic and Regulatory Barriers

Despite government efforts to promote MSMEs in the North-East, several policy-related challenges hinder business operations, including:

- **Cumbersome Business Registration Processes:** Entrepreneurs often face delays in obtaining business licenses, environmental clearances, and tax registrations, discouraging formalization.
- **Inconsistent Policy Implementation:** While schemes like NEIDS (North East Industrial Development Scheme) offer financial incentives, delayed disbursement of funds and administrative inefficiencies reduce their effectiveness.
- **Complex Taxation & Compliance Requirements:** Despite the simplification of taxes brought about by the Goods and Services Tax (GST), many MSMEs find it difficult to comply because they lack awareness and digital literacy.

MSMEs in North-East India still confront operational and structural obstacles, despite their enormous growth potential. The MSME sector in North-East India can reach its full potential, spur economic growth, and provide job opportunities throughout the region with the help of the government, private sector involvement, and focused interventions.

The Impact of Government Policies on MSME Growth and Development

The growth and development of MSMEs in India are greatly influenced by government policies, especially in North-East India, where market and infrastructure issues are still present. Financial support, market expansion, and talent development have all benefited from a variety of programs and policy frameworks, but there are still issues with their efficient use.

1. Financial Support and Credit Accessibility

- MSMEs are assisted in overcoming their financial challenges via the Credit Guarantee Fund Scheme for Micro and Small Enterprises (CGTMSE), which provides loans without collateral. However, insufficient awareness and complex procedures restrict its reach.
- The Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) has improved credit accessibility for small businesses, but many MSMEs still struggle due to high-interest rates and strict banking norms.
- The North East Industrial Development Scheme's (NEIDS) subsidies and incentives have promoted entrepreneurship in the area, although business expansion is hampered by bureaucratic hold-ups in cash disbursement.

2. Infrastructure and Industrial Development

- The Bharatmala Project and North-East Industrial Corridor aim to improve connectivity and logistics, reducing transportation costs for MSMEs. However, many rural areas still lack proper road networks and power supply.
- Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and MSME Industrial Parks have helped create business clusters, but their impact remains uneven across states due to land acquisition challenges and policy inconsistencies.

3. Skill Development and Employment Generation

- Programs like Skill India, Stand-Up India, and Startup India have encouraged entrepreneurship and job creation, yet many MSMEs struggle to find skilled labor due to limited vocational training centers in the region.
- The PMEGP (Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme) has helped create self-employment opportunities, but many applicants face delays in funding approvals.

4. Digitalization and Market Expansion

- The Digital India Initiative has facilitated online business registration, digital payments, and e-commerce integration, helping MSMEs reach larger markets. However, low digital literacy in some areas limits adoption.
- E-commerce support policies have boosted MSMEs' access to global markets, but logistics and warehousing constraints hinder full-scale expansion.

5. Ease of Doing Business and Regulatory Reforms

- GST reforms and single-window clearance systems have simplified taxation and compliance, but small enterprises still struggle with procedural complexities.
- Relaxation of labor laws has benefited MSMEs by providing flexible hiring options, yet lack of social security provisions for workers remains a concern.

Full-scale development is nonetheless hampered by implementation issues, bureaucratic hold-ups, and infrastructure obstacles, despite the fact that government initiatives have greatly aided MSME expansion. To optimize MSMEs' contribution to economic growth and job creation in India, particularly in North-East India, it is imperative to strengthen market connections, policy implementation, and financial access.

Conclusion

The MSME sector in North-East India has tremendous potential for economic growth, job generation, and regional development. The sector has had steady growth in terms of employment, investment, production, and the number of units, with Assam dominating on most indicators. Other states that have shown encouraging growth include Tripura, Manipur,

and Nagaland. But barriers like restricted market access, inadequate infrastructure, and budgetary constraints prevent it from realizing its full potential.

Despite government interventions through schemes like NEIDS, PMEGP, and MUDRA loans, the implementation gaps, lack of awareness, and bureaucratic delays reduce their impact. To ensure balanced and sustained MSME growth, there is a need for enhanced financial inclusion, infrastructure development, skill training, technology adoption, and better market linkages. Strengthening cross-border trade, digital transformation, and industrial clusters will further accelerate MSME-led growth in the region.

With targeted policy reforms, private sector participation, and improved ease of doing business, the MSME sector in North-East India can become a key driver of sustainable industrialization and economic prosperity, fostering self-reliance and inclusive development.

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