

## Bridging Borders: Libraries as Catalysts for Community Engagement and Connectivity in Northeast India,

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### Introduction

India has a 15,106.7 km (kilometre) long land border and a coastline of 7516.6 km, including the island territories. The North-Eastern Region (NER) of India, comprising of eight states — Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim alone share an international border of 5,182 kms (about 99 per cent of its total geographical boundary) with several neighbouring countries. They are: 1,395 kms with Tibet Autonomous Region, China in the north, 1,640 kms with Myanmar in the east, 1,596 kms with Bangladesh in the south-west, 97 kms with Nepal in the west, and 455 kms with Bhutan in the north-west. This makes the NER a key strategic location for the Indian subcontinent.

About 70% of North-East is the hilly region, and the topography varies within each state. Mountains and hills cover most of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya and about half of Tripura, 20% of Assam, 90% of Manipur and almost entire Sikkim. The plains of the region are mainly made up of separate landmasses - the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley in Assam and the Tripura plains in the South. In Manipur, the valley is small, comprising only about 10% of the total area of the State. The topography of the hills is generally rugged and vast areas are inaccessible. The flora and fauna of this region is numerous and varied. North-East is regarded as one of the 7 most bio-diverse endangered species of fauna like the one-horned-Asiatic rhino, white winged-wood duck, and Golden Langur can be spotted in the reserved forests and National Parks of NER. The North-East States possesses more than 550 varieties of orchids, which is said to be almost 70% of the total orchid species identified so far.

In the context of rural border areas, especially in regions; like Northeast India, regional connectivity plays a crucial role in fostering socio-economic development and enhancing the quality of life. These regions often face geographic isolation, underdeveloped infrastructure, and limited access to essential services, which can hinder progress. However, regional connectivity, when paired with community engagement, can act as a powerful driver for growth. Community participation ensures that local populations are involved in the decision-making process, contributing to solutions that are both culturally sensitive and practical for their specific needs. By incorporating the voices of the community, development becomes more inclusive and sustainable, addressing the challenges unique to these border areas.

At a workshop on Unlocking Economic Opportunities in Northeast India held in Assam in January 2023, there was a broad consensus on the need to implement the Motor Vehicles Agreement between Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. The agreement, signed in 2015 but not yet implemented, seeks to facilitate unrestricted cross-border movement of cargo, passenger, and personal vehicles between these countries. For the Northeast, if the trucks were allowed to transit via Bangladesh, it would reduce distance by 65% and transport cost by 68%. The 1,600 km journey from Agartala to Kolkata will be cut short to 450 kms via road through Bangladesh, and a mere 200 kms for direct access to the Chattogram port in Bangladesh.

### **1. Role of Libraries in Community Engagement and Connectivity**

Libraries, traditionally seen as repositories of knowledge, have evolved into dynamic spaces that support not only literacy but also regional connectivity and community engagement. In rural and remote regions like the border areas of Northeast India the role of library is something very new. The perception of the people is that library is associated with educational institutions and government assembly house or parliament, on contrary libraries serve as critical community hubs. With the advent of technology, libraries now offer more than just books; they provide internet access, digital resources and platforms for local discourse. They play a pivotal role in bridging digital divide, promoting knowledge sharing and opportunities for cross-border interaction and collaboration.

Moreover, libraries in these regions are essential for community development. They can offer programs and spaces that foster local participation, from skill-building workshops to cultural events that celebrate indigenous heritage. This makes libraries key institutions for community engagement, allowing for dialogue and collaboration on issues that matter most to the local population. Additionally, as advocates for sustainable development, libraries disseminate vital information on agriculture, health and environmental practices, helping rural communities

adopt modern technologies while preserving their traditional knowledge systems. Thus, libraries are essential in ensuring that regional connectivity and community participation drive sustainable development.

UNESCO has been laying great emphasis on the development of public libraries as institutions contributing to the progress and advancement of the society in its Public Library Manifesto. It has been encouraging its member countries to enact library legislation as a necessary and effective means of placing the development of public libraries on a stable organizational and financial footing. According to IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 2022. 'The public library is the responsibility of local and national authorities. It must be supported by specific and updated legislation aligned to international treaties and agreements. It must be financed by national and local governments. It has been an essential component of any long-term strategy for culture, information provision, literacy and education'. UNESCO and IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 2022 suggest that 'to ensure nationwide library coordination and cooperation, legislation and strategic plans must also define and promote a national library network based on agreed standard of service'

Community members generate service ideas when sustained relations are in place. In order for this to occur, library staff need to reposition their role in their community from an expert to a facilitator. By becoming active listeners instead of disseminators of information, librarians take information from the community and place what they are hearing within the context of library services. Each community is unique and will identify need(s) for services based on its unique circumstances, for instance, Halifax's Community Development Librarian heard that a large proportion of food at a local food bank was spoiling because community members did not know how to prepare some of the food; in Regina the community identified literacy as a major issue that they wanted to address with the library. Library staff continuously engaged the community in order to discover how the library could work with them to address their particular needs.

### **Role of Libraries in Regional Connectivity**

Libraries in the rural border areas of Northeast India can serve as a vital node for regional connectivity by bridging gaps in access to information, technology and opportunities. These libraries, often situated in geographically isolated regions, become essential community hubs that foster learning, social inclusion and local development.

- **Access to Information:** Libraries in the Northeast border areas can provide access to crucial information that might otherwise be unavailable due to limited connectivity and resources. Offering books, newspapers and periodicals in local languages, ensuring that community members are informed about national and global events, government policies and regional developments. This access is particularly significant in border areas, where awareness of cross-border relations, security updates and economic opportunities is crucial.

- **Digital Literacy and Technology Access:** With the increasing emphasis on digital governance and the global shift towards technology, these libraries when equipped with computers and internet facilities then it will allow rural populations to access e-governance services, educational platform and digital resources. Through digital literacy programs, libraries can enable individuals to acquire critical skills that help bridge the digital divide, enhancing opportunities for education, employment and entrepreneurship.
- **Community Engagement and Participation:** Libraries act as gathering spaces where communities can come together to share knowledge, discuss local issues, and participate in development initiatives. Library can create a space for workshops, literacy programs and cultural events that not only enrich the community's educational environment but also empower individuals to participate in local governance and decision-making processes. By encouraging dialogue and collaboration, libraries help strengthen social cohesion and local governance structures.
- **Promoting Sustainable Development:** As focal point of community knowledge, libraries support sustainable development by providing access to resources on agriculture, environment conservation and sustainable livelihoods. In rural areas where agriculture and natural resource management are primary sources of income, libraries can play a key role in disseminating information on modern farming techniques, climate resilience and sustainable practices. This empowers communities to improve their economic conditions while preserving their natural environment.
- **Cultural Preservation and Connectivity:** Libraries in Northeast India's border areas can play an important role in preserving and promoting local cultures, languages and traditions. By hosting cultural programs, archiving indigenous knowledge, and offering literature in native languages, they can ensure and maintained regional identities. This cultural preservation fosters a sense of belonging and strengthen cross-border relationships, as these areas often share historical and ethnic ties with neighbouring countries.

In essence, libraries in rural border areas of Northeast India are to act as pivotal connectors, linking remote communities to broader regional, national and global networks. They can provide access to information, technology and opportunities that contribute to the social, economic and cultural development of these marginalised regions.

In Northeast India, libraries functioning specifically as platforms for cross-border communication and knowledge-sharing, particularly in rural and border areas, are somewhat limited, primarily due to infrastructural challenges, isolation and political sensitivity in the border regions. However, there are some initiatives and models that indicate how libraries and knowledge centres can be utilised in these areas. While formal infrastructure might be limited, certain organisations and community-based initiatives have aimed to bridge these gaps. Here are a few noteworthy points:

#### 1. Community-Driven Libraries and Knowledge Centres in Northeast India

- **Mawlynnong Community Library (Meghalaya):** Mawlynnong, known as one of the cleanest villages in Asia, has a community library that not only caters to the local population but also attracts tourists and visitors from neighbouring countries. While it may not function explicitly as a cross-border communication platform, the library supports knowledge-sharing and community engagement, which could serve as a model for future cross-border initiatives.
- **Manipur's Border Libraries and Knowledge Centres:** Manipur shares a long border with Myanmar and informed knowledge-sharing occurs across these borders through community interactions. While there isn't a formal library recognised solely for cross-border communication, community centres and institutions such as the Inira Gandhi

National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) – Manipur Chapter have conducted cultural and historical studies, facilitating exchange between communities on both sides of the border.

- In Nagaland the Straightway Mission School in Dan (Pangsha) village (International Trade Centre) was founded by Dr. Aotemshi in 2005 with 50 children, now it has 304 students with 14 faculty as per its 2014 enrolment list. There is also an ark established in 2022 called as Straightway Learning Ark at Kingphu village under Lahe region (Myanmar) where Burmese children learn English. The library is open to children living in the villages on either side of the border. Public libraries, often called the heart of a community, are essential institutions that serve as invaluable resources for people of all ages and backgrounds. These knowledge hubs hold many functions that cater to the diverse needs of their patrons, making them vital contributors to education, culture and community development.
- Two bothers open a *community library* at Kigwema village (Nagaland). Nagaland. The self-funded initiatives were undertaken by Akho Phira and Thepfukelie Phira. The library was formally opened to the public on July 04, 2021. The space used for sitting arrangement has a significant ancestral history attached to it.

## 2. Telecentres and Digital Information Hubs

- Telecentres in Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh: Telecentres established in some rural areas of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh offer digital access points for local populations, functioning somewhat like modern libraries. These centres provide access to digital resources, which could be leveraged for cross-border communication and knowledge-sharing. They operate with a focus on digital literacy, access to government services, and even health information, connecting communities that may not have access to formal libraries.

## 3. NGO and Non-Profit Initiatives

- The North East Knowledge Network (NEKN): This initiative, supported by civil society organisations, focuses on connecting knowledge hubs across Northeast India. While primarily aimed at promoting local development and education, such initiatives could potentially be extended to support cross-border knowledge-sharing between border communities in India, Bangladesh and Myanmar.
- Tura District Library (Meghalaya): In the Garo Hills region near the Bangladesh border, the Tura District Library is a key knowledge hub. Although its cross-border functions are informed, such libraries are platforms for knowledge dissemination in border areas where formal infrastructure is scarce.

## 4. Border Trade Libraries

- In border regions where cross-border trade is prevalent (e.g. Moreh in Manipur), community-led information centres or libraries could theoretically serve as platforms for cross-border communication, especially by providing trade information, resources on local economies and shared cultural histories. These centres could evolve into more formal libraries dedicated to cross-border knowledge-sharing.

## 5. Potential for Future Development

- The potential for libraries in Northeast India to serve as cross-border platforms is significant. With increasing cross-border trade, cultural exchanges and economic connectivity between Northeast India and neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh, there is scope for libraries to evolve into centres for communication and collaborations.
- Border Area Development Programs (BADP), supported by the Government of India, could further integrate libraries into their development framework. These programs focus

on infrastructure and education in border regions, which could pave the way for libraries to function as platforms for cross-border dialogue.

### Conclusions

Beyond books, libraries create an environment that encourages lifelong learning, Intellectual curiosity and personal growth. With their diverse functions and unwavering commitment to serving the public, public libraries play a pivotal role in enriching lives and empowering individuals, making them essential cornerstones of knowledge and learning within society.

Libraries play a pivotal role in fostering community participation by providing inclusive spaces where people can engage in dialogue, cultural interaction, and skill-building. In rural and border areas, particularly in regions like Northeast India, libraries are not only repositories of knowledge but also serve as dynamic community participation through various initiatives: Spaces for dialogue and community engagement, cultural interaction and empowerment, collaborative projects and partnerships.

Professionals in the fields of library and information science, public libraries and community development discuss these successes and the ways that public libraries can build a strong community. Five facets of community building are explored: (1) how libraries serve as a conduit to access information and to learn, (2) how libraries encourage social inclusion and equity, (3) how libraries foster civic engagement, (4) how libraries create a bridge to resources and community involvement, and (5) how libraries promote economic vitality within the community. Public library is a beacon of knowledge, empowerment and community development. It is a vital resource for people of all ages and backgrounds, providing access to information, supporting education, promoting a rewarding culture and fostering social cohesion. As custodians of cultural heritage, public libraries preserve the collective memory of communities and promote local history and identity.

Thus, community engagement through libraries enhances connectivity in the border regions of Northeast India by fostering cross-cultural exchange and mutual understanding with neighbouring countries. Libraries in these areas serve as neutral, inclusive platforms where local residents can engage in dialogue on shared concerns, such as regional development, heritage preservation and sustainable practices. Through collaborative learning and capacity-building programs, libraries help individuals gain knowledge and skills that transcends borders, promoting cooperations on common issues like education, health and environmental sustainability. By facilitating cultural interactions, libraries contribute to the preservation of diverse traditions and languages, which strengthens social ties and regional connectivity with neighbouring countries. This approach creates a foundation for peaceful coexistence and enhanced socio-economic collaboration across borders.

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