NR19 / Rethinking Inclusive Policymaking through the Lens of Northeast India

Topic : Research

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

During a visit to Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh in September 2025, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed the Northeast as the country's "Ashtalakshmi," invoking the group of eight forms of the goddess Lakshmi and symbolizing the region's cultural wealth, rich biodiversity, abundance of natural resources, and developmental potential. The Ashtalakshmi analogy was accompanied by laying the foundation stone and inauguration of various development works and a series of major investment announcements in Manipur, including the construction of road bridges, markets, and upgrades to existing infrastructure. Such a push demonstrates a wider effort to recast the Northeast from a peripheral frontier into a 'frontrunner of growth,' that has been part of the wider 'Act East' policy agenda of the current Indian government. However, despite constitutional protections, special administrative arrangements, and targeted development programs, significant population, cultural representations, and regional concerns of Northeast India continue to experience persistent marginalization. Policy decisions at central, state, and district levels have often yielded inadvertent consequences for Indigenous governance institutions, local economies, and socio-cultural systems. Therefore, it is becoming increasingly pertinent and essential to critically assess how public policies are formulated, interpreted, and implemented within the Northeast. As governments worldwide search for models of inclusive and culturally grounded policy frameworks, Northeast India's experience promises to offer crucial lessons about policymaking in diverse multi-ethnic democracies.

Significance of the panel

This panel aims to produce a rigorous dialogue among scholars, policymakers, and development practitioners to explore how constitutional guarantees, public policy design, and development strategies converge or dissipate in shaping outcomes for Indigenous communities in Northeast India. The core objective of the panel is to highlight the concerns of Indigenous territories as a critical frontier in public policy worldwide. The case of Northeast India demonstrates how constitutional design, contested histories, cultural diversity, and development pressures complicate policy choices and create opportunities for innovation. By focusing on this region, the panel provides a platform for examining universal policy challenges such as decentralization, minority rights, participatory governance, sustainability, and equity through a nuanced and globally relevant lens.

The panel seeks to:

Examine the institutional architectures that govern the region and evaluate their effectiveness in protecting Indigenous rights.

Critically assess development interventions through a policy lens, exploring gaps between policy intentions and lived realities.

Discuss innovative approaches to policymaking that respect Indigenous knowledge, advance sustainable development, and strengthen democratic governance.

Key Research questions that the panel seeks to address:

1. How do constitutional safeguards and special administrative arrangements operate in practice across Northeast India, and what do they reveal about the capacity of existing institutional architectures to protect Indigenous governance and autonomy amid accelerated development initiatives?

2. Where and why do discrepancies arise between the stated objectives of national and state-level development policies such as the Act East agenda and the lived socio-economic and cultural experiences of

Indigenous communities in the region?

3. How can Indigenous knowledge systems and local governance institutions contribute to designing more inclusive, sustainable, and culturally responsive policy frameworks suited to complex multi-ethnic democracies?

CALL FOR PAPERS

In the recent past, the narrative of Northeast India, pushed by the Indian government, as a frontier for development and inclusion has accompanied major infrastructure and investment announcements across the region, including new bridges, market infrastructure, and upgrades to transport networks. Such interventions reflect a broader governmental ambition to reposition the Northeast from a geographically remote region to a strategic frontrunner of growth within the larger Act East policy framework. Yet, despite constitutional safeguards, special administrative regimes, and targeted development programs, Indigenous peoples and communities in the Northeast continue to face forms of political, cultural, and economic marginalization. Public policy decisions, whether at central, state, or district levels, often generate unintended consequences for local governance institutions, customary systems, and socio-cultural life. These dynamics underscore the urgency of critically examining how public policies are designed, interpreted, and implemented in complex, multi-ethnic regions.

Significance of panel

As countries worldwide search for models of inclusive, participatory, and culturally grounded public policy designs, the experience of Northeast India offers important insights into the challenges and possibilities of policymaking in democracies with multicultural and diverse groups of citizens. This panel seeks to foster a rigorous interdisciplinary dialogue among scholars, policymakers, and development practitioners on the intersections of constitutional design, public policy, and Indigenous rights in Northeast India. By foregrounding Northeast India, the panel positions Indigenous territories as crucial sites for rethinking public policy globally. The case of Northeast India illustrates how historical contestations, cultural plurality, and development pressures shape policy choices and open space for institutional innovation. Through this comparative and analytical lens, the panel engages larger policy debates on decentralization, minority rights, participatory governance, sustainability, and equity.

The panel invites papers that:

Interrogate Institutional structures and processes by examining constitutional provisions and administrative arrangements governing the region, assessing their effectiveness in protecting Indigenous rights and autonomy.

Evaluate Development Interventions and analyze policy implementation gaps between stated objectives within the Act East agenda and the lived realities of Indigenous communities.

Advance Policy Innovations in exploring approaches to policymaking that incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems, strengthen local governance institutions, and promote sustainable and culturally responsive development.

Submissions may address, but are not limited to, the following questions:

How do constitutional safeguards and special administrative mechanisms function in practice across Northeast India? What do these experiences reveal about the strengths and limitations of existing institutional frameworks in safeguarding Indigenous governance amid rapid development?

Where and why do discrepancies arise between national and state-level development objectives and the socio-economic and cultural experiences of Indigenous communities?

How can Indigenous knowledge systems and local institutional practices inform the creation of more inclusive, sustainable, and culturally grounded public policies suited to multi-ethnic democracies?

Who can apply

This panel welcomes contributions from a wide range of scholars and practitioners whose work engages with public policy, Indigenous governance, and multi-ethnic democratic contexts. We invite submissions from: Early-Career Scholar, Academics, and Researchers working in public policy, sociology, political science, anthropology, development studies, constitutional law, governance, area studies, and related fields.