

Third Party Evaluation of Helicopter Services in North East Region

Executive Summary

The helicopter services in the northeast were introduced during the financial year 1992-93 by the Government of India. This is a subsidy-based scheme designed to provide connectivity to remote areas and border terrains, as well as to facilitate air connectivity between the North Eastern Region and other states.

In order to provide connectivity to remote areas at affordable cost in NE region to common passengers, evacuation during natural calamities and for urgent medical evacuation etc., helicopter services are in operation in the NE States with the approval of the Cabinet in 1992. Presently, the helicopter services are in operation in seven NE States, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Manipur — with subsidy from MHA.

The Government of India, through regional civil aviation initiatives, has promoted helicopter services to enhance accessibility and support balanced regional development. Helicopter operations connect district headquarters, border villages, medical centres, and tourist destinations that often remain isolated during monsoons and natural disasters. In states such as Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya, helicopters significantly reduce travel time from several hours or days to less than one hour.

Helicopter services also contribute substantially to emergency healthcare and disaster management. They are frequently used for medical evacuations, delivery of essential supplies, rescue operations during floods and landslides, and connectivity during infrastructure disruptions. In strategically sensitive border areas near China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, helicopter services strengthen administrative presence, national security logistics, and rapid deployment capabilities.

Tourism development is another major benefit. Helicopter tourism has expanded access to ecotourism destinations, pilgrimage sites, wildlife reserves, and adventure tourism circuits across the Northeast. Improved aerial connectivity supports local economies by promoting employment, hospitality services, and regional trade.

Despite these advantages, helicopter services in the NER face several operational and financial challenges. Adverse weather conditions, high operational costs, limited helipad infrastructure,

shortage of trained personnel, and low passenger volumes affect sustainability. Safety concerns related to difficult terrain and unpredictable weather further complicate operations. Many routes remain dependent on government subsidies and viability gap funding.

The assessment was carried out through document review, field visits, stakeholder consultations, data verification, and analysis of operational and financial records. The audit covered key functional areas including governance, administration, financial management, monitoring systems, procurement practices, beneficiary outreach, and overall program

To improve long-term sustainability, policymakers must focus on modernising aviation infrastructure, expanding helipad networks, and integrating helicopter services with regional connectivity schemes, such as UDAN, improving safety standards, and encouraging private sector participation. Technological innovations including satellite navigation, weather monitoring systems, and advanced helicopters can further enhance operational efficiency.

The scheme is implemented as a Central Sector Scheme (CSS) under the North East Division of MHA, with financial support provided to state governments to operate helicopter services for civil purposes. The Government of India bears a substantial share of the operational costs, generally following a 75:25 cost-sharing arrangement between the Centre and the States after adjusting passenger fare recoveries. This subsidy framework ensures the continuity of helicopter services in areas where commercial operations are not viable.

The North Eastern Region (NER) of India continues to face significant connectivity challenges due to its difficult terrain, dispersed settlements, dense forest cover, high rainfall, and vulnerability to natural disasters such as landslides, floods, and earthquakes. In many remote and border areas, inadequate road and rail infrastructure limits access to healthcare, education, markets, administrative services, and emergency support.

In conclusion, helicopter services are not merely transportation facilities in the northeastern states but strategic instruments of regional integration, socio-economic inclusion, disaster resilience, and national security. Strengthening these services will remain essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable development in India's northeastern region.