

9. Cultural and Lingual Diversity of North East India

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Abstract:

Introduction- India is a country filled with diversity, and the states situated in the north-eastern part of the country are one of the most diverse lands. Not only do the geographical and ecological features make these states unique pieces of land, but also the variety of ethnic groups, cultures, traditions, languages and religions reflect the multi-cultural character of the states. This paper attempted to highlight the features of the diversity of these states.

Objectives- To understand and find out the features and forms of diversity of the 8 states, related to the culture and language of the north-eastern states of India.

Methodology- The study is done using secondary data which are collected from different journals, chapters of the book, and articles related to the north eastern parts of India.

Conclusion- The diversity of the North-eastern region is successfully depicting the true essence of colourful India

Keywords:

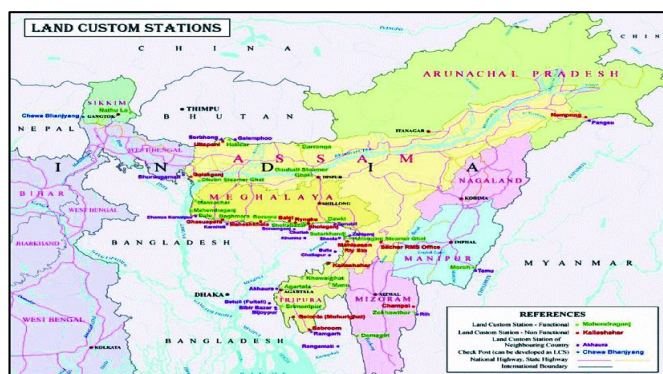
North east India, language, diversity, culture, ethnic groups, tradition.

9.1 Introduction:

India is a multicultural country; so, as its states are filled with diversity. The state located in the North-eastern Region (NER) of India, is one of the most diverse states¹⁷ among the other states of India. North-east India is the amalgamation of eight states of India, among which —Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura are widely known as the “Seven Sisters” because of its contiguity and Sikkim as the “brother” state³³. The city of Guwahati in Assam is known as the “Gateway of North-East India”.

The NER of India is linked with the central part, through the “Siliguri Corridor” or “Chicken Neck”, a thin strip of land¹⁴.

During the British colonial phase in India, North-eastern Region (NER) had been a part of Bengal Province (from 1839- 1873). After India gained independence in 1947 from British rule, NER consisted of only 3 states - Assam, Manipur and Tripura. Subsequently, Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura (1972), Arunachal Pradesh (1975) and Mizoram (1987) were separated from the large territory of Assam and became independent states and Sikkim was added as the eighth state in 2002^{14, 33}.



Map 1: Land Custom Stations of North East India with its Neighbouring Countries, Source- Subhanil Banerjee⁴

The North-east Region (NER) shares its borders with five neighbouring countries, i.e., China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan²⁹. From ancient times, people migrate from nearby countries and states, i.e., Tibet, Indo-Gangetic India, the Himalayas, present Bangladesh, and Myanmar,^{14, 17, 33} which contributes to the diversity of North-east India. Northeast India is home to more than 200 tribal groups, with a degree of variety even within that groups. This amalgamation of people belonging to different ethnic groups makes the NER a pool of diversity. With this paper, the researchers are trying to look into versatile features of dialects and languages, the rich history of culture, tradition and festivals of the people residing in North-eastern India.

9.2 Literature Review:

Gogoi (2014) highlighted the diversity related to linguistics and ethnicity of India and especially emphasized the northeastern states of India. He also described the various movements of ethnic groups in these regions.

Thanglen & Thanglen (2017) presented a vivid picture of the cultural festivals of the Chiru tribe. They discussed the various uses of cultural elements associated with the festivals of this tribe. Further, they have thrown light on the identity of the Chiru community and its characteristics as one of the lesser-known tribes of north east India.

Chhipa (2017) described the culture and architecture and the history of the construction of the north eastern states under the British colonial period. The researcher further elaborated on the various diversity related to the north-eastern states, with special emphasis on Arunachal Pradesh and its history, geographical features, lives of people, language and literature.

Kaur et al. (2018) discussed the culture, lifestyle, occupations, traditions and religious practices followed by the different tribal communities of the North eastern states. They have elucidated the various tribes residing in these regions.

Tripathi (2021) attempted to portray the culture and beauty of the northeast region. She has provided specific and popular details about the lives of people and the way they live together in all eight states through this paper.

9.3 Objectives:

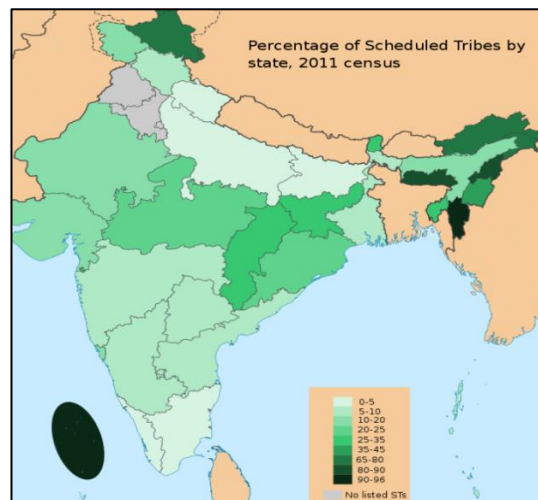
- ◆ To understand the diversity of culture.
- ◆ To study the diversity of language.
- ◆ To look into the features and various forms of diversity (i.e., lives of people, traditions, festivals, food habits, etc.) of the north eastern states.

9.4 Methodology:

This is a descriptive study which relies on secondary data. The data for the study is collected from different journals, chapters of book, Wikipedia and articles related to the north eastern parts of India.

9.5 Cultural Variety of Tribes of North-East India:

The North-eastern Region (NER) contains the highest population of the tribes of India. States like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland, have 90 percent tribal population, among the total population of these states. However, Assam, Manipur, Sikkim, and Tripura have lesser tribal peoples, which form 20 and 30 percent of the population of the states¹¹.



Map 2: Scheduled Tribes distribution map in India by state and union territory according to 2011 Census, Source- Wikipedia ²⁷

Table 9.1 States with a population of Scheduled Tribes as per the 2011 census

| States | Schedule tribes (%) |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| India | 8.61 |
| Mizoram | 94.44 |
| Nagaland | 86.46 |
| Meghalaya | 86.15 |
| Arunachal Pradesh | 68.79 |
| Manipur | 35.14 |
| Sikkim | 33.72 |
| Tripura | 31.76 |
| Assam | 12.45 |

Source- Wikipedia

It is evident from map 2 and table 1, that Northeast India is one of the most densely populated tribal areas. Population of tribes is much higher in NER than the tribal population of overall India. Mizoram has the largest tribal population, followed by Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Sikkim, Tripura and Assam. Some tribes residing in these states are described below-

9.5.1 Arunachal Pradesh:

Arunachal Pradesh is known as ‘dawn lit mountains’²⁵ as the ray of sun arrives first in this Indian state⁶. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are-**Abor**- also known as *Adiare* supposed to be the offspring of the Abutani/Abotani. Though they use Hindi as a link language, their native language, *Adi* can be classified under two groups- *Abor* and *Lhoba* and it is taught in schools as a third language where the population of *Adi* is high. They depend on agriculture and the tribals follow the *Donyi-Polo* religion. They celebrate many festivals, among which important are- *Aran*, *Donggin*, *Solung*, *Podi Barbiand Etor*¹, **Aka** (also known as *Aka*, they are the tribes living in the East Kameng& West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh)¹⁶, **Apatani** (They are the Chinese-Tibetan descent, wholives in and around the Ziro Valley of Arunachal Pradesh. Apatani was nominated for inclusion as a UNESCO World Heritage site, for its unique style of preserving the ecology and natural resource management and productivity. They celebrate two major festivals – *Dree*- to celebrate agriculture and *Myoko*-to honour village friendship and relation^{2,11}, **Dafla** (also known as *Nyishi*, spread across the eight districts,is the greatesttribal group of Arunachal Pradesh. Their traditional headdress decorated by the crest of a hornbill beak, extremely affected the population of this bird)²⁶, **Galong**, **Khampti**, **Howa**, **Monpa**, **Mishmi**, **Momba**, **Naga tribes**, **Sherdukpen**, **Singpho**. The staple diet of Arunachal Pradesh is rice, fish, meat, leafy vegetables and Momo, thupka and rice beer are some of their popular dishes^{31,33}. Some of the famous dance forms practised by the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are- *LossarMonpa* by the Monpa tribes to celebrate new year, *Goya Sedong Se* (to praise God and Goddess of Fine arts) and *Sadinuktso* (performed during marriage ceremonies) are the two dance forms performed by Aka tribes, etc⁶.

9.5.2 Assam:

The tribes residing in Assam are- **Barmans** in Cachar, **Deori** (they are one of the major Tibeto-Burmese ethnic groups of Assam. They call themselves “Jimochayan” which means “children of Sun” in their native language¹⁰, **Hojai, Kachari, Lalung, Mech, Miri, Rabha**. Agriculture, tea plantation, handloom and handicraft are the prominent source of livelihood of Assamese's²⁵. *Bihu* is the most celebrated festival of Assam. Tribes of Assam observe three types of Bihu festivals with Bihu dance to celebrate agriculture⁶.

9.5.3 Manipur:

Some of the tribes residing in Manipur are- **Aimol, Anal, Angami, Chiru, Chothe** (they are one of the oldest tribes of Manipur, with a population of 3,585)⁹, **Gangte, Hmar, Kabui, Kacha Naga, Koirao, Koirang, Kom, Lamgang, Mao, Maram, Maring, Paite, Purum, Ralte, Suhte, Tangkhul, Thadou, etc.**

Eromba, u-morok, ngari (fermented fish)- are some of the popular dishes of Manipur³³. *Manipuri* dance is one of the major Indian dance forms, named after the state of Manipur, which is based on the theme of Raslila, Shaivism, etc²¹. Besides, Lai Haraoba, Thang-ta, Kabui dance (performed by Kabui tribes) are some of the dance forms performed by Manipuri people⁶.

9.5.4 Meghalaya:

The literal meaning of ‘Meghalaya’ is “abode of cloud”^{22, 25}. The state is an amalgamation of three hills- Jayanti, Khasi and Garo. The tribes residing in this state are- **Boro Kacharis, Chakma, Garo, Hajong, Hmar, Khasi, Jaintia, Synteng, Pnar, War, Bhoi, Lynggam, Koch, Mikir, Pawi, Synteng**- are some tribes residing in the state of Meghalaya. The people of Meghalaya are mostly base on agriculture for their livelihood. Dishes made of Bamboo shoots or sprouts are one of the popular cuisines²².

Wangala dance and festivals are associated with the Garo community, which is celebrated after harvest in November. *Lewatana* dance is performed by the Hajong tribes to celebrate many Hindu festivals, including Diwali. *Shad Suk Mynsiemis* a thanksgiving festival which is celebrated by tribes of Khasi hills during the spring season. *Behdeiñkhlam* is a harvesting festival, celebrated by tribes of Jayanti in July^{6, 25}.

9.5.5 Mizoram:

The tribes residing in Mizoram are- **Chakma, Dimasa** (Kachari), **Garo** (they are Tibeto-Burmese ethnic group, comprising the one- third population of Mizoram)¹², **Hajong, Hmar, Khasi** (they form majority of the population of Mizoram around Khasi hills. They are one of the few remaining matriarchal tribes of the world and is received the status of Scheduled Tribe by Indian Constitution)²⁰ and **Jaintia, Lakher, Mikir, Pawi, Synteng, Riang**, etc²³. The livelihood of people is mostly based on horticulture, fisheries and sericulture (silkworm production)^{23, 25}. Traditionally, the people of Mizoram celebrate the *Chapchar Kut* festival before Jhum cultivation.

Cheraw dance is performed at happy occasions, like- harvest festivals, marriage ceremonies, etc. *Khuallamis* performed to celebrate successful hunting. Chawnglaizawn is a dance form performed by the Pawi tribes during various festivals and to celebrate hunting⁶.

9.5.6 Nagaland:

Nagaland is recognised as the “land of festivals”, due to the festivals celebrated throughout the year by the different communities residing here.^{24, 25} **Ao, Angami, Chang, Konyak, Lotha, Sumi, Chakhesang, Khamniungam, Kachari, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Yimchungru, Kuki, Seliang and Pochury** are the major tribal communities of Nagaland³³.

Farming, forestry, pottery and weaving are some of the sources of livelihood for the people residing in Nagaland. Fermented bamboo shoot, smoked pork, beef are some of the popular dishes of Nagaland³³. Most of the festivals are celebrated revolving the agriculture and festivals. Angami celebrate the *Sekrenyi* festival in February, *Moatsü, Tsüngremong* is celebrated by Aotribes in May and August, Dimasa Kacharitribes celebrate the *BushuJiba* festival in the month of January and April, Phom tribes celebrate *Monyü, Moha, Bongvü* during the months of April, May and October, and so on^{24, 25}.

Hornbill festival, which is termed after the bird ‘hornbill’, is a festival launched in 2000, by the government of Nagaland. It is the most famous festival celebrated by all tribes of Nagaland, which promotes the culture, tradition of the ethnic groups²⁴.

9.5.7 Sikkim:

Bhutia (they are linguistically related to Tibetan. The Parliament of India, recognized Bhoti/ Bhotia, which has Tibetan scripts, as one of the official languages of India through the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution)⁷ and **Lepcha-** are the two main tribal groups of Sikkim.

People of Sikkim mostly celebrate major Hindu festivals, i.e., *Diwali, Dusshera, Holi, Shivratri*, etc. Besides, *Losar* (Tibetan New Year), *Saga Dawa* and *Lhabab Duechen* are a few Buddhist festivals celebrated by the people of Sikkim²⁸.

9.5.8 Tripura:

Some tribes of Tripura are- **Bhil, Bhutia, Chakma, Garoo, Jamatia** (they are one of the chief Tripuri clans of Tripura and the only such group who have its Customary law in practice, which is called *Jamatia Raida*)¹⁸, **Khasia, Lepcha, Mog, Noatia, Orang, Reang, Santal, Tripura, Tripuri, Uchai**, etc. people of Tripura mostly belong to Hinduism, followed by Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. For livelihood, they depend on agriculture, pisciculture and trade and bamboo handicraft³².

Bizu dance was performed by Chakma tribes during ‘Chaitra Sankranti’ to welcome the new year. *Hozagiri* is performed by the Reangs community, where the dancers stand on the earthen pitcher and balances empty bottle on head while moving their body. They perform this before Jhum cultivation and pray to the goddess of wealth^{6, 32}.

The fishing community of Mog tribes perform *Fisherman's Dance*. To offer prayers to Lord Shiva, the Bengali community of Tripura celebrate the *Gajan* festival⁶.

9.6 Languages of North East India:

North eastern region is the only part of India with such variability of languages and dialects. This diversity of language is the result of the diverse tribal groups residing in these parts; each having its distinct dialect, culture and tradition. The languages spoken in the North-eastern states belong to five different language families: Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, Tai-Kadai, and Dravidian⁵.

9.6.1 Official languages of North-East India:

Due to the wide variety of languages in the North-East Region, the official language of these states also differs from each other and many other parts of India.

Table 9.2: Languages with official status in North-east of India

| States | Official languages |
|-------------------|---|
| Arunachal Pradesh | English |
| Assam | Assamese (in the Brahmaputra Valley), Bengali (in the Barak Valley), Bodo (in Bodoland) |
| Manipur | Meitei |
| Meghalaya | Khasi, Garo, English |
| Mizoram | Mizo, English |
| Nagaland | Nagamese, English |
| Sikkim | Sikkimese, Nepali, English |
| Tripura | Tripuri, Bengali |

Source- Wikipedia³³

Table 2. depicts the Languages with official status in the North-eastern Region (NER) of India. It can be understood that English is the most prominent official language used in most of the states of NER. But except that, there are some other Indian or native languages, which are considered as the official languages, i.e., Bengali of Assam and Tripura, Assamese and Bodo of Assam, Meitei or Manipuri in Manipur, Khasi and Garo in Meghalaya, Mizo of Mizoram, Nagamese of Nagaland, Sikkimese and Nepali of Sikkim and Tripuri of Tripura.

Besides these official languages, NER is the centre of many indigenous languages which are losing their identity without getting recognition and with the spread of modern 'lingua-franca'⁵. In Arunachal Pradesh, *Tani* is spoken by a majority of people³. People of Nagaland use various languages, like-*Konyak, Ao, Lotha, Angami, Chokri, Sangtam, Yimkhiungrii, Chang, Khiamniungan, Rengma, Phom, Kuki, etc*²⁴. *Dzongkha, Groma, Majhwar, Thulung, Yakha, etc* are a few languages used by the tribes of Sikkim²⁸. *Kokborok* is a predominant language used by most Tripuri people, besides, *Mog, Odia, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Manipuri, Halam, Garo, etc.* are a few other minor languages³².

9.7 Conclusion:

India is one of the most diverse countries in the world. The North-eastern Region truly depicts the colourful nature of India. NER shows “unity in diversity”. The abode of numerous tribal and ethnic groups, NER is one of the most multilingual and multi-cultural regions of India. But with the advancement of society and changing needs of humanity many tribes are losing their tradition and their dialects and languages are on the verge of extension. So, to protect and preserve the rich heritage of India, necessary actions need to be adopted by both government and local people.

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