

## 3. North East India: A Socio-Cultural Perspective

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### **Abstract:**

*India's North-East is the easternmost part of the country consisting of eight states namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The region is characterized by topographical variation, mesmerizing scenic views and a vibrant culture. A home to innumerable tribes, ethnic groups and communities; the North-East exemplifies the concept of unity in diversity. Linguistic and religious heterogeneity is a characteristic feature of each state due to the presence of a diverse population. Most of the North-eastern states are inhabited by indigenous communities as well as immigrants from other states or even countries. Each state has a rich cultural tradition which is a product of cultural assimilation and accommodation over a long period of time. Festivals are an integral part of each state and people from all walks of life join in on the celebrations. The region is predominantly dependent on agriculture and harvest festivals are celebrated with much pomp and show in every North-eastern state. These festivals reflect the rich art and culture of the region which is demonstrated through their music, dance, traditional attire, rituals and ceremonies, literary works etc. This chapter looks at the North East through a socio-cultural lens. The focus is on the inhabitants and their cultural practices. A discussion on each state has been presented with reference to its culture and people, so that the reader can gain a brief understanding of the socio-cultural picture of the region which is unique in and of itself.*

### **Keywords:**

*North East, diversity, culture, festival, language.*

### **3.1 Introduction:**

The North Eastern states of India comprising of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim—referred to as the ‘Seven Sisters and one brother’—are connected to the rest of the country through the Siliguri Corridor, also known as the ‘Chicken’s Neck’. The region is culturally and historically unique owing to the vast range of communities and tribes, vibrant culture, landscape, geographical as well as ecological diversity. It covers an area of 2, 63,179 sq. km. which is approximately 8% of the country’s geographical area. The region houses around 3.76% of the total population of India. Rich in biodiversity and natural resources, the North East is considered as a gateway to South-East Asia. The North East is a melting pot of cultures and cuisines. It is a true representation of multiculturalism, with each state being characterized by a variety of ethnic groups, religions and languages.

While Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland are primarily inhabited by tribals; Assam, Sikkim, Manipur and Tripura are inhabited by people belonging to different religious denominations like Christians, Muslims, Hindus as well as various local tribes.

This chapter attempts to shed light on the social and cultural norms of North East India with reference to language, literature, customs, traditions and festivals celebrated in each of the states.

### **3.2 Arunachal Pradesh:**

The literal meaning of Arunachal Pradesh is land of dawn-lit mountains. True to its name, Arunachal is an enthralling place with mountainous terrain and extraordinary scenic beauty. It is the largest of the north eastern states covering an area of 83,743sq. km. It shares international borders with Bhutan, China, Tibet and Myanmar.

The state is home to around thirty communities which include around forty-seven sub-groups. In terms of settlements, Arunachal is divided into five cultural zones. The first includes the regions of Tawang and Kameng where tribes like Buddhist Monpas, Akas, Mijis, Khowas and Sherdukpens are settled. The second zone covers East Kameng, lower and upper Subansiri and is inhabited by Nyishis, Sulungs, Nas, Apatanis, Tagins, Mikirs, Banginis and Hill Miris. The third zone covering parts of upper Subansiri as well as East and West Siang districts is home to the Adis. The fourth cultural zone spreads over the Dibang valley and Lohit regions. The major tribes settled in this zone are Mishmis and Khamtis. Tirap and Changlang regions constitute the fifth zone and house tribes like Wanchos, Noctes, Singphos and Tangsas.

Each tribe has their own festivals through which they express their distinct art and culture. Festivals in Arunachal are generally related to agricultural practices such as sowing and harvesting. Just like music and dance, prayers and sacrifices during festivals are also common.

**Table 3.1: Various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and their festivals**

<b>Tribe</b>	<b>Festival</b>
Adis	Solung
Nyishis	Nyokum
Gallongs	Mopin
Monpas	Lossar&Torgya
Apatanis	Dree&Murung
Noctes	Loku
Hill Miris	Boori-Boot
Tagins	Si-donyi
IduMishmis	Reh



**Figure 3.1: Nyokum celebration (Source: flickr.com)**

In places like Ziro, Pasighat, Along, Bomdila, Itanagar and Tezu where there is a noticeable presence of non-Arunachali people; popular festivals like Christmas, Vishwakarma puja, Durga Puja, Eid, Baisakhi etc. are also celebrated with much gusto. Unity in diversity is reflected in the celebration of all festivals as these are marked by enthusiastic participation of people from all walks of life and not just followers of a particular faith. This is a direct influence of innumerable tribes and sub-tribes interacting and co-existing with one another which has led to cultural accommodation and assimilation.

Even though the state is sparsely populated, there is linguistic heterogeneity amongst the inhabitants. Around 42 dialects are spoken by people of various tribes and communities. Most of these languages originate from the Tibeto-Burman language family. People living in each cultural zone have a distinct language which may sometimes be unintelligible to people from other cultural zones or communities. A combination of Assamese, Hindi and local languages known as Arunachalese serves as the link language not only between locals and outsiders but also amongst the locals. Linguistic diversity has resulted in English being the official language of administration and medium of instruction in schools. Most people in the state, especially the literates are multilingual and Arunachalese and Assamese are commonly spoken. Such multilingualism can be considered as a great strength of the state as well as its people.

### **3.3 Assam:**

Assam, the gateway to the North East is a land of extraordinary beauty and diversity ranging from majestic rivers, rolling hills, evergreen forests, oilfields, rare wildlife to lush green tea gardens. Comprising of two valleys, namely Brahmaputra and Barak, Assam covers an area of around 78,440 sq. km. The state shares international borders with Bhutan and Bangladesh. Assam is a picturesque and vibrant state which can be considered as the meeting ground of diverse ethnicities and cultures. Assam has been home to numerous races and linguistic groups such as Tibeto- Burmans, Austro-Asiatics, Dravidians, Mongoloids and Aryans. It has also been the abode of several ethnic groups like Karbis, Dimasas, Bodos, Tai-Ahom, Rabha, Mishing, Tiwa and Deori to name a few.

Assam is an agricultural state and its economy is primarily agrarian in nature. Some traditional industries that have been the hallmarks of Assam include production of three indigenous silks—*paat*, *muga* and *eri*. The town of Sualkuchi is the silk weaving hub of Assam with more than 3000 weavers in and around it.



**Figure 3.2: Muga silk (Source: purbashree.com)**



**Figure 3.3: Paat silk (Source: sereki.in)**



**Figure 3.4: Eri silk (Source: runwayindia.in)**



**Figure 3.5: Bihu dance (Source: thehillstimes.in)**

The Assamese culture is a rich blend of cultures of many ethnicities which has evolved as a result of a long process of assimilation. Bihu, a harvest festival of Assam, is the most important and popular cultural festival which celebrates the changing of seasons. It is a unifying force which brings together everyone who joins in on the celebrations irrespective of caste, creed, ethnicity, faith or religion. The Karbis celebrate a festival called Rongker in which the entire community comes together to thank God for their well-being and prosperity. The Bodos mark the advent of the new year by celebrating a festival called Bwisagu during mid-April. The main festival of Mishings is Ali-Aye-Ligang which is another spring festival associated with the onset of sowing season. Me-Dam-Me-Phi is celebrated by the Ahoms on 31<sup>st</sup> January every year to worship the ancestors. Jonbeel mela, one of the most attractive festivals of the Tiwa community is a three-day fair in which people exchange products in a barter system. Busu Dima is the biggest post-harvest festival celebrated by the Dimasas. IbakuBisu and Maghaya Utsav are two major festivals of the Deoris.

Folk tales and songs prevalent among the people can be considered as the foundation of Assamese literature. The Vaishnava renaissance in Assam was ushered in by several masterly writers like MadhabKandali and Srimanta Sankardeva. Srimanta Sankardeva was the founder of neo-Vaishnavism who covered almost all aspects of life and culture in Assam in his literary works. Bhattadev, regarded as the first Assamese prose writer, translated the Bhagawat into Assamese. The Ahoms introduced a new type of prose literature called Buranji—historical chronicles and manuscripts—which formed the basis of Assamese literature.

In contemporary times, the Assam Sahitya Sabha, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Karbi Sahitya Sabha, Mishing Agom Kebang and other such literary bodies have been working for the development and preservation of regional languages in the state.

### **3.4 Manipur:**

Manipur, known as ‘Sanaleipak’ or ‘Kangleipak’ to its people, is a beautiful north-eastern state surrounded by hills covering an area of 22,327 sq. km. It shares borders with Nagaland, Assam, Mizoram and Myanmar. The mountains and hill ranges of Manipur which act as the northern boundary of the country are offshoots from the Himalayas.

The state comprises of 16 districts which are further divided into sub-divisions and community development blocks. While the hill districts have Autonomous District Councils, the valley districts have Panchayats and Zila Parishads for social and developmental affairs.

Just like the other north-eastern states, Manipur too is a land of diversity where people belonging to different religions and ethnicities have been peacefully coexisting since ages. The most popular festival of Manipur is Yaoshang or Holi which is celebrated with much fervour for five consecutive days starting from the full moon day in the month of Falguna. A harvest festival called Kut is celebrated by Kuki-Chin-Mizo groups every year on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November. Lui-Ngai-Ni is a sowing festival celebrated by the Nagas. Another festival called Cheiraoba marks the Meitei New Year in which people offer special dishes to the deities and climb hilltops in the belief that it will take them to greater heights in their lives. Kang or Rath Yatra is another famous festival observed by the Hindus. Chakouba is a unique festival in which married women are invited to their parental homes to feast and offered gifts. Other festivals like Christmas and Eid are also celebrated with much enthusiasm.

Dance and music are integral to the culture of Manipur. Pung Cholom, considered as the soul of Sankirtana, is a classical dance form in which the Pung or drum is played while dancing. Raslila is the epitome of Manipuri dance. It is performed in temples during *puṛnima* or full moon nights. Moreover, tribal dance forms of Manipur are closely related to nature.



**Figure 3.6: Pung Cholom Raslila (Source: flickr.com)**



**Figure 3.7: Manipuri dance (Source: pinkzamazingmanipur.blogspot.com)**

Manipuri language has its own script known as Meitei Mayek. It is the official language of the state. Manipuri literature is a compilation of novels, short stories, poems and dramas written by eminent authors since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Lavanglata*, a historical novel by Kh. Chaoba Singh is an outstanding literary work. *Madhaviby* Kamal Singh is recognised as the first modern novel in Manipuri. A. Dorendrojit Singh, another dramatist and poet, created three dramas—*MoirangThoibi*, *Bhagyachandra* and *KauravParajay*. He also wrote two famous poems *Subhadra Haran* and *Kansa Badha*. In the pre-independence period, Manipuri authors primarily dealt with religious and mythological themes. The post-independence period is marked by social and political themes like identity, conflict, aggression, transition etc. Literary works of women authors reflect the agony, struggles and hardships faced by women, which is mainly due to royal culture, class and caste system and the like. The state also takes pride in having a successful film industry which has won many accolades, including an award at the Cannes International Film Festival for the film *Ishanou*(1990), directed by Padma ShriAribamShyam Sharma.

### 3.5 Meghalaya:

Meghalaya literally means ‘abode of clouds. Popularly known as the ‘Scotland of the East’, Meghalaya is endowed with spellbinding beauty and is one of the most attractive tourist hotspots in the North East. It was the provincial capital of Assam during colonial rule. On 21<sup>st</sup> January 1972, it was given statehood and carved out of Assam. The state covers an area of 22, 429 sq. km. It comprises of United Khasi Hills, Garo Hills and Jaiñtia Hills. Meghalaya is home to three major tribes namely Khasis, Achik (Garos) and Pnars (Jaiñtias). Among all the north-eastern states, Meghalaya is the only one which practises matrilineality, i.e., tracing of kinship through the mother. Women enjoy a privileged status and the youngest daughter inherits ancestral property.

A class of western educated elite emerged in Meghalaya due to the initiatives taken by missionaries in the field of education. As it was the provincial capital of Assam, Meghalaya has had some of the top schools and colleges in the region. Currently, the state houses reputed institutes like North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Indian Institute of Management (IIM) and North Eastern Indira Gandhi Regional Institute of Health and Medical Sciences (NEIGRIHMS).

Meghalaya is predominantly an agricultural state. It is also widely known for its cottage and handicraft industries which produce exquisite cane and bamboo products. These products have now been recognized in national as well as international spheres. Handicraft products like *shylliah* or cane carpets, *mula* or cane stools, *siangdieng* or wooden cutlery, *khoh and shang* or cone and cane basket, traditional musical instruments like flutes, drums, cymbals etc. are worth mentioning.

The state has four major festivals—Shad Suk Mynsiem (dance for peace of mind) and Nongkrem dancefestival of Khasis; Wangala dance of Garos and Behdeĩnkhlam festival of Jaiñtias. These festivals are celebrated with much pomp and gaiety, grand feasts and traditional dances. Dancers wear elaborate costumes with gold jewellery. They are accompanied by musicians playing traditional instruments.



**Figure 3.8: Nongkrem dance festival (Source: syllad.com)**

As a tradition, the wooden house in the background has been built without using nails or iron fixtures

While English is the official language, Garo and Khasi are the associate official languages of the state. Garo and Khasi languages have developed and progressed considerably after the emergence of written literature, although they had a rich oral tradition. The pioneers of Khasi literature include U. Jeebon Roy, HariCharan Roy, Morkha Joseph, Radhon Singh Berry, SosoTham and MondonBareh to name a few. Among the Garo writers Harendra W. Marak and Howard Denison W. Momin are notable. Streamlet Dkhar, Esther Syiem, MinimonLaloo, AlfidarieKharsyntiew and Lucky Kharpuri are prominent women writers.

### **3.6 Mizoram:**

Mizoram is another hill state located in the extreme south of the North East. The state is of strategic importance as it shares international borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh. It also shares boundaries with Tripura, Manipur and Assam. It covers an area of around 21,087 sq. km. Amongst all Indian states, Mizoram has the highest concentration of tribal people.

Mizoram is inhabited by various tribes such as Hmar, Lushai, Paite, Lai, Mara and Ralte which are further divided into sub-clans. Other tribal groups in Mizoram include the Bru and Chakma. A sizeable proportion of Nepali people also live in different parts of the state. Christianity was introduced in Mizoram by Christian missionaries during colonial rule. It is the major religion in the state. Other religions that are practised in the state include Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. There is also a section of ethnic Mizos who have converted to Judaism. Thus, it can be rightly said that Mizoram is a land of multi-religious faiths.

Women play an active role in Mizo society and shoulder all responsibilities of the family. Earlier, women were in charge of domestic work while men dealt with defence, hunting and gathering. However, the introduction of Christianity transformed the status of women in Mizo society. Exposure to education created avenues for formal education as well as salaried jobs for women.



As far as festivals are concerned, most of them are observed collectively by the entire community. ChapcharKut and Alphaloni are festivals celebrated by the Mizos and Chakmas respectively. Both these festivals revolve around different stages of *jhum* cultivation. ChapcharKut, the most joyous festival observed by the Mizos, is heralded with the famous bamboo dance or 'Cheraw'. 'Chai' is another dance form performed during the festival which draws the young and the old. Furthermore, traditional musical instruments like Khuang(drum), bamboobased phenglawng (flute), darkhuang (gong), dar (cymbals),tingtang (hollow guitar) etc. are an integral part of festivals and celebrations. Other festivals like Bishu, Christmas, Eid, Buddha Pumima are also celebrated in the state with much gusto.

Lushai or Mizo is the most widely spoken language in Mizoram. It originates from the Kuki Chin group of languages, a branch of the Tibeto-Burman language. It is the official language of the state along with English. However, it does not have a script of its own. The script for Mizo comprises of 34 letters in Roman alphabets. The literary trend initiated by the Christian missionaries laid the foundation for Mizo language and literature. *MizoZirTir Bu*, the first Mizo book was published in 1896. Other languages prevalent in the state include Hmar, Bengali, Mara, Lakher, Thadou, Pawi, Nepali, Paite etc.



Figure 3.9: Bamboo dance (Source: thenewsmill.com)

### 3.7 Nagaland:

Nagaland is popularly known as the 'Land of Festivals' as the state rejoices in one festival or another all throughout the year. It is primarily a tribal state sharing boundaries with Myanmar, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur. It covers an area of approximately 16,579 sq. km. and has remarkable variation in its terrain.

Nagaland is home to around 16 tribes, as well as several subtribes. Ao, Chang, Angami, Lotha, Konyak, Sumi, Khiamniungam, Chakhesang, Phom, Kakari, Rangma, Yimchungru, Sangtam, Pochury, Seliang, and Kuki are the major tribes of the state. Each tribe is distinct in the sense that they have their own unique language, customs, and attire. The Naga way of life revolves around family, land, clan, *khel*, or cluster of clans, and the village.

Similar to other North-eastern states the festivals of the Nagas revolve around agriculture. The main festival of the Angami tribe is Sekrenyi. It is a festival which symbolises purification and involves singing and feasting. Moatsu is the primary festival of the Ao tribe. It is held after the sowing season when the earth is fertile. The main festival of the Chakhesang tribe is Sukrenye which involves sanctification through religious rituals and ceremonies. The Chang tribe celebrates Naknyülüm in which gifts and food items are exchanged amongst friends and relatives. Miu is the main festival of the Khiamniungam tribe. The purpose of this festival is to strengthen ties between maternal uncle and nieces/nephews. Aoleang Monyu, a spring festival observed by the Konyak tribe marks the end of the old year and a fresh new start. Monyu is the main festival of the Phom tribe in which male members of the family shower love and affection upon their married sisters or daughters and present them with the finest rice beer and food. The iconic Hornbill festival is organised annually at Kisama which has been christened as Naga Heritage Village.

Folk songs, folk tales and traditional dances are an integral part of Naga culture. The lyrics of folk songs reflect diverse themes like agricultural seasons, historical events, romance etc. Likewise, folk tales are narrations of ancestry or historical events. Traditional dances are performed by men and women in a synchronised fashion on almost all festivals or religious occasions.



**Figure 3.10: Traditional dances being performed at the Hornbill festival**

(Source: thetravelshots.com)

(Source: kindleandkompass.com)

The languages spoken by the Nagas belong to the Tibeto-Burman language group. Nagaland has a rich diversity of languages as it has almost as many languages as its tribes. However, English is the official language of the state as the dialects of regional languages are exclusive to each tribe.

### **3.8 Sikkim:**

Sikkim, a Himalayan paradise, is a small state with mesmerising mountain peaks. It shares international borders with Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal. The state was originally known as ‘Nye-mae-el’ meaning heaven. Sikkim comprises of four districts—East District, West District, South District and North District with their headquarters in Gangtok, Gyalshing, Namchi and Mangan respectively. The state covers an area of 7,096 sq. km.

The three major communities of Sikkim are Bhutias (Khampas), Lepchas (Rongs) and Nepalese. They worship nature and practise Buddhism and Hinduism. The Lepchas consider the Kanchenjunga peak as a guardian deity and mountain worship is one of the major annual events in Sikkim. People enjoy equal status irrespective of religion, gender, caste or creed. Amongst the rural folk, agriculture is the principal occupation and the crops usually cultivated include paddy, maize, millets and wheat. Animal husbandry also contributes to the rural economy. The practice of worshipping Kanchenjunga, the third highest peak in the world, is one of the most important festivals of Sikkim. The people regard the peak as a protecting deity. The deity has been depicted in Buddhist paintings with a red fiery face, riding a white snow lion holding the banner of gyaltsen or victory. The deity is adorned with ornaments and colourful attire on the day of the festival. This festival called Pang Lhabso, meaning worship of the snowy ranges was introduced by Chador Namgyal, third ruler of the Namgyal dynasty. It symbolises the victory of good over evil.

Lord Buddha's birth anniversary is observed with much pomp and show on the tenth day of the month *Vaishakha*. On this day, the Bhutia festival 'Chhechu' is also celebrated in which lamas, lamis as well as lay Buddhists pay a visit to monasteries. Among the Lepchas this festival is known as Sagadawa.

Another major festival is held at Lachen every year in which lamas wear colourful robes and dance to sacred music. This particular dance is called Chham dance in which regional musical instruments like drums and pipers are played.



**Figure 3.11: Kanchenjunga peak (Source: makemytrip.com)**



**Figure 3.12: Singhi Chham dance (Source: gosahin.com)**

Dussehra is observed by the Nepalese Hindus and Goddess Durga is also worshipped with much fervour for 15 days. Animal sacrifices are made during the occasion and people engage in cultural activities like singing and dancing. Magh Sankranti is another Hindu festival celebrated in the month of January during which people take ritualistic baths at the confluences of rivers or *sangam*.

Nepali is the *lingua franca* of the state. Hindi and English are also spoken and understood in most parts of Sikkim. Other languages used include Gurung, Bhutia, Lepcha, Sherpa, Tibetan etc.

### **3.9 Tripura:**

Just like the other North-eastern states Tripura is another representation of unity in diversity. Situated at the extreme south-west corner of North East, it is bounded by Mizoram and Assam on the north-east and Bangladesh in the north, south and west. The state is inhabited by people belonging to different ethnic groups and faiths who celebrate life through their distinct art and culture, architecture, handicrafts etc. It covers a total area of approximately 10,486 sq. km.

The state is home to both tribal as well as non-tribal communities. Indigenous tribes comprising of 19 tribal groups constitute 31.05 % of the state's population, while non-tribal communities represent 69.95% (Census 2011). The Tripuris or Debbarman communities form the vast majority of the tribal population; while Bengalis, a small number of Vishnupriya Manipuris and Meiteis constitute the non-tribal community. Tribals who are native inhabitants of the state mainly comprise of Tripuri, Jamatia, Reang, Lushai, Noatia, Chaimal, Uchai, Kuki, Halam, Mog, Chakma and Garo. The Tripuris represent the largest tribal community in the state. They mainly follow Shakti and Vaishnavism, besides worshipping their local deities with indigenous customs and ceremonies. Tribes such as Bhil, Santhal, Munda, Meiteis, Lepcha and Khasis emigrated from various places like Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, Bhutan, Meghalaya, West Bengal, Sikkim etc. The tribes mainly speak Bodo, Kuki-Chin and Arakan languages. The people are mostly involved in agriculture and the economy is predominantly agrarian. The inhabitants are skilled workers and produce exquisite handicrafts like bamboo and cane items, hand woven fabric etc.

Tripura has a vibrant culture. Different tribal groups follow their distinct traditions and rituals. Some popular festivals celebrated in the state are Kharchi, Banabihar Mela, Makar Sankranti, Durga Puja, Unakoti Mela, Garia, Khumpui, Diwali, Biju etc. The Tripuris, Reangs and Jamatias also celebrate harvest festivals like BhangniMutairenai, Bisucani and Mamita. Religious diversity is also a characteristic feature of the state.

Music and dance are an indispensable part of Tripuri culture. Most tribal groups have their distinct dance forms in which both men and women participate and musical instruments like bamboo cymbal, *kham*, *chongpreng*, *dhukuk*, *khamb*, *sumui* etc. are used. Some folk dances which reflect the state's rich cultural heritage include Hojagiri, Bizu, Wangala, Jhum, LebangBomani, Hai-Hak and Sangrai-Mog to name a few.

The most widely spoken languages are Bengali, Manipuri and Kokborok. Kokborok originated from the Tibeto-Burman language family and is written using the Bengali script. In contemporary times, Kokborok writings have received attention which has led to its development. Bengali literature is also an integral part of the state's culture. Some of the prominent authors who have made substantial contributions to Bengali and Kokborok literature are Khagesh Dev Burman, Sankha Subhra Devbarman, Nanda Kumar Debbarma, Snehamoy Roy Chowdhuri, Rabindrakishore Debbarma, Bodhrai Debbarma, Sefali Debbarma etc.



**Figure 3.13: Hojagiri dance of Tripura (Source: theteenagertoday.com)**

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