

Tribes of North-East India

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Abstract

North-East India represents one of the most significant regions of tribal habitation in the Indian subcontinent. The region comprises the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Sikkim, each inhabited by a diverse range of tribal communities. Prominent among these are the Bodo, Sonowal, Deori, Chutia, Lalung (Tiwa), Karbi, Mishing, Garo, Dimasa, Naga, Kuki, Khasi, Hajong, Rabha, and several others. These communities are primarily of Tibeto-Burman origin and exhibit distinct cultural practices, including variations in food habits, dance, music, ritual systems, and social customs.

Keywords: Tribe, food, dress, musical instruments, religion

Introduction

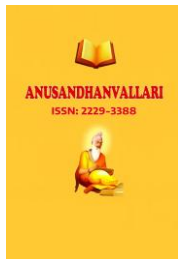
The tribes of North-East India largely belong to the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family. Each state in the region is characterized by linguistic diversity, rich folk traditions, and deeply rooted cultural practices.

Tribal Identity in North-East India

North-East India constitutes one of the most densely tribal-populated regions in India. Despite historical transformations, many tribal communities have preserved their distinct socio-cultural identities. The region, comprising Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram, is collectively referred to as North-East India.¹

The tribal populations of this region predominantly belong to the Mongoloid racial group and speak languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family. Major tribal groups include Bodo-Kachari, Rabha, Sonowal, Deori, Chutia, Tiwa, Karbi, Mishing, Garo, Mech, Dimasa, Naga, Kuki, Khasi, Hajong, and many others. Scholars have long recognized the linguistic richness of the region. As early as 1931, it was described as a “linguistic laboratory” due to its immense diversity in The 1931 Census of India, Volume III: Assam, supervised by C. S. Mullan (ICS), who served as the Census Superintendent of Assam.² Earlier observations (1884) also emphasized the region’s importance for ethnological and comparative linguistic studies. Sidney Endle, a missionary associated with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, was active in Assam during this period. In his Outline Grammar of the Kachari (Bārā) Language (1884), he observed that the ethnology and comparative philology of the region—particularly Assam—could provide significant insights. He further noted that, for students of linguistics, Assam represents a fertile and expansive field of study.³

Thus, the tribes of North-East India continue to provide a fertile ground for interdisciplinary research in anthropology, linguistics, and cultural studies, even in the twenty-first century.



Characteristics of Tribal Communities:

The tribes of North-East India, inhabiting both hills and plains, display a rich and distinctive set of characteristics shaped by their shared ethnocultural foundations and environmental context. Though linguistically diverse, most of these communities belong broadly to the Sino-Tibetan language family, reflecting a common origin beneath surface variation. Their religious life reveals a layered synthesis, with influences from Hinduism including Vaishnavism and Shaktism, as well as Buddhism and Christianity, coexisting with deep-rooted indigenous beliefs marked by animism, spirit worship, ritual sacrifice, omen interpretation, and traditional ceremonial practices. Their food habits are closely aligned with nature, with widespread consumption of meat and fish, the use of bamboo in cooking, and the preparation of rice-based alcoholic beverages that also hold ritual significance.⁴ A strong aesthetic sensibility is evident in their preference for vibrant colours such as red and deep blue and in their natural affinity for music and rhythm, expressed through diverse forms of dance and song unique to each tribe and often tied to festivals and seasonal cycles. Material culture reflects resourcefulness, with tools, weapons, and musical instruments commonly made from bamboo, wood, iron, and animal skin. Dress and ornamentation are particularly elaborate among women, who favour colourful attire and jewellery made from beads, metals, and natural materials, while both men and women may adorn themselves with items fashioned from bamboo, feathers, and bones.⁵ Shared physical and cultural traits associated with Mongoloid features are accompanied by practices such as tattooing, distinctive hairstyles, traditional housing, and specific marriage and funeral customs, alongside everyday habits like betel nut consumption and weaving on looms. Agriculturally, these communities practice both shifting cultivation or jhum in hilly regions and settled wet rice cultivation in the plains. Their craftsmanship is highly developed, with bamboo, cane, wood, and clay used to create baskets, mats, tools, household objects, and ritual items, while woodcraft extends to boats, drums, and idols. Food preparation techniques such as roasting, boiling, and smoking are common, and traditional beverages like ju, cha, chu, saj-pani, hadiya, harlang, and madhu play an integral role in both daily life and worship. Altogether, these elements illustrate how the tribes of North-East India have sustained a distinct identity rooted in language, culture, and social practice, preserving their traditional heritage with remarkable continuity despite external influences.

Tribal Communities of the Different Regions of North-East India:

Assam:

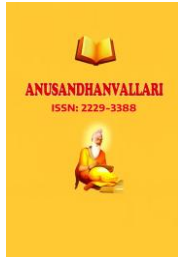
In Assam, diverse tribal communities are distributed across both the hill and plain regions. Among the principal tribes are the Bodo-Kachari, Rabha, Sonowal, Thengal, Deori, Chutiya, Lalung (Tiwa), Karbi, Mising, Garo, Mech, Dimasa, Jemi Naga, Moran, Barman, Biate, Jaintia, Khasi, Hajong, Rava, Kuki, Rangkhoh, Chingkho, Khelma, Lushai, Baite, and others.

Arunachal Pradesh:

Arunachal Pradesh is predominantly a mountainous and hilly region. The state is inhabited by approximately 82 tribes belonging to Indo-Mongoloid ethnic groups.⁶ The languages spoken by these tribes are of the Tibeto-Chinese linguistic family. Notable among them are the Khamti, Singpho, Miji, Sherdukpen, Bugun, Aka, Miri (Mishing), Adi, Nyishi, Apatani, Hill Miri, Tagin, Bangni, Nocte, Tangsa, and others.

Meghalaya:

Meghalaya comprises primarily the Garo Hills and the combined Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The overwhelming majority of the population consists of tribal communities, chiefly the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo.



Additionally, Hajong, Rabha, Tiwa, and Koch communities inhabit various parts of the state. The social organization of Meghalaya is characteristically matrilineal.

Nagaland:

Nagaland was constituted as a state of India in 1963 in accordance with constitutional provisions.⁷ A large majority of its population adheres to Christianity, while the number of Hindus remains comparatively small. The Naga population is composed of more than twenty major tribes and sub-tribes, including the Angami, Ao, Sema, Lotha, Konyak, Chakhesang, Tangkhul, Chang, Zeme, Yimchunger, Khezha, Phom, and others.

Mizoram:

Mizoram attained full statehood in 1972 under constitutional arrangements. The population is predominantly tribal in composition. Among these, the Lushai (Mizo) constitute the largest group. Other tribal groups include the Mara, Paite, Ralte, Hmar, Lai, Chakma, and others. The majority of the inhabitants profess Christianity, whereas the Chakmas have long adhered to Hinduism.

Manipur:

Manipur was granted full statehood in 1972. The Meitei (Manipuri) constitute the ancient inhabitants of the valley region. In the hill areas, approximately twenty-nine groups of Naga and Kuki tribes are found. The majority of the population follows Hinduism, although a section has embraced Christianity.

Tripura:

Tripura achieved full statehood in 1975 in accordance with constitutional provisions. The indigenous tribal inhabitants include the Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, and others, who belong to the Bodo group. Traditionally, these communities follow Hinduism. However, due to the influx of non-tribal populations, the tribal communities have, at present, been reduced to a minority.

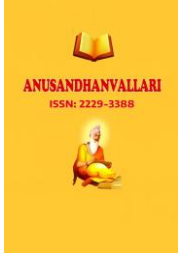
Sikkim:

Sikkim constitutes another state within the North-Eastern region. According to the 2011 Census, its total population stands at 610,577.⁸ The principal tribal communities include the Nepali, Bhutia, Lepcha, Gurung, Limbu, Magar, Sunwar, Newar, Rai, Sherpa, Tamang, and others. Their proportional distribution is approximately as follows: Rai (13.4%), Limbu (9.79%), Bhutia (8.57%), Lepcha (7.94%), Tamang (6.80%), and Gurung (5.87%).⁹

These communities have long inhabited the mountainous regions of Sikkim and have continued to preserve their linguistic, cultural, and traditional heritage from ancient times to the present.

Conclusion:

The tribal communities of North-East India embody a rich and complex cultural heritage. Their identity is shaped by language, tradition, and social practices, which have been preserved over centuries. Despite external influences and modern transformations, these communities have retained their distinctiveness. Their cultural systems not only define their identity but also contribute significantly to the broader cultural landscape of India. Understanding these communities is essential for appreciating the diversity and continuity of human civilization in this region. Future research must continue to explore and document their evolving cultural dynamics while ensuring the preservation of their unique heritage.



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