
UNIT 2 SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ETHNIC PROFILE OF THE REGION*

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the socio-cultural and ethnic profiles of different states in Northeast India; and
- Compare the profiles of different states.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Several ethnic groups inhabit every state in Northeast India. These groups are formed based on the social and cultural features of communities. There are three types of ethnic groups in the states of northeast India: indigenous tribes, non-tribal local communities, non-tribal migrants. The region is endowed with natural resources, which are also ingredients of cultural profiles of tribal groups. The ethnic groups follow different religions, speak dialects or languages, and celebrate festivals. Although each state in the Northeast has a substantial population of specific ethnic groups, these groups also exist in the neighbouring

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states. This unit deals with the socio-cultural and ethnic profiles of the states in Northeast India.

2.2 ETHNIC GROUPS IN NORTHEAST INDIA

This section elaborates upon the socio-cultural profiles of the communities in the states of Northeast India.

2.2.1 Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh is inhabited by the world's largest variety of ethnic tribal groups and sub-groups. It has 26 major tribes with more than 100 minor tribes. Each tribe speaks their own language or dialect. The languages spoken by the tribes are named after them. The principal tribes of the state are Adis, Nyishi, Apatani, Tagin, Mismi, Khampti, Noite, Wancho, Tangsha, Singpho, Monpa, Aka etc. Crafts such as weaving, pottery, smithy work and basketry symbolize the rich tradition of Arunachal Pradesh. Ethnic tribes such as Khamptis, Monpas, Khambas and Membas have their own script. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh follow a tradition of collecting folk songs, tales and lore. According to the 2011 census, there are 29.04 % Hindus, 30.26 % Christians and 1.95 % Muslims in Arunachal Pradesh. Those tribal who are categorized as Hindus by the Census are actually followers of their tribal religion. Let us look at the brief profiles of some tribes such as the Adis, Nyshisis, the Khamptis, the Singhpos.

The Adis

The Adis constitute one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. They inhabit largely the lower part of Lower Dibang Valley district (especially Roing and Dambuk areas), and east, west and Upper Siang districts of the state. Indigenous groups such as Padams, Milangs, Komkars, Minyongs and Pasis call themselves as Adi, meaning hill people. Earlier, the Adis were known as Abors. The Adis are basically dependent on agriculture. Besides, fishing and hunting are also carried out to supplement food. Adi practices animism – worshipping nature, deity, spirit. In order to protect and preserve indigenous beliefs and practices, the Adis revived their ancient religion called Donyi-Polo and launched a movement for its revival in 1968 (Chaudhury 2013). Folk dances are performed as part of important rituals during festivals and other occasions in Adi society.

The Nyishi

Earlier, the Nyishi were known as Dafla. They have their own culture and tradition. Forests and *Mithun*, sacred animal, are an inherent part of their cultural and economic life. *Nyokum Yullo* is a festival celebrated by the Nyishi tribe. They celebrate this festival to worship Goddess *Nyokum* to protect crops from insects and animals and save human beings from misfortune.

The Tai- Khamptis

The Tai-Khamptis inhabit the Namsai district of Arunachal Pradesh. They follow *Hinayana* Buddhism. The Tai-Khamptis are the only tribe in the state known to have their own script called "Tai script". Their main occupation is agriculture.

The Khampti dance is also one of the important symbols of the Tai-Khamptis. The Khampti dance is a mixture of both dance and drama. It reflects the rich culture of the Buddhists and other different stories of moral values. Another popular dance form of Khampti is the “Cockfight dance”.

2.2.2 Assam

Assam consists of diverse ethnic communities – tribals, non-tribals, Asamiyas and Bengalis. The tribal groups are plain tribes, hill tribes, and tea tribes. The plain tribes of Assam are Barmans, Bodos (Bodokacharis), Deori, Hojai, Sonowal Kacharis, Lalung, Mech, Miri (Mising), Rabha, Dimasa, Hajong, Singpho, Khamti, Garo. Bodos are the largest among the plain tribes. Bodos is a generic term used for some tribes, who prefer to be known by their individual identity. Bodos claim to be the original inhabitants of Assam. Sonowal Kacharis largely inhabit the districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji. Misings are other ethnic tribes of Assam that are mostly concentrated in Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sivasagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur. The principal hill tribes of Assam are Karbis and Dimasa, who inhabit the Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts of Assam. Other hill tribes that inhabit Assam are Garos, Hajongs, Hmars, Khasis, Jaintias, Synteng/Pnar/War/Bhoi/Lyngngam, and Kukis. Tea tribes of Assam are also known as Adivasis. They are descendants of indentured labourers who migrated to work in a tea plantation during the colonial period. They migrated largely from Chhotanagpur (contemporary Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh). Most of them belong to Munda, Oraon, Santhal tribes. They are called by the generic name of tea tribes because they work in more than 800 tea gardens. They largely inhabit the districts of Sonitpur, Darang, Nagoan, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Cachar, Hailakandi, Karimganj and Tinsukhia. In Assam, the tea tribes are not Scheduled Tribes because they are not the original inhabitants or indigenous to Assam. But they are classified as OBCs in the central list (Sharma 2018). Asamiyas refers to those inhabitants of Assam who speak Assamese, both Hindus and Muslims. In the 1980s, Assamiyas came to be alluded to as “ethnic Assamese” (Baruah 1999:p. xvii). The largest population of Bengalis inhabits the districts of Barak valley. According to the 2011 census, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Buddhists constitute 61.47 %, 34.22 %, 3.74 % and 0.18 per cent of Assam’s population. Besides, Assam has non- tribal descendants of migrants such as Marwaris, Biharis, Punjabi Sikhs, Nepalis and so on. Besides, there is a large number of descendants of Muslim peasants who had migrated to Assam during the colonial period inhabits districts such as Dhubri, Barpeta, Nowgong, Mangaldai, and Nalbari.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

1) Discuss the features of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.

2) Briefly discuss the profile of tribes of Assam.

2.2.3 Meghalaya

There are broadly two kinds of ethnic groups in Meghalaya: the indigenous tribes and non-tribals. There are three main tribes in Meghalaya - the Khasis, the Garos, and Jaintias in Jaintias. Jaintias are also known as Pnars. The Khasis along with the Pnars form a group named Khasi-Pnar. The population of the three tribes of Meghalaya is concentrated in the Khasi hills, Garo hills and Jaintia hills. The other tribals who live in Meghalaya are Hajong, Rabha, Bodo, and others. The non-tribals are descendants of those migrants that came to the area prior to independence or following the partition, besides those who are migrants to the state after independence due to occupation, employment and business purposes. The latter consist of Bengalis, Marwaris, South Indians, Biharis, Nepalis, Sikhs (in Shillong). The non-tribals largely inhabit cities such as Shillong, although they are found in other areas of the state too. The common trait binding all these three tribal communities is its matrilineal system in which the family lineage is taken from the mother's side. All three tribes of Meghalaya follow the matrilineal system. Besides, there are Muslim Khasis too. The traditional Khasi religion is known as Niam. However, most of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garols profess Christianity to which they were converted during the colonial period. Meghalaya is the only matrilineal society in the north-eastern region. In this system, the lineage of the family is traced through the mother of the child. Younger daughter (Khaduh) is the custodian of family property and inheritor of family property. The child bears the title of the mother, and the husband moves to the wife's parental residence after marriage. Women have no political representation in traditional political institutions. Their representation in the legislative assembly or parliament is also negligible.

The Khasis constitute about 50 per cent population of the state. According to the Khasi mythology, the Khasis owe their origin to seven huts or *Hynnewtrep*. According to 2011 Census, Christians, Hindus and Muslims 74.59 %, 11.53 % and 4.40 % respectively form population in Meghalaya.

Festivals also are important symbols of the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya. Different festivals are held at different places in the state of Meghalaya at different periods of the year. A five day long religious festival of the Khasis, *Ka Pembrang*

Nongkrem dance, popularly known as Nongkrem dance, is held annually at a village called Smit, 12 km from Shillong. The festival is celebrated to commemorate the evolution of the traditional Khasi state known as *Hima*. Another festival of the Khasis is held at Shillong during the second week of April. *Behdiengkhlam*, the most important and colourful festival of the Jaintias is celebrated annually at Jowai in Jaintia Hills in the month of July. *Wangla* festival is observed for a week to honour Saljong (Sun-God) by the Garos during October-November.

2.3.4 Manipur

The major ethnic group in Manipur are Meities who live in the plains, while the hills are inhabited by tribes such as Nagas, Kukis and Chins. Meitei Pangals (Meitei –Muslims) are an important component of the population. Apart from these tribes, some other Scheduled Tribes such as - Aimol, Anal, Angami, Chiru, Chothee, Gangte, Hmar, Kabui Kom, Mizo, Lush, Mao, Monsang, etc also inhabit Manipur. People of Manipur speak the Tibeto-Burman language. The Meitei language is the mother tongue of the Meitei people and is the lingua-franca of the state, whereas English is the official language and the language of conducting business. A festival popularly known as *Sangai Festival* is held annually for fifteen days at Palace Ground, Imphal, in which central /state government offices, private entrepreneurs and co-operative societies build their stalls to showcase their products. In that festival, along with other dances “Maibi” dance, the folk dance of Manipur is also performed by the local artists. Leading organizations dealing with handicrafts, wood carving and readymade garments etc., from the adjoining countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Bangladesh, South Korea, Japan, and even America also participate in this festival. Besides, each ethnic group of Manipur has its own distinct culture and traditions. The culture and traditions are reflected in its dances, music, customary practices. Some of the classical dances of Manipur include *Raas Leela*, *Nupa Pala*, *Pung Cholom*, *Khamba Thoibi* Dance etc. The *Raas Leela* dance is performed in an enclosure in front of the temple throughout the night.

2.2.5 Mizoram

Mizo is a generic term for the tribes and lives Mizoram/Mizo hills. There are five major tribes Lushei, Ralte, Hmar, Paite, Pawis (formerly known as Lais) - and 11 minor tribes. Broadly various tribes which were referred to as “Kuki-Chin-Lushai” during the colonial period who are spread across states of Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur, Assam as well as Bangladesh, and Burma. According to Pachuau (2018: p. 11), the Mizo identity is a “situational identity”. The groups which consider themselves Mizos in Mizoram, such as Hmars and Paites, may not consider themselves to be Mizos elsewhere. The Maras (formerly Lakhers) and Pawis also want to be called Mizos. Chins from Myanmar consider themselves to Mizos. Mizos in Mizoram also accept the Chins of Myanmar as Mizos. In this context, the Mizoram Chief Minister extended help in 2021 to the Chin migrants/refugees from Myanmar as Mizo fellow tribals. The latter consider Aizawl as their cultural capital – their *Zawlkhawpui*.

In terms of ethnicity and language, Mizos are characterized as “Tibeto-Burman”. *Duhlian* language is the *lingua franca* of Mizos is an official language along with English. Death rituals and Christianity form important ingredients of the Mizo culture. Death defines the identity of person as Mizo or not: a Mizo is allowed to be buried in their burial place, and non-Mizo is not. It also applies to a person who was born Mizo but ceased to be so due some reason or the other (Pachauu 2018). Bamboo cultivation, though related to the economy, is also an important part of Mizo food culture. Bamboo is a food supplement for Mizos. The flowering of bamboos which is called *Mautam* occurs every fifty years. It leads to a rise in the number of rodents after they consume the seeds from the flowers. A large number of rodents devour bamboo crops, resulting in food shortages, and finally, famine in the late 1950s (Sajal Nag 2008).

The famine led to the Mizo insurgency during the 1960s-1980s that ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1986. According to the 2011 census, 87.16 % of Mizos are Christians, 2.75 % of the inhabitants are Hindus, and 1.35 % are Muslims. There are some followers of Buddhism, especially the Chakmas. Along with New Year’s Day and Christmas Day, they also celebrate some other festivals. Popular dances of Mizoram include –the *Cheraw* (Bamboo dance), *Khuallam*, *Solakia* and *Chheih Lam* which symbolize the Mizo culture. The Mizo code of ethics focuses on “*Tlawmngaihna*,”. It means that it is the obligation of all members of society to be hospitable, kind, unselfish and helpful to others.

2.2.6 Nagaland

There are 16 main tribes in the state – Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Chang, Chiru, Khiemnungam, Konyak, Lotha, Makware, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Sema, Tikhir, Yimchugre, and Zeliang. Though each of these has its distinct identity, they are known by generic terms Naga. According to the 2011 census, Christians form 87.9 %, Hindus form 8.7 % and Muslims form 2.5 % of the population in Nagaland. Several languages are spoken in Nagaland. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. According to the 2011 census, the major languages spoken in Nagaland are Konyak, Ao, Lotha, Angami, Chokri, Sangtam, Bengali, Zeme, Yimchunge, Chang, Khiamniungan, Rengma, Phom. Folk songs and dances are essential ingredients of the traditional Naga culture. The state of Nagaland is famous for celebrating different festivals. One such festival is the “Hornbill Festival”. The Government of Nagaland launched it in December 2000 with the aim of encouraging inter-tribal interaction and also promoting the cultural heritage of the state.

2.2.7 Tripura

Tripura generally has two types of ethnic groups: tribals (indigenous people) and non-tribals. The tribals form around 19 main tribes along with several sub-tribes. The major tribes of Tripura include Tripuri, Reang, Chakma, Halam, Garo, Lusei and Darlong. According to the 2011 census, 83.40 %, 8.60% and 4.35% population of Tripura are Hindus, Muslims and Christians, respectively. The indigenous communities form around 30 per cent of the population of Tripura.

Bengalis form the largest ethnic group in Tripura. The larger share of Bengalis in Tripura resulted from the migration of Bengali speaking people after partition. Bengali culture and tribal traditional practices coexist to constitute “Tripuri Culture”. Bengali is the most spoken language due to the predominance of Bengali people in the state. Kokborok language is spoken by the majority of the tribal communities. Music and dances are an integral part of Tripura’s tribal communities. Each tribal community has its own songs and dances.

2.2.8 Sikkim

There are three major ethnic groups in Sikkim: Nepalis, Bhutias, and Lepchas are the three major languages spoken in Sikkim. The Lepchas were the original inhabitants of Sikkim; The Bhutias migrated from Bhutan in the seventeenth century, and Nepalese started migrating into Sikkim in the nineteenth century. The movement of the Bhutias began in the region from Tibet in the 14th century, when the kingdom of Sikkim was established in 1642. As you have read in Unit 1, Sikkim became part of the Indian Union in 1975, and earlier, it had existed as the protectorate of India. From the later nineteenth century, as the Sikkim monarchy was a British protectorate, Sikkim ethnic composition changed. Due to the migration of Nepalese into Sikkim encouraged by the colonial authorities, the Nepalese had become the single largest ethnic group in Sikkim, reducing the population of other ethnic groups.

All the three major ethnic groups, the Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese of Sikkim, have their own languages. Besides, several dialects are prevalent among the different Nepali castes like Gurung, Rai, Tamang Mukhia, Newer, Manger, Sherpa etc. However, Nepali is the lingua franca of the state because the majority of the population belongs to the Nepali community. The official languages of the state are English, Nepali, Sikkimese (Bhutia) and Lepcha. Buddhism and Hinduism are two main religions followed in Sikkim. Most of the Lepchas and Bhutias are Buddhists. The majority of Nepalese are Hindus. There are more than seventy monasteries in Sikkim. Folk dances, customs and traditions of different ethnic tribes and caste constitute cultural markers of Sikkim. *Pang Lhabsol* is one of the festivals celebrated by Bhutia communities. Through this festival, they offer gratitude to Mount Kanchendzonga. Mount Kanchendzonga is considered as a protector of the state.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Which tribes in Northeast India have a matrilineal system, and what are its features?

- 2) Mention the major ethnic groups of Sikkim.

2.3 LET US SUM UP

Northeast India is the most diverse region of the country. There are broadly three kinds of ethnic groups in the region: indigenous ethnic groups or tribes; non-tribals who have been residing in the region for several years, and descendents of migrants who came to the region from the nineteenth century. Each of the groups has its distinct social and cultural profile reflected in language, dance, way of worship and festivals, etc. Although every state in the Northeast has several ethnic groups, some of these groups are larger in size and politically more active than other groups. Arunachal Pradesh is ethnically most diverse state in India with ethnic groups having specific cultural symbols. In Assam, among such groups are included the non-tribals such as Assamese speaking Asamiya and Bengali speaking Bengalis, and descents of migrants speaking their languages or dialects; and, tribals such Bodos in the plains, and Karbis and Dimasa Cacharis in the hills of the state. They speak their own languages which are different from Assamese and Bengalis. Three principal tribes of Meghalaya – the Khasis, Garos and Jaintias can be distinguished by existence of matrilineal system among them. Nagaland consists of several tribes which are known by generic term Naga. Among their festivals “hornbill” is remarkable. The principal ethnic groups in Manipur are Meities and Nagas. The former live in the valley. The latter live in the hills. Three principal ethnic groups in Sikkim – Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese represent the social and cultural profile of the state. Tripura’s socio-cultural and ethnic profile is represented by several tribals who speak the Kokborok language and Bengalis who speak the Bengali language.

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2.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Exercise 1

- 1) Adis, who were known as Abors, are one of the major ethnic groups of Arunachal Pradesh. Adis means hill people. Indigenous tribes such as Padams, Milangs, Komkars, Minyongs and Pasis consider themselves as Adis. Their principal economic activities include tilling land, fishing and hunting. They practice animism. In 1968, they started a movement known as "Donyi Ploism" for the protection and preservation of their culture.
- 2) There are broadly three types of tribes in Assam: the plain area tribes, the hill tribes and tea tribes. The plain tribes such as Barmans, Boro (Borokacharis), Deori, Hojai, Sonowal Kacharis, Lalung, Mech, Mrit (Miching), Rabha, Dimasa, Hajong, Singpho, Khamti, Garo inhabit plain

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areas of Assam. Bodos constitute the largest tribe in the plain areas of Assam. They claim to be the original inhabitants of Assam. It is a generic term used for some tribes. Karbis and Dimasa Cacharis inhabit the hills of Assam in Karbi Anglong and Dimasa Hasao district. Munda, Oraon, Santhal tribes Tea tribes are descendents of tea plantation workers who had migrated to Assam from other states of India such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal during the colonial period.

Check Your Exercise 2

1. Matrilineal system is followed by three tribes of Meghalaya – the Khasis, Garos and Jaintias. In this system, the lineage of a family is traced through the mother of the child. Youngest daughter is the inheritor and custodian of family property. Child adopts the name of the mother's clan. After marriage, the husband moves to wife's parental residence.
2. There are three main ethnic groups in Sikkim: the Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese. Nepalese are the largest group among them.



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