

**MASTER OF ARTS  
SOCIOLOGY  
CENTRE FOR OPEN AND  
DISTANCE LEARNING  
(CODL)**



**MSO 404: SOCIOLOGY OF NORTHEAST  
INDIA  
BLOCK I**

**CENTRE FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING  
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY (A CENTRAL UNIVERSITY)  
TEZPUR, ASSAM - 784028  
INDIA**

### **Vision**

**To grow to be a leading centre for human resource development through distance, open and universal learning system.**

### **Mission**

**To provide quality higher education at door step through barrierless, flexible and open learning mode in conformity with national priority and societal need.**

### **Objective**

- **To offer degree, diploma, certificate level programme of study through distance learning in various emerging subjects across the disciplines.**
- **To offer job oriented and vocational programmes in flexible terms in the line of the national and regional level demand of manpower.**
- **To offer various programmes under lifelong learning contributing to the local and regional level requirements and as per the need of the society at large.**
- **To undertake various research and academic activities for furtherance of distance education in the region.**
- **To contribute to conserve and promote cultural heritage, literature, traditional knowledge and environment conducting short programmes, workshops, seminars and research in interdisciplinary field.**

# **MSO 404: SOCIOLOGY OF NORTHEAST INDIA**



**CENTRE FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING**

**TEZPUR UNIVERSITY (A CENTRAL UNIVERSITY)**

**TEZPUR, ASSAM-784028**

**INDIA**

## **MSO-404: SOCIOLOGY OF NORTHEAST INDIA**

### **ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

Prof. Rabin Deka	Professor and Head, Department of Sociology, Tezpur University
Prof. Chandan Kumar Sharma	Professor, Department of Sociology, Tezpur University
Prof. Kedilezo Kikhi	Professor, Department of Sociology, Tezpur University
Dr Amiya Kumar Das	Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Tezpur University
Ms Ankita Bhattacharyya	Assistant Professor, Centre for Open and Distance Learning, Tezpur University

### **CONTRIBUTOR**

<b>Module I &amp; II</b>	Ms Priyanka Borah	Lecturer, Department of Sociology, DHS Kanoi College, Dibrugarh
--------------------------	-------------------	---

### **EDITOR**

Prof. Chandan Kumar Sharma	Professor, Department of Sociology, Tezpur University
----------------------------	---

*Copyright © reserved with Centre for Open and Distance Learning (CODL), Tezpur University. No part of this work may be reproduced in any form, by mimeograph or any other means, without permission in writing from CODL.*

*Any other information about CODL may be obtained from the Office of the CODL, Tezpur University, Tezpur-784028, Assam.*

Published by the Director on behalf of the Centre for Open and Distance Learning, Tezpur University, Assam.

# BLOCK I

## TABLE OF CONTENT

### **MODULE I: NORTHEAST INDIA AS A CATEGORY**

**UNIT 1: GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF  
NORTHEAST INDIA**

**UNIT 2: CULTURAL SPECIFICITIES OF NORTHEAST  
INDIA**

**UNIT 3: NORTHEAST INDIA AS A CONCEPTUAL  
CATEGORY: EMERGENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF  
THE TERM**

### **MODULE II: SOCIAL FORMATION OF NORTHEAST INDIA**

**UNIT 4: TRADITIONAL SOCIETY, POLITY AND  
ECONOMY OF NORTHEAST INDIA**

**UNIT 5: TRIBE-CASTE INTERACTION, ADVENT OF  
CHRISTIANITY**

**UNIT 6: EMERGENCE OF MIDDLE CLASS**

**UNIT 7: PROCESS OF NATIONALITY FORMATION**

<b>MODULE I: NORTHEAST INDIA AS A CATEGORY</b>	
<b>UNIT 1: GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF NORTHEAST INDIA</b>	<b>4-20</b>
1.1 Introduction 1.2 Objectives 1.3 Geography: Geopolitical Location of Northeast India 1.3.1 Significant Key Events in Crafting of the States 1.3.2 Briefly on the States 1.4. Social Aspects of Northeast India 1.5 Summing up 1.6 Questions 1.7 Recommended Readings and References	
<b>UNIT 2: CULTURAL SPECIFICITIES OF NORTHEAST INDIA</b>	<b>21-38</b>
2.1 Introduction 2.2 Objectives 2.3 Cultural Plurality and Identity 2.4 Cultural Specificities of Northeast India 2.4.1 Arunachal Pradesh 2.4.2 Assam 2.4.3 Manipur 2.4.4 Meghalaya 2.4.5 Mizoram 2.4.6 Nagaland 2.4.7 Tripura 2.4.8 Sikkim 2.5 Summing Up 2.6 Questions	

<b>2.7 Recommended Readings and References</b>	
<b>UNIT 3: NORTHEAST INDIA AS A CONCEPTUAL CATEGORY: EMERGENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TERM</b>	
	<b>39-52</b>
<b>3.1 Introduction</b>	
<b>3.2 Objectives</b>	
<b>3.3 Northeast: The Emergence and Significance of the Term</b>	
<b>3.3.1 Northeast: The Evolution of the Term</b>	
<b>3.4 An Outline of the Evolution of Northeast India from a Historical Perspective</b>	
<b>3.4.1 Pre-colonial Period</b>	
<b>3.4.2 Colonial Period</b>	
<b>3.4.3 Post-colonial Period</b>	
<b>3.5 Summing Up</b>	
<b>3.6 Questions</b>	
<b>3.7 Recommended Readings and References</b>	
<b>MODULE II: SOCIAL FORMATION OF NORTHEAST INDIA</b>	
<b>UNIT 4: TRADITIONAL SOCIETY, POLITY AND ECONOMY OF NORTHEAST INDIA</b>	
	<b>54-70</b>
<b>4.1 Introduction</b>	
<b>4.2 Objectives</b>	
<b>4.3 Traditional Society in Northeast India</b>	
<b>4.3.1 Traditional Family</b>	
<b>4.3.2 Traditional Kinship</b>	
<b>4.3.3 Traditional Marriage</b>	
<b>4.4 Political and Economic Scenario of Northeast India</b>	

<b>4.4.1 Political Condition</b> <b>4.4.2 Economic Condition</b> <b>4.5 Summing Up</b> <b>4.6 Questions</b> <b>4.7 Recommended Readings and References</b>	
<b>UNIT 5: TRIBE-CASTE INTERACTION, ADVENT OF CHRISTIANITY</b>	<b>71-80</b>
<b>5.1 Introduction</b> <b>5.2 Objectives</b> <b>5.3 Tribe-Caste Interaction</b> <b>5.3.1 Advent of Neo-Vaishnavism</b> <b>5.4 Advent of Christianity in Northeast India</b> <b>5.5 Summing Up</b> <b>5.6 Questions</b> <b>5.7 Recommended Readings and References</b>	
<b>UNIT 6: EMERGENCE OF MIDDLE CLASS</b>	<b>81-93</b>
<b>6.1 Introduction</b> <b>6.2 Objectives</b> <b>6.3 The Middle Class: Meaning</b> <b>6.4 Emergence of the Middle Class in India</b> <b>6.5 Emergence of the Middle Class in Northeast India</b> <b>6.5.1 Emergence of the Assamese Middle Class</b> <b>6.6 The Role of the Middle Class in Nation Building</b> <b>6.7 Summing Up</b> <b>6.8 Questions</b> <b>6.9 Recommended Readings and References</b>	



<b>UNIT 7: PROCESS OF NATIONALITY FORMATION</b>		<b>94-107</b>
<b>7.1 Introduction</b>		
<b>7.2 Objectives</b>		
<b>7.3 Northeastern States: The Beginning</b>		
<b>7.3.1 Formation of the Northeastern States</b>		
<b>7.4. Process of Nationality Formation</b>		
<b>7.4.1 Assamese Nationality Formation and the Role of the Tribal Groups</b>		
<b>7.4.2 Sub-Nationalism</b>		
<b>7.6 Summing Up</b>		
<b>7.7 Questions</b>		
<b>7.8 Recommended Readings and References</b>		

\*\*\*\*\*

## **COURSE INTRODUCTION**

This course seeks to introduce the learners to the social and political processes in the north-eastern region of India. It historicizes the concept of Northeast India and the processes of political and socio-cultural formations of the region. It explains the traditional land relations in Northeast India, the main axis of traditional social organisation in the region. It also discusses the changes in traditional land relations and emerging social consequences. The learners will also get familiarized with the contemporary socio-political processes and the challenges they pose to the state.

The course is divided into four modules, each consisting of multiple units. This has been done to discuss the major concepts more elaborately and in a learner-friendly way.

**Module I** gives an introduction to Northeast India. It will help the learners to understand Northeast India as a category. It consists of three units. **Unit 1** deals with the geographical and social aspects of Northeast India. The learners will get a grasp of the unique geopolitical location of Northeast India along with the diverse social aspects. **Unit 2** discusses the cultural specificities of Northeast India. The unit will focus on some major tribal and ethnic groups of Northeast India to understand the unique cultural specificities of the region. **Unit 3**, on the other hand, will help the learners to look at Northeast India as a conceptual category, focusing on the emergence and significance of the term.

**Module II** is about the social formation of Northeast India. **Unit 4** deals with the basis of traditional societies of Northeast India and their various functional components along with the polity and economy of the region. **Unit 5** deals with tribe-caste interaction in Northeast India. The unit also explores the advent of Christianity and the subsequent developments in the region. **Unit 6** discusses the emergence of the middle class and its

significant role in the context of Northeast India. **Unit 7**, on the other hand, explores the process of nationality formation in Northeast India.

**Module III** focuses on land relations in Northeast India. **Unit 8** deals with the pattern of land ownership and social stratification in the region during the pre-colonial period while **Unit 9** discusses the colonial period, focusing on the emergence of modern land system in the region. The post-colonial developments in the context of land relations are covered in **Unit 10**. **Unit 11** will help the learners to have a clear grasp of state and society in Northeast India.

**Module IV** explores the issues of identity in Northeast India. **Unit 12** discusses identity assertion in Northeast India. The unit will help the learners to understand the fluid character of society in Northeast India and how identities get moulded and enacted in a shared situation. **Unit 13** deals tribal autonomy and homeland politics. On the other hand, **Unit 14** deals with the important topic of immigration in Northeast India. The unit will help the learners to explore the debatable question of indigenous-immigrant in the region.

The complete course is divided into two Blocks. **Block I** contains Module I and II. **Block II** will have Module III and IV.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **MODULE I: NORTHEAST INDIA AS A CATEGORY**

---

## **UNIT 1: GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF NORTHEAST INDIA**

---

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

1.1 Introduction

1.2 Objectives

1.3 Geography: Geopolitical Location of Northeast India

1.3.1 Significant Key Events in Crafting of the States

1.3.2 Briefly on the States

1.4. Social Aspects of Northeast India

1.5 Summing up

1.6 Questions

1.7 Recommended Readings and References

---

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this Unit, we shall discuss in detail the geographical and social aspects of Northeast India. As we know, Northeast India (NEI) or Northeast Region is comprised of eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram and Sikkim. These states are located in the North East of the country and command special importance in India, not only because of their location but also their cultural and historical uniqueness.

The northeast region has vast natural resources and has a high potential for development in multiple dimensions. As the region comprises of 8 states, there is diversity in every aspect, ranging from diverse cultures, and economic structure to geopolitical positions. Today, NEI stands as a fine

example of unity in diversity. In this Unit, we will discuss the geographical as well as the social aspects of Northeast India, keeping in view the various geopolitical significance and social aspects of this region.

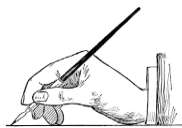
NEI occupies a strategic geopolitical position. The region shares more than five thousand kilometres long international boundaries with 5 foreign countries namely Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, Bhutan and Nepal. Before 2002, there were only seven states in Northeast India and they were together called as the 'Seven Sisters' excluding Sikkim. It was only after 2002 that Sikkim was included as a separate state of the Northeast Region. Surrounded by hills and beautiful rivers, this region is not only rich in natural resources, but also in its natural beauty including flora and fauna, hills and plains and other geographical features that provide a beautiful landscape. Nature has blessed this region with an abundance of natural resources in the form of coal, oil, medicinal plants, tea, etc.

Physiographically, this region is estimated to have more hill areas than valleys. The valleys can be found in Brahmaputra and Barak valley plains, Eastern Himalayas and the North-East Hills (Patkai, Naga Hills and Lushai Hills). The hills and basins are a mixture of mountain ranges, plateaus and low hills. James Scott, an American political scientist and anthropologist, in his book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland South East Asia*, mentions a place called "Zomia" (the term was first used by Willem van Schendel in 2002, the exact boundary of this area differs among scholars, however, this area can be defined as a mountainous region that consists of different portions of seven Asian countries with thousands of marginal people) - where large groups of ethnic communities reside as refugees who came running away from the states. Scott, in this book, tries to explain why people deliberately wanted statelessness. He further shows that there is a sharp division between the hills and the plains.

Geographically, NEI can be divided into two parts: plains and the hills. The region comprises of both tribal and non-tribal population. The tribal communities in the region are further divided into the 'plains tribe',

inhabiting the Brahmaputra and the Barak valleys and the ‘hill tribes’. The Northeast Region is a melting pot or a mosaic of vastly different ethnic groups, culture, religious beliefs and practices, customs, languages, etc. It also has diversity in terms of climate, topography and demography with its states having their own historical interpretations and political significance. NEI holds an important area of sociological studies because of its diverse geopolitical and social importance. Not only the larger structures have significance but the different segments like tribes and their ethnic groups, religion, kinship systems, marriage systems, etc. also have immense functional importance in the region. We will discuss these in detail in the subsequent sections.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



1. When was Sikkim included as the eighth Northeast Indian state?

-----

2. Who wrote *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland South East Asia*?

-----

---

### 1.2 OBJECTIVES

---

By the end of this Unit, you will able:

- Discuss the geographical aspects of Northeast India;
- Explain its unique geopolitical location;
- Explain the social aspects of Northeast India;
- Analyse the geographical location and social dimensions of Northeast India.

---

### 1.3 GEOGRAPHY: GEOPOLITICAL LOCATION OF NORTHEAST INDIA

---

As the word suggests, “geopolitical” here, means an amalgamation of the geographical and political specificities of a region or a state. The term was first used by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in his book *Discovery of India*. NEI is the easternmost region of India, located between 20° North latitude - 29°30’ North latitude and 89°46’ East latitude – 97°30’ East latitude. This region has both geopolitical and administrative importance. North-East region covers an area of 2, 62, 230 Sq. km., accounting for 8 percent of India’s total geographical area. With a total population of 45 million, the Northeast is home to around 3.8 per cent of the country’s total population. As mentioned, the region shares its international boundaries with other major neighbouring countries starting with China (Tibet) and Bhutan to its north, Nepal to its west, Myanmar to its east, Bangladesh (some parts of Bangladesh and Myanmar that consist of hills and plains) to its south and to its west lies Bangladesh and West Bengal. The region is today connected with the rest of India by a 22 kilometre land corridor through Siliguri in the state of West Bengal which is referred to as the ‘Chicken’s Neck’. This narrow tract and sharing of the international boundaries make this region geopolitically very significant.

The shape of NEI is like an inverse triangle. The region towards its north and east is surrounded by hills and large mountains; it is only to the west that this region experience plain valleys. Because of its location and terrain, the north-eastern part of India has remained isolated from communicating with mainstream India and in the process has failed to secure equal benefits in terms of development. In addition to this, migration of people in the various periods of history from different regions of India as well as from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Burma, etc. have added to the population of North East India causing havoc. However, in general, the population of this region consists of the indigenous people that are regarded as the original native people of this region, with many other ethnic groups and communities. While the region has a lower level of industrial and



economic development, it is rich in biodiversity and has abundant forest resources with 52 per cent of this region covered with forest and greeneries. Petroleum and tea are two significant resources harnessed in the region. At the same time, agriculture, horticulture and handloom continue to be the main activities of states of NEI.

Physiographically the North East Region can be divided into three divisions:

- The Plateau Region- it consists of Meghalaya Plateau and Karbi Plateau.
- The Hills and Mountains- comprising of Arunachal Himalaya and Patkai-Purvanchal hills.
- The Plains- it comprises of the Brahmaputra plain, the Barak plain, the Tripura plain and Manipur plain.

([www.shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in](http://www.shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in))

As said earlier, North-East India has not only diversity among people and in geographical locations but, also in climatic conditions. It has a tropical climate. The soil is alluvial in the plains of Brahmaputra and Barak in Assam, the Manipur plain and the plains of Tripura. Some areas of the hills also have red soil in lower altitudes and mountain soil in mountains. Agriculture is the primary basis of livelihood in North East India. Several food crops and tropical cash crops are also grown. The region is also rich in mineral resources like coal, petroleum, natural gas, limestone, iron ore, etc. Overall, the region has geostrategic importance with communication infrastructure, connecting this region with the other parts of India through roadways, railways, airways and waterways. The communication network however is not adequate.

### **1.3.1 Significant Events in Crafting of the States**

NEI was once connecting the Indian subcontinent with East, Southeast and Inner Asia with the southern Silk Route. Commerce and culture travelled that route and migrant streams moved into this sparsely populated but

richly endowed region from Central China and Southeast Asia. At the time of independence, the composition of this region consisted of the Assam Plains of the old Assam Province, the hill districts, the North-eastern Frontier Tracts (NEFT) of the North-eastern borderland and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura which became the part of India after 1949. The geopolitical position, the racial and linguistic diversity and the individualistic character of the people were some of the factors responsible for the constant reorganization of the area since 1874. During the period 1874 to 1905, there were various proposals for the reorganization of Assam. In 1898, South Lushai Hills which was a part of Bengal was transferred to Assam. In 1905, the whole of Assam was added to East Bengal. In 1912, Partition was annulled and Assam was restored to its former position, as a Chief Commissioner's province. When India got her independence on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947, Assam became a constituent state of India.

In 1957, Tuensang Areas Frontier Division of NEFA was separated from Assam and merged with the Naga Hills district to form Naga Hills Tuensang Area (NHTA) as an administrative unit. This territory was placed under the Nagaland Transitional Provisions Regulation, 1961. Subsequently, in 1963, Nagaland attained statehood with the enactment of the state of Nagaland Act in 1962. The establishment of Assam and Nagaland as a full-fledged State signalled the rise of demand for statehood in the region. Representatives from the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills District formed All Party Hill Leaders Conference in July 1960 and demanded for a separate State. Ten years later, these hills were separated from Assam and constituted into an Autonomous State of Meghalaya.

In 1971, the Reorganization of North East India Bill was framed and passed into law in 1972. This Act converted the Autonomous State of Meghalaya into a full-fledged State, the Union Territories of Manipur and Tripura into States, and the Mizo Hill district and NEFA into Union Territories, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. Both Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh

attained statehood on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1987. From time to time, Sikkim also underwent many administrative changes. Under the Treaty of Titalia, Sikkim had been a protectorate of India during the British colonial rule since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and this arrangement continued even after India's independence. On 16 May 1975, the monarchy in Sikkim was abolished and it became the 22<sup>nd</sup> state of the Indian Union. In 2002, Sikkim was made a part of North East Council as the 8<sup>th</sup> member.

### 1.3.2 Briefly on the States

In this section, we shall discuss the location and geography of each state of Northeast India.

- **Arunachal Pradesh** is also known as the '*Land of Dawn-lit Mountains*'. Itanagar is the capital of Arunachal Pradesh. It gained its statehood on 20 February 1987 and stands as a perfect example of unity and diversity today. Before 1972, Arunachal Pradesh was known as "North East Frontier Agency" (NEFA) and was under the control of Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. In 1972, Arunachal Pradesh attained the status of Union Territory and the name NEFA was renamed to 'Arunachal Pradesh'. With an area of 83,743 sq.km, Arunachal is the largest among the north-eastern states of India. It shares international borders with four countries- Bhutan in the west, Myanmar in the east, Tibet and China in the north. It has a strategic geopolitical location and is a home to 30 communities and 47 sub-groups. Going by the settlements, the state is divided into five zones namely- the first zone lies in Tawang and Kameng regions, the second zone covers East Kameng and upper and lower Subansiri, the third zone covers upper Subansiri and, east and west Siang districts, the fourth zone covers Dibang valley and Lohit regions and the last zone spreads over Tirap and Changlang regions. Arunachal is covered by a dense evergreen forest with abundant of forest products such as bamboo, cane, timber and medicinal plants found in the region. Village is the centre of

community life in Arunachal Pradesh and each tribe has its own distinct culture, dress, and festivals etc. which showcase the grandeur of the State. Natural biodiversity and ecology also add to Arunachal's natural scenic landscape.

- **Assam** is popularly known as the '*Land of the Blue Hills and Red Rivers*'. Dispur is the capital of Assam. Rich in natural resources and greeneries, Assam or Axom is located in the latitude of 24° and 28° N and longitude of 90 ° and 96° E. Assam covers an area of 78,440 sq.km and shares international boundaries with Bhutan and Bangladesh. It is surrounded by Bhutan and Arunachal on the north, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh on the east and Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram on the south. Occupying such a strategic position, it is the 'gateway to the North-Eastern states'. Assam is divided into two segments: the Barak Valley and the Brahmaputra Valley. The mighty Brahmaputra River, flows right through the land and nurtures a majestic and complex ecosystem around it. With a population of 30.57 million, Assam is an ideal meeting ground for diverse communities and ethnic groups having their own myriad distinct cultures. Assam is also rich in natural resources like petroleum, coal, natural gas, tea and other minerals. Assam produces 52 per cent of tea production all over India. Assam is a beautiful state with rich culture and colourful human landscape. Multiple festivals are celebrated in Assam and the major one is 'Bihu'. Assam silk, especially 'Muga' is famous all over the world. Assam has a number of national parks, sanctuaries and wetlands along with reserved forests that house many endangered animals and birds such as one-horned rhino, wild ducks and others. It is home to two of India's world heritage sites- Kaziranga National Park and Manas Wildlife Sanctuary. Assam has a rich tourist potential with numerous historical sites and architectures like Kareng ghar, Rang ghar etc.

- **Manipur** is also known as the “*Jewel of India*”. Imphal is the capital of Manipur. Known for its beautiful hill ranges, Manipur covers an area of 22, 327.km sq., and has a population of about 27.22 lakh. It is bounded by Nagaland in the north, Assam in the west, Mizoram in the south-west and Myanmar in the east and south-east. Manipur is endowed with rich natural resources, lush green forests in the hills and fertile alluvial soil in the river basins. Manipur’s economy is based on agriculture, forest produce, mining, business and tourism. However, agriculture provides the largest share of employment in the region. Manipur is a land of diversity with unique culture and a rich history of traditional games and sports. Due to its hilly terrain, the state is well suited for horticulture. Manipur has a sub-tropical climate with annual rainfalls ranging between 1,100 mm and 3,500 mm. 77 per cent of the total geographical area is covered with forests. The forest-clad hills have a rich variety of wildlife. Himalayan black bear and the common Indian sloth bear are found in the northern hills. The wild pig is common throughout the region. It is also home to migratory birds and a variety of orchids.
- **Meghalaya** is also known as the “*Abode of Clouds*”. During the colonial period, the capital of Meghalaya, Shillong was known for its scenic beauty and climate and hence described as “Scotland of the East”. Meghalaya comprises the United Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills. Meghalaya covers an area of 22,429 sq.km and has a population of 29.67 lakh (2011 census). Khasis, Pnars (Jaintias) and Achik (Garos) are the three major tribes here. Each tribe has its own diverse culture and traditional ways of life. The state has beautiful waterfalls, lush green hills, and picturesque surroundings. In East Khasi Hills district, Mawsynram is situated which receives highest rainfall and is dubbed as the wettest place on

earth. Meghalaya is also rich in natural vegetation and biodiversity with a temperature that rarely goes beyond 28 degrees. 70 per cent of the total geographical area of the state is covered with forests. Rich in flora and fauna, Meghalaya has 660 species of birds, 250 different species of butterflies and nearly 350 varieties of orchids.

- **Mizoram** is also known as the “*Land of Blue Mountains*”. With Aizawl as its capital, Mizoram is situated in the southernmost corner of North-East India. It shares international boundaries with Myanmar and Bangladesh, Tripura, Assam and Manipur, thus, occupying an area of great strategic importance. With a population of 10.91 lakh, it covers an area of 21,087 sq.km. A majority of the people inhabiting Mizoram, collectively known as Mizos are divided into numerous tribes that are further subdivided into different sub-clans. The state has a pleasant climate throughout the year and is composed of both hilly and plain areas. 91.27 per cent of the state is covered with forests out of which 57 per cent of the area is covered with 27 different species of bamboo. Mizoram is also home to many endangered animal species, including Asian elephant, clouded leopard, binturong and others. The forests in Mizoram also house 640 species of birds and over 200 varieties of orchids. Known for its natural beauty, Mizoram has scenic landscapes of bluish hills and mountains, mesmerizing lakes, and beautiful waterfalls.
- **Nagaland** is also known as the “*Land of Festivals*”. Kohima is the capital of Nagaland. It covers a geographical area of about 16,579 sq. km and has a population of 19.78 lakhs as per 2011 census. The state lies between 25°6’ – 27°4’ north latitude to 93°2’ – 95°15’ east longitude and has diverse topographical variations. It is bounded by Myanmar and Arunachal Pradesh in the east, Assam in the west and north, and Manipur in the south. Consisting of major 16 tribes and

other sub-tribes, the languages spoken by the Nagas are broadly grouped under the Tibeto-Burman family. It has four mountain ranges namely Patkai Mountain Range, The Low Mountain Range, The Middle Mountain Range and The Barail Mountain Range. The Patkai Mountain Range is the longest mountain range in the state and forms the international boundary with Myanmar. The Dzukou valley, located in the eastern-most part of the Barail Mountain range, is the only place in the world where elephants are found at an altitude of more than 2,400 metres. The state enjoys very rich biodiversity with a typical monsoon climate. With forest coverage of about 78.20 percent, Nagaland is also rich in medicinal plants, canes, bamboos, and a variety of orchids.

- **Sikkim** is also known as the “*Himalayan Paradise*”. It was originally known as “Nye-mae-el” or ‘heaven’. With Gangtok as its capital, Sikkim covers a total area of 7, 096 sq.km. and lies between 27° – 28° north latitude and 88° - 89° east longitude. Even though Sikkim is very small in size, it has diverse geography with hilly terrain ranging from high to low owing to its location in the foothills of the Himalayas. Kanchenjunga, the world’s third highest mountain peak is located in Sikkim. The state is blessed with prominent mountain peaks, glaciers, lakes, and many hot springs, rivers and streams. Because of its Himalayan location, the state has a beautiful landscape and is distinguished by its Himalayan flora and fauna and Buddhist monasteries.
- **Tripura** is also known as the “*Land of Diversity*”. Agartala is the capital of Tripura. With a total population of about 36.74 lakh, Tripura covers an area of 10,486 sq.km. Tripura is known for its geographical and ecological diversity combined with a rich and diverse cultural heritage. The different ethnic groups celebrate their life through dance, music, festivals, fine arts, architecture etc.

Etymologically, the name ‘Tripura’ is derived from two words used in the local language, ‘tui’ meaning ‘water’ and ‘pra’ meaning ‘near’. The state displays three distinct physiographic regions; they are hill ranges, plateau land and low-lying alluvial land. The climate is humid and warm with temperature varying between 10 degrees Celsius in the winter to a maximum average of 35 degrees Celsius in summer. The state has a rich ecosystem ranging from forests and grasslands to freshwater wetlands.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



1. Why is the Northeast India considered as geopolitically located?

-----

-----

-----

---

#### 1.4 SOCIAL ASPECTS OF NORTHEAST INDIA

Below we will briefly discuss the social aspects of North-East India. As we have already seen above in the discussions, this region is very diverse and also is geopolitically relevant. To understand this region in its entirety, it becomes important for us to look into its social aspects as well.

Comprising of variety of ethnic groups, languages, religions and customs, NEI reflects a multi-cultural character. The region houses over 200 of the 635 tribal groups found in the country, speaking a variety of languages like Austro-Asiatic or Mon Khmer (one of which is Khasi), Sino-Tibetan



representing the Bodo and numerous other languages and dialects. States like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are predominately inhabited by tribals with varying degree of diversity among the tribes. States like Assam, Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim are inhabited by people of various religious denominations like, Hindus, Christians and Muslims along with local tribes and communities.

In the course of evolution, the tribes of northeast India have developed deep attachment to the land and strong adherence to traditional beliefs. In tribal society the sense of kinship is closely linked to the family and blood relationship. A tribe is usually composed of a number of clans, kinship groups and extended families. All members have a sense of belonging to a community which had common ancestors. There are certain obligations, societal practices, norms and restrictions that are being established by each group (tribal group or a clan) for the smooth running of the society and to maintain social order. Marriage is also an integral part of the tribal communities and mostly clan exogamy is practised.

Northeast region is widely known for its tribal cultures which are circled around the traditional religions of the tribal people inhabiting this region. Each and every tribe has its own distinctive cultural and religious beliefs. Their religious beliefs are related with their day to day activities. Moreover, their beliefs are associated with their festivals, rites of passage; birth, initiation, marriage, sickness, death, etc., agricultural activities, natural phenomena, spirits both malevolent and benevolent, gods and goddesses, magic and sorcery, sin and taboo and so on. Tribal religions in most of the cases are found in villages: beginning from the family, clan and society. A large segment of tribal population practice animism and naturism; naturism means the belief that the forces of nature have supernatural power and in animism, human attributes living soul to plants, inanimate objects and natural phenomena.

Northeast is also known for its festivals, traditions, rituals and dances. Festivals are plentiful in this region; each state has its own festival, which

provides a great forum for expressing the distinctness of their art forms, dresses, dance forms, cuisines, etc. Most of the tribal economies are engaged in subsistence agriculture and have developed great knowledge on the use of plants and plant production in curing various ailments. The population has a deep belief in their native folklore medicine for remedies. In each region, one can find the existence of traditional healers, commonly referred to as the 'medicine man or woman' (shaman) that has the power to cure people of vulnerable diseases. They also perform various magical rites and worships for the treatment of diseases. Their knowledge is passed on from generation to generation by oral tradition, and much of the traditional knowledge has been kept secret from outsider's world.

A striking aspect of Northeast India is the practice of matriliney among the Khasis of Meghalaya. Among the Khasis, the ancestral property is passed down in the female line, the usual heir being the youngest daughter (Khadduh). Sons have no right to it except in rare cases of the absence of any female heir. However, at the same time, it is important to note that matriliney among the Khasis does not translate into a matriarchy. In fact, the maternal uncle plays a crucial role in it and his role is similar to the father in a patrilineal society. Moreover, with the impact of Christianity and modernisation, there has been a certain degree of change in the traditional Khasi matrilineal system.

It is also interesting to explore Vaishnavism among the Meiteis in Manipur. Even though Meitei Vaishnavism had its roots in Bengal, the Meiteis have fashioned it to their own taste and therefore, it will be wrong to assume that Meitei Vaishnavism is a copy of what is being practised in Bengal. Similarly, in Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva launched the neo-Vaishnavism during the medieval period which was instrumental in changing not only the spiritual outlook of the people of then Assam but also in the creation of a new society. However, even though the neo-Vaishnavism of Srimanta Sankardeva did not differ in essential elements from the Vaishnavism in other parts of India that formed a part of the Bhakti Movement of the

medieval period, it was at the same unique on its own. It was evolved to suit the socio-economic fabric of then Assam. The organisation of the Satras (Vaishnavite monasteries) and Namghars (Prayer House) led to changes in the society as it stood in confrontation with the existing rigid social structure of then Assam. Moreover, neo-Vaishnavism also ushered in a cultural renaissance in Assam.

With time, however, many fundamental social changes have taken place in these states due to modernization of economy and expansion of education. Changes are occurring in the major social institutions and their patterns. Structural changes like the disintegration of joint families, kinship systems, modernization of marriage patterns, changes in religious beliefs, and others have also significantly brought rapid transformation in the social life of the people living in this region. Assimilation of the tribal people also adds to it.

---

## **1.5 SUMMING UP**

In this Unit, we have discussed the geopolitical significance of North-East India, a brief outline on the crafting of the states, geography and location of each state and lastly, the social aspects of the region in general. Here, diversity is not only seen in culture but also geography and all other major aspects. Each state is comprised of many tribal groups and ethnic groups; there are many other sub-groups under them and they also have many similarities and dissimilarities that add to the region as a whole. Different societal obligations and mechanisms are devised by them to maintain the social order in society. Not only there are structural differences but functional differences are also present. With time, many changes are impacting on the various aspects of this region. From kinship systems, language to patterns of marriage, there is diversity in all spheres. Not only is the region rich in cultural heritage and biodiversity but it also has administrative importance along with sensitive geopolitical boundaries.

## Glossary:

- **Indigenous people:** Indigenous people are also known as the 'First people' or the 'Aboriginals'. They are native and naturally existing in a place or a region or country at large. They are not immigrants. Historically, indigenous means plants or animals, it was only after the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the term 'indigenous people' began to be used.
- **Exogamy:** Exogamy is a custom or social norm to marry outside one's group, clan or moieties. It is also known as 'out-marriage'. The opposite of this social norm is endogamy or marriage within one's own group, clan or moieties. Exogamy is related to the kinship system, class, ethnicity or religion.
- **Medicine man or woman:** Medicine men or women are the traditional healers who are knowledgeable about the magical and spiritual potencies. They are the members of an indigenous society. With these skills, they also serve as a spiritual leader in a community. Different names are given to this category of people.

---

## 1.6 QUESTIONS

---

1. What are the key events that took place in the crafting of the states of Northeast India?
2. Discuss the geopolitical location of Northeast India.
3. Write on the social aspects of Northeast India.
4. Discuss the different geographical aspects of each state of Northeast India.

---

## 1.7 RECOMMENDED READING AND REFERENCES

---

Saikia, A. and Sen, S. (2013). *Society in North East India- A Socio Economic and Historical Perspectives*. Brahmaputra Offset, Assam.

Scott, J.C. (2009). *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland South East Asia*. Yale University Press, London.

Nath, D. (Ed.) (2011). *Religion and Society in Northeast India*. DVS Publishers, Guwahati.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

## UNIT 2: CULTURAL SPECIFICITIES IN NORTHEAST INDIA

---

### UNIT STRUCTURE

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Objectives
- 2.3 Cultural Plurality and Identity
- 2.4 Cultural Specificities of Northeast India
  - 2.4.1 Arunachal Pradesh
  - 2.4.2 Assam
  - 2.4.3 Manipur
  - 2.4.4 Meghalaya
  - 2.4.5 Mizoram
  - 2.4.6 Nagaland
  - 2.4.7 Tripura
  - 2.4.8 Sikkim
- 2.5 Summing Up
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Recommended Readings and References

---

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

---

In this unit, we shall discuss in detail the various cultural specificities of Northeast India. Every state of this region is itself an abode of multiple ethnicities, comprising of many tribes with diverse cultures. Cultural specificities are seen not only in terms of art, idea and customs alone but also in language, taboos, culinary practices, dresses, symbols, house patterns etc.

Many scholars and renowned anthropologists have conducted research on primitive tribe and culture, the most significant being that of E.B.Tylor. In his famous book, *Primitive Culture* (1971), he defined culture as a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, moral, law, custom and any

other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society. Culture, to be precise, is all that a man creates in order to adapt himself to the environment for survival, which includes customs and traditions, beliefs, social institutions, artefacts and techniques, etc. that can be transmitted from one person to the other through speech and symbolic actions. It is the symbolic expressions of social life. Each of the eight states of Northeast India has different cultural specificities confined to each geographical boundary. These cultural specificities differ from state to state and from one community to the other. Some may be age-old and some may have changed and developed through consequent innovation and acculturation over time.

‘Sociology of Culture’, is a sub-discipline of sociology that looks into the various aspects of culture in a society systematically. Boris Erasov and Yogendra Singh in their work *The Sociology of Culture* (2010) defined this sub-discipline as a subject which deals with intellectual life as a social phenomenon and also examines the connection between intellectual matters and other aspects of society’s life. It explains the effect of cultural factors on economic and political activity, on various types of social organization, and investigates the role of various classes and strata in the intellectual life of the society on the whole, as well as their cultural characteristics specifically. This discipline also aids in the understanding of the nature of the relationship between different communities.

Not only sociologists but also anthropologists took keen interest to understand the different dimensions of society starting with human behaviour to culture. ‘Sociology of Science’ is another sub-discipline of sociology that looks into science as a social activity and further examines the social aspects of science. This sub-discipline also tries to look into the cultural aspects of society and considers that among the indigenous people there is a concept of ‘ethnoscience’. Every group of people in a society has some unique cultural mechanisms that help them to regulate their day to day life activities smoothly. They have direct or indirect systematic

traditional laws that govern their living, even though they are not directly standardized like natural science. In Northeast India, along with the ethnic groups, there are many tribal groups and their sub-tribes. Anthropologists, historians and sociologists are curious to know and discover the various socio-cultural complexities and dimensions of this region. The various cultural specificities of Northeast India are discussed in detail below.

---

## **2.2 OBJECTIVES**

---

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the cultural specificities of Northeast India;
- Explain the cultural significance of this region;
- Discuss some significant cultural specificities of some major tribal and ethnic groups of Northeast India.

---

## **2.3 CULTURAL PLURALITY AND IDENTITY**

---

With rich natural beauty and abundant forest resources, Northeast India is ideally situated to produce various crops, fruits, medicinal plants, etc. The region has a high potential for eco-tourism and is known for its exotic flora and fauna and beautiful landscapes. Along with its biodiversity and geopolitical location, this region has a high concentration of various tribal and ethnic populations. Each tribal and ethnic group has its own distinct tradition, culture and ways of life. Northeast region is linguistically and ethnically very diverse, where every ethnic community has a history and shares a cultural memory. One of the foremost features of the social order of northeast India is its heterogeneity. The region is inhabited by three major groups: the hill tribes, the plain tribes and the non-tribal population of the plains. Within each group, there is immense diversity; in terms of race (the Aryans, the Australoid, the Dravidians, Tibeto-Burman, and Sino-Tibetan); language (with as many as 220 languages and dialects); and religion (animism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam).



Over the centuries northeast India has faced contradictory processes of assimilation and preservation of ethnic identity. Throughout the colonial period, the North East was treated separately and differently from other regions by the British administrators. Independent India commenced the process of integrating this region with the rest of country. There was a sudden exposure of particularly the tribals in remote hill areas to a complex modern civilization like introduction of modern education or imposing a language of State's choice on the indigenous population as was done during the first phase of British rule or later in 1960s in Assam. In a society which is undergoing as rapid modernization as northeast India, an identity crisis is therefore evident. The large scale migration of population from outside the north east India during the last one hundred years has put strain on the region's indigenous culture, identity and language.

In recognizing the cultural distinctness of the northeast region, it is important to look at process of Sanskritization (Sanskritization was first used by M.N. Srinivas). The process of Sanskritization among the indigenous people of Assam reached its height in the 16th century when Hinduism became the most dominant religion and the Sanskrit language has replaced the native language. Likewise, the Meiteis of Manipur too got influenced by this dominant religion. The Tipras of Tripura were Hindus from time immemorial. In 1705, the Rajah of Manipur (Manipur was a princely state during that period) officially adopted Hinduism as the state religion. The Meiteis tried to retain their native language and stopped attempting Hindu rituals and practices. Therefore, the level of assimilation of the people into Hindu religion and Indic culture differs from people to people and tribe to tribe (Raatan, 2006). The Hinduisation of the region was limited to the plain areas alone. This happened because the Indic culture never reached the hilly areas of this region. Until the British rule, this region was preserved from all the outer influences like Sanskritization. Their cultural distinctness to the Indic cultural system distinguishes the hill tribes from the non-hill tribal people or Indians at large.

---

## **2.4 CULTURAL SPECIFICITIES OF NORTHEAST INDIA**

---

In this section, we shall discuss the cultural specificities of each state and look into the cultural significance that makes North East India one of the most diverse regions. We will discuss some of the major tribal and ethnic groups of each state along with their culture, customs, rituals and practices. But before discussing the cultural specificities of each state of North East India, we must understand what cultural specificity actually means. Cultural specificity means the condition or the quality of being culturally specific to a particular group which is peculiar and unique and not universal.

### **2.4.1 Arunachal Pradesh**

The grandeur of Arunachal Pradesh not only lies among the diverse tribal groups but also in its environment that comprises of natural forests, numerous streams, rivers, lofty Himalayan mountains, etc. that provide the state with a beautiful landscape. The ancient and medieval history of Arunachal remains shrouded in the mist of legends and mythology. The first historical account about the tribesmen of Arunachal could be seen in the writings of a Mughal chronicler, Shihabuddin, in 1662. There are a few ruins in the foothills which indicate evidence of contact between the medieval rulers of Ahom dynasty and the tribesmen living near the plains. Archaeological sites such as Rukmininagar and Bhismaknagar in Dibang Valley, Parashuramkund in Lohit district, and the ruins of Malinithan in Lower Siang district indicate the contact of Arunachal people with those of the plains during the pre-modern times. Arunachal Pradesh has a rich tourist potential with numerous captivating places. Tawang in the west is a beautiful hill town. Located at 10,000 ft. above sea level, it has the largest and one of the oldest Buddhist monasteries in India. Itanagar taking its name from the medieval fort city of Ita Hills has developed as the largest

town in the State with museum, a lake, zoological park, etc. Ziro is another picturesque town, which has been a favourite town for World Heritage Site for a number of years now.

Arunachal Pradesh has almost 26 major scheduled tribes with numerous sub-tribes. Some of the principal tribes of this state are Adi, Aka, Apatani, Galo, Monpa, Nyishi, Tagin, Tangsa, Singpho, Khampti, Wancho and others. The population of Arunachal Pradesh is mostly constituted by scheduled tribes which constitute 70 per cent of the total population. Most of these communities are ethnically similar having derived from an original common ancestors but their geographical isolation from each other has brought amongst them certain distinctive characteristics in language, dress and customs

The socio-religious differences among the communities classify the people of the state into three broad categories. The first group of people comprises of Monpas and Sherdukpens of Tawang and West Kameng districts who are the followers of Lamaistic tradition of Mahayana Buddhist sect. Culturally similar to them, Khamptis and Singphos of Lohit district are Buddhists of Hinayana sect. The second group of people comprises of Adis, Akas, Apatanis, Galos, Nyishis, Mishmis, Mijis, etc whose principle deity gods are the Moon and the Sun, namely Donyi Polo. The tribes of Noctes and Wanchos located in the Tirap district form the third group. These groups believe in Vaishnavism (Saikia & Sen, 2013). Arunachal Pradesh is a patriarchal society and rule of clan exogamy is strictly observed. Animism is highly practised among them and religious sacrifices form an integral part of the rituals (Mithun, pig and chicken are mostly slaughtered during sacrificial ceremonies). Like mentioned earlier, with numerous tribes each tribe has its own ambit, culture, faith, code of conduct, rituals, festivals, etc. Festivals form an important part in the lives of the natives of the state. The festivals are generally related to agricultural activities like sowing and harvesting. Community as a whole perform collective rituals and celebrate festivals for the harmony and prosperity of

the people and fertility of the land. Some of the important festivals are Solung by Adis, Dree by Apatanis, Nyokum by Nyishis, Mopin by Galos, Loku by Noctes, Boori Boot celebrated by the Hill Miris etc. Other such festivals are Reh, Si-Donyi, Yulo, Losar, etc. These festivals are celebrated with dance and music, feast and fairs across the state. In addition, as many as 42 dialects are spoken in the region. Most of the languages belong to the Tibetan-Burman language family.

A glimpse of the rich culture of Arunachal Pradesh manifests a very diverse and kaleidoscopic life of the people. Societies do not have caste system and the deciding authority is mainly the older generation. Music, art and dance are an important part of their lives along with festivals. They are symbolic expressions so as to keep their tradition and heritage intact. Now, we shall discuss some of the customs and traditions of some major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

- *Adis*: They are the major group of tribes inhabiting the East Siang and Upper Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. There are different sub-tribes of the Adis namely Padams, Milangs, Komkars, Minyongs and Panggis. Youth dormitories called ‘Moshup’ and ‘Rasheng’ for both boys and girls play an important in Adi society. A boy can visit the girl’s dormitory although he is not allowed to stay overnight. At times, guardians will have to be around to guide the youngsters and in any case if a boy and a girl happen to like each other then negotiations are made between the two families. After that, customary formal marriage takes place if accepted by both the parents of the couple. Patrilineal descent is established by tracing descent exclusively through males from a founding male ancestor. Traditional village council, known as Kebang holds an important place among the Adis. Kebang as a self-governing institution has been the custodians of law and order and collective welfare of Adi community.

- *Akas*: They are the inhabitants of the south-eastern part of east Kameng district Arunachal Pradesh. Marriage among them is through negotiation or capture. The negotiations are mostly from the boy's side and the priest known as Mugou tries to examine the auspiciousness of the proposal by killing a fowl. He acts as the middle man and goes to the girl's house to inform about the boy's decision. If the girl's parents agree then the marriage takes place. But after marriage, the bride does not directly go to her husband's home but the husband can visit her. It is only after the end of the year the husband with the priest goes to bring her to his home. Marriage by capture only takes place when youths are not sure about their parents' consent. After elopement, the boy sacrifices a pig and invites his community people for a feast. The priest ties a sheep hair called 'fokki' around the girl's right hand along with the ancestral necklace to give social recognition to their marriage and the bride becomes a member of the husband's house. After all these events when the girl's family becomes aware about them they come to inquire about the bride wealth, to which they are fully entitled to. Among the Akas, slave system is prevalent. There are also different punishments for instance putting the hands in the boiling water meted out to people committing crimes. Different religious practices and sacrifices are made to please the deities.
- *Singpho* and *Khampti*: They practise Hinayana sect of Buddhism. The Sangken festival is celebrated by the people of the Singpho tribe. The main attraction of the festival is splashing clean water, which is the symbol of peace and purity. The images of Buddha are taken out and after the ceremonial bath. The procession is accompanied by drums, dances, and enjoyment. This holy bath of is an auspicious event. The celebration takes place for three consecutive days. During the celebration, the locals make homemade sweet and distribute them. The exchange of gifts is a common trait of the festival.

Apart from these tribes discussed above, there are several other tribes too. Arunachal Pradesh is also famous for its beautiful handicrafts comprising a wide variety. Artistic craftsmanship has been passed on from one generation to the other. A wide variety of crafts such as making weapons and ornaments, weaving, cane and bamboo work, basketry, carpet making and wood carving flourish in the state

#### **2.4.2 Assam**

Assam has a rich legacy of culture and civilization with a history of its own. The state is rich in biodiversity and natural resources. It has beautiful scenic beauty with lush greeneries, flora and fauna, vast rolling plains, mighty water bodies, etc. It is home to different races of people who came to dwell at different phases of time. Assam's history dates back to ancient times and holds crucial administrative importance. Some writers often describe Assam as miniature India. Assam is multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious in nature. The people of Assam belong to three different language groups: Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman. The ethnic groups of Assam include the Assamese, Bodos, Dimas, Karbi, Mising, Rabha, Deori, Tiwa, etc.

Assam is mainly an agricultural state with major industries petroleum and natural gas. It is also well-known globally for its tea production. There are 765 tea estates in Assam and more than 1, 00,000 smaller gardens that produce 570 million kg tea annually. Sugar, paper, bell-metal works, the spinning of *endi*, *muga*, and *paat* silk, pottery, carpentry, etc. add in as other minor industries. The state is also rich in natural resources like coal, limestone, minerals, etc. Assam is also rich in art and craft.

The Assamese culture is a rich and exotic drapery of many races that evolved through a long assimilative process. Bihu is the major festival of Assam and represents the true essence of Assam with three different festivals of Bihu celebrated at different phases of the year mostly related to agriculture namely 'Magh Bihu', 'Rongali Bihu' and 'Kati Bihu'. Rongali

or Bohag Bihu is celebrated with great pomp and grandeur with the Bihu dance and Bihu songs. These Bihu dance and songs are symbolic and have different meanings associated with them. The joyous dance is performed by both men and women of all age groups. 'Husori' is another form of dance where people visit from house to house across villages with traditional attire like 'riha', 'mekhela-chador', 'dhuti', 'gamusa', etc. and even certain food and dishes are prepared and shared like 'pitha', 'laadu', etc. Likewise, the Bodos have their traditional dance called 'Bagurumba', Mishings have 'Gumrag', etc. Each community of Assam has its own festivals, traditional dress, dialect, culinary practices, folk songs and dance, etc.

Assam is also rich in mantras of the tantric cult, folk songs and tales that remain the base of Assamese literature. 'Bor-geet', 'Bia-Naam', 'Diha-Naam', etc. add to the richness of the folk songs of Assam. 'Buranjis' are also written with the arrival of the Ahom kings. Many eminent scholars and writers have contributed their life to promote Assamese literature like Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla, Hem Baruah, and Homen Borgohain, etc. Assam is also known as the land of mysteries for places like Mayong, also known as the land for black magic. With different places of interest, tourist spots, religious places and historical importance from Rang Ghar, Kareng Ghar, Tolatol Ghar and others in Sibsagar, Majuli, Soraideu, Kamakhya, Umananda, different national parks and sanctuaries, the state has a rich cultural and historical importance that are embedded in the lives of the people.

### **2.4.3 Manipur**

Manipur, is the land of rich valleys, hill ranges, beautiful lakes and water bodies, alluvial soil, rich natural resources, an optimum climate that influences its economy. It was a princely state under the British rule and became a full-fledged state in 1972. The population of the state can be divided into hill population and valley population. Manipur comprises of 16 districts that are being divided into different sub-divisions and tribal blocks. About 41.4 per cent of the people of Manipur are Hindus and

Vaishnavism became the official state religion in the 18<sup>th</sup> century after the declaration of the then king Raja Garib Niwa. Meities are the largest group of the state and worship the Sun God, locally known as 'Sanamahi'. Earlier, the people of Manipur worshipped 'Lainingthou Soralel'- a supreme deity and also followed ancestor-worshipping. Ethnic deities like 'Umang Lais' are being prayed in the sacred groves. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity was introduced by the Christian missionaries and therefore, a segment of the population follows Christianity. The Hindu population also resides in the valley with a section of Manipuri Muslims, locally known as 'Pangals' that belongs to the Sunni sect. Manipuri or Meiteilon is the official language of the state.

'Ngari', a kind of fermented fish is one of the most favourite food items for them. Delicacies like 'Iromba', 'Kabok', 'Sekmai', 'Kanghau' etc. are very popular among them. Manipur is distinguished for its rich and unique traditional clothes and dress patterns. There are different dresses worn by both man and woman at different occasions. Woman wear 'phanek' and 'inaphi' and man wear dresses like 'dhuti', 'kurta', and 'pugree'. There are specific dresses worn for festival dances like 'Raslila'. The state is also rich in sports. Locally played sports include 'Sagol Kangjei' (Polo), 'Hiyang Tannaba' (Boat race), 'Mukna' (Wrestling), etc.

The state economy is largely based on agriculture, mining, tourism, forest produce and industries like horticulture, handicraft, pottery, handloom, and food processing industries, etc. Women contribute to the socio-economic and political life of the state. They hold a free and empowering position. 'Ima Keithel' is a women's market in Imphal that demonstrates an important symbol of empowerment in India. Dance, songs and festivals are a way of life for the people of Manipur. The state holds a rich culture where different ethnicities and religions co-exist. There are several festivals celebrated throughout the year and the most popular is Holi locally known as 'Yaoshang' celebrated in the month of February and March. 'Thabal Chongba' a kind of folk dance associated with this festival. Other festivals



are '*Chawang Kut*', '*Lui-Naga-Ni*', '*Kang*' etc. Festivals and folk dances are also related to agriculture and social life like child birth, marriage, death, etc. Eid and Christmas are also celebrated with much enthusiasm. Manipur is a fable state with distinguished ethnic diversity and historical importance.

#### **2.4.4 Meghalaya**

Meghalaya is home to various tribal groups, especially the Khasis, Jaintias, Mikirs and Cacharis with 40-50 thousand Nepalis and Bengalis. There are other minor tribes in Meghalaya like Hajong, Koch, Kuki-Chin, Synteng and Rabha, etc. The state not only has a rich ecosystem that attracts thousands of tourists every year, it also has a rich deposits of mineral resources. The economy of Meghalaya is predominantly agrarian. Religion in Meghalaya is closely related to ethnicity. Close to 80-90 per cent of the Garos and Khasis is Christian. Apart from Christianity, Hinduism is also prevalent among many people. Islam Sikhism and Jainism are practised by a few. There is also a prevalence of Animism. The principal languages in Meghalaya are Khasi, Pnar, Garo and English is the official language (Saikia & Sen, 2013).

The major tribes in Meghalaya are the Khasis, Garos, and the Jaintias . They follow a matrilineal system, i.e. their mother's lineage. Among the Khasis 'Khadduh' or the youngest daughter inherits all the property. However, the mother's brother (maternal uncle) indirectly or directly controls the ancestral property and has the right to take part in important decisions. Among the Garos in terms of lineage, the youngest daughter inherits the property, unless another daughter is given the same rights by the parents. In case there are no daughters than the daughter-in-law (bohri) or an adopted child (deragat) inherits the property. The people of Meghalaya represent the world's largest matrilineal culture. Dance and music are the part and parcel of the tribes of Meghalaya. Dance like Shad Sukynsiem (dance for thanksgiving to God), Shad Nongkrem (dance for pleasing the God for agriculture), Doregata (joyful dance), Do Dru-su'a

(dance like doves), etc. Festivals are celebrated with much pomp and show. They are associated with agriculture, fertility, chasing away the demons, etc. Some of them are Wangla, Shad Suk Mynsiem, Beh-dien-Khlm, Umsan Nongkharai, etc. Some major tribes of Meghalaya are discussed below.

- The *Khasis*: They are the followers of different religions. They call themselves ‘Hynniew Trep’, meaning ‘the seven huts’. They have their local language. Agriculture is done through the practice of Jhum cultivation. Both men and women have different dress codes. Khasis have liberal laws regarding marriage.
- The *Jaintias*: Jaintias are also known as Pnar or Synteng and belongs to the Hynniewtrep sect of Austric race. They are also matrilineal. They have much interest in making carpet, jewellery, musical instruments, etc. Among them, Beh-dien-Khlm is celebrated as one major festival.
- The *Garos*: They are the inhabitants of the Garo hills. They have traditional dress patterns but, irrespective of the gender they wear head outfits made out of hornbill feathers, bangles, earrings, etc. but with the modern outer influences, many changes can be seen. Food made out of onion, salt etc. and drinks are enjoyed every day. They have a matrilineal lineage system. Birth and death are not family occasions alone but the entire community will take part in such events.

Apart from these few tribes, there are others too. To be precise, Meghalaya has a glorious past, a rich cultural heritage and mesmerizing beautiful landscapes.

#### **2.4.5 Mizoram**

Mizoram is a land of rolling hills, valleys, rivers, forests and natural vegetation. People of Mizoram are very affectionate and social. Agriculture

is the main means of livelihood for the people of Mizoram. There are different tribes like Poi, Dulien, Mar, Dalang, Fanai, etc. They have their own unique cultures and practices but with the advent of Christianity, there has been a tremendous change in the lifestyles and traditions of the people. The Mizo code of ethics centres around “*Tlawmngaihna*” (selfless service), which means one has to be hospitable, kind, unselfish and helpful to others. People are engaged in social work voluntarily known as ‘*Hnatlang*’. For them, the social unit is the village. Their houses are at the top of the hills and the chief house is at the centre with the bachelor’s dormitory called ‘*Zwalbuk*’. Occasions like death, birth, marriage, etc. are not an individual matter but the whole village gets involved in it.

Dance, Music and Festivals hold an internal part for the people of Mizoram. There are different dances for different occasions like Cheraw (Bamboo dance), Khuallam (Dance of the Guests), etc. Among all others ‘Chapchar Kut’ or spring festival is one of the most important festivals. Others are Christmas, Mim-Kut, and Thalfavang Kut, etc. As we have already discussed, the Mizos today are fast giving up their old traditions and adopting new Western cultures. Many of their present customs and practices have been an amalgamation of the old and new patterns of cultures and way of life. Mizoram has no major industries but few cottage industries and small scale sectors like handloom, weaving, mining, sawmilling, oil and flour making, etc.

#### **2.4.6 Nagaland**

Nagaland is a tribal state with a population of 19.78 lakhs as per 2011 Census. The name ‘Naga’ has been derived from the Burmese word ‘Naka’ which means people with ‘Perforated ears’. They belong to a certain Mongoloid stock and speak languages that belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. Nagaland is inhabited by 16 major tribes along with major sub-tribes. Some of the major tribes are Ao, Angami, Chang, Konyak, Lotha, Sumi, Chakhesang, Khiamniungam, Kachari, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Yimchungru, Kuki, Seling and Pochury with each tribe having its

own customs, language, traditions and cultural heritage. Their colourful ornaments and outfits that make them distinguished from one another. Nagaland is mainly a rural agrarian state (Jhum cultivation is practised) and villages are divided into khels (cluster of clans) or quarters having its own headmen and administration. They construct their huts with wood, bamboos, straw, etc., each tribe having their own design. Decorating their huts with animal skulls is common among the tribes of Nagaland. Weapons are made out of 'Doas' and spears. Weaving is an important activity for women in Nagaland. Clothes and ornaments made out of bones, ivory, cane, orchids and stones, etc. that are symbolically worn representing one's social status.

Industrial development is very slow here. The state has many unutilized resources like limestone, nickel, cobalt, copper, etc. Festivals are celebrated with much pomp and show with the preparation of many delicacies and exotic foods. People dress up in different attires irrespective of age and gender. Each tribe celebrates different festivals like 'Sekrenyi' by Angami Nagas, 'Moatsu' by Ao Nagas, 'Sukrenye' by Chakhesang Nagas, 'Naknyulum' by the Chang tribe, 'Miu' by the Khamniungam Nagas, 'Mimkut' by the Kuki Nagas, etc. Indigenous musical instruments are also used in these festivals. The annual Hornbill festival of Nagaland attracts thousands of tourists. This also promotes cultural tourism. Traditional folk songs, dress, food, dance, and folk tales are an important part of the Naga culture.

#### **2.4.7 Tripura**

Tripura is home to different ethnic groups that celebrate life through music, festivals, dance, fine arts, architectures and different religious practices. There are both tribal and non-tribal communities which can be stratified into many ethnolinguistic groups. With an area of 10,486 sq. km it has a population of 36.74 lakhs as per the 2011 Census. There are 31.05 per cent tribal people and 69.95 per cent non-tribal people. Tribals are considered to be the original inhabitants of the state. There are several dominant cultures

like Bengali, Manipuri, Tripuris, Jamatias, Reang, Garo, Noatia, Koloi, Oraon, Kuki, Chakma, and Mizo among others. Among the non-tribals, the Bengalis constitute the largest non-tribal groups. Bengali culture is the main non-tribal culture of Tripura. Many urban tribal families have assimilated into the Bengali culture. When Tripura was a princely state, the Maharaja was very fond of Bengali Culture and its language. Bengali cuisine and music are very popular in the urban areas of the state.

Music and dance are an integral part of the tribal people of Tripura. Songs are sung during occasions like weddings and religious festivals. Like the other tribes of the different states here too each tribal people have their own dance forms and songs. The Tripuri and Jamatias perform gorja dance during Gorja puja. Jhum dance, lebang dance, mamita dance, etc. are other forms of dance among the Tripuris. Reang community is the second-largest tribe of the state. Reang girls perform the popular 'Hojagiri' dance by balancing on earthen pitchers. Likewise, the Chakmas perform 'Bizhu' dance, 'Wangala' dance by the Garo people, 'Hai-hak' dance by Kuki people and others. Indian classical music is also popular in Tripura apart from tribal folk songs. Hindus believe that Tripureshwari is the patron goddess of Tripura and an aspect of *Shakti*. Durga puja, Kali puja, Ashokastami, etc. are some important festivals. There are also many rock carvings that portray the presence of Buddhism and Brahminical orders. Football and cricket are popular sports across the state. People of the state are great artisans. They are famous for bamboo and cane works. Handicraft and handloom industries are very popular in Tripura with bakery adding to it.

#### **2.4.8 Sikkim**

Sikkim is a small state surrounded by mountains and rich natural beauty. Sikkim draws its culture from its neighbours which are Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet. There are three ethnic groups of people that represent a synthesis of three diverse culture, traditions, and religions in Sikkim. These communities are Bhutias, Lepchas and Nepalese. Lepchas are considered as

the original natives of the state, the Bhutias are said to be migrated from Tibet in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Nepalese started to migrate to this state. The traditional dress of the Lepcha men are 'Gada' and women wears 'Dumdyan'. Both Bhutia men and women wear 'Kho' where male 'Kho' is called po-kho and woman 'Kho' is called mo-kho. The traditional dress of Nepali man is consists of daura and the suruwal. A cap called the birkhe topi completes a Nepali man's dress. Nepali woman dresses are 'choubandi' and other gold and silver ornaments (Saikia & Sen, 2013).

Rice, maize, meat, fish and birds, alcohol etc. are some of the important foods of the natives of the state. Buddhism and Hinduism are two important religions of Sikkim. However, the state celebrates many festivals which can be classified into three categories, they are Buddhist festivals (like Bumchu, Losoong, and Saga Dewa, etc.), Hindu festivals (like Saraswati puja, Durga puja, etc.) and Other festivals (like Christmas, Sakewa, Naamsoong, etc.). In this state, there are also different patterns of houses from two-storied rectangular structures to thatched roofs with mud, bamboo, etc. Different forms of folk dances are also performed by different groups, the famous among them being the mask dance. Sikkim with its rich biodiversity is also a home for religious pilgrimages.

---

## 2.5 SUMMING UP

---

In this Unit, we have discussed the different cultural specificities of Northeast India. This region is known for its geographical and ecological diversity and for its rich and diverse cultural heritage. With different diverse states, there are also different ethnic groups and subgroups with their own specific cultural identities. We have seen that culture is an integral part of every single group found in any state. For some tribal groups, culture holds some symbolic importance. They are learned, shared and are social in nature. The region of Northeast, as said earlier, is very diverse and because of it, people around the globe are curious to know and

study this region. We have also come to know that the region is undergoing rapid changes due to modernization of economy and expansion of education. Despite being a relatively difficult and disadvantaged region, these states present a picture of modernization and deserve to be recognized for their historical and cultural uniqueness.

---

## 2.6 QUESTIONS

---

1. Discuss the cultural specificities of Northeast India.
2. Write a brief note on the cultural plurality of Northeast India.
3. Discuss how in the contemporary times societies in Northeast India are changing with outer influences.

---

## 2.7 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

---

Datta, B., Sharma, N.C. and Das, P.C. (Eds.) (1994). *A Handbook of Folklore Material of North-East India*. Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art & Culture, Assam.

Nath, D. (Ed.) (2011). *Religion and Society in Northeast India*. DVS Publishers, Guwahati.

Raatan, T (2006). *History, Religion and Culture of North East India*. Isha Books, Delhi.

Saikia, A and Sen, S. (2013). *Society in North East India- A Socio Economic and Historical Perspectives*. Brahmaputra Offset, Assam.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

## **UNIT 3: NORTHEAST INDIA AS A CONCEPTUAL CATEGORY: EMERGENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TERM**

---

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Objectives

3.3 Northeast: The Emergence and Significance of the Term

3.3.1 Northeast: The Evolution of the Term

3.4 An Outline of the Evolution of Northeast India from a Historical  
Perspective

3.4.1 Pre-colonial Period

3.4.2 Colonial Period

3.4.3 Post-colonial Period

3.5 Summing Up

3.6 Questions

3.7 Recommended Readings and References

---

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this Unit, we shall discuss in detail ‘Northeast’ as a conceptual category and also, the significance and emergence of the term that has, with time, evolved in the official and scholarly writings. The region has its own distinct significant conceptual understandings even though the region has changed considerably over the ages.

Northeast India is the creation of the colonial administration. Prior to 1947, excluding Tripura and Manipur (as they were princely states at that time),



the whole of Northeast India was part of the greater undivided Assam. However, after independence, this greater Assam due to various reasons resulted in segmentation leading to the formation of different states, known as the ‘Seven Sisters’, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Meghalaya (later, Sikkim was also added as the 8<sup>th</sup> state).

Northeast India has a geostrategic location sharing its international boundaries with many other countries like Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, China and also Bangladesh. It is a land of diversities. It is not only diverse geographically with hills and valleys but also in terms of climate, culture, language, people, etc. We will discuss the region in the following sections.

---

### **3.2 OBJECTIVES**

---

By the end of this Unit, you will able to:

- Discuss the emergence and significance of the term Northeast India;
- Understand Northeast as a conceptual category and its evolution;
- Discuss the idea of region.

---

### **3.3 NORTHEAST: THE EMERGENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TERM**

---

The term “Northeast Frontier” was first used by Alexander Mackenzie, a British officer to identify Assam and its related hill areas in his book *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes on the North East Frontier of Bengal* which was published by the Bengal Government in the year 1884. The term ‘Northeast’ was mostly used to identify a particular geographical area. During the 1890s-1900s, when decisions were made to merge Assam with East Bengal, there were recommendations to name this new province as the “Northeastern

Province”. It was a geographical concept under the rule of the Britishers; they identified Assam as ‘Northeast Frontier of Bengal’.

It was only after the separation of Burma in 1937 from Indian sub-continent and India’s independence in 1947 that the term ‘Northeast’ to refer to the region came to the fore. It became a region through a geopolitical accident. Therefore, the region does not manage to fulfil the required criteria to become a region. It is a region of diversity not only in terms of geography but also in terms of culture, language and ethnicity. During the time of independence, “Northeast” meant only Assam with the two princely states i.e. Manipur and Tripura. After 1947, different states were carved out from Assam. In 1971, North Eastern Council was formed and after this formation, the concept of Northeast was formally and politically popularized. This region is one of the ethnically and linguistically diverse in all of Asia. The northeastern region shares many common problems like immigration, insurgency, etc. but many serious intra-regional differences cannot be overemphasized.

### **3.3.1 Northeast: The Evolution of the Term**

The term ‘North East’, ‘North East Region’ (NER) or Northeast India (NEI) is synonymously used today. It is not wrong to say that it was the administrators, scholars and policy makers, during the colonial and post-colonial era that contributed to the usage and naming of the term. Here, we will trace the evolution of the term through various phases from the time of its first usage till the time it acquired its present nomenclature as a geospatial location.

When the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) took place, agents were created to look into the entire region and it was David Scott who was recruited first. The Britishers looked into this region as a frontier and made all the policies accordingly and with time the North East Frontier is shifted into the present-day Arunachal Pradesh (or NEFA, i.e. North East Frontier Agency). During that time the ‘North East Frontier’ was very commonly

used. During those times Alexander Mackenzie submitted a memorandum, *Memorandum on the North East Frontier of Bengal* in 1869. He also wrote a book named *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes on the North East Frontier of Bengal* which was published by the Bengal Government in the year 1884. Some writers also called it the 'Eastern-Frontier'. Many other writers like R.B Pemberton in his *Report on the Eastern Frontier of the British India* (1835), A.C Banerjee's *Eastern Frontier of the British India* (1943), etc. also used this term. H.E Stapleton, a British scholar was the first one to use the term 'North-Eastern India'. His work entitled 'Contributions to the History and Ethnology of North Eastern India' in 1910 alludes to what used to be identified in ancient times as Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa. Another writer, Radhagovinda Basak in his *History of North Eastern India* 1934, represents northern and eastern India with just a small glimpse of Kamarupa. However, it was David Roy who in his work, *The Frontiers of North East India* (1947), used the term 'North East India' to mean the then Assam, NEFA (Arunachal), Manipur and Tripura, in other words, the region identified as Northeast India today (excluding Sikkim) (Bhattacharjee, 2018).

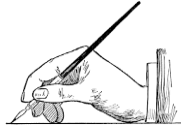
In the year 1973, the Indian Council for Social Science Research-North East Regional Centre was found and, in the year 1979, the North East India History Association was found.. This has been followed by many discipline-level northeastern regional societies and associations. On the demand of the academia, the ICSSR, ICHR, ICCR, UGC and NCERT established their Regional Centres in the Northeast. Among scholarly books, N.K. Barooah's *David Scott In North-East India* came out in 1970 and S.K. Chaube's *Hill Politics in Northeast India* in 1974. By now Northeast is in the title of numerous books and articles in almost all disciplines (Bhattacharjee, 2018). The North-Eastern Hill University was established in 1973, and this was followed by the creation of North-Eastern Circles and Divisions of the central organizations and agencies and establishment of regional institutes and authorities for the Northeast. The Northeast became a region (separated from the Eastern Region), and

finally, a separate ministry at the Centre (DONER) for the development of the region was established. Academics have also played some role in endowing the region with a common identity (Bhattacharjee, 2018).

The North Eastern Council (NEC) was established in 1971 by an act of the Parliament as an agency for the economic and social development in the North Eastern Region. The Ministry for Development of North-Eastern Region (DONER) is currently in place at the Centre and is operated through the NEC and has its headquarters in Shillong. Sikkim was included as the 8<sup>th</sup> member of NEC in December 2002 by an NEC amendment act but this state was geographically separated from rest of the states by Bhutan and West Bengal. Therefore, a historical study of Northeast should take into considerations only the seven contiguous states. The region so constituted is known for its geographical, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversities, and also there have been different political formations in different areas of the region in different phases of history.

Despite the diversities that cut across the eight states that constitute it, Northeast has come to be identified as a region distinct from other parts of the country. During the British rule, the entire region was a part of one colony of British India, though different parts were designated such as British province, princely states, and as excluded and partially excluded areas. The diversity of the region, however, is apparent in geographic structure, as well as in ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural compositions. Assam, Manipur and Tripura consist of hills and plains, while Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram are hill states predominantly inhabited by hill tribes. Assam itself is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural, while in Manipur and Tripura the hill areas are inhabited by different tribes. The non-indigenous persons from different parts of the country, have a significant presence in almost all the states. The ethnic and linguistic tensions have affected social harmony several times even in the recent past, and the boundary disputes between some of the states are yet to be resolved.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



1. What is DONER?

2. Who is the author of *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes on the North East Frontier of Bengal*?

3. When was the North Eastern Council formed?

---

### 3.4 AN OUTLINE OF THE EVOLUTION OF NORTHEAST INDIA FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

---

In this section, we shall discuss the historical evolution of the Northeast Region in the following phases:

1. Pre-Colonial Period
2. Colonial Period
3. Post-Colonial Period or Post-Independence Period

#### 3.4.1 Pre-Colonial Period

In the pre-colonial period, the present eight states were different political entities. The political background of the region was peculiar in nature because various ethnic groups living in a given area had their own systems of governance. Cultural exchanges took place among these groups and influences marked the stretch from Burma to all areas bordering the present day territory of the Northeast. Prior to the Yandaboo Treaty, the vast plains

of the Brahmaputra were ruled by the Ahom kings and the Imphal valley had a Meitei kingdom. The current Tripura along with some plains of current Bangladesh, Cachar and Jaintia Hills had their own kingdoms. The hills in between the valleys were inhabited by various tribes ruled by their chiefs and village headmen. Some of them were village republics with a community based system of governance (Verghese, 1996, pp. 10-23).

The contemporary Assam that we see today was named after the advent of the Ahoms. It was formally known as 'Pragjyotishpur', meaning 'The City of Eastern Lights'. And after the advent of the Aryans, it was renamed 'Kamrup'. Some parts of Bengal were also included in Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa. It was the common regional identity to the rest of the sub-continent. From a historical perspective, the eastern part of the Brahmaputra Valley of Northeast India in the 13<sup>th</sup> century began to be ruled by the Ahom kings. From that period onwards different Ahom rulers have ruled Assam for six hundred years until the British came and occupied the Northeast region. The Ahom kingdom also had its economic network spread to the hill areas as well, apart from its longstanding trade relations with mainland India and the neighbouring countries bordering the present day Northeast region such as China, Burma and Nepal etc. During mid-16<sup>th</sup> to mid-17<sup>th</sup> centuries, western Assam was ruled by the powerful Koch kings. While the Koch kingdom disintegrated soon, several small principalities under rulers of Koch royal descendants continued in western Assam till the advent of the British and beyond.

The rest of the NER constituted of hills which were ruled by village heads and chiefs. The natural strategic positioning of the hills as buffers between the ruling kingdoms made their relationship complex and dialectical. The kingdoms made efforts to expand their boundaries to the hills abounding resources. That was resisted by the communities inhabiting them and they too engaged in ambushes and raids in the valley. Efforts to expand territories were sometimes successful making the communities pay taxes to the kings. But it was mostly partial subjugation as the communities were

largely independent land ran their own affairs (Phanjoubam, 2016). The paying of taxes was more like truce to win peace than actual full subjugation similar to that of the subjects of the plains. The cultivators in the foothills would pay a percentage of their agricultural produce annually to the hill chiefs in their vicinity in return for the promise that they would not raid the valley through the course of the year. The tribal chief in return would pay a tribute to the king with a promise of peace. The Posa system that regulated the relations between the Ahom kings and the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh is one of its examples. The word Posa literally means a collection or a subscription for a common purpose (Sharma, 2012: 225). The Ahom Bhuranji gives us the information that during the reign of the Ahom ruler Pratap Singha (1603-45) the Posa system was officially recognised and was introduced in regards to all tribes on the northern frontier of Assam. The Ahoms recognized the system because they had not only to protect the country against foreign aggression but had an additional responsibility of protecting their subjects from the raids of the hill tribes. It was not always possible to carry out expeditions against the tribes since the latter lived in inaccessible hills and forests (Sharma, 2012: 217).

### **3.4.2 Colonial Period**

It was only after the Yandaboo Treaty of 24<sup>th</sup> February 1826 that the NER became a part of the political imagination by virtue of it being included in British India. This treaty was signed between the British East India Company and the king of Ava (Burma, now Myanmar). As a result, the Burmese king handed over the then Assam to the British East India Company. It covered vast tracts of plains of Brahmaputra valley extending from Sadiya to Dhubri along with three provinces of Burma; Arakan, Martaban and Tenasserim. The British colonizers saw a huge fortune in the lands of Northeast India. It may also be noted that many ethnic groups were under the rule of the Ahoms and had friendly relations with them. Northeast India, during this period, consisted of the undivided Assam that included Garo hill district, Khasi-Jayantia hill district, Naga hill districts,

Lusai hill districts and the princely states, i.e. Manipur and Tripura along with a big centrally administered area known as NEFA (North East Frontier Agency). The British government established a temporary government in Assam.

In 1823, David Scott was appointed as Agent to Governor-General of Eastern Frontier from North Cachar to Sylhet in the south and the Sikkim in the North, the entire administration was under him. His jurisdiction extended to Assam once it became a part of the British territory in 1826. For the convenience of the British administration, Assam was divided into two parts Upper Assam and Lower Assam. Rangpur was the capital of Upper Assam and Guwahati was the capital of Lower Assam. After establishing themselves in the Brahmaputra valley, the British colonisers gradually annexed the remaining kingdoms of the Northeast one after another. The whole of undivided Assam came under the control by the East India Company from the Calcutta Presidency in 1839. In 1891, Manipur was the last to be annexed. However, in 1858, the British Crown took over the Company and established British Raj in India. Until its separation in 1874, the Northeast continued to be ruled under the Calcutta presidency. From, the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards the political scenario of NER experienced a mammoth change.

The British government also organised trade fairs along the foothills where the tribal people of the present day Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland traded. No attempt was, however, made by the British to interfere in the local affairs of the tribal and no regular administrative agency was set up in this area. The Posa system was continued but it was commuted to cash payments for administrative reasons. The economic viability of the province of Assam with her rich minerals, oil fields and tea motivated the British imperialists to see that the tribals were not enraged by the inroads of the outsiders into the hills and also any economic profit that could be generated from the deep forests, went into the coffers of the Government. This led to the promulgation of the Inner Line Regulation of



1873 or The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation I of 1873. This act was to be applicable to the districts of Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Naga Hills, Cachar and Chittagong Hills. This line of restriction regulated the intercourse between the tribesmen and the British subjects in the plains bordering the hills. Plains people were not able to go into the hill areas; the domain of the 'backward' tribes, thus the development of the hill areas was minimal, while the plains became part of the colonial economy with links to the rest of British India by road and rail (Baruah, 2003).

The bright economic prospects of the forests in the hills and the promising prospects of Frontier and trans-Himalaya cross-country trade with Tibet and Central Asia motivated the British to exercise indirect control over these areas. Since there were no records describing the exterior limits of the northern frontier, the 'Outer Line' was introduced in 1907, which was indefinite and undefined. Up to the Inner Line, the British Government only administered politically (administered land) and between the Inner Line and Outer line, their Political Officers exercised very loose jurisdiction (partially administered). Therefore, though Arunachal Pradesh, Naga Hills, Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills, hilly areas of Tripura and Manipur were formally under the rule of the British in reality, they were independent and ran their own affairs. The imperialist regime continued to treat NER as the buffer zone between China and Burma. The concept of 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' areas that were introduced in the recommendations of Simon Commission of 1928 was further incorporated in the Government of India Act 1935. The act classified the North East Frontier Tract (NEFT) which constituted three tracts – Tirap Frontier Tract, Sadiya Frontier Tract and Balipara Frontier Tract as 'excluded area' and the Governor of Assam were given additional power to make regulations for these areas. The word 'excluded' was replaced by 'backward' as the official classification of the areas outside ministerial jurisdiction. The external limit of the jurisdiction in the NER was further given a stamp in 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1914 Shimla Conference signed between British India and Tibet

when the McMahon line was demarcated. The McMahon Line runs over a distance of 820 miles or 1320 kms of which 998 kms is between India and Tibet from the tri-junction of Bhutan, Tibet and Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh.

### **3.4.3 Post-Colonial Period or Post- Independence Period**

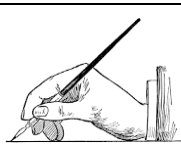
As mentioned above, the regional identity of Northeast that we see today is very recent. Partition had a major impact on the Northeast. The new political boundaries meant that the entire region was joined to the rest of India by a narrow tract of land between Bangladesh and Bhutan. Hill communities that had established trading relations with the plains communities of Bengal were now left straddling an international border. Other communities found that they were now divided along the new frontiers with East Pakistan and Burma; Nagas, Mizos, Chakmas, Khasis, Garos, and Jaintias had their communities dissected by the new borders. Access to ports, especially Chittagong and Khulna in present-day Bangladesh, was cut and access to markets was limited; the development of the Northeast was further stalled (Hazarika, 1995: 257-260). The established river and land routes that had facilitated trade and migration for centuries were closed, the Northeast was landlocked. Thus the tribal communities of the Northeast found themselves in the sensitive border areas of India, thus the means of securing their loyalty to preserve these borders became a subject of widespread debate by the central authorities (McDuie-Ra, 2009). The actual quest for the identity emerged in the 1960s when Assam was in havoc on the problems arising on language and territory related hill movements that led to military issues and insurgencies. During the 1960s and 1970s, various political movements called for the establishment of separate states for hill tribes, based on the perceived neglect of the Indian and Assamese governments, and the attempts to make Assamese the official language of the hill areas. Assam was divided into seven separate states between 1971 and 1987 as a result of violent and non-violent agitations from different hill-tribal groups (Chadda, 2002: 50).

In 1963, Nagaland attained its statehood with the enactment of the state of Nagaland Act in 1962. In 1970, the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills districts were constituted into a Sub-State (Meghalaya) within Assam. In 1971, The North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act was implemented and as a result, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh were separated from the province of Assam. In 1971, the two Union Territories Manipur and Tripura attained statehood, and the Mizo Hills district and the erstwhile NEFA became Union Territories, while Meghalaya was upgraded to a full-fledged State in 1972. Later in 1987, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh also acquired the status of full-fledged states respectively. As a result, the Northeast is now a collection of eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura and Sikkim within the Indian Union which are economically dependent on the central government.

Despite the fact that Inner Line Permit was originally created by the British to safeguard their commercial interests, it continues to be used by GoI, officially to protect the tribal communities in NEI. The ILP is an official travel document issued by the GoI to allow inward travel of an Indian citizen into a protected area for a limited period of time. The word 'British Subjects' was replaced by 'Indian Citizen' in 1950. Currently, the states which require a permit are Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland. There is an ongoing demand for introducing ILP in Assam and Meghalaya. It may be noted here that with the shift from the colonial period to the post-independence period, there emerged some striking changes in the political system of Northeast India. Even though the advent of trade and commerce, as well as industries, was seen in the region during the British rule, nevertheless, those served to fulfil the colonial interests of the British with little emphasis on the demands of the native people. In the post-independence period, the government began to take a keen interest in the economic development of the country at large. Many schemes at different levels in different sectors like education, agriculture, small scale industries,

health etc. were taken in hand. Steps for developing the country was taken with the establishment of Five Year Plans. There were other initiatives too taken in hand that we find today that has brought about both positive and also unwanted consequences. In the entire process, however, Northeast India has emerged as a conceptual category, though problematic, holding its own unique significance.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



1. What is Inner Line system?

-----

-----

2. What is the full form of NEFA?

-----

-----

---

### 3.5 SUMMING UP

From the above discussion, we have come to know that Northeast India has evolved through different phases in history. It has a rich history with the evolution of the term itself. Different scholarly texts, historical books and literature help us understand how different people have used the term 'Northeast' or 'Northeast Region' as a category having a distinguished regional identity.

---

### 3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss from the historical perspective how Northeast India has evolved.
2. Discuss the emergence and significance of the term Northeast.

3. Discuss how the term Northeast has changed or evolved into the idea of a region.

---

### 3.7 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

---

Bhattacharjee, J.B. (2018). The Northeast: The evolution of the idea of a region. *Studies in People's History*, 5 (1): 65-71. SAGE Journals. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2348448918759869>.

Bhattacharya, S.N. (2005). The North East Frontier- The Land, the People and Their Early History. In Sharma, S.K. and Sharma, U., editors, *Discovery of North East India*, pages 1-40. Mittal Publications, New Delhi.

Hazarika, S. (1995). *Strangers in the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast*. Penguin, New Delhi.

McDuie-ra, D. (2009). *Civil Society, Democratization and the Search for Human Security: The Politics of the Environment, Gender, and Identity in Northeast India*. Nova Science Publishers, Inc., New York.

Phanjoubam, P.(2016). *The Northern Question: Conflicts and Frontiers*, Routledge Publications, New Delhi.

Raatan, T. (2004). *Encyclopaedia of North East India*, Vol. 1. Kalpaz Publications, Delhi.

Sharma, C.K. (2012). The State and the Ethnicisation of Space in Northeast India. In Mahanta, N.G. and Gogoi, D. editors, *Shifting Terrain: Conflict Dynamics in North East India*. DVS Publishers, Guwahati/ Delhi.

Verghese, B.G. (1996). *India's Northeast Resurgent*. Konark Publishers, Delhi.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **MODULE II: SOCIAL FORMATION OF NORTHEAST INDIA**

---

## **UNIT 4: TRADITIONAL SOCIETY, POLITY AND ECONOMY OF NORTHEAST INDIA**

---

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

#### 4.1 Introduction

#### 4.2 Objectives

#### 4.3 Traditional Society in Northeast India

##### 4.3.1 Traditional Family

##### 4.3.2 Traditional Kinship

##### 4.3.3 Traditional Marriage

#### 4.4 Political and Economic Scenario of Northeast India

##### 4.4.1 Political Condition

##### 4.4.2 Economic Condition

#### 4.5 Summing Up

#### 4.6 Questions

#### 4.7 Recommended Readings and References

---

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

---

The Northeastern area originally comprised of the composite Assam or the old Kamarupa along with the two princely states Manipur and Tripura. Although Assam of the past or the Northeast Region that we called today, had not been known to many people, according to the Chinese pilgrim Huen Tsang, Assam had attained a fairly high degree of civilization under the reign of Bhaskar Varman in the 7th century. However, apart from a few copper plates and rock inscriptions, little is known about the kingdom of Assam after Huen Tsang's visit until the arrival of the Ahoms in the 13th century. The Ahoms were the Shans from a land called Pong lying between old Assam and Burma, who originally belonged to north China and entered

this region for the first time through the Patkai Hills as a small group of people in 1228 A.D. They took the advantage of the political instability in the country and gradually became the masters over the lands for six centuries as they had high knowledge on the history and therefore, chronicled their stories on the dried barks of trees. They gradually brought together the indigenous rulers- the Kochs, the Kacharies and the Chutiyas and organized a feudal system. After the Ahoms, the British colonial rulers established their regime and further changed the structure of the region.

Therefore, Northeast India has undergone many significant changes through different phases in history. Changes are not only structural but also functional which are reflected both in the political and economic aspects. The changes impacted both the people of the valleys and the plains. The tribal people have their ways of life. They have evolved from their traditional societies with each having their political systems and economic arrangements. We will deal with all these in the sections below.

---

## **4.2 OBJECTIVES**

---

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

- Discuss the basis of traditional societies of Northeast India and their various functional components;
- Analyse the political scenario of Northeast India;
- Analyse the economic scenario of Northeast India.

---

## **4.3 TRADITIONAL SOCIETY IN NORTHEAST INDIA**

---

In this section, we shall discuss the traditional societies of Northeast India. Northeast India, as we already know, is a melting pot of different groups of people, i.e. those that have arrived here, in batches, in different points of time period and those that are considered the natives of this land since the earliest times. This region has a diverse geopolitical strategic location which has led some scholars to divide it into the hill areas and the valleys. The traditional societies of this region cover the marriage systems and



traditional kinship systems that act as an important social institution. As we have come to know that this region comprises eight states and every state has multiple tribal and ethnic groups along with caste groups, each of the states has its own diverse traditions, polity and economic practices. For a more holistic understanding of the functioning of the traditional societies and its constituents, this section has been divided into different sub-sections covering different areas of society. Here, we will discuss some of the major and dominant tribal and ethnic groups of each state that mostly represents the entire state in general.

#### **4.3.1 Traditional Family**

In the case of Northeast India, diversity can also be seen in terms of the types of family existing in the region. Nuclear, joint and extended types of family are found among the different tribes and groups of the region along with both matrilineal and patrilineal family set up. Matriliney is found among the Khasis, Garos and Jaintias of the state of Meghalaya. Apart from them, other tribes and caste groups of the region are patrilineal and patrilocal. By now, you are already familiar with the basic functions of a family as covered in the paper on family and kinship that you have read in your first-semester course. Here, we are not going to repeat those basic functions, rather we are going to discuss the family system and the function it serves among a few important tribes of Northeast India.

In the case of Adis of Arunachal Pradesh, the family is the basic functional unit. Adi families are nuclear families. The father holds a significant central position and therefore, authority in any matter is vested upon him. In his absence, the mother or any grown-up son takes his place. Adi traditional families are patrilocal, where after marriage the sons of this tribe build their own houses separately to stay with his own wife and children. The daughters are sent to her husband's house. In the case of Pangchem Monpas, again the nuclear families are found, with the father holding the central authority. They are also patrilocal. Among the Bodos of Assam,

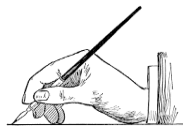
both joint families and nuclear families are found. In both the types of family, the father is the head of the house. They are patrilocal. In a joint family, the male members enjoy coparcenary rights, unless one leaves the family even though the father is alive. If the father is dead then the eldest male member takes his position and discharges his responsibilities along with his mother. Among the Misings and Karbis of Assam again, both of their traditional family systems are patrilocal. The head of the family is a male and hence, has a patriarchal family set up. But, nowadays among the Misings, nuclear families are mostly found. Only two or three nuclear families live peacefully together under one roof. On the other hand, the Karbis are unitary one. Very few extended families are still found among the Karbis today.

In Manipur, the Meities, Nagas and the Kukis are patriarchal. Among them too the father is the head of the family and follows patrilocal family setups. In Meghalaya, on the other hand, the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias are matrilineal, where the descent is traced from the mother's side. They are also matrilocal in terms of residence where the husband of the youngest daughter lives with her in her parental home. The property is also vested among the youngest daughter. However, the father still plays an important role in bringing up their children, security of the family, livelihood, etc. though these tribes of Meghalaya are matrilineal in nature, they are not essentially matriarchal for it is the maternal uncle that becomes the guardian of the children of his sisters and thereby, plays the most significant role in terms of decision-making, including in the matters of land and property.

The Mizos of Mizoram are patriarchal as well as patrilocal. The duties of both the genders are taught with the utmost strictness. After the son's marriage, he starts to live separately and if the family has three or more sons then all the sons after their marriage do the same like the elder one apart from the youngest son who is given the sole responsibility to look

after his parents. The Ao tribe and Angami tribe of Nagaland are also patrilocal and patriarchal. Likewise, the Mags of Tripura live in nuclear families and functionally is similar to the other patriarchal families of other tribes. The Bhutias of Sikkim are also patriarchal but the mother too holds an important position in the family structure in. Apart from the groups discussed here, there are other different groups of people living in Northeast India having their own traditional structures of family patterns.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



1. The traditional family system of the different groups of Northeast India has now undergone several changes. Identify the changes that can be observed. What do you think are the main factors behind those changes? Think and reflect.

#### 4.3.2 Traditional Kinship

In all human societies, people are grouped through different kinds of bonds. One such most universal bond is Kinship bonds or Kinship system. Kinship is based on blood, marriage or adoption. Kinship bonds are of two types, affinal kins (relations established through marriage or contract) and consanguineous kins (relations based on genes or blood). Both these kin groups represent the lineage group (descendants of a common ancestor). This lineage again is of two types matrilineal (when one traces one's descent through one's mother) and patrilineal (when one traces one's descent through one's father). These lineages are important as through these, functions like helping one another in the time of need, inheritance of property, etc. are decided. As for illustration purpose, we will discuss here some of the important tribes and sub-tribes of Northeast India.

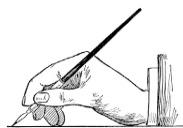
Bodos of Assam are patrilineal. Their Descent is traced through male lines only and children take the surname of their father. And when a daughter is married off she takes the surname of her husband. In terms of property inheritance, male members enjoy this right. But, if the father is alive and a son meanwhile still wants to live separately with his wife and family then these rights are not given to that son. On the death of the father, and on the event of breaking up from the joint family (by the married son), the unmarried son gets the double of the family property. However, the eldest son gets more preference in both inheritance and social responsibilities. The Karbis of Assam are divided into three major divisions- Ronghong, Chintong and Amir. They are patrilineal. So, when the head of the family (male member) dies then the property is inherited by the son or the nearest male relative of his clan. A childless couple can also adopt a son and when the foster father dies the adopted son gets all the property. Among the Mizos, the son inherits the father's property mostly the smallest son gets the preference in this regard. Among them, the daughter does not get any share of her father's property except for some dowry during her marriage.

Among the Aos of Nagaland, a woman can inherit property, even though the society is patrilineal in nature. A widow too receives property for her support. If a father without sons has a daughter she receives all the rights of his property even after his death if she has the nominal rights, if not then it goes to the next male heir. But among the Angamis, a widow cannot claim her husband's property nor a daughter gets a share of her father's property. If he does not have sons, the property will directly go to the next male heir. In Tripura, among the Mags, after the father's death, the eldest son gets half of the property and the remaining half is shared equally among the other sons. The daughter only gets the ornaments and other traditional ancestral pieces of jewellery.

The societies of the Khasis, Garos and Jaintias of Meghalaya are matrilineal. Therefore, a woman has more authority and power to demand change. The line of descent is traced through female lines only. Among the

Khasis, the youngest daughter by birth becomes the custodian of the family property however; it is managed by her elder brothers and maternal uncles. Without consulting them, she cannot dispose of any part of the property. She lives in the ancestral house. Her brothers and elder sisters after their marriage live separately in the land given by their mother. If the youngest daughter dies, her next elder sister inherits the property she has. If all the daughters are incapable of retaining the ancestral property then the property goes back to mother's sister, mother's sister's youngest daughter and so on. Among the Garo's this privileged daughter is called as 'Nokna', which means heiress. Without her will, not even her sisters can live under the same roof. And if a Garo family does not have a daughter than the family adopts one. At the death of the daughter, the property still does not pass on to the sons. Among the Jaintias, sons cannot inherit the mother's property. The familial and kinship functions of the Jaintias are same as that of the Garos and the Khasis.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



1. What is the difference between matriliney and matriarchy?

-----

-----

-----

### 4.3.3 Traditional Marriage

In the Northeastern Region, the most ideal form of marriage is monogamous marriage (where a man could only have one wife so long his wife is alive). However, the tradition of polygyny (where a husband marries more than one wife) can also be seen among most of the tribes living in both the plains and the hills. Some non-tribal communities also have this similar pattern of marriage system which is socially accepted but among them, such practices are very rare. In the past, those with power and wealth mostly practised polygyny. Though socially accepted in this region, this type of marriage is almost given up. In case of traditional marriage pattern too, we are going to cover some of the major tribes and sub-tribes of Northeast Region as it is not feasible to cover all of numerous tribes and sub-tribes of this region.

Adi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh is one among the major tribes of the state. The state is also a home for many sub-clans like Galo, Ramo, and Milang etc. These sub-clans are very exogamous. Monogamy is the socially accepted ideal form of marriage among them but polygyny is also found to be practised. Among the Monpas again, the similar form of marriage pattern is followed. Cross-cousin marriages are found among them and polygamous marriages are highly practised. Marriage through negotiation is also practised but parallel cousin marriages are strictly prohibited. The Bodo-Kacharis of Assam are the largest plain tribal group. Commonly known as the Bodos, they follow a patrilineal group. Therefore, clan exogamy is practised. Traditional marriage among the Bodos is like a civil contract. Negotiation is being made called *Hatha Chuni*. This form of marriage is highly practised where a certain amount of money is taken from the bride's family called *Malsa*. Marriage by servitude (groom has to serve or represent his physical strength in the prospective bride's house before marriage for one year or more by the wish of his father-in-law) is also a traditional form of marriage among them, even though it is now rarely

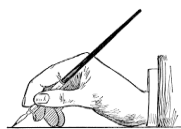
practised. Widow remarriage, traditionally known as *Chawdang-Jagarnay* and *Dhoka* respectively, is also practised. *Khar-Chanai*, another form of marriage is also practised where the girl voluntarily goes to stay with a man with whom she wishes to be her life partner. In general, Bodo societies are monogamous. However, it is to be noted that there are differences in ritualistic practices and customs between the traditional Bodo marriages and the Bodos that follows Hinduism. The former follows *Hatha Chuni* and the later practises *Hom-Yogna*.

Among the Khasis of Meghalaya, Khasi clans are exogamous and are matrilineal. The clan exogamy applies to both the mother's and father's clans. There is also no restriction of a Khasi girl to marry a non-Khasi man and similarly, a Khasi man can marry a non-Khasi girl as she does not belong to any of the clans of the mother or father. A girl has more freedom to choose her life partner as it is a matrilineal society. Cross-cousin marriages are practised among them but not preferred. Both senior levirate, as well as junior levirate, is practised. Those who have adopted Christianity, marriages are performed in the churches according to the Christian traditions and practices. Divorce, remarriage of the divorcees and widow remarriage are permissible. The Garos share a lot of commonalities with the Khasis in terms of marriage. The girl takes the initiative to select her partner. The negotiated form of marriage is called *do'sia*. In the past, among the Garos other forms of marriage like marriage by elopement, marriage by capture, etc. were also practised. Cross-cousin marriage that is, marrying the daughter of mother's brother is highly practised. At present endogamous marriages are also found to be present among them. An interesting practice among the Garos is the *Nokrom*. After marriage, the son-in-law resides in the bride's house and become a *Nokrom* and represents his father's clan in the family of his mother-in-law. However, there are two types of son-in-law among the Garos. First is *Nokrom* and the other is *Chowary*. The *Chowary* does not have to live with his parents-in-law. He builds a house to stay separately with his wife and manages his own property and whatever inheritance his wife has brought. After the

death of the father-in-law, the *Nokram* gets to manage the property on behalf of his wife since the inheritance is always on the female line. There is no bridewealth in the Garo society. They are also polygamous. A man has to marry the elder sister first if he marries two sisters of the same family. The senior wife is called as *Jik Mamung* and the other wives are called as *Jik Gites* (Saikia & Sen, 2013).

Apart from the above-discussed forms of marriages, there are other forms of marriages in general that are being practised in the traditional societies among the tribes and sub-tribes of Northeast India which include marriage by purchase, marriage by service, marriage by capture, marriage by consent and elopement, marriage by exchange, levirate, etc. The aim of marriage is mainly to procreate, enjoyment of sex and companionship. Dormitory (an accommodation for the youths or sleeping chambers where different life activities also take place) also plays a significant role in the life of some tribes of Northeast India (for instance, the Morung system of Nagaland).

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



1. What is *Hatha Chuni*?

-----

-----

2. What is *Nokram*?

-----

-----



---

## **4.4 POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SCENARIO OF NORTHEAST INDIA**

---

For a more holistic understanding, we shall discuss the political and economic scenario of Northeast India by classifying both the aspects into two different sections. However, in reality, these two aspects are inter-related and it is not easy to put them into watertight compartments.

### **4.4.1 Political Condition**

The political scenario of Northeast India began to change drastically with the annexation of the region by the British colonial rulers after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. The concept of well-demarcated boundaries began to be initiated and to keep the tribal areas isolated, the Britishers also introduced the concept of 'Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas' which were directly under the control of the Governor. Likewise, they also adopted the 'Inner Line' to control the entry of outsiders in Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland. After 1947, the political scenario of Northeast India further underwent a sea change as political consciousness started to develop among the different tribes and groups of the region.

The Constitution of India in the Sixth Schedule provided district autonomy for the hill areas. However, prior to the enactment of the Constitution, the Nagas began to demand separation from Assam. Therefore, due to their staunch will of separation, they even did not cooperate in forming a District Council in accordance with the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. In 1952, only five district councils- North Cachar hills, Garo hills, United Khasi and Jaintia hills, Mikir hills and the Mizo hills were set up. In 1953, the regional council was developed. The motive of this regional council was for the minority communities in Mizo hills and for the United Khasi and Jaintia hills. This further resulted in the establishment of Pawlakher region in the south-eastern part of the Mizo district and in 1963, a separate District Council was created for the Jowai Sub-Division of the United Khasi and Jaintia hills district (Saikia & Sen, 2013).

The phenomenon of the ethnic assertion that began with the Naga insurgency witnessed further intensification since the 1980s as the demand for separate ethnic homeland spread to various ethnic groups in the region. In Assam, it started with a resurgent Bodoland statehood movement in 1986 which claimed half of the state's territory. Around the same time, the Karbis of the hill district of Karbi Anglong launched a movement for an autonomous state (the Karbis, along with the Dimasas of the erstwhile North Cachar Hills district already had autonomous district councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution). This new demand of ethnic homeland then spread to other ethnic groups of the state such as the Misings, the Tiwas, the Rabhas, and so on.

In 1993, the Bodos were given an Autonomous Council (subsequently, more than ten years later, it was upgraded to what is called the Bodo Territorial Autonomous District – BTAD) incorporating not only the Bodo majority areas but also many areas, for maintaining territorial contiguity, with clear majority of the non-Bodos. The issue of inclusion of the latter in the BTAD thus gave rise to an intensely hostile situation between them and the Bodos. To make the situation even more complex, the proposed 'Nagalim' (the Naga homeland) of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (IM) incorporates a large tract of land that is part of Assam which are the natural habitats of some of the indigenous ethnic groups of Assam like the Karbis, the Dimasa-Kacharis, and so on and also includes a considerable area of Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. It needs to be noted here that in a number of cases in recent years the demands for ethnic homeland have not emerged from popular movements. Rather these demands have been raised by newly emerging groups of ethnic armed insurgents (Sharma, 2012).

In 1960, Assamese was made the official language of Assam. Therefore, many hill movements aroused. These movements were spearheaded by an organization formed together by various hill political parties called the All

Party Hill Leader's Conference (APHLC). On 11<sup>th</sup> September 1968, the Government of India decided on the reorganization of Assam as an autonomous state comprising the hill areas within the state of Assam. This proposal was accepted by APHLC on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1968. Meanwhile, all the hill districts of erstwhile Assam except Garo hills and the United Khasi and Jaintia hills decided to keep away from this autonomous state. Therefore, at the time of reorganization of Northeast India, Nagaland emerged as a full-fledged state within India in 1963, followed by Manipur, Meghalaya, and Tripura in 1972. Mizoram attained statehood in 1987.

The reorganization of the states in Northeast India could not put an end to the issues of the social groups of the region. They have their problems and aspirations and political aspiration is a very elusive term. Demands for more new states, secessionist and separatist movements continue to form a conspicuous feature of Northeast India.

#### **4.4.2 Economic Condition**

Due to its social and political conditions along with the geographical structures, the economy of Northeast India is somewhat backward. At the social and political plane, ethnic considerations sometimes come in the way of integrated economic development of the region. But to be precise, the economy of the hills and the plains are complementary to one another (Das, 1986). The NER is endowed with rich natural resources such as oil and natural gas and agro and forest-based products. The Region is a major producer of tea and possesses one-third of the country's hydropower potential. The scenic surroundings also provide an ideal setting for the promotion of the tourism industry. The Region has great potential for exports and there is also considerable scope for regional co-operation (Mohan, 2003).

The economic problems of Northeast India can be divided into the problems of the valley dwelling tribes and the problems of the hill dwelling tribes. The economic problems of the people living in the valley mostly include land alienation, landlessness, indebtedness, etc. while on the other

hand, the economic problems of the hill populations are entirely different. This region is indeed rich in mineral resources, natural resources, and other indigenous resources but due to the lack of proper utilization of these resources, external forces like market intervention, etc. the region faces economic backwardness. The conventional tribal economy of the region is quite different from the modern economy that we have today and therefore, the inclusion of the tribes (especially the hill tribes) into the fold of modern economic system led to several changes that are detrimental to the self-sufficiency of these tribes. Due to the traditional kin-based economic organization, the tribes are lagging in the participation process which is making the other developed communities and the foreign entrepreneurs to take the utmost advantage of their simplicity and economy.

There are weaknesses and threats to be sure, emanating to a large extent from the difficult terrain of the Region also — 70 percent of the NER is hilly, with forests covering between 42 and 76 percent of the area of each of the States. This poses one of the greatest constraints to rapid economic development (Mohan, 2003).

Agriculture is the main occupation of the people of Northeast India, with *Jhum* cultivation (shifting cultivation) being still widely practiced among the hill tribes. It may be noted here that before the annexation of the region by British colonial rulers, developed agriculture could be seen only in a few areas of the region, especially in the Brahmaputra valley while most of the hill tribes relied on a subsistence economy. There were also some areas in the hills where the subsistence economy was also not to be found. Trade and commerce took place between the hills and the plains. After the British annexation of the region, the discovery of tea and petroleum along with the introduction of the railways indeed led to a boost in the economic development of the region, however, not much development was seen in other sectors, be it during the Colonial rule or after Independence of the country.

As of now, the North East region is the closest to this prosperous neighbourhood in Asia. As the on-going effort of conducting trade pacts with neighbouring countries proceeds, this potential would have a much greater probability of being realized. Discussions are already underway for the enhancement of regional cooperation in the BIMST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand- Economic Cooperation framework). In fact, the six sectors of cooperation identified in the arrangement are: trade and investment, energy, fisheries, tourism, technology and communication & transport. Of these, the first four sectors are among those where the region can have a good competitive advantage. The region is blessed with a full variety of silkworms, mulberry, muga, tussar and eri which if supplemented with its tradition in handloom weaving has a huge potential in the handloom and textile industry. The region also has an advantage in cane weaving as its tradition that can further boost the local economy. The agro climate of the region is characterized by unique diversities. With such an agro climate, there is great potential for propagating horticulture crops including vegetables and fruits, along with flowers (Mohan, 2003).

Industrialisation and employment generation that can make a substantial impact to the region have not yet been introduced even though the recent efforts by the Government of India are accelerating the process to some extent; an important step in this regard is the establishment of a separate ministry for the development of the region (DONER). Numerous schemes and policies have also been introduced by GoI for the socio-economic development of the NER. One such policy is the Look East Policy" of India was launched by former Prime Minister P.V Narasimha Rao in 1991. The main focus of this policy was to increase economic integration in South East Asian countries.

Since the formation of the new government in the centre in 2014, the government renamed the policy to "Act East Policy". The "Act East Policy" was launched at the East Asia Summit in Myanmar in November

2014, the main objective is to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties, and develop a strategic relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region through continuous engagement at regional, bilateral and multilateral levels. Another magnum opus created for the overall development of the region is the North Eastern Region Vision 2020 Document, brought out by NEC, a nodal agency for the social and economic development of the NER. and accepted and signed by all the Members of the Council in the 56th Plenary of the NEC on 13th May 2008 at Agartala, Tripura. It urges the concerned Central Ministries/Departments to formulate relevant socio-economic programs and projects in the region. Ministries are also invited to spell out their development plans, achievements and ongoing activities in the North Eastern Region during routine meetings of the North Eastern Council and other review meetings. Although detailed quantification of progress made in respect of the implementation of NER Vision 2020 is not possible, major infrastructure projects in roads, railways, airways and power have been implemented and telecom connectivity has also improved considerably. The 12th Five Year Plan (2012-17) Document of Planning Commission has observed that larger plan investment and focus on infrastructure development has resulted in average growth of the gross domestic product in the NE States at 9.8% which was higher than the national average of 8% during the 11th Five Year Plan (2007-2012) period. Presently, the Vision 2020 is undergoing mid-term academic evaluation ([necouncil.gov.in](http://necouncil.gov.in)).

---

#### **4.5 SUMMING UP**

---

In this unit, we have discussed the traditional society of Northeast India. We have seen that though diversity cut across the different tribes and groups of the region in the context of traditional practices, there are also threads of commonality that run through them. We have also discussed the economic and political scenario of the region where we can see how each of these spheres influences the other.

---

#### 4.6 QUESTIONS

---

1. Write an essay on the traditional society of Northeast India.
2. Illustrate how the various constituents of the traditional society of Northeast India are changing with suitable examples.
3. Discuss the political and economic scenario of Northeast India.

---

#### 4.7 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

---

Barpujari, H. K. (1990). *Comprehensive History of Assam*. Vol 1, Publication Board, Assam.

Das, S.T. (1986). *Tribal life of North Eastern India*. Gian Publishing House, Delhi.

Mohan, R. (2003). *Economic Development of the North East Region: Some Reflections*. <http://rakeshmohan.com/docs/RBIBulletinDec2003.pdf>

Saikia, A and Sen, S. (2013). *Society in North East India- A Socio Economic and Historical Perspectives*. Brahmaputra Offset, Assam.

Sharma, C.K. (2012). The State and the Ethnicisation of Space in Northeast India. In Mahanta, N.G. and Gogoi, D. editors, *Shifting Terrain: Conflict Dynamics in North East India*. DVS Publishers, Guwahati/ Delhi.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

## **UNIT 5: TRIBE-CASTE INTERACTION, ADVENT OF CHRISTIANITY**

---

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Objectives
- 5.3 Tribe-Caste Interaction
  - 5.3.1 Advent of Neo-Vaishnavism
- 5.4 Advent of Christianity in Northeast India
- 5.5 Summing Up
- 5.6 Questions
- 5.7 Recommended Readings and References

---

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this Unit, we shall discuss the interaction between caste and tribe in Northeast India. Here, we need to note that the caste system that prevails in Northeast India is somewhat different from the one that prevails in the other parts of India. We will also cover the advent of Christianity in Northeast India which indeed made an impact on the lives of a large population of the region, especially in the hills.

---

### **5.2 OBJECTIVES**

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Discuss the interaction between caste and tribe in Northeast India;
- Discuss the emergence of Christianity in North East India and its impact.



---

### 5.3 TRIBE-CASTE INTERACTION

---

Northeast India is marked by diversity. It has been home to diverse groups and communities since long past. It may be noted here that it is very difficult to trace its earliest inhabitants. However, different groups of Mongoloid stock are considered to have started the social process for the first time in the region. In the beginning, these groups were essentially food gatherers but eventually, with the improvement in production technology, they turned into food producers (Sharma, 2011). Further, the region also witnessed the migration of Aryans into it from north India who introduced a peasant society and settled cultivation. The Aryan migrants also initiated the process of setting up of territorial units by subjugating the autochthons (ibid.). The autochthons were also initiated to the process of Sanskritisation and were brought under the fold of settled agriculture. Moreover, the Aryan migrants also established marital ties with the tribal groups thereby strengthening the tribe-caste interaction (Sharma, 2009).

The rulers of the emerging states began to encourage more upper caste migration to the region. The Brahmin priests could not only fulfil the aspiration of creating a better administration but also helped the local rulers of tribal origin to acquire the status of the kshatriya (Sharma, 2011). Many even tried to link the origin of the tribal rulers with some of the Hindu mythological deities. The Ahoms have embraced Hinduism in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and offered patronage to it especially as a result of expanding their territory in the west which has subsumed many Hindu 'Assamese' speaking subjects. Likewise, in certain other parts of the region that we now refer to as Northeast India, Hinduisation process was taking place, for instance, the Hinduisation of the rulers of the then princely states of Manipur and Tripura. Following the ruling classes, the autochthons also have embraced Hinduism. With the course of time, Brahminic orthodoxy also gained supremacy. Here, you can understand how the concept of caste and Hinduisation of the tribal groups began to take shape in the region. The growing popularity of Brahminic Hinduism began to mould the otherwise

autonomous and egalitarian tribal societies into a hierarchical caste-based social order.

### **5.3.1 Advent of neo-Vaishnavism:**

The growing supremacy of Brahminical orthodoxy prepared the ground for the emergence of Neo-Vaishnavism in the then undivided Assam which emerged not only as an egalitarian religious faith of medieval India mysticism but also as a movement that brought about several changes in the social fabric of the region. Founded and propagated by Shankardeva (A.D. 1449- A.D. 1568) and his disciple Madhavdeva (A.D. 1489-A.D. 1596), Neo-Vaishnavism came as a challenge to Brahminical ideology. The caste hierarchy and the ritual complexities of the Brahminic Hinduism enjoyed little significance in Neo-Vaishnavism. Neo-Vaishnavism stood against the injustice of the Brahminic orthodoxy and conservatism by advocating simplicity and liberalism in religious practices (Sharma, 2009).

The Neo-Vaishnavite sect in Assam was based on the wide networks of *satras* (monasteries) headed by a guru. There is a very simple procedure to be part of this sect that is, through '*Sarana*' (religious shelter). This facilitated the inclusion of a large number of tribals into the fold of Hinduism. The tribal neophytes were commonly known as 'Saranias'. Many tribal groups like the Bodos, Tiwas, and Rabhas, etc. became Saranias and are still addressed and seen to be assimilated into the Assamese society. Between the tribals and the Saranias, there is another stage that exists called the 'Modahis' where the tribals were allowed to have liquor. Upward mobility among the tribal neophytes was also facilitated by the process of 'enunciation' and 'renunciation' (ibid.)

According to Sharma (2009), the transformation of the tribals was actually nothing but a product of a process of detribalization. This enables the tribal peasantry to acquire more developed production methods of the mainstream non-tribal society and eventually to enter into its fold. In the process, he argued that several tribal groups like the Chutiyas, Borahis,

Morans, Deori, Kacharies (Bodos), etc., especially of the upper Assam and the Central Assam, turned into sanskritized “Assamese” peasants in the course of time. Therefore, a sizeable section of people of the present caste Hindu society is of tribal origin. But, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the process of proliferation in the number of *satras*, differences in the ideology came up.

Tribal revivalism emerged with the expansion of the colonial education systems. The works of the missionaries, the expansion of the colonial administrative machinery to the tribal areas, etc. had led to the emergence of the tribal middle class. This class was very conscious about the tribal marginalization and started asserting for their identity against the caste Hinduisation of the Assamese society. The self-assertion was not only confined to the symbolic domain (ibid.). But, it was seen that the tribal groups demanded their own separate ‘homelands’. It was the Bodos who first raised their voice for a separate homeland. At the end of the 1960s, the other tribals also began to raise their voices.

By now, we have understood how Northeast India came under the fold of Hinduism and caste-based social order. We have also learnt how the rise of Neo-Vaishnavism challenged the growing popularity of Brahminical Hinduism in the region. The transition from Hinduisation and Sanskritisation to tribal revivalism has also been a significant event in the shaping of the social and political scenario in the region. Since the long past, the different groups inhabiting the region that we now refer to as Northeast India have been living interacting with one another. However, the creation of new categories of tribes and castes was introduced by the colonial rulers in India. Tribe, therefore, is a colonial construction. When the British began to write on Indian society, the term 'tribe' was used in general parlance, implying more than one meaning. The term has undergone changes in the course of history. The early British writings on India did not study groups or communities from the caste or tribe perspectives. The groups were studied in their capacity as human groupings

or communities. The separate description of the terms 'caste' and 'tribe' was a later phenomenon. It is, therefore, not very clear in which sense the British ethnographers used the term 'tribe' in India. In the census reports of 1881, when the first 'proper' all-India census was undertaken, the term 'tribe' was not used but, 'forest tribe', and that too as a sub-heading within the broader category of agricultural and pastoral castes.

In the post-independence period, one finds more systematic efforts to distinguish tribe from caste. It has generally been assumed that tribe and caste represent two different forms of social organizations - castes include hereditary division of labour, hierarchy, the principle of purity and pollution, civic and religious disabilities, etc. and tribe is characterized by the absence of the caste attributes. The two types of social organizations are seen as being governed by different principles. It is said that kinship bonds govern tribal society and, caste groups tend to maintain different forms, practices and behavioural patterns for each of these two aspects of the religion. Tribes and castes are also seen to be different in respect of the psychological features among members (Xaxa, 1999).

The colonial scholars created the conception that tribes lived in isolation from the rest of the population and that they had no interaction or interconnection with them. But the post-colonial ethnography mainly focussed to show a close interaction between the tribes and the larger society or civilization. It has been found that tribes are getting absorbed into our societies that manifest civilization. As we have already understood, one significant method of tribal assimilation is the state formation. The formation of the state provided the decisive socio-political framework for the transformation of the tribal system into the regional caste system (Xaxa, 1999).

The tribe is a creation of the colonial administrators. The colonial construction of new categories of castes and tribes has been somewhat confusing and it actually emphasised the tribe-caste dichotomy rather than the continuity thereby leading to the widening of the gap between caste and

tribes. The colonial construction of tribe-caste relationship continued in the socio-political discourse of post-colonial India too. With the inclusion of the policy of positive discrimination in the Constitution of India, one can see the tribe-caste relationship taking a different turn. Even though the interaction between the two still continues yet the aspirations have changed as the tribes no longer desire for vertical mobility in the caste hierarchy rather even those tribes who were earlier turned into castes are now demanding their tribal status back (Sharma, 2009).

It is also important to note that Northeast India, when it comes to identity formation, has undergone a long historical process where both tribal and non-tribal groups played equally important roles. As already mentioned earlier, 'tribe' is a colonial construction and the whole concept of identifying certain socially backward groups as tribes is a colonial legacy that has been continued, leading to the designation of certain groups as Scheduled Tribes (STs). The benefits that one can avail of as belonging to ST have led to many communities in India, including Northeast India to demand ST status. This has indeed led to inter-community discord in the region. However, even though there is a binary opposition between the caste and the tribal groups within the Assamese society but this Assamese society represents a continuum of both the caste and tribe (ibid.).

---

#### **5.4 ADVENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN NORTHEAST INDIA**

---

As we already know that the colonisation of then undivided Assam led to many changes and one important development has been the advent of Christianity in the region. The beginning of the 19th century was a landmark in the history of the colonial expedition in the Northeast region. The arrival of Christian missionaries and the spread of Christianity in tribal areas during the latter part of the nineteenth century not only introduced organized religion but brought about changes in the social life of the people through the church programmes, particularly in education and health. It was also due to the work of the Christian missionaries that

linguistic consciousness emerged particularly in the tribal areas. However, the most significant development during this period was the emergence of an educated modernized elite (Dangmei, 2012).

The first presence of Christian Missionaries in the North East region may be dated back in 1626, when two Jesuit Missionaries, Stephen Cacella and John Cabral arrived at Pandu, near Guwahati in Assam, probably on their way to Tibet and China. Accounts on the activities of Christian missionaries are available from the colonial ethnographers and administrators. The founding of Serampore Mission in 1793 by the Baptist Missionary Society of England was the beginning of missionary activities in Northeast India. Following the Charter Act of 1813, which stipulated that the British administration must take more responsibility for the religious and moral improvement of the people of India, William Carey sent Krishna Chandra Pal to work among the Khasis of Sylhet on the invitation of the British magistrate of Sylhet. William Carey, who was closely associated with the Serampore Mission, founded the Serampore College in 1818, and soon it became a nodal centre for academic as well as missionary works. Since then slowly and gradually the Christian Missionaries penetrated in the different parts of NEI. Many tribal groups also adopted Christianity like the Nagas (Dangmei, 2012). Depending on theological positions and political, social, economic situations among the people of Northeast India, the missionaries began their work by adopting certain suitable approaches which are relevant, effective and necessary. Before choosing a field, missionaries look for a particular group of people, assessing their geographical location, language, cultures, approximate population, political and economic life and religious beliefs. Some of these primary pieces of information is gathered from the census records and other sources. Most missionaries often go directly to the people and stay with them. By learning the local dialect and customs, they began to have close contact and interaction with the people. After winning the confidence and learning the dialect and culture of the people, missionaries began

witnessing through casual talk or dialogue with the village elders and leaders. They allowed the people to ask questions, clear their doubts, and even express their views in order to establish better communication. This took place while visiting homes, in the medical centres, classrooms, Sunday schools, church services or prayer meetings and field visits.

The missionaries also developed mission compounds wherever they went. Making their base in such centres, they reached out to the people around them. These compounds served as a centre of new activities, opening schools, meeting or chapel halls, teaching vocational skills such as carpentry, industry, tailoring, and weaving. Missionaries also established important institutions like ecclesiastical, educational, medical, training schools, colleges and theological seminaries. Each denomination has its own church structures and policies. For instance, the American Baptist missionaries established their churches among the converts adopting the autonomy of the local church. The missionary activities were disrupted during the First World War, as Germany was actively involved in the war. But it gained the momentum again with the arrival of eleven missionaries in January 1922 at Shillong. Since then the Catholic missions entered into a period of stability and expanded its activities throughout the region. Subsequently, Silesians also arrived and began their significant educational and medical services for the people. The Catholic Mission had made an immense contribution to the people through the introduction of standard schools and colleges, medical dispensaries, clinics and hospitals, training institutions for self-employment opportunities, agricultural training centres, and museums for the preservation of tribal cultures, old-aged homes, orphanages and rural development programmes. Besides the Baptists and Catholics, there are many other Christian Churches spreading in Northeast India. The churches include Anglican Church, Seven Day Adventists, Revival, Pentecostal, Welsh Calvinist, and Presbyterian (Dangmei, 2012).

It is interesting to note that Christianity became a preferred agent of acculturation in Northeast India (Syimlieh, 2011). As we have already learnt that Hinduisation of the various tribes of the region was popular during the pre-colonial times, the process got a halt with the advent of Christianity under the colonial rule. Christianity not only emerged as a new religion rather it emerged also as a new way of life for the converts. The tribes were made to realise the importance of personal hygiene and changes were also brought about in their attire. Further, the introduction of modern education and modern medical facilities pioneered by the Christian missionaries led to a sea change in society.

---

### **5.5 SUMMING UP**

---

In this unit, we have learnt that Northeast India has been home to many groups who have been living in close interaction with one another. We have understood how the migration of the Aryans from North India to the region led to changes in the social fabric. The Hinduisation and Sanskritisation of the communities to bring them to the fold of caste-based hierarchy have been significant developments. We have also seen how the events took a new turn with the advent of Neo-Vaishnavism that challenged the growing popularity of Brahminical dominance. Further, during the colonial rule, the concept of ‘castes’ and ‘tribes’ as new categories led to further changes in the social fabric. The advent of Christianity during the colonial period was also an important development as it put a halt to the process of Hinduisation of the tribes. Moreover, it also led to several changes in the lifestyle of the convert tribes. Finally, we have also understood how in the post-Independence India, the process of tribal revivalism is gaining ground owing to the benefits attached to the category of ST.



---

## 5.6 QUESTIONS

---

1. Discuss tribe-caste interaction in the context of Northeast India.
2. Discuss about the emergence of Christianity and its impact in Northeast India.
3. Explain the role played by neo-Vaishnavism in shaping the social fabric of Northeast India.

---

## 5.7 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

---

Barpujari H. K & Others (1977). *Political history of Assam*. Vol 1, Government of Assam, Guwahati

Barpujari H. K (1990). *Comprehensive history of Assam*. Vol 1. Publication Board, Assam.

Dangmei, S (2012). *Religious politics and search for indigeneity a study of donyi polo and heraka movements in North East India* (PhD.). Jawaharlal Nehru University: Delhi. Retrieved from: <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/117881/7/07>

Sharma, C.K. (2009). The Tribe Caste Continuum and the Formation of the Assamese Identity. In Medhi, B.K., Athparia, R.P. and Jose SVD, K., editors, *Tribes of North-East India*, pages 354-366. Omsons Publications, New Delhi.

Sharma, C.K. (2011). Religion and Social Change: Neo-Vaishnavism vis-à-vis Tribal Groups in Assam Valley. In Nath, D., editor, *Religion and Society in Northeast India*, pages 111-142. DVS Publishers, Guwahati.

Xaxa. V (1999). Transformation of tribes in India: terms of discourse. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 34 (24): 1519-1524. Doi: <https://www.jstore.org/stable/4408077>.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

## **UNIT 6: EMERGENCE OF MIDDLE CLASS**

---

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

6.1 Introduction

6.2 Objectives

6.3 The Middle Class: Meaning

6.4 Emergence of the Middle Class in India

6.5 Emergence of the Middle Class in Northeast India

6.5.1 Emergence of the Assamese Middle Class

6.6 The Role of the Middle Class in Nation Building

6.7 Summing Up

6.8 Questions

6.9 Recommended Readings and References

---

### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

---

In this Unit, we shall discuss the emergence of the middle class in Northeast India. The rise of the middle class in the valley areas of the region broadly followed the lines of the other areas of the mainstream India. In the hills, the emergence of the middle class is an independent development. The middle class in the hills started to develop due to the result of western education, newly changed markets and Christianity. However, the middle class in the hills could not remain entirely out of touch with the middle class among the people residing in the valleys as with time, better contacts were established between the hills and the plains of Northeast India. Different authors and scholars have put forward different definitions for the middle class. Some authors have taken some academically accepted definition and have cast their discussions around

those definitions. Others establish their own definitions according to the requirement of their subject-matters. The middle class plays a significant role as they become the leaders in the development of language and literature, infusing new ideas in the region and also became instrumental in bringing about political and revivalist movements (Ray, 1983). The middle-class everywhere played a significant role in various movements.

---

## **6.2 OBJECTIVES**

---

By the end of this Unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the meaning of middle class;
- Discuss the emergence of middle class in India;
- Explain the role of the middle class in social movements;
- Analyse the role of middle class in nation-building.

---

## **6.3 THE MIDDLE CLASS: MEANING**

---

With much controversies around the exact meaning of the middle class, it is not easy to define the term. In general, members of the middle-class are those who are neither rich nor poor but are in the middle of the class hierarchy. This category of the middle class can be divided into two groups- the upper middle class and the lower middle class. They constitute the intelligentsia of a nation. They play a vital role in nation-building.

The middle class is a historical and sociological category. It has emerged with the emergence of the modern capitalist society, with markets and cities. The development of this group implies the emergence of a new kind of social order based on a system of ranking and social classifications. It transforms the nature of social relations within communities and households, men and women, and between the young and the old. The development of a middle class marks a decisive moment in a nation's history. It indicates a society with upward mobility and achievement beyond subsistence which marks the transition from an industrial society,

polarized into the antagonistic classes of propertied and property-less, to one with buffering groups in the middle (Jodhka, 2016).

In the everyday life of India, 'middle class' is often used as a buzz word. It was only after the early 1990s with the introduction of the neo-liberal policies and economic reforms, this word 'middle class' came into use. The term was coined by James Bradshaw in a pamphlet in the year 1975, titled "Scheme to prevent running Irish Wools to France". In the medieval period (in Europe), the middle class consisted of those who were peasants, and have developed into a new 'bourgeoisie' based on the successful outcome of their mercantile ventures by overthrowing the monarchy or the king's rule that ultimately led to the development of the capitalist societies. Within the capitalist regime, the middle class is referred to the *bourgeoisie* and later it is synonymously used with the *petite bourgeoisie*. From the Marxian perspective, social classes are related to the means of production. For them, the middle class comprises of small to medium-sized business owners as well bunch of intelligentsia like the professors, lawyers, doctors, etc. that stand between the ruling capitalist owners of the means of production and the working class.

However, it is also to be noted that, those located in the middle of the caste hierarchy or the land ownership pattern, are not middle class. Again, the middle peasants of agrarian societies are not middle classes due to their attachment towards land and their dependence on subsistence agriculture. In contemporary times, the middle class is viewed as a modern concept which has emerged with industrial development and urbanization in the modern West. The middle class is not a community with an ascriptive identity. It emerged in the Indian sub-continent with the introduction of a western-style secular education system, the industrial economy and the new administrative systems under the colonial rulers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Jodhka, 2016). Over the years, the Indian middle class has continued to grow, because of the rise of the new state expansions on the bureaucratic structure and investments in public sectors. This has led to the rise in

schools, hospitals and universities. In the 1990s, greater visibility of this class was found in the onset of the ‘new economy’. They grew within the expanding private manufacturing economy. This growth of the middle class has also influenced the Indian political system. With its increasing size, the Indian middle class has also been getting richer and more diverse. It is transforming the structure of Indian society into a substantial intermediate class and further changing the image of India as well as that of the Indians.

---

#### **6.4 EMERGENCE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN INDIA**

---

In the context of India, the concept of middle class emerged due to the changes in the system of law and public administration. We need to understand the dynamics of Indian middle class because, despite being an identifiable category, the middle class has also come to be the norm, that is, the “normal” way to be, in contemporary India. It has played a kind of hegemonic role since the days of the colonial period in shaping national identity during the freedom struggle, in shaping the development agenda and nation-building after India’s independence, and in contemporary times, in creating social consensus on neoliberal reforms. Within this middle class, many contradictions are prevailing (Jodhka, 2016).

In the 19th century, under the direct rule of the imperialist British, the middle class emerged in India. This elite middle class has the spirit of western thought and ideology and therefore they began to criticize the feudalistic and traditional system of India. In association with the ruling class, the Indian middle class gave birth to renaissance and reformation movement in society. In Bengal, this movement was led by the Zamindars and officials of the East India Company. Under the leadership of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dwarka Nath Tagore, Debendra Nath Tagore, and others, this renaissance and reformation movement received tremendous success in Bengal. In Bombay, the rich and wealthy class and in Madras the business class took the leadership of this movement. Slowly and gradually, English education expanded and as a result, a new bourgeois class comprising of

engineers, doctors, lawyers and businessmen emerged in the Indian scene who fetched messages of a new age to their society. This newly-emerged middle class is dependent on change and development, expressing their allegiance to the government.

---

## **6.5 EMERGENCE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN NORTHEAST INDIA**

---

In this section, we shall discuss the emergence of the middle class in Northeast India. As, in the earlier sections towards the beginning, we have already come to know that, the rise of the middle class in the valley areas broadly followed the lines of the other areas of the larger mainstream India and in the hills, the emergence of the middle class is an independent development. But to be more specific, we will only look into the emergence of the Assamese middle class in Northeast India. This group of Assamese middle class has made a significant impact on the social life of Assam.

### **6.5.1 Emergence of the Assamese Middle Class**

Until the 1860s, the population of the middle class in Assam was very small but by the end of the 19th century, this class began to make its influence felt in the social life of Assam. The Assamese middle class was the product of the Colonial period and their appearance as a class was primarily an urban phenomenon. The factors responsible for the growth and development of the Assamese middle class were the increasing trade and commerce, the bureaucratic administration and courts, a new system of education based on western ideals of civil liberty, social ethics, legal procedure, notions of state and political theories and organizations, the creation of private property inland in absolute terms with the right of transfer, sale and mortgage and the introduction of the institutional devices for the collection of land revenue and the opening up of modern system of roads and communication, the railways and the tea industry.

The Assamese middle class has certain uniqueness of its own. First of all, it is comparatively of recent origin. Secondly, it exhibits a connection between the strength of traditional culture and the weakness of productive forces it commands in a way illuminating for the whole of India. Thirdly, having defended its interests in competition with 'outsiders' who possess greater financial resources and more advanced skill in economy stunted by imperialism, it has developed chauvinist tendencies that continually deflect its legitimate aspirations (Gohain, 1973). According to Hiren Gohain (1973), there are dangers in discussing the Assamese middle class in general. He said there has been considerable change in the composition and economic role of this middle class since independence. By a process of simple plunder from the state treasury in the name of 'development programme', the Assamese middle class has noticeably become more affluent and ambitious. But it does not hold the key to the further development of the region and the people; this is mainly because of its necessarily subservient relation to the Indian big capital.

Like the Indian middle class of the 19th century, the newly-emerged Assamese middle class also had deep loyalty and concern to the Colonial Government. They wanted change and development of Assam under their tutelage. This allegiance they showed to Colonial Government gave birth in their mind a colonial outlook and with such outlook, they judged their society and literature. This has clearly safeguarded their class-interest, rather than the collective interest of Assam. The Assamese middle class was the compound product of the colonial bureaucracy, English education and the tea industry. Though the three components played a mutually supportive role, the social formation of the class was flexible and it was capable of absorbing newer elements. Though the Assamese middle class was not a ruling class during the colonial period, it was able to maintain dominance over the Assamese society. Gohain stated that the Assamese middle class is now a helpless witness of the ruthless march of big capital rather than the advance guard of capitalism. Its base is so narrow that it cannot hope to transform the productive forces in agriculture. At the same

time, it has been alarmed at the growing demand of the poor peasants for land. The rapid increase in the number of educated unemployed has also shaken it badly. The reaction to it has assumed the form of acute xenophobia.

Revisiting the Colonial period, after the arrival of the British East India Company, there was a drastic change in the socio-political scenario in entire Northeast India. Money economy was introduced in place of a feudal economy based on *Paik* System of the medieval Assam. After some time, the Western system of education threw away the old system of education. As a result, a new Assamese middle class emerged from the debris of the old social system. The birth and development of the Assamese middle class is the output of the British rule. The capitalist economy and education culture carried by the British gave birth to the Assamese middle class. The newly emerged middle class was comprised of two classes; one comprising of *mauzadars*, *gaonburhas*, *mandals*, *satradhikar* and the Brahmin intellectuals who resided at villages. This class welcomed and co-existed with the new social system, but did not want to cut off their relationship with the feudal social system. They were scared of losing their social status if the feudal system vanished. But the British dashed their so-called social status, dynastic splendour, arrogance all to the ground. The other was comprised of magistrates, munshifs, clerks, doctors, lawyers, engineers, police inspectors who resided at towns. Undoubtedly, the middle class of towns were more radical than that of the villages. Western education, culture and rationalism made the minds of the middle class of towns more progressive, liberal and dynamic. But the fact is that despite having progressive and dynamic minds, this section still was stuck to the feudalistic culture of their ancestors. As a result, many a time, contradictions took place between these two categories of the middle class in Assam.

It will be an exaggeration to say that the British fostered the growth of the middle class without restriction. In fact, anything that disturbed the tenor of



their colonial exploitation was destroyed. At this point, it is useful to recall the meteoric rise and fall of Mani Ram Dewan, an outstanding Assamese gentleman who developed from a loyal friend and enthusiastic supporter of the British into a mortal enemy. Mani Ram in his memorandum to Mills had hailed the abolition of forced labour and restoration of law and order as the beginning of a new era of prosperity and well-being for the people of Assam. But he also listed the shortcomings of the British administrators. Dewan, in fact, had served as the dewan of the first private tea garden in Assam, the famous Assam Company. The Colonials praised his work and organizing skills. But Mani Ram was too independent and spirited to pull on as an underling with other British officers, and he started his own garden. To the amazement of the Britishers, Mani Ram's garden was successful while their venture flopped. Then suddenly the revenue assessment on his estate was increased manifold, and he was deprived of a few lucrative mauzas (tehsils) at a stroke. This naturally earned Mani Ram's undying hatred. In 1857 he was found plotting the overthrow of the British in collusion with a prince of the former ruling house. The attitude of the new middle class is better typified by Mani Ram's illustrious contemporary, Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan who belonged to an enterprising family. Ananda Ram went for higher education in 1841 mainly at the instance of British charge of the administration of Assam. On his return, he joined service at Rs. 120 a month, a fairly large sum in those days and rose to be a Sub-Assistant Commissioner, drawing Rs 250 a month often in charge of the entire district. Ananda Ram was deeply at the plight of his countrymen. *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language* written by him affirmed identity of the Assamese language against the expansionist claims Bengali chauvinism, and thus became a historic document in Assamese nationalism. Many such illustrations show how some people even though at first lured with the Colonials but deep within had sensed the plight of their own motherland (ibid.).

The Assamese middle class was even more of a product of administration than its Bengali counterparts. There is enough evidence that proves that the East India Company set about destroying systematically all serious competition in the field of trade and commerce, ceding the right of existence only to those who agreed to serve their monopoly. But that was not necessary for Assam as commerce and commodity-production still remained backward in Assam. Most of the necessities including oil and cloth were being produced at home. The feudal aristocracy had used forced labour to produce surplus food and luxury articles for their use. There was no native capitalist and the artisans were independent and they supplemented their income with products of a farm they worked regularly. This explains the commercial monopoly of the Marwari merchants who followed the British and diligently tapped the few opportunities for money-making, like moneylending, supplying provisions to tea gardens, producing mustard and later, jute for the market outside Assam and meeting demand for new household implements and articles produced, that the Assamese soon came to adopt (ibid.).

According to Gohain, the fact that the Assamese middle class had little connection with trade and the consequent triumph of traders from outside has something to do with the lack of enterprise, irregular habits of work, and the lack of calculating rationality make-up of the Assamese middle-class mind. The Assamese middle class had only two sources of income-service in a government department or tea garden, and *mauzadari* or agency for collection of land revenue in the countryside (ibid.).

The Assamese middle class later on also took to the profession of law. Assam became a separate province in 1874. She had her first university 75 years later in 1948. Slowly and gradually, the Assamese middle class grew through different means. However, Gohain asserted that the history of the Assamese middle class is thus one of tragic deformation under the imperialist rule. But there is little awareness of the historic reasons for this

stunted growth among the Assamese themselves. The lack of economic power combined with the survival of feudal mindset have continued to plague the Assamese middle class (ibid.).

---

## **6.6 THE ROLE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN NATION BUILDING**

---

As we have discussed the emergence of Assamese middle class in the earlier section, it would be familiar for us to discuss the role of the middle class in the context of Assam. Assam is a land of contradictions and antagonism. To a great extent, Assam is plagued with insurgency, economic underdevelopment, ethnic movements, sub-national movements and also has problems of foreign infiltrations. The capitalistic path of modernization is consolidated in India after independence. As its consequence, states like Assam have had to face an acute regional crisis that creates sub-regional and sub-national movements in the state. Assam, in fact, has become one of the most economically depressed state within the federal democratic polity. Scholars would often say it to be a 'colonial hinterland' of Independent India. The legacy of the colonial polity and economy seems to continue in Assam despite being an inseparable part of the Indian Union. Assam suffers from destabilization, violence and normlessness. Democracy is severely injured and threatened here due to the inefficiency of the centre and state governments. Politics of Assam can be referred to as the by-product of national politics and the nature of Indian politics and the nationalist big elite (Das, 2005).

After the independence of India, Assam had to face a significant historic event, i.e. the Grouping system as suggested by the Cabinet Mission Plan. The Grouping plan proposed to divide the country into three groups, i.e. Group 'A' comprising of United Province , Bihar, Orissa, Central Province, Bombay and Madras; Group 'B' comprising of Punjab, North West Frontier Province and the Province of Sind; and Group 'C' comprising of Assam

and Bengal. The Grouping Plan created uneasiness among the people of Assam. Therefore, strong protest movements and public agitations were launched throughout the state, against the grouping of Assam with Bengal. It was Gopinath Bordoloi who must be credited for the ultimate collapse of the Grouping arrangements. Thus, Assam was saved from Grouping (ibid.).

After the Cabinet Mission Plan was collapsed, new alternatives were taken in hand by the Colonial rulers under Mountbatten as the new viceroy who went ahead for the division of the country on a communal basis. This was approved by the Congress and the Muslim League. Under this plan, a referendum was to be held inter-alia, in Sylhet whether that district should remain a part of the Assam or should go to East Pakistan. Thus, the focus on political activity shifted to the Sylhet issue. The Sylhet referendum was held in July 1947 and Sylhet became a part of East Pakistan. The transfer of Sylhet had brought about a demographic and political change in Assam. According to Hussain, the Brahmaputra Valley has been the traditional homeland of the Asamiyas which they have been historically sharing with the autochthon tribals such as the Bodos, Rabhvas, Misings, Tiwas and Deuris, etc. Therefore, during independence, the Asamiyas became the single largest group in Assam. On the other hand, as a result of independence, the Bengalis lost their size in numbers while the Muslims lost their erstwhile political relevance and suffered frustration. The tribal groups both in the hills and in the plains remained backward. Besides, the non-caste groups like Ahoms and the Koch-Rajbansis also remained backward. In such circumstances, the middle class, hailing mostly from the caste Hindu Assamiya society emerged as the most dominant class in Assam. It would be important to note that this newly emerged Asamiyas middle class composed of caste Hindu Asamiyas was not a ruling class during the colonial period but it became the most dominant class in Assam by consolidating its position over other ethnic groups (ibid.).

With India's independence, slowly and gradually, different states began to be carved out from Assam. During the entire post-colonial period, Assam

experienced innumerable social and political movements mainly based on ethnicity having both peaceful political mobilization and violent manifestations. Distinctively, the nascent middle classes of various ethnic groups led these movements. The All Assam Students Union led several movements in the Brahmaputra Valley since the late 1960s. Among them was the medium movement launched in 1972, demanding Asamiya as the sole medium of instruction together with English for college education of Assam. Another tumultuous movement, popularly referred to as the Assam movement, was launched over foreign nationals issue during 1979- 85. However, the secessionist movements which were alien to the Brahmaputra Valley started in the late 1980s only with the consolidation of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Bodo Security Force (BSF). All these movements apparently raised the fundamental issue of one's identity and assertion of such identity to wrest political power and concessions (Das, 2005).

It should be noted that simultaneous to the above, gradually the middle class formation process among the Muslims, Tribes and other ethnic groups also started and specifically, after the Assam movement, the middle class of the non-caste ethnic groups including Muslims have become relevant and began to assume importance in Assam society and politics. The Assam movement aimed at stopping the inflow of foreign nationals into Assam. But it has failed to do so because of external as well as its own internal constraints. The problem left unresolved, causing existential concern for both the majority and the minority of Assam and causing unwanted political and social problems.

---

## **6.7 SUMMING UP**

In this Unit, we have discussed the emergence of the middle class in Northeast India by emphasizing the emergence of the Assamese middle class. Different theorists and scholars have put forwarded various conceptual understandings on the middle class. The economy is not only

the sole reason for class polarization in general but there are other elements associated with it. The middle class is said to have emerged due to the changes in culture. It is an urban concept. This group is a bundle of vibrant and diverse people that have contributed to the process of nation-building too. In Assam, it is a colonial construction. Therefore, we can see that they hold a major position in the social hierarchy which we have already discussed earlier.

---

## 6.8 QUESTIONS

---

1. Who are the Middle Class? Write a note on the emergence of the middle class in Northeast India.
2. Discuss the emergence of the Assamese middle class. Discuss the role played by it in various movements and nation-building.

---

## 6.9 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

---

Das. J.K (2005). Assam : The post-colonial political developments. *Indian Political Science Association*, 66 (4): 873-900. Doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856173>.

Gohain. H. (1973). Origins of the Assamese middle class. *Social Scientist*, 2 (1): 11-26. Doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3516465>.

Jodhka. S.S. (2016). *The Indian Middle Class*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Ray B.D. (1983) (ed). *The Emergence and Role of Middle Class in North East India*. Uppal Publishing House, New Delhi.

Saikia, A. and Sen, S. (2013). *Society in North East India- A Socio Economic and Historical Perspective*. Brahmaputra Offset, Assam.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

## **UNIT 7: PROCESS OF NATIONALITY FORMATION**

---

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

7.1 Introduction

7.2 Objectives

7.3 Northeastern States: The Beginning

7.3.1 Formation of the Northeastern States

7.4. Process of Nationality Formation

7.4.1 Assamese Nationality Formation and the Role of the Tribal Groups

7.4.2 Sub-Nationalism

7.6 Summing Up

7.7 Questions

7.8 Recommended Readings and References

---

### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

---

In the last Unit, you have learnt in detail about the emergence of middle class. In this unit, we are going to cover the process of nationality formation in the context of North East India. To look more holistically, we will also try to understand the formation of the various states of Northeast India, which marked the beginning for nationality formation in this region. Northeast India has encountered several crises for identity; therefore, we will further try to analyse briefly the emergence of sub-nationalism in Northeast India.

---

## 7.2 OBJECTIVES

---

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Discuss the formation of the Northeastern states;
- Explain the process of nationality formation in Northeast India;
- Discuss sub-nationalism in Northeast India.

---

## 7.3 NORTHEASTERN STATES: THE BEGINNING

---

After 1947, after Independence, a new era with a new political system started in India. The new India was developed into a nation and has inherited lot of structures from the past. There is continuity and discontinuity of colonial legacies. Immediately after Independence, India was governed by the Government of India Act, 1935 because there was no constitution in terms of Governance and the Constitution of India came into force only in 1950. Therefore, for the three consecutive years 1947-1950, they followed the British Act of 1935. The Northeast India comprised of seven states called as the “seven sisters”- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Mizoram. In 2002, Sikkim was also added as the eighth state of NER. The state of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland all formed part of Assam at the time of independence. Sylhet was the largest district at the time of India’s independence. It was transferred to Pakistan (now Bangladesh) except for a few police stations of Karimganj sub-division in 1947.

### 7.3.1 Formation of the North Eastern States

In this section you will learn about the formation of the Northeastern States which is discussed below.

**ASSAM:** Before the arrival of the British in India, the present Northeast India, except Manipur and Tripura (as they were princely states), was the “greater Assam” or the “undivided Assam”. The Burmese invasion in Assam, during the reign of Swargadeo Chandra Kanta Singha paved the way for British intervention in the then undivided Assam. Finally, the



Yandaboo Treaty was signed, and whole of undivided Assam was handed over to the colonial rulers in 1826. Till 1960, Assam maintained this identity. But during 1960s-70s Assam was partitioned three times, creating the states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram.

**NAGALAND:** Prior to India's Independence, the area inhabited by Naga tribes were divided into four administrative units, viz. Naga Hill District, The Tuensang Area, Ukhrul Mao and Tamenglong sub-division in Manipur. In 1918, Naga Club was created and this club submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929. Twenty members from different tribes signed this memorandum. They demanded that the Nagas should be excluded from the scope of the proposed constitutional changes and they should be kept under the direct authority of the British administration even after the British left India. They should be left alone to determine their own future political requirements and none should interfere. In 1945, 'The Naga Hill District Tribal Council' was formed at Kohima. Its main aim was to repair the damages of World War II and to unite the Nagas under the Naga National Council (NNC) in 1946. NNC was politically and technically strong with the aim to attain autonomy within the province of Assam and further, train people of their tribe for self-government.

The Nine-Point Draft Agreement was drawn up between the Governor of Assam and the NNC leaders. The agreement was such that the Nagas will be part of Assam for ten years and after that, they will be part of India or on their own. Phizo became its president. During 1951, a plebiscite was organized involving whole Naga population to take an oath to fight for independence. They boycotted the general election of the year 1954. In 1956, the NNC found the Naga Federal Government and proclaimed, "Nagaland" as the people's sovereign Republic. The Sixth Schedule was not implemented in Nagaland as NNC were protesting. The NNC was the first to form their own Government.

After 1956, much political unrest took place which was civil in nature in Nagaland. From 1957-1958, 'Arm Forces special power Act' was enacted. In 1958-1959, 'Nagaland Peace Community' was formed and aimed to abandon the policy of armed rebellion. Another solution to stop arm violence was to make Tuensang region a separate region which was under NEFA until 1960. In 1961, 'The Nagaland (Transitional Provision) Regulation' redesigned Nagaland. Through this, the 'State of Nagaland Act' was passed by the Parliament through this act in 1963 and Nagaland was created officially as the 16th state of the Indian Union through the 13th Amendment Act of the Constitution of India.

**MEGHALAYA:** The creation of Meghalaya is very different from the rest of the states. In 1945, the Khasi leaders, through a memorandum, demanded a separate hill state comprising all the hill districts of Assam. By 1945-46 the tribal population of the hill areas were certain that the British rule was coming to an end and they, therefore, began to demand new administrative arrangements which were not accepted. In 1954, a conference was held by all the tribal leaders of hill areas of Assam at Tura. They demanded the Eastern Hill state of Assam, except the Nagas. The reasons for their demand were-

- Land for Hydro project was given away without the consent of the District Council.
- The license for maintaining transport service was taken away by the Assam Government from the district council.
- Differences in terms of Language and Culture in between the hills and plains communities.

In 1955, the State Reorganization Committee demanded 54 District Committees. In 1960, "Assam Official Language Bill" was passed and Assamese was made the official language. A division came between the tribal and the non-tribal populations. In that year itself, 'All Party Hill Leaders Conference' (APHLC) was formed with the same demand, i.e. a need for a separate state. Subsequently, the 'Mizo Union' stood out of

APHLC and wanted separation like the Nagas. The support from North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills was curtailed from APHLC. This party had many proposals and one such is the “Scottish Pattern” but, was rejected by all the hill communities. But another was made “Federal Pattern” and was welcomed by the hill communities but was rejected by the North Cachar Hills and the Mizos. A Federal structure was made, i.e. division of powers between the Autonomous District Council and the Government of Assam. The demand for separate political identity gathered momentum and, the Government of India announced their decision to reorganize Assam by constituting the autonomous state of Assam with Khasi, Garo and Jaintia Hills.

Finally, in 1972 the North East Areas (reorganization) Act, 1971 was passed and three states were created Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya.

**ARUNACHAL PRADESH:** After the act of 1971, the reorganization of the states led to the carving out from Assam a new Union Territory called North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), the area which we now refer to as Arunachal Pradesh. Later, in 1987, Arunachal Pradesh attained statehood. It may be noted here that during the British colonial rule, this area was left untouched by the Britishers. In the year 1873, the first British law “Inner Line Regulation” was enacted. In 1914, the formal shape was given to this region under the Shimla Convention. Thereafter, in the post-colonial period, until 1951, this area which formed a part of the North East Frontier tract was governed by the government of Assam. In 1954 with the North East Frontier areas (administration) regulation, the boundaries of the areas under the tract was redefined and there emerged NEFA. The areas falling under the Agency were of six divisions. They are-

- Kameng
- Tirap
- Lohit
- Subansiri
- Siang

- Tuensang

In 1957, the Tuensang Frontier Division was separated from NEFA and became part of Naga Hill District. Till, 1971, NEFA being constitutionally a part of the state of Assam was administered by the President of India through Governor of Assam. In 1972, NEFA was made a new Union Territory with a new name Arunachal Pradesh. In 1975, it had a full-fledged Legislative Assembly with Council of Ministers. In the year 1986, Arunachal Pradesh became a full-fledged state.

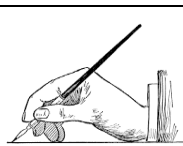
**MIZORAM:** During the colonial period, the British rulers followed the policy of non-interference in the Mizo areas which came to be known as the Lushai Hills District in 1898. Following the passing of the Government of India Act of 1935, it became “Excluded Area”. This along with the Inner Line Regulation of 1873 gave the chiefs of the Mizo areas to continue with the institution of the chieftainship to administer these areas. However, during 1901-02, the British rulers introduced the system of circle administration thereby curtailing the powers of the chiefs to some extent and bringing in the seeds of the democratic system. The creation of educated elites with the advent of western education led to the formation of Young Lushai Association (YLA) in 1935 which was later renamed Young Mizo Association (YMA). After World War II, this association actively involved in politics demanding democracy in Mizoram. In 1954, with the pressure put by the first Mizo political party, the Mizo Union, chieftainship was abolished in Mizoram. From 1959-60, Mizoram was hit by a famine and ‘Mizo National Famine Front’, a voluntary organization was formed for the collection and distribution of food. In 1961, the organization changed the name to ‘Mizo National Front’. In 1966, this Front revolted and attacked the Government treasury and other establishments in the districts. In 1972, the Mizo Hills changed their name to Mizoram and gained the full-fledged statehood in 1986 with the signing of the Mizoram Peace Accord.

**MANIPUR:** Prior to India's independence, it was a princely state. In 1907, the king had an agreement with the government of the colonial rulers of India. The administration of hill tribes in Manipur was directly under the control of the Government of Assam. In 1948, the Maharaja executed instrument of accession and the state was merged within the Indian Union on October 15, 1948. Manipur became 'C' state with the coming into force of the Constitution of India in 1950. The State Reorganization Commission recommended that the state of Manipur should be independent as it is a border state. It was also considered that Assam will be burdened if Manipur was bought together with Assam. Therefore, Manipur was given local self-government under the provision of the 'Territorial Council Act, 1956' and did have the power of legislation. Manipur became a full-fledged state on January 20, 1972.

**TRIPURA:** Tripura was another princely state of the Northeast region. The last Raja who died in 1947 had expressed his intentions to merge his kingdom with India after independence. Tripura merged with Indian Union on September 9 1949, after the Maharani signed the merger. In 1949, it became part 'C' state without legislature under the State's Act, 1951. It became a full-fledged state in 1972.

**SIKKIM:** Sikkim was integrated as the 8<sup>th</sup> state of Northeast India in 2002. On April 14, 1975, a referendum was held in which Sikkim voted to merge with India. It became the 22<sup>nd</sup> Indian State in 1975. On May 16, 1975, Sikkim was officially made a state of the Indian Union and Lhendup Dorji became the head of the state (Saikia & Sen, 2013).

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



**Fill up the gaps:**

a. In 1945, \_\_\_\_\_ was formed at

Kohima.

b. In \_\_\_\_\_, NEFA made a new Union Territory with a new name Arunachal Pradesh

c. \_\_\_\_\_ the great famine has happened in Mizoram.

d. Manipur was given local self-government under the provision of the \_\_\_\_\_.

---

## 7.4 PROCESS OF NATIONALITY FORMATION

---

Before discussing the process of nationality formation in Northeast India, we need to understand the meaning of the term 'nationality'. However, it is not easy to define terms like nation or nationality. In the past, many thinkers viewed the nation as people sharing common race, language, religion, etc. that must live together in a geographical area. However, this dominant view is not much applicable now. The generally accepted view today holds that rather than sharing attributes like common race, language, religion, etc., it is the sentiment of a common consciousness that forms the basis of a nation. Again, a nation has a political meaning which is distinct from a nationality. A nationality is transformed into a nation when it organizes a state or at least cherishes a common will to live together in a state for the future.

Amalendu Guha (1979) defines nationality as “a stable community of culture, historically evolved within a definite territory, on the basis of common economic ties and language and, also often with one or more of other such common factors”. It is to be noted that the seeds of nationality formation in India, including Northeast India, were sown during the colonial period. By now, you are already familiar with the important role played by the emergence of a middle class during the colonial period in national movements in Northeast India.

#### **7.4.1 Assamese Identity Formation and the Role of the Tribal Groups**

By now, you have learnt that the process of nationality formation in Northeast India began after the British annexation of the region. In the context of nationality formation, Assamese identity formation coupled with the role of the tribal groups forms a significant aspect of it.

In the context of Assamese identity formation, we first need to note that the term 'Assamese' began to appear in written documents only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The advent of British colonial rule in the then undivided Assam in 1826 was indeed a turning point in the history of the region. It was during the colonial rule in the region, the Assamese language was replaced by Bengali from the schools and courts of Assam in 1836. It gave rise to a strong sense of resentment among the indigenous people of Assam. In this regard, the emerging middle class and indigenous elites created by the colonial administration played the most crucial role. The elites, through their struggle against the British occupation of Assam in general and also through their protest against the replacement of Assamese language with Bengali as the official language of the province in particular created a common identity among different sections of people inhabiting different parts of Assam but speaking the same language with minor variations (Sharma, 2006). Language served as the most important element in the creation of the Assamese identity. Several groups, who had their own languages and cultures, also spoke Assamese and had close interaction with the Assamese culture. They were also seen to be influenced by this emerging identity and this common identity came to be known by the generic name 'Axamiya'.

The tribal communities of Assam, especially those of the Bodo stock, made very significant contributions towards the process of Assamese nationality formation. Although in the medieval Assam there was relatively advanced and dominant Ahom and Koch state systems, the rulers permitted several

tribal principalities to enjoy limited political autonomy. There were considerable interactions and intermixing among the subjects of these territories and also between those of the Ahom and the Koch states in the spheres of polity, economy, language and culture. This process of interaction can be traced back to much earlier times under different politico-economic and societal arrangements even before the Ahom and the Koch kingdoms came into being. By now, you are also familiar with the process of Sanskritisation of the tribal communities that began after the arrival of the Aryans from North India to the region. (ibid.)

This process Sanskritisation and Hinduisation was done by the upper caste Hindus, especially the Brahmins. They have already settled in the area which was otherwise dominated by mongoloid people and culture. Even the Burman kings, who reigned over parts of North Bengal and central and western Assam from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. were Hinduized Bodos. After the Burmans, the other royal kings of Kamrupa also accepted Hinduism. Following the royal dynasties, many autochthons also embraced Hinduism. Thus, Hinduism began to play the role of a common ideological thread among the subjects. Consequently, there emerged the authority of one monarch over a number of groups whose habitats came under the former.

We have also discussed in Unit 5 how neo-Vaishnavism movement led to further changes in the social fabric of Assam. As already discussed in the earlier unit (unit 5), the various indigenous communities of Assam were attracted to the egalitarian tenets of neo-Vaishnavism. Neo-Vaishnavism, later on, made tremendous inroads in the upper Assam. Many tribal groups became followers of neo-Vaishnavism. These tribal groups included the Morans, Sonowal-Kacharis etc., some of which were of Bodo origin (e.g., the Sonowal and the Thengal-Kacharis), are now part and parcel of the Assamese society (ibid.).

Thus, neo-Vaishnavism created the ideal condition for the emergence of wider society by incorporating various communities into its fold. It is to be mentioned here that the principal patron of Sankardev's neo-Vaishnavism



was the Koch king Naranarayan (c. 1540 AD- c.1586 AD), son of Biswa Singha. It may also be noted that the Assamese rendition of the Ramayana by Madhab Kandali in the 14<sup>th</sup> century was also achieved under the patronage of Borahi-Kachari king Manikpha alias Mahamanikya (ibid.).

The tribal communities were also very much influenced by mainstream society and culture. Many of them with the passage of time got totally assimilated into the newly emergent wider social formation. This was but a process of detribalization that enabled the tribal peasantry to acquire more developed production methods of the mainstream society and eventually to enter into the fold of Hinduism. Many of them gradually even acquired caste status and got completely merged with the emerging Assamese society. In fact, the majority of people of the contemporary caste Hindu Assamese society was of tribal origin. Thus, the future of Assamese nationality is laid on the twin processes of sanskritization and tribalization. In this process, many tribal groups or sections have turned themselves into sanskritized 'Assamese' peasants. However, this process did not have equal influence all over Assam. For instance, Hinduisation in Assam was more prominent in the western and central Assam. Its influence in the upper Assam was not that strong at least till the end of the first millennium. In eastern Assam, Hinduisation began to gain ground mainly after the Ahom royalty embraced Hinduism and offered patronage to it from 15<sup>th</sup> century, especially as a result of the expansion of the Ahom territory westward which subsumed many Hindu Assamese speaking subjects. (ibid.). However, it is to be noted that the Hinduized tribals did not start speaking the mainstream Assamese language immediately but have remained bilingual for quite some time. Meanwhile, some tribal groups became totally Assamese-speaking.

After the British annexation in 1826, the political authority in the area underwent a period of instability. The neo-Vaishnavism-led social development was one of the main reasons behind the instability in the region. The emergence of the middle class among the various ethnic groups further added to the crisis as these groups began to compete for the

limited resources of the underdeveloped colonial economy. The instability that emerged in the region during the colonial rule continued in the post-colonial period too. Here, one also needs to understand how discord and dissension among various communities of Assam impeded the process of nationality formation in the region (ibid.). Thus, we now observe that there is an emergence of a new kind of identity assertion among various ethnic groups. This also includes those that once considered as a part of the Assamese society and were in the process of being assimilated into it.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



1. Fill up the gap: The future of Assamese nationality is laid on the twin processes of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

#### 7.4.2 Sub-Nationalism

The British colonial rule in India undoubtedly gave rise to the sentiment of nationalism in the heart of every Indian, however, with the partition of the country in the eve of independence, the feelings for nationalism and sub-nationalism started to germinate simultaneously among the masses. The idea of state autonomy within a fast setup government, semi-political recognition to the primacy of a particular language, religion or culture got mingled with regionalism to create a sense of sub-nationalism among the different groups of Northeast India. For example, in the context of Assam, Bodo autonomy is a burning example of this sub-nationalism. The impact of sub-nationalism can be more clearly perceived in the formation of new states of Northeast that were once part of the undivided Assam. The carving out of new full-fledged states in Northeast India did not put a stop to the feeling of sub-nationalism among the different tribes and communities in the region. They have not ceased to raise their voice to get

their identities recognized. These tribes and communities, though a part of a larger group, are conscious about the security and preservation of their own identity in terms of language, culture, etc. (Saikia & Sen, 2013).

---

### **7.5 SUMMING UP**

---

In this Unit, we have learnt how the different states of Northeast India have carved out with its own separate identity through various political and social confrontations. This unit also dealt with the process of nationality formation in Northeast India. In the process of nationality formation, the roles of the tribal groups of people in identity formation are also highlighted in this unit.

---

### **7.6 QUESTIONS**

---

1. Discuss the formation of North Eastern States.
2. Write a note on Sub-Nationalism in Northeast India. Give examples.
3. Explain the process of nationality formation in Northeast India.

---

### **7.7 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES**

---

Guha, A. (1979). Great Nationalism, Little Nationalism and Problem of Integration: A Tentative View. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 14 (7/8): 455-458. Doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4367362>.

Phukan, G. and Dutta, N. (1997). *Politics of Identity and Nation Building in North East India*. South Asian Publication, New Delhi

Saikia, A and Sen, S. (2013). *Society in North East India- A Socio Economic and Historical Perspectives*. Brahmaputra Offset, Assam.

Samanta, R.K. (2002). *India's North East: The Process of Change and Development*. B.R Publications.

Sharma, C.K. (2006). Genealogy Contested: Oral Discourse and Bodo Identity Construction. In Muthukumarswamy, M.D., editor, *Folklore as Discourse*, pages 73-94. National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai.

\*\*\*\*\*

Programme	Eligibility	Programme Coordinator
MA in Mass Communication	Bachelor's Degree in any discipline	Ms. Madhusmita Boruah <a href="mailto:madhu@tezu.ernet.in">madhu@tezu.ernet.in</a> 03712-275359 Dr. Uttam Kr. Pegu <a href="mailto:uttamkp@tezu.ernet.in">uttamkp@tezu.ernet.in</a> 03712-275455
MA in English	Bachelor's Degree in any discipline	Dr. Suchibrata Goswami <a href="mailto:suchitu@tezu.ernet.in">suchitu@tezu.ernet.in</a> 03712-275358 Dr. Pallavi Jha <a href="mailto:pjefl@tezu.ernet.in">pjefl@tezu.ernet.in</a> 03712-275215
MA in Sociology	Bachelor's Degree in any discipline	Ms. Ankita Bhattacharyya <a href="mailto:ankita@tezu.ernet.in">ankita@tezu.ernet.in</a> 03712-275359 Dr. Amiya Kr. Das <a href="mailto:amiyadas@tezu.ernet.in">amiyadas@tezu.ernet.in</a> 03712-275805
PG Diploma in Human Resource Management	Bachelor's Degree in any discipline	Dr. Runumi Das <a href="mailto:runumi@tezu.ernet.in">runumi@tezu.ernet.in</a> 03712-275015
PG Diploma in Environmental & Disaster Management	Bachelor's Degree in any discipline	Dr. N. Gogoi <a href="mailto:nirmali@tezu.ernet.in">nirmali@tezu.ernet.in</a> 03712-275609 Dr. Dipak Nath <a href="mailto:dipak@tezu.ernet.in">dipak@tezu.ernet.in</a> 03712-275306
PG Diploma in Renewable Energy and Energy Management	BE/B.Tech or M.Sc in Physics or Chemistry	Dr. S. Mahapatra <a href="mailto:sadhan@tezu.ernet.in">sadhan@tezu.ernet.in</a> 03712-275306
PG Diploma in Child Rights and Governance**	Bachelor's Degree in any discipline	Dr. Subhrangshu Dhar <a href="mailto:sdhar@tezu.ernet.in">sdhar@tezu.ernet.in</a>



The Centre for Open and Distance Learning (earlier Directorate of Distance Education) was established in 2011 with the aim of disseminating knowledge and imparting quality education through open and distance learning mode. The Centre offers various post-graduate, undergraduate, diploma and certificate programmes in emerging areas of science & technology, social sciences, management and humanities with flexible system to cater to the needs of the learners who otherwise cannot avail the regular mode of education. The basic focus of the Centre is to prepare human resources of the region and the country by making them skilled and employable.

Centre for Open and Distance Learning  
Tezpur University (A Central University)  
Tezpur, Assam -784028  
India

Visit us at: [http://www.tezu.ernet.in/tu\\_codl](http://www.tezu.ernet.in/tu_codl)