



NORTH EAST INDIA

Land, People & Culture

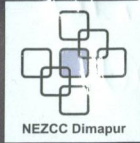


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Land, People & Culture





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Written and edited by Aiyushman Dutta

Conceived by V Hekali Zhimomi

Acknowledgements: Som Kamei, Director, NEZCC

Content developed by Quaint Essense, Guwahati

E-mail: quaint69@gmail.com

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Photo captions:

Cover photo: A group of Naga tribesmen

Title page photo: A Naga *Morung*

Following page: Sunrise in tea garden of Assam



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INTRODUCTION

"We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value; no matter what their color."

Maya Angelou-American poet

North-east India is one such "rich tapestry" made up of myriad colourful threads. An enchanting mosaic of diverse cultures, races, tribes, languages and religious beliefs, co-existing in a harmonious environment, the North-east is indeed every poet's 'dream-come-true' destination.

Its uniqueness lies in this diversity. A region of geological marvels, natural opulence, ethno-cultural traditions and cheerfully colourful people, North-east India is a one-of-a-kind montage designed by God himself.

The eight North-eastern States, though, pronounced in the same breath by mainstream Indians, each have their own distinctive identities. Brought together by the demands of the world's biggest democracy, these States, viz. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim, are as different from each other as chalk and cheese. A multitude of tribes and communities with their countless ethno-cultural traditions, religious beliefs and languages have lived in this region for ages.

The North-eastern map, however, has not always been the way it appears now. When India attained independence in 1947 the entire region was covered by merely three States - an all encompassing Assam province and the two princely States of Manipur and Tripura. In the decades following independence, four new States were etched out of the Assam province. And thus, Nagaland became a State in 1963, Meghalaya in 1972 and Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh attained Statehood in 1987.

The eight North-eastern States, though pronounced in the same breath by mainstream Indians, have their own distinctive identities. Its uniqueness lies in this diversity



Sikkim, meanwhile, wasn't a part of the Indian republic until 1975, but it is now considered a part of the North-eastern region which initially included only the 'Seven Sister' States.

Incidentally, the North-east shares 99 per cent of its boundary with China, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh and only 1 per cent with mainland India. Loosely connected to the mainland by a mere stretch of 20 kms at Siliguri, known as the Chicken Neck, and surrounded by alien territories, the region is totally interdependent on each other in every aspect. As for its resources, the plains are petroleum hubs and the hills supply numerous mineral and forest resources. They are equally dependent on each

Money is not the 'be-all' and 'end-all' for the simple folk of this region as they are yet to be stained by the immoral cravings that plague modern contemporary society

other in various other aspects as well. While the hills depend on the plains for their food grains and their markets to sell the produce, the plains depend on the hills in matters of flood control.

Every State is home to numerous tribes and communities. And these diverse groups of people have lived harmoniously

over the ages. Arunachal Pradesh, territorially the biggest State in the region, is home to many tribes, viz. Monpas, Idi Mishmis, Wanchos, Singphos, Mijis, Apatanis, Adis, Nishis, Hill Miris, Noctes, Tagins etc. Nagaland, meanwhile, houses 16 major tribes, including the Aos, Sumis, Angamis, Changs, Lothas, Phoms, Rengmas, Konyaks, Chakhesangs, Yimchunger, Khamniungn, Sangtam, Pochury, Zeliangs and others. Even Assam, with its largely Assamese population, makes room for numerous communities like the Boros, Rabhas, Misings, Deuris, Kacharis, Karbis, Tiwas, et al. The Khasis, Jaintias and Garos have made the hilly abode of Meghalaya their home. And the State of Tripura is a

cosy nest for the Tripuris, the Reangs, Jamatias, Chakmas, Garus, Noatias as well as a sizeable number of Bengalis and Manipuris. As for Manipur, the Meities form the majority although a few tribal communities like the Tangkhuls, Kabuis, Marings, Vaiphies and the Thadous too reside in the State. Mizoram has the Chakmas, the Pawis, Raltes, Kukis and the Hmars. And the newly ordained North-eastern State of Sikkim houses the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Nepali communities.

Several races like the Mongoloids, the Aryans and the Dravidians have intermingled with various other bloodstreams and shaped this heady concoction called the North-east. Even the languages and dialects of this region have evolved from diverse language groups and are still, therefore, at a fascinatingly raw state. A predominantly tribal region, the people here speak numerous Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman languages. In Assam, however, Assamese and Bengali are the major languages spoken and Tripura has a largely Bengali speaking population.

As far as religious leanings are concerned, Hinduism and Christianity are the principal religions in the region. Assam, Manipur and Tripura have a large-scale Hindu population, with a sizeable Muslim presence in Assam and a Christian minority in Manipur. But the other States have a largely Christian presence, mostly owing to the work carried out by the Christian missionaries in these remote locales.

Despite these differences in language and religion there is an innate sameness about the land, the people and their cultures. The underlying similarity may not be what is generally perceived by mainland Indians as this 'oneness' is not really evident even to the common North-easterner.

Due to its geographical alienation from the rest of the country, North-east India is predictably different from the mainland. The most significant difference being the North-easterner's total ignorance of the class system. Disparities do exist between the rich and the poor but they have never acted upon the North-easterner's





consciousness.

Even in terms of gender issues, North-easterners are way ahead of their counterparts from the rest of the country. Gender inequality is an alien concept in this region as men and women live and work side by side. The womenfolk are also placed at a high pedestal, with most of them holding eminent positions in society. So much so that most tribes of the region are matriarchial and matrilineal in practice, a rarity indeed. Even in the patriarchial societies of the North-east, women do not necessarily sit by the fireside and cook meals for the men.

It wouldn't be wrong to say that the simplicity of the North-eastern milieu stems from its culinary interests. The North-eastern cuisine reflects the uncomplicated mindset of the people of this region. Because unlike the complex curries that represent Indian cuisine, food here is plain and basic. And although masalas have made their way into the modern day kitchen, typically ethnic cooking has no place for the popular Indian spices. The gastronomical fare here includes some rare eatables, which incidentally act as unifying influences. Khar for instance, is a naturally distilled alkali consumed by most of the tribes and communities of the region. Bamboo shoot is another unique yet common fodder here. So is steamed rice in bamboo hollow. Connoisseurs would, however, be more interested in having a go at the assorted range of rice beer available in the region.

North-easterners love to sing and dance. Every new season calls for a celebration and music is a part of every little occasion. And spring seems to be the most opportune time to make merry as almost every tribe and community has some or the other occasion to celebrate around this time.

Most of the tribes and communities here in the region celebrate the onset of a new crop cycle. The beginning of the crop cycle is a joyous occasion all over the world but unlike elsewhere, the celebrations here have not lost the vigour and glory of the past. Be it the Bihu of

Assam, or the Lai Haraoba of Manipur or the Garia Puja of Tripura or Aoleang-Monyu of Nagaland, spring festivities in the North-east are incomparably fascinating to watch and experience. More so for the festive performances which are the highlights of each and every occasion.

Even the musical instruments accompanying these performances are unique and unusual. The dhol or drum, a popular Indian instrument, is present in most of the North-eastern performances but in different avatars. Aside from that, several distinctive instruments like the Tati — a string instrument of the Nagas, the Gogona, an instrument made out of bamboo of the Bihu dancers of Assam, another bamboo instrument known as the Khamb of the Tripuris, et al make up an interesting musical anthology for the region.

Another aspect that adds to the fascinating spectacle of the North-eastern region is its affinity to nature. It is at its best in this remote corner of the world. With hills and dales, sub-tropical rain forests, tea gardens, alpine meadows, waterfalls, rivers, streams, exotic animals and birds, one couldn't ask for more. Nature here is not just a calming influence but also a protection for the numerous tribes that blossom in these unparalleled terrains. The people here revere Mother Nature and she in turn has blessed the region with her bounty. It's a unique combination of nature and the people that makes up the North-east so enchanting. The ever gracious nature has given the North-easterner his identity and it is in nature that he has created his culture, his habits and his own little space.

The people, the cultural multiplicity, the natural abundance, the geological wonders, the intriguing festivals, the captivating dances, the delectable cuisine, et al, North-east India is an alluring potpourri of colours and aromas. Having said that, it is absolutely impossible to gauge its true self through these widely accepted traits because North-east India unfolds itself in its own unique way to every individual and therein lie its versatility and queer charm.