

NORTH EAST INDIA IN PERSPECTIVE

**BIOLOGY, SOCIAL FORMATION
AND CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS**

**EDITED BY
RAJAT K. DAS
DEBASHIS BASU**

The trend of social science research that has been set in North-East India during the past 50 years or so has given rise to a regional approach to the socio-demographic and socio-cultural domains of existence reflected in the lifestyles of the original people, particularly the tribals, who though disadvantaged in many respects, seem to have a kind of natural association with the region.

Given the variations at biological demographic, socio-cultural and political levels of existence in North-East India, it becomes necessary to examine the situation as it is prevailing here in proper perspective. The present exercise makes an attempt in that direction. The contributions included in this volume are aimed at analyzing the diverse formations of North-East India in different perspectives ranging from population, biogenetic structure and community health on the one side to socio-cultural formations, ethnicity, politics, community interests and developmental changes on the other. Ethnicity-dominated movements are suggestive of a process of political resurgence and reorientation, but these need to be seen in multidimensional setting. An exercise of this dimension requires a comprehensive knowledge about different perspectives of human existence. The book may be helpful to develop such an outlook.

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PART ONE

INTRODUCING NORTH EAST INDIA

1

A Profile of North-East India and its Disadvantaged Populations

B. DUTTA ROY

For a long time North East India was tagged with the Eastern zone of India. Now it is treated as a separate zone. The bifurcation is significant. It underlies the importance of North East India as a separate entity having a viable social, political and economic representation in the country. The region is potentially rich, though economically and otherwise disadvantaged.

The resource-rich North East India is geopolitically distinguishable. It is bounded by four countries—Bhutan and China on the North, Myanmar on the East and South and Bangladesh on the West and South. The area covers 3,54,000 sq. km. and includes Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura with a total population of 31,547,314 (1991 Census). Sikkim is not included in the list as the main consideration is geographical contiguity. The area contains the unpredictable Brahmaputra, somewhat difficult terrain of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and forested hills of Meghalaya. North East India is connected with the rest of India by a strategic but vulnerable narrow corridor with North Bengal.

A feature of population of North East India is its rapid growth—both in the hills and in the valleys. Another significant feature is that more than 25 percent of its total population are scheduled tribes and about 7 percent are scheduled castes.

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more than 25 percent of its total population are scheduled tribes and about 7 percent are scheduled castes.

Table 1.1 State-wise total scheduled caste and scheduled tribe populations of North-East India (1991 census)
Population

<i>State</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Scheduled castes</i>	<i>Scheduled tribes</i>
Arunachal Pradesh	864,558	4,052 (0.47)	550,351 (63.66)
Assam	22,414,322	1,659,412 (7.40)	2,874,441 (12.82)
Manipur	1,837,149	37,105 (2.02)	632,173 (34.41)
Meghalaya	1,774,778	9,872 (0.51)	1,517,927 (85.53)
Mizoram	689,756	691 (0.1)	653,565 (94.75)
Nagaland	1,209,546	-	1,060,82 (87.7)
Tripura	2,757,205	451,115 (16.48)	853,345 (30.95)
	31,574,314	2,161,448 (6.85)	8,142,624 (25.81)

The tribals constitute 87.70 percent in Nagaland, 85.53 percent in Meghalaya, 30.95 in Tripura and 34.41 percent in Manipur; only 12.82 percent of the population of Assam belong to scheduled tribes. The tribal population in Mizoram is the highest with 94.75 percent, while Arunachal Pradesh tribals constitute 63.66 percent of its population. At least every third citizen of North East India belongs either to a scheduled caste or a scheduled tribe. No other region presents such a variety of tribes and communities as North East India does. Castes and tribes from other parts of India also find a place here.

Major tribes and sub-tribes entered into North East occupying mostly hills and some fringe areas in the plains. They speak different dialects and possess their own distinctive social and cultural traditions which they jealously guard. Two major ethnic strains are found in the tribes

of North East India—that of the Mongoloid and Proto-Australoid. But generally, the bulk of tribal population show strains of Mongoloid features. Linguistically, they speak a form of Tibeto-Burman and Siamese-Chinese, which have affiliation with the Thai language. The Khasis and Pnars speak dialects which belong to the Mon-Khmer linguistic group showing characteristics of Austro-Asiatic linguistic family.

The number of tribal communities, having distinctive cultures, languages, dialects including sub-tribes would be around 200 in North East India as against 460 for the whole of India. In other words, it may be inferred that about 44 percent of the Scheduled Tribes of India live in the North East region of the country, which in terms of percentage comes to 25.81 of the total population of North East India.

All the tribals are not at the same level of social and economic development. Some of them, particularly the Khasis and Mizos, have educationally and economically reached a higher level of attainment than many others. But most of them are poor as underdevelopment or lack of development is widespread and land is appropriated by a few. Industrialisation is almost unknown. Literacy rate among the Mizos is second only to the people of Kerala. Despite the progress made towards amelioration of the lot of the tribals, the impact of the successive Five Year Plans has so far been marginal.

The hill areas of North East India were uniformly administered till 1932 as a backward tract. From April 1937, there was a bifurcation of the administrative pattern. The Mizo Hills (Lushai Hills), Naga Hills, North Cachar Hills and North Eastern Frontier tracts became 'Excluded Areas', excluded from ministerial jurisdiction, and the Garo Hills, the British portion of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Mikir Hills (Karbi Anglong) were partially excluded areas. The excluded areas were further protected by the inner lines which prevented the entry of outsiders without permit. The last of such lines was drawn in North Cachar Hills in 1942.

The tribals of hill districts as a result developed a special kind of identity which had remained crucial for subsequent political developments. All the new political units in North East India except in Meghalaya are really old administrative tribal hill districts. Meghalaya is an amalgamation of two tribal districts—Garo Hills and Old Khasi and Jaintia Hill districts plus 25 Khasi Syiemships, which had a nominal status of princely states. Beside these Syiemships, there were two princely states of Manipur and Tripura, which had usual political connections

through the agency of Governor of Assam. There was finally an unadministered Naga tribal area beyond the boundaries of British India but within India and under the executive control of the Governor General of India exercised through the Governor of Assam. Such ethnic pockets had close affinities with neighbouring British India territories. It may be mentioned here that many tribals live along international boundaries and their ethnic and cultural affinities are with other tribes across the frontier. The tribal areas of North East India were not completely integrated with the political and economic system of the country and the Inner Line System still in vogue further reported the tribal region of North East India from the rest of the country.

Admittedly, tribes were not integrated with the political and economic system of the colonial India. After Independence also, the process of integration of the tribals with the mainstream people could never get under way, partly because of the continuation of the British legacy and partly because of the growing political consciousness of the tribal people. On the eve of Independence, the situation in the North East Hills was very fluid. The economic impact of the Second World War, the divisive policy of the colonial administration, the possibility of freedom in near future, the national movement and growing sense of ethnic identity among different ethnic groups, spread of education in the hills by Christian Missionaries and a gradual emergence of a small educated middle class among the tribals of the hills and in the plains contributed to the growth of a sense of political awareness among the different tribal groups. The political movement in these hills surfaced with the coming of Independence. With the transfer of power, the tribes became more conscious of their a political identity. The Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India was an attempt to protect tribal interests in the hill tribes-dominated composite Assam districts in 1952. The Nagas were not impressed with the arrangement and rejected it outright. They eventually got by a hard way a territorial and political entity in 1962-63. The other tribes, the Khasis, the Pnars, the Garos, and Lushias took advantage of this new political instrument in the form of Autonomous District Council to consolidate the authority of the newly emerging liberal middle class leadership and to set about a process of political modernisation. The Lushai hills following the Naga path grew into Mizoram. By 1972, political reorganisation created Meghalaya as an amalgamation of the Garos, Khasis, Pnars, Syntengs, Jaintias among the major tribal groups. Arunachal Pradesh was formed out of the North East Frontier Tracts and Mizoram became a full state in 1986. Likewise,

the two former princely states of Manipur and Tripura were accorded the status of full statehood in 1972 along with Meghalaya.

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Arunachal Pradesh has 51 tribes and sub-tribes. Out of these, 25 tribes are identified as major tribes. Deori, Kimir, Mishing, Zakhring and Lisu are not declared as scheduled tribes in this state. In Arunachal Pradesh only 0.47% of the total population belongs to schedule caste group. There is no indigenous scheduled caste in the state. However, 16 castes are recognised as scheduled castes in Arunachal Pradesh. There is no specific development scheme for them. No specific tribal sub-plan or special common plan is in operation in Arunachal Pradesh. All the developmental schemes taken up by the state government are directed towards the development of scheduled tribes. There is no separate scheme ensuring social, cultural and economic safeguards to the tribals. But the state has taken up some measures to protect the socio-cultural heritage of the scheduled tribes. Being a tribal state, there is little scope for the non-tribals to exploit the scheduled tribes. But suppression of rights and differentiating women as reflected by the presence of bonded labour and slavery in some tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh have also to be taken note of. The original settlers of the state, however, resent the settlement of Chakma and Majong tribal refugees in Arunachal Pradesh, who took shelter in the state in the wake of disturbances in Bangladesh in sixties and seventies. If anything, the relationship between the two groups of tribals is not normal.

ASSAM

16.48 percent of the people of India belong to the scheduled castes, while in Assam it is 7.40 percent of the total population. In Assam, there are 16 scheduled castes with 9 synonyms as per Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes list Modification Order, 1976. The literacy rate in Assam is 53.43 percent, while only 43.42 percent of scheduled castes and 39.12 percent of the tribals in Assam are literates. Among the scheduled castes, the Namasudras occupy the predominant position with 32.97 percent of the total scheduled caste population of Assam. They are supposed to belong to the fishing community. In fact, they are an agricultural caste in the Barak Valley. Kaibartas are equally prominent. Fishing is also an avenue for their livelihood. 53.5 percent of the scheduled caste people are agriculturists. Pottery and goldsmithy are important occupations for the Hiras and Banias respectively. Fishing

is no longer an exclusive profession for the Kaibartas. They have almost lost the profession to outsiders. There is no denying the fact that in terms of economic progress the scheduled castes are much behind other people. Their children help the parents in their professional work, denying them the opportunity of schooling. They are never self-sufficient in agricultural production as cultivable land is limited and insufficient. As a result, they are in perpetual indebtedness. There is now a growing trend in them to shift to other occupations. The Assam State Development Corporation for Scheduled Castes, the Assam Plains Tribes Development Corporation and the Assam Tribal Development Authority established in 1983 are important institutions working for overall social and economic development of scheduled castes and plains tribals in Assam. A number of N.G.Os are also working in this field.

NAGALAND

Nagaland is a predominantly scheduled tribe-inhabited state with a population of 1,209,546. There are many separate tribes and sub-tribes amongst the Nagas, each with their own distinct language and culture. Of the tribes, mention may be made of the Konyak, Angami, Lotha, Chakosang, Chang, Khienungam, Phom-Sangtam, Yimchungre, Zeliang, Khezha, Chakru and Rengma. Ao, Sema, Lotha, Konyak and Angami are the leading Naga tribes. Some of the important Manipur Naga tribes like the Tangkhul, Mao, Maram have their representation in Nagaland. Besides, a small number of Kukis, Garos, Kacharis and Karbis also live here.

In Nagaland, the tribal or village councils control the social life, try minor criminal and civil cases in accordance with customary law, though a limit has been put to avoid harsh and heavy punishment.

There is no tribal sub-plan or special component plan in Nagaland as it is predominantly a tribal state. The state has, therefore, no separate or exclusive scheme for the development of scheduled tribes of the state.

The status of women in Naga society is not that low as the incidence of suppression of woman and apathy towards them are rather uncommon. Women are engaged in handloom and some cottage industries. There is no major industry in Nagaland. The paper mill is now closed. People practise *jhum*, terrace and settled cultivation. But food production is inadequate.

MANIPUR

About 10 percent of the total area of Manipur is in the valley, which comes to 223 sq. km. hills account for 90 percent of the area of the state. But about 70 percent of the people of Manipur live in the valley and the rest in the hills. Imphal, Thoubal and Bishnupur areas are mostly inhabited by the Meiteis. 68.46 percent of the population is dependent on agriculture and wet cultivation is widely practised in the valley. Shifting cultivation is still in practice in the hills. The handloom industry keeps about five lakh people engaged, who represent about 28 percent of the total population and comprise mostly women.

Out of a total population of 1,837,149, scheduled castes number 37,105, while the tribal population comes to 6,32,173 according to 1991 Census. There are 29 scheduled tribes and 7 scheduled castes.

The state government is implementing special component plans for the development of scheduled caste people. The Tribal sub-plan is directed towards the development of the tribals. Interestingly, 47.72 percent of the scheduled castes live in the villages and 52.28 percent of them live in urban areas. The literacy rate of the scheduled castes is 56.44 percent against 59.89 percent for the whole state. The population of scheduled castes in Manipur is only 2.02 percent of the total population and 2.14 percent of land belong to them. So, the share of land of the scheduled caste people is slightly more than their population. But the land holding is not equitable.

The 29 major scheduled tribes may be divided into some broad ethnic groups like Naga, Kuki-Chin, Mizo. The literacy percentage of scheduled tribes is 53.63 as against 59.89 percent for the whole state. The incidence of poverty is 56.80 percent among the tribals.

There is a regular interaction between scheduled castes, scheduled tribes with the Meiteis, which is by and large peaceful. But in recent years the relation between the Nagas and the Kuki tribes has been strained mostly because of the dispute over the exercise of control in specific areas.

The tenancy laws of Manipur exclude the hill areas where the scheduled tribes are predominant and the land traditionally belongs to the tribal chiefs. The forest policy is also directed to safeguard the customary rights and interests of the tribals. But in practice the conditions are not always maintained. Illegal felling of trees has reached an alarming proportion and in this act tribals are not always to be blamed. The five

Tribal District Councils under state legislation are ineffective due to unequal land relations.

MEGHALAYA

Meghalaya is the amalgamation of the two old districts under British rule—that of the Garo Hills and United Khasi Hills and 25 former syiemships under the Sanad relationship during colonial rule. It is now divided into seven districts with Three Autonomous District Council, under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. The three leading tribes are Khasi, the Pnar and the Garo. A section of the Rabhas, Boro-Kacharis and Kochs are also permanently staying in Meghalaya with 5 percent government posts being reserved for them. Eighty percent of the posts, are, however, reserved for the main groups of tribals. Interests of the tribals are protected under the Meghalaya Transfer of Land (Regulation) Act, 1971, the provisions of reservation in services and provision of seat reservation in the Legislative Assembly and in Parliament. Out of a total population of 1,774,778 (1991), 9,072 (0.51 percent) are scheduled castes and scheduled tribes numbering 1,517,927 (85.52 percent). Being a tribal—dominated state, atrocities on scheduled tribes and even scheduled castes are far from a common feature. For the same reason, all the general schemes for economic, cultural and social development are earmarked, in essence, for the tribals.

The Khasi and Garo are recognised matrilineal societies. But even in a typically matrilineal society like the Khasi, the women are not allowed to participate in the traditional village *Durbar* and their representation in Autonomous District Councils is also rare. They are usually dependents on males for management of landed property. There is, however, no child and bonded labourer in Meghalaya. Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy of the people. But the total area under cultivation is only 8.75 percent of the area of the state. Only a few small scale industries exist in the state. In its present form agriculture holds little promise.

MIZORAM

Mizoram is primarily a landlocked hilly area occupying a strategic frontier. It has an area of 21,081 sq. km, about 62 percent of which is covered by forests and 10 percent of the available land is cultivable. Champhai, North Vanlaiphai and Thezawl practise rice cultivation. Though Chamdura is a plain area, it is covered by forest. The state is

predominantly inhabited by scheduled tribes. Of the 13 tribes, the main tribes are Mizo, Pawi, Lakher and the Chakma. About seventy percent of the tribals depend on agriculture for their living. But it is mainly based on shifting cultivation on 189 thousand hectares accounting for 8.97 percent of the total area of the state. No major industry functions in Mizoram.

The population of Mizoram is 6,86,217 (1991) and the scheduled tribes account for 94.75 percent of the total population. The scheduled caste population is very small with 691 persons who are mostly engaged in agriculture, trade and commerce, service and construction works.

Being a tribal state, there is no special component plan or tribal sub-plan in Mizoram. There is no special scheme for the scheduled caste people also as they represent only 0.10 percent of the total population. The state government has been providing reservation in Government services for the scheduled tribes to the extent of 93.26 percent and 1.83 percent for the scheduled castes. But there is no specific legislation for it. The Government is providing reservation for scheduled tribes in proportion to their population in the state as approved by the Government of India in 1985. The interest of the tribals were protected under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1973 in the form of Inner Line, which used to prohibit Indian citizens from entering Mizoram without a government pass. Now the entry is not that strictly regulated. The China Hills Regulation Act of 1896, made effective from October 1951, empowers the Deputy Commissioner to expel any Indian citizen from Mizoram. The Mizo District Transfer of Land Act 1963 and Mizoram Transfer of Land Amendment Act of 1990 provide protection to the scheduled tribes of the state as regards asserting inalienable rights of the tribal people on land. The Mizoram Trading by Non-Tribal Regulation Act of 1974, 1977 protect the tribals against non-tribals in the field of trade and commerce. In Mizoram there is no municipality or Gram Panchayat. There are Village Councils numbering 671 to look after the general welfare of the people. They are important political and social bodies entrusted with village administration and development work. There are three Autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule to protect tribal identity and culture. There is no special scheme as such for the development of the scheduled tribes and scheduled castes, as the state is essentially a tribal society. However, efforts are being made to protect the social and economic interest as well as the cultural identity of the people.

TRIPURA

Tripura is a landlocked state, (former princely state) which had merged with India soon after India's Independence. It had, in 1951, 639000 people, a substantial portion of whom were local tribals. The Maharaja himself was a tribal. But due to unabated influx from neighbouring country (the present Bangladesh), the demographic balance was lost and in 1991 the total population rose to 2,757,205 with scheduled tribe population standing at 853,345 persons (30.95 percent). Not unexpectedly, they had lost control over a substantial portion of tribal land. Recent legislations providing for re-transfer of tribal Council under the Sixth Schedule was created to protect the identity and land of the tribals in tribal-dominated areas.

There are 19 tribes and 17 Kuki sub-tribes in Tripura. The three most important tribal communities in Tripura are Tripuri, Reang and Jamatia. The Tripuris are the most important scheduled tribe in Tripura who have been divided into two groups - The Puran Tripuris and the Deshi Tripuris. In the past, the Tripuris mostly depended on *jhum* cultivation. Now-a-days, many of them have settled down in the plains and adopted plough cultivation. In the land previously used for *jhum* cultivation, coffee and rubber cultivation have been introduced in a big way. But *jhum* cultivation still continues in many areas.

It is true that efforts are being made to protect the interests of the tribals by introducing tribal sub-plan. The scheduled castes, mostly immigrants, are also looked after by special component plan. In Tripura the scheduled caste people numbering 451,116 (1991) account for 16.48 percent of the population of the state. They are mostly migrants.

Taking North East India as a whole, one gets the impression that the tribal sub-plans and special component plans for the scheduled tribes and also for the scheduled castes have not brought about significant results. Mostly they remain non-implemented except to an extent in Tripura and Assam. The scheduled castes have almost touched the rock bottom level of existence. They lost ownership of land in many cases and became victims of exploitation as artisans, as labourers and professionals. The scheduled tribes were in a better position with command over their land and forests in their respective areas. But slowly there have been inroads of commercial ventures from outside and moneylenders and money-lending agencies have become more active. Refugees from Bangladesh had encroached upon tribal land in Tripura.

Slowly tribals began to loose command over their resources, land and forests to the emerging elites of their own communities and to the state. The emerging middle class in tribal society is indicative of the growth of an exploitative trend in their set up. The structural transformation of the tribal economy had gone in favour of a small group of tribals, who could get the benefits of political accessibility, economic and educational opportunities.

It has been estimated in 1981 that approximately 52.63 percent of the population in rural areas and 33.37 percent in urban areas in North East India live below the poverty line. The present day position has not substantially changed. In tiny Meghalaya more than 50 percent of the families live below the poverty line. The process of economic deprivation of rural people has adversely affected the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes. Ironically, due to the policy of reservation for the scheduled tribes and scheduled castes in services, the emerging middle class in the tribal society corner most of the benefits.

Of the total population of 31,547,314 (1991) , the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, forming 6.85 percent and 25.81 percent respectively of the total population, along with other backward communities are mostly the victims of inequality in the socio-economic field. Inequality has also emerged in the tribal society because the common villagers have lost command over land and forests. At another level, the scheduled castes have lost control over land to the advanced class. There is today a growing number of landless agricultural labourers among both scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. They are getting restive as they suffer from a sense of deprivation. The widening disparity of income within the tribal society has definitely contributed to the growing sense of frustration among the tribals. Unemployment in the sense it is understood in the complex, class-based society has gradually crept into the tribal society as well. This is probably expected. What could not be properly anticipated is the kind of reaction to such deprivations. Their biological background has not always proved to be advantageous to them, but it has at least provided them with a footing to think differently for which they alone cannot be blamed.

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