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Population Growth of North East India

A Geographical Analysis

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The most striking feature of the demographic characteristic of North East India is its high decadal growth of population, which has always been higher than the national decadal growth rate of population. It is estimated that the population of the region in 1830 was only 1 million. It grew four times to 4 million in 1901. During the last century between 1901-1991 the population of the region grew by about 8 times to 31.4 million as against 3.6 times in India as a whole (Taher *et al.*, 2001). In 2001 Census the region had a population of 38, 4995, 489 persons showing a decadal growth rate of 24.37 per cent as against the national decadal growth rate of 21.38 per cent. The growth rate however varies from State to State, e.g. the highest decadal growth rate is in the State of Nagaland (64.41 %) where it was more than double the growth rate of the nation. This high growth rate which is due to both natural increase as well as migration-induced has a great impact not only on the demographic composition of the region but also socio-economic consequences which are often reflected in political turmoil and consequent conflicts witnessed in the entire region.

This paper is an attempt to study the trend in the growth of population, the factors responsible for the high growth rate and some of the demographic, socio-economic and environmental implication arising out of this. This paper examines the high growth rate of population in the region from 1951 Census onwards in general (as this region experienced a large scale population re-distribution associated with the Partition of India in 1947) and from 1971 Census in particular (as the region once again experienced large scale exodus of population from the erstwhile East Pakistan, majority of whom subsequently went back to the newly created independent nation of Bangladesh).

Regional Setting

North East India lying between 20° N–29.30° North latitude and 89.46° E–97.30° East longitude consists of the seven sister States of Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura. (In this paper Sikkim has been omitted though otherwise in the recent past Sikkim has been added to North East for policy-matters only). The region has an area of 255037 sq. km (7% of the geographical area of the country) and supports a population size of 38,495,489 (accounting for about 4% of the total population of India) (2001 Census). The region holds a strategic position (hemmed by China in the north, Bhutan in the north-west, Myanmar in the east and Bangladesh in the south and south-east) by having international borders on all sides except the west where it is linked up with the mainland of India by a narrow corridor of about 40 km. width along the Bhutan and Nepal Himalayan Foothill. The region lies where South East Asia ends and South Asia begins, hence the region can be compared to a gateway connecting the subcontinent of India with South East Asia. Here the brown and the yellow races mingle resulting to a highly diversified socio-cultural scenario. There are about 209 indigenous tribes belonging to various racial stocks speaking about 420 languages and dialects which can be traced to diversified linguistic groups and sub-group such as Mon-Khmer speaking Austro Asiatic population represented by the Khasis and Jaintias, the Indo-Aryan linguistic groups of the India mainland, Tibeto-Burman linguistic groups of Mongoloid origin (represented by four distinct branches). These Mongoloid groups probably immigrated to the region from the north and east through the numerous mountain passes. The Indo-Aryans came from the west while the Tai Ahoms entered this region around 1228 A.D. and established their kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley that lasted till 1826 A.D. Around 17th and 18th centuries came another small groups of Tai people who are now found to be living in Arunachal Pradesh. Around 19th century another significant tribal group of Kukichin, Naga and Kachin immigrated to this region through the present Myanmar to occupy the present Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and the eastern districts of Arunachal Pradesh (Taher *et al.*, 2001).

The North East is also characterized by highly diversified physical features. The plains of Brahmaputra, Barak, Imphal Valley and Tripura cover an area of 6878528 sq. km. (accounting for 28% of the region's total area). The Plateau of Meghalaya and Karbi Anglong uplands cover an area of about 32282 sq. km. (approximately 12 per cent of the region's total area) and the rest of the area of about 153970 sq. km. (approximately 60% of the region's total area) are predominantly hilly and mountainous in character having thick vegetation which is intercepted by deep and inaccessible valleys.

Though the region is characterized by socio-economic backwardness and political instability yet it has witnessed a significantly high decadal growth rate of population when compared to the national decadal growth rate in almost all the Census (Table 7.1).

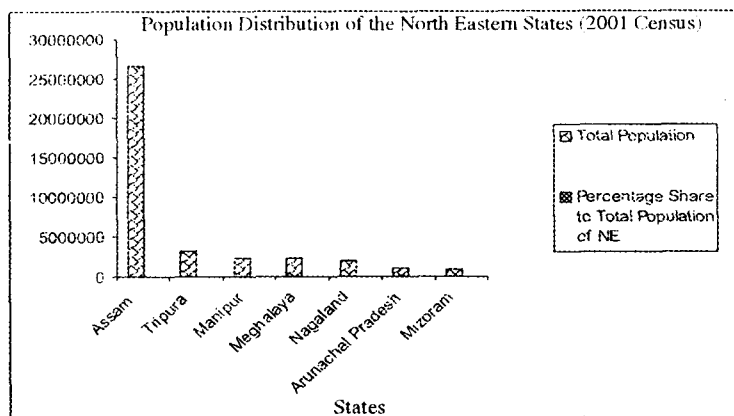
Growth of Population and its Spatial Variation

A cursory glance at the population distribution (Table 7.1) suggests that more than 2/3 of the population are living in the plains. It can be inferred from Table 7.2 that the region had always experienced a higher decadal variation of population when compared to the rest of the

Table 7.1 : Population Distribution among the States of North East India (2001 Census)

States	Total Population	Percentage Share to Total Population of NE	Density Persons/sq. km.
Assam	26638407	69.19	340
Tripura	3191168	8.29	304
Manipur	2388068	6.21	107
Meghalaya	2306069	5.99	103
Nagaland	1988636	5.17	120
Arunachal Pradesh	1096702	2.85	13
Mizoram	891058	2.31	42
North East (Total)	3850018	3.75	151
India	1027015245		312

Source: Census of India (2001), Percentage Share calculated by the Author.



country. It is observed that during the decade of 1951–61, following the Partition the entire region recorded a higher decadal growth (41.32%) rate than the national average (21.51). In fact the states of Assam (34.98%) and Tripura (78.71%) recorded the highest decadal growth rate of the country. The subsequent decades show a fall in the region's growth rate with a slight increase of about 0.72 per cent in the 1981–91 decade. The 1991–2001 decade shows a further fall of about 2.56 per cent from the previous Census, and the difference between the decadal national growth rate and the growth rate of north-east is narrowing down from 19.81 per cent in 1951–61 to about 2.83 per cent in the last Census.

However, this growth rate is not even over space. Certain States in the North East are showing highly explosive growth rate in the last decade. As earlier pointed out, Nagaland had the highest growth rate of above 50 per cent in the last two decades. The present decade indicates that the growth rate of Nagaland has increased by about 12.45 per cent from the previous Census. The 1991–2001 Census suggests that except the States of Assam (18.92%) and Tripura (16.03%) rest of the States have a decadal growth rate which is higher than the national decadal growth rate of 21.54 per cent. (Nagaland 64.53%, Arunachal Pradesh 27.00%, Manipur 24.86%, Meghalaya 30.65%, and Mizoram, 28.32%)

The exponential annual average growth rate of the region in the last decade (1991–2001) works out to be 2.02 per cent as against the

national exponential annual average growth rate of 1.95 per cent. This, however, as stated earlier varies from State to State (Table 7.2).

Table 7.2 : Average Annual Exponential Growth Rate of the North Eastern States (1971–2001)

States	1971–81	1981–91	1991–2001
Arunachal Pradesh	3.01	3.14	2.39
Assam	2.10	2.17	1.73
Manipur	2.81	2.57	2.22
Meghalaya	2.78	2.84	2.67
Mizoram	3.96	3.34	2.53
Nagaland	4.06	4.45	4.98
Tripura	2.77	2.95	1.49
India	2.20	2.14	1.93

Source: Basic Statistics of North Eastern Region (NEC).

Taking 1971 Census as the base the growth rate from 1971–2001 of the region has been to the tune of 97.21 per cent as against the country's growth of 87.36 per cent during the same period. This however varies from State to State ranging between 82.14 per cent in Assam to 285.47 per cent in Nagaland followed by Mizoram (168.37%), Meghalaya (127.87%), Arunachal Pradesh (134.18%) and Tripura (105.08%).

A district-level analysis further helps us in understanding the marked variation in population growth among the different States of the region as well as different areas of the State.

At present there are 72 districts in the seven mentioned States of North East. In the last decade (1991–2001) population growth has been as high as 95.16 per cent in Wokha district of Nagaland, though all the districts of Nagaland have shown a very high growth rate of above 45 per cent. In Arunachal Pradesh out of 13 districts, Papum Pare district records the highest decadal growth rate of 67.56 per cent. There were only 4 districts, viz. East Kameng (13.46%), Upper Subansiri (10.50%), Lower Subansiri (15.55%) and Tirap (17.33%) where the decadal growth rate was less than the national average in the last decade. Manipur consisting of 9 districts has only three districts having a decadal growth rate less than the national average while the rest of the 6 districts have seen a higher growth rate than the national average and it ranges

between 66.62 per cent in Chandel to 23.87 per cent in Thoubal district. Like-wise all the 7 districts of Meghalaya recorded a higher population growth rate than the national decadal growth rate. In Mizoram all districts except Mamit and Serchipp have a relatively higher growth rate ranging between 38.07 per cent in Aizawl to 23.16 per cent in Lunglei. In the States of Assam and Tripura that recorded a lower growth rate than national average, there are 8 districts (7 districts in Assam and 1 district in Tripura) where the decadal growth rate (1991–2001) was slightly above the national average of 21.54 per cent.

Table 7.3 : District-wise Decadal Growth Rate and Density of Population of the North Eastern States (1991–2001)

<i>Districts</i>	<i>Growth Rate in % (1991–2001)</i>	<i>Density of Population in Persons/sq. km.</i>
Assam		
Kokrajhar	12	256
Dhubri	23.63	585
Goalpara	23.03	450
Bongaigaon	12.05	420
Barpeta	18.87	508
Kamrup	26.11	580
Nalbari	13.03	509
Darrang	15.82	432
Marigaon	21.35	500
Nagaon	22.26	500
Sonitpur	18.06	316
Lakhimpur	18.30	390
Dhemaji	19.45	176
Tinsukia	19.51	303
Dibrugarh	13.68	350
Sibsagar	15.83	394
Jorhat	14.69	350
Golaghat	14.27	270
Karbi Anglong	22.72	77
North Cachar	24.72	38
Hills		
Cachar	18.89	382
Karimganj	21.87	557
Hailakandi	20.89	409
Tripura		
West Tripura	18.48	512
South Tripura	6.78	251

(Contd...)

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Dhalai	10.96	128
North Tripura	26.49	290
Nagaland		
Mon	74.12	145
Tuensang	78.11	98
Mokokchong	46.54	144
Zunheboto	60.01	122
Wokha	95.16	99
Dimapur	73.66	333
Kohima	47.92	100
Phek	45.07	73
Manipur		
Senapati	36.09	87
Tamenglong	29.23	25
Churachandpur	29.36	50
Bishnupur	15.27	420
Thoubal	23.87	708
Imphal West	16.70	856
Imphal East	19.49	557
Ukhrul	28.83	31
Arunachal Pradesh		
Tawang	37.60	17.92
West Kameng	32.22	10
East Kameng	13.46	14
Paum Pare	67.56	35
Lower	18.13	10
Subansiri		
Upper	10.50	8
Subansiri		
West Siang	15.55	12
East Siang	21.61	24
Upper Siang	20.10	5
Dibang Valley	34.02	4
Lohit	30.83	13
Changlang	31.29	27
Tirap	17.33	42
Meghalaya		
West Garo Hills	28.62	140
East Garo Hills	32.70	96

(Contd...)

(Contd...)

South Garo Hills	31.02	55
West Khasi Hills	33.05	56
Ri Bhoi	51.43	81
East Khasi Hills	23.41	234
Jaintia Hills	35.67	78
Mizoram		
Mamit	- 2.77	20
Kolasib	35.25	48
Aizawl	38.07	91
Champhai	29.88	34
Serchip	17.63	38
Lunglei	23.16	30
Lawngtlai	35.83	29
Saiha	33.67	44

Source: Basic Statistics of NER, NEC, Shillong. Density of Population calculated by the Author.

Factors Responsible for the High Growth

The high growth rate of population is obviously not only due to natural increase alone but also due to a high rate of migration into the region both from within and outside the country.

Natural Increase

With Independence the region like rest of the country has experienced sharp fall in death rates with slow decline of birth rates and this has contributed significantly to the increased population growth rate. The life expectancy at birth has increased. In Assam (which has more than 68 per cent of the total population of North East) life expectancy has increased from 32.7 years during the time of Independence to about 56 years (2002 World Bank Report) as against nation's life expectancy of 62 years. The IMR of Assam has reduced from 118/1000 in 1978 to about 78/1000 in 2002 as against the country's average of 126/1000 and 63/1000 respectively.

Table 7.4 shows the natural increase of population for the North Eastern States for the year 2001. It is observed that out of the 7 States

Table 7.4 : Estimated Crude Birth Rate and Death Rate/1000 persons (North-Eastern States, 2001)

States	CBR	CDR	Natural Increase
Assam	27.0	9.6	17.4
Tripura	16.1	5.6	10.6
Manipur	18.3	5.2	13.1
Meghalaya	28.3	9.0	19.3
Nagaland	NA	NA	NA
Arunachal Pradesh	22.2	5.7	16.5
Mizoram	15.7	4.4	11.3

Source : Office of the Registrar-General, India.

it is only Meghalaya which is having about 2 per thousand higher natural growth rate of 19.3/1000 against the national average of 17.3/1000 (SRS Data Year 2000). Assam has marginally higher natural growth of 17.4/1000. While the rest of the States Arunachal Pradesh (13.1), Manipur (12.7), Mizoram (11.7) and Tripura (11.1) have a natural growth rate below the national average. Thus the high growth of population is not only due to natural increase that is almost at par with the national trend with slight deviation from year to year. Hence, migration do play a significant role in the higher growth rate of population in the region.

Table 7.5 : Estimated Crude Birth Rate and Crude Death Rate/1000 persons (India, 1991–2001)

Years	Crude Birth Rate	Crude Death Rate	Natural Increase
1991	29.5	9.8	19.7
1992	29.2	10.1	19.1
1993	28.7	9.3	19.4
1994	28.7	9.3	19.4
1995	28.3	9.0	18.5
1996	27.5	9.0	18.3
1997	27.2	8.9	18.3
1998	26.5	9.0	17.5
1999	26.1	8.7	17.4
2000	25.8	8.5	17.3
2001	25.4	8.4	17

Source : Basic Statistics of North Eastern Region, NEC.

Taking 1951 population as the base and the national birth rates and death rates as the norms, it is estimated that within 1951–1991 about 8 million people of the region were migrants (Sharma *et al.*, 1997).

Taking 1991 population as the base and the national decadal natural increase of 20.29/1000 (1991–2001). It is observed that in the last decade about 16.81 per cent (64,71,338 persons) of the total population of North East were migrants (Table 7.6), the share of migrants however varies from State to State. Of the total population (2001 Census) Nagaland had the highest number of migrants (37.63%) followed by Meghalaya (22.10%), Manipur (21.95%), Mizoram (21.43%), Arunachal Pradesh (20.14%), Assam (14.16%), and Tripura (12.17%).

Migration thus turns out to be distinct factor contributing to this high growth of population and it has a long historical background which can be divided into colonial phase and post-independence phase for the convenience of our study.

Table 7.6 : Estimation of Migrant Population in the States of North East India, 2001

<i>States</i>	<i>Base Year Population (1991)</i>	<i>Actual Population (2001)</i>	<i>Expected Population (2001)</i>	<i>Access Population (Migrants)</i>	<i>Percentage of Migrants to Total Population</i>
Arunachal Pradesh	858392	1096702	875809	220893	20.14
Assam	22294562	26638407	22746919	3891488	14.61
Manipur	1826714	2388068	1863778	524290	21.95
Meghalaya	1760626	2306069	1796349	509720	22.10
Mizoram	686217	891058	700140	190918	21.43
Nagaland	1215573	1988636	1240237	748399	37.63
Tripura	2744827	3188636	2800520	388116	12.17
NE (Total)	31386911	38495089	32023751	6471338	16.81

Source : Calculated by the Author.

Colonial Phase

Before the British annexed Assam and brought under its rule around

1826, immigration was not very high as there was no economic necessity. During the British Rule—labourers, technicians, clerks etc. had to be imported from rest of the country. With the advent of the Tea Industry in last decade of the 19th century and early part of 20th century the British imported tea garden labourers from the Central Indian tribal belt as the local population did not like to work due to low wage and inhospitable jungle terrain (Gopalakrishnan *et al.*, 2002). This group of tribal migrant from Central India later settled here and constituted the various tea tribes of Assam. The next group constituting the East Bengal Muslims were attracted to the virgin alluvial low lying land prone to water logging and converted these wastelands into rich agricultural lands producing jute and vegetables. Assam during the early part of 19th century had low density of population due to high mortality rate and unhealthy climate while adjoining East Bengal (Bangladesh) was densely populated. Hence the surplus agrarian population from these adjoining areas came to settle here. The Nepalese were inducted to the region as soldiers in the British army or to work as chowkidars and other petty services and they later settled here. The literate Bengalees from the adjoining region were brought here by the British as lower officials to man the administration and other ancillary industrial development like communication networks, petroleum industry etc. The Rajasthanis mainly from Marwar region came here during the colonial phase to trade, while the other communities from the country (mainly from plains of Northern India) came to the region with the advent of the British rule to render their services as washerman, barbers, cobblers etc.

Independence Phase

With Indian Independence in 1947 and the partition of the country on communal lines this region experienced an exodus of immigration of the Hindu population from erstwhile East Pakistan. At the time of partition Tripura had sheltered about 1 lakh refugees from the then East Pakistan (Census of India, 1951). In 1947 the estimated refugees were about 1.14 lakh in Assam, out of which majority were settled in Cachar district.

Post-Independence

The decades after Independence marked a new stage of demographic development in the region. The decade 1951–61 witnessed an unprecedented volume of migration when the population growth of the region shot up by 41.32 per cent as against the nation's growth rate of 21.51 per cent, which can be attributed to the consistent flow of migrants from the erstwhile East Pakistan (which was facing communal conflicts targeting the minorities) as well from within the country as a number of Central Government offices were established.

Mass migration of population again affected this region in 1970s when mutual antagonism between Bengali and non-Bengali population over economic and political issues led to the civil war in East Pakistan and ultimately resulted in the Independence of Bangladesh in 1971. It is estimated that about 10 million people left their hearth in East Pakistan for the adjoining areas of India. In the following year with the liberation of Bangladesh most of them returned back but their exact number is however not known (Elahi *et al.*, 1991).

However illegal immigration to this region continues unabated over the decades. The location of the region between South and South East Asia attracts migrants from the neighbouring countries. The boundary of adjoining Bangladesh is more political than natural. There are large numbers of streams flowing from this area to the Bangladesh and the mighty Brahmaputra, which is highly braided in its lower course result in the formation of low lying alluvial deposits locally termed as *chars*. These *chars* are highly fertile and attract the agrarian population from the neighbouring areas. Bangladesh is having environmental ethos similar to that of this region of India. Bangladesh is characterized by higher degree of poverty with lower economic development marked by traditional agrarian economy coupled with environmental problems and high growth of population leading to higher density distribution, thus the surplus population often enters the adjoining region as illegal migrants. Moreover, the earlier immigrants from erstwhile East Bengal who occupy the older char lands often give physical and social shelter to these illegal immigrants. Once inside the region the illegal immigrants get settled and mingle

with the earlier comers from the same origin. With high density of population especially in the plains, which support more than 2/3rd population of the region, the surplus population is now moving into the relatively isolated pockets of North East India. This is indicated by the high growth rate of population of States—Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh etc.

Impact

The excessive nature of population growth both due to natural increase and migration has exerted a great influence on the demographic as well as socio-economic character of the region. In spite of the fact that the percentage of urban population is low here (15.45% as against the country's 27.70%) the urban growth rate is very high suggesting high rate of migration these urban centres. This has resulted in a highly unbalanced sex ratio especially in the urban areas of Arunachal Pradesh (894), Nagaland (909). The declining sex ratio in the context of rapid population growth suggests that there has been a massive male migration, either as sojourners or as permanent residents to this region in the last few decades.

The man-land ratio is increasing in the region. In fact the State of Assam records a higher density (340 persons/sq.km) when compared to the national average (324 persons/sq.km).

The physiological and agricultural density are on the rise, the average size of the land holding has come down from 1.71 hectares in 1970-71 to 1.64 hectares in 1980-81.

Due to higher growth rate of population the forested areas, hill slopes and other marginal areas has been encroached upon resulting in loss of forest cover, land degradation and loss of bio-diversity causing ecological imbalance.

The explosive population growth is halting the pace of socio-economic development of the region. Here about 50 per cent of its main workers are still dependent on traditional agriculture practices and in spite of the high dependency on the agricultural sector there is foodgrain deficiency in the region as the production is not compatible with the rapid population growth (Agarwal, 1987).

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