

# Learning About the Tribes of North-East India

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## Abstract

**North-East India** is a land of ethnic diversities which is rich in its indigenous tribes. These tribes help to understand the culture, life-style patterns, occupations, political, and religious practices. It is truly amazing to learn about their distinctive artistic pursuits, family relationships, social system, customs, traditions, marriage laws and their festivals. This paper attempts to unveil the known and unknown tribes who have a rich cultural heritage and valuable knowledge of plants and weaving skills.

**Keywords:** Tribes, culture, indigenous, life-style.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

India is known for its valuable heritage. The country has been hailed as one of the most complex amalgamation of various cultural identities. North-East India is known for its natural beauty and diversity. It comprises the states of Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Sikkim, Tripura, Assam, Mizoram, and Nagaland. The North-Eastern region of India shares its boundaries with Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar. According to the 2011 census, 8.6% of India's population consists of tribes. There are altogether 427 tribal communities all over India. North-east India is a land inhabited by more than 200 tribes, with each community having its own unique way of living. This makes North-East India one of the most culturally diverse regions of the world. Anthropologists and even us Psychologists have started taking keen interest in the area. The Indian Government is focusing on developing the life and tourism among the tribal occupied states.



Fig. 1 Location Map of North-East states

Table 1—Major tribes of the North-eastern region of India

States	Tribes
Arunachal Pradesh	Adi (Ashing, Bogun, Bokar, Bori, Botng, Galling, Komar, Karka, Lodung, Milang, Minyong, Padam, Pailibo, Pangi, Ramo, Shimong, Tangam), Aka, Aptani, Bangani, Khamba, Khowa, Momba, Miji, Hill Miri, Mishing Miri, Sherdukpen, Sulong, Singpho, Tagin, Tangsa, Wancho, Yobin (Lisu), Zakhing (Meyor)
Assam (in the autonomous districts)	Chakma, Dimasa, Garo, Hajong, Hmar, Khasi, Jaintia, Synteng, Pnar, War, Bhoi, Lynggam, Kuki tribes (Baiate, Changsan, Chongloi, Doungel, Gamalhoo, Gangte, Guite, Hanneug, Hao Kip, Hanpit, Lhonyem, Lhocvun, Lupheng, Mangje, Misao), Rieng, Sairhem, Selnam, Singson, Haolai, Hengna, Hongsingh, Hrangkhwal, Raokhol, Tongbe, Khawathlang, Khothalong, Khawchung, Khelma, Kholhou, Kipgen, Kuki, Lengthang, Lhangum, Lhoujem, Lhouvun, Misao, Riangon, Sairhem, Selnam, Singson, Sithou, Sukto, Thado, Thangngue, Uibush, Vaiphei), Lakher, Man (Tai speaking), Any Mizo (Lushai) tribes, mikir, Any Naga Tribes, Pawi, Syntheng.
(in the states of Assam excluding the autonomous districts)	Barmans in Cachar, Boro, Borokachari, Deori, Hajong, Kachari, Sonwal, Lalung, Mech, Miri, Rabha
Manipur	Aimol, Anal, Angami, Chiru, Chete, Gangte, Hmar, Kabui, Kacha Naga, Koirao, Koireng, Kom, Langang, Mao, Maram, Maring, Any Mizo (Lushai) tribes, Monsang, Moyon, Paite, Parum, Ralte, Sema, Simte, Subte, Tangkhul, Thadou, Vaiphei, Zou.
Mizoram	Chakma, Dimasa Kachari, Garo, Hajong, Hmar, Khasi, Jaintia, War, Any Kuki (Baiate, Changsan, Chongloi, Doungel, Gamathou, Gangte, Guite, Hanneug, Hao Kip, Hanpit, Lhonyem, Lhocvun, Lupheng, Mangje, Misao, Riang, Sairhem, Selnam, Singson, Haolai, Hengna, Hongsingh, Hrangkhwal, Raokhol, Tongbe, Khawathlang, Khothalong, Khawchung, Khelma, Kholhou, Kipgen, Kuki, Lengthang, Lhangum, Lhoujem, Lhouvun, Misao, Riang, Sairhem, Selnam, Singson, Sithou, Sukto, Thado, Thangngue, Uibush, Vaiphei), Lekher, Man (Tai speaking), Any Mizo (Lushai) tribe, Karbi, Any Naga tribe, Pawi.
Meghalaya	Bhoi, Boro, Chakma, Dimasa, Garo, Hajong, Hmar, Jaintia, Karbi (Mikir), Khasi, Koch, Kuki, Lakher, Lynggam, Man (Tai speaking), Mizo (Lushai), Naga, Pawi, Pnar, Rabha, Synteng, War.
Nagaland	Adi, Aka, Dimasa, Galong, Garo, Khasi and Jaintia, khowa, Kuki, karbi (Mikir), Mizo, Any Naga tribe (Ao, Angami, Chakhesang, Chang, Chiru, Khiermungan, Konyak, Lotha, Mkwari, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Sema, Tikhir, Yinchongree, Zeliang), Syntheng, Momba.
Tripura	Bhil, Bhutia, Chaimal, Chakma, Garo, Halam, Jamatia, Khasia, Kuki (including Balte, Belalhat, Chihalya, Fun, Hajango, Jangte, Khareng, Khephong, Kuntei, Lafiang, Lentei, Mizel, Namte, Paitu, Paite, Rangchan, Rangkhole, Thangluaya) Lepcha, Lushai Mag, Munda, Kaur, Noatia, Orang, Riang, Samhal, Tripura, Tripuri, Tippera, Uchai.

### 1.1 A Tribe

Tribes are primarily seen as a stage and type of society. A tribe is considered as a type of society which lacks the traits of modern society follow simple ways of living. There are certain problems in using the term 'tribes' due to conceptual and empirical issues. So it is overcome by using the term indigenous instead of tribes. This term is used in anthropology sometimes to describe the tribes.

Now, this term goes beyond the subject and use in political science for important discussion and describing the rights and identity of indigenous people. Indigenous people are generally identified as the real owner of that geographical area which is destroyed because of colonialism and that is why now they are decreasing in numbers. In Hindi, indigenous is referred to as *Adivasi*. In North-East India, the term 'indigenous' is used to describe more than fifty percent of their population, identifying their rights, and also way of living and identities.

### **1.2 Origin of Tribes in North-East India**

The tribes existing in the North-East India are indigenous to the land. They have originated from the ethnic groups of Tibeto-Burmese, Proto Austrioids, and some groups of Indo-Mongoloids. They trace their ancestry to lands in Mongolia and South-East Asia. Many of the tribes still follow the traditions of Mahabharata and Ramayana as they consider themselves to be an integral part of that era.

The migration of people from ancient to present time and from various directions to North-East India has significantly contributed towards the growth of ethnic diversities. Besides the tribal groups, a few other non-tribal groups have also come to existence as a consequence of prolong interactions between the cultures of the migrants and those of the indigenous people. The spread of Hinduism; invasions of different outside rulers at different historical periods; integration of the north eastern region with the rest of India in the nineteenth century and migrations that took place as late as the last century have resulted spectacular social, cultural, economic, and political transformations in this region (Ali and Das, 2003).

## **2. VARIOUS TRIBES OF NORTH-EAST INDIA**

The tribal frontiers are known for their wonderful skills when it comes to agriculture, tribal textiles, bamboo craft, wood cane, traditional medicine, and other sustainable methods of livelihood. They constitute more than 25% of population of North-East India. The largest of all the tribes are the Khasis, Bodos, Pnars and Khyntriams, Garos, Mishings, Karbis, and Mizos. Mishings primarily live on the banks of the Brahmaputra, and all the other major tributaries are spatially widely distributed. The tribes living in the hill areas mainly practice *jhum* (shifting cultivation). Some of the tribes are involved in market economy through a large number

of weekly and by-weekly rural markets. The trend of occupational diversification has also emerged (Ali and Das, 2003).

We will be talking about the different tribes and their culture further in detail but first here are a few interesting facts related to the tribal culture in the area: Konyak Tribe rewarded the head hunting skills of young boys with prestigious facial tattoo, The Khasi tribe of Meghalaya follows a matrilineal system, The Gobha and Ahom kings still promote the barter system through the Jonbeel Mela and the endemic tribes have their own locally brewed liquor.

Through this paper, we'll be discovering the major tribes in all the eight states of North-East India.

### **2.1 Tribes in Assam**

Assam is one of the states in North-East India. It is situated near the region of South Himalayas and Barak and Brahmaputra valley. It covers the area of 78,483 km. It is famous for Assam tea and Assam silk. Its economy is based on wildlife tourism like Kaziranga National Park and Manas National Park which are included in the list of world heritage sites.

#### **2.1.1 Ahom Tribe**

They are the tribes that belong to the land of pong which is located between old Assam and Burma. This tribe named their land as country of gold. They arrived in 13<sup>th</sup> century. They ruled for six centuries and the popular kings were Kochs and Kacharies. They have a developed feudal system and a sense of history. The people of this tribe also write stories on the dried bark of tree.

#### **2.1.2 Bodos Tribe**

They are located near the Brahmaputra Valley. Their livelihood is based on hunting and fishing. The language they speak is Tibeto-Burmese. People of this tribe use iron tools to work on the evergreen forests and the heavy soil of valley. They could store more food. Their population increased and soon their culture and language spread in the region of whole valley.

#### **2.1.3 Kachari Tribe**

They are located near the Barak valley. Their livelihood depends upon hunting and fishing and they speak Tibeto-Burmese language. Their culture and language is spread in the region of whole valley. The kings of these tribes were given the fictional names of *kashatriya* lineage. The area is referred as *cachar*. This tribe also has the immigrants from West Bengal.

### 2.1.4 Assamee Tribe

This tribe represents the early Indian society where there was negligible untouchability. The elders have a special status and the young have rights and freedom. The headman of the village is known as *gaonbura*. The young people have the choice of mate selection. They are located in the areas of enclosed mountains and valley.

## 2.2 Tribes in Tripura

Tripura is the second smallest state in India where over 23 languages are spoken by a population of 3.66 million. Its capital is Agartala which is surrounded by hills on all the three sides. Tripura lies to the south-west of Assam and to the east of Bangladesh. It was previously a princely state and then subsequently a union territory and was elevated to the status of a state on January 21, 1972.

### 2.2.1 Bhil Tribe

Bhills are considered one of the oldest tribe in India, belonging to the Austroloid group. They speak a language of Dravidian origin. Their income comes from working in tea garden, brickfield, and agriculture. It is a wild tribe which enjoys music, drinking, and dancing. In the other part of the country, Bhills enjoy a modern weave of life.

### 2.2.2 Chakma Tribe

Chakmas are known to be a tribe of South-East Asia, and is one of the major tribe in Tripura when it comes to population strength. They are divided into three major groups: Anokia, Mangla, and Tandugia. They mainly speak Arakan language mixed with words from Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Chinese language. They earn from jhum cultivation, fishing, plain land cultivation, and vegetable growing. Chakmas are well known for trapping wild elephants.

### 2.2.3 Garo Tribe

It is one of the immigrant tribe in Tripura. Ethnically Garos is a tribe of Tibeto-Burman linguistic family and under Mongoloid racial stock. The mother in the family is considered the head of the family, and a matrilineal culture is followed. They celebrate the wan-gala festival when a new crop penetrates their granary.

## 2.3 Tribes in Meghalaya

Meghalaya was formed in January 1972. Its area is 22,429 sq. km. It has a total population of 29,64,007. The languages spoken in this state are Khasi, Pnar, Garo and

English. This state is known for its matrilineal system where lineage and inheritance are traced through women.

### 2.3.1 Khasi Tribe

There is uncertainty related to the origin of this tribe so it is believed that it belongs to the population movement of Indo-China in India. They spoke *mon-khmer* language. They are known for their matrilineal society where property passes from mother to daughter. The popular saying of this tribe is "long jaidnakaynthei" which means "from the women sprang the clan". There is a customary law where the youngest daughter gets the largest share of the property which is known as lion share because she is the one who has the responsibilities of ancestral house and performs the ceremonies. After her marriage her husband comes to her house to live with her family whereas other daughters can start their own nuclear families. Other daughters also have share in the property of the mother. These tribes gives women the freedom to select and marry a man. The identity of child is linked with the women, like surname and kin. Dance is the central culture of khasi life.

### 2.3.2 Garo Tribe of Meghalaya

They are located in the western segment of state and belong to the Tibeto-Burman family race. They practice shifting cultivation or jhum culture. It is also matrilineal society. The major difference from the Khasi matrilineal system is that in this tribe the daughter which the parents selects gets the ancestral home and perform the rituals. Usually parents select the daughter which is obedient, well-mannered and married to the father's nephew. The daughter who is selected by parents is known as *nokama* and her husband is known as *nokarom* (acts as headman of village). Other customary laws are same as in the Khasi tribe.

### 2.3.3 Jaintia Tribe

They are believed to be originated from the population movement of Indo- China in India. The language they speak is *mon-khmer*. It celebrates nature, balance and harmony among its people. It is a matrilineal society where mothers have the property and her surname is passed on to the children. The interesting custom that makes it different from both Khasi and Garo tribe culture is that the husband lives with his mother and sister and the wife lives in their ancestral home. The husband is allowed to meet his wife during night time. This custom is followed to maintain a good relation between the mother and son.



## 2.4 Tribes in Nagaland

It is a state in North-East India which has an area of 16,579 sq. km. and the population is 1,980,602(2011 census). Most of the area of the state is covered by mountains and the highest peak is Mount Saramati. There are 16 major tribes in Nagaland which are different from each other on the basis of their colours, patterns of shawls and dialect. Each tribe has its own attire, signature hats and jewellery. The customs of this state are colourful and they have specific dresses for specific occasions.

### 2.4.1 Angami Tribe

They are one of the major *Naga* ethnical groups. They are found in Kohima and Dimapur district and celebrate *Sekrenyi*. They are the warriors. The land is most important form of property among them because of labour intensive cultivation. They are known for the terrace wet rice cultivation.

### 2.4.2 Konyak Tribe

They are the largest tribes of the sixteen tribes in Nagaland. They celebrate the festival *aoleng*, which represents the coming of spring. They can



Picture 3: Chakma Tribe



Picture 1: Boos Tribe



Picture 4: Jaintia Tribe



Picture 2: Konyak Tribe



Picture 5: Garo Tribe



**Picture 6: Adi Tribe**

be distinguished from other tribes because they have tattoos all over their body and pierced ears. The unique traditional practices of this tribe are iron smelting, brass work, gun powder making and gum smiting. They belong to the history of brutal head hunting and animistic culture. The members of this tribe lead a very disciplined community life. They follow their responsibilities and duties. Its culture is one of the richest among the naga tribes.

#### **2.4.3 Ao Tribe**

They are also one of the naga tribes. They are known to be the first naga tribe that embraced christianity and followed the methods of western education. They are known for their harvest festival that is held each year. They are located in Tsula Valley and Tusrang Valley in Mokochung District.

#### **2.4.4 Chang Tribe**

It is one of the recognised scheduled tribes in India. They perform jhum cultivation and head hunting. Majority of people in these tribes are Christians and speak *chang* language. They have a part lineal system. They are involved in the activity of craft such as pottery, spinning, wood carving, and many more.

### **2.5 Tribes in Mizoram**

Mizoram was just another district of Assam and was known as the Lushai Hills till 1972. It was carved out as a union territory and became the 23<sup>rd</sup> state of India on 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1987. It is the southernmost landlocked state, sharing borders with Manipur, Assam, and Tripura. It is the second least populous state in the country. Its capital is Aizawl. 'Mizo' refers to native inhabitants, and 'Ram'

refers to as land, and thus Mizoram means "land of mizos".

#### **2.5.1 Chakma Tribe of Mizoram**

It is one of the most important tribes in Mizoram and follows a combined religion of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Animism. They are influenced by Indo-Aryan culture. They speak a language closely associated with Bengali.

#### **2.5.2 Pawi Tribe**

This tribe has migrated from the Chin Hills in Burma and calls itself *Lai*. Pawis speak the lai and mizo language. They reside in the south and south-eastern regions of Mizoram. Among the Pawis, the eldest son is entitled to property rights of the father. The men of this tribe tie their hair in a bun, and women wear a lot of ornaments. The Pawis prefer to grow maize and millet. They have similar customs to those of Lushais.

#### **2.5.3 Ralte Tribe**

This tribe is largely settled in the Lushai villages located in the northern province of Aizawl. 'Himar' is the most significant group among them.

### **2.6 Tribes in Arunachal Pradesh**

It is one of the major states in North-East India and it was formed in 1972. It shares its boundaries with China, Bhutan, Myanmar, Assam, and Nagaland. It has five major districts which are named after the rivers of that area. It has an age long social and economic contact with Tibet so it has influenced their culture, language, religion, dress and interpersonal habit. This area follows the democratic process. It has vibrant beauty of flora and fauna. It has 25 major and many minor tribes.

#### **2.6.1 Adi Tribe**

It is also known as *abroes* and is one of the major tribes in this state. It is inhabited in siang district. This tribe is divided into many sub-tribes like padam-mingyong, pasis, karkoes, galo, boris, bokaras, romos, tangams and many more. They made hanging bamboo bridges in Siang River. They are also known for making bamboo items and cane. They are democratic and organised. Women in this tribe are good weavers. They have the culture of dance which they perform on special occasions, functions and perform dramatic acts related to Buddhist Culture.

#### **2.6.2 Mishmi Tribe**

They are located in the district of Dibang Valley. They have a vast population situated in this valley. They are divided into three main groups and names of these

groups are Toroan, Kaman and Chulikatas. Agriculture is one the major occupation of this tribe. The people of this tribe are also considered as a good traders and name of the few trade items are deer masks, medicinal plants, animal skins, and many more.

### 2.6.3 Singpho Tribe

They are located near the Tengapani and Nao Dehang River. The women of this tribe are known as good weavers. They work as agriculturalists and expert blacksmiths.

### 2.6.4 Nyishi tribe

These are the largest group of people located near the Subansiri District. The men of this tribe usually have a long hair tied over their head. They also have the attire of wearing cane bands on their wrists. They believe in sprits and re-birth. Polygamy is practised in this tribe and their language belongs to Sino-Tibetan family.

## 2.7 Tribes in Manipur

It covers the area of 22,327 sq km. It has a population of 3 million people. It is one of the smallest states in India. It has a history of being a princely state. The main language of the state is *Manipuri* and it has only 20% of the tribal population. Main occupation of this state is agriculture.

### 2.7.1 Hmar Tribe

They are settled in Manipur since 1872. They are recognised under the Constitution of India as Scheduled Tribe. They originated in South-West China and their ancestors belong to Chinese Dynasty. They follow the patriarchy system in their community. Their houses are located in the top of the hills with four chambers in the house. They perform shift cultivation and make medicinal products and forest products.

### 2.7.2 Kuki Tribes

They are one of the largest ethnical groups. They are also known as hill man because their tribes or clans are located in hilly areas. They have different customs related to child naming ceremonies, child rearing customs, etc. They follow the administration of chief in the tribe and other members are dependent on the chief.

### 2.7.3 Maram tribe

It is the sub group of naga tribe. It is located in Senapati District. It is also included in the primitive tribal group of India. They belong to the Mongolia race as the part of Tibeto-Burma family. It follows the patriarchy system. Monogamy is the common form of marriage in this tribe.

They practice agricultural activities and shifting cultivation. They hunt animals and birds for their livelihood from nearby forests. This tribe celebrates around twenty festivals in a year like Ponghi, Kanghi etc. They perform dance and music in their festivals and on other special occasions. Popular dance form which is the war dance is known as Sarukata.

## 2.8 Tribes in Sikkim

Sikkim is bordered by Tibet, Bhutan, and Nepal. It includes India's highest mountain range, Kanchenjunga. It is home to glaciers, alpine meadows, and Buddhist monasteries dating back to 1700s.

### 2.8.1 The Lepchas

They are known to be the original inhabitants of Sikkim and earlier believed in Bone or Mune faith. Then they adopted for Buddhism or Christianity. The Lepcha population is concentrated in the central part of Sikkim and its folklore is rich with stories. The male lepcha wear a striped cotton dress called *pagi*, and the female lepcha wears a two piece. The language lepcha though is not very well developed but is rich in vocabulary related to flora and fauna. The polyandry marriages are permitted in this culture. These people are also good at archery.

### 2.8.2 The Bhutias

These are the people of Tibetan origin, and migrated to Sikkim after the 15<sup>th</sup> century. They majorly reside in the Northern Sikkim. They are also known as *Lachenpas* and *Lachungpas*. The tribe speaks Sikkimese. A Bhutia house is of a rectangular shape and is called *Khin*. The females wear a loose silk gown type garment called the 'Honju' and the men wear a full sleeves cloak called the 'Bakhu'

## 3. CONCLUSION

North-East India has a very rich cultural heritage and it will be a great opportunity to know about the indigenous tribes that are dwelling in this area. There is so much one can learn about Indian cultural traditions, life-style patterns, language, customs, festivals, social life, family structure, occupations along with their precious natural habitat and mountains that have so much to offer.

A visit to the North-east would not only be a treat to the eyes but a great source of knowledge for the soul.



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