

Northeast the Broken Mirror: Shades of Asian Culture

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Abstract

Since India gained its independence, the nation's northeastern region has experienced secessionist and insurgency-related bloodshed and strife. The problem has become more difficult as the region is populated by individuals of various racial origins, who speak different languages and have diverse socio-cultural traditions. These people are now battling over the same geographical territory to safeguard and maintain their culture and identity. Illegal immigration from surrounding countries, particularly Bangladesh, and Myanmar has exacerbated the problem by reducing the population of indigenous people to a minority in some sections of the region. The northeast region of India refers to the easternmost region, which includes the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and a new addition, Sikkim. China, Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh have international borders with the region, which is connected to the rest of India through a small route. Northeast India is the home of many ethnic groups who arrived in the region from various directions at various historical times. These communities are of various racial stocks, speak different languages, and have a variety of sociocultural traditions. As a result, the region has become a melting pot of several ethnic nationalities. The society that exists in the hill regions of the northeast, in particular, exhibits a high degree of diversity, as each community living there has its distinctive traits. The northeastern part of India has seen significant transformations in all sectors of life after independence. This is owing to its interaction with several cultural change factors operating in the region. The arrival of British administrators and missionaries, as well as the establishment of state governments and a state legal system, hastened the transition. Contact between and among the region's diverse tribal groups has also aided in the interchange or assimilation of features. This paper investigates the various dynamics of cultural shifts and continuity in the region using proper instances from various tribes and their distinct conditions.

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Introduction

A Comprehensive Exploration of Northeast India: A Complex Asian Culture

The Northeast is home to over 300 ethnic groups, including numerous tribes and indigenous communities. Some of the major tribal groups include the Nagas, Mizos, Bodos, Dimasas, Karbis, Khasis, Garos, and Adis. Many of these communities have lived in the region for centuries and have distinct cultures, languages, attire, and traditions.

For instance, the Nagas comprise over 40 tribes spread across Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam. Well-known Naga tribes include the Konyaks, Aos, Angamis, Lothas, and Rengmas. Naga tribes are known for their unique housing architecture, customs like headhunting (now abandoned), and vibrant festivals such as the Hornbill Festival. Similarly, the Khasi and Garo tribes inhabit Meghalaya and are famous for their matrilineal culture where lineage and inheritance pass from mother to daughter. The tribes of Mizoram like the Lushais and Pawis are

predominantly Christian due to missionary activity under British rule. Mizo culture revolves around the concept of Tlawmngaihna, which emphasizes selflessness, hospitality, and community values.

Other lesser-known but fascinating tribes include the Apatani of Arunachal Pradesh known for their sustainable agriculture practices and facial tattoos; the Dimasa tribe of Assam with their ancient Bathou religion; and the Karbi Anglong community of Assam which follows a syncretic form of Hinduism and animism. Thus Northeast India presents a vibrant mosaic of indigenous ethnic diversity unseen elsewhere in the subcontinent. Sadly, many of these unique tribal cultures are now endangered due to modernization, conflicts, and migration. Efforts are ongoing to preserve tribal heritage through initiatives like cultural centres, museums, festivals, and government programs.

North-East India is home to a diverse range of tribal people who arrived from various routes at different junctures in history. These communities are of various racial origins, speak different languages, and have diverse socio-cultural traditions. The region has been colonized by various streams of Mongoloid people who arrived from the north and east at various times. The Australoids are thought to have arrived in this region before the Mongoloids, who either partially or completely assimilated the Australoid strains (Das 1970). According to the 2011 census, the region has a population of about 3,88,57,769 individuals, accounting for only 3.75% of the entire Indian population. What is remarkable is the presence of over 300 tribal communities in the region, each with its own set of social norms, leading to the region's designation as an anthropologist's paradise. Except for a few fights between plains and hill people before the arrival of the British, the entire territory remained anonymous. Due to the lack of mitigating circumstances, the land remained more or less virginal until a sweeping transformation occurred in the last 50 years.

However, in recent decades, this diversity has come under threat due to various factors leading to rapid cultural change in the region. The indigenous communities, in particular, have experienced the erosion of their cultural identities, values, and ways of life. This has sparked concerns over the loss of indigenous knowledge systems, languages, art forms, and more.

Conflicts and Insurgencies in Northeast

The Northeast has been impacted by various armed conflicts and insurgencies over the decades. Factors like ethnic tensions, underdevelopment, illegal immigration, and the AFSPA military law have fueled unrest and separatist struggles in the region. In Nagaland, insurgent groups like the NSCN-IM and NSCN-K have waged a struggle for Naga self-determination since the 1950s. The Naga cause is based on their unique history and culture compared to mainland India. Peace talks have been ongoing but a final settlement remains elusive.

Manipur has about 34 insurgent groups including the UNLF, PLA, and PREPAK which seek Manipuri independence. Extrajudicial killings and militant attacks continue to impact stability. The AFSPA military law provides impunity to armed forces aggravating public resentment. Mizoram witnessed a violent 20-year rebellion led by the MNF from 1966 to 1986. The struggle ended after the MNF signed a peace pact and became a mainstream political party. Mizoram remains peaceful though groups like HPC-D continue to demand a separate state.

Assam saw turbulent times through the Assam Agitation (1979-1985) against illegal immigration which led to the 1985 Assam Accord. ULFA, the leading insurgent group in Assam, arose during this period and continues to operate despite heavy counterinsurgency operations. While the scale of conflicts has reduced since the 2000s, the complex issues fueling unrest remain unresolved. Sustainable peace can only come through political settlements that balance national integrity with the region's unique context. Greater autonomy and ethnic reconciliation are key to the Northeast's stable future.

Identity Crises and Ethnicity Challenges in the Northeast

One major factor reshaping the culture of Northeast India is the region's increasing integration with mainstream Indian society. For centuries, much of the Northeast remained isolated from the rest of India due to the narrow Siliguri Corridor linking it to the rest of the country. However, improved connectivity via roads, railways, airways, and telecommunications has led to greater mobility and interaction with other parts of India. Bollywood films, satellite TV, festivals, and the Hindi language have penetrated the region, influencing local cultures.

While some view this integration positively as part of national unity, critics argue that the influx of exogenous cultural elements is eroding the unique local cultures of the Northeast. Indigenous languages such as Sema and Ao are being replaced by Hindi and English as lingua franca. Traditional festivals are losing relevance to more mainstream Indian celebrations. Indigenous food habits, clothing styles, music, and more are being displaced. The cultural distinctiveness of ethnic groups like the Nagas, Mizos, and Manipuris is declining. Assimilation of indigenous cultures into a homogeneous Indian identity risks immense loss of cultural diversity in the Northeast.

Rapid modernization and development in Northeast India have also profoundly reshaped indigenous cultures. With growing urbanization and expansion of infrastructure, rural and tribal communities are transitioning away from traditional lifestyles. Modern amenities and technologies like mobile phones and televisions have become ubiquitous. Traditional livelihoods centred on jhum cultivation, hunting, and gathering are being replaced by more modern occupations. Even dietary habits are shifting with the availability of new processed foods. While modernization has brought improved standards of living, it has also led to the decline of indigenous knowledge systems, customs, oral traditions, and more. Sacred groves and sites of cultural significance are being degraded amidst unchecked development. Rituals, festivals, and oral traditions are eroding as the younger generation embraces modern lifestyles. Some have argued for finding a balance between modernization and preserving indigenous heritage. However, the rapidly changing material conditions continue to transform local cultures.

Christianization has also been an agent of cultural change in Northeast India. Missionary activities under British colonial rule led to the large-scale conversion of indigenous tribes to Christianity. Today, over 90% of Mizoram and Nagaland's population, 88% of Meghalaya's, and over 40% of Manipur's are Christian. The adoption of Christianity has displaced traditional animist belief systems and practices like ceremonial sacrifices to indigenous deities. Adherence to church doctrines has changed local customs and worldviews. For instance, tribes like the Khasis in Meghalaya have transitioned from matrilineal to patrilineal systems under

Christian influence. While many indigenous groups have embraced Christianity wholeheartedly, critics argue it has undermined traditional cultures. However, others state Christianity has helped uplift marginalized tribes through education and health services provided by missionaries. The complex role of religious change continues to reshape indigenous cultures.

Migration and displacement of indigenous communities have also catalyzed cultural change. Lack of livelihood opportunities has driven the migration of youth to urban areas within and outside the Northeast in search of jobs and education. Consequently, their connections to traditional lifestyles weaken over time. Displacement due to armed conflict and natural disasters has also impacted cultural continuity. For instance, the Bodo-Santhal ethnic violence in the 1990s and floods displaced thousands from their native villages. Being uprooted from their ancestral lands disrupted their cultural moorings. Migrating communities have to assimilate to new cultures at their destinations. At the same time, the culture back home transforms due to outflux. Temporary migration for work leads to cultural diffusion as well. These dynamics disrupt the cultural fabric of indigenous communities.

The deep-rooted cultural changes in Northeast India have profoundly impacted indigenous identities and ways of life. The cultural distinctiveness of ethnic groups which defined their sense of identity and belonging for centuries is fading. The erosion of indigenous languages, rituals, food habits, attire, art, and more has created a sense of cultural loss and identity crisis. The strong community and clan ties that formed the core of traditional social structures are weakening. Individualism and nuclear families are replacing the more collective ways of life. Knowledge systems and traditions passed down generations orally are being lost with the passing of the elderly.

For some indigenous youth, modern urban living offers new opportunities. But many also struggle to balance modernity with their cultural heritage. The socio-economic marginalization of indigenous groups also continues despite cultural assimilation. While culture naturally evolves, the rapid pace of change is threatening the cultural continuity of indigenous communities. The loss of ethnic diversity damages the socio-cultural fabric of the Northeast. However, culture can also be revitalized through community-led efforts. The future trajectories remain complex. Many of the works also touch upon the dilemmas of identity faced by Northeasterners who migrate to metropoles like Delhi for education and work. Uprooted from home yet outsiders in the city, these communities are often forced to navigate multiple worlds and cultures.

Conclusion

The deeply rooted forces transforming culture in Northeast India have had profound impacts on indigenous communities. Integration into mainstream India, modernization, religious change, and migration are driving an erosion of indigenous languages, knowledge systems, customs, identities, and ways of life. However, culture is dynamic and resilient. Indigenous groups continue to adapt their traditions to modern contexts or revive threatened practices. The region still retains its incredible ethnic diversity even as cultures change. Protecting this diversity while embracing change requires balancing development with the safeguarding of cultural heritage.

Unsynchronized diversity is a weakness and it engenders disintegration and violence. However, understanding these

complex dynamics can help policymakers and communities manage cultural change more responsibly. The diverse cultures of the Northeast enrich India's socio-cultural fabric. Ensuring their continuity while embracing change is crucial for inclusive development and national integration.

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