

Advances in Asian Human-Environmental Research

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North-East India: Land, People and Economy

 Springer

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North-East India, comprising the seven contiguous states around Assam, the principal state of the region, is a relatively unknown, yet very fascinating region. The forest clad peripheral mountains, home to indigenous peoples like the Nagas, Mizos and the Khasis, the densely populated Brahmaputra valley with its lush green tea gardens and the golden rice fields, the moderately populated hill regions and plateaus, and the sparsely inhabited Himalayas, form a unique mosaic of natural and cultural landscapes and human interactions, with unparalleled diversity.

The book provides a glimpse into the region's past and gives a comprehensive picture of its physical environment, people, resources and its economy. The physical environment takes into account not only the structural base of the region, its physical characteristics and natural vegetation but also offers an impression of the region's biodiversity and the measures undertaken to preserve it. The people of the region, especially the indigenous population, inhabiting contrasting environments and speaking a variety of regional and local dialects, have received special attention, bringing into focus the role of migration that has influenced the traditional societies, for centuries. The book acquaints the readers with spatial distribution, life style and culture of the indigenous people, outlining the unique features of each tribe. The economy of the region, depending originally on primitive farming and cottage industries, like silkworm rearing, but now greatly transformed with the emergence of modern industries, power resources and expanding trade, is reviewed based on authentic data and actual field observations. The epilogue, the last chapter in the book, summarizes the authors' perception of the region and its future.

Prof. Dr. K.R. Dikshit is a former Professor of Geography of the University of Pune, India (now retired). He has written several books, such as "Geography of Gujarat" (1970), "Contributions to Indian Geography: Geomorphology" (1983), "Maharashtra in Maps" (1986) and "Environment, Forest Ecology and Man in the Western Ghats: The Case of Mahabaleshwar Plateau" (1993) as well as many research papers.

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Preface

For the authors of this book, stationed 2,000 km away from North-East India, to write a book on this region would appear at first sight a farfetched exercise. But, sometimes, unforeseen situations change the perspective of individuals and induce commitment to specific tasks. That is what happened with the authors of this book. The idea of a book on North-East India had its origin in a book-writing workshop, conducted at North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, in 2005. The workshop, attended among others, by the authors of this book, concluded with a plan to produce a book, on the North-East region of India, to which all the participants were to contribute. For some reason, the plan did not materialise, and consequently, the present authors, encouraged and assisted by the geography faculty of the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), undertook to write the book.

We started working on this book in all seriousness in the summer of 2006. During the last 6 years, we visited all the states of North-East India several times and spent considerable time in the field, observing landscape and meeting people, recording our observations and collecting numerical data wherever possible. The field work in North-East, though purposive, often appeared a kind of adventure to explore an unfamiliar terrain. It is not that the region, especially its eastern periphery, is an unknown territory, but some parts of the region are quite isolated and not absolutely risk-free. The towns are a safe zone, but away from the towns one is left to one's own devices. It was quite an adventure to cut across the entire length of mountainous Nagaland or a part of Mizoram or Manipur, all alone in a hired transport. The disturbed conditions, in some of the border states, have a daunting effect on field researchers, but the thrill of reaching certain points or being able to have a visual contact with the landscape of some important areas provides the required propelling energy. The communication with the local people, always through interlocutors who are able to communicate in English, was not always perfect, but carried enough clarity to draw conclusions. In the remote areas, consulting maps in the field, within the sight of local inhabitants, is not without risk. Whenever and wherever we started consulting the map by a roadside, some people arrived from nowhere and started looking at the map from over our shoulders out of curiosity, and finding strangers in their area, started interpreting our field work in their own way. It is best to avoid

consulting maps in the open by the roadside, lest one should be mistaken for a spy. Heights pose another problem. The town with the highest location in the region is Tawang (over 3,000 m ASL). For those not accustomed to this height, a prolonged stay in the region is tiring, unless one stays there long enough to get acclimatised to these heights. Transport is a problem not because hired vehicles are not available but because of the reluctance of transport operators to travel to the areas one would like to visit. It may be emphasised that not all district headquarters in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram have hotels and one has to depend on the circuit houses run by the State Governments for their own visitors, but are available to bona fide academics and researchers, if informed in advance.

The authors would like to make a mention of the recurring ordeal that every field researcher or an ordinary visitor intending to enter Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland or Mizoram has to face in getting the entry permit from the representatives of these states, stationed at Guwahati, Shillong or Delhi, to be able to enter these states. Such permission is required under an archaic Bengal Regulation of 1873, under which plains people were not permitted to cross a limit, known as the 'Inner Line' that separated these states from the plain area of Assam. That regulation, to the dismay of many of us, still persists. More frustrating is the fact that the 'Inner Line Permits' are usually valid only for a week and even mention the places one is to visit, thus restricting the movement of the visitors. Deviation from the prescribed route may attract penalty. One has to count oneself lucky to be able to obtain a permission to stay in these states for a fortnight at a stretch. It is like getting a visa for a foreign land. Notwithstanding these minor glitches, the authors have enjoyed travelling through the region. Another difficulty that a field researcher faces in the North-Eastern region of India is the fear of encountering local insurgent groups. There is no state in North-East India which doesn't have a dark corner known for the presence of insurgents. Field scientists are, as such, highly restrained in their choice of areas and time to visit these areas. Access to international borders with China and Myanmar is restricted. Intrastate movement in states other than Assam is not a smooth affair, and one has to be all the time on guard. Our experience of visiting a wayside restaurant in one of the states, where we were advised to hurry up as the area is infested with insurgents, reveals the state of security in the region. Despite all the inconvenience that an individual field researcher faces, contact with the landscape and the people of the region is a rewarding experience, enough to ignore the difficulties of field work undertaken by individuals without any logistic support.

During many of our field trips and visits to the towns and state capitals, we met people of all shades and opinions. They included scholars, university teachers, students and researchers and the faculty and research workers of several other institutes, the government officials and above all the people in the field, belonging to different professions or engaged in different trades. Contact and dialogue with simple peasants and the indigenous people, some of them openly informative while others secretive and clearly indifferent, opened for us the indigenous world of the North-East, without our being able to absorb all that was revealed to us.

The faculty and the research workers of different universities and the research institutes we met, during our visits to the region, wondered at our temerity to undertake

this arduous task of writing a book on a region with a difficult terrain, unsettled political situation and a society not quite at peace with itself. We persisted in the hope of gradually acquiring enough information on the region to be able to weave it in a meaningful text. In our effort we received support from many quarters which we have thankfully mentioned in 'Acknowledgements'. At Pune, our home base, we had the advantage of consulting several libraries that were open to us, the Jayakar Library of Pune University as well as the libraries of several research institutes, including the well-known Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics and the Deccan College. For several years, it was routine for us to visit these libraries as and when required to fill the gap in our data bank or to acquire any other specific information. Writing the book has been a gradual and prolonged affair. The book took 6 years to complete, after it was conceived and involved considerable field and library work.

Initially, the intent was to write a handy book keeping in view the needs of the university and college students; but as the work progressed, we realised the difficulty of limiting the discussion of the land and people of all the states to a predetermined length. Besides, it had a severe restraining effect on our interpretation of facts. The scope of this book was, therefore, enlarged to make it a reference book as much as a textbook. The book, with no technical jargon, can be read or consulted by anyone interested in North-East India. During the preparation of the manuscript, we occasionally visited the North-East region for lectures and seminars, and that provided us added opportunity to improve our understanding and knowledge of the region. We have adhered to an objective interpretation of the different aspects of society and economy, but interpretations have a way of appearing subjective depending on the perspective and the preconceived notions of the authors. We don't claim immunity from such a bias, but would like the readers to understand that plurality in interpretation is a common feature of the academic world and a conformist view is often unproductive.

This book, it must be understood, doesn't cover each and every aspect of the region. Certain aspects like political developments, border conflicts and strategic situations are not within the purview of this book and the text is confined, as is suggested by the title, to land, people and economy of the region.

We regret our ignorance of the languages of the region, especially Assamese. A knowledge of the language of the people would have better equipped us to interact with them and even promoted a sense of familiarity. Yet, we have honestly tried to understand the people of the North-East, their hopes and aspirations, their despair and sense of frustration and their anger finding expression in occasional revolt. Unfortunately, the society in North-East India, like many other societies, consists of several disparate groups. Each group has its own agenda and a different perspective for social, political and economic development that does not accord with its neighbour, giving rise to mutual distrust and conflict. We only hope that intergroup understanding develops and many of the apparently intractable knotty problems are resolved to the benefit of all the groups. The core problem is the lack of understanding of others' problems and points of view and hence absence of initiative in the right direction. The book refers to some of these problems but avoids sitting on judgement, accusing one group or the other.

This book was planned to be an average length text, but as it turns out, it has taken more space and more pages than expected. The photographs which, we think, are quite expressive and meaningful, while adding to the value to the book, have also added to the length of the volume.

We, the authors, shall feel fully awarded, if the readers find themselves better informed about the region or some aspects of its life and economy, after going through the entire or part of this book.

Pune, Maharashtra, India

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Acknowledgements

In writing this book, we have received assistance from many institutions and individuals. Their number is legion, and it is not possible to thank all of them individually. Yet, it would be sheer ingratitude to forget those who have extended valuable assistance during the course of our work. We would like to clarify that the assistance we received was not in financial terms and confined to goodwill gesture from universities and friends and extended to library facilities, guest house accommodation, and invitation to participation in seminars or deliver some lectures. These could facilitate our travel. The assistance we value greatly is the moral support and the academic input we received from the faculties of different universities of North-East India, especially the North-Eastern Hill University and its geography faculty. There is no institutional funding received or claimed by the authors for writing this book.

Among the institutions, the authors like to express their gratitude to the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, for all the support they received. We have lost count of the number of visits to this university, at their expense, as a member of some advisory or selection committee, as visiting professors and as participants in some seminars or for a rest in transit from one of the neighbouring states. In fact, we took it for granted that once we are in Shillong, our friends would take care of us. We are, indeed, grateful to the university. The geography faculty of the university always extended a friendly gesture to us. Prof. A.C. Mohapatra, Prof. Surendra Singh, Prof. B.S. Mipun and Prof. Debendra Nayak gave us unstinted help whenever needed. This extended to our stay on the beautiful campus of the university, transport facility, consultation and reference work and even help in field work. We were first taken to Cherrapunji by Dr. H.J. Syiemlieh and subsequently to some other places. This was one of our first contact with Meghalaya; we fondly remember and thankfully acknowledge his help. While staying on the campus of NEHU, the evening get-togethers, with some of our friends, were real unwinding sessions. These are etched in our memory. There, we met several other distinguished scholars like Prof. T.B. Subba. We must make a special mention of the generous help extended by Prof. Debendra Nayak during our visit to Majuli, the largest river island in the world. His doctoral student Ku Mayuri Das was of immense help. She and her

father Dr. Das, a professor of horticulture, at Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat, organised a visit to a village located around 25 km east of Jorhat city. Mayuri accompanied us to Majuli Island, helped us in communicating with the local residents and enlightened us with her own interpretation of the ecology and culture of the island. During another visit, this time to Garo Hills, especially to a Garo village, Prof. Nayak not only accompanied us but helped us understand the cultural landscape of the area. Prof. P.R. Tiwari of botany department was kind enough to send us the proceedings of the seminar, held in 1984, on 'Resources of North-East India', which we utilised for acquainting ourselves with the biotic resources of the North-Eastern region. We benefitted considerably from other writings of the university faculty, especially from the humanity side, and most crucially from geography. One of us had the benefit of discussion with Prof. Apurba K. Baruah of political science and Prof. P. Nayak of economics departments, both distinguished in their own fields. Prof. Subba's suggestion in finding appropriate reading material on the 'people of the region' was of great help. We are thankful to Dr. P. Nag, former Surveyor General of India, Director, NATMO, and presently the Vice Chancellor of Kashi Vidyapeeth University, Varanasi, for some helpful suggestions, especially on Tripura. While still working as the Director of NATMO, he sent me the much needed maps of the North-East region including some district planning maps, without insisting on prior payment. He also gave me useful suggestions about getting the clearance for the outline map of North-East India, from the Survey of India. To all these professors and others we interacted with, we say, 'Thank you, Sirs, we are really grateful to you'. We must recount an incident, an encounter I had with Prof. Mrinal Miri, a former Vice Chancellor of NEHU, in an evening get-together during the course of a 3-day seminar organised by geography department. I was then organising my ideas about the people of Assam. During the course of our discussion, I opened the topic of 'Miris', the second largest tribe in Assam, and the group from which Prof. Miri hailed. To my pleasant surprise and great appreciation, Prof. Miri gave a short discourse on Miris and their progressive outlook. Could there be a better source of learning than the one I found in him?

Other institutions from the North-East region which extended valuable help include University of Gauhati, Tripura University, Nagaland University, Manipur University, Rajeev Gandhi University of Arunachal Pradesh and Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development. We are especially thankful to Gauhati University. The cordiality and warmth we received at the university guest house and the department of geography of the university make us feel indebted to the university. We must make a special mention of Prof. A.S. Bhagabati, Prof. Barman, Prof. Bimal K. Kar and several others of geography department and Prof. D.C. Goswami of Environment Sciences, who ungrudgingly extended all the help they could. We are grateful to them. At Rajeev Gandhi University of Arunachal Pradesh, we had the privilege of meeting Dr. Sarma, the then Vice Chancellor of the university. Prof. R.C. Joshi, of geography department, guided us about the precautions we should take during our travel in Arunachal Pradesh. He made arrangements for our visit to

Bomdila and Tawang, where Mr. Leki Norbu, another geographer, welcomed us and went out of his way to organise our onward journey to Tawang. We would like to thank Prof. R.C. Joshi and Mr. Norbu for their sincere help. The visit to Nagaland was made meaningful courtesy Dr. Sangyu Yaden at Mokokchung and Dr. Zamir and his associates at Kohima. I greatly appreciate the assistance given by Dr. Yaden who organised visits to a couple of villages and introduced me to a few Ao Naga families whose warm hospitality I would ever cherish. In fact, while living in the university guest house, he was the link between me and the Naga world around me. At Kohima, we were helped by Prof. Zamir and his associates, a charming group of young geographers. They facilitated my visit to Khonoma, a village of Angami Nagas, about 25 km from Kohima, famous for its resistance to British occupation of their territory, in the late nineteenth century. In Manipur, Prof. Deva Singh extended a helping hand and organised a visit to Loktak Lake; though obstructed by some insurgent groups, we could not reach the lake shore.

The officials of the states of Nagaland and Manipur not only were, to my pleasant surprise, willing to provide me the required government publications and data but even offered to help in whatever possible ways they can. In Mizoram, Prof. P.R. Tiwari, professor of geology, was of great help and provided me with some of his publications and a photograph of landslide, reproduced in the present volume. The University of Tripura gave me shelter for a week, and the then Head of the department, Dr. Nibedita Das, was kind to let me consult some of the maps in the department. Dr. Suneel De and the late Dr. Sudepta De were also helpful in arranging my itinerary. At Guwahati, Prof. A.K. Bhagawati arranged a trip to an Assamese village that was interesting. I am thankful to his doctoral student Dr. Nityanand Deka and his parents who played the role of a very gracious host, invited us to an unforgettable delicious Assamese lunch and made us feel at home during our day long visit to the village.

While stationed at the guest house of Gauhati University, I visited most humanities departments for consultations. I would specifically like to thank Prof. Bezbarua of economics department, Prof. Piyam Goswami of History department and Prof. Goswami of Political Science department. All three professors not only tolerated my intrusion in their busy schedule but offered some helpful suggestions and gifted me some of their publications. In Guwahati, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development is a quiet place with a reasonably good library and a guest house. I had the privilege of visiting the Institute and staying at its guest house courtesy of its Director Dr. Indranee Dutta. The library has a good collection of literature on North-East India, and I benefitted greatly from my visit to this institute. The librarian and his staff were friendly and helpful. I would like to thank them. I am especially thankful to Prof. Dutta for arranging a visit to Prof. Amalendu Guha who warmly received me and narrated his experience of working at Pune at Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics in 1970s.

One person I always looked up to for advice and encouragement while at Guwahati is Prof. Mohd. Taher, former Professor of Geography, at Gauhati

through the section on the 'People of Manipur' very meticulously and offered some valuable suggestions including making some corrections. In cartographic work, we were helped by Mr. Abhinav Kurkute and Mr. Bhuvanesh Gomashe. We express our appreciation of the dedication with which Mr. Kurkute, holding a Masters degree in geography, helped us in preparing the maps. Besides these individuals, Prof. R.C. Tiwari, another student of mine with considerable interest in North-East India, was of immense help. He procured some valuable information for us from the century-old Bombay Asiatic Library. With his knowledge of North-East India that he had acquired over the years, he read through several chapters of the book and offered invaluable comments and suggestions. We are thankful to him for his support and willingness to help in whatever way he could. Lt. Gen. Nanavati, a gentleman, though not a part of academic world but deeply acquainted with North-East India, helped the authors greatly in understanding Nagaland. We thankfully acknowledge his help.

Some of my geographer friends, from across the country, who had an idea of our working for the book, kept encouraging us to complete this book. In this category, we include Prof. Gurudev Singh Gosal, Prof. Gopal Krishan, Prof. K. D. Sharma and Prof. Surya Kant of Chandigarh, Prof. Baleshwar Thakur and Dr. Anu Kapur of Delhi, Prof. D. N. Singh and Prof. Ravi Singh of Varanasi and Prof. Daksha Barai of Bangalore. Each one of them thought of the proposed book as an admirable adventure. My younger brother, a mathematics graduate, who spent his working life in the field of education and stationed a 1,000 km away, enquired about the book every time I talked to him and exhorted me to complete the work. But the most gentle reminder came from Richard, our son, who, stationed in Europe, kept track of the difficulties his elderly parents faced in writing the book and was ever ready with suggestions to overcome them. An economics graduate from a British University, his inquisitiveness and enquiry about the book as if he had kept a log was a source of inspiration to us. We consider him a partner in this book-writing enterprise, thank him for his interest and wait for his comments, as and when the book sees the light of the day.

Finally, we shall like to thank the following individuals, institutions and publishers for granting the permission to reproduce photos and figures of which they hold the copyright.

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University. There is an aura of scholarship around this gentleman; and he and Ms. Taher living in their small yet well-appointed cottage, close to the University campus, present an old-world charm, exuding warmth and hospitality. On a few occasions I visited him, I had some short yet meaningful discussion and benefitted greatly from his perspective. I very thankfully remember him and can never thank him enough. Another gentleman, relatively younger yet well informed, who enlightened me with his views is Shri Samudra Gupta Kashyap, Indian Express Correspondent at Guwahati, possessing a wide sweep of knowledge of North-East India. I relished each piece he wrote on the region ranging from 'Small Tea Planters' to 'Brahmaputra Floods'. He also helped us in securing some photographs of 'Brahmaputra in Flood'. His gentle approach and enlightened views impressed us. We thank him for not only extending help but also a warm welcome one of us received at his residence by the husband-wife duo. Both Shri and Shrimati Kashyap have been students of English literature, the former taking to journalism and the latter taking a college teaching assignment after securing a Ph.D. in literature. Prof. G. Bahrenberg of Bremen University, Germany, accompanied us on our field work in Brahmaputra valley, Majuli Island and Garo Hills. It was a great assurance having him and Prof. D.K. Nayak of NEHU in our group, as both of them, with their field experience, helped us interpret the landscape correctly. To Prof. Bahrenberg we say, we shall always remember our journey across Brahmaputra to visit Majuli Island, where we subsisted on fat 'Bhim bananas' a local variety of banana with seeds, and our visit to a village located about 30 km from Jorhat. We learnt quite a bit from your curiosity in the field and hope you also benefitted from your visit to Brahmaputra valley and Garo Hills.

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through the section on the 'People of Manipur' very meticulously and offered some valuable suggestions including making some corrections. In cartographic work, we were helped by Mr. Abhinav Kurkute and Mr. Bhuvanesh Gomashe. We express our appreciation of the dedication with which Mr. Kurkute, holding a Masters degree in geography, helped us in preparing the maps. Besides these individuals, Prof. R.C. Tiwari, another student of mine with considerable interest in North-East India, was of immense help. He procured some valuable information for us from the century-old Bombay Asiatic Library. With his knowledge of North-East India that he had acquired over the years, he read through several chapters of the book and offered invaluable comments and suggestions. We are thankful to him for his support and willingness to help in whatever way he could. Lt. Gen. Nanavati, a gentleman, though not a part of academic world but deeply acquainted with North-East India, helped the authors greatly in understanding Nagaland. We thankfully acknowledge his help.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Abstract The present volume embarks on an exploration of North-East India, a region lying on the crossroads between India and Southeast Asia. As the title of the book suggests, it discusses the land of the region with all its physical attributes, the people of the region with their distribution, ethnic and cultural traits and the economy of the region in a historical as well contemporary context. Divided into 20 chapters – some long, some short and some unseemly long – the text starts with giving the readers a glimpse of the region's past and ends with evaluating the socio-economic achievements of the region. Since space and distribution are involved, the volume carries many illustrations, including maps and photographs that offer a visual spot contact with the region.

The part of the book titled 'The Land' looks at the structural base of the area, in a geological sense, the physical relief, the climate and the vegetation cover with a short note on the region's biodiversity. The readers may find in the appendix a list of wildlife sanctuaries and national parks, meant to save the precious natural heritage of the region. Subjected as the region is to frequent floods and seismic tremors, there is a brief analytical account of natural hazards. The indigenous people of the North-East region who account for 27 % of its population form the most tangled, yet most interesting, section of the book, and the important among them are discussed in brief showing their distribution on maps. Population and migration have claimed a large space in the book in view of perpetual problem of illegal immigration in the region, particularly Assam. Agriculture, industrial development and the importance of transport, in the region, have been evaluated objectively. The book concludes with an evaluation of the socio-economic achievements of the region and an epilogue, which broadly records the reflections of the authors on the region. The book is intended for scholars as well as others interested in the region. It is not a research monograph but a comprehensive text that provides information on different aspects of the region and different facets of the social life of its people.

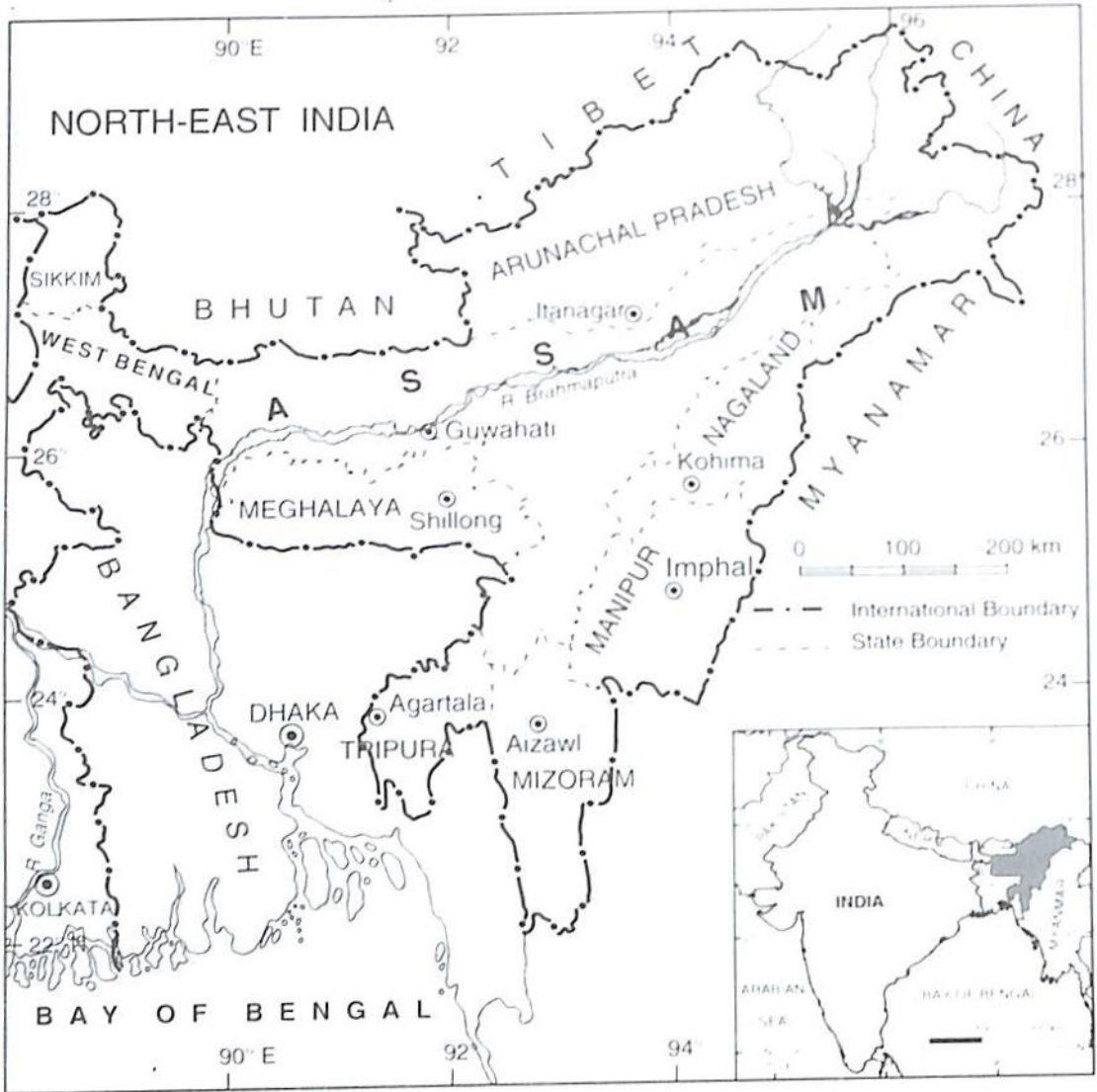


Fig. 1.1 Outline map of North-East India, with constituent states and their capitals

The present volume, as the title suggests, discusses the land, the people and the economy of North-East India, a constellation of seven states, (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura). Lying between 22° and $29^{\circ}25'$ N. latitude and $89^{\circ}42'$ and $97^{\circ}25'$ E. longitude, the region is spread over an area of 255,083 km² and has a population of over 45,000,000 (forty-five million in 2011). Over two-thirds of the population live in Assam, the principal, the most ancient and the most populous state of the region. The region accounts for 7.75 % of the area and 3.7 % of the population of India (Fig. 1.1).

North-East India, known for centuries as Assam, the principal constituent unit of the region, was for long perceived as the land of magic and incantation, a by-product of Tantric Buddhism. Very early in history, it was known as Pragjyotish. Subsequently

around the sixth century AD, it came to be known as Kamarupa before it finally attained the present name of Assam in the fourteenth century. The fame of Assam's royalty, after Bhaskarvarman, the most illustrious king of Varman dynasty during the sixth century, and the lore of its people had hardly any echo beyond the neighbouring Bengal. The mighty Brahmaputra and the tropical dense forests, teeming with wildlife, rendered Assam least attractive and at the same time most impregnable. The advent of British rule opened the region and brought it closer to other parts of India and the world. The discovery of tea in Assam; the growth of tea plantations, owned largely by British companies; and the tea export from the region to the Western capitals made Assam famous for its tea. In fact, Assam tea became the most valued beverage in the Western world and Assam tea companies the most profitable ventures, and Assam came to be known by its trademark product 'the Assam tea'.

By introducing steam navigation on Brahmaputra and facilitating communication between Assam and Bengal and laying down railways to provide access to sea, the British rule brought Assam closer to the rest of India. From Assam as the focal point, the British expanded in the eastern frontier regions, enlarging the area of Assam province that included many tribal territories. Thus, Assam, as a British province in 1947, had a much larger area than what it had in the early nineteenth century when the British wrested it from the ruling Ahoms.

After 1947, the year of India's independence, several smaller states, notably Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram were carved out of the monolithic province of Assam. In addition, two princely states, viz. Manipur and Tripura, were merged into Indian Union and attained the status of full-fledged states. The North-East Frontier Area (NEFA), the land between the Himalayan watershed and the Brahmaputra, was also given the status of a state. Thus, seven states, including Assam, emerged in the region, popularly known as seven sisters. Together, these states constitute what is administratively recognised as North-East region of India. Though for the purpose of giving grants and other material assistance, the Government of India has clubbed Sikkim with other North-Eastern state of states, the Sikkim is not contiguous to any of the above states and has no close economic or cultural link with other states of the region. Hemmed in by Bhutan, West Bengal, Nepal and Tibet, its eastern boundary is at least 150 km west of Assam's border. Sikkim is, therefore, omitted from the ambit of North-East India.

Locationally, North-East India represents a transition between South and Southeast Asia, on the one hand, and between the eastern extremity of the Indo-Aryan linguistic and racial domain that extends across North India and the Mongoloid domain of East and Southeast Asia, on the other hand. Equally, the region represents the crossroads of Indo-Malayan, Indo-Chinese, Sino-Himalayan and East Asiatic flora. Besides, the Eastern Himalayas and the peripheral eastern mountains are labelled as one of the two biodiversity hotspots in India. Indeed, standing between South Asia and Southeast Asia, the region shares the characteristic features of both these regions.

The land of North-East India is a nature's museum. With 'blue hills and red rivers', the forest clad mountains rising in stages to the Great Himalaya heights, the

evergreen and semi-evergreen forests with a very high level of biodiversity, interspersed with clearings occupied by tribal habitats, are a plant explorer's delight. Added to this are the lush green tea plantations, soothing to an observer, where the British planters with their exclusive 'Planters Clubs', tennis courts and evening parties, with a host of native attendants in tow, ruled the roost. A visit to a large tea estate plantation reminds one of the lifestyle of tea planters during the British Raj. Abounding in wildlife, large mammals, like tigers and panthers, elephants and rhinos, with a large variety of reptiles, the region is home to some of the rare animals like the one-horned rhino. India's North-East is especially known for a large range of orchids, some of them very rare.

This land is largely inhabited by two groups of people: the indigenous people of the Mongoloid stock who, largely confined to the peripheral mountainous region, constitute about a quarter (27 %) of the total population of the region and the Indo-Aryan group living in the two alluvial valleys of Brahmaputra and Barak. While the indigenous people, distributed over 200 tribes, speak a Tibeto-Burman dialect, specific to each tribe, the people of the plains have a well-developed language, the Assamese, with its own grammar, and a literature, comparable to the best of any other Indo-Aryan group of languages. In fact, the state of Assam, the focal state of the region, occupying the Brahmaputra valley, with a population of over 30 million (31,169,272 in 2011), is the most developed part of the region. For centuries, it has experienced successive waves of immigration and the cultural impulses from the Gangetic valley and developed a society, which in its language, religious beliefs, family and social relationships and cultural practices is akin to the one in the North Indian plains. There has certainly been a cross-fertilisation of ideas and cultures, and in the process a society with a relatively syncretic culture has emerged.

A majority of the indigenous people, especially those in the peripheral mountainous areas, have embraced Christianity and the indigenous tribal culture is replaced with one based on Christian morality. The emergence of some of the states, viz., Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya, was the fulfilment of the aspirations of these groups to have a state of their own and manage their own affairs.

1.1 A Glimpse of Early Writings on the Region

Such a region as India's North-East, one could imagine, may not have attracted any serious research or writing on the region. This is not so. Besides the accounts contained in the chronicles of different ruling dynasties, and the writings of some Muslim historians who accompanied the invading armies, an abiding interest in understanding the region, its people and resources, was shown by the East India Company and its civil servants. North-East India also exercised great fascination on researchers of a different breed, notably those interested in anthropology and society. The pages of the 'Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal', after it was started

in 1785, are replete with reports and descriptions of all kinds. These related to historic ruins, inscriptions, some unique cultural practices or any other event that appeared unique and threw some light on the history, life and culture of the people. As early as 1804, when the East India Company was nowhere in Assam, Dr John Peter Wade (1805) wrote *Geographical Sketches of Assam* published in the Asiatic Annual Register. A far more comprehensive work, one of its kind, was William Robinson's book *A Descriptive Account of Assam, with a sketch of the Local Geography, and a Concise History of the Tea Plant of Assam: To Which Is Added a Short Account of Neighbouring Tribes, Exhibiting Their History, Manners, and Customs* published in 1841. Almost on the eve of the British dislodging the Ahoms and taking control of Assam's administration, they deputed Capt. Bedford and Lts Wilcox and Burlton to explore the Brahmaputra toward its source in 1825. Burlton surveyed the Brahmaputra as far as Sadiya, Bedford journeyed up the rivers Dihong and Dibong until he was stopped by wild frontier tribes and Wilcox made one journey beyond the frontier up the Brahmaputra and in another penetrated to the banks of Irrawaddy. The results of many of these surveys were combined by Capt. Pemberton in 1835 and Wilcox (1832).

The British *interest* in North-East India was phenomenal and stemmed not only from the exigency of knowing thoroughly the territory; they ruled, or were to rule. The two unique features of the North-East especially attracted them: one was the large population of indigenous tribes which evoked their curiosity and interest, and the other was the biodiversity of the region that attracted plant explorers like Francis Kingdon Ward. Ward visited Assam not once but several times, starting from 1926 and ending in 1950. As a plant explorer, he spent months together in the inhospitable jungles of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. His first visit to East Tibet was in 1926, and his last to Assam was in 1950. In fact, he was in Lohit valley when the great earthquake of 1950 occurred in Assam. The results of his exploration are published in many books and research papers. The most quoted of his books in relation to Assam are *The Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges* (1926), *Assam Adventure* (1941) and the *Plant Hunter in Manipur* (1952). Another great earth scientist, a geologist, who visited Assam in the mid-nineteenth century, was Sir Thomas Oldham. Oldham (1859), the first Head of the Geological Survey of India, made extensive traverses of Khasi Hills in 1851 and published his account under the title *On the Geological Structure of Parts of the Khasi Hills with Observations on Meteorology and Ethnology of That District* in 1854. Oldham stayed at Cherrapunji for five rainy months and recorded the rainfall with a pluviometer, besides recording temperature, pressure and humidity of the station.

Similarly, E. T. Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872), published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal, is an early standard publication on the tribes of the North-Eastern India. To take it further, Mackenzie A. (1884) wrote a *History of Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of North-East Frontier of Bengal*. The first 50 years of the twentieth century saw a flurry of publications by the officials and the civil servants of the British Government. The most significant of all the publications was the first ever written *History of Assam*

by Alexander E. Gait (1906), a text that is valuable even today. Shakespear, L.W. picked up the thread from Mackenzie, took the studies of frontiers further and wrote *A History of Upper Assam, Upper Burma and North-East Frontiers* in 1914. The last in the series of the history of frontiers was the *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam from 1883 to 1941* written by Sir Robert Reid (1942). This was the last of the history works by the officials of the British Government. Added to these, and not less significant, are the research monographs on individual tribes. In this context the contributions of J. H. Hutton (1921a, b), J. P. Mills and von Fürer-Haimendorf could be mentioned. The first two were working as Deputy Commissioner in Naga Hills district, but von Fürer-Haimendorf arrived in Nagaland as an anthropologist. In this category are included the published studies of Angami and Sema Nagas by J. H. Hutton in 1921; the study of Ao, Rengma and Lotha Nagas by Mills (1922, 1926, 1937); and the study of Konyaks published under the title *The Naked Nagas* by Fürer-Haimendorf (1939). This is just to suggest that North-East India figured quite prominently in the British scheme of things and the knowledge of this region was very vital to them.

The departure of the British from India ushered in the era of expansion of education in India, and North-East India saw the establishment of a number of colleges, universities and research institutions. During the last 60 years, scholars from a variety of fields in the North-East are not only engaged in researches relating to different aspects of nature, land and society but have published works of merit in arts, science and other aspects of the region. A large number of university teachers are involved in editing and writing books on themes ranging from the history, culture and civilisation of Assam to political instability and insurgencies. Most of these publications are thematic, discussing a single aspect in the complex regional problems. Economy, security, history, social welfare, folklore and literature – all form interesting areas of publication. Some of these publications are referred to in the present text.

1.2 Organisation of the Text and Content of the Book

1.2.1 Organisation of the Present Text

The present volume is a tad different in that it carries a holistic perspective on the land, people and economy of the region. It doesn't, nor was there ever an intention to, drift into the unfamiliar terrain of literature or regional and local politics. Depending on the demand of each chapter, the authors have discussed the contemporary physical, cultural and economic landscapes of the region without adhering to any pre-established theoretical framework. Similarly, while discussing the people, their spatial distribution is emphasised together with the economic activities, mode of living and some of their principal cultural traits.

The text of the book is divided into five parts, the historical outline, the land, the people, the economy and the future, each containing one or several chapters. Thus, there are 20 chapters, some short and some long. The themes, as signified by each chapter, are discussed in a contemporary frame, without sacrificing the historical perspective, based on the conviction that the cultural landscapes carry the imprint of their history as much as the influence of their physical and social environment.

The opening chapter 'North-East India Through the Ages' is intended to establish a continuity with the past and gives a glimpse of what has happened in the history of the region. Similarly, the book closes with an 'Epilogue' where the authors record their impression of the region, keeping in mind its past and the contemporary situation, and project their imagination about the region's future. Most of the chapters in the book have a moderate length; some are quite short, but the chapter – 'People of North-East India' – is inordinately long, long enough to test the patience of the readers. The authors, despite the awareness of this fact, could not prune its length. A discussion of the people of the North-East region of India involves taking stock of roughly two hundred tribes including subtribes. Even limiting the discussion of tribes to those having a population of over 20,000 doesn't simplify things. There are over 70 tribes with a population over 20,000 population. Besides, there are regional contexts and concerns, which cannot be sacrificed. A greater part of this chapter is devoted to the 'people of Assam'. The importance given to Assam signifies the crucial role that the state and its people play in the affairs of the entire region. Assam is the socio-economic and cultural core of the region. It acts as a balancing lever. It has, for long, experienced the interaction between the tribal and the nontribal people, learning from each other, and absorbing from each other elements of culture that suit them. Many of the sociocultural elements of the Assamese society are briefly recounted to strengthen our understanding of its structure and unique features.

The number of illustrations is kept to the minimum, keeping in view the length of the book and the wide readership that the book may attract. This may include university students and teachers, researchers and scholars in several disciplines, administrators and the general public. All these groups may not show as much enthusiasm for maps as perhaps some earth scientists, especially geographers.

1.2.2 The Content of the Book

Besides the three principal parts, the land, the people and the economy, there are some introductory chapters which acquaint the readers with the region's past. The book opens with a chapter titled *North-East India Through the Ages*. Similarly, to provide a background to the part on 'the People', a chapter entitled *Early Colonisation* is given as a prelude to enable the readers to appreciate the enormous variety in nomenclature and the present distribution of different groups. A brief

justification is given in the beginning of each of these chapters. A brief introduction to these chapters is given here.

To establish continuity with the past, the book begins with the region's historical antecedents and the changes the region has experienced through the ages, in the opening chapter, 'North-East India Through the Ages'. The unrecorded early history of Assam, based essentially on inscriptions, is symbolic of early eastward propagation of Indo-Aryan culture in Brahmaputra valley, from the Gangetic plain. A succession of royal dynasties, ruling before the thirteenth century, has left its imprint on the region in the form of temple ruins and a number of copper plates carrying grants and royal charters, at several places. The early dynasties, exemplified by Varman dynasty of which Bhaskarvarman was the most illustrious king, had adopted an Aryan culture and were worshippers of Shiva or Vishnu, the Hindu deities. Subsequent events of invasion, occupation of territories, propagation of cultures and the development of economies are recorded and better known through recorded history.

The history of Assam is replete with several short- and long-term occupations of the land by invaders, from the east as well as the west. The Ahoms, who ruled Assam for 600 years and after whom Assam is named, invaded and occupied the Brahmaputra valley in the early thirteenth century. They arrived from Shan plateau of Burma. For over four centuries (fourteenth to eighteenth), the ruling dynasties of Bengal, as much the generals of Delhi emperors, invaded the Brahmaputra valley time and again, established their rule for awhile and finally retreated. While much of western Assam remained turbulent, having witnessed a series of invasion and short tenure of foreign rule, the eastern part ruled by the Ahoms remained more or less stable, till they were dislodged by the British in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The principal dynasties which ruled Assam before the imposition of the British rule included the Ahoms ruling in eastern Assam; the Koches ruling for 200 years, from Cooch Bihar on Bengal border; and the Kacharis who ruled over the Dhansiri valley and the Cachar region of Assam. The history of the British rule and the events that took place during that period are well recorded. During the last 65 years, the period of an independent democratic India, North-East India has witnessed far too many political events to be included in the present text. The aspirations of many indigenous tribal groups, to have a state of their own, found expression in the creation of the existing seven states that constitute North-East India.

Like 'North-East India Through the Ages', another chapter, *Early Colonisation*, was considered necessary to understand the sequence of early occupation. Recent archaeological works by some of the academics, working in the region, have deciphered the imprint of early man in the region from the Neolithic period. The earliest immigrants and an understanding of their diffusion would help establishing a link between the successive waves of immigrants and the present social and ethnic groups in the region. A linguistic similarity has been the most significant criterion in understanding their spread, despite the distance and change in their faith and manner of living. In the closing pages of the book, there is yet another chapter,

Socio-economic Assessment of the Region, which besides being unconventional appears judgemental, which it is not. It is more or less a performance indicator on a scale of progress, as seen in India or in other states of the region. This, the authors believe, gives an idea of the pace of development and the extent of achievement or the lack of it. After all, one would always like to know the state of welfare of the people. The objective of this chapter is to provide some hints on the socio-economic standing of the region.

All other chapters are factual, sometimes with some simplified technical details, as in the case of *Geological Structure* that provides the base for all the subaerial and diastrophic forces to work on, to fashion a physical landscape. A round up of what to find in the book follows.

1.2.3 *The Land*

The structural base of the region is formed of two contrasting sets of rocks. Leaving the Arunachal Himalayas and the Meghalaya plateau which have crystalline rocks, much of the North-East India is formed of the Tertiary rocks, ranging in age from 2 to 60 million years. Even the alluvial valleys of Brahmaputra and Barak rest over a thick pile of Tertiary sediments, deposited on the crystalline basement. The movement of Indian plate to the north and North-East, underthrusting the Tibetan and the Burmese plates, has subjected the region to a variety of compressional or tensional movements, throwing the region into a number of folds and thrusts and, thus, bringing into existence mountain ranges and synclinal valleys. The eastern peripheral mountainous system of the region, covering the states of Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, and a series of north-south trending hills of Tripura have resulted from such movements. The Arunachal Himalayas are the eastern continuation of the great Himalaya range, where underthrusting of the Indian plate started about 50 million years ago during early Tertiary and still continues, giving rise to the mighty Himalayas. The median zone between the two major thrusts, the Naga-Disang thrust on the east and southeast and the main boundary thrust (MBT) on the outer limit of the Himalayas, was occupied by a sediment-filled Brahmaputra valley.

What appears today as the relief of the region is an expression of the lithology and structure of the area, subjected to tectonic movements, triggered by the collision of the continental plates. Subsequently or even concurrently, the subaerial forces have worked to create the present relief.

The physical landscape of the region is best described by comparing the region to an amphitheatre, in which the two east-west flowing main rivers, the Brahmaputra and Barak, are surrounded, and overlooked, by mountains and plateaus from the three sides, north, east and south. There is, besides, an alternate arrangement of four east-west aligned subparallel physical units: the 150-200 km wide high Himalayan zone in the north, followed by a 70 km wide Brahmaputra valley in the south, to be buttressed again in the south by Karbi-Anglong plateau and the Barail range and

finally the valley of east–west flowing river Barak. The Himalayas, rising north of the Brahmaputra plain, in a series of west–east aligned ranges, and forming the northern boundary of the region, attain a height of 7,000 m ASL. The Himalayan ranges have the most vital influence on the life and economy of the region. They not only cause heavy orographic rain but are the source of all the northern tributaries of Brahmaputra, which, running down on steep slopes, create a huge potential for the generation of hydroelectric power. The north–south trending Indo-Burma orographic chain, a reflection of the subduction of the Indian plate under the Burmese plate, forms the eastern boundary of the region and extends all the way south till the tip of Mizoram and beyond. The height of the region varies from 50 m ASL in lower Brahmaputra region to the Himalayan heights reaching 7,000 m ASL.

The region lying between 22° and 29°30' N, though not within the Tropics, enjoys a climate, almost similar to the one within the tropics. Ranging in altitude between 50 and 100 m ASL and enjoying monsoon rains varying in amount between 1,800 and 2,500 mm in the plains to 2,500–>10,000 mm in the hills, the region is the rainiest part of India, with high temperatures in summer and a high relative humidity during the monsoons. This climatic environment has generated a kind of vegetation that ranges from tropical evergreen at lower levels to conifers in the higher Himalayan zone. The physical landscape of the region can be summarised by the two linear plains, one developed by the Brahmaputra and the other by the river Barak, surrounded by a girdle of forest clad mountains which form the habitat of a large variety of wildlife that includes, among others, elephants, tigers and one-horned rhino and all kinds of aquatic and avian fauna. Besides providing a glimpse of some salient facts about the biodiversity in the region, which claims the status a biological hotspot, the measures initiated to preserve the biodiversity and protect wildlife are discussed in a short section on region's biodiversity.

1.2.4 The People

The part devoted to the *People of North-East India* is the longest. As mentioned in subsequent paragraphs, the region has a large number of complex social and ethnic groups. Illustrating this complexity has taken large space. Despite the length of this chapter, the authors are not sure if they have succeeded in providing some idea of the people of the region.

This unique theatre of nature, once in its pristine glory, has been gradually colonised and transformed into a cultural landscape, a mosaic of traditional and modern cultures, juxtaposed to each other. The earliest colonisers of this land were the Neolithic people, in all probability of Mongoloid stock. In fact, the Mongoloid people were firmly established in this region, at least several thousand years ago. A culture of better agricultural methods, a grammatically refined literary language and a better organisation of territory, people and administration arrived in the valley from the Gangetic plain, later. This region also witnessed an early migration of

people and some ruling dynasties which transplanted an Indo-Aryan cultural in the valley. Successive waves of immigration and invasion produced a mass of humanity in which multiple racial and ethnic stocks were fused to produce an Assamese language, an Assamese culture and an Assamese cultural landscape.

The contemporary society of the North-East region has two major strands of ethnicity and culture. One is the Mongoloid stock, largely represented by the tribal population of the region, and the other is the dominant Indo-Aryan group of people, the Assamese, the Bengalis and myriad other immigrant Indo-Aryan groups. Even today, these tribal groups maintain their distinct identity, and the larger among them assert their distinctiveness. In the first group are included the tribes like Nagas, Mizos and the Khasis. While the tribal groups, regardless of numerical strength, have retained their cultural moorings, speaking their own dialects and practising their own rituals, the people of the plains have adopted a regional identity and are collectively known as Assamese, signifying a common bond of the land they inhabit and the language they speak.

The region has one of the largest concentrations of indigenous people who form around 27 % of its total population. Distributed over 200 odd tribal communities, none of them has a population of over two million. The three large tribal communities in the region are represented by the Nagas, the Khasis and the Mizos. Each of these has succeeded in carving out a state for itself, out of the parent state of Assam. The North-East region with a population of 45 million, in 2011, is divided into multiple sociocultural blocks, represented by some major tribal communities and Assam, the principal state of the region, with roughly 30 % of the area and over two-thirds of the total population of the region.

Assam is the principal state of the North-East with a millennium-old sociocultural tradition and an economy larger and more balanced than the rest. The principal tea-producing state of the region and rich in minerals like petroleum, Assam has a streamlined administration. The population of Assam consists largely of Hindus and Muslims, unlike Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya where a large majority has embraced Christianity.

The North-East was once the most sparsely populated part of India. The population of the region has grown from around ten million in 1901 to 45 million in 2011, with a corresponding increase in the density of population from less than 40 persons per km² in 1901 to 147 in 2011. Assam, largely occupying Brahmaputra valley, and unlike other states of the North-East, has a much higher density of population that reaches over 300 persons per km², comparable to an overall density of India. There are, however, still large chunks of territory in the region, as Arunachal Pradesh, where the population density is around 15 persons per km². The region is not highly urbanised and Guwahati, the capital of Assam, is the only million-city in the region. A very important fact about the population of North-East India is the huge immigration of people, much of it illegal, from the neighbouring countries. A serious consequence of India's division in 1947 into two countries, India and Pakistan, is the uninterrupted illegal immigration from the neighbouring countries, principally East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. In fact, the single important element disturbing the

harmonious existence of Assamese society is the fear of immigration and the immigrants who increasingly influence the politics and the economy of the state. The border clashes, between the indigenous people and the immigrants, don't appear to be one odd incident and have turned into periodic disturbances. The possibility of immigration of people with an alien culture is a perpetual threat to the Assamese society. So immense has been the immigration, especially after 1971, that Assam revolted against the Union Government, accusing it not only of its failure to check this immigration but even of the latter's connivance at the illegal entry of Bangladeshis in Assam. Another consequence of illegal immigration and the perceived indifference of the Central Government is the emergence of a number of insurgent groups who advocate secession from India. The insurgency in the North-East of India, a recurring phenomenon, has done tremendous harm to the region and its overall development.

1.2.5 The Economy

Agriculture, the main occupation of the people, suffers from the inadequacy of cultivable land, though Assam with its two main alluvial plains, the Brahmaputra and the Barak, has more than one-third of its land under cultivation. The North-East is agriculturally a rice domain. Rice is the most important crop and staple food of the people. The hilly areas, largely inhabited by indigenous tribes, are still subjected to 'slash and burn' type of shifting cultivation, a practice that has damaging impact on the plant resources of the region. Its intensity, in recent years, has declined, and horticulture as an option is being promoted. Introduction of rubber as a commercial crop in Tripura and some other areas is proving a popular alternative, besides horticulture.

The discovery of petroleum and tea and their economic exploitation and the introduction of railways boosted the economic development of the region in the beginning of the last century. But after the initial take off, that remained confined to expanding tea plantation and exploiting petroleum and coal, no industrialisation that could make substantial difference to the economy and employment opportunity in the region took place. Assam tea and petroleum were the most lucrative commodities in the British trade, and the province had the pride of a place in British commercial interests. The state was industrially undeveloped during the period of British rule and remained so for decades, even as a state of democratic India. Recent efforts of the state, supported by the Union Government, have produced some results, and industrialisation is likely to be accelerated.

The economy of the region has expanded in recent years. A separate ministry for the development of the North-East region (DONER) is established at the level of the Union Government, and around 10 % of the Union budget is meant to be spent for the development project of the region. The resources that are awaiting development include, among other things, a huge water power potential in the region.

It is estimated that Arunachal rivers have the potential to generate 50,000 MW of power, that is, half the potential of the entire country. A terrain, quite suitable for horticulture, remains unutilised. So far, the public sector enterprises have concentrated on the exploration and exploitation of oil and gas and the refining of petroleum. The infrastructural development to connect and bring the most inaccessible areas – and there are many – closer to the centres of population and economic activities is under way.

The book closes with an 'Epilogue'. This is our reflection on the future of the region which we perceive rather optimistically to be bright. We genuinely foresee the emergence of a vibrant North-East India, in a span of a few decades, after its economic potentials are realised and social harmony returns to the region.

1.2.6 About the Maps

The North-East India, the outline of which, as given in this chapter, is authorised and approved by the Survey of India. While authorising the use of this outline map, Survey of India requires the following footnotes to be written in each map. Since this is impractical, they suggested to us to record these footnotes in the initial pages of the book. These footnotes, related to the outline map of North-East India (as given in this chapter), are as follows: (1) @Government of India, copyright 2013; (2) the responsibility for the correctness of the internal details rests with the author; (3) the territorial waters of India extend into the sea to a distance of twelve nautical miles measured from the appropriate baseline; (4) the interstate boundaries among Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Meghalaya shown on this map are as interpreted from the 'North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971' but have yet to be verified; (5) the external boundaries and coastlines of India agree with the record/master copy certified by the Survey of India; and (6) the spellings of the names in this map have been taken from various sources. The authors take complete responsibility to adhere to these instructions.

The foregoing paragraphs, we think, are enough of an introduction to the book and should give an idea about what the book is about. To our readers, we would like to say that North-East India is a very fascinating region, suffused with natural beauty, but riddled with disputes and controversies. Writing about the regions, as has been our experience, is a cautious enterprise if one wants to keep away from any controversy. Yet, the possibility of being accused of bias is always there. We, on our part, have tried to keep away from being judgemental unless we are convinced of the facts and their interpretation offered. Yet, there may have crept in the book some sentences or statements which may appear ambiguous or convey meanings that don't conform to the views of the some readers. In a large volume of this size, the possibility of some repetitions cannot be ruled out, but these have to be seen contextually. We have acknowledged the sources of data, information or

interpretation that are used in the text as a support base for discussion. Omissions and mistakes, if any, are inadvertent and would be corrected at the earliest available opportunity.

We value greatly opinions of the readers and particularly of those who are well acquainted with India's North-East. To that end, comments are welcome from all quarters and especially from the scholars of North-East India. The authors shall consider the objective of writing this book fully realised, if the students, teachers and researchers and other scholars find the text worth consulting and reading and the book finds a place on the shelves of most of the libraries in the country, especially in North-East India (Fig. 1.2).

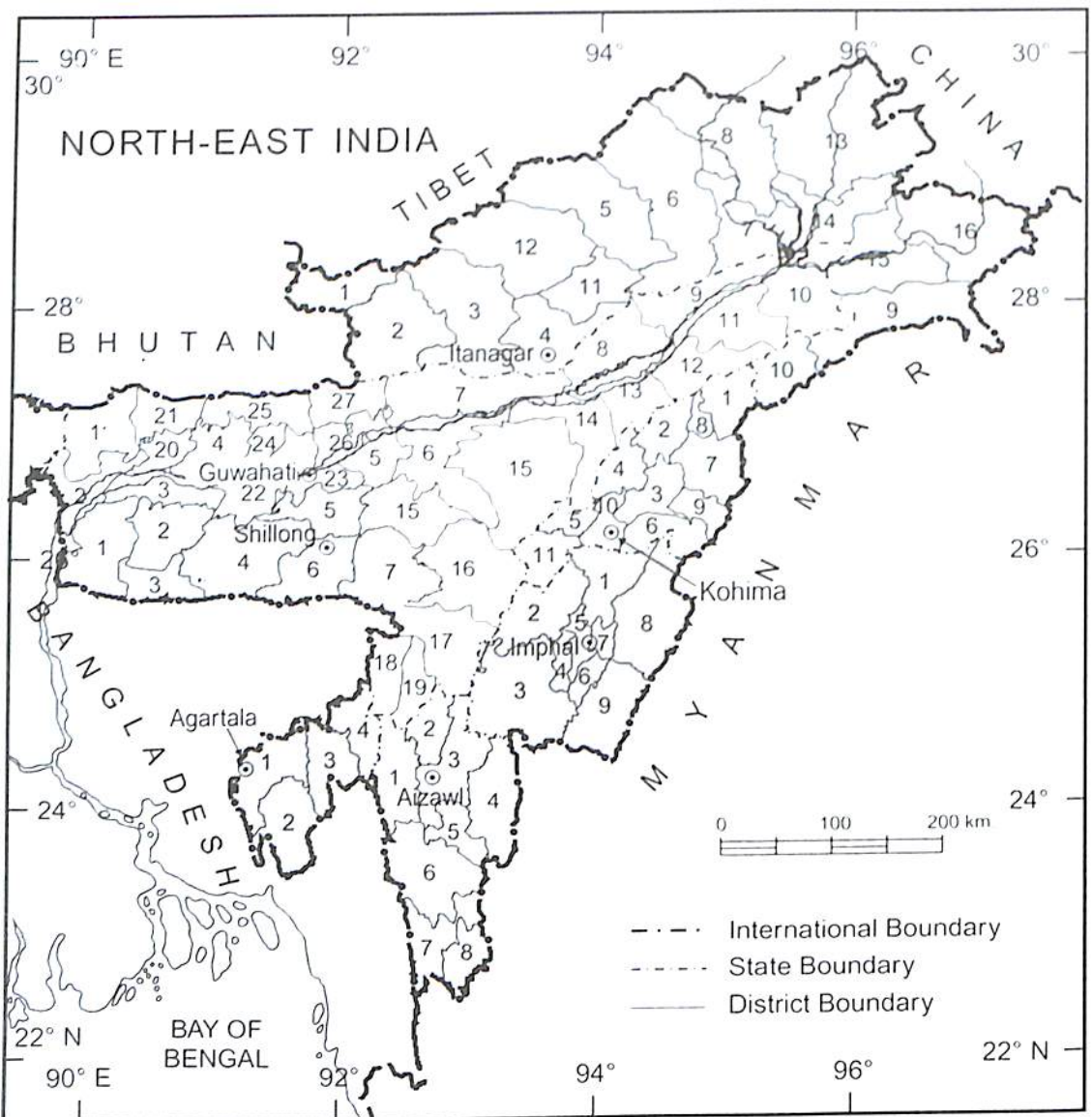


Fig. 1.2 North-East India: states and districts. The numbers, appearing in the map, conform to the numbers assigned to the districts in the appended list

Arunachal Pradesh	Mizoram	Tripura
1. Tawang	1. Mamit	1. West Tripura
2. West Kameng	2. Kolasib	2. South Tripura
3. Balem (East Kameng)	3. Aizawl	3. Dhalai
4. Papum Pare	4. Champhai	4. North Tripura
5. Upper Subansiri	5. Serchip	
6. West Siang	6. Lunglei	
7. East Siang	7. Lawngtlai	
8. Upper Siang	8. Saiha	
9. Changlang		
10. Tirap	Nagaland	
11. Lower Subansiri	1. Mon	
12. Kurung Kumey	2. Mokokchung	
13. Dibang Valley	3. Zunheboto	
14. Lower Dibang Valley	4. Wokha	
15. Lohit	5. Dimapur	
16. Anjaw	6. Phek	
Assam	7. Tuensang	
1. Kokrajhar	8. Longleng	
2. Dhubri	9. Kiphire	
3. Goalpara	10. Kohima	
4. Barpeta	11. Peren	
5. Morigaon		
6. Nagaon		
7. Sonitpur		
8. Lakhimpur		
9. Dhemaji		
10. Tinsukia		
11. Dibrugarh		
12. Sivasagar		
13. Jorhat		
14. Golaghat		
15. Karbi-Anglong		
16. Dima Hasao		
17. Cachar		
18. Karimganj		
19. Haflakandi		
20. Bongaigaon		
21. Chirang		
22. Kamrup		
23. Kamrup Metropolitan		
24. Nalbari		
25. Baksa		
26. Darrang		
27. Udalguri		

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Part I
Historical Outline

Chapter 2

North-East India Through the Ages

Abstract For long, North-East India was a terra incognita firstly because of its physical isolation but no less because of its being in a remote corner of India far away from the early ruling dynasties which were confined largely to the Ganga plain. The earliest known kingdom in the region, known as Pragjyotish/Kamarupa, was established by the Varman dynasty in the third century AD. The most illustrious ruler of Assam in the pre-Ahom period was Bhaskarvarman (AD 594–650). Through a succession of dynasties, viz. Varman, Salastambha, Pala and Vaidyadeva, all of which have left their imprint on the region, the region passed in the hands of Ahoms who came to Assam in the early thirteenth century, from the Shan region of Myanmar, settled in the eastern part of Brahmaputra valley, and ruled over Assam for 600 years. During the medieval period, Assam developed as a distinct politico-cultural unit. The region suffered repeated invasions from the Nawabs of Bengal, but none of the invaders could establish a permanent foothold in the region. Some of them even suffered defeat and had to retreat. Besides the Ahoms who ruled over much of the Brahmaputra valley, there were other dynasties who ruled in other parts of the region. The Koches ruled over western Assam during the sixteenth century. The 600-year reign of Ahoms came to an end in the early nineteenth century with the arrival of the British who dislodged the Ahoms and occupied the Assamese territory. The British, besides establishing their rule and administering Assam, expanded the Assamese territory, before they quit India in 1947.

The state of Assam, in a series of administrative manoeuvres, was divided into four states, viz. Assam, the parent state, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. Besides, the two princely states of Tripura and Manipur were merged in the Indian Union and came into existence as independent states. Another territory, North-East Frontier states, sandwiched between the Himalayas and the Brahmaputra, was made into a full-fledged state of Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, the seven states of North-East India came into existence. These seven states constitute North-East India. Together, these states have an area of 255,000 km² and a population of 45 million.

North-East India, as we know today, is very different from what it was centuries ago. The region was not a part of India politically and not even administratively till the British unified it with the rest of India, with their conquest in the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was a land beyond Bengal to the North-East, a mountainous territory drained by the mighty Brahmaputra, known initially as Pragjyotish and later as Kamarupa, a name which remained in vogue for over thousand years before it was substituted by 'Assam'. The latter name was given to the region after the Ahom dynasty, which ruled over the region for 600 years, from the early thirteenth century till the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The British made Assam a province of India and expanded it by annexing a large part of the eastern hilly tribal territory. After India attained independence in 1947, Assam became a state of the Indian Union, subsequently expanded and divided into a number of minor states. Thus, North-East India today, a conglomerate of seven states, popularly known as seven sisters, is far removed from the early days of Pragjyotish or medieval Kamarupa.

During the first millennium of the Christian era, the region, not as fully explored as the present one, and confined largely to the lower region of what is present-day Assam, was ruled by a succession of dynasties of mixed descent who had adopted the Indo-Aryan cultural ethos and traditions and followed the religious practices and rituals enjoined by the Vedic tradition and emulated the royalty in the Gangetic plain. This was a period before the arrival of Islamic order in India and the establishment of Muslim rule. A broad genealogy of the ruling dynasties and the rulers of Kamarupa is traced by historians, starting from the seventh century AD till the arrival of the British, yet the history of Assam till the twelfth century is known only in broad outlines as gleaned from copper plates and inscriptions, as will be briefly discussed in the sequel.

2.1 North-East India, a Terra Incognita till the Sixth Century AD

There was hardly anything known about the North-East of India, or even present Assam, till about the beginning of the seventh century, a period marked by flourishing kingdoms in other parts of the Indian subcontinent. It is mainly because of the geographical isolation of the region, but in no small measure also the result of a slow spatial progression of the Indo-Aryan culture that moved gradually from the mid-Gangetic plain eastward. The movement of the Indo-Aryan people eastward, marked by the emergence of several kingdoms even before Christ, was slow to reach the Brahmaputra valley. They, as a rule, followed the Gangetic axial route and several of their kingdoms, strung along the river, included the fertile alluvial plain of Ganga and its tributaries. The easternmost extension of these kingdoms terminated in Gauda kingdom corresponding with the northern and western part of the present-day Bengal as well as part of eastern Bengal.

The Ganga–Brahmaputra divide, beyond 88° E, presented a formidable barrier for further eastward movement. It was marked by a number of Himalayan rivers, flowing almost north–south and frequently changing their course, and they needed to be crossed, one after the other, for further eastward movement. This had a restraining impact on the extension of Indo-Aryan regime further east. Secondly, a progressively increasing higher rainfall; flood-prone rivers especially Brahmaputra and its tributaries; and a forest clad marshy plain of Assam, teeming with wildlife and a none-too-healthy climate were also a serious deterrent to the conquest of the region. It may be emphasised that the physiographic conditions of Assam often played a deterministic role in the rout of many invading armies. During the early Christian era before the sixth century, there was no dearth of land in the mid-Gangetic valley and the unsettled and uncultivated land hardly exercised any attraction. It was only the expansionist spirit of the adventurous warrior kings, which often prompted them to invade a neighbouring territory.

2.1.1 Physical Isolation

India's North-East is as much a physical divide between the two continental drainage systems, one leading to the Pacific and the other to the Indian ocean, as it is between the two cultures, the Indo-Aryan and the Mongoloid. The Eastern Himalayas, attaining a height of 6,000 m, bend southward and merge into the Indo-Burma orographic chain, effectively separating the East and Southeast Asian region from South Asia. For millennia, this region has been one of the most inaccessible regions of the world. The chain of mountains – the Patkai, Naga and Lushai Hills from north to south in that order – dissected, forest covered and experiencing heavy rainfall and sparsely inhabited by tribal people, some of them head hunters, with hardly any contact with the rest of the world, did not induce any significant immigration. Any east–west movement was virtually blocked. North-East India remained for long a nature preserve, a sanctuary for biological evolution and perhaps a rare niche for homeostasis.

The two river valleys – Surma and Brahmaputra – with their annual floods inundating large tract of their narrow plains, associated with frequently occurring *bhils* cut-offs, wild animals and forests, did not present a picture of a hospitable terrain nor did it exercise an economic attraction based on its agricultural potential. Thus, establishment of a well-organised kingdom in the early part of the Christian era, as much as the development even after the region came to be administered, was retarded.