

# Landscaping Tribal Culture: Towards A Cultural Landscape Approach in North-East India

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**Abstract:** North-east India, being the home of numerous indigenous groups of people, always plays a point of attraction for anthropologists and social scientists all over the world. The land with magnificent natural beauty and cultural heritage also form an ideal destination for a large number of tourists every year. As any natural landscape, when modified by culture group, forms a particular cultural landscape; thus North-east India provides a special type of cultural landscape if we look through the lenses of cultures and traditions of numerous indigenous people of this region. The human-nature interaction gets a new vista in this part of India. The present paper deals with some facts regarding human and nature relationships which take part among various groups of tribal people in ecological setting of North-east India to formulate a cultural landscape approach based on these human-nature interactions.

**Key Words:-** Natural landscape, Tribes, Human-nature interaction, Cultural landscape

## I. INTRODUCTION

The north eastern region is surrounded by foreign territories like Bhutan, Tibet, China, Burma, and Bangladesh on the north, south and the east except for a long narrow passage in the west which connects the region with West Bengal and the rest of India. North East India occupies an area of 255,000 sq km. This largely hilly area comprises about 7 percent landmass of India with the Bramhaputra valley of Assam is the most extensive plain area in North-East India. This part of the country occupies a distinguishing place due to its geographical, historical, social, cultural and political features. The region comprises seven states- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. This is the homeland of a large number of ethnic groups who came from different directions at different historical times. These groups belong to different racial stocks, speak different languages and have varied socio-cultural traditions. This region has been occupied by different streams of the Mongoloid people who came from the north and the east at different periods. The Australoids came to this region before the coming of the Mongoloids who partially or fully absorbed the Australoid strains.

## II. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The present research will focus on two objectives - 1] to describe the distribution of major tribes of North –East India and 2] to find out the extent of linguistic parameter in framing a specific cultural landscape of this region.

The study is mainly based on secondary sources like journals, books and Census Reports of India. These sources are utilized for detailed analytical construct. Number of people in different racial groups and people speaking a particular language has been calculated in percentage to get a clear picture of proportion of people under each category.

## *North East India- Demographic Importance*

This is the homeland of a large number of ethnic groups. There are wide diversity in racial stock, language, socio-cultural traditions. The region plays an important transition zone between India and its neighbouring countries like China, Tibet, Burma and Bangladesh. The physical features of different tribes of North-East India suggest that the Australoid elements are present in some of the tribes. It has been stated that long ago one section of the Indo-Mongoloids spread over the whole of the Bramhaputra valley, North Bengal and East Bengal (now Bangladesh) giving rise to various tribal groups inhabiting this region. The diverse Mongoloid groups in course of time settled down in different habitats and ecological settings of the north-eastern region crystallized into distinct entities which are referred to as tribes today.

## III. CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

In 1925, Carl Sauer introduced the term 'cultural landscape' in an essay on 'The Morphology of Landscape'. He introduced the term to express the ways of life in a place. In his words, "the cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result" (Sauer, 1925). In this way, he distinguished between natural and social aspects of an area or a landscape and it may be introduced that landscapes are formed or natural land area and shaped by human being with their history and culture.

In other words, landscape of any form cannot arise spontaneously rather it is the result of cultural beliefs and values of those who create the landscape. Thus, the landscape refers to the look and style of the area or land which developed through the socio-cultural interrelationship with nature. Hence, landscape does not only refers to mere the house types, tree and road arrangements rather the socio-cultural 'significance' of makeup. Such a bridge between nature and culture recognises that the present landscape is the product of long-term and complex relationships between human being and surrounding environment.

*Major Tribes in North East States*

**Assam-** In Assam, 23 tribal communities constituting about 12.28% of State’s population are recorded during 2001 census. Among them important are- Boro or Kachari, Karbi, Koch-Rajbanshi, Mishing, Mishimi, Rabha and so on. Assam may broadly be divided into Plain tribes and Hill tribes. The Plain tribes mainly inhabit the plain areas of the state and the hill tribes are mainly concentrated in the hilly areas. Boro Kacharis constitute the largest tribal group in Assam constituting about 35 percent of the state’s tribal population.

**Arunachal Pradesh** – This state is India’s land of rising sun as it is situated on the easternmost tip of the country. Arunachal Pradesh shares its international boundary with Bhutan, China and Burma and national border with Assam and Nagaland. Most of its population is of Asiatic origin and shows physical affinities with the people of Tibet and Myanmar hill region. A large number of tribes and subtribes are found in Arunachal Pradesh. Important among them are Adis, Nishi or Dafla, Sulung, Sherdukpen, Aka, Apatani, Monpa etc.

**Meghalaya** - The state of Meghalaya has 7 administrative districts namely West Garo Hills, East Garo Hills, West Khasi Hills, East Khasi Hills, Ri-Bhoi, South Garo Hills and the Jaintia Hills. The bulk of the people belong to three major tribal groups – the Khasis, the Garos, and the Syntengs (Pnars) who are more popularly known as the Jaintias. The term Khasi is applied to the group of matrilineal and Mon-Khmer speaking people who presently inhabit the East and the West Khasi Hills and the Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya. The Garo is a term used by others to refer to a particular group of people who are mainly concentrated in the Garo hills. The term Jaintia is a generic term which includes the Pnars/Synteng and other sub groups. While another section of the population is made up of such other tribal groups as the Rabhas, the Hajongs, the Tiwas and the Koches, there is also a sizeable number of non-tribals scattered in different parts of the state.

Table: Important Tribal Groups in North East States

State- Assam	
Tribal groups	Population in Percentage
Boro, Borokachari	35.06
Miri	17.52
Kachari, Lalung	11.22
Karbi	11.08
Rabha	7.63
Garo	3.50
State- Manipur	
Tribal groups	Population in Percentage
Thadou	18.49
Poumai&Kacha Naga	16.58

Tangkhum	15.30
Kabui	8.90
Mao	8.00
Vaiphei& Zou	5.76
Paite	4.76
State- Nagaland	
Tribal groups	Population in Percentage
Naga	97.47
Kuki	1.10
Garo, Kachari, Mikir	0.91
State- Tripura	
Tribal groups	Population in Percentage
Tripura, Tripuri, Tippera	50.76
Riang	16.13
Jamatia	7.14
Chakma	6.84
State- Sikkim	
Tribal groups	Population in Percentage
Bhutia (including Chumbipa, Dophthapa, Dukpa, Kagatey, Sherpa, Tibetan, Tromopa, Yolmo)	33.73
Limboo	26.02
Lepcha	20.79
Tamang	18.27
State- Mizoram	
Tribal groups	Population in Percentage
Mizo (Lushai) tribes	70.93
Chakma	9.36
Pawi	4.96
Lakher	4.14
Hmar	2.86
Paite	2.24
State- Arunachal Pradesh	
Tribal groups	Population in Percentage
Nyishi	26.25
Galong	8.33
Adi	7.13
Tagin	6.61
Wancho	5.98

Apatani	4.60
Mishmi, Idu, Taroan	3.38
Nocte	3.64

Source: Census, 2011

**Mizoram** - Mizoram has the most variegated hilly terrain in the eastern part of India. Till 1972, it was just another district of Assam and known as the Lushai Hills. There are, more or less, six to seven parallel ranges of hills from north to south, tending to be higher in the middle of the territory. The valleys are hot and wet during the summer, but up in the hills it is pleasant and cool. The Mizo are divided into several tribes – the Lusei, Pawis, Paites, Raltes, Pangs, Hmars etc. The present population is composed of 15 broadly divided communities. Groups like the Ngente, Kiangte, Chawngthu, Rentlhei, Zowngte and Khwhring are no longer considered as separate groups having identities of their own. The communities that still maintain a sort of identity of their own are Lusei, Hmar, Paite, Pawi, Mara, Bawm, Tlau, Ralte, Pang, Hualngo and the Baite.

**Manipur** - Manipur was made an integral part of the Indian Union in 1949. Bounded by the states of Nagaland, Assam and Mizoram, Manipur shares an international boundary on the east with Myanmar. The Manipur valley was remote, inaccessible and existing in isolation and yet migratory movements of Aryans from the west and Mongoloid people from south-east-Asia were evident through the terrain of the valley. Manipur is inhabited by 29 communities of which 22 are Scheduled Tribes, (75.86 per cent as against the national average of 13.72 per cent). There are 3 distinct human conglomerates in this state. The Meiti as a population group also includes the Loi, Pangal, Yaithibi and Thanga. The other older group is the Naga consisting of the Kabui, Kacha, Tangkhul, Mao, Maram, Marim and Taroa. The third group is the Kuki-Chin which includes the Gangte, Hmar, Paite, Thadou, Vaiphei, Zou, Aimol, Chiru, Koiring, Kom, Anal, Chote, Lamgang, Koirao, Thangal, Moyan and Monsang. The two distinct parts of Manipur valley are dominated by the Meitei, Pangal, Loi and Yaithibi and immigrant groups like the Nepali and the hill area is inhabited by the Naga group and the other by the Kuki Chin groups.

**Nagaland** - The state consists of eight administrative districts, inhabited by 16 major tribes along with other subtribes. Each village of Nagaland has its own definitive population, area and administration. Not surprisingly Nagaland is sometimes described as a conglomeration of 'village republics'. Each tribe is distinct in character from the other in terms of customs, language and dress. The state is predominately inhabited by the Naga communities and hence it forms a single cultural region generally definable by a common culture and linguistic traditions. Nagaland comprises the former Naga districts of Assam and the former Tuensang frontier divisions. Nagaland lies to the south of Jorhat in Assam, and is home to myriad tribes and sub tribes. Nagaland is divided into eight main districts of Mokokchung, Tuensang,

Mon, Wokha, Phek Zunheboto, Kohima and Dimapur. The predominant Naga tribes are the Angami, Ao, Chakesang, Chang, Chir, Konyak, Lotha, Khiamngam, Makware, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Sema, Yimchunger and the Zeliang.

**Tripura** - It is an ancient land, which has ever been a melting pot for tribal and non-tribal cultures producing an exotic cultural synthesis. The capital of Tripura, Agartala, is surrounded on three sides by hills. Tripura, a land-locked state, lies to the south-west of Assam, and to the east of Bangladesh. This is a land of transition; satisfying compromise between the old order and the new; a fusion of styles and cultures of the hills and plains. Today, Tripura is largely dominated by Bengali community which forms a major chunk of population, in spite of having a sizeable population of Scheduled Tribes. The tribals, with a rich and varied culture, belong mainly to the Reang, Chakma, Deobarma, Halam and Usai communities.

#### IV. LANGUAGE – A PART OF CULTURE

A cultural landscape is a set of ideas and practices embedded in a place. The 'ideas and practices' are what make it cultural; the 'place' is what makes it a landscape. It is commonly accepted that language is a part of culture. Language simultaneously reflects culture, and is influenced and shaped by it. Generally two main linguistic sub-families exist in North East India among its tribal population, which are Austro-Asiatic group and Tibeto-Burman Group. Khasi is the only group belonging to Austro-Asiatic group in this region, whereas the Tibeto-Burman family is widespread and represented by the Adi, Apatani, Boro, Chutia, Deuri, Garo, Hajong, Kuki, Maran, Mech, Rabha, Tripuri etc. The other groups are the Tai groups and the Indo-Aryan speakers.

The members of a society can communicate through language which implies a system of mutually comprehensible verbal symbols. In anthropological terms as a part of culture, language is also a historically consequent system of cognizant and sub-conscious patterns shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society. At the same time, language as an exclusive component of communication can act in part as a code, in part as a symbolic organization of experience which is interwoven with other cultural subsystems. Furthermore, language performs a singular role in the process by which individuals and groups identify themselves and are defined simultaneously by others. The rise of nationalism is openly linked with question of linguistic status and linguistic boundaries (Friedrich P, 1962). Linguistic uniformity as one of the quantifiable characteristics of nationalism (Karl Deutsch, 1966).

This family of language is mainly spoken in the northern and north east regions of India. Since the languages spoken by this family of tribes is also similar to that of the language spoken in Myanmar (earlier Burma) hence the name of the said set of language is Tibeto-Burman. Nine languages of the Bodo sub-family of the Tibeto-Burman language family constitute the largest group of tribal languages in the country.

LANGUAGES	Bodo, Garo, Tripuri, Mikir, Rabha, Dimasa, Lalung, Deori and Koch, Lushai/Mizo, Thado and Paite
SPOKEN GROUP	Brahmaputra valley, North Cachar Hills in Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura
SEPARATE BRANCHES	Tibeto Himalayan, Assam Burmese and North Assam

These languages have some common attributes (Bhimkanta Boruah, 2003)

The members of these languages are members of particular tribe and geographical region of the tribe. Some of these languages are principally vocal as the words are monosyllabic. Hence the structure of language becomes very specific, the presence of the said form is not familiar to the mainstream population.

There is an extensive multiplicity of theoretical approaches to analyse ethnolinguistic identity perspective, multicultural attitudes and interactions. In cross-cultural research, Berry's (Berry, 1990; Berry & Sam, 1997) model of cultural relations in multicultural societies has been broadly used to understand the consequences of cultural and linguistic contact. It helps to expand the concept of acculturative attitudes of individuals as well as communities in to preserve and protect individual identity, culture, language and way of life (Berry, 2003).

#### V. LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY: STATE LEVEL ANALYSIS

**Assam** -Assam is populated by several tribes that co-exist peacefully, each unique in its traditions, culture, dress and exotic ways of life. Most tribes have their own language although Assamese is the principal language of the state. The Rabhas who live in the forest villages have retained their original Rabha dialect to a great extent. The Rabha dialect belongs to Boro group of languages of Assam-Burmese branch.

**Arunachal Pradesh** –The vast majority of languages indigenous to modern-day Arunachal Pradesh belong to the Paleao-Mongoloid with Tibeto-Burman groups of language family. It is the home to at least 30 and possibly as many as 50 distinct languages in addition to innumerable dialects and subdialects thereof. The language of Aka tribe belongs to the Tibeto- Burman family. The most commonly spoken languages in Arunachal Pradesh are Dafla, Mishri, Adi Gallong, Monpa, Aka, Nocte, Khamti, Nishi, Wancho and Tagin.

**Mizoram** -Mizo is the official language and the most widely used language for verbal interactions, but English, being important for education, administration, formalities and governance, is widely used. The Duhlian dialect, also known as the Lusei, was the first language of Mizoram and has come to be known as the Mizo language. The language is mixed with other dialects like the Hmar, Mara, Lai, Paite, Gangte, etc.

**Manipur** –There are 29 different dialects spoken in Manipur. Important dialects are:

- Zou, dialect of the zou/zomi people.
- Poula, dialect of the Poumai Naga
- Thadou, dialect of Thadou people, the second language in the state after Meiteilon during the Colonial Period.
- Vaiphei, dialect of Vajphei people.
- Tangkhul, dialect of Tangkhul people
- Paite, dialect of Paite people
- Hmar, dialect of Hmar people
- Mao, dialect of Mao people
- Lianglad, dialect of Liangmai Naga People
- Maring, dialect of Maring Naga/Maring, MaringKhoibu, MaringNarum-saibol people
- Maram, dialect of Maram Naga
- Gangte, dialect of Gangte people etc.

**Meghalaya**- Khasi is a branch of the Mon-Khmer family of the Austroasiatic stock. Garo language has a close affinity with the Koch and Boro languages. Garo, spoken by the majority of the population, is spoken in many dialects such as Abeng or Ambeng, Atong, Akawe (or Awe), Matchi Dual, Chibok, ChisakMegam or Lyngngam, Ruga, Gara-Ganching and Matabeng. Several other languages are spoken in Meghalaya. For example, Pnar language is spoken by many people of the Jaintia hills. The language is related to the Khasi language. The Pnar, or Jaintia, language is spoken, along with Khasi, by the Khyntiam, Bhoi, Pnar and War tribal groups. Another example is the Biante language spoken by many people of the Saipung Constituency Jaintia Hills. The language is closely related to the Biante of Dima Hasao, Assam. Nepali is found in almost all parts of the state.

**Nagaland** –All the major Naga tribes have their own language. Naga languages in the Tibeto-Burman family is divided into three groups – the western sub-group, the central sub-group and the eastern sub-group. The western sub-group comprises Angami, Sema, Rengma and Chakhesang languages; The central sub-group include Ao, Lotha and Phom languages; While the eastern sub-groups is made up of among others, Chang and Konyak languages.

**Tripura** –The Tripuri people mainly speak various dialects called Kokborok, the standard dialect of the Debbarma tribe spoken around Agartala and the second official language of Tripura. There are estimated to be 1,000,000 speakers of the various dialects of Tripuri in Tripura, others being in Mizoram & Assam in India and Sylhet and Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh.

Therefore, it can be said that, the North East India may be consider as the living museum of human being, which has diverse population speaking different languages, adopting different socio-economic-cultural lifestyles and professing divergent religious faiths.

#### *Towards a Cultural Landscape in North East India*

It is necessary to connect the landscape ecology with cultural attributes of local human population as indigenous people do not draw clear distinction between 'natural' and 'cultural'



aspects of life. It helps to A landscape gradient approach seems helpful to facilitate this integration. Landscape gradients can be constructed in a number of different ways. Two general approaches are relevant to the case in point. A) The first is the landscape modification gradient approach, which reflects the increasing human influences on the structure and function of landscapes like natural landscape, managed landscape, cultivated, suburban and urban landscapes and so on. B) The second is the regenerative capacities based approach which classifies landscapes according to their energy inputs and self-organizing and regenerative capacities through the photosynthetic conversion of solar energy. As for example, solar powered semi-natural and managed landscapes, intensive agro-industrial landscapes, technosphere landscapes etc. Based on such landscape gradients, different cultural landscapes can be compared, and our understanding of landscape sustainability can be improved.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The North-East India is a region with high linguistic diversity and blessed with diverse ethnic and cultural characteristics. To preserve the cultural attributes, varieties of plans and strategies have been adopted at State and Central level. In 2001, a separate department was set up to fulfil the development needs of the region. This Department of North-East Region (DoNER) upgraded to Ministry of Development of N E Region (MDoNER) in 2004. This Ministry was also responsible for policy change of the region through planning execution and monitoring of various development plans for the region. The North-Eastern Vision 2020 along with North-Eastern Council in 2008- all set out for the holistic development of the North East Region. Besides, the Asian Development Bank in the areas of urban renewal and road construction helped in development of regional economies along with flow of capital, culture, information and people's

ideas. Such a flow of culture and ideas influence the holistic development of the region maintaining its own identity and cultural diversity.

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