

North East India



REGIONAL INFORMATION



General Info

North East India - diversity brought to life

North East India is one of the few gems of the world that has remained relatively undiscovered. Distinct from mainland India, it has managed to retain many of its ancient traditions, and an underdeveloped tourist industry means you can take a glance into another world. Come discover the magic of North East India.

People



Religion

Religion in India is among the world's most ancient and varied. The Indian subcontinent spawned Vedic religions, which compose one of the world's three major groups of religions. Vedic religion gave rise to what is now the oldest extant and third-largest religion, Hinduism, and almost 900 million of its one billion adherents live in the Republic of India. The other major Dharmic religions, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, each have millions of Indian followers. The Abrahamic religions of Islam and Christianity, spread by missionary activity and conquest over many centuries, are the two largest non-native religions.

More than four-fifths of Indians practice Hinduism. Islam, practised by around one-sixth of the population, is the most prevalent minority religion. Christianity and Sikhism are each practised by around 2% of Indians. About 1.1% practise Buddhism and 0.4% practise Jainism. Zoroastrianism and Judaism have a centuries-long history in India; each has several thousand Indian adherents.

More than nine-tenths of Indians state that religion plays a key role in their lives. Though inter-religious marriage is not widely practiced, Indians are generally tolerant of other religions and retain a secular outlook.

In the North East there is a huge diversity of religious beliefs and the religious breakdown of each of these three states are quite different from each other. Arunachal Pradesh's main religions are Buddhism (40%), Hinduism (25%), Animist (20%) and Christian (15%). Meghalaya's population however is more than 70% Christian, with Hindu and Animist beliefs making up 10-15% each, and less than 5% Muslim. Assam on the other hand has a majority of Hindus (65%) with 31% Muslim, and less than 4% Christian. See the chart below.



Religion	Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Meghalaya
Christian	15%	3.7%	70.3%
Animist	20%	-	11.5%
Hindu	25%	65%	13.3%
Muslim	-	31%	4.3%
Buddhist	40%	-	-

Culture

Arunachal Pradesh

The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh can be broadly divided into three cultural groups on the basis of their socio-religious backgrounds. The Monpas and Sherdukpens of Twang and West Kemeng districts follow the lamastic tradition of Mahayana Buddhism. Noted for their religious beliefs, the villages of these communities have highly decorated 'Gompas', symmetrical fortifications for spiritual learning. Though largely agriculturists, many of these people are also pastoral and breed herds of yak and mountain sheep. Culturally similar are the Membas and Khambas, who live in the high mountains along the northern borders. Khamptis and Singphos inhabit the eastern part of the State and are Buddhists of the Hinayana sect. They are believed to have migrated from Thailand and Burma long ago.

A second group of tribes, living largely in Central Arunachal Pradesh, include the Adi, the warlike Nishi, the Tagin, the Apatani and many more. These tribes come from Tibeto-Burman stock predominantly and practice Donyi-Polo (sun and moon) worship, though in recent times Christianity has made quite some headway here. Donyi-Polo religious rituals largely coincide with the phases of agricultural cycles and involve animal sacrifice and the invocation of natural deities. The Adis and Apatanis extensively practice wet-rice cultivation, though the Apatanis have specialised over the centuries by harvesting two crops of fish with each crop of rice. Apatani women were considered the most beautiful of the region and during more turbulent times many Apatani women were 'decorated' with facial tattoos and enormous nose plugs to make them less appealing, particularly to marauding Nishi warriors. Today only woman in their 50s and above sport such adornments.

The third group comprises the Noctes and the Wanchos in the Tirap district, adjoining Nagaland. These are hardy people known for their structured village society in which the hereditary village chief still plays a vital role. The Noctes also practice an elementary form of Vaishnavism, a tradition of Hinduism where the God Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi are the main focus of worship.

Assam

Society in Assam is not just a conglomeration of diverse racial and cultural elements but a composite whole arising out of the integration and synthesis of all of them. Indeed, Assam has been a curious melting pot into which have gone the Aryan and

non-Aryan, the tribal and the non-tribal, the indigenous and the exotic, making for a delightful and wonderfully mixed society.



The majority of the population in the plains is made up of Hindus, speaking the Aryan Assamese language. But the Aryan racial strain is prominent only in the upper castes, most of the other castes are of the Mongoloid stock. The Satras (seat of the religious head Satradhikar) and Namghars (houses of names or prayer halls) plays an important role in the life of the average Assamese and have acted as cultural as well as religious institutions.

As in Arunachal Pradesh the majority of the tribal groups in Assam belong to the Tibeto-Burmese family. The colourful people of Assam consist of Bodo-Kacharis (who since 2004 have been granted partial autonomy over a region adjacent to Bhutan), Rabha and Hajongs, Tiwas (Ialung), Misings, Sonowal Kacharis, Deuris, Karbis, Dimasa Kacharis, Rengma Naga, Zemi Naga, Kukis and the Hmars.

In Assam, the line between the tribal and the non-tribal is very thin and the so-called non-tribal Assamese Hindu society retains many elements, which are patently 'tribal' by orthodox Hindu standards. Castes are not strictly occupation linked, and there are very few caste-based disabilities.

Before the British arrived in Assam, it was already a very diverse place. The British further added to the demographic canvas by bringing labour from Central India to work in the tea fields. The majority of tea workers in Assam today are their direct descendants! Since India's independence further waves of immigration have further diversified the culture of the state.

Meghalaya

Meghalaya is dominated by two ethnic groups 'the Khasi (49%) and the Garo (34%). The stone monoliths that can be seen around the state have been erected by the Khasi to commemorate tribal chieftains. Khasi women often wear traditional dress consisting of a checked cotton jai^nkrysha pinafore with a tartan shawl. Although Christian, it is not unusual for the Khasi to sacrifice chickens and goats at festivals to ensure the return of the sun, and chewing betel (the Khasi call it 'kwai') is considered a semi-religious habit. Bullfights occur in many Khasi village fairs, however in their version of bullfighting, called yaturmasi, it's one bull against another.

Traditionally Animist-Hindu, more than 80% of Garo are now Christian. However witch doctors are still common and Wangala dances are held in order to insure a good harvest. The Garos are one of the few remaining matrilineal societies in the world. Individuals take their clan titles from their mothers and the youngest daughter (nakma) inherits the property from her mother. Sons leave the parents' house at puberty, and are trained in the village bachelor dormitory (nokpante). After getting married, the man lives in his wife's house.

Population

India's population at the last census was 1,027,015,247 and it is expected to pass China and become the world's most populous country by 2035. The combined



population of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Meghalaya is 30,052,714, just under 3% of the total population of India. Assam alone has 26,655,528 people, meaning Meghalaya has a mere 2,306,069, and Arunachal Pradesh (with a land mass more or less the equivalent of Austria) has a paltry 1,091,117 (around 0.1% of India's total).

Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh are among the most sparsely populated states in India, with population densities of 13.11 (the lowest of all Indian States) and 103.38 per square kilometre respectively; the country wide average is 324.85, and there is a whopping 903.37 in neighbouring West Bengal.

The biggest cities in each region are the capitals 'Guwahati in Assam (808,021), Shillong in Meghalaya (260,000) and Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh (34,970). Technically Dispur is the capital of Assam but today it is a suburb of Guwahati.

Language

The languages of India primarily belong to two major linguistic families, Indo-European (whose branch Indo-Aryan is spoken by about 70% of the population) and Dravidian (spoken by about 22%). Other languages spoken in India come mainly from the Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman linguistic families, as well as a few language isolates.

Individual mother tongues in India number several hundred, making it linguistically one of the most diverse countries in the world. The North East itself is considered to be one of the most linguistically diverse regions in Asia, and therefore the world. The most common languages in Assam are Assamese, Bengali and Bodo. The most commonly heard tongues in Meghalayaspeak Khasi, Garo, Assamese, English and Bengali. In Arunachal Pradesh dozens of tribal languages compete alongside Assamese and some Bengali. A high level of bilingualism exists in the region.

Food & Drink in North East India

The food in North East India has many influences - from mainland India, Tibet, China and Burma. Assamese dishes tend to be more similar to mainland Indian dishes than other parts of the North East though not as spicy. However there are exceptions! Locals eat a lot of duck, chicken and pork, as well as several vegetarian dishes but fish is the regional favourite (as in neighbouring Bangladesh) and many types of local fish are available as well as fish from further afield. Rice is the main staple, though chapatti and paratha, Indian flat breads, are also popular. The Assamese use less vegetable oil in their cooking than most of India. Instead they use mustard oil, a healthier alternative or occasionally ghee. You will also find a wide range of pithas, or cakes.

In Arunachal Pradesh the food varies according to region with the Western part strongly influenced by Tibetan and Chinese food. Noodles are popular here, as is thukpa, a thin soup of vegetables and meat. The most popular choice is momos, dumplings filled with meat or vegetables. Bamboo shoot is also commonly used in cooking here. In other parts of Arunachal you will find meat and rice dishes, often cooked in bamboo.

In Meghalaya you typically find meat and rice dishes with pork the mainstay, though in Shillong and some places beyond it is possible to find Western and other styles of cuisine with pizza a particular favourite amongst locals.



A traditional drink in all three states is delicious fermented rice beer (known locally as apong, kyat and host of other names) and it is used extensively during festivals and religious ceremonies. Many places also produce stronger spirits distilled from millet or rice.

Environment



Geography

Arunachal Pradesh covers 83,743 sq. kms. (roughly the size of Austria) and is characterised by mountains. Much of the state is covered by the Himalayas, further parts by the Patkai. Its highest mountain is Gorichen Peak at over 6,700 metres. Arunachal Pradesh is bordered by Bhutan, Tibet, Myanmar and the Indian states of Assam and Nagaland, making it a unique blend of cultures and peoples. It is also an area disputed by China, which calls it South Tibet and does not recognise the McMahon line that separates the two countries. It has only been a full state of India since 1987.

Assam covers 78,438 sq. kms. (roughly the size of the Czech Republic) and is bordered by West Bengal and six of the Indian States collectively known as the "Seven Sisters" Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Manipur (Assam itself is the 7th Sister) as well as Bhutan and Bangladesh. The river Brahmaputra, which is as wide as 10km in places, cuts the state in two. Majuli, the world's largest river island, covering 577 km² and with a culture all of its own, is found in the Brahmaputra near Jorhat.

Meghalaya covers 22,429 sq. kms. (roughly half the size of Denmark) and shares a border with Assam to the North and West and with Bangladesh to the South and East. The state is also known as "Meghalaya Plateau" because it consists mainly of Archean rock formations. Due to its heavy rainfall it is characterised by rivers, gorges and waterfalls.



Flora & Fauna

Owing to a very sparse population and an underdeveloped infrastructure, much of the wilderness in Arunachal Pradesh is in pristine condition, making it an ideal habitat for an abundance of creatures and plant life. It is home to an enormous variety of orchids - five hundred of the thousand different types that exist in India - many unique to this state. Elephants, tigers, jungle cats, leopards and white Gibbons can also be found in Arunachal Pradesh. There are several types of birds that are also indigenous to the area including the Great Indian Hornbill and the Wood Duck.

Assam has a huge range of biodiversity supported by a number of tropical rain forests, bamboo forests, riverine grasslands and wetland eco-systems. Kaziranga and Manas National Parks are both World Heritage sites and home to a great variety of wildlife including two thirds of the World's population of unicorn Rhino. Tigers, Gibbons and several extremely rare species are also found in Assam. You might even be lucky enough to spot a blind Gangetic dolphin in the Brahmaputra with January typically the best time to see them.

Meghalaya is home to about 300 varieties of orchid, the insect eating Pitcher plant and a whole host of other botanical specimens. The fauna of this state includes elephants, tigers, bears, jackals, leopards, golden cats, binturong, slow loris, capped langurs, golden langurs, and a variety of birdlife including the king vulture, the crested serpent eagle, partridges, teals, snipe and quail.

Climate

The climate of the three states is quite diverse, reflecting their differing geographical make-ups.

In Arunachal Pradesh climate varies enormously according to altitude. Areas in the highest altitudes enjoy an alpine climate, in the Middle Himalayas the climate is temperate, and at a level closer to sea-level, a sub-tropical climate is experienced. Most rain in the region falls between May and September.

Assam is a temperate region characterised by hot summers (temperatures can reach as high as 40°C), followed by heavy rains (peaking in June), and mild winters.

Meghalaya is more moderate in terms of temperature (temperatures rarely exceed 30°C), but extremely wet in the rainy season (from May to September), resulting in some spectacular year round waterfalls. In fact Meghalaya boasts two places, Cherapunjee (Sohra) and Mawsynram, that vie with each other for the title of the wettest place on earth.

History & Economy



History

Ancient and Medieval History and Literary References

Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya have had a long and diverse history with evidence of human settlement from all periods of the Stone Age.

Ancient Assam was known as Kamarupa and was ruled by many powerful dynasties such as the Koch Dynasty, the Varman Dynasty and the Xalostombho Dynasty. The earliest references to Arunachal Pradesh are found in the Indian epics Mahabharata, Ramayana and other Vedic legends. For more on these see <http://www.nriol.com/indianparents/indian-epics.asp>. Several famous characters are said to be from the region, such as Princess Rukmini, King Bhismaka and Lord Parashuram. The Dibang Valley lying to the extreme north of the state, close to the Chinese border, was the ancient kingdom of Bhismaka, where Rukmini was given in marriage to Lord Krishna. Malinithan, a small town South of Along, has strong historical links with Lord Krishna and his consort Rukmini.

The first ancestors of the tribal groups in Arunachal Pradesh migrated from Tibet during the prehistoric period, and were joined by Thai-Burmese counterparts later. Except for the northwestern parts of the state, little is known about the history of Arunachal Pradesh. The earliest recorded history is from Ahom chronicles dating from the 16th century. The 400-year-old Tawang monastery in the Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh provides important historical evidence of the Buddhist tribal peoples. Historically, the area had a close relationship with Tibetan people and Tibetan culture; indeed the sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso, was born in Tawang.

It was two later kingdoms, however, that left the biggest impact in the region. The Ahoms, a Thai group, ruled eastern Assam for nearly 600 years (1228'1826), continuously fighting off attacks from Moghul India. The Koch, a Tibeto-Burmese tribe, established sovereignty in Central and Eastern Assam in 1510, and later extended this to Western Assam and northern Bengal. The Koch kingdom later split into two - the Western kingdom became a vassal of the Moghuls whereas the Eastern kingdom became an Ahom satellite state. The locals pronounce 'Ahom' as 'Asom', which later became the state's name, 'Assam'.



British Rule

Despite numerous invasions from the west, mostly by Muslim rulers, no western power ruled Assam until the arrival of the British around 1920. However by 1821 Ahom palace intrigue, and political turmoil due to the Moamoria rebellion, aided the expansionist Burmese ruler of Ava to invade Assam and install a puppet king. However this meant that they were now neighbours to Britain's expanding empire. The First Anglo-Burmese War ensued, in which Assam was one of the main sectors. The war ended with the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, which saw the East India Company take control of Lower Assam. Purander Singh was installed as king of an independent Upper Assam in 1833. This arrangement only lasted until 1838 when the British annexed most of independent Assam, annexing the remainder the following year.

Modern day Arunachal Pradesh came under the loose control of Tibet and Bhutan, especially in the Northern areas. The remaining parts of the state, especially those bordering Myanmar, came under the control of the Ahom and the Assamese until its annexation by the British in 1858.

Under British administration, modern day Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya were a part of the British Indian province, the Bengal Presidency, with its capital at Calcutta. Between 1905-1912, a separate province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was established, comprising modern-day Assam and some regions of Bengal, with Dhaka as the capital.

In the early 1900s, many people from present-day Bangladesh migrated to Assam, chiefly for economic reasons. The British tea planters also imported labour from Central India to work in the estates adding to the demographic canvas, and laying the foundations for future discontent amongst the indigenous peoples. In 1913-14 the British administrator, Sir Henry McMahon, drew up the 550 mile (890 km) McMahon Line - the border between British India and Tibet - during the Simla Conference, as Britain sought to advance its line of control and establish buffer zones around its colony in South Asia. The Tibetan and British representatives at the conference agreed to the line, which ceded Tawang and other Tibetan areas to British India; however the Chinese representative refused to accept the line. The Chinese position since then has been that since China was sovereign over Tibet, the line was invalid without Chinese agreement. However, not until 1937 did the Survey of India publish a map showing it as the official boundary.

Post-British Empire / Indian Independence

The end of World War II brought about the independence of India in 1947. Until last minute negotiations Assam was set to join East Bengal (which later became Bangladesh). Instead it joined India (although it lost the predominantly Muslim area of Sylhet). As a result of the split Assam was flooded with Bengalis who preferred not to live in a Muslim country. This caused a lot of resentment and ethnic tensions in the region spiralled.

By November 1950 India unilaterally declared the McMahon Line to be the boundary with Tibet, and in 1951 forced the Tibetan administration out of the Tawang area, despite protests by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Tibet.



The issue was quiet during the next decade or so of cordial Sino-Indian relations, but erupted again during the Sino-Indian War of 1962. The cause of the escalation into war is still disputed, though it centred around territorial claims to Aksai Chin (a border region between India, China and Pakistan, currently administered by China but claimed by India) and Arunachal Pradesh.

During the war, the PRC captured most of modern day Arunachal Pradesh, then known as the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA). However, China soon declared victory and voluntarily withdrew back to the McMahon Line. The war resulted in the termination of barter trade with Tibet, though more recently the state government has shown signs it is keen to see it resumed.

Trouble in the region, however, was not limited to external factors. In the early 1960s, the Government of Assam passed legislation making the use of Assamese language compulsory. The legislation resulted in widespread protest in the Barak Valley, particularly amongst the Bengali speaking majority. Coming under intense pressure, the Government withdrew the legislation, in the hope of calming the increasingly strained relations between the various ethnic groups in the area.

Economic indexes of the region, which were above average before independence, began to fall compared to the rest of the country. This sparked the formation of separatist and militant groups, mostly along ethnic lines, and demands for autonomy and sovereignty grew. In the 1960s Nagaland separated from Assam and was accorded full statehood. The 1970s saw a sharpening of ethnic conflict in Assam, partly due to a second wave of Bengalis fleeing the war in Bangladesh. Meghalaya was formed by carving out two districts from Assam: the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and the Garo Hills. Semi-autonomous status was granted to the state in 1970, and then on 21 January 1972 full statehood was accorded. Manipur also achieved statehood in 1972. Assam's capital was moved from Shillong in present Meghalaya to Dispur, now swallowed up by an ever-expanding Guwahati.

In the 1980s the Brahmaputra valley saw a six-year Assam Agitation that began non-violently but became increasingly violent. The movement tried to force the government to identify and deport foreigners who, the natives maintained, were illegally inundating the land from neighbouring Bangladesh and changing the demographics, gradually pushing the indigenous Assamese into a minority. The agitation ended after an accord between its leaders and the Union Government. Most of the accord remains unimplemented however, causing simmering discontent. In 1987 both Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram were granted full statehood.

In November 1990, the Government of India deployed the Indian army to the region in order to counter the growth of armed secessionist groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). The Indian army deployment has now been institutionalised under a 'Unified Command'.

More recently there have been more positive developments in the region including a thaw in relations with China, and the increased stability that resulted has benefited the region. The government in Delhi has also taken a renewed interest in the region, investing more resources and promoting the area for industry and tourism. Arunachal

Pradesh was opened to tourists as recently as 1998, finally granting the outside world access to one of the last unspoilt paradises on the planet (though special permits are required in addition to an Indian visa).



Economy

Arunachal Pradesh's economy is dominated by agriculture. Among the crops grown here are rice, maize, millet, wheat, pulses, sugarcane, ginger and oilseeds. Arunachal Pradesh has close to 61,000 square kilometres of forests, and forest products are the next most significant sector of the economy. Arunachal is also ideal for horticulture and fruit orchards. Its major industries are sawmills, plywood (though these two trades however have been stopped by law), rice mills, fruit preservation units and handloom handicrafts.

Agriculture accounts for a third of Assam's income and more than two thirds of its employment. Tea is its main crop (and export) but rice, rapeseed, mustard, potato, banana, papaya and turmeric are also grown. Tea and petroleum refineries are among a small number of industries in Assam. Poor infrastructure is to be found throughout the region and is a major impediment to the areas development. Whereas India's economy grew at an average rate of 6% between 1981 and 2000, Assam's only grew at a rate of 3.3%, with the 1990s showing the greatest disparity. However since 2000 this gap has been showing signs of receding. Indeed the estimated growth rate for Assam in 2005-2006 was over 6%.

Meghalaya is predominantly agrarian, with similar proportions of its income and employment coming from the agriculture sector as in Assam. Despite the focus on agriculture they are still dependent on imports for many food items such as eggs, meat and grains due to low productivity, often caused by unsustainable farming practices.