



# Ethnic and Cultural Ties between Northeast India and China: Insights from the Past

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## Abstract

*Belonging to the great trans-Himalayan region, India's Northeast is a multinational habitat. Being an integral of the Himalayas, scholars believe, this region makes up one of the cradles of human civilizations. Due to extensive migrations from the surrounding East and Southeast Asian regions and invasions from Burma and plains of India in the past, Northeast India's ethnic composition has become a unique one and it turned into a store house of nationalities. Many of the tribes in the region claim to be descendents of the Indo-Mongoloid populace of Mongolia, Tibet, China, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. Therefore, this region can be argued to be a 'Mongoloid India' and culturally it is a part of the Southeast Asia. Northeast India represents an ethnological transition zone between India and neighbouring China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. This paper focuses especially on revealing out the ethnic and cultural affinities that Northeast India shares with the other part of the Himalayas, esp. China. It shows that ethnically and culturally the regions shares proximity with China on various fronts. And it argues that on the basis of such similarities, in present times, India could develop a strong relationship with China involving the Northeast region. This paper is based on secondary sources and for the purpose historical-analytical methodology has been applied.*

**Keywords:** Northeast India, multi-ethnic composition, ethnic-cultural affinity etc.

## Introduction

Northeast India is a peculiar region of the Indian Union from many respects. From its geographical and geopolitical location to its ethnic situation, the region projects uniqueness. Surrounded by foreign nations and connected by a narrow land mass (popularly known as 'Chicken Neck') with the rest of the country, and composed of populace that is diverse from all fronts, India's Northeast indeed draws a picture of geopolitical, strategic and ethnological puzzle. The region belongs to the great trans-Himalayan multinational habitat which is watered and nurtured by the mighty Brahmaputra. Many scholars are of the view that this region, being integral to the Himalayas, makes up one of the cradles of human civilizations. The discovery of Yunnanmou Human has provided a Himalayan species that was as old as, if not older than the Lantian Human discovered in Shanxi province in the Yellow River Valley of China<sup>1</sup>. This virtually extended the cradle of Chinese civilization from the Yellow River Valley to further down south of the Himalayas foothills.

## Methodology

The data in the form of information are collected from various secondary sources and analyses of this paper are based on those data. Historical-analytical methodology has been employed in this paper. This paper is with the objective of revealing the ethnic-racial link between some of the Indo-Mongoloid groups in the Northeast India and the Mongoloid stock of China. This is

basically fulfilled in the context of extensive migrations occurred in the East and Southeast Asian regions in the ancient times. On the basis on such ethnic-racial linkages, this paper endeavours to analyse cultural ties that existed in the ancient times between the people of Northeast India and China, taking various factors into consideration that contributed for such contacts.

## Discussion

**Formation of Indigenous Ethnicity in Northeast India:** The ethnic composition of Northeast India is complex and unique. This is mainly because of the extensive migration of various ethnic groups from the surrounding East and Southeast Asian regions in the ancient times. There had also been raids and invasions by many invaders from Burma on the one side and from the Indian plains on the other. Such invasions left an abundant number of races, religions and languages. Consequently, this contributed Northeast India becoming a storehouse of nationalities. It can be easily inferred from the languages spoken or the myths created that the ancestors of many ethnic-tribal groups in the region hailed from far flung regions.

A large number of tribal groups living in Northeast India are descendents of those who migrated here centuries ago from countries like- Mongolia, Tibet, China, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. Therefore, this region can better be called a 'Mongoloid India' and culturally it is a part of the Southeast

Asia. Northeast India represents an ethnological transition zone between India and neighbouring China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh. There had been waves of migration of various ethnic groups to the region. The original home of these groups was in western China near the Yang-tse Kiang and the Huang Ho rivers from which they came down the courses of the Brahmaputra, the Chindwin and the Irawaddy and entered Northeast India and Burma<sup>2</sup>. The group of people that came to Assam proceeded towards Dhubri (on the bank of river Brahmaputra) and a section of the group moved southward and occupied the Garo Hills and the state of Hill Tippera. Other members of the Tibeto-Burman origin occupied the Naga Hills. Another group settled in some parts of Manipur. This is how various ethnic-tribal groups from the surrounding areas migrated to the Northeast India and spread into the various parts of the region. Most of these Tibeto-Burman stocks still practice their own religious rituals and cultural festivals. Some of their rituals have been animistic while others practice polytheistic religious traditions. These unique religious and cultural aspects have contributed in building up of different attitudes and life styles of the tribal people in the Northeast region which vary greatly from those of the rest of Indians.

#### **Ethnic-Racial Affinities between Northeast India and China:**

The present day territory of Mizoram is a homeland of some clans that collectively are called the 'Mizos' (Mi-zo 'highlanders'). Among them the 'Lushais', the 'Hmars', the 'Raltes', the 'Paites' and 'Zos' are the most numerous. Their ancestors seem to have migrated from the Tao valley in north-western China's Kangsu province. They claim Chhinlung to be their original homeland. However, there are controversies around this. About the exact location of Chhinlung, there is a speculation that it might have been Silung in southwest China or Sinning in central China. Another possible theory suggests that Chhinlung is a derivative of the Chin Dynasty (200-207 B.C.)<sup>3</sup>. Notwithstanding these controversies, the fact is that there has been certain truth about the Mizo migration from the said region to the Northeast India.

Various conjectures and assumptions reveal that the Nagas belong to the Indo-Mongoloid race. It is speculated that most probably they moved south and east from Sinkiang (in China). Some of them trekked along the Brahmaputra and halted at the present day Arunachal Pradesh. Some were pushed southwards into Indonesia and Burma, and the evidences of strong cultural parallels remain. It can also be assumed that at one time the Nagas might have wandered about before they found their present permanent abode. From their myths and legends one gathers that there is some relationship with the natives of Borneo in that the two have had a common traditional way of head-hunting, with the Philippines and Taiwan through the common system of terraced cultivation<sup>4</sup>.

Some historians view that the 'Garos' of Meghalaya are of the stock known as Tibeto-Burman, which drifted into Northeastern India and Burma across the plateau of Tibet. The ethnic features

of the Garos such as stature, unusual and cephalic indexes, hair forms etc. strongly suggest resemblance to the Mongoloid races of China<sup>5</sup>. Their language still retains some similarity with the Tibetans; some of their ideas, such as the sentimental value they attach to songs, are identical with those prevailing in Tibetan villages<sup>6</sup>. Tradition bound and unwilling to change too rapidly, the Garos still talk of their migration from the uplands of the Himalayas to the valley of Assam.

Number of racial groups in Assam also exhibits a whole range of facial features, many of which would support the hypothesis that they migrated from the northwest Tibet and China, and southwest Burma (Myanmar) and Cambodia. The 'Ahoms' rather the 'Tai-Ahoms' were a branch of the great 'Tai' race of Southeast Asia, who ruled the Brahmaputra Valley for a period of nearly six hundred years (from 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). They belong to the 'Shan' tribes. The Shans first appeared in the history of Yunnan (reference 6). Some of them migrated to upper Burma. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D., some of them migrated from the mountains of southern Yunnan to the valley of the Shewei and the adjacent regions. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D., some of their groups, i.e., the Ahoms, overran and conquered Assam itself, giving their name to the country Ahom (Axom- Assam). In conformity with their traditions, the Ahom Kings traced their descent from Lengdon, the ruler of the upper kingdom of the 'Ngai-Lao Shans' of Yunnan and Sze-Chuan of the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>7</sup> Other Shan tribes who followed the Ahoms were the 'Khamtis', 'Phakials', 'Naras' and 'Aitoniyas', who mostly inhabit the eastern part of Assam. The 'Bodos' or the Boros, who constitute one of the major communities in Assam, belong to the Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group of Tibeto-Burman language family. The group of Bodo migrants, who followed the Austrics to the Northeast India, was from the north of the Himalayas and northwest China<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, it can be substantiated that ethnic and racial affinities exist between the Indo-Mongoloid populace of the Northeast India and the Mongoloid stock of southwest China and north of the Himalayas.

#### **Cultural Ties between Northeast India and China in the past:**

Study in cultural history of Northeast India would suggest that there had been cultural contacts between the region and China in the ancient times. However, such contacts between the either sides were not vast and official. Such relations were mainly a kind of people to people contact, exchange of ideas and feelings. It can be observed that four basic factors contributed to the development for such cultural ties between Northeast India and China: i. Geographical proximity of Northeast India to China, ii. Ethnic migrations in the past, iii. Movement of religious missionary and iv. Various trade routes through Northeast India to the East and Southeast Asia.

First, geographically Northeast India is intimately connected to China. The location of the region on the foothills of the Himalayas has made it a meeting place of diverse ethnic-

cultural elements. It is a vital link between the east and the west, and between the north and south of the entire trans-Himalayan world. This trans-Himalayan linkage of the region can be ascertained through its linguistic and racial connections. Such peculiar geographical setting of the region along with linguistic and ethnic affinities with its neighbouring countries encouraged developing various relations with them since the past.

The close proximity amongst the trans-Himalayan regions, of which the Northeast India and Southwest China are parts, has through the history created cultural contact in the entire area. Though the mighty Himalayas acts as a formidable barrier between the either sides, there were many passes through which various contacts were possible. Through such contacts, ideas and cultures had their access in both Northeast India and Southwest China. It is also assumed from the point of the view that as both China and Northeast India share a common border there was possibility of such contacts. It is because of such geographical location that often strengthened common cultural and social link at least in the immediate bordering areas.

Secondly, in the past there had been overwhelming migrations among the trans-Himalayan regions. For instance, the 'Thai Kadai' ethnic group migrated from the Nanzhou region of South China. It forms today the most significant ethnological grouping all of Southeast Asia extending from the Brahmaputra to the Gulf of Tonkin, and then to Yunnan and Guangxi, and southward as far as the Kedah state of Malaysia and Myanmar<sup>9</sup>. Likewise the Ahoms, Bodos, Mizos and Nagas migrated from the various parts of the north of Himalayas and the Southwest China and various parts of the Southeast Asia. This had greatly contributed to the cultural assimilation in the region and in turn, created a cultural bond between the people of the two regions. The fact is that still there have been certain ethnic-religious rituals and ceremonies of various ethnic groups that have similarities with those of the people of the south-western China and other parts of the Southeast Asia.

Thirdly, there are religious factors, especially, the Buddhists monks' missions to China at various times in the past that created a strong religious-cultural bond between the two sides of the Himalayas. Mahayana monks like Dharmabodhi and others who went to China through Northeast India opened a glorious chapter on the religious-cultural ties between the either sides. Other two legendary Indian Buddhist monks, Kasyapa Matanga and Dharmaratna, who entered China through the Yunnan-Sichuan route to Luoyang, had been historical witnesses to the existent religious-cultural relations between India and China through the Northeast region in the past (reference 1).

*Tantrism* is another factor which forms a cultural bond between the Northeast India, Tibet and South China. The Kamakhya Hills and Umananda in Guwahati on the southern bank of Brahmaputra are still important centres of the *tantra* culture which have similarity with that of China. The famous story of friendship between the Kamrupa King Kumar Bhaskaravarmana

(600-648 A.D.) and the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang shows the traces of the historical development of the *tantra* culture in Assam.

Finally, the role played by various routes existed in the past had been crucial in encouraging cultural and commercial relations between India through the Northeast and China. There had been many passes through the Himalayas between the Northeast region and China, many ancient trade routes between the region and China through Bhutan and Myanmar. Trade is not independent of cultural aspects. There is always an integral connection between culture and commerce. The commodities that a state produces and exports carry cultural identity of that very state.

There were four historically recognised routes through which India was connected with China:<sup>10</sup> i. the Central Asian Route or the Silk Route, ii. the route of Assam [Assam- Upper Burma] or the famous Southern Silk Route, iii. the route of Tibet-Nepal and iv. the sea routes or the so-called Maritime Silk Routes

Among these, the routes of Assam and Tibet played crucial role to connect Northeast India with China. The route of Tibet was through Nepal, Bhutan and Lohit region of present Arunachal Pradesh. The route of Assam passed through Burma to China. This route had three sub-routes: i. the first one was by the valley of the Brahmaputra up to the Patkai range and then through its passes up to Burma; ii. the second was through Manipur up to the Chindwin valley; and iii. the third one ran through the Arakan range up to the Irawaddy valley. All the three met on the frontier of Burma, and then proceeded over the mountains and across the river valley to Yunnanfu, i.e., Kunming which was the southern province of China. These routes were in extensive use in the past. The usage of the Tibet and Assam routes in testified by many historical events of different times. These have significance for the relations that existed in the past between Northeast India and China. There is reference to the Assam route in the history of the Wei Dynasty (629-45 A.D.)<sup>11</sup>.

## Conclusion

It is natural to observe that being a 'Mongoloid India', the Northeast region shares ethnic similarities with the surrounding Mongoloid populace living in the neighbouring countries of East and Southeast Asia. This is also revealed that there had been extensive migrations in the region covering the trans-Himalayan and other Asian areas. Through such migrations there had been transfer of cultures along with populace. The people of the region are aware about their ethnic-cultural links with surrounding areas. However, in present times most of them are on the verge of losing such linkages due to a number of factors which include nationalising tendencies penetrating from rest of India. The potential points of such linkages have been that this could serve the purpose of building a strong bond with the countries of East and Southeast Asian nations. This would, in the present age of globalisation, serve the economic purpose

of India, and in turn bring prosperity to the region as well. Such potentiality seems to have exerted influence in the minds of policy makers of our country. This is obvious from launching of policies like 'Look East Policy' in recent past. However, it till date remains 'hype'. But sections of people are still optimistic that such policy if implemented properly at a sooner date, would transform Northeast India into a hub of Indian trade with Asian economic giants, and this would develop the region and many of the problems from which the region has been suffering would disappear automatically. Being specific to China, it can be said that the revival of the ancient trade and cultural contacts could serve the great purpose of strengthening India-China relations. Cultural aspects have always been a building factor in the strained relations between countries. The usage of various modern technologies of communication would help in re-energizing the age-old cultural relations. In the present age of globalization where there is increasing cultural assimilation, there is scope for the reshaping the ancient cultural contacts. This would greatly contribute in the strengthening of social aspects of the India-China relations.

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