

# FOLK ART AND CULTURE OF RICH ETHNIC COMMUNITIES IN THE NORTH EASTERN INDIA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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## To Cite this Article

Raj Kumar Mazinder (2026). Folk Art and Culture of Rich Ethnic Communities in the North Eastern India: A Brief Overview. *SAARC Journal of Social Science*, 4: 1, pp. 65-72.

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**Abstract:** From a geographical standpoint, art has consistently been accessible to Indian artists, playing a crucial role in social, cultural, and political expression. Nevertheless, during the creative process, feelings of pain and a profound longing for one's ancestral homeland emerge, whether on an individual or collective level. The objective of the paper is to explore the folk art and culture of the diverse ethnic groups in North-eastern India states Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim, focusing on the evolution of creative ideas, thoughts, and shifts in paradigms related to regional art practices and genres in the face of globalization, gender/racial dynamics, religious extremism, and the impact of a non-existent art market.

**Keywords:** Folk art, visual arts, tribal, ethnic communities, and North-Eastern India

## Introduction

Due to major part of migration from Tibet, Southeast Asia, and Indo-Gangetic India, North Eastern India is home to more than 300 different ethnic communities. Assamese, Bodos, Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Meiteis, and Garos are among the primary Indo-Chinese/Mongoloid racial groups that constitute the majority of the population. (Gogoi, 2022, p. 2) Folk art and culture signify the traditional, utilitarian, and decorative expressions of a community, deeply rooted in local heritage, mythology, and daily life. Even though India is experiencing significant social and technical transformation, folk art and crafts continue to play an important

role in daily life (Dhamija, 2011). “Folk art and culture” is a term used to describe visual art that is primarily utilitarian or functional, made by hand (or with limited mechanical facilities) for the creator or a small, restricted group, and that has a retention component—the long-term survival of tradition. Through the creation of functional yet beautiful structures and artefacts, folk art is the artistic manifestation of the human quest for civilization within a specific setting.

Additionally, the North-Eastern part of India is well-known for its terracotta, relief sculpture, temple architecture, indigenous stone monoliths, and other handcrafted traditions. In addition to being the gateway for sister states connecting to the mainland, Assam serves as a centre for creative ideas for both individualistic and communal inspiration in artistic culture and society. As Prof. A. K. Das of the Department of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University, “The North-East India is a region of rich natural heritage having a unique grandeur. Topographically, it is a combination of high mountain ranges, valleys, and hilly tracts criss-crossed by rivers, streams, and woodlands. There are water bodies of big and small sizes, which can be seen in the low-lying areas of all over the valley. The entire region could be categorized into four distinct natural niches. The northern height is composed of the impenetrable Eastern Himalaya, the fertile river valley of the Brahmaputra, and undulating Southern hilly tracts merging with the flood plains of the Barak River. As one moves from east to west and north to south, the visuals in this kaleidoscope of nature gradually changes. The human geography and related cultural milieu evolve in tandem with the ecology and terrain. (Das, 2025, p.1)

The term “Seven Sister States” or adjacent states Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura in North-Eastern India, coined by a journalist J. P Rajkhowa, also known as “Paradise Unexplored and later included another state, Sikkim, as part of Northeast India. Several significant plants are thought to have been domesticated by early immigrants in Northeast India because of the region’s biocultural and crop diversity. Scholars believe that an early trade route that went through Northeast India is indicated by the records of Chinese explorer Zhang Qian, who lived around 100 BC (Lahiri, 1991). Along with textiles, painting, and engraving, there are also indications that the visual arts, such as painting and sculpting, have been practiced in Assam since very early times. These include references to its early cultivation in literature and inscriptions. Folk art of North-east India incorporates many Eastern, especially Southeast, elements. There were no cultural boundaries between Burma and Assam till independence of India.

Dr. Niharranjan Roy made an important point when he visited many years ago, as the history of Assam should be discussed from the side of Burma and Southeast Asia (Phookan, 1987).

### **Methodology**

Various folk art, artists, scholars, and academicians are considered to develop the research paper's methodology. The study is carried out the site visited to collect the necessary data and images. Because it focuses on the stylistic shifts and online advancements of folk art and culture in states of North-Eastern India, this descriptive study has visited several locations, institutions, and documented individual and collective art activities in the region as Assam State Museum, Guwahati, Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra, Guwahati, The Madhab Chandra Goswami Anthropological Museum, Gauhati University, Departmental Museum, Department of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University, Manipur State Museum, Imphal, Capt. Williamson Sangma State Museum, Shillong, Mizoram State Museum, Aizawl, Tripura State Museum, Agartala, Nagaland State Museum, Kohima, Sikkim State Museum and Archives, Gangtok, Jawaharlal Nehru Museum, Itanagar. Besides these, primary data has been collected through visiting several villages all over the North Eastern states and their significant festivals, such as the Majuli Rash-leela festival at Natun Samaguri Satra, Assam, the Hornbill Festival, Nagaland, and the Singpho National Festival, Margherita, Assam. Secondary data has also been gathered from journals, online, and book sources.

### **Ethnic Communities in the North Eastern India**

According to Raj Basu, in the foreword of the seminal book *Life and Culture in Northeast India*, “the entire Northeast region has more cultures than the rest of the country, as several of the tribal communities place their faith in bio divinity. Not to describe it as animism, here they have learnt to depend on their immediate biodiversity for their basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter.” (Verma & Verma, 2000, Forward page) The north-eastern part of India or Northeast India, is regarded as one of the most ethnically diverse, culturally and environmentally rich areas in the nation. In North-East India alone, there are over 220 dialects and about 220 ethnic groupings. Native ethnic groupings make up the majority of the population of the region's hill states, including Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Sikkim, though there is some variety even among these ethnic groups. The Indian

government has taken several actions to improve the socioeconomic circumstances of the nation's ethnic groups of indigenous people.

The majority of people who reside in other parts of India believe that the Northeast is a region marked by socio-political instability, tribal wars, and border disputes. Like most stereotypes about individuals as well as locations, this picture only presents half the truth. This image frames only half the truth, as do most preconceptions about individuals and places. In areas with few commercial galleries or collectors, it is encouraging to see them working hard to produce works for a non-existent art market and critical evaluations. (Bordewkar, 2006)

There are over 220 languages spoken in the Northeast region of the Indian subcontinent. The Indo-Aryan language known as Assamese is the mother tongue of many people and is primarily spoken in Assam's Brahmaputra Valley. Other Assamese-based lingua franca spoken in Nagaland and Arunachal are Nagamese and Nefamese, respectively. Khasi is a member of the Austro-Asiatic language family. The Tai-Kadai languages include Ahom, Tai Phake, Khamti, and others. Other languages that originated in the Sino-Tibetan region include Bodo, Deori, Missing, Rabha, Karbi, Tiwa, Biata Garo, Hajong, Angami, Lotha, Mizo, Chakma Tanee, Nisi, Adi, Abor, Apatani, Misimi, and others. Since the majority of the population in lower Assam and Tripura hails from undivided Bengal, Bengali is also commonly spoken there. In Sikkim, many people speak Nepali. Despite the rapid modernisation of other parts of India, certain indigenous populations in the area have managed to maintain a traditional way of life. Numerous ethnic groups, primarily of the Indo-Chinese Mongoloid race, call the region home. With over 200 distinct ethnic groups, each with its own unique culture and customs, Northeast India is renowned for its diverse people. The Assamese, Bodos, Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Garos, and Arunachalis are some of the most significant ethnic groups in the region.

The state ethnic groupings are as follows.

Arunachal Pradesh is home to the Adis, Nyishi, Apatani, Tagin, Mismi, Khampti, Wancho, Tangsha, Monpa, and so forth.

Assam: Dimasa, Hajong, Deori, Hojai, Sonowal Kacharis, Assamese, Bengali, Barmans, Miri (Mising), and Bodos (Bodo-kacharis).

The Khasis, Garos, Jaintias, and others call Meghalaya home.

Manipur is home to Meities, Nagas, Kukis, and Chins, Meitei Pangals (Muslims), and others.

Mizoram: Lushei, Ralte, Hmar, Paite, Pawis (formerly known as Lais), etc. Nagaland includes Angoma, Ao, Chang, Chiru, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Sema, Zeliang, and so on.

Tripura: Tripuri, Lusei, Darlong, Halam, Reang, Chakma, and Garo, among others.

Sikkim: Bhutias, Lepchas, Nepalis, etc.

### **Folk Art and Culture of Rich Ethnic Communities in the North Eastern India**

Renowned craft personalities Aditi Ranjan and M P Ranjan write in their unique book *Crafts of India Handmade in India* that “India is a land of immense variety, a land of vast diversity and climatic zones from the sea-level coastal settlements to the extreme habitats built on top of lofty snow-covered mountains.” We can learn a lot from how local communities have used climate variation to their advantage. Both survival and joy are creatively addressed by these answers. For example, farmers in Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya wear bamboo rain shields as headgear, and Assamese dancers celebrate the spring season by performing the Bihu dance while wearing *japi*, an adorned headpiece. (Ranjan & Ranjan, 2024)

With the introduction of “Modern art” in the early 20th century, traditional art forms like miniatures, manuscript paintings, murals, traditional sculptures, and crafts, which had flourished for centuries before starting to wane due to political turmoil and other circumstances, were completely transformed. (Kandali, 2009) Numerous tribes and sub-tribes can be found in north-eastern India. They have a strong craft tradition, and each tribe has exceptional workmanship, which is seen in the range of goods produced by its members. The following lists the primary arts and crafts of each Northeast Indian state:

**Arunachal Pradesh:** Each tribe in Arunachal Pradesh has a long history of crafting, and the variety of products made by its individuals demonstrates their skill. The category of crafts includes a variety of crafts such as weaving, woodcarvings, jewellery, bamboo and cane crafts, painted wood containers, carpet manufacturing, and masks. This includes handcrafted ceramics, brass cutting, and silversmithing. They make a wide range of objects with agate beads, boar’s tusks, goat hair, ivory, and other stones in addition to brass and glass.

**Assam:** A wide range of arts and crafts have been mastered by the people of Assam, which is mostly an agricultural state. The panorama includes crafts including ceramics, *sholapith* or pith work, brass and bell metal, ivory, woodworking, cane

and bamboo, and handloom weaving. Mulberry silk, Endi, and Muga are all part of the handloom weaving culture.

**Meghalaya:** Art & crafts of all kinds are well-known in Meghalaya. Bamboo and cane are in high demand. The Garo highlands are a place where people weave beautiful textiles and carve wood. It is well known that Endi silk is woven. However, pineapple fiber products, which use the fiber from its leaves to make different kinds of nets, bags, and purses, are this state's distinctive craft. Dance and music have a very rich cultural heritage in Meghalaya. Nohkjot, Mastieh, Shad wait, Shadynti, and other dancing forms are among them. In remembrance of the deceased, the Khasi and Jaintia people of Meghalaya built a single standing stone or stone alignments at a location called Nartiang, which is close to Shillong.

**Nagaland:** A significant component of India's vibrant culture is Nagaland. Among the arts and crafts in Nagaland are weaving, basketry, woodworking, and jewellery-making, among others. People of Nagaland use flowers, bird wings, shells, and beads to make a variety of goods. Pot making is a craft that is exclusively practiced by women, much like weaving. Without a wheel, Naga artisans create earthen pots by hand. In addition to creating everyday items like cutlery and other items, the Naga people also create woodcarvings that are typically connected to their religious beliefs and activities.

**Manipur:** With its unique fusion of Vaishnavism and tribal customs, Manipur has added to the diversity and depth of its unique culture. Among Manipur's many vibrant crafts, its textiles, sturdy bell-shaped metal bowls, bamboo and cane, and spongy reed mats deserve special recognition. Manipur is also renowned for its gold and gold-plated jewellery, which includes bracelets, armllets, necklaces, and earrings. Manipur also produces lovely dolls, clay, and straw toys.

**Mizoram:** Among the Mizos, there are many skilled artisans and craftsmen. Weaving, cane and bamboo crafts, jewellery, pipes, and musical instruments are some of their important crafts. An essential component of Mizo culture is weaving. In Mizoram, bamboo and cane works are equally significant.

**Tripura:** There are many tribal people in Tripura, which has led to a tradition of many crafts. The most significant craft in the state is the handloom. The primary characteristic of Tripura handlooms is their horizontal and vertical stripes with sporadic, multi-coloured stitching. Cane and bamboo crafts come next. Silver decorations, bamboo screens, lamp stands, tablemats, sitalpati, woodcarving, and other crafts are examples of popular handicrafts. The trademark of Tripura's brass and bell metal products is their simplicity.

Sikkim: Sikkim's folk art and culture are a vibrant tapestry woven from the traditions of the Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali communities, featuring unique dances, music, and crafts like Thangka painting and wood carving, all reflecting a harmonious blend of religious and cultural influences of Buddhism. Sikkim is known for its beautiful wood carvings found in monasteries, temples, and religious places. These carvings frequently feature Buddhist iconography and symbols, and the wood masks used in performances are also finely made. In Sikkim, carpet weaving is another handcrafted tradition. (www.icnca.gov.in, 2025)

## Conclusion

At the outset, my gratitude has been conferred to the Vikram Sarabhai Foundation, New Delhi, for giving me a fine arts fellowship for two years during 1993-1995, by which my fieldwork on the art and culture of North Eastern states was started. During those initial years of my visit to various remote places, villages has been given impetus with lots of materials for writing on such a vital issue of North-Eastern India. The anthropologist and well-known author Verrier Elwin explained in the introduction of his book *The Art of the Northeast Frontier of India* that he wrote it because he thought it was possible to counteract this harmful influence. He would go into further detail because he believed that encouraging tribal artists, allowing them access to raw materials, encouraging pride in their work, and protecting their finest patterns and designs may all help to inspire a resurgence of artistic pursuits in India's hill regions. (Elwin, 1958)

The folk art and culture of this particular region have perhaps not been discussed in detail. Ironically termed as Junglee, Chinky, the Northeast people are aware of the pros and cons of their identity and try to defend and sustain as a whole. So the artists' fraternity pursue themselves concerning creative idea, thought, and paradigm shift in terms of region-based contemporary art practice as well as revolting against the so-called West. As wind up the research paper with an excerpt of writing by Phanindra Talukdar published in the catalogue, "Contemporary Printmaking of North-East India", in which he writes as, "The cultural dislocation and collisions in peripheral state like the North East of India is always an account of seeing subjected into the diverse methodological approach rather than a subject to be elevated by saying as multi-colourful cultural approach. At the issue of representation, however, is not the value of postmodernist commentary, such as irony and parody, of which artists of India have used to claim a national identity against imperial hegemony,

but rather the use of postmodernity to define contemporary art in the Third World. (Talukdar. 2018, p.1)

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