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UNDERSTANDING OF THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE IN THE NORTHEASTERN REGION OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Northeast India, home to a remarkable diversity of indigenous communities, has long been a focal point of interest for anthropologists, geographers, and social scientists. The region's extraordinary natural beauty, combined with its rich cultural heritage, has also made it an important destination for cultural and ecological tourism. When natural landscapes are shaped and modified by human societies, they evolve into distinctive cultural landscapes. In this context, Northeast India presents a unique cultural landscape shaped by the traditions, belief systems, and land-use practices of its numerous tribal groups. The dynamic interaction between humans and their environment in this region reveals an intricate spectrum of adaptive strategies, ecological knowledge, and cultural expressions. This paper examines key dimensions of human–nature relationships among various indigenous communities in Northeast India and highlights how these interactions contribute to the formation of a traditional cultural landscape. By adopting a cultural landscape perspective, the study aims to illuminate the intimate ecological engagements and cultural processes that define the region's identity.

Northeast India, situated in the easternmost frontier of the Indian subcontinent, is a region of exceptional geographical and cultural significance. Bordered by Bhutan and Tibet to the north, China to the northeast, Myanmar to the east and south, and Bangladesh to the southwest, the region is connected to the rest of India only through a narrow land corridor in West Bengal, often referred to as the "Chicken's Neck." Covering approximately 255,000 sq. km, this largely hilly and ecologically diverse region accounts for nearly seven percent

of India's total landmass. Within this landscape, the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam stands out as one of the most extensive and fertile plains, contrasting sharply with the surrounding highlands.

Comprising the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, Northeast India has long been recognized as a cultural crossroads. Its strategic location has historically facilitated movements of people from Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Indian subcontinent, making it a vibrant transition zone and a meeting ground of civilizations. Over millennia, successive migration waves of Mongoloid, Indo-Mongoloid, and earlier Australoid populations settled in the region, each contributing distinct cultural, linguistic, and biological traits. The absorption, adaptation, and coexistence of these groups resulted in an extraordinary mosaic of ethnic identities.

Figure: Map showing North East India with different ethnic groups (Adapted from Roger &Post, 2013)

The region today is home to hundreds of indigenous communities, each possessing its own language, traditional knowledge systems, belief structures, and ecological practices. These communities inhabit varied ecological niches—from the dense forests of Arunachal and Nagaland to the rolling plateaus of Meghalaya, the riverine plains of Assam, and the valley–hill complex of Manipur and Tripura. Their intimate engagement with land, forests, rivers, and climate has shaped not only their subsistence patterns but also their ritual life, social organization, and cultural expressions.

Such continuous human–environment interaction has given rise to a distinctive traditional cultural landscape, where natural features and cultural practices are deeply intertwined. The cultural landscape of Northeast India is thus not merely a physical space but a living representation of the region's history, ecology, and identity. Understanding this landscape requires recognizing the dynamic relationships between indigenous societies and their environments—relationships that embody adaptation, resilience, and cultural continuity.

This paper situates Northeast India within this broader cultural landscape framework, exploring how traditional ecological knowledge, settlement patterns, subsistence strategies, and cultural beliefs collectively shape the region's unique cultural geography.

AN APPROACH TO CULTURAL LANDSCAPE STUDY

Cultural landscape is a term used in the fields of geography, ecology, and heritage studies, to describe a symbiosis of human activity and environment. Landscapes can be divided into natural landscapes and cultural landscapes, and cultural landscapes have a long history of study in disciplines such as human geography, ecology, and archaeology (Mao et al, 2023, p.3). The term Cultural landscape is defined as a marked geographical area that has been under the influence of continuous human activity both symbiotic and parasitic with the natural environment over time (Singh & Singh, 2022).

This concept of landscape is crucial in archaeological research with reference to how societies use, adapted to, and transform their environments from ancient times till the contemporary periods. Cultural landscape is usually change from time to time and are not static. They embody the dynamics of human presence, belief systems, economic strategies, and ecological adaptations.

The concept of cultural landscape was incorporated into the World Heritage List at the 16th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, held in Santa Fe, USA, in December 1992. As a result, World Heritage Sites are divided into natural heritage, cultural heritage, natural and cultural composite heritage, and cultural landscapes. According to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, cultural landscapes across the globe represents the combine work of nature and the man (UNESCO, 2008). This reflects the evolution of human societies around the world to its natural habitats.

The German geographer, Humboldt, conducted landscape studies at the beginning of the 19th century, arguing that landscape should be the central issue of geography and exploring the process of changing from a primitive natural landscape to a cultural landscape (Mao et al, 2023, p.3). Sauer, an American human geographer in the 20th century studied cultural landscapes and believed that cultural landscapes are a form of human activity attached to natural landscapes (Sauer, 2008, pp. 108-116).

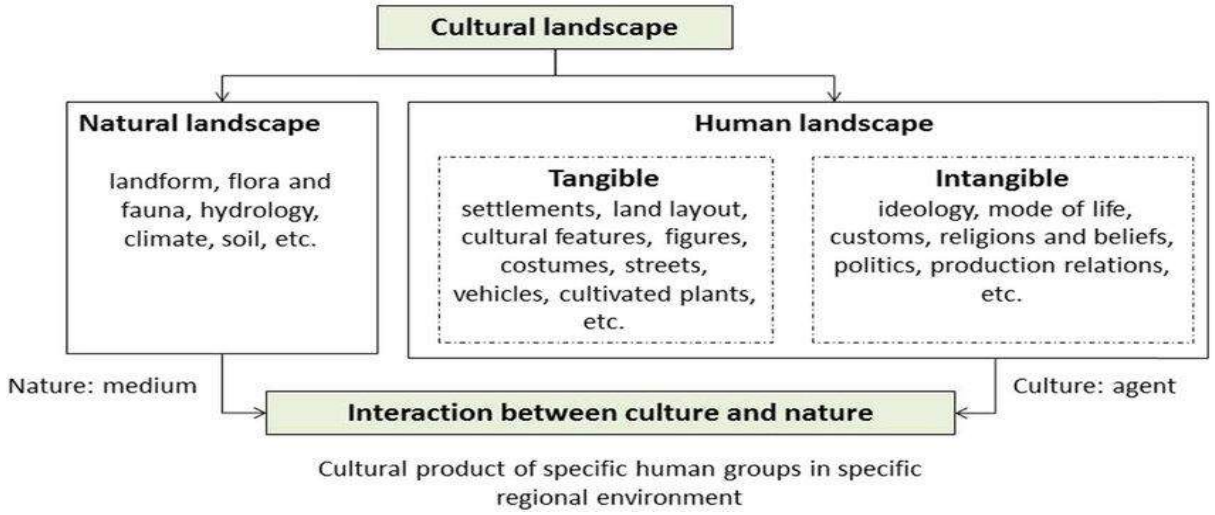

Figure: Diagram showing cultural landscape and its components. (Adapted from Ying Sun & Quanfeng Qu, 2021)

According to Sauer (1925) the cultural landscape is evolved or fashioned from the natural landscape with the helped of an agent called as culture acted in the natural area which is the medium and the final product is the cultural landscape. The study of cultural landscapes is helpful to understand the spatial differences of human culture, and even reflects the natural historical background that forms regional culture. All these definitions of cultural landscape underscore the transformative role of human agency in modifying and interpreting the physical environment through collective behaviour, knowledge, and material culture.

UNESCO classified cultural landscape into three categories-

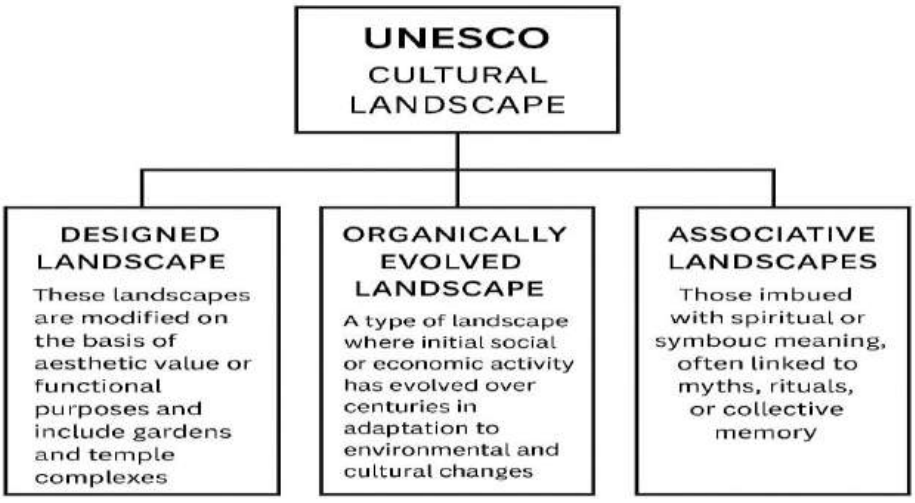

Figure: Diagram illustrating UNESCO Cultural landscape and its categories.

COMMUNITIES OF NORTHEAST INDIA AND THEIR CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

ASSAM

Assam is home to a diverse population comprising both tribal and non-tribal communities. According to the 2001 Census, 23 recognized tribal groups constitute approximately 12.28% of the state's population (Chaudhuri, 2022). These tribal communities are broadly classified into Plain Tribes and Hill Tribes, based on their geographical distribution.Plain Tribes inhabit the extensive river valleys and plains of the Brahmaputra and Barak regions.Hill Tribes are concentrated mainly in the hilly terrains of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts.Among the tribal groups, the Boro (or Bodo)-Kachari form the largest tribal community, accounting for nearly 35% of Assam's total tribal population (Ibid.). Other significant tribes include the Karbi, Koch-Rajbanshi, Mishing, Mishimi, Rabha, Deori, Tiwa (Lalung), and Dimasa.In addition to tribal communities, Assam's major non-tribal population groups include, Assamese caste–Hindu groups,Tea-tribe communities (descendants of Adivasi groups brought during colonial tea plantation expansion),Bengali Hindus and Muslims,Marwari trading communities, andNepali settlers.This ethnic diversity has contributed to Assam's rich cultural mosaic and complex socio-cultural dynamics.

Traditional Cultural Landscape and Archaeology of Assam

Assam's cultural landscape is one of the most historically layered and archaeologically rich regions of Northeast India. Shaped by the fertile Brahmaputra and Barak River valleys, alluvial plains, wetlands, forested hills, and river islands, Assam evolved as a dynamic cultural zone where diverse ethnic groups interacted with complex ecological forces over millennia. The archaeological record of Assam reflects this deep human–environment engagement, offering insights into early settlements, agricultural systems, religious traditions, and political developments.

The prehistoric landscape of Assam was shaped by the Brahmaputra Valley's fertile alluvium, perennial rivers, and forest resources, which fostered early human settlement. Neolithic sites such as Sarutaru, Deojharu, the Khasi foothills, and the Rongram Valley reveal polished stone tools, pottery, and agricultural beginnings, showing affinities with wider Eastern and Southeast Asian Neolithic traditions. Settlements on river terraces and foothills reflect early adaptation to a riverine environment. Regions like Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao, and the Khasi–Jaintia belt contain abundant megaliths—stone alignments, menhirs, dolmens, and cairns—indicating ancestral veneration and emerging social complexity. Iron Age tools, slag, and fortified sites further illustrate technological advancement and organized communal spaces.In the early historic period (c. 4th century CE onwards), the region known as Pragjyotisha–Kamarupa developed fortified urban centres, brick architecture,

organized layouts, terracotta art, and sculptural traditions, as seen at Ambari, Bamuni Hills, Sri Surya Pahar, and Goalpara. The rulers shaped a sacred temple landscape integrating hills, riverbanks, and natural groves, which are evident in the religious complexes of Kamakhya, Da Parbatia, Surya Pahar, Navagraha, and Umananda. These sites exemplify the blending of terrain and spirituality to form a distinctive sacred geography.The medieval Ahom period (1228–1826 CE) further transformed Assam's cultural landscape through advanced hydraulic systems—pukhuri (tanks), ali (canals), and extensive embankments and forts (garh). Architectural remains at Joypur, Garhgaon, and Rangpur, including Kareng Ghar and Talatal Ghar, show innovations in water management, groundwater use, and wet-rice irrigation. Ritual landscapes were shaped through maidams at Charaideo, monumental burial mounds for Ahom royalty that reflect strong Southeast Asian mortuary parallels and highlight sophisticated socio-political organization.The rise of Neo-Vaishnavism under Srimanta Sankardeva (15th–16th centuries) introduced a new cultural landscape defined by satras and namghars, which served as religious, social, and artistic centres. In places like Majuli, Barpeta, and Bardowa, these monastic settlements fostered music, dance, drama, manuscript production, and community cohesion, becoming key spaces of Assamese cultural identity.Assam's tribal cultural landscapes—including those of the Boro, Karbi, Mishing, Deori, Dimasa, Tiwa, and Rabha—reflect ecological adaptation and long-established settlement systems. Karbi and Dimasa hills contain early stone monuments, fortified village sites, and terraced fields, while the riverine Mishings maintain stilted houses, flood-adapted agriculture, and riverbank shrines. Boro homestead landscapes with bamboo groves, forests, and granaries reveal sustainable resource management. Collectively, these indigenous spaces embody traditional ecological knowledge and resilient adaptation to plains, hills, and river systems.Majuli Island forms a dynamic archaeological and cultural landscape where erosion constantly exposes ancient habitation materials such as pottery and terracotta fragments. Its satras preserve medieval manuscripts, dance traditions, and ritual objects, making the island a living repository of Vaishnavite heritage. The Brahmaputra's seasonal floods continuously reshape the island, creating a rare interplay of environmental change, cultural continuity, and archaeological visibility.

Modern Assam continues to express its traditional cultural landscapes through practices such as rice agriculture, wetland fishing, riverine festivals like Bihu, weaving traditions, bamboo and cane craftsmanship, sacred riverscapes, and the enduring presence of temples and Satra institutions. Yet, alongside this continuity, forces such as urbanization, riverbank erosion, tea plantation expansion, and modern infrastructure development are reshaping older cultural environments and generating new archaeological and cultural patterns. Overall, the cultural landscape archaeology of Assam highlights a deep and continuous interaction between people and environment—from Neolithic settlers and megalithic communities to early historic polities, Ahom hydraulic systems, Neo-Vaishnavite monastic networks, and diverse tribal ecological traditions. The archaeological record

affirms that Assam has long functioned as a dynamic cultural corridor where riverine ecology, migration, and technological innovation have shaped one of Northeast India's most vibrant and enduring cultural landscapes.

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Known as the *"Land of the Rising Sun,"* Arunachal Pradesh occupies the easternmost part of India and shares international borders with Bhutan, China, and Myanmar, along with state boundaries with Assam and Nagaland. The population of Arunachal Pradesh is predominantly of Asiatic origin, exhibiting strong physical and cultural affinities with the peoples of Tibet and the Myanmar highlands.The state is characterized by the presence of a large number of tribes and sub-tribes, each with distinct cultural traditions. Prominent tribal groups include theAdi,Nishi (or Nyishi/Dafla),Sulung (Puroik),Sherdukpen,Aka (Hrusso),Apatani, andMonpa.These groups practice varied forms of shifting cultivation, terrace farming, and intricate ritual traditions that reflect deep ecological knowledge and cultural uniqueness.

Traditional Cultural Landscape and Archaeology of Arunachal Pradesh

The cultural landscape of Arunachal Pradesh is deeply shaped by its ecological diversity, which ranges from snowbound Himalayan peaks in the north to humid subtropical valleys in the south, creating distinct cultural zones inhabited by various tribes. The Tawang–West Kameng highlands are dominated by the Buddhist Monpa and Sherdukpen groups, while the central hill regions are home to the Apatani, Nyishi, Tagin, Galo, and Adi tribes. In the eastern river basins, communities such as the Mishmi, Miju, Kaman, Digaru, and Nocte have established settlements adapted to rugged terrain and dense forests. Traditional villages are typically built on hill slopes or ridges for defense and safety, whereas communities in the lower valleys construct stilted houses to cope with flooding, high humidity, and wild animals. These settlements are organized around clan-based structures, featuring communal halls, men's dormitories, granaries, and ritual platforms that form the core of social and cultural life.

Agriculture and land-use systems play a central role in shaping the region's cultural landscape. Shifting cultivation (jhum), practiced by tribes such as the Adi, Nyishi, and Galo, involves clearing forest patches, controlled burning, mixed cropping, and long fallow cycles, all accompanied by rituals that promote harmony with the spiritual forces of the land. In contrast, the Apatani of Ziro Valley have developed an exceptional terrace farming system characterized by stone-lined terraces, stream-fed irrigation canals, an integrated paddy–fish cultivation practice, and extensive bamboo plantations, earning the region recognition on UNESCO's tentative list for its sustainable cultural landscape. Forest management is another vital component, with communities

distinguishing between clan-owned forests, community-protected areas, and sacred groves tied to indigenous belief systems such as Donyi–Polo, Sedi–Selo, and Uyi, where strict customary laws preserve biodiversity.

The ritual landscape of Arunachal Pradesh is rooted in indigenous cosmologies that maintain a profound spiritual connection with mountains, rivers, forests, and animals. Animistic traditions among groups such as the Adi, Nyishi, and Galo view natural elements as living entities, and ritual platforms like mosup, yari, and murung serve as communal ceremonial spaces. In the Tawang and West Kameng regions, Tibetan Buddhist influence is reflected in monumental structures such as Tawang Monastery—the second largest in Asia—along with Bomdila Monastery and Dirang Dzong, creating a sacred architectural landscape marked by stupas, prayer flags, and meditation houses integrated into the mountainous terrain. Festivals such as Solung, Mopin, Dree, Myoko, Losar, Reh, and Boori-Boot are closely linked to agricultural cycles, clan unity, and the renewal of harmony between humans and nature, reaffirming the inseparability of ecology and spirituality.

Arunachal Pradesh also possesses a rich archaeological heritage connecting prehistoric, protohistoric, and early historic cultural traditions. Stone tools, pottery, and habitation remains from regions like Rima–Putok, Kamla Valley, Tali Valley, and the Siang Valley reveal early human occupation, while megalithic monuments—menhirs, dolmens, and stone platforms—in Upper Siang, West Siang, and Dibang Valley point to longstanding practices of ancestor worship. Petroglyphs from Tuting in Upper Siang and the Dirang–Bomdila region depict humans, animals, and geometric symbols, reflecting cultural links with Tibet and broader Himalayan rock-art traditions. Early medieval fortified complexes such as Bhalukpong Fort, Ita Fort in Itanagar, Malinithan, and Bhismaknagar demonstrate political interactions with both the Brahmaputra Valley and Himalayan Buddhist polities. Sculptural and architectural remains at Malinithan and Naksaparbat show traces of Shakta and Shaiva traditions, revealing a syncretic religious landscape influenced by both indigenous tribes and Kamarupa rulers.

Material culture further expresses ecological adaptation through bamboo and cane architecture, wooden masks and ritual effigies, iron-smelting traditions among the Monpa and Sherdukpen, and the intricate weaving traditions of Adi, Apatani, and Mishmi women, all of which contribute to the region's distinctive visual and functional landscape. Archaeological and ethnographic evidence indicates that Arunachal Pradesh historically served as a cultural corridor and migration route linking Southeast Asia, Tibet, Bhutan, and the Brahmaputra Valley, contributing to shared architectural forms, ritual practices, and artistic styles among Tibeto-Burman speaking communities.

Despite modernization and expanding infrastructure, many traditional cultural landscapes remain vibrant. Terraced valleys, sacred forests, monasteries, jhum fields, and clan-based settlements continue to define the

region's cultural identity. Arunachal Pradesh thus stands as a living cultural landscape where prehistoric heritage, tribal ecological knowledge, Buddhist traditions, and indigenous cosmologies converge within one of India's most environmentally diverse settings.

MEGHALAYA

Meghalaya comprises seven administrative districts, West Garo Hills, East Garo Hills, South Garo Hills, Ri-Bhoi, West Khasi Hills, East Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills. The state's population is dominated by three major matrilineal tribal groups:Khasi, Garo, andJaintia (including the Pnar/Synteng).

The Khasis, belonging to the Mon-Khmer linguistic family, primarily inhabit the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The Garos are concentrated in the Garo Hills and are known for their strong matrilineal lineage system. The Jaintias represent a broad category comprising the Pnar/Synteng and related subgroups.Besides these major tribes, Meghalaya is also home to smaller tribal communities such as the Rabha, Hajong, Tiwa, and Koch, along with a significant number of non-tribal populations settled across urban and rural areas.

Traditional Cultural Landscape and Archaeology of Meghalaya

Meghalaya's cultural and archaeological landscape is shaped by its high rainfall, rolling plateaus, deep gorges, and dense forests, inhabited mainly by the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes. The region's matrilineal social system strongly influences landownership, clan settlements, and ritual spaces, while traditional villages—built with bamboo, wood, and stone—feature communal areas, ancestral sites, and stone-paved pathways. The ecology of the Khasi–Jaintia and Garo Hills have shaped settlement patterns, agricultural practices, and ritual life.Agriculture reflects adaptation to hilly terrain and heavy rainfall, combining terrace farming, jhum cultivation, and paddy cultivation in valley bottoms. Indigenous ecological knowledge supports agroforestry, bamboo management, watershed conservation, and the protection of clan forests. Sacred groves such as the Khasi Law Kyntang and Garo A'khing remain among India's oldest conservation traditions, serving as biodiversity refuges tied to animistic beliefs.Meghalaya is also one of South Asia's richest megalithic regions. Menhirs, dolmens, cairns, and stone alignments—especially in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills—serve as ancestral memorials, ritual markers, and clan symbols, demonstrating strong continuity from prehistoric times. Archaeological evidence from the region's extensive cave systems, Neolithic tool finds, and sites associated with the Jaintia Kingdom, such as the monolith complex at Nartiang, reveals a deep and diverse cultural history.

Ritual festivals like Shad Suk Mynsiem, Shad Nongkrem, Behdeinkhlam, and Wangala reinforce ties between community, ecology, and ancestral memory. Material culture—from bamboo architecture and weaving

traditions to the remarkable living root bridges—illustrates the fusion of ecological adaptation and indigenous innovation. Despite pressures from modernization and land-use change, many traditional landscapes, sacred groves, and megalithic sites remain central to tribal identity. Meghalaya thus stands out as a region where ancient megalithic heritage, matriliny, sacred ecological spaces, and vibrant indigenous knowledge converge into a rich cultural and archaeological landscape.

MIZORAM

Mizoram, located in the easternmost part of India, is characterized by one of the most varied hilly terrains in the region. Until 1972, it formed a district of Assam known as the Lushai Hills. The state's physical landscape consists of six to seven roughly parallel hill ranges stretching from north to south, with elevations generally increasing towards the central zone. While the valleys experience hot and humid conditions during summer, the higher altitudes remain cool and pleasant throughout the year.Ethnically, the people of Mizoram—collectively referred to as Mizo—are composed of several tribes and sub-tribes. Historically, major Mizo groups included the Lusei, Pawi (Lai), Paite, Ralte, Pang, and Hmar. Over time, around 15 major communities have been broadly recognized within the state. Some smaller groups such as the Ngente, Khiangte, Chawngthu, Renthlei, Zowngte, and Khwlhring have largely merged with larger tribal identities.The communities that continue to maintain distinct social and cultural identities include:Lusei,Hmar,Paite,Pawi (Lai),Mara,Bawm,Tlau,Ralte,Pang,Hualngo, andBaite.These groups together contribute to the rich cultural fabric of Mizoram, shaped by shared traditions, clan-based social structures, and a deep connection with the hilly environment.

Traditional Cultural Landscape and Archaeology of Mizoram

Mizoram, located in the southernmost part of Northeast India, is defined by rugged hill ranges, deep valleys, swift rivers, and dense evergreen forests. Historically known as the Lushai Hills, the region is inhabited by the Mizo and related tribes, whose settlement patterns, ecological adaptations, and clan-based social structures have shaped a distinctive cultural landscape. Traditional villages were built along ridges for defence and visibility, organized around the authority of a chief (Lal), and structured by clan-based spatial layouts. Houses made from bamboo and timber followed the contours of the terrain, forming cohesive linear settlements adapted to the hilly environment.Jhum cultivation remains central to Mizoram's cultural and ecological identity. This shifting agricultural system involves clearing and burning forest patches, cultivating mixed crops, and allowing long fallow periods for regeneration. Embedded within the jhum cycle are rituals that ensure fertility and harmony with nature. The Mizo possesses deep ecological knowledge of crop rotation, soil regeneration, bamboo flowering cycles, and water management, while communal labour traditions such as hnahthlak and hnathawh reinforce

social cohesion. Before the advent of Christianity, Mizo religion centred on animism, ancestor worship, and spirit appeasement, elements of which survive in sacred hills, groves, memorial stones, and agricultural festivals such as Chapchar Kut, Mim Kut, and Pawl Kut.

Material culture and architecture reflect close adaptation to the hill ecology. Traditional bamboo houses on stilts, the Zawlbuk boys' dormitory, basketry, weaving, wooden effigies, and handcrafted tools form the core of Mizo craftsmanship and social identity. Archaeologically, although research is still emerging, Mizoram contains scattered megaliths, burial cairns, habitation caves, and rock shelters that point to early settlement and long-term mortuary traditions. British colonial records documenting stone circles, ritual platforms, and abandoned hill forts provide additional insights into the region's pre-modern cultural landscape.

Migration histories indicate that the Mizo and cognate groups entered the Lushai Hills from the Chin Hills of Myanmar between the 16th and 18th centuries, creating a cultural corridor linking Myanmar, Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura. Despite transformations brought by Christianity and modern infrastructure, many traditional cultural elements remain preserved in clan customs, jhum fields, bamboo groves, weaving traditions, and stone monuments. Overall, Mizoram's cultural landscape reflects a rich interplay of ecological adaptation, clan organization, shifting cultivation practices, ritual traditions, and archaeological continuity across the forested hills of the Lushai region.

MANIPUR

Geographically, Manipur is surrounded by Nagaland, Assam, and Mizoram, and shares an international boundary with Myanmar on its eastern side. Although the valley's encircled terrain once contributed to a degree of isolation, historical records and oral traditions indicate the movement of Aryan groups from the west and Mongoloid populations from Southeast Asia into Manipur at different periods.Manipur's population is broadly grouped into three major human conglomerates. The Meiteiform the principal population group.The surrounding hill regions are inhabited by numerous tribal communities belonging to diverse cultural lineages. In the surrounding hill ranges reside groups such as Zeme,Liangmai, Rongmei, Tangkhul, Mao, Maram, Maring,Tarao, Gangte, Hmar, Paite, Thadou, Vaiphei, Zou, Aimol, Chiru, Koireng, Kom, Anal, Chote, Lamgang, Koirao, Thangal, Moyon, and Monsang.This diversity reflects long-term migration histories, ecological adaptations, and inter-community interactions that have shaped the region's cultural landscape identity over centuries.

Traditional Cultural Landscape and Archaeology of Manipur

Manipur's cultural heritage is shaped by its rich history, ecological diversity, and the long-standing traditions of its many communities. Manipur also possesses a remarkable prehistoric and protohistoric archaeological landscape. Sites such as the KhangkhuiMangsor Cave Ukhrul have yielded Palaeolithic artifacts, including stone tools, bone implements, and faunal remains, offering evidence of early human occupation in the region. These limestone cave complexes served as habitation spaces in deep antiquity and were even used as shelters during World War II. In the Imphal Valley, the Sekta Archaeological Living Museum preserves a protohistoric burial mound with urn burials, metal relics, and funerary objects belonging to early Meitei groups. Stratified excavations at Sekta have identified seven cultural layers, providing invaluable insight into social hierarchy, ritual life, and technological development in the valley's early societies

The state's tangible heritage is dominated by the sacred landscape of Kangla, the ancient capital of the Meitei kings. Archaeological remains within the Kangla complex—including fort walls, concentric moats (Thangapat), gateways, citadel ruins, sacred spaces, and the reconstructed Kanglasha sculptures—reflect over two millennia of political, ritual, and architectural continuity. Kangla stands apart as one of the most significant historical sites in Northeast India, representing cultural exchanges with Southeast Asia and a unique South Asian fort typology. Surrounding the capital are several important temples that express Manipur's Vaishnavite heritage. The Shree ShreeGovindaji Temple, the Old Govindaji Temple at Kangla, Radha Raman Temple, Brindavanchandra Temple, and Temple of Leimapokpa Keirungba illustrate distinctive architectural styles combining Mughal, Bengali, and indigenous influences. Their features—arched mandapas, curvilinear roofs, domes, and miniature shrines—demonstrate the evolution of Manipuri temple architecture from the 15th to the 19th centuries. Other monuments such as the Thangal General Temple commemorate important historical figures, while the Sana Konung Royal Palace reflects early 20th-century architectural fusion influenced by Mongol, Hindu, and European styles.

Museums such as the Manipur State Museum and the Mutua Bahadur Museum (Andro) help document and preserve this heritage. Their collections include tribal ornaments, historical artifacts, pottery, wood carvings, traditional tools, and an impressive 78-foot royal boat (Hiyang Hiren), representing the state's artistic and ceremonial heritage. The Imphal War Cemetery, maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, further contributes to Manipur's historical landscape, marking its strategic role in World War II's Burma Campaign.Collectively, Manipur's cultural and archaeological sites—ranging from prehistoric caves and protohistoric burial mounds to temples, palaces, and war memorials—illustrate a long, dynamic history shaped by indigenous traditions, royal patronage, regional interactions, and global historical events. They form a vibrant cultural landscape where myth, memory, and material heritage converge across the valley and hill regions.

NAGALAND

Nagaland comprises eight administrative districts, inhabited predominantly by 16 major Naga tribes along with several sub-tribes and clan-based groups. The state is often described as a "conglomeration of village republics" because each Naga village traditionally functioned as an autonomous socio-political unit with its own governance system, territory, and customary laws. This village-based autonomy continues to shape the social structure and cultural identity of Nagaland.Although the various Naga tribes maintain distinct traditions, dress styles, and languages, they share broad cultural affinities, making Nagaland a relatively homogeneous cultural region bound together by common ancestral roots and linguistic heritage. Historically, Nagaland comprised the former Naga Hills District of Assam and the Tuensang Frontier Division, which later unified to form the present state.The eight principal districts of Nagaland include:Kohima,Dimapur,Mokokchung,Wokha,Zunheboto,Phek,Mon, andTuensang.Among the major tribes inhabiting these districts are the:Angami,Ao,Chakhesang,Chang,Chirr,Konyak,Lotha,Khiamniungan,Makware,Phom,Rengma,Sangtam,Sema (Sumi),Yimchunger, andZeliang (Zeme, Liangmei, Rongmei).

Despite their diversity, these tribes collectively form the cultural core of Nagaland, each contributing unique traditions, architectural forms, rituals, and ecological practices that shape the state's cultural landscape.

Traditional Cultural Landscape and Archaeology of Nagaland

Nagaland's cultural landscape is shaped by its rugged hills, deep valleys, and thick forests, which historically fostered the emergence of small, autonomous hilltop villages. These settlements were strategically located for defence and visibility and were organized around clan-based social structures. Each village functioned as a self-sufficient unit with its own governance, elders' council, and ritual spaces. Traditional houses built with wood, bamboo, and cane blended seamlessly with the natural environment, while the morung—the men's communal house—served as the cultural and educational centre, preserving craftsmanship, oral traditions, and communal identity. This intimate relationship between people and terrain created a landscape where ecology and culture were inseparable.

The archaeological record of Nagaland, though still evolving, reveals early habitation and long-standing cultural continuity. Sites such as Chungliyimti have yielded pottery, stone tools, beads, and shell ornaments that hint at ancient trade links and migration histories. Megalithic traditions—visible through standing stones, stone platforms, and memorial structures—demonstrate the importance of ancestor veneration, social prestige, and

communal memory. These stone features, found across many districts, show striking continuity with practices still observed in some communities today, bridging the gap between the prehistoric past and living tradition.

Agricultural practices further shaped this landscape, with jhum (shifting cultivation) forming the backbone of subsistence. The Naga tribes developed deep ecological knowledge related to soil fertility, forest regeneration, and seasonal rhythms, allowing them to cultivate diverse crops on steep slopes. Festivals tied to agriculture—such as Moatsu, Sekrenyi, and post-harvest celebrations—reinforced community bonds and reflected a worldview in which humans, ancestors, and nature were deeply interconnected. Ritual stones, sacred groves, and ancestral platforms within village territories marked important cosmological and social spaces, contributing to a landscape rich in symbolic meaning.Together, Nagaland's traditional cultural landscape and archaeology highlight a region shaped by ecological adaptation, clan-based social order, ritual life, and enduring material traditions. Despite modern transformations, the cultural memory embedded in its villages, crafts, festivals, and megaliths continues to define Nagaland as one of the most distinctive cultural terrains of Northeast India.

TRIPURA

Tripura, situated at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, has long been a cultural meeting ground where tribal and non-tribal traditions intersect. Bordered by Bangladesh on three sides and lying southwest of Assam, the state's predominantly hilly terrain, with Agartala in a valley, has shaped its diverse cultural evolution. The major tribal communities—such as the Reang (Bru), Chakma, Debbarma, Halam, and Usai (Uchoi)—maintain distinct languages, customs, and clan-based social structures. Their practices of shifting and settled cultivation, rich festivals, ecological knowledge, and intricate handicrafts contribute significantly to Tripura's cultural landscape. As a result, Tripura represents a unique transitional zone where indigenous traditions interact with Bengali influences, creating a distinctive and enduring socio-cultural synthesis in Northeast India.

Traditional Cultural Landscape and Archaeology of Tripura

Tripura's traditional cultural landscape is a dynamic blend of the indigenous tribal population's heritage and the influential Bengali culture that coexists within the state. This landscape is visibly shaped by the daily lives, festivals, architecture, and crafts of its people. The social fabric is woven around festivals like Kharchi Puja, a unique celebration involving fourteen deities worshipped by all communities, and Durga Puja, a major event, showcasing the syncretic religious life of the state. Artistic expressions thrive through traditional dance forms such as the Hojagiri dance of the Reang community and the intricate handicrafts made from locally abundant bamboo and cane. Architecturally, grand royal residences like the Ujjayanta Palace and the Neermahal are prime

examples of the region's royal history, while traditional tribal homes (Tong Ghars or Gaireng), built on stilts, reflect practical adaptation to the region's hilly geography and climate.

The archaeology of Tripura provides substantial evidence of a rich historical continuum that extends from prehistory through ancient and medieval periods. Sites of global significance offer insight into early religious and artistic practices. Unakoti is renowned for its monumental rock-cut sculptures and stone images dating back to the 7th-9th centuries CE, featuring a colossal 30-foot-tall image of Lord Shiva and thousands of other carvings that have earned it the nickname "Angkor Wat of the Northeast". Further evidence of a flourishing mixed culture of Hinduism and Buddhism between the 8th and 12th centuries CE can be found at Pilak, a site yielding numerous sculptures and terracotta plaques. Similarly, Debtamura, or Chabimura, displays large panels of rock carvings of Hindu gods and goddesses along the Gomati River, dating to the 15th-16th centuries. These archaeological findings, combined with recent geo-archaeological studies uncovering Upper Paleolithic tools in the river valleys, solidify Tripura's status as a historically significant region and a crucial early corridor for human migration between South and Southeast Asia.

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