

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 An Introduction to the Population, Economy and Society of North-East India

1.1.1 North-east India: The Land, it's People and their History¹

At the convergence of the Indo-Malayan, Indo-Chinese, Palearctic and Indian bio-geographical realms, lies the North-eastern Region of India (NER hereafter) - a region that still remains rather obscure from the viewpoint of 'mainland' India (Fig. 1). Situated between the latitudes of 21.57°N and 29.30°N and longitudes of 88°E and 97.30°E, NER comprises currently of eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, which together cover a total area of about 2.6 lakh sq. km. and occupy 7.9 per cent of the total geographical area of the Indian subcontinent (Registrar General, 2004). Remarkably, it shares as much as 4200 km. of international boundary (that constitutes nearly 98 % of its total boundary) with four nations-Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar- while at the same time being joined with the rest of India by means of a narrow route popularly known as the *Siliguri corridor* or *Chicken's neck* (the latter name being rather an apt description of the relative dimensions of this passage) (Taher and Ahmed, 2000).

Physiographically, the land can be categorized into four distinct regions- (i) the

¹ It must be mentioned at the outset that this section does *not* present a complete discussion on the history and society of North-east India (which is indeed somewhat outside the scope and objective of the present research). In fact, the sole purpose of this part and its rather strategic insertion at the beginning of the thesis is to provide the most important facts on the region that have a bearing upon the issues to be presented and discussed in the rest of the dissertation.

Brahmaputra Valley (that lies almost entirely in Assam) (ii) the Eastern Himalayas (situated in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim) (iii) the Eastern Mountain Region (sprawled over parts of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and all of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura; with important low lying regions being the Tripura-Cachar plains and Imphal Valley) and (iv) the Meghalaya Mikir Tableland (a geological extension of the Indian Peninsula and covering the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya) (Government of India, 1981). The region is thus a mixture of hills and plains and specifically, while Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Sikkim could be described as hilly, Assam is largely a plain.

Not surprisingly, the distribution of population is highly skewed towards the plain areas, which in fact, finds reflection in the variation of population density across the states of the region (Table 1.1). Assam, which is obviously the largest state in NER, in terms of both the size of population and geographic extent, has the highest population density followed by Tripura, Meghalaya and Manipur. In fact, as can be seen from Table 1.1, with the sole exception of Meghalaya, all the hill states evince considerably lower population density vis-à-vis not just Assam, but also as compared to Manipur, Tripura, and the average for the region as a whole. In fact, the hills, while spreading across as much as 70 per cent of the entire landscape of NER, accommodate only about 30 per cent of its total population (Nayak, 2010).

It is perhaps obvious that the relatively higher productivity of plain land, determined in large part by the nature of soil and river systems, coupled with the arduous nature of the hilly terrain, has led to the aforesaid patterns of human settlement in the region. Indeed, soils of the plains are mostly alluvial in nature and ideal for agriculture, while those of the hills are red/red-loamy in nature and being generally less

fertile requires extensive treatment before cultivation. In fact, the differential nature of terrain and soil conditions has given rise to two distinct types of agricultural practice in NER- (i) settled agriculture in the plains, valleys and gentler slopes and (ii) slash and burn (called *jhum* in local terminology) elsewhere (Government of India, 1981). Needless to say, *jhumming* is the dominant agricultural practice in (but not restricted to) the hilly states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland.

TABLE 1.1: SOCIAL COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION OF NER, 2011

State/Region	Total Population	Population Density (persons Per Sq.km.)	Percent of lower castes (SC) in total population	Percent of tribal (ST) in total population	Number of ST groups*
Arunachal Pradesh	13,83,727	17	0.0	68.7	16
Assam	3,12,05,576	397	7.1	12.4	23
Manipur	27,21,756	122	3.7	35.1	34
Meghalaya	29,66,889	132	0.6	86.1	17
Mizoram	10,97,206	52	0.1	94.4	15
Nagaland	19,78,502	119	0.0	86.5	5
Sikkim	6,07,688	86	5.0	20.6	4
Tripura	36,73,917	350	17.8	31.7	19
NER	4,56,35,261	174	6.6	27.2	133
India	1,21,01,93,422	312	16.6	8.6	659

Source: Census of India, 2011, Provisional Population Totals, Paper-1 of 2011; *tribal.nic.in

What is more important (though hardly surprising) is that the hilly regions of NER are predominantly occupied by tribes.² In fact, as is evident from Table 1.1, the

² It should be mentioned here that the terms ‘tribe’, ‘tribal’(population) and ‘scheduled tribe’ have been used interchangeably in the text, and unless specified otherwise, refer to population

four hill states, viz., Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, have a largely tribal character, with the percentage of tribes in total population ranging from almost 69 per cent in Arunachal Pradesh to slightly under 95 per cent in Mizoram. However, the tribal population of the remaining states of NER including Assam cannot be said to be negligible either, given that they evince a far greater concentration of tribal population as compared to the all-India average (Table 1.1). Indeed, NER distinguishes itself in being home to at least 133 Scheduled Tribe groups out of a total of around 659 such distinct groups presently identified in India (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India).³

As mentioned earlier, the concentration of the tribal population in the hilly regions of NER hardly comes as a surprise. Several scholars (for e.g. Maharatna, 2005; Raza and Ahmad, 1990) observe that the tribes of India, who are arguably the autochthones of the region, are now found largely concentrated in various hilly, forested and semi-arid areas of the subcontinent, which are mostly unsupportive of large agricultural settlements. Indeed, the spatial distribution of the various ethno-cultural groups within the Indian subcontinent could be explained as resulting from a process of ‘backwash’; with the invasion and ingress of each new migratory wave,

groups that have been recognized as Scheduled Tribes under Article 342 of the Constitution of India and declared as such by the President through public notification.

³ As is perhaps well known, the list of Scheduled Tribes (ST) has been expanded and modified several times since it was first promulgated in the year 1950, the same year that India adopted its Constitution. In fact, the number of ST groups has increased manifold since then, with the last Constitutional amendment of 2012 bringing a nearly three-fold rise in their number- from 212 ST groups in 1950 to 659 such distinct groups presently (tribal.nic.in). Indeed, in the context of NER, talks are underway for granting ST status to six communities of Assam- the tea tribes, Koch-Rajbongshi, Moran, Motok, Tai-Ahom and Chutia- that together account for around 60 per cent of the population of Assam presently. In that case, Assam would count among the tribal majority states of NER with more than 70 per cent of its population belonging to one or other of the tribal communities (Kalita, 2013).

pushing the existing groups to the periphery (Panikker, 1955). Speaking specifically of the distribution of tribal population in India, it appears that their present predicament has been largely designed by this historical process of peopling of the subcontinent coupled with their inability to withstand the aggression of the incoming population groups. In fact, as argued by Maharatna (2005), in the mainstream perception of the process of peopling of the Indian subcontinent (and the resulting distribution of the tribal and non-tribal population), it was possibly the superior social organization and techno-economy of the non-tribal, Indo-Aryan speaking peoples that had forced the indigenous peoples, originally settled in the plains and river valleys of India, to recede gradually to their present locations in these rather inaccessible terrains.

Needless to say, the geographic patterning of the tribes has had historic impact on the future course of their economic and social development. Here, it seems worthwhile to quote from Ahmad (1983), who expresses this concern succinctly in the following words:

“The locational constraints have exercised far-reaching impact on their (tribal) world view, social responses to the agrarian formations and the pattern of interaction with the neighbouring communities.... There is no gainsaying the fact that the problems of the Indian tribes in contemporary India cannot be understood if they are delinked from the geographical and social isolation.”

[Ahmad (1983), quoted in Nayak, 1998: 166]

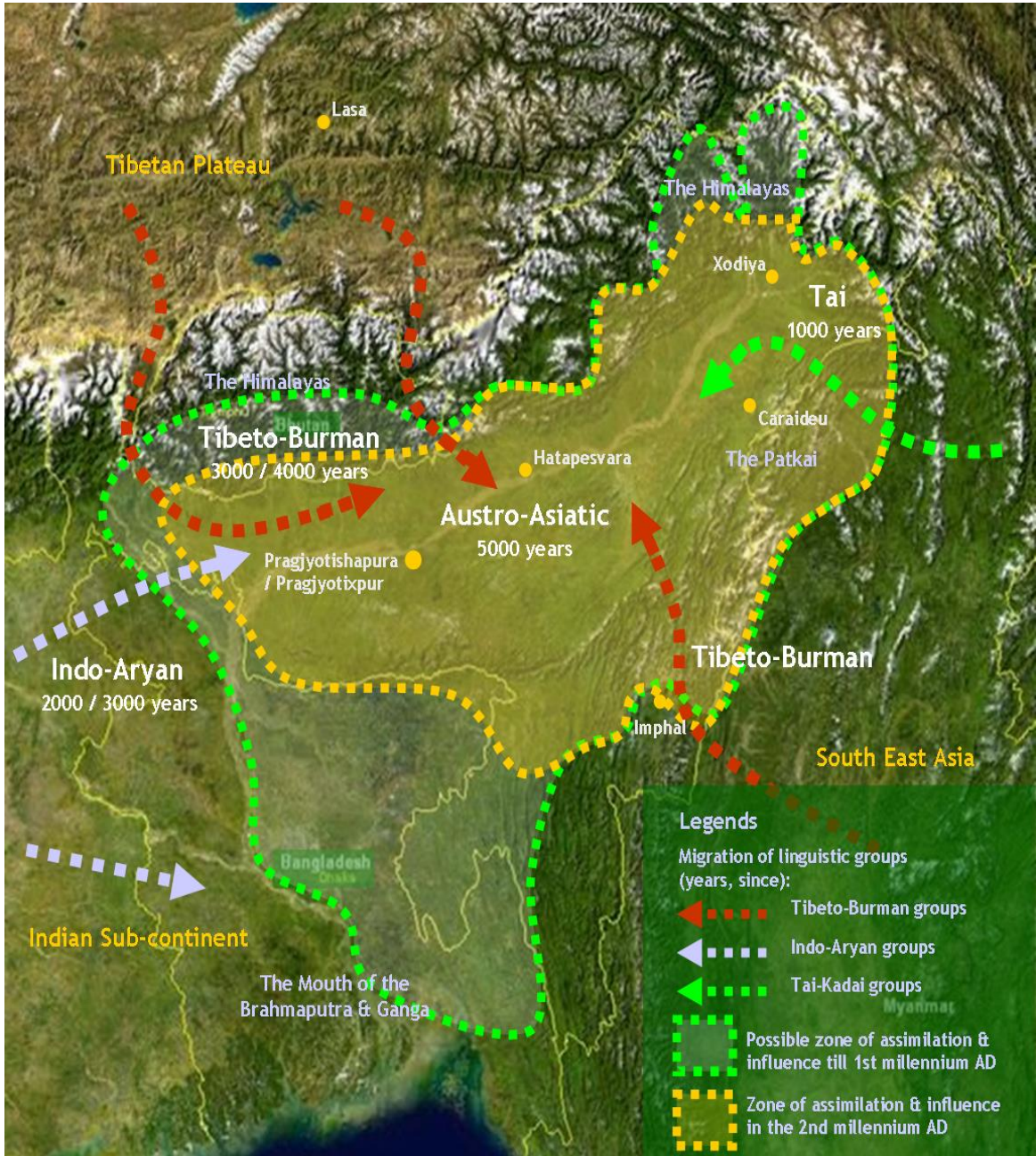
Indeed, it could be argued that, at least in the context of NER, the historical disadvantage in economic and social development was perpetuated (and possibly exacerbated) by the colonial, and to a certain extent, post-colonial policies on the

socio-political integration of the region with the remaining subcontinent (but more on this presently).

Anthropological research on the region finds its population to be primarily composed of four distinct ethno-cultural groups, viz., the Austro-Asiatic or Australoid groups, the Tibeto- Burmans, the Indo-Aryans, and the Tai-Ahoms (Barpujari, 1990; Baruah and Roy Choudhury, 1999; Kakati 1941, among others). Fig. 2 is a possible representation of the process of peopling of NER that has resulted in the presence of the aforementioned identities in the region. The Austro-Asiatic groups, represented primarily today by the Khasis of Meghalaya, are generally believed to be the earliest settlers of this region, who were driven from the foothills of the Brahmaputra Valley to their present habitats in the Khasi hills and the neighbouring hill districts of Karbi Anglong and Cachar, by the invasion of the Tibeto-Burmans (Nayak, 1998). These groups, in turn, were driven to their present primarily hilly habitats, by the invading Indo-Aryan groups who established the ancient kingdom of *Pragjyotishpur* (later known as *Kamrup*) including present day Assam and parts of Bengal and Bangladesh. The last ethno-cultural group to invade the region during the thirteenth century were the Ahoms/Tai-Ahoms, who came from the Yunnan province of China and established a kingdom that survived for nearly six hundred years before its annexation by the British in 1826 (Baruah, 1999).

Ethno-linguistically, the various dialects spoken in the region can be broadly assigned under the Austric, Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European language families (Taher, 1979; Moral, 1997). Interestingly perhaps, the Indo-European language finds its sole

FIG. 2: IMMIGRATION AND ASSIMILATION OF VARIOUS ETHNO-CULTURAL GROUPS IN ASSAM OVER VARIOUS PHASES OF HISTORY



Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Assam_Assimilation.png#file

Original sources: Barpujari (1990); Kakati (1941); image from NASA

autochthonous representation in the Assamese (Asamiya) language.⁴ Likewise, the only representative of the Austric language family is the Mon-Khmer, spoken by the Khasis of Meghalaya (Kakati, 1941). Almost all the remaining languages spoken by the various major and minor population groups in the region including Meitei, Angami, Ao, Konyak, Bodo, Mising, Kak-borak, Mizo, Hmar etc. can be placed under the Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Not surprisingly perhaps, Assamese (and in several cases pidgins derived from Assamese, such as Nagamese and Arunachalese) has been serving as the *lingua franca* among many linguistic groups for the past several centuries (Moral, 1997). In this connection, it is worth mentioning that the Asamiya language itself, as it stands currently, is a result of the fusion of the Ahom dialect of the Tai-Ahoms with the then existing Assamese language of the Brahmaputra valley (an *Apabramsa* dialect developed from Magadhi Prakrit of the eastern group of Sanskritic languages). Indeed, the exchange of several linguistic features among the various dialects of NER, as indicated by several researches (e.g. Moral, 1997), indicates considerable acculturation and socio-cultural diffusion among the various communities residing in and around the Brahmaputra Valley in the pre-colonial era.

⁴ Of course, we find other dialects belonging to the Indo-European language family in NER- the most notable among them being Bengali. However, in contrast to the prehistoric presence of the other languages, the latter were introduced much later by the British. In fact, as the story goes, the inability of the Ahom rulers of the eighteenth century to protect themselves from Burmese invaders, led them to seek assistance from the British, who were equally willing to oblige due to their commercial interests in the region, and conceded in return for a ‘Commercial Treaty.’ This treaty, which was signed between Gaurinath Singha of Assam and Captain Welsh in 1793, led to the opening of free commerce between British occupied Bengal and Assam, which effectively unlocked the doors of the region to immigrants from Bengal who came to settle in the region in various medical, legal, and teaching professions as well as many positions in the railways and post office (Chadha, 2005; Baruah and Roy Choudhury, 1999, Weiner, 1978).

Indeed, the Ahom rulers expressed a zeal for secularism marked by a policy of peaceful co-existence with the surrounding tribes, which even extended towards cultural synthesis with the latter. Evidence suggests that the Ahoms maintained commercial ties with many of the tribes during the pre-colonial times. Weekly trade with the Garos, Nagas and some tribes of Arunachal Pradesh (especially the Apa Tanis, hill Miris, Adis) was a regular feature during the Ahom rule, to which the aforementioned Nagamese and Arunachalese languages bear testimony today. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that Ahom kings conferred titles (such as *Bor Phukan*) on Naga individuals, allotted land to them and appointed them as officers in the army (Baruah, 1999). In fact, the bonds with the nearby tribes went further than interaction for commercial and military purposes and many Ahom kings are known to have sought alliance with women from neighbouring tribal communities. The records of the social interactions between the former and the latter, maintained carefully by the Ahoms, demonstrate this by indicating that many leading Ahom families had been formed by patriarchs belonging to non-Ahom (tribal) communities such as the Varahi, Miri, Chutiya, Koch, Kachari, and Garo (Ghosh, 2006). The Konyak Nagas maintain that at least up to 1936, they continued to receive an annual tribute, as acknowledgment of the marital bond between a certain Ahom king and a daughter of their village (Jacobs et.al., 1998). Indeed, some historians (e.g. Elwin, 2005) believe that tribes such as the Nagas may even have been subjects of the Ahom rulers. Overall, it appears that there was considerable interaction between the tribal communities and those residing in the plains of the Brahmaputra valley. However, much of that was to change with the advent of colonial rule in the Brahmaputra valley in 1826.

Indeed, the dominion of the Ahoms in the Brahmaputra valley had effectively come to an end before 1826 when the Burmese, after repeated attempts to overthrow the Ahom rule, finally succeeded in occupying Assam in 1821 and the Ahom kingdom came to be ruled by a Burmese commander. However, the Burmese rule in Assam was short-lived as the British, upon request from the Ahom ruler (and possibly being driven by the imminent threat of future invasions by the Burmese into Bengal), declared war against the latter in 1824. What followed was the two year long First Anglo Burmese war that ended with the Treaty of Yandaboo, signed on 24th February, 1826 between the Burmese and the British East India Company, leading to the British occupation of Assam (Baruah, 1999; Baruah and Roy Choudhury, 1999, among others).

However, what is more important from the socio-political (and economic) standpoint is the divisive policy adopted by the British administration between the Assam plains and the remaining (tribal) areas of North-east, after they established themselves in the region. In fact, “[t]he experience of the colonial rule in these areas (*tribal areas*), to say the least, was profoundly different from that of the regularly administered parts of British India,” (Baruah, 1999: 28) (italicized words added to original quotation). Specifically, while the principally non-tribal districts of the province of Assam were placed under the regular administrative regime of the Empire⁵ as in the rest of the British Provinces of India, the tribal tracts surrounding the Brahmaputra Valley (that today correspond roughly to the four states – Arunachal

⁵ Indeed, there was also some confusion regarding the position of Assam in the administrative map of British India (probably stemming in part from a lack of understanding of the region and its people). Assam was ruled as part of the Bengal Province till 1874, when it was declared a separate province due to administrative difficulties. However, again between 1905 and 1921, the region was merged with Bengal and administered as the Bengal and Assam Province. Amidst strong protests against the merger, it was once again separated from Bengal and constituted as the Assam Province and placed under the Governor-General of Assam Province (Inoue, 2005).

Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland) faced severance and isolation- physical, social and perhaps even psychological- from the Valley (and as a consequence, the rest of India), through a series of rules and regulations beginning 1874. “First, the people living in the settled districts of Bengal and Assam were prohibited from entering these hills by the introduction of Inner Line System under the East Bengal Frontier Regulation, 1873. This was followed by removal of all outsiders not required by the British in the hills or considered undesirable under the Chin Hills Regulation of 1896. Then the operation of most of the general laws of the country was made inapplicable in these hills by an order under the Assam Frontier Tracts Regulation, 1880. The Government of India Acts of 1915 and 1919 termed these areas as "backward" and excluded them politically from the purview of the new provincial legislature and the High Court. Finally, the Government of India Act of 1935 created a totally new political status for these areas by excluding them fully from the federal and provincial legislatures as well as the jurisdiction of the High Court” (Jafa, 1999).

Thus, the colonial rule in NER, in effect, led to a hardening of the boundaries of the tribal hinterland with the rest of Assam. It would not be incorrect to say that the policies followed the British in NER laid the foundations for the balkanization of Assam witnessed in independent India, by sowing the seeds of ethnic determinism of nationhood (which is inherently opposed to the character of the Indian state marked by a multi-ethnic and socio-culturally diverse population) and more importantly, by creating a *political* cleavage with the rest of the subcontinent. Indeed, many researchers and scholars are of the opinion that the ethno-centric political movements in the tribal dominated areas of NER heralded by the Naga armed conflicts (beginning

1963) have their roots in the inability of the rising political consciousness of the Indians during the final years of the British *Raj* to penetrate the hills of NER.

It is perhaps interesting to note that the proclaimed reason behind the introduction of the various regulations on the tribal areas within NER was the 'protection' of the tribes from the plains people. Prima facie, the policy of 'non-interference' in the internal affairs of the tribes even adduced support for the benevolent intentions of the *Raj* towards the socio-economically backward region in NER. However, evidence perhaps suggests to the contrary and indeed, the reason behind granting the tribes the freedom to govern themselves, might have been a lack of commercial interest in the areas inhabited by them. In fact, a reading of the '*History of the Frontier Areas Bordering Assam*' penned by one of the Governors of colonial Assam, Robert Reid, makes it amply clear that while on the one hand, the *Raj* started to raise considerable taxes of various kinds from the tribes, on the other, they thought it commercially more prudent to dissociate themselves from the direct administration of these areas, thus leaving them to manage their internal affairs according to existing rules (Reid, 1942). However, this is not to say that the condition of the directly administered plains region of Assam, at least as far as socio-economic conditions are concerned, was any better than the surrounding tribal areas.

In fact, on the eve of Independence, Assam was among the poorest states of India; the reasons for which can clearly be traced back to the policies adopted during the colonial period. There is no gainsaying that the administrative and economic policies followed by the British in India, which were mostly driven by their short-term commercial interests, led to an overall degeneration of India's local/village economy, North-east India being no exception. However, it would be interesting here to point out

some drastic changes that occurred by way of the British involvement (or rather interference) in the economy of Assam.

It is well-known that the British were allured to the region by the possibility of financial gains from investment in its indigenous resources, of which tea is the primary example. However, the policies used by the British for the establishment and expansion of the tea estates (and a few other industries, such as coal and oil) entailed practically no involvement of local resources; leading to the formation of an enclave economy in Assam (Guha, 1977, 1991; Sharma, 2011). In fact, “the most significant aspect of the colonial economy was that the people of the region did not stand to benefit much from the “enclave” economy that was being developed by the British. The extracted surplus from the tea industry as well as a substantial portion of the wage bills went outside the province and there emerged a serious imbalance between the growing modern sector comprising the tea plantations, coal-mines, oil-fields and the associated infrastructure on the one hand and the near-stagnant agriculture on the other. With most of the head offices located in London and Calcutta, the indigenous sector of the economy may be said to have only marginally benefitted by the colonial development pattern” (Misra, 2005: 57). Interestingly, even the modest infrastructural investment undertaken by the British in the plains region of Assam failed to benefit the populace. For instance, the railway lines that were laid down for tea trade served merely the interests of the European planters and never connected the districts or towns of Assam (Sharma, 2011).

Furthermore, there were changes both in the nature and pattern of the existing trade relations of Assam with its neighbours. While on the one hand, trade with Bengal received substantial boost, that with the surrounding tribes or even with neighbouring

countries such as Bhutan, Tibet, Myanmar and China (even if comparatively marginal) declined tremendously during the first half of the twentieth century. Alongside with this, commodities such as tea, oil and jute came to occupy the most important place in the external trade of Assam replacing others like cotton, lac and ivory (Barpujari, 1996; Misra, 2004, Misra, 2005).

Remarkably perhaps, the financial relations between the Provincial Government in Assam and the Imperial Government at the Centre, was one marked by inequity and exploitation and added further to the socio-economic woes of the region. While on the one hand, the provincial governments had little control over the taxes collected by them, on the other they were made responsible for the provision of social services, which no doubt suffered due to lack of resources. In fact, such was the extent of exploitation that in spite of the presence of quite a few flourishing industries in the region such as tea, oil and coal, the province steeped deeper into financial deficits with each passing year. In fact, Assam's main industries fell under Central taxation, the profits of which never reached Assam (Jakhalu, 2001).

On the whole, it appears that that the occupation of Assam by the British was a turning point in the history of the region, one that set the course for its social, economic and political development (or misery?) in the years to come. In light of the preceding discussion, we next set out to examine and interpret the economic and social developments in NER in the post-colonial era, and identify the contemporary issues facing the people of the region today.

1.1.2 Economic and Social Development in NER: An Overview

That NER is economically the least developed region of the Indian subcontinent is a widely known fact. The average annual per capita income of NER during 2011-12 was around 27,500 I.N.R, which was around 38 per cent lower than the all-India average for the same period. Indeed, even as many parts of the country have made significant strides towards modernization, industrialization and economic prosperity, NER as a whole remains largely a rural agrarian society with the majority of its workforce engaged in the primary sector. According to the 2001 Census, the percentage of cultivators was highest in Nagaland (68.4%), followed by Meghalaya (65.8%), Arunachal Pradesh (61.7%) and Mizoram (60.6%). However, there is little variation in these figures over the states of the region and overall, agricultural labourers and cultivators together constituted 54.7% of the total workforce of NER.

Even though the proportion of workers engaged in the primary sector in NER is comparable to the all-India average of 58.2%, what is distressing is that while the agricultural sector has witnessed considerable progress elsewhere in India, it continues to remain backward in NER. Whereas NER accounts for 3.4 per cent of the agricultural land of the country, it contributes just 2.8 per cent to the total foodgrain production of India (RBI, 2005); a fact that underscores the extremely low agricultural productivity of the region. In fact, the agriculture of the region is primarily of the subsistence type dominated by small farmers. While around 60 per cent of the farmers possess landholdings below one hectare, around 80 per cent hold below two hectares of land (CMIE, 2007). Indeed, the entire gamut of factors including an exceptionally low proportion of total irrigated area (ranging from 5.5 per cent in Assam to 30.2 per cent

in Meghalaya- well below the national average of 41.5 per cent), the negligible use of agricultural inputs in the form of fertilizers (compare for instance the use of 1.5 kg per hectare in Sikkim or even 60 kg per hectare in Manipur to the all-India average of 104.5 kg per hectare during 2004-05) or even electricity, and the ground level utilization of credit, points towards the lack of development of the agricultural sector of NER (Karmakar, 2008). Surprisingly, even though the staple food of all the states of the region is rice, the lack of required infrastructural support and market forces do not encourage the region to specialize in foodgrain production (that is especially true of the hilly states Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Sikkim), leading to high dependency. Indeed, each year more than a thousand crore is expended in importing food from the rest of the country (Sinha, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, there has been practically no growth of the secondary sector (manufacturing and industries) in NER. Keeping aside the few large-scale industries set up in Assam during the colonial period, the region has witnessed very little progress in this area. Indeed, so little has been the investment in the secondary sector that at present less than two per cent of the total number of large-scale industries and only around three per cent of the small and medium enterprises (SME) in the country is located in the region (Sinha, 2010). In fact, most of the employment outside the primary sector is concentrated in services, especially in Government services/public administration, which is in contrast to the reasonably high presence of the manufacturing and industrial employment elsewhere in the country (e.g. Saha, 2012; Sinha, 2010; Srivastav, 2006).

One of the primary (and immediate) causes of the deficient growth of both agriculture and industry is the lack of economic/physical infrastructure in NER

(Karmakar, 2008; Sinha, 2010). Even basic infrastructural facilities in the form of rail lines, metalled roads and power are grossly wanting in the region and majority of its states. The availability of all-weather roads is generally poor in NER. In terms of road density (as the standard indicator for measuring the development of road network), we find that all the North-eastern states (with the sole exception of Tripura) evinced lower figures as compared to the all-India average during 2004-05. In fact, the relative situation, in terms of differentials between the state figures and national averages, has worsened since 1979 (Table 1.2). Indeed, Assam had a higher road density compared to the national average in 1979, but the situation deteriorated rather fast during the preceding three decades, so that during 2004-05, it lagged behind the rest of India almost as much as it was ahead during 1979!

This appears even more distressing in the light of the fact that railway connectivity is practically non-existent in the hill states of NER. Remarkably, railways are yet to be established in Meghalaya, while rail routes are below 2 km in length in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland. In fact, around 98 per cent of railway route lies within a single state viz., Assam. It perhaps goes without saying that the poor state of road and rail connectivity, apart from hindering the general mobility of population, retards the growth of both the agricultural and industrial sector by increasing the difficulties in accessing markets for finished commodities and material inputs to production, and even the movement of labour across states.

Indeed, the situation is not very different in the case of other physical infrastructural facilities as well. For instance, the per capita consumption of electricity among the North-eastern states is among the lowest in India, and even though

Table 1.2: Broad Indicators of Social and Economic Development in NER and Constituent States, A Long Term View

State → Year ↓	Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Manipur	Meghalaya	Mizoram	Nagaland	Sikkim	Tripura	NER*	India
Compound annual growth rate of per capita NSDP at constant prices										
1980-81 to 1996-97 ^a	5.42	0.96	2.38	2.19	-	2.71 ^c	8.85 ^d	3.91	1.54 ^e	3.22
1999-00 to 2006-07 ^b	5.20	3.11	2.71	4.34	3.28	4.42 ^f	6.07	7.09	3.27 ^g	5.21
2004-05 to 2011-12	5.15	4.75	3.65	6.41	7.42	5.13	16.57	7.34	5.25	6.70
Sex Ratio (females per 1000 males)										
1901	-	919	1037	1036	1113	973	916	874	939	979
1951	-	868	1036	949	1041	999	907	904	891	965
1971	861	896	980	942	946	871	863	943	906	930
2011	919	953	987	985	975	931	889	961	956	940
Population Literacy Rates (per cent)										
1971	11.3	28.7	32.9	29.5	-	27.4	17.7	30.9	28.6	29.4
1991	32.8	42.5	49.9	38.2	66.9	51.1	46.5	49.5	43.9	42.5
2011	66.9	73.2	79.8	75.5	91.6	80.1	82.2	87.7	75.6	74.0
Female Literacy Rates (per cent)										
1971	3.7	19.3	19.5	24.6	-	18.6	8.9	21.1	19.3	18.9
2011	59.6	67.3	73.2	73.8	89.4	76.7	76.4	83.2	70.2	65.5

Table 1.2 continued..

State → Year ↓	Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Manipur	Meghalaya	Mizoram	Nagaland	Sikkim	Tripura	NER*	India
Poverty Rates (Head Count Poverty)										
1983	40.9	40.5	37.0	38.8	36.0	39.2	39.7	40.0	-	44.5
1993-94	39.3	40.9	33.8	37.9	25.6	37.9	41.1	39.0	-	35.9
1993-94**	54.5	51.8	65.1	35.2	11.8	20.4	31.8	32.9	-	45.3
1999-00	33.5	36.1	28.5	33.9	19.5	32.7	36.5	34.4	-	26.1
2004-05**	31.4	34.4	37.9	16.1	15.4	8.8	30.9	40.0	-	37.2
2009-10**	25.9	37.9	47.1	17.1	21.1	20.9	13.1	17.4	-	29.8
Rural Male Unemployment Rate, Usual Principal Status (Current Daily Status) (per cent)										
1993-94	16 (19)	46 (70)	12 (22)	4 (6)	14 (10)	21 (21)	6 (6)	14(34)	-	14 (56)
1999-00	8 (13)	32 (64)	21 (24)	5 (6)	14(19)	26 (28)	32 (33)	7 (17)	-	17 (72)
2004-05	11 (16)	30 (60)	20 (19)	1 (2)	8 (8)	59 (40)	31 (29)	98 (122)	-	21 (80)
Rural Female Unemployment Rate, Usual Principal Status (Current Daily Status) (per cent)										
1993-94	2 (4)	77 (124)	7 (11)	0 (2)	4 (5)	0 (6)	16 (17)	58 (104)	-	8 (56)
1999-00	1 (1)	66 (125)	15 (26)	3 (5)	3 (5)	20 (31)	19 (25)	4 (57)	-	10 (70)
2004-05	6 (11)	70 (87)	12 (11)	6 (7)	1 (3)	33 (22)	17 (21)	350 (374)	-	31 (87)

Table 1.2 concluded

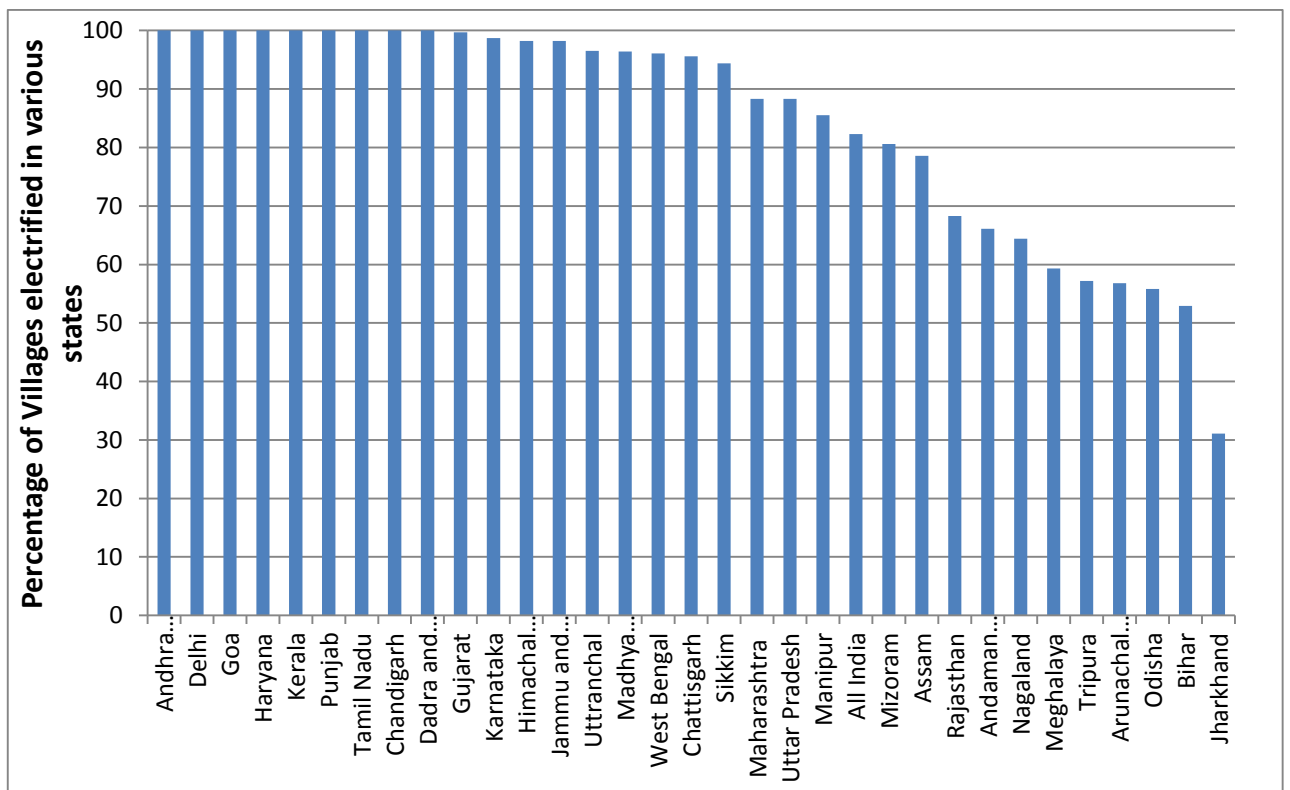
State → Year ↓	Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Manipur	Meghalaya	Mizoram	Nagaland	Sikkim	Tripura	NER*	India
Nutritional status among children (2005-06) (figures in parentheses are the respective figures for 1998-99) (per cent)										
% 6-35 months with anaemia	66.3 (54.5)	76.7 (63.2)	52.8 (45.2)	68.7 (67.6)	51.7 (57.2)	-	56.9 (76.5)	67.9 (61.8)	-	79.2 (74.2)
% with BMI <18.5 kg/m ²	30 (22)	36 (35)	20 (20)	43 (29)	14 (20)	24 (19)	17 (16)	35 (37)	-	40 (43)
Nutritional status among adult women (2005-06) (figures in parentheses are the respective figures for 1998-99) (per cent)										
% 6-35 months with anaemia	50.6 (62.5)	69.6 (69.7)	39.3 (28.9)	49.6 (48.0)	40.7 (48.0)	-	58.5 (61.1)	67.4 (59.0)	-	56.2 (51.8)
% with BMI <18.5 kg/m ²	16.4	36.5	14.8	14.6	14.4	17.4	11.2	36.9	-	35.6
Nutritional status among adult men (2005-06) (per cent)										
% 6-35 months with anaemia	27.4	44.6	14.1	34.2	19.5	-	18.1	39.8	-	4.3
% with BMI <18.5 kg/m ²	15.2	35.6	16.3	14.1	9.2	14.2	12.2	41.7	-	33.7
Road Density (per 100 sq. km.)										
1979	13.82	72.59	39.47	16.04	13.82	35.06	-	74.63	-	48.90
2004-05	17.12	47.77	38.73	35.12	19.21	73.24	-	150.49	-	76.84

Notes: ^a Compound annual growth rates calculated at 1980-81 constant price. ^b Compound annual growth rates calculated at 1999-00 constant prices ^c The compound annual growth rate for Nagaland has been calculated for the period 1980-81 to 1993-94 ^d The compound annual growth rate for Sikkim has been calculated for the period 1980-81 to 1991-92 ^e The compound annual growth rate for NER excludes the figures for Mizoram as data are not available at constant prices. The NER figure excludes the figures for Nagaland for the period 1994-95 to 1996-97 and the figures for Sikkim for the period 1992-93 to 1996-97 ^f The compound annual growth rate for Nagaland has been calculated for the period 1999-2000 to 2005-06 ^g The compound annual growth rate for NER excludes the figure for Nagaland for the year 2006-07 * population-weighted average ** Tendulkar Methodology

Sources: Government of Meghalaya, 2006; RGI (1951, 1971, 1991, 2011); NSSO (various rounds); www.mospi.gov.in; IIPS (2007)

there has been some increase in this variable overtime, there remains a substantial gap between the North-eastern states and the average consumption levels in the country (not to mention that among the more developed states of India). Remarkably, rural electrification (the percentage of villages having electricity) has registered considerable progress among the states of the region, but even here we find that these states are among the remaining few that have yet to reach full rural electrification in India (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Percentage of Villages Electrified, various states of India, 2008



Source: Government of Meghalaya, 2009

Given the rather tardy progress of both the primary and the secondary sectors in NER, it should come as little surprise that the growth of real per capita incomes has been sluggish over the past decades. In fact, as can be seen from Table 1.2, the

compound annual rate of growth of per capita net state domestic product (NSDP) was a meager 1.54% per annum (p.a.) for NER during the period 1981 to 1997, while the same for all-India was 3.22% p.a. on average. However, the growth rate of per capita income recorded an increase in later periods, especially after the 1990's. Indeed while between 1996 and 2006, per capita incomes grew by 3.37% p.a., growth rates escalated further to 5.25% p.a. in NER between 2004 and 2012. Nevertheless, the growth rates were still considerably lower than the all-India figures for the respective periods. Indeed, at least up to 2005, all the states of the region (barring Tripura) evinced lower growth rates than the national average. In fact, the relatively higher rates of growth evinced lately by a few states of the region, viz., Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura, has been primarily fuelled by the growth in the service sector, and especially through expansion of public administration (Srivastav, 2006)⁶. Hence, even the economic growth of the aforementioned states remain uncertain in the future, unless there is adequate thrust on the development of the agricultural and manufacturing sectors in these states, and of course, in the region as a whole.

The situation of employment (or rather unemployment) presents another area of concern in NER. Even as per capita income growth rates were rising in the region (however slowly), unemployment did not show any clear trend of decline at least after the 1990's, as can be seen from the various (and any of the) indicators of unemployment (Table 1.2). In fact, a remarkable feature among the various states of NER, which stands in contrast to the all-India pattern, is the lack of significant difference between the short-term [as measured for instance by the Current Daily

⁶ Of late, the manufacturing sector of Meghalaya has shown some signs of growth and it has been contributing substantially to the growth of per capita incomes since at least the middle of the 1990's (Srivastav, 2006; Sinha, 2010).

Status (CDS)] and long-term unemployment rates [as measured by the Usual Status (US)], signifying the structural nature of the problem in the region (Government of Tripura, 2007).

Not surprisingly, between 1993 and 2000, there was increase in the percentage of unemployed males and females among most of the states of NER according to both the CDS and US measures and, in rural as well as urban areas. However, the only exception to the usual pattern was Tripura, and to some extent Assam, that evinced moderate decline in unemployment during the aforesaid period. Interestingly, from 2000 to 2005, there was very little change in the unemployment rates in NER but for Nagaland and Tripura, the latter two states revealing a huge increase in both male and female unemployment. It should also be mentioned that overall, among the various states of this region, the situation of employment seems better in Meghalaya and Mizoram (and to some extent Arunachal Pradesh) as these states reveal lower employment rates over most of the period covered here as compared to the all-India average. In this context, it is interesting to note that the proportion unemployed, as perhaps expected, is many times higher among the educated group as compared to the population average among the North-eastern states. Not surprisingly, the latter two states perform better in this respect too, but the situation of educated females in both rural and urban areas appears worrisome even here (Government of Tripura, 2007:181-182).

Given the history of relative socio-economic backwardness of the region, it would be rather interesting to look into the progress in poverty reduction among the states of NER (Table 1.2). Official poverty estimates are available at least since the early 1980s, but are based on a methodology of estimation that has been modified quite

a few times. To keep the discussion simple, we focus here on the changes in headcount poverty rate between 1993 and 2010, for which we have estimates based on a uniform methodology (Tendulkar methodology), thus helping us dodge many of the problems of interpretation of estimates thrown up by dissimilar methods of estimation. More importantly, the Tendulkar methodology provides estimates based on a wider and more comprehensive definition of poverty, which includes education, shelter and clothing in addition to food requirements.⁷

A look at the level and trend of poverty decline in NER, reveals several interesting patterns in the data. First, even though there has been a tendency towards decline, poverty rates show considerable variation among the states of NER. Second, during 1993-94, NER had one of the highest poverty rates in India and while only a single state- Mizoram- evinced lower poverty as compared to the national average, three states- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur-evinced vastly higher poverty compared ranging from around 51 percent in Assam to 65 per cent in Manipur (Table 1.2). However, all the states, including the three mentioned above, witnessed substantial reduction in poverty in later years, and in fact, at a faster rate vis-à-vis all-India, so that all of them (with the sole exception of Tripura) evinced lower poverty as compared to the national average figures during 2004-05. Third, during the period 2004 to 2010, poverty rates *increased* in as many as five states of the region- Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland- and in fact, lead to the reversal of poverty decline experienced earlier by Meghalaya and Mizoram. Thus, in the latter two

⁷ However, according to the Planning Commission, the Tendulkar methodology has to be put to disuse as there have been several recent economic changes not accounted for by it. Indeed, a new committee headed by C. Rangarajan is already underway with a new methodology and as a result new estimates of poverty, even as we write this.

states headcount poverty was higher in 2010 as compared to their levels in 1993! Indeed, in 2010 all the states of the region, with the exception of Meghalaya and Sikkim, revealed higher headcount poverty as compared to the national average. Overall thus, the performance of the North-eastern states in poverty reduction cannot be said to have been consistently satisfactory since the early 1990s at least.

The last observation is however, intriguing. In fact, the North-eastern states were the only to reveal rise in poverty since 2005 and this deserves some explanation and verification. As an explanation, it is quite simply possible that there has been poor implementation of State sponsored programmes aimed at the generation of employment among the poor in rural (and urban) areas. For instance, it has been claimed that the lower rural unemployment rates in Tripura as compared to the all-India average after 1990 can be directly attributed to the serious implementation of rural employment programmes in this state compared to other regions of the country (Government of Tripura, 2007). This obviously has positive implications for the reduction of poverty. Hence, it is conceivable that administrative failure in terms of poor implementation of poverty reduction/employment generation programmes in most of the states in NER have been contributing to the high levels of poverty, and perhaps even the sudden rise in poverty among the aforesaid states.

Indeed, the evaluation of the State sponsored poverty reduction programmes such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)/ Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MG-NREGA) by several scholars, reveal that there are more serious administrative problems in the implementation of these programmes in NER as compared to many other states of India (see for instance, Rengasamy and Sasi Kumar, 2011). Moreover, several researchers have also noted that

states that have performed better in the reduction of poverty rates within the region such as Meghalaya and Tripura (recently), have also performed better in several ways in the implementation of poverty reduction (and employment generation) programmes as compared to others such as Assam, which has performed poorly in both respects (see for instance Feroze et al., 2012; Panda et al., 2009; Roy, 2010 among others).

It is interesting to note that evidence on the change in the nutritional status of children and adults, also suggests that improvements in the standard of living in the recent past in NER have been sluggish at best. For example, between 1999 and 2005, the percentage of undernourished children- those with anaemia or those who were underweight- showed significant decline in just a single state, viz., Mizoram, while undernourishment actually rose in the remaining states (Nagaland presented a unique case with increase in the percentage of underweight children on one hand and a decline in those with anaemia on the other). In fact, the situation is almost identical in the case of women as well, with the percentage of women experiencing nutritional deficiencies actually rising between 1999 and 2005 among two of the states of the region, viz., Manipur and Tripura. It is perhaps noteworthy that regardless of current trends, the nutritional status of men, women and children appears to be much better among the tribal dominated states of the region. Indeed, the percentage of undernourished population in these areas is lower as compared to the average of the region as well as all-India, reflecting the healthy lifestyle followed by the tribals- at least till recently.

Despite several disadvantages related to economic growth in NER, many states of the region still stand ahead as far as several social development indicators are concerned (Table 1.2). Majority of the population of NER is literate, and the region as a whole, as well as all the states, except Arunachal Pradesh, evinced higher literacy

rates vis-à-vis all-India in 2011 (Assam evinced comparable literacy rates with the all-India level). Interestingly, even though it is generally held that the growth in literacy, especially that among females, in NER has been huge achievement, it appears only partially true in the light of evidence. No doubt, female literacy rates among most of the states of NER, and especially the tribal majority states, was substantially higher than that attained at all-India level for instance during 2011. However, it cannot be forgotten that these states had a higher female literacy rate to begin with (Table 2.2). In fact, between 1981 and 2011, female literacy rates have increased faster at the *all-India level* as compared to most of the states of NER- notable exceptions being the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim.

Be that as it may, the overall progress in NER along various dimensions of social development has been noteworthy, at least since the beginning of the 1990s. Indeed, the human development index (HDI), for instance, shows that the absolute value of HDI in most of the North-eastern states was higher than the national level in 1991.⁸ While, the relative ranking among the 32 states and union territories of India placed NER at the lower end of the development spectrum, the India Human Development Report 2011 nevertheless reveals that the position of the North-eastern states has been steadily improving since the 1990s. Whereas the North-eastern states (excluding Assam) occupied rank 9 (which is itself commendable) during 1999-2000, the states climbed the ladder further to position themselves at number 6 during 2007-08 (Government of India, 2011).

⁸ The HDI, as is well known, is a composite measure of the relative progress of a region/country/state along set benchmarks of consumption, longevity and educational attainment. And even though we have seen that the growth of income and consumption has not been impressive in NER, the purpose of studying the HDI is that it is a useful summary measure of the overall social progress of a population.

Further, NER has historically evinced far more balanced sex ratios vis-à-vis India. Indeed, the sex ratio (female/male) in this part of the country started to look up much earlier than that at the all-India level, commensurate with the decline in immigration since the beginning of the 1970s. Indeed, it can be reasonably argued that the higher proportion of females in the population in NER (among both children and adults) is a direct outcome of the higher proportion of tribes in the population.

Tribals everywhere have been known for far more egalitarian gender relations in their societies compared to their non-tribal counterparts. The situation in NER is broadly in harmony with this larger picture. In addition to the relatively favourable female to male ratios as compared to the all-India average scenario, we find that the female singulate mean age at marriage among the North-eastern states has been, and still is, considerably higher compared to all-India average levels (Maharatna, 2005). Moreover, recent data from standard sample surveys [National Family Health Survey (NFHS)] find that women's participation in decision-making regarding their own health care, household purchases and physical mobility was highest among the North-eastern states, and actually even higher than the Southern states (IIPS and ORC Macro, 2007) (but more on this in subsequent chapters).

Unfortunately, there is evidence that the situation may be fast changing in NER. Even as sex ratios have been rising in NER since 1971/81, the JSR has registered continuous decline especially since 1981 (Ramaiah et al., 2011). There is a growing discomfort that tribal societies may in fact, be emulating the culture of discrimination against females characteristic of large parts of 'mainstream' India, leading to an intensification of gender bias among them. Interestingly enough, recent estimates indicate that gender discrimination could actually be on the rise in NER; rolling back

the earlier trend of relative female *advantage* in nutritional and mortality outcomes among most of the states of the region. As an illustration, we present changes in the gender disparity indices of mortality, nutrition and childcare for the period 1998 to 2005, constructed from NFHS data in Table 1.3 below. These indices, based on Sopher's method (Sopher, 1974), measure the disparity between male and female children along any particular dimension of well being. For instance, the index of gender disparity in childcare reflects the extent of discrimination against the girl child in receiving full immunization. A positive value indicates bias against females, while a negative value would indicate a relative female advantage. When there is no discrimination between the sexes, the index assumes the value zero. (See Appendix 1 for a full description of the method and the calculation of the various indices).

As far as these indices lead us, none of the states of the region exhibited any form of gender bias during the late nineties. In fact, what we come across is a relative female advantage in nutrition, childcare and mortality, which is especially pronounced in the case of the tribal dominated states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. Surprisingly, the situation is altogether reversed in many states of the region during the following period.

During 2005-06, in around half of the states, the nutritional status of girls was found to be relatively worse as compared to boys, and in nearly all the others, the relative advantage of girls had declined significantly. In fact, the picture is remarkably consistent with regard to the reversal of female advantage in each of the three indicators of gender disparity. Surprisingly, we find a relative male advantage even in the case of immunization. This is especially alarming as the vaccination and immunization campaigns are sponsored by the Government and do not involve any

Table 1.3: Gender Disparity Indices along Various Dimensions of Well-Being among Children Aged 0-6, NER: 1998-99 and 2005-06

State	Index of Gender Disparity In Nutrition		Index of Gender Disparity In Childcare		Index of Gender Disparity In Mortality	
	1998-99	2005-06	1998-99	2005-06	1998-99	2005-06
Arunachal Pradesh	-0.40	-0.04	-0.63	0.36	-0.10	-0.04
Assam	-0.01	0.10	1.04	-0.17	-0.22	0.10
Manipur	-0.01	0.04	-0.22	0.44	-0.22	0.04
Meghalaya	-0.02	-0.04	-0.11	-0.01	-0.34	-0.05
Mizoram	-0.26	0.04	-0.49	0.41	-0.30	0.04
Nagaland	-0.51	-0.16	0.04	0.03	-0.13	-0.16
Sikkim	-	-	-	0.52	-	-
Tripura	-0.10	0.04	0.95	0.30	-0.62	0.04

Source: Author's calculations from NFHS data [IIPS (2007)]

direct monetary cost on the part of the family. Indeed, it may not be long before gender bias against females manifest itself in many other forms in this region as well.

Before concluding this section, we briefly discuss the political situation in the region and its states, Indeed, any discourse on the society of NER is incomplete without reference to the socio-political turmoil that has been going on in the region for a considerably long time now, and which has rather wide-reaching consequences in several contexts within the region, as shall be evident during the course of this thesis.

1.1.3 Socio-Political Situation in NER: The Contemporary Picture

It is perhaps well-known that the ongoing conflicts (especially the armed conflicts) between various tribal groups and the State in NER, are primarily driven by either of the two goals: (a) political autonomy within the Indian nation (b) secession from the Indian nation (see for instance Upadhyay, 2006), which suggests that the process of nation building is yet to reach conclusion, at least as far as the North-eastern region of India is concerned. It goes without saying that the process of nation-building in pluralistic societies (such as India) is universally fraught with such fears and the progression towards the idea of a single nation cannot be expected to be a smooth and quick process. However, the fact that such a situation has come to pass as the mainstay of the politics and polity of NER, is something that deserves special attention. Not surprisingly then, this issue has received considerable thought from all sections of society including researchers, and several theories have been put forth towards explaining the emergence and continuation of conflicts in NER. Among these, a particularly dominant perspective is the one that suggests that incorrect/misdirected policies of the Centre towards the (peripheral) North-east, which, it is claimed, is a continuation of the colonial policy towards NER, have been the root cause of the socio-political unrest in NER (for instance Baruah, 1989; Haokip, 2010; Upadhyay, 2006). However, this is perhaps not entirely correct.

As will be remembered from the discussion presented in the first section of this chapter, the British followed the policy of ‘non-interference’ in the internal affairs of the tribal communities of NER driven primarily by their lack of commercial interest in these areas. The separate policies adopted by the British towards the Assam plains on

the one hand and the hill areas on the other, advertently or accidentally, also led to the physical and psychological isolation of the tribal-dominated areas of NER from the Assam plains and the rest of India as well. It cannot be denied that the government of independent India adopted a socio-political position similar to that of the colonial rulers by granting a great degree of autonomy to the hilly/tribal-dominated areas of NER, as embodied in the provisions for self- governance in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India for the tribal- dominated areas of NER. A critical component of these provisions has been the extensive legislative as well as executive powers to protect land and tribal traditions in the scheduled areas (occupied primarily by tribes) through the system of autonomous district and regional councils. In fact, these are the very areas that were accorded the position of Excluded and Partially Excluded areas under the British administration. But, this is perhaps where the similarities end.

In fact, although the strong resemblance between the colonial policies and those adopted by independent India towards the political administration of NER cannot be denied, there is possibly also a huge difference in the *spirit* with which such administrative mechanisms were introduced in the region by the former and the latter. Indeed, the implementation of the Sixth Schedule in NER reflected a standpoint that was almost diametrically opposed to that of the British. Whereas the former was aimed at the development of the tribes, the latter had no such connotation. Specifically, the Sixth Schedule was introduced in NER within the broader ‘Nehruvian policy framework’ that sought adequate protection and freedom to the relatively socio-economically backward and culturally distinct tribes of the North-east. Within this framework, the idea was to gradually *integrate* the tribes within the mainstream, as distinct from efforts towards the *assimilation* of the tribal minorities in the Indian

society (Haokip, 2010).⁹ However, the results of the intervention were not satisfactory, mainly due to problems with structural translation of the idea. Nonetheless, it would not be correct to view the Centre's policy towards NER as a colonial legacy in the context of the region, even if the former were influenced by the latter to a certain extent.

Having said this, it needs to be pointed out that in the aftermath of the Chinese aggression of 1962, there was a drastic change in the Centre's overall policy towards NER; a shift from the integrationist approach followed earlier to one that broadly resembled the policy of assimilation as defined earlier. Indeed, it is during this phase that the policy of the Centre could be said to have been analogous to the one followed during the British rule. In fact, from that point on, the policies were driven more by a 'security' perspective as compared to a 'development' perspective; the execution of which brought about drastic changes in the society and politics in NER. The focus now was the development of the territory of NER, as distinct from the development of the tribes, and the earlier policy was replaced by an aggressive regime of politico-economic and cultural integration of the tribal people to speed up their socio-economic development (Das, 2001; Haokip, 2010). The overall idea was to pacify any possible discontent through various means (including even force perhaps) in order to maintain the territorial integrity of India.

⁹ Even though the terms 'integration' and 'assimilation' are generally used loosely and often interchangeably, in this context, the difference between them formed the defining feature of the Centre's policy towards North-east India as envisaged under the Nehruvian or Nehru-Erwin framework. Whereas, the former (and the one adopted by Nehru) meant political, economic and administrative integration of the tribes *without* the loss of linguistic, religious or cultural features, the latter implied loss of ethnic attributes of tribes and their absorption into the dominant group, possibly resulting in increasing alienation and antagonism (Haokip, 2010).

What followed was the Balkanization of Assam beginning with the formation of Nagaland in 1963. Indeed, the re-organization (or rather fragmentation) within the region has been a continuous process, the discontinuation of which does not appear to be any time soon at present. In fact, there are two interrelated issues at work here. First, while most of the states of India were organized on linguistic grounds after based on the States Reorganisation Commission constituted in 1953, those in NER were formed on ethnic grounds, thus sowing the seeds of ethnic determinism of Statehood (Haokip, 2012b). Second, the security perspective adopted by the Centre towards the region led to the rather uncritical granting of political autonomy to minorities, which in several instances took the form of the creation of new states along ethnic lines. These two factors taken together resulted in the proliferation of demand for separate states, and in extreme cases, the demand for separate nations, by various ethno-cultural groups who perceived them to have been wronged in some sense.

Indeed, several scholars are of the opinion that the efforts of the Centre in the direction of maintaining peace in the region were largely of a stop-gap kind and could not be expected to deliver the goods in the sense of either sustained economic development or lasting peace in the region. In fact, the strategy of granting Statehood to ethnic groups that was adopted by the Centre for dealing with armed conflicts in the region, has led to the creation of a periphery within a periphery. The ethnic minorities *within* these new-formed states in NER claim that their rights and resources are being impinged upon by the ethnic majorities, and have thus been demanding political autonomy of their own, paving the way for further divisions of the existing territories of the states of the region (Baruah, 1989; Barbora, 2002; Roy, 2002; Shimray, 2004). Thus, this policy seems to have failed, at least till now. However, there is little doubt

that the Centre has not taken the repercussions of its ‘minority’ policy into full cognizance. Indeed, what is perhaps very much lacking from the side of the Center is a holistic strategy for the development of NER. It would be useful to quote from Baruah in this context who argues that “[T]o deal with the troubled north-east region, India has a counter-insurgency strategy, an economic development strategy and even a vacuous nation-building strategy. What it sorely lacks is a thoughtful *state-building strategy* - one that could link state and society in a way that harmonises the interests, cultural values and aspirations of the peoples of the region with the agendas of the national state” (Baruah, 2002: 4178, emphasis added).

However, this is hardly all, so far as the ramifications of the ethno-centered political struggles in the region are concerned. Indeed, in the democratic set-up of the Indian state, it is hard to miss the development consequences of demographic power (or the power of numbers) in any region, and especially in NER, where political supremacy yet remains a contested issue, as should be clear from the discussion in the preceding few sections. The fates of the various communities of the region are in fact, inextricably tied to political representation, the lack of which spells economic, social and cultural marginalization. Indeed, this is what has led sections from many minority groups to engage in armed conflict with the State in the first instance. For instance, the socio-political unrest over the issue of migration into the states of NER could be explained within this framework. Once it is made clear that political power/autonomy is directly linked to ethno-cultural aspirations (rather agitation in many instances), the strategy that ethnically larger groups would adopt towards the ethnically dissimilar and numerically weaker migrants perhaps becomes clear. Indeed, the fear of being driven down to a minority and the consequent decline of political voice, or in extreme cases,

demands for complete autonomy by the migrants, has resulted in the ethnic majorities resorting to constitutional (and in many cases unconstitutional) remedies in order to maintain their socio-cultural hegemony.

A related issue concerns the fear of identity loss among the ethnic minorities in NER, and in some cases even among the majorities within a particular State, when threatened by large and incessant inflow of migrants, as exemplified by the case of Meghalaya (see for instance, Saikia, 2005). In fact, there is evidence to suggest that a cultural assimilation of a different kind has also been going on in the North-east, whereby, the ethnic majorities are forcing the ethnic minorities to adapt to and accept the former's language, culture and way of life in general (Shimray, 2004). Not unexpectedly then, in many of these instances, the response has been in the form of stricter adherence to traditional laws including those that support large family size (Saikia, 2005). However, we discuss this issue in greater depth in a later chapter.

Overall, the discussion till now indicates that the society of North-east India has been troubled with social, political and economic maladies at least since the British occupation of Assam in 1826, which resulted in unfavourable changes in socio-political and economic relations in the region during the colonial era. The experience of the region in the post-Independence, though not equally depressing, has been largely one of dealing with profound challenges, the ongoing ethno-political struggles being the most important among them. Needless to say, the socio-political crisis in NER has severely crippled the prospects of economic and social growth in the region. NER remains largely a backward agrarian economy with dire consequences as far as employment and livelihood opportunities for the masses are concerned. Also, equally important are the contemporary changes in the socio-cultural milieu of the tribes

inhabiting NER, as indicated by the deteriorating position of women, manifested for instance, in anti-female bias in several areas including health and nutrition as mentioned earlier. Indeed, gender bias among tribes in general and among those of NER in particular has been hitherto unknown, and its emergence in NER is particularly distressing.

With this attempt to provide a brief but detailed review of what is relatively better known about the North-eastern region and its states, we now come towards such issues that have received very little attention from researchers historically as well as currently, but nevertheless remain such important facets that can shed useful light on the society and gender relations in NER. Indeed, politics has held the spotlight in NER for so long now, that other issues have been, much to the dismay of many, relegated (rather buried) to the background for too long now. One could even argue that it is in fact, ironical that while emphasizing the need to look beyond the ‘politics’ of the region, most research on NER has in fact, failed to do so.

Specifically, among many aspects and dimensions of inquiry and research on the region, its demography – for almost obvious reasons – is central to a deeper understanding of its problems and possible remedies. Unfortunately, the existing literature on the demographic trends and characteristics in this region is conspicuously thin. In fact, it is only recently that a few academic attempts at the examination of some specific demographic indicators e.g. reproductive behaviour, mortality, status of women, and migration – albeit mostly in the context of some specific locations and/or tribes of the contemporary states of NER have been made (e.g. Deb, 2010; Nayak, 2010; Saikia, 2005; Tyagi, Chowdhury and Banerjee, 2000; Dass, 1980; Mishra, 1999).

In this context, the primary object of the present thesis is to look into the fertility¹⁰ transition in NER and its constituent states from a long –term comparative perspective vis-à-vis India.¹¹ In fact, it would not be incorrect to say that this research is one of the very few (if any) that deals with the complexities of the process of fertility transition in the tribal-dominated NER, and in fact, adds to the existing literature on regional differences and determinants of fertility in India. Although the importance of research on fertility can hardly be overemphasized, it could be mentioned here that the total fertility rate (TFR), per se, as an indicator of reproductive ‘output’ of a population, has important demographic and gender implications. Apart from the widely acknowledged facts that first, the TFR is itself an indicator of social development (with regions and populations with a higher levels of human development, typically posing lower fertility rates), thereby implying that research on the levels and trends in fertility in a population deserve attention in their own right, and second that higher fertility impedes economic growth in various ways, it has been argued of late that reduction in fertility or a change in the demographic regime from one with high fertility to one with low fertility, is a pre-requisite for “gender transition” (broadly referring to transformation of unequal social and institutional structures) (see for instance, Mason, 1995). Interestingly, this issue is also inextricably linked with much of what has been

¹⁰ The term fertility or fertility rate, as used in this thesis, and unless specified otherwise, refers to the total fertility rate, generally understood as the average number of children born to a woman in any specified population. Formally, the total fertility rate is defined as the average number of children that would be born to a woman by the time she ended childbearing if she were to pass through all her childbearing years conforming to the age-specific fertility rates of a given year (Haupt, Kane and Haub, 2011).

¹¹ Even though mortality studies on the region are also relatively scarce as compared to other states and regions of India, its determinants are relatively well-known and hence our decision to focus on fertility in this research. Further, we also do not take up the issue of migration, which even though remains a germane issue, has received ample academic attention as any scholar aware of research on NER would perhaps know.

discussed in this section relating to the economy, society, and politics in the region, as will be argued in much of the remainder of this thesis. Besides, as much as the latter helps us to understand demographic processes in NER, the demographic perspective on the region and its states, on its part, informs us on the nature and changes in the socio-cultural and socio-political aspects of the region. With this perspective, we now move towards the approach and methodology of the present research for answering the various issues related to fertility transition in NER.

1.2 Research Questions, Methodology, and Structure of the Thesis

As mentioned above, the primary aim of this thesis is to examine and explain the process of fertility transition in North-east India. However, before moving ahead, it is imperative to mention here that in clubbing the eight states of the region together, we adopt a position that is arguably insensitive to the diversity of the sub-national cultures within NER to a great extent. In fact, it has been pointed out by several scholars that the very idea of a North-eastern region is a misconception, an artificial construct, born out of administrative requirements that cannot be used in a meaningful way for academic or policy purposes (Haokip, 2012a; Hussain, 2004 among others). However, there are others who point out that there *is* in fact, a pan- North-East identity (and commonality) in the minds of both- the people of NER and others outside the region, and that, more importantly, it could actually be *useful* to approach the region as a whole from an analytical standpoint in several cases, thereby attaching greater weight to the similarities as compared to the diversities among the people of NER (see for example Ngaihte, 2013). Indeed, one could argue that the relative parity in the nature

and extent of economic development of the states of NER, the distinct socio-cultural moorings of its peoples, especially when compared to ‘mainstream’ India, and most remarkably, the shared experiences of its inhabitants in the historical past and indeed, to a great extent in the present, as indicated during the course of the discussion in the previous section, justifies its treatment as one distinct region. It is specifically from this perspective that it becomes meaningful also to discuss the pattern and determinants of fertility transition in NER as a well-defined entity in its own right, especially in a comparative perspective vis-à-vis other regions or all-India for that matter.

However, this does not preclude us from the analysis of the constituent states (or for that matter, the districts) of the region. Contrariwise, the analysis of fertility transition in a region can hardly be conducted without analysis of its constituent units (states, districts, villages etc). In fact, what we are essentially trying to argue is that it is rather unnecessary to focus on the dissimilarities within NER to such an extent as to discard the very notion as untenable, thus ending all possibilities of such discussion that would throw useful light on various issues facing the North-eastern region as a whole.

Coming back to the objective of this research, we begin by asking ourselves several questions such as, what do we know about the demographic regime of NER in the past? Did the region and its constituent states evince a higher population growth as compared to the rest of India in the past? If so, was it due to immigration or was the fertility rate of the region higher then? What is the contemporary situation in NER and its constituent states pertaining to fertility, mortality and migration, especially as compared to the all-India scenario? What explains the relatively higher fertility rates in NER? Is it that the people have a higher fertility preference or do they lack access to

family planning methods? How do economic, socio-cultural and socio-political factors influence the fertility outcome in the region? And finally, what policy relevant conclusions can one arrive at from the analysis of the process of fertility transition in NER?

With the intention of finding the answers to the above, we begin by searching for relevant literature in the form of books and published journal articles. As already noted, we find very little (indeed, practically negligible) information on fertility in NER and its constituent states, especially for the historical/colonial period. What we come across for the colonial period on the North-east that comes closest to our field of research, is basically ethnographic literature on the larger tribes of NER, primarily penned by British anthropologists (Allen, 1902; Gurdon and Lyall, 1914; Reid, 1942 among a few others), which though precious in terms of the information they contain, can hardly be expected to illuminate us on the issue of fertility in the region.¹² Surprisingly, even when information on demographic variables such as fertility was available for the more recent period, we hardly find any analytical discourse on the issue to inform the present inquiry (but more on this in Chapter 3).¹³

The tasks before us then, was to first collect (and in several cases construct) and then analyze the available information on fertility in the region and its states, which was found to be especially challenging for the pre-Independence period. Moreover, it

¹² However, we do come across one such study by Ghosh (1956) that discusses the demography of colonial Assam, and proves to be of immense value to us. It has been discussed in the following chapter.

¹³ Indeed, a search through some of the highly esteemed social science journals leaves one distressed with the discovery that is hardly any reference on North-east India. For instance, upon hunting for fertility related literature in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, we learn that while there are more than four dozen articles on fertility in India and its major states for the post-Independence period itself, that on fertility issues of the states of NER is practically non-existent.

was clear by now that dictated by the nature of the central question posited in the thesis (and available resources), we would be relying mostly on standard secondary sources for this study, viz., the Census, Civil Registration System, Sample Registration System, National Family Health Survey and District Level Household Survey. However, we would like to quickly add here that an analysis of the nature and quality of the data from these various sources has not been discussed here, but has been taken up in the individual chapters, as and when they are introduced for the purpose of the analysis.

As regards the theoretical framework of the thesis, given the breadth of the research questions we set out to answer, it was difficult to settle on a single theoretical framework that could fit all the strands together. In fact, for the same reason, there is no single chapter devoted to a ‘Literature Review’, but a thematic approach is taken to the issue and relevant literature is discussed alongside each topic. However, for the latter part of the thesis that discusses the fertility transition in the post-Independence period in NER and its states, our framework broadly *resembles* that developed by Easterlin and Crimmins (1978) generally, in that we begin with an examination of the proximate determinants of fertility among the states of NER, and then continue with the investigation of background or contextual factors (economic, social, cultural political) influencing fertility decline in NER. Each substantive chapter is devoted to answering a particular or particular set of questions and we employ suitable methods in order to answer the specific questions raised therein as discussed briefly below. The general method applied to the thesis is one of examining the issues from multiple approaches loaded with the notion that “No single analysis will tell the entire story” (Fricke, 1997: 21).

Chapter 2 of the thesis examines long-term demographic trends in NER and its constituent states, from 1901 to 2011, in a comparative perspective vis-à-vis India. In fact, this chapter has two major sections; the first one discusses fertility, mortality and migration during the colonial period beginning 1901, while the second major section traces the changes in these variables over the post-Independence period (till 2011), and compares the performance between the former and the latter periods in terms of these demographic indicators.

The construction of the demography of NER during the British period is largely based on Census reports, supplemented to some extent by the work of earlier researchers on the topic, which though scarce proves to be immensely useful. In addition, we use our own estimates of the TFR using indirect estimation procedures based on census data to complement existing information on fertility differentials between the region and all-India during the pre-Independence era. The second part, yet again, relies on official sources- the Census and the SRS. In the process, we discuss the quality of the data sources (primarily the Census and SRS) specifically in relation to the effect of under-registration and misreporting on reported vital rates.

A particularly remarkable finding from the colonial period is that of a differential in reproductive performance of the region vis-à-vis all-India. In fact, our own calculation of the TFR for Assam and all-India for the years 1911 and 1931 using Rele method shows that it might have been higher in the former region as compared to the latter by nearly a child. This is indeed a significant finding, especially in view of the fact that previous research on the subject has largely focused on immigration into NER as possibly the lone cause of its relatively higher population growth vis-à-vis India. However, our analysis finds that comparatively higher fertility of NER possibly also

had a role to play in it. The rather lower levels of socio-economic development and higher infant mortality rate (IMR) of the region compared to all-India provide clues as to why such differentials might have existed during that time.¹⁴

The post-Independence period presents us with some larger surprises. While relatively higher birth rates among the major states of NER coupled with heavy immigration flows, continued to push population growth rates above the national average throughout this period, there was a dramatic change in the destination of the primarily non-tribal immigrants from the tribal-minority regions in the pre-Independence period to the tribal-majority states after Independence¹⁵. Indeed, the ramifications of these developments have been the motivation behind extensive academic debates and writings on the socio-political turmoil and its possible solutions and resolutions in NER.

Chapter 3 analyzes fertility levels, trends and differentials among the states of NER from the early 1970 to late 2000s. Data from three consecutive rounds of the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) found that none of the states experienced a steady decline in fertility for the entire period from 1990 to 2005, which was marked by statistically significant slowdown, and in some cases even reversal of the fertility decline witnessed during the preceding decades in these states. Indeed, fertility trends constructed from indirect estimates for the concerned period substantiate the finding of a stall, and lead us to conclude that even though fertility had started declining in the region and its constituent states at nearly the same time as the rest of India, NER

¹⁴ The infant mortality rate is defined as the number of deaths of infants below one year, per thousand live births in a population in a given year.

¹⁵ The term birth rate or crude birth rate (CBR) is defined as the number of live births per thousand population in a given year.

witnessed a stalling in fertility decline at considerably higher levels than replacement level fertility from the middle of the 1990s. We also find substantial rural-urban differences in fertility among the states of NER, as also by socio-economic categories such as wealth and education.

We begin the investigation into the determinants of fertility in NER with an examination of its intermediate determinants utilizing Bongaarts' Aggregate Fertility Model in Chapter 4. Among the various proximate determinants, the index of noncontraception is found to be the most important factor influencing fertility. Interestingly perhaps, nuptiality is also found to be an important determinant of fertility- and especially important in determining its decline- among the states of NER. However, we find very little change in most of the proximate determinants during the period 1990 to 1998, and in fact, our estimate of the combined index- measuring the joint influence of the indices of proportion married, noncontraception and postpartum infecundability- shows practically no change or even a slight rise overtime among the concerned states confirming the existence of a fertility stall.

Stepping closer towards the contextual factors influencing fertility, we also examine the relative influence of fertility preferences, and family planning programmes in determining fertility trends among the states of the region in this chapter. We carry out the analysis utilizing state-level data drawn from the NFHS. Interestingly enough, we find that in most cases of a rise in fertility, it is some deficiency in the family planning programme and the associated rise in unwanted fertility that has an overriding influence, reversing the effect of the change in fertility preferences towards a smaller number of children. Among various indicators of socio-economic development that influence fertility preferences in our model, we find that

the stall in fertility decline is associated with increases in infant and child mortality. Interestingly perhaps, states that did not experience a stalling in fertility decline went through relatively rapid increases in female literacy rate.

In the final analytical chapter, Chapter 5, we move further with our search into the socio-economic and cultural correlates of fertility, and introduce a panel data model to explain district level variations in fertility in NER for the period 1991 and 2001. While most of our explanatory variables have been gleaned from standard secondary sources like the census, comparable estimates of the TFR at the district level for 1991 and 2001 were unavailable for the concerned period. Hence, we use our own indirect estimates of fertility based on the Arriaga-Arretx method (which can be considered as a refinement over the original Brass P/F method of estimation in relaxing the assumption of constant fertility). In fact, ours is perhaps the first instance of an attempt towards quantifying the various social, economic and cultural influences on fertility in NER, and the results prove that the effort has possibly been worthwhile.

Remarkably, while variables capturing overall levels of economic growth, like urbanization, are found to be of little consequence in determining fertility in NER, those that are more closely associated with socio-cultural factors are found to be of greater consequence. In line with several other studies on the determinants of fertility in India, and indeed, several countries throughout the world, we find that female literacy contributes significantly to lowering fertility in NER, thus confirming the near universal positive impact of female education on fertility decline. As partial evidence of change in the socio-cultural mores of the tribes of NER, we find that a higher proportion of Scheduled Tribes leads to higher fertility in NER. This finding is again of crucial significance as it reflects, at least to a certain extent, a tearing away from

past cultural practices related to lower fertility among tribes, a conclusion reached by several painstaking inquiries on the subject in the past. Interestingly, we do not find support for the generally held view that adherence to Christianity has a fertility enhancing effect in NER. Interestingly, we also find evidence in support of the hypothesis that in certain situations, such as the one we encounter in the newly formed tribal-majority states of NER, ethnic clashes triggered by demographic imbalance due to huge in-migration, and the accompanying perceptions of marginalization in the State's political processes, can lead to pro-natalist proclivities in the concerned groups under circumstances where political representation is linked to the size of population, and the society is passing through a stage where political supremacy remains a contested issue.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis and provides a few suggestions. From a policy perspective, improvement in the family welfare programme with a thrust on its IEC (information, education and communication) component has the potential of reducing fertility primarily by reducing unwanted fertility. The study also brings out that greater effort has to be made towards bringing down the infant and child mortality rates and increasing the female literacy rate in the North-eastern states of India if there has to be sustained fertility decline in the region in the coming years. Importantly perhaps, this thesis makes a case for a deeper understanding of the basic issues of socio-political organization, not only in their own right, but as they affect myriad dimensions of people's lives- both personal and social. The silent but significant changes confronting the peoples of the region, as for instance, in socio-cultural practices governing fertility behavior, calls for greater attention and a holistic approach to the various demographic, economic and social issues facing NER to-day.