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# UNIT 13 POLITIES OF NORTH-EASTERN INDIA<sup>1</sup>

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## 13.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objectives of this Unit are to study the following:

- regional polities in north-eastern India from *c.* 1300 to 1800 CE;
- their interactions with other political units and how they dealt with potential threats from their neighbouring kingdoms as well as powerful empires and dynasties such as the Mughal Empire, Bengal Sultanate, Arakan etc.; and
- advent of Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism in the region and their impact on regional kingdoms.

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## 13.1 INTRODUCTION

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In fourth century CE in ancient India the Gupta Empire rose as a formidable political construct with several feudatory states under its subjugation. Kamarupa, corresponding roughly to modern-day Assam and parts of West Bengal, Bihar, Bhutan, Nepal and

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Bangladesh, was also one of the feudatory states of the Gupta Empire. It was founded in c. 350 CE but eventually it established itself as an independent kingdom as the Gupta Empire started to decline. Kamarupa consisted of three main ruling dynasties:

- 1) Varman dynasty (c. 350-650 CE)
- 2) Mlechchha dynasty (c. 655-900 CE)
- 3) Pala dynasty (c. 900-1100 CE)

The Pala dynasty of Bengal and Bihar which rose in the eighth century during the reign of Ramapala (reigned c. 1077-1120 CE) captured the western part of Kamarupa in c. 1100 CE. Ramapala appointed a Pala governor to look after the administration of the conquered territory. The tussle with Bakhtiyar Khilji, the ruler of Khilji dynasty in Bengal, also weakened the Palas of Kamarupa. After their downfall, new kingdoms such as Kamata, Chutiya, Kachari and Ahoms emerged.

Sikkim in the seventeenth century witnessed the emergence of a Buddhist state and this development was an outcome of a political and religious upheaval in Tibet which caused major changes in the political, religious and social structure of Sikkim. Likewise, the polity, society and the belief system of the people of Manipur underwent a transformation when Meitei rulers began embracing different forms of Vaishnavism. The Hindu concept of kingship impacted other tribal polities as well and this will be one of the topics we will discuss in this Unit.

The north-eastern states faced frequent threats of invasions from its neighbouring kingdoms and also from the Mughal Empire which advocated the policy of aggressive conquests and territorial expansion. In 1400 CE to the east of Bengal Sultanate rose Manikya dynasty: the ruling house of the Twipra Kingdom. The dynasty had to face frequent invasions from its neighbouring Bengal Sultanate and also from the Mughal Empire. Consequently, it lost a major portion of its territories. The powerful kingdoms in the north-east such as the Ahom kingdom had to fight numerous battles with the Mughals to defend their territories. Some kingdoms came under the Mughal sphere of influence without much resistance, accepting the status of a tributary state. However, the presence of the Mughals in the region was not purely offensive. They are also credited for the expulsion of the Arakanese pirates who operated in collaboration with the Portuguese pirates in the coastal regions of the Bay of Bengal and, thus, they were pivotal in facilitating trade there. Now you will read about these political entities and various facets associated with them.

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## 13.2 ASSAM

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The present-day Assam in ancient India was known by various names. Pragjotishpura is the oldest among them. In ancient texts such as the *Kalika Purana* and the Epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* it is mentioned as Pragjotishpura. Pragjotishpura became synonymous with the Kamarupa kingdom when a seventh century ruler of the kingdom named Bhaskarvarman traced his dynastic lineage to Naraka: a mythical *asura* king of Pragjotishpura. Its downfall gave way to a number of other kingdoms.

### 13.2.1 Kamata Kingdom

After the fall of the Pala dynasty of Kamarupa, Kamata kingdom emerged in thirteenth century in the western part of Assam (Lower Assam), corresponding to modern-day

districts of Kamrup, Goalpara of Assam, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar of West Bengal and the Rangpur Division and northern parts of the Mymensingh Division of Bangladesh. Several historians attribute Prithu (c. 1200-1228 CE) as the real founder of Kamata kingdom. After the reign of Arimatta (c. 1415-1440 CE) who died without an heir to the throne, Nildhwaj (c. 1440-60 CE) founded Khen dynasty. According to Arun Bhushan Mazumdar and Jadunath Sarkar, the Khens migrated from the central region of Bhutan while Rajmuhn Das believes that the word 'Khen' is from 'Sena' and it was the Senas who established the Sena dynasty in Bengal. Thus, their origin is quite obscure. Risalat-us-Saladin records that during the rule of Chakradhwaj, Ruknuddin Barbak Shah (1459-74 CE), the Sultan of Bengal of the Later Illiyas Shahi dynasty, sent his military commander named Ismail to invade Kamata kingdom. But, his military expedition was unsuccessful. In 1498 the kingdom eventually fell to the invasion of Alauddin Hussain Shah (1494-1519 CE) who founded the Hussain Shahi dynasty in Bengal. The Khen ruler Nilambar and the whole royal family were imprisoned. However, Hussain Shah could not sustain his rule there as the Bhuyans could not be subjugated and the latter in 1505 CE controlled the territory. But soon the Koch ruler Biswa Singha occupied the area and set up the Koch kingdom and replaced Kamata kingdom which had emerged from the declining Kamarupa kingdom. You will read more about the Koch kingdom in the Sub-section 13.2.4.2.

### 13.2.2 Kachari Kingdom

The earliest reference to the Kachari kingdom dates back to the early ninth century. By the thirteenth century the kingdom expanded along the southern banks of the Brahmaputra river<sup>2</sup>, including the Dhansiri valley and Dima Hasao district of Assam. However, when the Ahoms came into power their expansionist policy began to threaten the existence of the kingdom. In 1419 the two kingdoms fought for the first time and the Ahoms were defeated. The Ahom king signed a peace treaty and offered his daughter to the Kachari ruler. Later, in 1531 the Ahoms annexed the Kachari capital Dimapur (now in Nagaland) and the Dimasa Kachari ruler and other royal members were captured and put to death. Hereafter, the Dimasas abandoned Dimapur and built their new capital in Maibang where they became Hinduised. Earlier they worshiped Khechai Khait: a popular war goddess of Bodo-Kachari tribes, Chutias, Koch, Rabhas, Tiwas etc. Now they started to worship a Hindu war goddess named Ranachandi. They sought to gain political legitimacy by tracing the lineage of the royal family to Ghatotkacha and the Kachari princess Hidimba.

### 13.2.3 Chutia Kingdom

Likewise, the Ahoms became a serious threat to the Chutia<sup>3</sup> kingdom too. In the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, we see the rise of the Chutia kingdom in modern districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia and some parts of Dibrugarh of Assam and in the plains

<sup>2</sup> The Brahmaputra river is commonly called Lauhitya in Sanskrit and in Assam it is known as Lohit or Luit.

<sup>3</sup> The Chutias were a branch of the widespread Kachari race. There are a number of different theories regarding the origin of the race. Most probably they migrated from Tibet and China. As per Assam District Gazetteers (Sibsagar district) they belonged to the Indo-Chinese race and they gradually migrated from China to Assam in successive waves. It is difficult to ascertain the origin of the Chutia kingdom as it is shrouded in myths and legends which cannot be corroborated with epigraphic evidence. However, we do have clear references to Sanskritized Chutia rulers in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

and foothills of Arunachal Pradesh. It was also known as the Sadia kingdom as it flourished in and around Sadia (in Tinsukia district) and it was also the capital of the Chutia kingdom. The first confrontation between the Ahoms and Chutias occurred during the reign of King Sutupha (1369-76 CE) of the Ahom kingdom as mentioned in the *Deodhai Asam Buranji* and some other chronicles. This confrontation lasted for about hundred years after the death of Sukapha (1228-68 CE) under whose leadership the Ahom kingdom was founded. In 1523 the Chutia kingdom was fully annexed by Ahom king Suhungmung (1497-1539 CE).

### 13.2.4 Ahom Kingdom

During the early thirteenth century there was an advent of Turko-Afghan adventurers (from Bengal) and Ahom settlers in Assam. The Ahoms belonged to the Sino-Tai linguistic family who entered Assam after crossing the Patkai range either from the Upper Burma or the Yunnan province of China. The region at this time was politically fragmented with many new tribal and non-tribal kingdoms along with the armed landed intermediary class between the ruler and the ruled which was called *Bhuyan* or *Bhaumik*. *Bhuyans* were primarily settled in the western and central parts of Assam. They were assimilated into the Ahom kingdom as petty officers. Gradually, the small kingdoms, too, were brought under the direct or indirect subjugation of the Ahom empire. The territorial extent of the Kachari kingdom was tremendously reduced and its rulers were often serving as vassals of the Ahom empire. The westward expansion of the empire is chiefly credited to the *Bhuyans*. They were responsible for the conquest of virgin lands and bringing them under cultivation, providing irrigation facilities and defending the lands from invasions.

In 1752 the Konbaung dynasty rose in Burma which is also called the Third Burmese Empire. It adopted the policy of expansionism. The repeated invasions of Burma caused the downfall of the Ahom dynasty in Assam and it was finally annexed in 1820. This brought it in conflict with the East India Company, resulting into Anglo-Burmese Wars in the nineteenth century. After the first Anglo-Burmese War, through the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, the Company occupied Assam.

#### 13.2.4.1 Conflicts with the Sultans of Bengal and Delhi

After ending the rule of the Sena dynasty of Bengal in c. 1203 CE, Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji founded Khilji dynasty in Bengal. He wanted to annex Tibet which ended in a disaster. While returning he found that the ruler of Kamrupa had destroyed the bridge and it was difficult to cross the Karatoya river which formed the western boundary of Kamrupa. The Kamrupa king attacked him. Khilji somehow managed to cross the river along with a few hundred horsemen. Therefore, it was not just his expedition to Tibet but also the attack he faced from the *raja* that proved to be disastrous for Khilji. The *Alamgirnama* informs that even Muhammad Bin Tughlaq, the Sultan of Delhi, attempted to conquer Assam in 1332-33 CE but was unsuccessful. Then, in 1356 Sikandar Shah, the Bengal Sultan, attacked Kamrupa. Alauddin Hussain Shah, the then Bengal ruler, defeated and imprisoned Nilambar, ruler of Kamata of the Khen dynasty in 1498 CE and, thence, the Khen dynasty saw its downfall. By 1502 the Sultanate of Bengal expanded its territory up to Hajo (modern-day western Assam). But, Bengal occupation was overthrown in about ten years by the Assamese Bhuyans under the leadership of Harup Narayan. Turbak, a military commander of Gaur, invaded

Assam in 1532 which lasted for three years and the Ahoms were successful in pushing back and extending the territory of their kingdom up to Koch Behar and Gaur. The war is significant because according to Edward Gait this was the first time that the Ahoms used gunpowder. Earlier, they had been using swords, spears, bows and arrows. Bengal Sultan Sulaiman-i-Karrani's military commander Kalapahar overran Assam but it was of not much consequence. However, Kalapahar in Assamese records have been referred to as *Pora Sultan* (iconoclast). He destroyed images and temples, viz., the temples of Kamakhya and Hazo. Hence, there were attempts made mainly by the Bengal Sultanate to conquer Assam but even after the conquest the domination of the Sultanate was not durable.

#### 13.2.4.2 Mughal-Ahom Rivalry and Koch Behar

The process of state formation in the Sub-Himalayan Bengal and Lower Assam was commenced by the Koch and Mech tribes in the late fifteenth century. A petty chiefdom was established by Haria Mondal, a Mech clan leader, in alliance with the Koch people. This small chiefdom was metamorphosed into a territorial kingdom under Bisu or Biswa Singha in the early sixteenth century. The Koch kingdom was once part of the Kamata kingdom. Ralph Fitch<sup>4</sup>, one of the first Englishmen to travel through India, visited the Koch kingdom in 1583 and noted its commercial links with Tibet, China, Tartary and Muscovia. However, the kingdom was divided into three among the descendants of Biswa's three sons, viz., Koch Behar, Koch Hajo and a third branch at Khaspur. Koch Behar under its first ruler Laxmi Narayan accepted the overlordship of the Mughal empire as he was incapable to check the Mughal invasions. As Koch Behar became a tributary state of the Mughal empire, Mughal revenue administration was introduced in the region. Laxmi Narayan aided the Mughals to capture Koch Hajo in 1612 which was ruled by Parikshit Narayan. Parikshit endeavoured to obtain some support from the Ahoms and the Afghan chieftains of the Greater Mymensingh and south Sylhet areas but was not successful. The Ahom ruler Swargadeo Pratap Singha wanted to avoid any confrontation with the Mughals while the Afghans were subjugated by the Mughals in 1612. He was defeated and captured by Mukkaram Khan who was put in charge of an army by the Mughal governor of Bengal – Islam Khan. However, his brother Balinarayan escaped and fled to the Ahom kingdom for help. With the occupation of Koch Hajo the Mughal territories expanded further up to the Barnadi river. The Mughals advanced further and expelled the Baro-bhuyan chieftains from the territory between the Barnadi and Bharali rivers. The rich natural resources (elephants, aloe-wood, pepper, tobacco etc.) lured the Mughal merchants to engage in illegal trade within the Ahom kingdom. For instance, a merchant named Ratan Shah was involved in the procurement of aloe-wood from the kingdom and supplied those to the Mughals. This displeased the Ahom king. To check it the boats of unauthorized Mughal traders in the kingdom were seized. This began Mughal-Ahom rivalry in the early seventeenth century. This was the first direct battle fought between the two in 1616 and it is known as the Battle of Samdhara. The Ahoms repulsed them back and assigned the region between the two rivers to Balinarayan who became a vassal to the Ahom kingdom and remained a tributary state till the decline of the Ahom kingdom. Thus, during the reign of Jahangir the Ahoms were successful in checking Mughal military advances in the north-east. The Bhomoraguri rock inscription records the victory of Ahom ruler Swargadeo Pratap Singha in the battle.

<sup>4</sup>Ralph Fitch went to the court of Akbar in 1585 CE. In his account he records, "Agra and Fatehpore are two very great cities, either of them much greater than London, and very populous."

However, Aurangzeb was an expansionist. He assigned Mir Jumla, the governor of Bengal, to subdue Assam between 1661-1663. The tributary ruler of Koch Behar had revolted. Mir Jumla led a military campaign to suppress the rebellion in which he was successful. Afterwards, he annexed Garhgaon, the capital of the Ahom kingdom. Shihabuddin Talish (also known as Ibn Muhammad Wali Ahmad), author of the *Tarikh-i-Assam* or *Fateha-e-Ibreyā* ('Victory with a Lesson') was in the service of Mir Jumla and accompanied him in his military expeditions in Koch Behar, Kamrupa and Assam. He gives an eyewitness account of the Mughal-Ahom rivalry during this time. He provides a detailed account of the flotilla of the Ahoms. They built numerous war-boats such as the *kosahs* and *bacharis*. However, this victory did not last long and the Ahoms recovered the areas occupied by the Mughals. In 1669 Raja Ram Singh I, the Kachwaha king of Jaipur, was sent to Assam by Aurangzeb to recapture the lost territories. The Ahom army was commanded by General Lachit Borphukan who preferred guerilla warfare to open battle which proved to be advantageous strategy for the Ahoms. In the naval battle – Battle of Saraighat – fought on the Brahmaputra river at Saraighat (in Guwahati) the Ahoms defeated the Mughal army through the means of diplomatic negotiations, guerilla warfare and military intelligence. But, the Ahoms could not stop the Mughals from regaining Guwahati. It was in the Battle of Itakhuli which was the final battle fought between them in 1682 that they could seize Guwahati from the Mughals. The Ahoms also ousted them from Koch Behar.

Thus, a series of conflicts between the Mughals and the Ahoms did not prove to be of any significant consequence for the former. The territories they came to acquire in the region were lost rapidly. The unfamiliar and difficult geographical terrain of the region also played a crucial role. The expedition of Mir Jumla to conquer territories such as Rangpur and Ghergaon in Assam failed due to a sudden rise or a violent storm in the Brahmaputra river which swept away the boats loaded with ammunition. This forced him to sign a peace treaty with the Ahom ruler. Also, Assam was surrounded by warlike tribes who supported the Ahoms. Mir Jumla was succeeded by Shaista Khan as the Mughal governor of Bengal. He was more focused on dealing with the Magh or Arakanese pirates in South Bengal. Their presence affected the trade and commerce of the region adversely. Arakan came into prominence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Myanmar. It adopted slave raiding as a core component of its economy. It had a big navy with thousands of vessels of various designs and about 70-80% of them were swift-moving, shallow-draft, oar-propelled boats which in European sources have been mentioned variously as *jalia*, *gelia*, *gallivant*, *galeasse*, *jelyasse* etc. These huge slaving fleets were between 60-80 feet in length, carrying hundreds of men and they were very apt for operating in riverine and coastal conditions. They were easy to row forward and backward speedily and, therefore, could be used to reverse direction rapidly. The design of these vessels was a key factor in manouvering in the coastal regions of the Bay of Bengal, from Bengal to Odisha, capturing people and selling them as slaves in order to cater to the increasing demand of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) for slaves. Between the 1620s and 1640s the Magh or Arakanese pirates in collaboration with the Portuguese marauders were very active in the region. From the 1660s the VOC's trade in slaves from the coastal areas of the Bay of Bengal had ceased. The Mughals had expelled the Arakanese pirates from the area. Shaista Khan had made an agreement with the king of Koch Behar so that there would be no military operation from its ruler while he dealt with the Arakanese pirates. He also persuaded the *Firingis* to lend no support to the Arakanese pirates through the means

of money and favours. The Dutch East India Company was reluctant to provide military assistance to the Arakanese and jeopardize its commercial relations with the Mughals. During the 1650s the Mughals had already threatened them a number of times with expulsion from their factories in Mughal empire. The Mughals were successful in destroying the Arakan navy and capturing their ships. Shaista Khan seized Chittagong in 1666. Thus, the Mughals were triumphant in safeguarding the coast of the Bay of Bengal and facilitating trade and commercial activities but they could not achieve much success in the north-east.

When the British East India Company emerged as one of the major political units in the Indian sub-continent we observe that the conflicts between the regional powers in the north-east and the kingdoms in modern-day Bhutan as well as Myanmar provided opportunities to the Company to bring the region under British domination. The great famine of 1770 in Bengal affected British trade adversely. By 1765, when the East India Company was granted the *diwani* rights by the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II, the ruler of Bhutan acquired control over large parts of the fertile western *duars* which belonged to Koch Behar, attempted to annex it and held its ruler Dhairjendra Narayan as a captive at Buxa in 1770. The military commander of Koch Behar sought the help of the East India Company to attack Bhutan and force the ruler to release the imprisoned king of Koch Behar. The conflict between the two kingdoms eventually led to a war from 1772 to 1774. This also brought Koch Behar under the Company rule in 1773. Assam, too, eventually came to be acquired by the Company in 1826 after the Treaty of Yandabo owing to the animosity between the Konbaung dynasty of Burma and Ahom dynasty as you have read earlier.

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### 13.3 SIKKIM

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It is believed that the first inhabitants of Sikkim were the Lepchas or Rong who migrated from present-day Assam and Myanmar to this eastern Himalayan region. Buddhism was introduced by Rinpoche (Padmasambhava<sup>5</sup>) in Sikkim in the ninth century. The territory also witnessed the advent of various Tibetan clans. In 1642 Phuntsog Namgyal is said to have established a Buddhist kingdom called the Namgyal dynasty. The ruler of the dynasty was ruled by a Buddhist priest-king called Chogyal. Phuntsog Namgyal was chosen as the first Chogyal (*dharma*-king) of the Namgyal dynasty by three 'Red Hat' Tibetan lamas called Lhatsun Chempo (founder of the Nyingmapa sect in Sikkim), Sempa Chempo and Rigzing Chempo<sup>6</sup> who, owing to a revolution, Chinese wars and the persecution of the Nyingma sect in Tibet, fled to Sikkim. Tibetan Buddhism was proclaimed as the state religion. The Bhutias (Sikkimese Tibetans), to which race the *Chogyals* belonged, came to acquire affluence and prominence in the Sikkimese society. Many big landowners in the region were the Bhutias. The Lepchas, on the other hand, were mainly agriculturists and hunters.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Sikkim had to deal with frequent invasions from Nepal in the west and Bhutan in the east. The reign of the third *Chogyal* – Chagdor Namgyal – saw the first invasion of Bhutan in early 1700. The whole of

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<sup>5</sup> Padmasambhava belonged to *Mahayana* Buddhism and taught at Nalanda *Mahavihara*. He is considered to be an important figure in introducing Buddhism in Tibet in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. He is regarded as the Second Buddha in Tibetan Buddhism and the patron saint of Sikkim.

<sup>6</sup> They escaped from Tibet to West Sikkim in 1741 and in order to disseminate the *Cho* (*dharma*) of Buddhism they installed a *Chogyal* (*dharma* king) in Sikkim.

Sikkim was annexed except Chumbi, Ilam and the Limbuwan area of the Greater Sikkim for a span of eight years, after which the *Chogyal* with the aid of Tibet was able to retrieve the lost lands. However, he lost the bulk of the Mon-Loong-kha-bzi area of the Greater Sikkim which was inhabited by the Lepchas. The second invasion of Bhutan in 1718 led to the annexation of the territories between Teesta and Tagong La. There was a further disintegration of the Greater Sikkim when the Limbu, Tsong or Yakthung tribal chiefs refused to remain subservient to the Chong, as even after the Tripartite Treaty of Lho-Mon-Tsong-Sum<sup>7</sup> in 1663 the Limbus continued to face discrimination and were accorded no prominent positions in administration or other political spheres. Thus, the dissatisfied Limbu chiefs began asserting independence in the Limbuwan area and stopped paying tribute to the *Chogyal*. Sikkim lost the Limbuwan area.

During the rule of Gyurmed Namgyal (1707-1733), Nepal, which was ruled by the Gorkha Confederacy (1559-1768)<sup>8</sup> during this time, attacked the kingdom while during the reign of Phuntsog Namgyal II (1733-1780), Rabdentse, the then capital of the dynasty, was raided by Nepal. The sixth *chogyal* Tenzing Namgyal (1780-1793) fled to Tibet (where he died in exile) when in 1788 the Gorkha kingdom attacked Sikkim. From 1788 to 1791 there were repeated invasions of Tibet, sacking its cities and monasteries. The Dalai Lama sought military assistance from the Qing dynasty of China (1644-1912). His son Tshudphud Namgyal (1799-1863) returned to Sikkim in 1793 and with the aid of the Qing army freed Sikkim from Nepal. It was in this state of uncertainties that in the early nineteenth century a number of treaties were signed between the *chogyal* of Sikkim and the East India Company. Through the Treaty of Sugauli<sup>9</sup> in 1816 after the Anglo-Gorkha War, Sikkim became independent. In 1835 the Company acquired Darjeeling from the *Chogyal* in exchange for an annuity. Finally, through the Treaty of Tumlong, Sikkim became a British protectorate in 1861.

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## 13.4 MANIPUR

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The Ningthouja or Mangang dynasty in Manipur was founded by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba in 33 CE in Imphal River Valley. Kangla became the seat of power. The dynasty is considered to be the longest lasting dynasty in Manipur. It continued until the

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<sup>7</sup>As per the Tripartite Treaty of Lho-Mon-Tsong-Sum the Limbu and Lepcha tribes were to be incorporated within the jurisdiction of the Namgyal kingdom and all three tribes – Bhutias, Lepchas and Limbus – were to be treated equally. It was also agreed that there would be no separate government and they would be brought under the rule of one government, one order and one religion. The agreement became instrumental in the effective propagation of Buddhism in Sikkim as a number of Buddhist monasteries were constructed at Dubdi, Khechopalri and Sangachoeling, primarily for the Lepchas and the Limbus.

<sup>8</sup>Nepal from 1559 to 1768 was ruled by the Gorkha Confederacy which was a confederacy of 24 states called *chaubisi rajya*. In 1768 the king Prithvi Narayan Shah unified Nepal and established the Kingdom of Nepal or the Gorkha Kingdom.

<sup>9</sup>The East India Company wanted to have a trade link with Tibet while the Gorkha kingdom was not willing to permit trade through its territory. Besides, the expansionist policy of Nepal was proving to be a threat to the Company. This became a bone of contention between the two and became a factor for the Anglo-Gorkha War (1814-1816). The war defined the political boundary of Nepal. It lost about one-third territories to the Company which included the whole of Sikkim, the territories of Kumaon and Garhwal (in present-day Uttarakhand) and western *Terai*. This provided the British a passage to trade with Tibet. Also, a number of Gorkhas were recruited by the British Indian Army.



abolition of the privy purse and royal entitlements through a constitutional amendment in 1971. In the thirteenth century Khuman dynasty, which ruled parts of Manipur, was subjugated by the Ningthouja dynasty. One of the most important rulers of the Ningthouja dynasty was Pamheiba (c. 1709-1747 CE). His father Charairongba (c. 1697-1709 CE) was able to conquer Senki Tekhao in his first military expedition. After the victory he took the title of or *Senpi Tekhao Ngampa* ('the Victor of Tekhao'). *Tekhao* is the Manipuri term for Ahom. Pamheiba expanded the territorial extent of the dynasty even further and undertook several successful military expeditions. He conquered Burma, Tripura and Cachar.

Manipur was in constant conflict with the Burmese Empire (Myanmar). Manipur paid tribute to Myanmar under Bayinnaung (1551-1581). In the mid seventeenth century the Manipuri king Khunjabao (1652-1666) attacked Upper Burma under the rule of the Toungoo dynasty (1510-1752). Such raids continued under the successive Manipuri rulers into the regions of Upper Chindwin and Upper Burma which were under the Konbaung dynasty of Myanmar. By the eighteenth century the frequency of loot and plunder in the region was intensified. Pamheiba infiltrated deeper into the heartland of Myanmar. The monasteries, houses etc. were burned down and people were slaughtered. In 1749 Pamheiba reached the ancient capital of the Ava kingdom that flourished in Myanmar from 1364-1557.

Manipur faced Myanmarese retaliation under the rule of Alaungpaya (1752-1760) and Hsin-byin-Shin (1763-1776). Alaungpaya attacked Manipur in 1755 and 1758. In the history of Manipur this is termed as 'First Devastation'. During these early Myanmarese invasions the inhabitants were taken as war captives and eventually assimilated into the society of Myanmar. These raids compelled the reigning ruler of Manipur to seek refuge in Cachar and take help from the British or the ruler of Assam to reclaim his throne. During the early eighteenth century a war of succession started in Manipur which resulted into a civil war. Taking advantage of the political instability the ruler of Myanmar named Bagidow (1819-1826) attacked Manipur and the latter accepted the overlordship of Myanmar. This period is known as *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* ('Seven years of Devastation'). During this phase a number of Manipuris migrated to Assam which was later conquered as well by Myanmar in 1822, leading to the Anglo-Burmese War in 1824-1826 which resulted into the end of the *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* in Manipur.

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## 13.5 TRIPURA

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As per *Rajmala*, a fifteenth century chronicle of the royal family of Tripura, Manikya dynasty was founded in Tripura by a chief named Chhengthung *Pha*<sup>10</sup> who was later called Maha Manikya in 1400 CE. The account establishes the connection of the Manikya dynasty with the *Chandravamshis* (lunar dynasty of the *Kshatriya* caste). The advent of this dynasty in Tripura marked the beginning of the real process of state formation in the region. It ruled Tripura for a long span of 549 years. They ruled from the capital Udaipur. Chhengthung *Pha* is believed to be the earliest Tipra tribal chief. The rise of the Tipra chiefs in the hilly region of Tripura brought the area in conflict with the Sultanate of Bengal. Chhengthung protected his territory against the invasions of

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<sup>10</sup>*Pha* was a title, meaning father. It was granted to the chief of the Tripura tribe.

the Bengal Sultanate. In 1618 the Mughals attacked and captured Tripura. However, they withdrew from there when a catastrophic epidemic hit the region, after which Kalyan Manikya became the new ruler in 1626 and the kingdom was restored. However, Kalyan, too, declined to accept the overlordship of the Mughal emperor and pay tribute. Accordingly, numerous battles were fought. Prince Shah Shuja finally defeated Kalyan in 1658. Nakshatra Roy, the second son of Kalyan, was taken as a hostage to the court of the Mughal prince.

After his death a fratricidal succession struggle between his sons viz. Govinda Manikya and Nakshatra further weakened the dynasty. Kalyan's eldest son Govinda succeeded him in 1660. But, Nakshatra usurped the throne with the aid of the Mughals. He adopted the title *Chhatra*. Govinda had to flee. He was able to recover the throne with the help of the ruler of Arakan after Chhatra died. After securing his position he pacified the Mughals by acknowledging Mughal authority and consenting to send regular *peshkash* (annual tribute). Dharma Manikya II, who came to power in 1713, could not pay tribute as a result of which the Nawab of Bengal sent an army. Initially, the army was not successful. But, internal dissension gave the Mughal army an opportunity to replace the reigning Manikya king with Jagat Manikya who agreed to pay tribute to the Nawab. Hence, from the seventeenth century and for almost 200 years the Mughals attempted to establish a hold on the state, compel it to pay regular *peshkash* and also to send horses and elephants procured from the jungles of the Hill Tipperah. However, the Mughals took no initiative to incorporate the state under their direct control whereas with the arrival of the British colonial rule in India it became a princely state.

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### 13.6 MEGHALAYA

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Before the Jaintia kingdom, which was established in the twelfth century, the territory was ruled by several oligarchies called *Ka Hima*. It was *Ka Hima* Sutnga, the chief of one such *Ka Hima*, who founded the Jaintia kingdom and established its capital Jaintiapur (now in Bangladesh). The kingdom had a separate administrative apparatus for the hills and for the plains on the foothills.

The Jaintias and the Ahoms were at loggerheads for the possession of the Gobha region (now in the Morigaon district of Assam) due to its strategic location and economic significance. The *Jayantia Buranji* describes it as a transit point for the exchange of diplomatic correspondence between them. It was a vassal principality of the Jaintia kingdom as per the Assamese *Buranjis* and the British reports.

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### 13.7 MIZORAM

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Between 1450 to 1700 Mizoram was ruled by chiefs who were living in the territory between the Lentlang mountain range and the river Tiau. As per Mizo legends the first Mizo chief was Zahmuaka (1580-1600). Eventually the Mizos moved westward. In 1700 many had reached the region beyond the Tiau. Between 1740 to 1750 seven Sailo chiefs, led by Pukawlha, founded the village of Selesih 7000 (7000 houses). The terrain that they chose was strategically beneficial to the Mizos as their opponents on east of the river would not raid their territory. The origin of Mizo customs and traditions in present-day Mizoram can be traced back to Selesih 7000.

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## 13.8 INFLUENCE OF HINDUISM, ISLAM AND BUDDHISM ON TRIBAL POLITY

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This was also a period when tribal societies in the north-east were undergoing some significant changes in terms of political formation. Different tribes had different rituals and customs. The tribal society was also experiencing the process of Hinduization, Islamization and Buddhization which, in turn, impacted the political processes in the region. As we read earlier, in Sikkim, Tibetan Buddhism aided the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty and its *Chogyals* were considered not only temporal but also spiritual kings and they presided over a social system which rested on Tibetan Lamaistic Buddhism.

Many tribal chiefs, who adopted the titles of kings and assumed royal duties, embraced Hinduism and wanted to be identified as Hindus. Thus, Hindu ideals of kingship became part of the tribal polity. Hindu fables and legends were introduced to claim political legitimacy. For instance, the story of Jayanti Devi, an incarnation of Goddess Durga, was incorporated in a Jaintia court chronicle titled the *Jaintia Buranji* as per which the Jaintia rulers were descendants of Goddess Durga who was the presiding deity of the Jaintia kingdom. This was a political attempt to proclaim that the kingdom was originally a Hindu kingdom and to establish the divine status of the Jaintia kings and, thereby, creating a power structure that was made sustainable by the application of Hindu devotion. Earlier, the tribal oligarchs believed in the legend of Ki Hynniewtrep-Khyndai Skum (“the seven huts on earth and nine huts in heaven”). The legend says that they were descendants of the families of seven mothers and that God communicated only through the chiefs. They received God’s commandments. Therefore, by obeying their respective chiefs they could reach the God after they died and join the nine families in heaven. This way the tribal chiefs aimed to gain political legitimacy as well as loyalty of their people. But, when the Jaintia kingdom came into existence its rulers adopted Hinduism and Hindu fables to support their political authority. Likewise, the origin of the state of Tripura, too, has been explained through the means of Hindu legends as per which it was one of the sons of Yayati<sup>11</sup> named Druhyu of the Lunar Dynasty who founded Tripura.

The Brahmanical influence in Assam was evident since the ancient times. The Allahabad Pillar inscription mentions that Pushya Varman, the founder of Varman dynasty of Kamarupa, was forced to pay all types of tributes (*sarva-kara-dana*) to the Gupta empire under Samudragupta. This led to the influence of the Guptas on the rulers of Kamarupa. The rulers assumed titles such as *Maharajadhiraja* (supreme ruler of rulers). They performed *ashwamedha* sacrifices. The Badaganga Rock Inscription records the performance of an *ashwamedha* sacrifice by Sri Bhuti Varman. As per Birinchi Kumar Barua, after the downfall of the imperial Guptas and the growing influence of Kamrup, a number of Brahmins migrated to Kamarupa in the late fifth century. The Nishanpur Grant shows that the rulers adopted a systematic policy of settling the Brahmins by granting *lakheraj* (revenue-free lands) to them. The Khanamukh Copper Plate and Kamuli Grant record the migration of Brahmins in Assam. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Shreemanta Shankar Dev worked for the dissemination of Bhaktism in Assam.

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<sup>11</sup>Yayati is believed to be the ancestor of the Yadavas and Pandavas.

As per the Chutia legend, Birpal, who established Chutia kingdom, was a descendant of Bishmak, the father of Rukmini in the *Mahabharata*. But, in the *Mahabharata* he is mentioned as the ruler of Kundinpur or Kundina which is believed to be in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. Buddhism, too, reached Assam. Huien Tsang visited the court of Bhaskar Varman of Kamarupa in seventh century. However, Buddhism did not receive as strong royal patronage as the Brahmanical faith did.

The repeated invasions of Bengal Sultans and the Mughals also left an impact on the geo-political set up of Assam. Some Sufi saints arrived here along with the invaders and, at times, as missionaries to propagate the doctrines of Sufism. One of the earliest Sufis to enter Assam was Shaikh Jalaluddin Tabrezi whose name is mentioned in *Siyar-al-Arifin* (a text on Sufi saints, compiled in c. 1530-36 CE) and Ibn Batuta's *Rehla*. It is difficult to ascertain his relationship with the local authorities but it seems that he did have their support. *Risalat-ush-Shuhada* mentions that Sultan Ruknuddin Barbak Shah of the Bengal Sultanate attempted to defeat the ruler of Kamarupa on several occasions but could not succeed. He credited his failures to the witchcraft practiced by the people in Kamarupa. To remedy this, he appointed a Sufi saint named Shah Ismail Ghazi. Ghazi successfully defeated the ruler and Kamarupa became a tributary state of the Bengal Sultanate. However, later Ghazi was beheaded by the order of the Sultan due to a false accusation. Thus, Sufi saints either entered the region as invaders or they accompanied the invading army. The rulers of the Koch, Kamata and Ahom kingdoms gave the Sufis land-grants as well as state patronage. Thus, both Sufism and Vaishnavism flourished in these kingdoms because of the state patronage. However, the Sufi saints or *fakirs* refrained from participating in political affairs.

Manipur had its indigenous religion which was later termed as Sanamahism<sup>12</sup> and it is practiced there till today and its predominant tribe was the Meiteis. The early eighteenth century in Manipur was the period when the process of Sanskritization started which reached its peak in the nineteenth century from 1898-1930. During the initial years of his reign, Meidingu Charairongba (c. 1697-1709 CE) was a Meitei ruler. But this changed in 1707 when he commissioned the construction of a temple dedicated to Lord Krishna. He was converted to Shakhya or Nimandi Vaishnavism by a Brahmin named Banamali and he became the first Meitei ruler to be converted to Hinduism. Charairongba was succeeded by his eldest son Pamheiba. According to the Sanamahi Laikal manuscript, he was converted to Nimandi Vaishnavism by Gangadhar, the son of Banamali. He started working for the propagation of this variant of Vaishnava tradition. But, soon he switched to another variant of Vaishnavism. Shantidas Gosai, a Brahmin priest from Sylhet (Bangladesh) arrived in Manipur in c. 1717 CE with his two followers Bhagwan Das and Narayan Das to popularize Ramandi Vaishnavism in Manipur. Guru Gopal Das influenced him to become a Ramandi follower. The adherents of Ramandi Vaishnavism worshipped Lord Rama. Pamheiba also replaced the Meitei royal titles for the ruler such as *Ningthou* or *Meidingu* with *Maharaja*. He also changed his name from Pamheiba to the Persianate Gharib Nawaz. Similarly, the commander of the army was appointed as *Senapati* and some of the nobles were addressed as *Mantri*, *Katwan* and *Dewan*. Pamheiba forcibly converted his subjects to Vaishnavism and desecrated and destroyed the sacred idols and shrines of Meitei deities and burned the sacred writings of Meiteis known as *Meitei Puyas*. Hinduism became a state religion. The ruler adopted the Hindu *varna* system and came to be associated with

<sup>12</sup>Sanamahism is a polytheistic religion, named after a Meitei deity called Lainingthou Sanamahi.

the *kshatriya* caste. Those who refused to accept the new religion were executed or exiled. The latter were excommunicated as *mangba* (untouchable) class. It was during this phase that Kangleipak, the former name of Manipur, was changed to Manipur. Prof. Ch Manihar Singh, an eminent literary historian, notes, “Worshiping of local ancestral deities, observances of traditional rites, performance of religious festival Lai Haraoba were put to sudden end.”

Since the sacred texts of the Meities were burnt to ashes, Shantidas was commissioned to write a text inventing a new creation fable of the Meities. Thus he wrote *Bijay Panchali* tracing the origin of the Meities to the *Gandharvas* (celestial beings in Hinduism), linking them with the *Mahabharata* and that Arjuna married Chitrangada, the warrior princess of Manipur. The account also claimed that Lord Shiva was the creator as well as the first king of Manipur. This way, Hindu gods and goddesses via narratives were appropriated so as to replace the old creation story. Thus, in this section you read about the role of state patronage as a very effective instrument in the dissemination of a religious belief system and its impact on royal court and the subjects.

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### 13.9 SUMMARY

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To sum up, in this Unit you learnt about different dynamics concerning the state formation and the struggle for power of regional states in the north-east from c. 1300 to 1800 CE and how they attempted to deal with the recurring threats of powerful entities, from the Mughals to the British East India Company. You also read about the gradual transformation the societies in the north-east underwent with the coming of religions from other regions. They became indelibly grafted onto the psyche of the people here, changing cultural norms and practices, affecting political situation, enabling court chroniclers to assist the rulers (who adopted these religions) in order to produce narratives which connected the origins of their respective patrons’ lineages with religious stories, with the motive of providing sanctity to their rule and legitimizing their rule over their subjects. The interactions between the tribal or indigenous beliefs and the religions that were introduced here had not always been cordial. Some coercion and friction were noticeable and sometimes they were violent too.

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### 13.10 GLOSSARY

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- Duar** : *Duar* (meaning ‘door’ or ‘gateway’) refers to the alluvial floodplains, lying south of the outer foothills of the eastern Himalayas and north of the Brahmaputra river basin. *Duar* is divided into Eastern *Duar* (also called the Bengal *Duar*) and Western *Duar* (Assam *Duar*).
- Nyingma** : The Nyingma or Nyingmapa sect is a part of Tibetan Buddhism and is considered to be the oldest sect among the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The term *Nyingma* means ancient in Tibetan. It is also known as the Red Hat sect since its *Lamas* don red robes and hats. The principal teachings of this sect are based on the teachings of Padmasambhava and Shantarakshita who came to Tibet in the eighth century.

**Sanskritization** : The term ‘sanskritization’ was coined by M. N. Srinivasan in his work, *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*. It denotes the adoption of orthodox rituals and practices of the upper castes by lower-caste Hindus to achieve upward mobility in the caste hierarchy. As per this concept, the stratification in the caste system is not rigid. There is a scope for mobility for lower castes.

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### 13.11 EXERCISES

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- 1) Throw light on the conflicts between the Ahom kingdom and other political powers.
- 2) Explain the formation of the Namgyal dynasty and its struggles with its neighbouring political entities in present-day Bhutan and Nepal.
- 3) How did the advent of Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism in the north-east impact the politics of the region?

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