# Religious Movements in North-East India with Special Reference to Buddhism

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## Introduction

North-East India is a region of remarkable cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. Comprising the eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, the region has historically served as a bridge between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. As a result, several religious traditions, including indigenous tribal beliefs, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Jainism, have flourished here. Among these, **Buddhism** has played a significant role in shaping the cultural, spiritual, and social life of many communities, especially in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and parts of Assam and Tripura. Buddhism in North-East India is not merely a religion but also an important cultural movement that has promoted peace, compassion, education, and artistic development.

## Religious Movements in North-East India

The religious history of North-East India reflects the coexistence of diverse traditions. The major religious movements include:

- **Hinduism**, particularly Shaivism, Shaktism, and Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam and Tripura.
- **Buddhism**, practised by Monpa, Sherdukpen, Khamti, Singpho, Chakma, and other communities.
- **Islam**, introduced through migration, trade, and political contacts.
- **Christianity**, which spread extensively through missionary work in Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Manipur.
- **Indigenous tribal religions**, based on ancestor worship and nature worship.

Among these, Buddhism occupies a unique position due to its ancient roots and enduring influence on the social and cultural life of several ethnic communities.

## Origin and Spread of Buddhism in North-East India

Buddhism originated in India during the **6th century BCE** with the teachings of **Gautama Buddha**. From the Gangetic plains, it gradually spread across Asia through monks, traders, and royal patronage. North-East India became an important route connecting India with Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Southeast Asia.

The spread of Buddhism in North-East India occurred mainly through:

- Trade routes connecting India with Tibet and Southeast Asia.
- Buddhist monks and missionaries.
- Influence of neighbouring Buddhist kingdoms such as Tibet, Bhutan, and Myanmar.
- Royal patronage by local rulers.

Today, Buddhism is mainly practised in **Arunachal Pradesh**, **Sikkim**, and by communities such as the **Chakmas** in Tripura and Mizoram.

## Major Schools of Buddhism in North-East India

Two major schools of Buddhism are followed in the region.

### 1. Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism is widely practised among the **Monpa**, **Sherdukpen**, and **Memba** communities of Arunachal Pradesh. It is closely associated with Tibetan Buddhism and emphasizes compassion, the Bodhisattva ideal, meditation, and monastic life.

### 2. Theravada Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism is followed by the **Khamti**, **Singpho**, **Tai Phake**, **Aiton**, **Turung**, and **Chakma** communities. It stresses adherence to the original teachings of the Buddha preserved in the Pali Canon and emphasizes individual spiritual discipline.

## Important Buddhist Communities

Several ethnic groups in North-East India have preserved Buddhist traditions for centuries.

### Monpa

The Monpas of Tawang and West Kameng districts in Arunachal Pradesh follow Mahayana Buddhism. Their monasteries are important centres of learning and pilgrimage.

### Sherdukpen

The Sherdukpen community combines Buddhist beliefs with local tribal traditions and actively participates in monastic festivals.

### Khamti

The Khamtis follow Theravada Buddhism and maintain close cultural ties with Myanmar. Their monasteries are centres of education and social life.

### Chakma

The Chakmas of Tripura, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh are followers of Theravada Buddhism. Religious ceremonies and festivals play an important role in preserving their identity.

## Buddhist Monasteries

Monasteries, or **Gompas**, are the most important institutions of Buddhism in North-East India. They serve as places of worship, education, meditation, and cultural preservation.

Some famous monasteries include:

- **Tawang Monastery (Arunachal Pradesh)** – The largest monastery in India and one of the largest in the world. It belongs to the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism.
- **Bomdila Monastery (Arunachal Pradesh)** – A major centre of Mahayana Buddhism.
- **Rumtek Monastery (Sikkim)** – One of the most important monasteries of Tibetan Buddhism in India.
- **Enchey Monastery (Sikkim)** – A renowned monastery famous for its annual religious festivals.

These monasteries preserve ancient manuscripts, Buddhist art, and religious traditions.

## Principles of Buddhism

The Buddhist movement in North-East India is based on the fundamental teachings of Gautama Buddha.

The main principles include:

- Belief in the **Four Noble Truths**.

- Following the **Eightfold Path**.
- Practice of **non-violence (Ahimsa)**.
- Compassion towards all living beings.
- Meditation and self-discipline.
- Rejection of unnecessary rituals and superstition.
- Pursuit of wisdom and moral conduct.

These teachings have contributed to peaceful coexistence and ethical living among Buddhist communities.

**Cultural Contributions**

Buddhism has significantly enriched the cultural heritage of North-East India.

**Art and Architecture**

Buddhist monasteries display beautiful architecture, murals, statues of the Buddha, prayer wheels, and colourful frescoes. They preserve traditional craftsmanship and sacred art.

**Literature**

Monasteries have preserved Buddhist scriptures written in Tibetan, Pali, Sanskrit, and local languages. They continue to promote learning through religious education.

**Festivals**

Important Buddhist festivals celebrated in North-East India include:

- **Losar** (Tibetan New Year)
- **Saga Dawa**
- **Buddha Purnima**
- **Torgya Festival**
- **Sangken Festival**, celebrated by the Khamti and other Theravada Buddhist communities

These festivals promote social harmony, cultural identity, and community participation.

**Education**

Monasteries function as educational institutions where monks receive training in philosophy, ethics, languages, and traditional medicine. Many monasteries also provide modern education to local children.

## Social Impact

Buddhism has made significant contributions to society in North-East India.

- It promotes peace, tolerance, and compassion.
- It encourages education and literacy.
- It strengthens community life through monasteries.
- It preserves indigenous languages and cultural traditions.
- It promotes respect for nature and environmental conservation.
- It encourages equality and discourages discrimination.

The Buddhist emphasis on non-violence has helped maintain harmonious relations among various communities.

## Contemporary Challenges

Despite its rich heritage, Buddhism in North-East India faces several challenges.

- Modernization has reduced the influence of traditional monastic education.
- Migration and urbanization have affected the preservation of Buddhist culture.
- Some monasteries face financial and infrastructural difficulties.
- Younger generations are increasingly influenced by globalization and changing lifestyles.
- Preservation of ancient manuscripts and heritage sites requires greater governmental and community support.

Efforts are being made by governments, monasteries, and cultural organizations to conserve Buddhist heritage and promote religious tourism.

## Significance of Buddhism in North-East India

The Buddhist movement continues to be an important force in the region.

- It strengthens cultural links between India and neighbouring countries such as Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, and Tibet.
- It promotes tourism through famous monasteries and festivals.
- It contributes to India's rich religious diversity.
- It preserves ancient traditions of art, architecture, philosophy, and literature.
- It encourages peaceful coexistence among different religious communities.

## Conclusion

Religious movements have greatly influenced the history and culture of North-East India. Among them, Buddhism occupies a special place because of its long history, rich philosophical tradition, and lasting cultural contributions. Introduced through trade, missionary activity, and cultural exchanges, Buddhism became deeply rooted among several communities in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Assam, Tripura, and Mizoram. Its monasteries serve as centres of spirituality, education, and cultural preservation, while its teachings of compassion, non-violence, and wisdom continue to inspire people. Despite modern challenges, Buddhism remains a vital part of North-East India's religious and cultural landscape, contributing to social harmony, ethical values, and regional identity. Its enduring legacy demonstrates the importance of religion as a force for peace, cultural continuity, and human development.