Unit 3: Ethnohistory in Context of North-East India

UNIT STRUCTURE

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3.1 Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the relevance of ethnohistory in North East Indian studies
- Understand the contribution of ethnohistory to regional scholarship

3.2 Introduction

Ethnohistory, as an academic discipline, combines the methods of history and anthropology to reconstruct the past of communities that have traditionally been outside the purview of conventional historical narratives. In the context of Northeast India, ethnohistory plays a vital role in understanding the diverse and complex histories of its numerous ethnic groups. The region, inhabited by a mosaic of tribes and communities with distinct languages, customs, and social structures, poses unique challenges and opportunities for historical reconstruction. Unlike mainstream Indian history, which often relies heavily on written records, the ethnohistorical study of Northeast India depends largely on oral traditions, myths, folklore, rituals, and material culture that have been passed down through generations. These sources, when interpreted alongside colonial records, archaeological findings, and local chronicles, provide a more holistic picture of the region's past.

Northeast India's historical trajectory is deeply intertwined with its geographical isolation, ecological diversity, and cultural pluralism. The study of ethnohistory here enables scholars to trace the origins, migration patterns, settlement histories, and socio-political

organizations of different ethnic groups such as the Ahoms, Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, and others. Through this approach, one can understand how identities were formed and transformed through interactions, conflicts, and assimilation among neighboring communities and with external powers. Ethnohistory also provides insights into pre-colonial polities, indigenous governance systems, and the impact of colonial administration on traditional institutions. For instance, the Ahom chronicles (Buranjis), British ethnographic surveys, and local oral narratives together help historians reconstruct the evolution of political and cultural identities in Assam and other parts of the region.

Furthermore, ethnohistory contributes o the understanding of cultural continuity and change in Northeast India. It reveals how myths of origin, clan traditions, and customary laws serve as repositories of historical memory, shaping contemporary ethnic consciousness and political movements. In modern times, ethnohistorical studies have become increasingly significant in identity politics, territorial claims, and the assertion of indigenous rights. By integrating historical evidence with anthropological perspectives, ethnohistory in Northeast India not only bridges the gap between past and present but also challenges the dominance of linear, text-based historiography. Thus, ethnohistory emerges as a dynamic and inclusive approach to uncovering the plural pasts of Northeast India—pasts that continue to influence its social and political realities today.

3.3 Relevance to North-East Indian Studies

Ethnohistory holds immense relevance in the study of Northeast India due to the region's unique ethnic composition, cultural diversity, and complex historical development. Traditional historical methods, which rely mainly on written records and chronological narratives, often fail to capture the lived experiences and indigenous perspectives of the many tribal and non-tribal communities of the region. In contrast, ethnohistory—an approach that integrates historical data with anthropological insights—enables a more inclusive reconstruction of the past by giving importance to oral traditions, folklore, rituals, myths, and material culture alongside conventional archival and textual sources. This approach is particularly valuable in Northeast India, where oral traditions serve as the primary means of preserving history among many communities.

The relevance of ethnohistory in Northeast Indian studies also lies in its ability to highlight the interconnectedness of culture, identity, and history. The region is home to diverse ethnic groups such as the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Karbis, Bodos, and Ahoms, each possessing distinct cultural narratives about their origins, migrations, and social structures. Ethnohistorical research helps trace these cultural trajectories, enabling a deeper understanding of how these groups have interacted, adapted, and coexisted through centuries. It allows scholars to examine not only the internal dynamics of individual tribes or kingdoms but also their relations with neighboring groups, larger regional polities, and external influences such as colonialism and missionary activities. By doing so, ethnohistory broadens the scope of regional historiography and restores agency to indigenous voices that were often marginalized in mainstream historical accounts.

Moreover, ethnohistory contributes significantly to contemporary socio-political discourses in Northeast India. Many current identity movements, ethnic revivalisms, and territorial claims are rooted in historical memories and cultural continuities that ethnohistorical research helps to contextualize. It provides academic grounding to the study of ethnicity, tradition, and change—key issues in understanding the region's politics and development. Ethnohistory also assists in policy-making, heritage preservation, and cultural documentation by validating indigenous knowledge systems and historical consciousness. Therefore, in the broader framework of Northeast Indian studies, ethnohistory stands as an essential interdisciplinary approach that not only reconstructs the past but also connects it meaningfully with the region's evolving present and its search for identity and autonomy.

3.4 Contribution of Regional Scholarship

The growth and development of ethnohistorical studies in Northeast India owe much to the dedicated efforts of regional scholars who have contributed significantly to documenting, interpreting, and promoting the diverse cultural and historical narratives of the region. Their scholarship has played a pivotal role in bridging the gap between mainstream historiography and indigenous knowledge systems, giving voice to the lived experiences and memories of the region's numerous ethnic communities. By integrating oral traditions, folklore, archaeology, linguistics, and anthropology with conventional historical methods, these scholars have laid the foundation for a distinct regional approach to ethnohistory that reflects the complexities of Northeast India's past.

One of the earliest and most important contributions came from Assamese historians and scholars such as S.K. Bhuyan, H.K. Barpujari, and S.L. Baruah, who emphasized the use of local sources like the *Buranjis* (Ahom chronicles) and oral narratives in reconstructing Assam's history. Their works demonstrated that indigenous records and traditions could serve as valuable historical materials, thus challenging the colonial notion that the region lacked a proper historical consciousness. Later, scholars from various northeastern states —such as Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh—extended this methodological approach to their own cultural contexts. They began to collect and analyze oral histories, myths of origin, clan genealogies, and customary practices to uncover the indigenous perspectives on migration, settlement, and political organization. This initiative marked a significant step toward decolonizing the history of the region and situating it within its own intellectual and cultural framework.

The establishment of universities and research institutions in the region, such as North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Dibrugarh University, Gauhati University, and Rajiv Gandhi University, further encouraged the growth of ethnohistorical studies. Departments of History, Anthropology, and Tribal Studies in these institutions have produced a wide range of research that combines ethnographic fieldwork with historical analysis. Regional journals and publications, such as the *Journal of the North East India History Association (NEIHA)*, have provided crucial platforms for scholars to share research findings and engage in interdisciplinary dialogues. Through annual conferences, workshops, and

publications, NEIHA and similar organizations have actively promoted the study of ethnohistory, fostering collaboration among historians, anthropologists, and linguists working in the region.

Additionally, regional scholars have contributed to preserving and revitalizing indigenous knowledge systems that were threatened by modernization and globalization. Their documentation of traditional governance systems, ecological practices, oral epics, and folk literature has not only enriched the field of ethnohistory but also strengthened the cultural identity of local communities. In recent years, younger researchers have begun to explore new themes such as memory, identity politics, and the impacts of colonialism and globalization through ethnohistorical frameworks, further expanding the discipline's scope and relevance. Their work continues to inspire new generations of researchers, ensuring that the historical and cultural richness of Northeast India remains an integral part of India's broader historical narrative.

Institutions like NEIHA and regional universities have played a significant role in promoting ethnohistorical research, fostering collaboration, and preserving the diverse cultural heritage of the region. Today, ethnohistory continues to be relevant as it provides critical insights into issues of identity, ethnicity, and socio-political transformation that shape the contemporary Northeast. Ultimately, the discipline serves not only as a means of understanding the past but also as a tool for cultural preservation and regional empowermentensuring that the voices of the people of Northeast India remain central to the telling of their own history.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What type of sources are primarily used in ethnohistory in Northeast India?

2. What do Buranjis represent in ethnohistorical studies?

3. What do Buranjis represent in ethnohistorical studies?

4. What aspect of society does ethnohistory help to understand in contemporary Northeast India?

3.5 Let us sum up

- The contribution of regional scholarship to ethnohistory in Northeast India has been invaluable in promoting a more inclusive and context-sensitive understanding of the region's past. By emphasizing indigenous voices, local methodologies, and interdisciplinary collaboration, these scholars have transformed ethnohistory from a marginal approach into a vibrant and respected field of study.

- The study of ethnohistory in Northeast India has emerged as a vital and dynamic field that bridges the disciplines of history and anthropology to present a more inclusive understanding of the region's past.

- The contribution of regional scholars has been instrumental in this development. Their efforts to collect, document, and interpret indigenous records, oral narratives, and cultural practices have established a strong foundation for the discipline within the Northeast.

- Ethnohistory, therefore, not only enriches academic inquiry but also empowers indigenous communities by validating their own versions of history and memory.

3.6 Further readings

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14. Misra, T. (1989). *The Valley and the Hills: Essays on the North East.* Spectrum Publications.
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3.7 Answers to check your progress

Answer 1: Oral traditions such as myths, folklore, and rituals.

Answer 2: Indigenous historical chronicles of the Ahom period.

Answer 3: North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU).

Answer 4: Identity and cultural consciousness.

3.8 Model questions

Very Short Answer Type Questions

1. What is ethnohistory?
2. Name one important regional scholar who contributed to the study of ethnohistory in Assam.
3. What is the main source of historical information for tribal communities in Northeast India?
4. Name one academic institution that promotes ethnohistorical research in Northeast India.

Short Answer Type Questions

1. Why is ethnohistory important for the study of North East India?
2. Mention two sources used in ethnohistorical research.
3. What is the role of regional universities in promoting ethnohistorical studies?
4. How does ethnohistory help in understanding identity formation in Northeast India?
5. What are *Buranjis* and why are they important in ethnohistorical studies

Long Answer Type Questions

1. Discuss the relevance of ethnohistory in the context of Northeast India.

2. Describe the contributions of regional scholars to the promotion of ethnohistory

3. Explain how ethnohistory contributes to the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems.

4. Evaluate the role of ethnohistory in contemporary identity and political movements in Northeast India.3.7 Check your Progress

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