
NAVIGATING IDENTITY AND GOVERNANCE: ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND THE POLITICS OF INCLUSION IN NORTHEAST INDIA'S TRIBAL REGIONS

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ABSTRACT

In a multi-ethnic country like India, integrating differing realities around various communities and areas has occupied policymakers since the establishment of the Indian state. The tribes of the Northeast have long wrestled with the issue of adjusting to new politico-legal and administrative systems that would reduce conflict and improve social, political, and economic fairness. The region, distinguished by its own cultural mosaic, is home to numerous tribes, each with its own identity, traditions, and social systems. This paper examines the benefits and drawbacks of diversity, with a focus on the complexities of encouraging inclusion within a framework that respects and honours the various cultural traditions of all cultures. It investigates the colonial and postcolonial legacies and wars that have shaped these groups and their current political landscape. Issues of representation, cultural preservation, and socioeconomic development are all addressed, as are current efforts and legislation to promote diversity. The purpose of this study is to help policymakers and scholars interested in North East India's ongoing development and identity discourse by sharing insights acquired by analyzing the relationship between ethnic diversity and inclusion politics. This study emphasizes the complexities and limitations of inclusive policies in meeting the needs of communities with diverse racial and ethnic compositions. It examined the framework of a federal organization and highlighted how people have dealt with the benefits and limitations of self-government.

Keywords: Ethnic diversity, inclusion politics, tribal communities, north east India, cultural heritage, identity dynamics

1. INTRODUCTION

Northeast India has a well-deserved reputation for radicalism, insurgency, and ethnic violence—both at home and abroad [1]. The region saw the emergence of numerous extremist groups that threatened the integrity and sovereignty of the Indian state. In the rich tapestry of India's cultural landscape, the North East region stands as a mosaic of diverse ethnicities, each contributing to the vibrant fabric of the nation. Among the numerous communities that call this region home, the tribal communities of North East India hold a distinctive and integral place. This study delves into the intricate dynamics of ethnic diversity and inclusion politics within the tribal communities of North East India, unraveling the historical threads that have shaped their socio-political landscape [2].

Amidst the emerald embrace of the Himalayas and the verdant tapestry of lush rainforests, North East India pulsates with the symphony of over 200 tribal communities. Each, a distinct melody in this harmonious chorus, weaves a tale of vibrant cultures, ancient traditions, and languages as diverse as the landscapes they inhabit. This region, nestled at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, is a kaleidoscope of ethnicities, a testament to the enduring power of human diversity. Yet, beneath the breathtaking panorama lies a labyrinth of complex challenges, where the politics of inclusion for these communities becomes a delicate dance amidst historical shadows and contemporary struggles.

For centuries, the tribal communities of North East India have walked a tightrope between the allure of integration and the sting of marginalization [3]. The promise of the Indian Constitution, etched with ideals of equality and inclusivity, often clashes with the harsh realities of underrepresentation and overlooked vulnerabilities. Political spaces, where decisions shape destinies, frequently echo with the voices of dominant groups, leaving the concerns of tribes relegated to the periphery. Development initiatives, though well-meaning, can inadvertently trample upon cultural sensitivities and disrupt delicate ecological balances, leaving communities adrift in the wake of misplaced progress. The very systems meant to empower can, at times, become instruments of alienation, leading to a simmering frustration that threatens to spill over into unrest.

The quest for inclusion, therefore, transcends mere policy pronouncements and demands a nuanced understanding of the intricate tapestry of tribal societies. It necessitates acknowledging the profound significance of each community's unique identity, woven from threads of ancestral wisdom, distinct languages, and deeply embedded customs. The Garos of Meghalaya, with their matrilineal social structure and vibrant

dance forms, stand in stark contrast to the Apatani of Arunachal Pradesh, known for their facial tattoos and intricate rice cultivation practices [4]. Each community, a sovereign island within the larger archipelago of North East India, deserves respect for its distinct cultural autonomy and self-governance structures.

This pursuit of autonomy, however, often collides with the realities of power dynamics. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, envisioned as a bridge between tribal aspirations and national governance, can sometimes morph into a bureaucratic labyrinth, with resource allocation and decision-making power remaining elusive. Traditional councils, steeped in the wisdom of elders and customary practices, face the constant challenge of navigating their authority within the larger web of state and national structures. The yearning for a voice in shaping their own destinies becomes a relentless drumbeat, echoing through valleys and resounding in the hearts of every tribal elder and youth [5].

Inclusion cannot be achieved solely through top-down pronouncements; it must blossom from the fertile ground of community empowerment. Strengthening tribal political representation through reserved seats and community-based initiatives is not a mere gesture, but a vital step towards amplifying their voices in the corridors of power [6]. Decentralizing power and resources, ensuring capacity building for tribal councils, and recognizing their leadership as legitimate partners in decision-making processes are not optional add-ons, but fundamental pillars of an inclusive future.

Yet, the path to inclusion is not paved with smooth stones. Internal conflicts within communities, fueled by historical grievances and competing visions for the future, can fracture unity and stall progress. External pressures from powerful groups, driven by economic interests or political ideologies, can threaten the delicate balance of cultural autonomy and environmental integrity. And the ever-present specter of bureaucratic hurdles, red tape, and unfulfilled promises can erode trust and dampen the fire of hope.

Despite these challenges, the landscape of inclusion is dotted with the footprints of unwavering determination and hopeful initiatives. The rise of young tribal leaders, vocal and unafraid to challenge the status quo, injects fresh energy into the movement for equity. The growing awareness of tribal rights, amplified by the efforts of dedicated activists and civil society organizations, resonates with a powerful call for justice. And the burgeoning collaborations between communities, transcending borders and language barriers, build bridges of understanding and solidarity, paving the way for a future where inclusivity is not a slogan, but a lived reality.

North East India's tapestry of tribal communities pulsates with the rhythm of ancient wisdom and fervent dreams of a just future. To truly understand this region, we must move beyond the superficial gloss and delve into the labyrinthine complexities of its struggles and aspirations. Inclusion cannot be a one-time act of charity, but a sustained commitment to recognize, respect, and empower the diverse voices that weave the very fabric of this vibrant land [7]. Only then can the mosaic of mountains and movements, of traditions and triumphs, reveal its true brilliance, a testament to the enduring power of human diversity and the transformative potential of a truly inclusive India.

2. ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN NORTH EAST INDIA

North East India is a vibrant tapestry of ethnic diversity, where over 200 distinct communities weave together a rich cultural landscape. This region, often referred to as the "Seven Sisters" and with brother state of Sikkim, is home to people of Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Iranian, and Austroasiatic descent, each with their unique traditions, languages, and customs [8].



Fig. 1: Map of North East India

Source: <https://www.thenevibes.com/unveiling-indias-northeast-breaking-the-shackles-of-neglect>

HERE'S A GLIMPSE INTO SOME OF THE MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS

1. Arunachal Pradesh: Land of the Monpa, Apatani, and Adi Tribes

Arunachal Pradesh, nestled in the Eastern Himalayas, known as land of dawnlit mountains, is a treasure trove of ancient traditions and vibrant tribal communities. The Monpas, known for their colorful prayer flags fluttering in the mountain breeze, revere nature and celebrate life through vibrant festivals like Tawang Torgya. The Nyishis, who traditionally wear cane helmets surmounted by the crest of a [Hornbill](#) beak known as pudum, famous for their warrior agility is the largest tribe. The Apatani, distinguished by their distinctive facial tattoos, are skilled farmers and weavers, while the Adi tribes showcase their rich heritage through their energetic dances and colorful attire. Distinguished by their distinctive facial tattoos, the Apatani revere nature and celebrate life through vibrant festivals like Dree, Myoko etc, where the ground trembles beneath the rhythmic stomping of tattooed feet [9].



Fig. 2: Arunachal Pradesh People

Source: <https://www.indiatravel.app/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Nyishi-Tribe-300x180.png>

2. Nagaland: Land of the Angamis, Lothas, and Konyaks etc.

Nagaland, the land of the headhunters, now known as land of festivals, is a mosaic of fierce warriors and rich cultural heritage. Out of seventeen major tribes, the Angamis, known for their impressive Morungs (communal houses), are skilled woodcarvers and storytellers. The Lothas, renowned for their warrior spirit, showcase their cultural pride through their vibrant festivals and colorful attire. The Konyaks, with their distinctive hornbill-feather headgear, are skilled hunters and farmers, their traditions deeply rooted in their connection to nature. Comprising over 16 tribes, the Nagas are renowned for their warrior spirit and rich cultural heritage. Each tribe has its own distinct language, dress, and traditions, but they share a common bond of community and respect for nature [10].



Fig. 3: Nagaland people

Sources: <https://easternroutes.com/northeast-india/nagaland/traditional-festival/>

3. Mizoram: Land of the Mizos (Lushai)

Mizoram, the land of the Lushai people, is renowned for its breathtaking beauty and vibrant musical traditions. The Mizos, with their colorful Puanchi shawls and infectious love for music, celebrate their matriarchal society through energetic dances like Cheraw. Their traditional bamboo houses and intricate bamboo handicrafts showcase their skilled craftsmanship and deep connection to nature. Also known as the Lushai people, the Mizos are known for their love of music and their colorful "puanchi" shawls. Their society is traditionally matriarchal, and their vibrant dances and songs are a testament to their rich cultural heritage [11].



Fig. 4: Mizoram people

Source: https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/Mizo_people#/media/Mizo_people|File:_

4. Meghalaya: Land of the Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos

Meghalaya, the land of the clouds, is home to the Khasis, renowned for their entrepreneurial spirit and awe-inspiring "living root bridges" woven from the roots of banyan trees. Their matrilineal society forms the bedrock of their vibrant culture, reflected in their colorful attire and captivating festivals like Nongkrem Dance. The Jaintias, skilled basket weavers and farmers, add a touch of serenity to the region's landscape. The Garos, with their rich storytelling traditions and energetic dances like Wangala, celebrate their connection to nature and community. These matrilineal people from Meghalaya are known for their entrepreneurial spirit and their unique "living root bridges." They are skilled weavers and farmers, and their traditional attire is a riot of colors and intricate designs [12].



Fig. 5: Meghalaya people

Sources: <https://www.kipepeo.in/festivals-of-meghalaya/>

5. Assam: Home to the Ahoms, Bodos, and Dimasa Kacharis

Assam, the heart of the Northeast, is a land steeped in history and vibrant traditions. The Ahoms, who once ruled the region, left behind a legacy of majestic architecture and rich cultural practices. The Bodos, known for their colorful Bihu festival celebrating spring, are skilled farmers and weavers. The Dimasa Kacharis, once headhunters, have transformed into skilled artisans, their wood carvings whispering tales of their rich past. The largest ethnic group in the region, the Assamese are known for their warmth and hospitality. Their rich literary tradition includes the epic "Mahabharata," and their Bihu festival is a joyous celebration of spring [13].



Fig. 6: Assamese people and other tribes of Assam.

Sources: <https://www.outofboundstours.com/tribes-northeast-india/>

6. Manipur: Home to the Meiteis, Tangkhuls, and Kukis

Manipur, the land of dance and theatre, is home to the Meiteis, renowned for their graceful Manipuri classical dance form. The Tangkhuls, with their vibrant festivals like Lui-Ngai-Ni, celebrate life and nature. The Kukis, known for their skilled craftsmanship and rich folklore, add a unique thread to the cultural tapestry of Manipur. The Meiteis of Manipur are known for their love of dance and theater. Their classical Manipuri dance is a graceful and expressive art form, and their colorful festivals like Lai Haraoba and Yaoshang are a visual treat [14].



Fig. 7: Kukis of Manipur.

Source: https://www.indianetzone.com/tribes_manipur

7. Tripura: Home to the Tripuris, Reang, and Chakmas

Tripura, the land of ancient temples and serene lakes, is home to the Tripuris, known for their rich folklore and vibrant festivals like Hojagiri. The Reang tribe, with their colorful attire and energetic dances, add a unique flavor to the region's cultural landscape. The Chakmas, with their love for music and storytelling, celebrate their heritage through festivals like Chakma Rangdania [15].



Fig. 8: Tripura People

Sources: <https://www.tripuraonline.in/guide/tribes-of-tripura>

This is just a glimpse of the incredible diversity that North East India has to offer. Each ethnic group brings its own unique flavor to the region, creating a cultural mosaic that is both vibrant and harmonious.

Beyond the major groups, there are countless smaller communities, each with its own story to tell. From the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh with their distinctive facial tattoos to the Dimasa Kacharis of Assam known for their headhunting past, the region is a treasure trove of cultural riches.

The ethnic diversity of North East India is not just a source of pride for the region, but also a valuable asset for the entire country. It is a reminder of the power of tolerance and understanding, and it serves as a bridge between different cultures and traditions.

3. POLITICS OF INCLUSION IN NORTH EAST INDIA

The "Politics of Inclusion" in North East India refers to the complex interplay of policies, governance structures, and societal dynamics aimed at integrating diverse ethnic communities within the broader framework of the Indian nation-state [16]. This region, comprising eight states with a multitude of indigenous tribes and ethnic groups, has been historically characterized by unique cultural, linguistic, and social identities. The politics of inclusion strives to address historical grievances, empower marginalized communities, and foster a sense of belonging within the diverse tapestry of North East India [17].

One of the key aspects of the politics of inclusion is the recognition and accommodation of the unique identities and aspirations of various ethnic groups. The region has witnessed movements seeking autonomy and self-determination, driven by the desire to preserve cultural heritage and address historical injustices. In response, political frameworks and administrative structures have been developed to provide a degree of autonomy to these communities, allowing them to govern specific aspects of their affairs. Autonomous councils and special provisions have been established to safeguard the interests of tribal communities in areas such as land ownership, cultural preservation, and representation in governance. However, the effectiveness of these measures is often debated, and challenges persist in achieving meaningful inclusion that addresses the multifaceted needs of the diverse communities.

The politics of inclusion also extends to addressing socio-economic disparities. Economic development initiatives, educational opportunities, and infrastructural projects are designed to uplift marginalized communities and bridge the gap between different sections of society. However, the implementation of these initiatives faces challenges such as uneven distribution, resource allocation, and the impact of large-scale development projects on indigenous communities and their traditional ways of life. Inclusive governance involves the participation of diverse communities in decision-making processes. The representation of ethnic groups in political bodies, administrative roles, and policy formulation is crucial for ensuring that their voices are heard and their interests are considered. However, achieving equitable representation poses challenges, and

the region has seen instances of political instability and resistance against what some perceive as dominant and exclusionary politics.

Cultural diversity is a hallmark of North East India, and the politics of inclusion recognizes the importance of preserving and promoting this diversity [18]. Efforts are made to celebrate indigenous languages, traditions, and festivals, fostering an environment where various cultural identities coexist harmoniously. Additionally, policies aim to protect the rights of indigenous communities over their ancestral lands and natural resources. While the politics of inclusion in North East India has made strides in addressing historical injustices and recognizing the unique identities of its diverse communities, it remains an ongoing and complex process. Striking a balance between autonomy and integration, economic development and cultural preservation, and ensuring equitable representation pose ongoing challenges. The effectiveness of inclusive policies is contingent on continuous dialogue, adaptive governance structures, and a commitment to addressing the evolving needs and aspirations of the region's diverse population.

4. TRIBAL COMMUNITIES IN NORTH EAST INDIA

The term is commonly associated in popular culture with individuals who live in remote areas away from the majority of people. An indigenous, homogenous unit, speaking a common language, claiming a common lineage dwelling in a certain geographical area, backward in technology, pre-literate, loyally preserving social and political norms based on kinship. That was the 1962 definition of a tribe given in the Shillong consolation of tribals. The word "Indigenous people" is substituted by "tribe" in International Circles by the United Nations Organisation (UNO). Indian tribals have long sought recognition as "Indigenous people," but the country's government has so far refused. Politicians and anthropologists in India are concerned that the word adivasi can lead to privilege claims and undermine efforts to promote racial and ethnic harmony.

With over 150 distinct tribal clans, northeastern India is home to a vast array of indigenous peoples. The northeastern tribe's people make up about 15% of India's overall tribal population, as reported in the 2001 census [19]. There is a significant tribal population in Assam (12.4% of the total population), Manipur (34.2%), and Tripura (31.1%), but this percentage is lower in India as a whole. Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland also have disproportionately large tribal populations [20].

Table 1: Major Tribal Communities in North East India

State	Major Tribal Communities
Assam	Bodos, Karbis, Ahoms, Rabhas
Nagaland	Angamis, Ao, Sema, Zeliang
Mizoram	Mizo (Lusei, Hmar, Mara)
Meghalaya	Khasis, Garos
Arunachal Pradesh	Nyishi, Adi, Apatani, Galo
Manipur	Meiteis, Nagas, Kukis
Tripura	Tripuris, Jamatias, Reangs
Sikkim	Bhutias, Lepchas, Limbus, Tamangs, Sherpas

5. RELATED WORKS

Riamei et al. (2023) [21] examined India's ethnic diversity & the politics of inclusion. This study highlights the difficulty of embracing diversity while maintaining traditional traditions. The study explores inclusive policies' challenges and limitations for racially and ethnically diverse populations. This study examines the benefits and drawbacks of diversity as well as initiatives and legislation in North East India aimed at promoting it.

Deka et al. (2021) [22] examined traditional Ahom medicine in the Indian state of Assam. This study centres on the Ahom people and their extensive historical practice of utilising flora for medicinal purposes. The cultural significance and traditional Ahom medicine are also examined in the research. This research emphasises the significance of Ahom traditional medicine and its potential for promotion and preservation in order to improve the Ahom people's health and well-being.

Debbarma et al. (2020) [23] focused on the importance of overlooked veggies to the native inhabitants of Northeast India's Tripura region. According to this study, vegetables that are often overlooked are very healthy and help ensure the tribe's food security. The study also explores the customs and knowledge that have been passed down through the tribal society's generations with reference to the use of these plants. It is imperative for the health and well-being of the native population to increase the production and consumption of these unappreciated vegetables.

Singh et al. (2018) [24] focused primarily on the traditional processed meals of the indigenous peoples of the western hill states of India, including Manipur. This study demonstrates the nutritional value and significance of traditional processed foods in the diets of various ethnic cultures. The inquiry also addresses the traditional ways of food preparation and preservation used by the ethnic tribes. The study emphasises how important it is to preserve and promote ethnic tribes' traditional process foods for the sake of community health and wellness.

Dewri et al (2018) [25] examined the new issues brought forth by tribal ethnic nationalism in Assam. The political and historical context of Assamese tribal ethnic nationalism is examined in this paper along with its causes and circumstances. Furthermore, the study explores the challenges that indigenous groups face in defending their identity and rights. The research emphasises that inclusive policies and activities are crucial to resolving the problems that Assamese tribal people and other ethnic groups confront.

6. CHALLENGES TO INCLUSION POLITICS IN NORTH EAST INDIA

In North East India, despite efforts towards inclusive politics, several challenges persist, hindering the effective implementation of inclusion policies. The challenges to inclusion politics in North East India are multifaceted and deeply rooted in the region's complex socio-cultural and historical context. One significant challenge lies in the diverse ethnic tapestry of the North East, where numerous tribes and communities coexist. While efforts have been made to implement inclusive policies, balancing the aspirations of different ethnic groups within a federal structure poses a considerable challenge. Autonomy frameworks designed to empower local communities sometimes face resistance, as various tribes seek different degrees of self-governance, leading to intricate negotiations and occasional tensions.

Historical grievances and identity-based movements further complicate inclusion politics. Some ethnic groups have longstanding demands for autonomy or even separate states, driven by a desire to preserve their cultural heritage and address perceived marginalization. The Mizo movement, for example, and the demand for a Bodoland state in Assam exemplify the persistent challenges arising from historical grievances and aspirations for political autonomy. Economic disparities and developmental challenges also hinder inclusive politics. Despite efforts to promote economic development in the region, disparities persist, with certain areas facing infrastructural gaps and limited access to opportunities. Ensuring that development reaches all sections of society, including marginalized tribal communities, requires sustained efforts and strategic planning.

The presence of armed insurgent groups adds another layer of complexity. Insurgencies, rooted in historical, socio-economic, and identity-related issues, pose a significant obstacle to inclusive governance. The security situation in parts of the North East creates challenges for effective policy implementation and hampers the establishment of stable political structures. Moreover, the intricate demographic composition of the North East, coupled with porous international borders, raises concerns related to migration and citizenship. The issue of illegal immigration, particularly in Assam, has fueled tensions and shaped political narratives, impacting the delicate balance of inclusion politics. The dynamics of inclusion politics are also influenced by external factors. The region's geopolitical significance and proximity to neighboring countries contribute to a complex geopolitical landscape. External influences and cross-border dynamics can influence the internal affairs of the North East, posing challenges to the formulation and execution of inclusive policies.

7. BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF DIVERSITY IN NORTH EAST INDIA

Benefits:

1. **Cultural Richness:** The diverse ethnic groups contribute to a vibrant tapestry of cultures, traditions, and languages, fostering a unique and rich cultural heritage.
2. **Traditional Knowledge:** Each community brings unique traditional knowledge, passed down through generations, contributing to a wealth of wisdom in various fields such as agriculture, herbal medicine, and craftsmanship.
3. **Ecological Harmony:** Indigenous practices, deeply rooted in the diverse cultures, often promote sustainable coexistence with the region's ecosystems, contributing to ecological conservation.
4. **Social Resilience:** The varied ethnicities provide a strong social fabric, and communities often exhibit resilience in the face of challenges, drawing strength from their cultural bonds and shared histories.
5. **Tourist Attractions:** The cultural diversity in the North East becomes a significant attraction for tourists, offering a plethora of festivals, traditional performances, and unique experiences.

Drawbacks:

1. **Ethnic Tensions:** Historical grievances and identity-based movements can lead to inter-tribal tensions, creating challenges for social cohesion and stability.
2. **Insurgent Challenges:** Presence of insurgent groups, rooted in historical, socio-economic, and identity-related issues, hampers stability and effective governance in certain regions.
3. **Economic Disparities:** Despite development efforts, some areas face persistent developmental gaps, leading to disparities in access to opportunities and resources.
4. **Migration Issues:** Concerns about illegal immigration and demographic changes contribute to social and political complexities, sometimes leading to tensions between communities.
5. **External Influences:** Geopolitical factors and the proximity to international borders introduce external dynamics, influencing internal affairs and occasionally impacting regional stability.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the intricate relationship between ethnic diversity and inclusion politics among North East India's tribal communities reflects a complex tapestry shaped by historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. The region's ethnic richness contributes to a vibrant mosaic of traditions and knowledge, fostering a unique cultural heritage. However, the path to inclusive governance faces challenges arising from historical grievances, insurgencies, economic disparities, and external influences. Striking a delicate balance between preserving cultural identities and fostering a united socio-political framework is crucial for the region's sustainable development. The journey toward inclusive politics in North East India necessitates adaptive policies that consider the nuanced aspirations of diverse communities, ensuring equitable representation and addressing the multifaceted challenges embedded in the region's socio-political landscape.

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