



Contours Of Indigeneity: The Role Of Tribal Politics In Shaping Assam's Socio-Political Landscape

Dr. Madan Chandra Boro

Associate Professor

& HoD Political Science

Kumar Bhaskar Varma Sanskrit and Ancient Studies University, Nalbari, Assam

1.0 Introduction

Assam, a northeastern state of India, has been at the center of contentious debates regarding indigeneity and immigration. The region has experienced multiple waves of migration over centuries, leading to ethnic, linguistic, and socio-political tensions. The core issue revolves around the rights of indigenous communities versus the integration or expulsion of migrants, particularly those of Bangladeshi origin (Baruah, 2020).

1.1 Meaning of Terms

The term “Indigeneity” originates from the Latin word *indigena*, meaning “native” or “sprung from the land” (Merlan, 2009). It is used to describe the collective identity, cultural practices, and historical experiences of Indigenous peoples worldwide. The use of Indigeneity extends across various disciplines, including anthropology, law, and political science, often in discussions related to Indigenous rights, governance, and resistance movements (Wilmer, 2021). International bodies such as the United Nations have incorporated the term in frameworks like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), recognizing Indigenous communities’ rights to self-determination and cultural preservation (United Nations, 2007). In contemporary discourse, Indigeneity is employed to challenge historical marginalization and advocate for policy changes that address land dispossession, environmental justice, and linguistic preservation (Smith, 2012).

The term *contours* is used to refer the outlines, boundaries, or defining features of a concept or phenomenon. In this context, it signifies the evolving shape, dimensions, and nuances of indigeneity as a political and cultural idea in Assam (Karlsson, 2003). *Indigeneity* means the state or quality of being indigenous belonging originally to a particular place. It reflects the identity, rights, and lived experiences of tribal or native communities who assert their cultural and political distinctiveness from dominant or settler populations (Cowan, Dembour & Wilson, 2001; Xaxa, 2005). *Tribal politics* refers to the political activities, movements, and expressions of tribal communities, including their struggles for autonomy, rights, representation, and recognition within the larger state and national framework (Baruah, 2005). The *role* implies the function, influence, or contribution of tribal politics in shaping broader processes and structures within society. The term *shaping* suggests the active process of forming, influencing, or transforming something. It indicates how tribal political actions and ideologies influence the socio-political reality of Assam (Nath, 2011). By *socio-political landscape*, it encompasses the social structures, cultural identities, power relations, political institutions, and historical dynamics specific to the state of Assam. It includes issues like ethnic relations, autonomy movements, governance, and identity politics (Barbora, 2002; Hussain, 1993). Thus, the title refers to a study that explores how the identity and political mobilization of indigenous tribal communities influence and redefine the social and political realities of Assam.

1.2 Tribe and Indigeneity

The terms “tribe” and “indigeneity” share a close affinity, particularly in the context of identity, land, and cultural rights. A “tribe” generally refers to a social group with distinct cultural, linguistic, and social practices, often organized around kinship and traditionally linked to specific territories. “Indigeneity”, on the other hand, is a broader political and cultural concept that refers to the original or earliest known inhabitants of a region who maintain continuity with their ancestral territories, cultures, and ways of life.

In the context of Assam and many other post-colonial societies, tribal communities often assert indigeneity to claim historical rights to land, autonomy, and self-determination. Indigeneity gives political legitimacy to tribal claims, especially when facing issues like displacement, migration, and state-led development. At the same time, the concept of “tribe” is sometimes critiqued as a colonial classification, while “indigeneity” offers a more empowered, rights-based framework. Despite these distinctions, the two terms remain deeply interconnected as tribes are frequently seen as bearers of indigeneity, and indigeneity often finds expression through the lived realities and political struggles of tribal groups.

1.3 Research Context: In Assam, Indigeneity is a complex and contested concept, shaped by the region's diverse ethnic composition and historical migration patterns. The Indigenous communities of Assam, including the Bodos, Karbis, Mishings, and several other Scheduled Tribes, have long asserted their distinct cultural identities through language, traditions, and territorial claims (Baruah, 2005). The question of who

qualifies as “Indigenous” in Assam has been a subject of political and social debate, particularly in the context of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and movements advocating for the rights of Indigenous Assamese people against perceived external influences (Hussain, 2019). The issue of land rights, autonomy, and political representation remains central to the discourse on Indigeneity in Assam, with Indigenous groups seeking greater recognition and protection under state and national frameworks (Sharma, 2012). Furthermore, the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution provides special provisions for certain Indigenous groups in Assam, allowing for self-governance through autonomous councils, which serve as a significant mechanism for preserving Indigenous heritage and political autonomy (Bordoloi, 1991).

1.4 Background of the Problem

Tracing the Prehistoric Indigenous Tribes: Assam, located in the northeastern region of India, has a rich prehistoric past, with evidence of human habitation dating back to the Stone Age. Archaeological findings from sites like Sarutaru, Daojali Hading, and Marakdola suggest that early inhabitants belonged to the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods. The prehistoric tribes of Assam were primarily Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, and Dravidian in origin. The Bodo-Kachari group, including tribes like the Bodos, Dimasas, and Kacharis, is believed to be among the earliest settlers. These tribes practiced shifting cultivation, used stone tools, and lived in close harmony with nature. Over time, they developed their own distinct languages, traditions, and socio-cultural identities, influencing the later history and culture of Assam.

1.5 Nature and Scope: The nature and scope of the study lie in its critical examination of how tribal identities, movements, and political assertions have influenced Assam's evolving social and political fabric. This study delves into the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of indigeneity in Assam, exploring how tribal communities negotiate their place within the state's complex mosaic of ethnicities and power structures. The scope encompasses the role of autonomous councils, demands for statehood, identity-based mobilizations, and the contestations over land, resources, and representation. By highlighting the interplay between tribal assertions and mainstream political processes, the work sheds light on the broader dynamics of inclusion, marginalization, and resistance that define Assam's contemporary socio-political landscape.

1.6 Rationale: The rationale of this study stems from the growing importance of understanding how indigenous tribal identities and political aspirations shape regional politics in Assam a state marked by ethnic diversity and historical contestations. As demands for autonomy, recognition, and rights intensify among tribal communities, their political mobilization has become a decisive factor in state policymaking, electoral politics, and social cohesion. Yet, scholarly engagement with these dynamics remains limited or fragmented. This study seeks to fill that gap by critically analyzing the evolving role of tribal politics in redefining the

notions of identity, citizenship, governance, and power in Assam, offering insights that are essential for both academic discourse and practical policymaking in a pluralistic democracy.

2.0 Objectives

- 2.1 To explore the historical construction of indigeneity among tribal communities in Assam and its role in shaping their collective identity.
- 2.2 To examine the evolution of tribal political mobilization in Assam with emphasis on land rights, autonomy demands, and representation.
- 2.3 To analyze the impact of state policies such as the Sixth Schedule and autonomous Councils on land, tribal autonomy and indigeneity in Assam.

3.0 Methodology and Data

3.1 Methodology: This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, combining historical analysis, case study approach, and field-based ethnographic insights to understand the relationship between indigeneity and tribal politics in Assam. The historical component involves archival research and document analysis to trace the evolution of tribal identity and political assertions from colonial times to the present. Case studies of selected tribes e.g., Bodos, Karbis, Misings, and Dimasas and specific political developments such as the formation of autonomous councils and land rights movements provide a grounded understanding of how indigeneity is constructed and contested. Semi-structured interviews with tribal leaders, activists, council members, and scholars help capture lived experiences and political narratives.

3.2 Data: The research uses both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data includes interviews, focus group discussions, official documents (such as council records and government notifications), and field observations in tribal-dominated areas. Secondary data comes from academic books, peer-reviewed journals, government reports and tribal political movements. Legal texts such as the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, and state acts on autonomous councils are critically analyzed to assess their impact on tribal indigeneity. This multi-source and interdisciplinary approach ensures a comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of the subject.

4.0 Findings and Discussions

4.1 Findings

This study discusses key findings related to the historical construction of indigeneity among tribal communities in Assam, focusing on how it has shaped their collective identity over time. It traces the evolution of tribal political mobilization, particularly around issues of land rights, demands for autonomy, and political representation. The research highlights how tribal identity has been both a tool of resistance and

negotiation within Assam's multi-ethnic framework. Special attention is given to the impact of state policies like the Sixth Schedule and the functioning of Autonomous Councils. These institutions have had complex implications sometimes empowering, at other times limiting tribal autonomy and access to land. Overall, the findings reveal a dynamic interplay between state frameworks and indigenous assertions in shaping Assam's socio-political landscape.

4.1.1 The concept of indigeneity among tribal communities in Assam (objective 2.1) is deeply rooted in their historical relationship with land, culture, and self-governance. From pre-colonial times, tribes such as the Bodos, Karbis, and Dimasas maintained distinct socio-political systems and customary laws that reflected their autonomous status. Colonial interventions disrupted these systems, imposing administrative boundaries and revenue models that ignored indigenous traditions. In response, tribes began to articulate their identity through cultural symbols, oral history, and collective memory. The emergence of tribal organizations and literary movements further shaped this indigenous consciousness. Post-independence, state classifications like "Scheduled Tribes" reinforced official recognition but also narrowed the broader cultural context of indigeneity. Demands for protecting tribal belts and blocks, language, and traditional practices became central to identity politics. This historical construction of indigeneity functions as both a form of resistance and a foundation for political mobilization. Understanding this evolution is key to analyzing tribal engagement with the state and society. It also sheds light on how indigeneity is not static but constantly redefined in changing political landscapes.

4.1.2 Tribal political mobilization in Assam (objective 2.2) has undergone significant transformation from local resistance movements to structured political activism. In the early 20th century, tribal communities began organizing against land alienation and migration-induced displacement, laying the foundation for later political consciousness. The post-independence period witnessed growing mobilization around demands for tribal belts and blocks, as well as access to state resources and administrative autonomy. Movements by the Bodo, Karbi, Mising, and Dimasa communities led to the creation of autonomous councils and, in some cases, armed struggles for self-determination. Political parties and student organizations emerged as key actors in negotiating tribal rights. Electoral participation also increased, with many tribal leaders entering mainstream politics while still advocating for community interests. Land remains central to these struggles, as it is linked to both survival and cultural preservation. Tribal mobilization continues to evolve in response to state policies, ethnic tensions, and development pressures. Today, it balances between institutional engagement and grassroots activism, reflecting both aspirations and anxieties about identity, autonomy, and future existence.

4.1.3 The objective (objective 2.3) aimed to analyze the impact of state policies such as the Sixth Schedule and Autonomous Councils on land, tribal autonomy and indigeneity in Assam reveals that state policies like the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and the establishment of Autonomous Councils have significantly influenced the political and cultural landscape of tribal Assam. These mechanisms were intended to provide self-governance, protect tribal land, and preserve indigenous customs. Councils such as the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), and North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (DHAC) enjoy legislative and executive powers over key areas like land, forests, and education. However, implementation has been uneven, and many tribes continue to face land alienation, encroachment, and administrative neglect. In non-Sixth Schedule areas, councils formed under state law often lack real autonomy, functioning mainly as developmental bodies without decision-making power. While these institutions have enhanced political representation, they have also sparked inter-ethnic tensions and questions about inclusion. Furthermore, the gap between legal provisions and ground realities weakens trust in the system. Despite these challenges, these policies remain central to the discourse on tribal rights, shaping how indigeneity is practiced, protected, and politically negotiated in Assam.

4.2 Discussions

4.2.1 **Gopinath Bordoloi Plan:** The Gopinath Bordoloi Plan was instrumental in shaping the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, ensuring constitutional safeguards for tribal communities in Northeast India. As chair of the Assam Sub-Committee in the Constituent Assembly, Bordoloi advocated for autonomous self-governance to protect tribal identity, land, and customs within a democratic framework. His vision led to the creation of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) under the Sixth Schedule, which granted legislative and executive powers to tribal areas while maintaining national unity.

4.2.2 **Constitutional Provisions:** The Sixth Schedule (Articles 244(2) and 275(1)) allows for the establishment of ADCs in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram, with authority over areas like land, forests, and customary laws. In Assam, the BTC, KAAC, and NCHAC operate under this provision. In contrast, non-Sixth Schedule councils like the Mising, Rabha Hasong, Tiwa, Deori, Thengal Kachari, Sonowal Kachari, and Koch-Rajbongshi councils are formed under state laws and serve primarily developmental and advisory roles, lacking legislative power. While both types of councils aim to promote cultural preservation and tribal development, Sixth Schedule councils enjoy greater autonomy and constitutional backing.

4.2.3 Indigeneity Trait of Tribes

Assam's tribal communities exhibit a rich tapestry of indigeneity, shaped by diverse racial, linguistic, and cultural origins. The state's location at a historical and geographic crossroads has led to the coexistence of Indo-Mongoloid, Tibeto-Burman, and Austroasiatic tribes, each maintaining distinct identities through language, customs, and traditions (Sharma, 2010; Baruah, 2005). Prominent among these are the Bodos, Misings, Rabhas, Garos, Tiwas, and Dimasas all belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid stock while the Karbis and Sonowal Kacharis represent the Tibeto-Burman lineage (Deka, 2013; Gogoi, 2011). Despite some level of assimilation into Assamese society, these groups continue to preserve their languages and cultural practices. References to early tribes such as the Kiratas and Asuras in ancient epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* highlight the deep-rooted presence of tribal populations in the region and underscore their historic role in shaping Assam's sociopolitical landscape (Mahabharata, Sabha Parva; Ramayana, Kishkindha Kanda; Baruah, 2003).

Further insights into Assam's tribal heritage can be drawn from medieval tantric texts like the *Kalikapurana* and *Yogini Tantra*, which symbolically portray tribes and Asuras as representations of indigenous, non-Vedic communities (Kalikapurana, 59.35–40; Yogini Tantra, Chapter 1). These texts mention groups such as the Kiratas and Pulindas, situating them in sacred geography while also reflecting their marginalization in Brahmanical narratives (Sharma, 2004). The *Kalikapurana* presents Kamarupa as a Shakta landscape where divine and demonic forces coexist, symbolizing the integration of tribal beliefs into Hindu cosmology. The *Yogini Tantra* goes further by absorbing indigenous customs into tantric worship, illustrating a complex religious syncretism (Nath, 1989). These literary and ritual traditions not only preserve the memory of Assam's tribal past but also demonstrate how tribal indigeneity has been historically entwined with religious identity, sacred space, and political representation.

4.2.4 Development of Political Assertions

During the pre-independence period, tribal communities in Assam lived with relative autonomy, practicing traditional land tenure and governance systems (Xaxa, 2005). British colonial expansion disrupted these systems through land encroachments for tea plantations, forest exploitation, and revenue extraction, leading to early tribal resistance (Baruah, 2005). Although the Government of India Act, 1935 identified certain tribal areas as “Excluded” or “Partially Excluded,” these protections were limited in effect and often bypassed in practice (Guha, 1991). Post-independence, the influx of migrants due to Partition and internal displacements further strained tribal lands, especially in Assam's plains (Hussain, 1993). In response, the Assam government introduced “Tribal Belts and Blocks” under Chapter X of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886 (amended post-independence), to restrict land transfers to non-tribals in specified areas (Assam Land Revenue Regulation, 1886). However, violations through encroachments and manipulation of

land records became widespread, prompting increased tribal political mobilization through student unions and community organizations demanding stronger land protections (Sharma, 2010).

In the decades that followed, movements like the Udayachal movement, led by the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), reflected tribal aspirations for a separate state to protect their identity and land rights (Saikia, 2008). As the movement evolved, Bodo groups emerged with more focused demands, such as the call for “Bodoland,” symbolized by the slogan “Divide Assam 50/50” (Baruah, 1999). These struggles laid the foundation for the creation of various autonomous councils, institutionalizing tribal self-governance under the Sixth Schedule and state legislation. Today, tribal politics in Assam continues to center around land rights, cultural identity, and political autonomy (Nath, 2011). While Sixth and non-Sixth Schedule autonomous councils have offered platforms for self-rule and development, persistent issues such as weak enforcement of land laws, political interference, and ethnic tensions highlight the ongoing challenges (Barbora, 2002). Land remains the core of tribal politics both as a resource and as a marker of identity and survival (Karlsson, 2003).

4.2.5 Political Arrangements for Indigenous tribes in Assam

The Bodo, Karbi, and Dimasa tribes are among the most prominent indigenous communities in Assam, each having their own autonomous councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Bodos, the largest Scheduled Tribe in Assam, primarily inhabit the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) and have a strong political identity rooted in their language, culture, and demands for land rights. The creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003 granted them legislative powers in various areas, helping preserve their ethnic identity while addressing socio-political unrest. Similarly, the Karbis, residing in Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong districts, are governed by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), which supports local governance, land rights, and cultural preservation. Despite this framework, both communities continue to face challenges such as demands for statehood, ethnic tensions, and uneven development. The Dimasas of Dima Hasao also enjoy autonomy through the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC), which manages their cultural and political affairs, although the region has experienced political instability and ethnic insurgencies.

In addition to Sixth Schedule councils, Assam also has several autonomous councils created under state legislation to represent other tribal and ethnic communities. These include the Mising Autonomous Council (MAC), Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC), Tiwa Autonomous Council (TAC), Deori Autonomous Council (DAC), Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council (TKAC), and the Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council (SKAC). While these councils lack legislative authority, they serve important roles in protecting cultural identities and implementing welfare schemes. Each council focuses on region-specific

development, such as education, healthcare, language preservation, and infrastructure, often operating in advisory capacities with state funding. Though resource constraints and administrative overlaps remain challenges, these councils play a vital role in empowering marginalized tribal communities and ensuring their inclusion in Assam's broader socio-political landscape.

5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the question of indigeneity among tribal communities in Assam is deeply intertwined with their history, identity, and political struggle. From resisting colonial encroachments to asserting rights in post-independence India, tribes have continuously redefined their place within the state. Their mobilization around land, autonomy, and representation highlights both resilience and adaptation. While policies like the Sixth Schedule and Autonomous Councils were designed to empower these communities, their impact remains uneven. Legal recognition has not always translated into real autonomy or protection from marginalization. Tribal belts and blocks, though constitutionally safeguarded, face frequent violations. Despite this, tribal movements continue to assert their rights through both institutional and grassroots means. Indigeneity remains a powerful tool of resistance, negotiation, and identity. As Assam's socio-political landscape evolves, the role of tribal politics will remain central to its democratic and cultural future.

6.0 References

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