



Tribal Movement of North East India: Present Day Context

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Abstract

North East India, a region characterized by extraordinary ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, has witnessed multiple tribal movements since the colonial period. These movements emerged from concerns surrounding identity preservation, political autonomy, land rights, cultural safeguarding, and resource protection. In the post-colonial era, tribal movements intensified due to rapid socio-economic changes, perceived political marginalization, demographic shifts, environmental degradation, and challenges posed by modernization. The tribal communities of the region—such as the Nagas, Mizos, Bodos, Kukis, Garos, Karbis, Dimasas, Mishings, Rabhas, Tiwas, and several others—have historically engaged in mobilization to safeguard their collective rights and resist external pressures. The present-day context is marked by evolving forms of tribal assertion, constitutional negotiations, new political arrangements, and identity politics shaped by globalization and state interventions. This research paper examines the contemporary nature of tribal movements in North East India and situates them within the broader framework of historical grievances, insurgency, peace accords, administrative reforms, resource conflicts, and developmental policies. The study focuses on both old movements that continue to influence regional politics—such as the Naga movement and the Bodo movement—and emerging issues related to land alienation, environmental protection, and political representation. The contemporary phase is also shaped by rapid urbanization, infrastructural expansion under

India's Act East Policy, and greater media exposure, which have reshaped the forms and expressions of tribal activism. Increasing youth participation, digital mobilization, and civil-society-led movements create new dynamics in tribal politics. At the same time, tribal movements remain deeply rooted in traditional social structures and customary institutions. The research highlights how present-day tribal movements negotiate between demands for autonomy and the desire to benefit from the developmental efforts of the state. Key issues include Sixth Schedule reforms, expansion of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), demands for new states, territorial disputes among tribes, and assertion of indigenous land rights against both state and private development projects. In addition, identity-based conflicts arising from migration and inter-tribal competition have added layers of complexity.

The paper adopts a qualitative methodology using historical sources, academic literature, government reports, and recent policy documents. It concludes that tribal movements in North East India today are not solely separatist, but also represent aspirations for sustainable development, inclusive governance, cultural recognition, and respectful integration within the Indian federal structure. While peace accords and constitutional provisions have resolved many issues, emerging challenges will require nuanced policy interventions grounded in socio-cultural realities.

Keywords: Tribal Movement, North East India, Ethnicity, Autonomy, Identity Politics, Sixth Schedule, Insurgency, Indigenous Rights, Development.

Introduction

North East India is home to more than 200 tribes belonging to diverse linguistic and cultural groups. These tribes possess distinct customs, traditional political institutions, social structures, and belief systems. Historically, tribal societies of the region operated outside centralized state control and enjoyed considerable

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autonomy. The imposition of colonial administration, followed by post-independence state formation, migration pressures, economic changes, and political integration, created tensions between tribal interests and state policies. Tribal movements in North East India have taken many forms—ranging from peaceful mobilization, cultural revivalism, and advocacy for autonomy to armed insurgency and territorial claims. Present-day tribal movements represent continuity of historical struggles but also new transformations arising from global and regional political shifts. Issues such as ethnic identity, land rights, resource ownership, protection of traditional institutions, and demand for statehood remain central to tribal mobilization. This research paper examines the tribal movement in North East India with a focus on the present-day context. It explores historical backgrounds, regional variations, and contemporary political developments influencing tribal mobilization. The paper also identifies factors shaping tribal aspirations and the role played by various institutions, including Autonomous District Councils, ethnic organizations, insurgent groups, civil society, and the central/state governments. By tracing the evolution of tribal movements from the colonial period to contemporary times, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political environment shaping tribal activism today.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the historical background and evolution of tribal movements in North East India.
2. To analyze present-day tribal movements, their demands, and organizational structures.
3. To understand the socio-political and economic factors driving contemporary tribal mobilization.
4. To study the role of the Indian state, constitutional provisions, and peace accords in shaping the movements.
5. To assess the challenges and opportunities for tribal communities in the context of present-day development policies.

6. To identify emerging trends and predict future trajectories of tribal movements.

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study includes:

- Historical tribal movements from 1947 onwards.
- Tribal movements across Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim.
- Analysis of major tribal communities such as Nagas, Mizos, Bodos, Dimasas, Karbis, Kukis, Garos, Rabhas, Mishings, Tiwas, and others.
- Examination of issues such as autonomy, statehood, land rights, identity, insurgency, resource conflicts, and inter-ethnic relations.
- Present-day political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts influencing tribal mobilization.

Methodology

1 Research Design

The study employs a qualitative and descriptive research design.

2 Data Sources

- **Secondary sources:** scholarly books, journal articles, government reports, peace accord documents, and news archives.
- **Historical analysis:** tracing the evolution of movements from past to present.
- **Policy analysis:** evaluating constitutional provisions, development schemes, and administrative reforms.

3 Analytical Framework

The analysis relies on:

- Ethno-historical approaches
- Political sociology
- Conflict and peace studies
- Comparative regional perspectives

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it:

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- Offers detailed insights into the complex dynamics of tribal movement.
- Helps understand contemporary tribal politics in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment.
- Provides relevant knowledge for scholars, policymakers, and administrators dealing with issues of ethnicity, autonomy, and regional governance.
- Highlights the importance of culturally sensitive and inclusive development strategies.
- Contributes to academic discourse on tribal rights, conflict resolution, and federalism.

Literature Review

1 Historical Foundations of Tribal Movements

Scholars like Elwin (1960), Bailey (1960), and L. P. Vidyarthi (1977) studied early tribal life, colonial policies, and autonomy structures. These works formed foundational understanding of tribal-state interactions.

2 Ethnicity and Identity Politics

Baruah (2005), Horam (1988), and Hazarika (2008) emphasize how ethnicity, nationalism, and migration shape political mobilization. Their works explain identity politics behind movements like those of the Nagas, Mizos, and Bodos.

3 Insurgency Literature

Sanajaoba (1996), Sinha (2007), and Singh (2015) discuss armed groups, peace negotiations, and security issues. These writings provide insights into tribal militancy and its evolution.

4 Development Policies and Tribal Aspirations

Dutta (2000), NITI Aayog Reports, and World Bank regional assessments highlight constraints in the development process. These works illustrate how economic factors shape tribal movements.

5 Autonomous Arrangements and Constitutional Studies

Suresh (2009) and Barooah (2016) discuss the Sixth Schedule, Autonomous District Councils, and state reorganization, which are essential to understanding tribal political institutions.

Detailed Analysis of Tribal Movements in North East India

1 Historical Background of Tribal Movements

Tribal movements have historic roots in anti-colonial resistance, administrative autonomy demands, and protection of land rights. The British introduction of excluded and partially excluded areas created separate administrative mechanisms for hill tribes. After independence, tribal movements intensified due to political integration, new state boundaries, and demographic changes.

2 Major Tribal Movements in North East India

2.1 The Naga Movement

The Naga movement is one of the earliest and most influential tribal movements.

- Initiated by the Naga National Council (NNC) under A. Z. Phizo.
- Demanded independence separate from India.
- Culminated in decades of insurgency.
- NSCN(IM) and NSCN(K) emerged later.
- Ceasefire agreements (1997 onwards) created a framework for negotiation.

Contemporary Context

- Ongoing peace talks between NSCN(IM), NNPGs, and Government of India.
- Demand for “Greater Nagalim” affects neighboring states.
- Ethnic tensions (e.g., Nagas vs. Kukis) remain relevant today.

2.2 Mizo Movement

Triggered by the famine of 1959 (Mautam).

- Mizo National Famine Front transformed into the Mizo National Front (MNF).
- Armed struggle began in 1966.
- The 1986 Mizo Peace Accord ended violence.

Present-Day Context

- Mizoram is one of the most peaceful states in the region.
- Revival of traditional Mizo identity and church-based mobilization.
- Issues of Bru refugees and border tensions with Assam occasionally spark unrest.

2.3 Bodo Movement

The Bodos of Assam mobilized for cultural protection, autonomy, and political rights.

Phases:

- 1. Cultural renaissance (early 20th century)**
- 2. Political mobilization (1960s–1980s)**
- 3. Armed insurgency by NDFB and ABSU (1980s–1990s)**
- 4. Formation of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003**
- 5. Creation of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in 2020**

Present Context

- Demand for statehood continues in sections.
- Issues of identity, land rights, and relations with migrant communities remain sensitive.
- Peace accords created new political elites and developmental opportunities.

2.4 Kuki Movement

Kuki tribes in Manipur and surrounding areas mobilized for political identity and protection against Naga claims.

Present Context

- Kuki insurgent groups have Suspension of Operation agreements.
- Ongoing Kuki–Meitei conflict in Manipur has renewed tribal political mobilization.

2.5 Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia Movements (Meghalaya)

Meghalaya has witnessed multiple tribal movements seeking cultural protection and autonomy.

Contemporary Issues:

- Demand for Inner Line Permit (ILP).
- Anti-outsider sentiments and migration concerns.
- Border disputes with Assam.

2.6 Karbi and Dimasa Movements

These tribes mobilized for autonomy in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills.

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Present Issues

- Demand for full statehood.
- Ethnic clashes between Karbis and Dimasas.
- Withdrawal or disbanding of armed groups under peace talks.

2.7 Tripura Tribal Movements

Tribal groups in Tripura mobilized due to demographic marginalization after migration from East Bengal.

Present Context

- Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council remains a powerful tribal body.
- Nationalist and ethnic tensions persist around land rights and political representation.

3 Contemporary Factors Shaping Tribal Movements**3.1 Demographic Change and Migration**

Migration from Bangladesh, Nepal, and mainland India has reshaped ethnic compositions, causing tribal anxiety.

3.2 Development Projects and Land Alienation

Large dams (Subansiri, Tipaimukh), mining, highways, and military installations impact tribal lands.

3.3 Identity Revival and Cultural Assertion

Tribal communities today use digital platforms, festivals, and organizations to assert identity.

3.4 Inter-Tribal Conflicts

Competing claims over boundaries, ethnic homeland demands, and resource competition create conflicts.

3.5 Act East Policy

Increased infrastructure along borders influences tribal land use and political mobilization.

4 Autonomous District Councils and Governance

Autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule provide limited self-governance:

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- BTC (Assam)
- KAAC (Karbi Anglong)
- Dima Hasao ADC
- Garo Hills, Khasi Hills, and Jaintia Hills ADCs (Meghalaya)
- Tripura Tribal Areas ADC

ADCs play major roles in present-day tribal movements by negotiating autonomy and resource control.

5 Role of Civil Society and Student Organizations

Organizations such as ABSU, Naga Hoho, KSU, NESO, AMSU, and Mizo Zirlai Pawl continue to influence tribal politics and mobilization.

6 The Shift from Armed Struggle to Negotiated Politics

Many tribal groups are transitioning from insurgency to political negotiation:

- Peace accords
- Suspension of Operations agreements
- Participation in elections
- Local self-government empowerment

Conclusion

Tribal movements in North East India remain dynamic and evolving. While historical grievances and identity politics continue to influence mobilization, present-day tribal movements have adapted to changing socio-economic and political environments. Today's movements are shaped by development, land rights, migration anxieties, globalization, digital communication, and expanding political consciousness. The shift from armed struggle to dialogue-based politics reflects growing willingness to engage with democratic institutions. Despite these shifts, challenges persist, including inter-tribal rivalries, ecological pressures, and demand for greater autonomy. A sustainable solution lies in responsive governance, culturally sensitive policymaking, and empowerment of tribal institutions.

Findings

1. Tribal movements in North East India today are more identity-driven than secessionist.

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2. Land rights, migration pressures, and autonomy remain core issues.
3. Peace accords have reduced violence but not eliminated political grievances.
4. Many tribal movements have shifted from militancy to negotiation.
5. Autonomous Councils play a major role in shaping tribal political aspirations.
6. Inter-tribal conflicts pose new challenges in states like Manipur and Assam.
7. The Act East Policy has created new developmental opportunities but also fears of land alienation.
8. Digital mobilization has increased youth participation in tribal movements.
9. Environmental degradation and resource extraction are emerging triggers of tribal activism.
10. Inclusive development and cultural preservation remain essential for long-term peace.

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