



## Actors Of Identity: Colonial Legacies, Political Institutions And Social Movements In Northeast India

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### ABSTRACT

Identity in Northeast India is shaped not merely by cultural difference but by a complex interplay of actors and forces such as colonial administrators who codified ethnic categories and reorganized boundaries, post-colonial state institutions that reinforced and regulated divisions through policies of reorganization and reservation, migration flows intensifying insider–outsider dynamics, resource politics that displaced communities and sharpened land-based identities, insurgent groups militarizing grievances, political parties and ethnic organizations transforming anxieties into demands for autonomy, counter-insurgency measures eroding trust, as well as religious conversion and cross-border ties with neighboring countries which altered cultural markers and internationalized identity concerns; these intertwined actors collectively co-produce identity in the region, making conflict-sensitive governance, inclusive development, and sustainable peacebuilding contingent on recognizing and engaging with these distinct but interconnected influences.

**Keywords:** Identity, Ethnicity, Northeast, Insurgent, Colonial,

### Introduction

The ethnic identity politics of Northeast India, encompassing eight states and over 200 distinct groups, are rooted in the region's complex colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary history (Gupta, 2019). Colonial administrators significantly influenced these dynamics by codifying ethnic categories and manipulating territorial boundaries, thereby embedding divisions into the fabric of governance. British colonial policies, such as the administration of "Excluded" and "Partially Excluded Areas," fostered a deep sense of separation among hill and plain communities, as well as a legacy of mistrust towards outside intervention. The British simultaneously promoted migration into resource-rich plains, altering demographic balances and setting the stage for later disputes over land and identity (Gupta, 2019). These divides persisted and often deepened under post-colonial governments, whose policies of state reorganization and reservation schemes, though intended for inclusive development and political representation, reinforced exclusivist tendencies by legally privileging certain communities over others (Misra, 2016). The creation of new states and protected Autonomous Councils, largely along ethnic lines, was intended as a conciliatory gesture; yet, it often solidified inter-group boundaries and fueled competition for special status and resources.

The politics of identity extend to contestations over land, citizenship, and public resources. Migration flows from Bangladesh, Nepal, and other Indian regions have sharply intensified "insider–outsider" dynamics. The arrival of Bengali-speaking populations in Assam and Tripura, and Nepalese migrants in Sikkim and northern Assam, triggered fears of cultural dilution and economic displacement among indigenous groups, leading to recurrent agitation and the emergence of movements like the Assam Movement and the demand for an Inner Line Permit in Manipur (Hazarika, 2000). Ethnic organizations, student unions, and political parties harnessed these anxieties, transforming fear of demographic marginalization into powerful mass mobilizations (Baruah, 2020).

Meanwhile, resource politics accelerated identity-based demands. Large-scale plantation expansion, land acquisition for infrastructure, and development-induced displacement disproportionately affected tribal communities, sharpening land-based identities and fueling resentment (Karlsson, 2011). Insurgent organizations such as ULFA and NSCN transformed localized ethnic resentments into secessionist and autonomy-seeking insurgencies, employing violence as a tool for political bargaining. The Indian state's response—deploying security forces and enacting the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA)—

contributed to an environment of militarization and insecurity, resulting in grave human rights concerns and deepening estrangement between many communities and the state apparatus (McDuie-Ra, 2017).

Religious conversion and missionary schooling, largely introduced during colonial rule, further reshaped cultural markers, especially in the hill states, where mass conversion to Christianity created new forms of pan-tribal solidarity as well as fresh cleavages with neighboring Hindu-majority regions. Cross-border connections, particularly with Myanmar and Bangladesh, have internationalized issues of identity, making regional politics susceptible to transnational influences and security anxieties (Singh, 2019).

The identity question in Northeast India is not a simplistic product of enduring cultural difference—rather, it is co-produced by various historical and contemporary actors and processes: colonial boundary making, postcolonial policies, migratory shifts, insurgencies, resource politics, religious change, and transnational linkages. Disentangling these factors reveals that contemporary identity politics in the Northeast are shaped less by primordial loyalties and more by the compounded effects of structural power, political mobilization, and external interventions. Such an actor-centric analysis offers critical insights for developing governance frameworks that are conflict-sensitive, inclusive, and capable of supporting long-term peace and development in the region (Misra, 2016).

### Colonial Legacies

The enduring impact of colonial legacies on identity politics in Northeast India is profound and multifaceted. Before the arrival of the British, social and political organization in the region was characterized by fluid boundaries, overlapping identities, and governance rooted in kinship ties, clan structures, and customary law (Sengupta, 2011). These arrangements fostered adaptability and flexible access to land, allowing communities to coexist without rigid distinctions. However, colonial interventions disrupted this landscape by introducing administrative boundaries, unified revenue systems, and new policies of control designed to consolidate state power.

A central colonial innovation was the classification of “tribes” in census enumerations and administrative records, which grouped internally diverse and stratified communities into homogenous identities such as “hill tribes” and “plains tribes”—frequently disregarding local nuances and self-identifications (Gupta, 2019). This process of state-driven ethnographic categorization, which Cohn (1996) termed “ethnographic state-making,” not only solidified previously fluid identities but also created new axes of exclusion and hierarchy. Over time, these categories formed the basis for ethnic mobilization and claims to recognition in the post-independence era.

The British further institutionalized division with the creation of “excluded” and “partially excluded areas” under the Government of India Act of 1935, effectively segregating the hills from the plains and entrenching political separation (Misra, 2016). While such measures protected some hill groups from domination by plains communities, they fostered isolation and excluded these areas from broader processes of political integration. The Inner Line Regulation of 1873 additionally reinforced boundaries by restricting outsider entry into the hills, thus cementing the insider–outsider dichotomy that remains central to contemporary identity struggles (Baruah, 2020).

Colonial land and forest policies further compounded these divides. By designating forests as “reserved” or “protected,” the colonial state undermined customary rights of shifting cultivators and forest-dependent groups, causing widespread displacement and sharpening ethnic boundaries as communities fought to reclaim ancestral lands (Karlsson, 2011). In the Brahmaputra valley, colonial encouragement of tea plantations and migrations from East Bengal not only radically altered the demographic composition but also sowed the seeds for later disputes over land and identity (Weiner, 1983).

Another significant legacy was the division of labor: hill communities were recruited into the colonial army and categorized as “martial races,” while plains populations were absorbed into administrative and revenue roles (Bhattacharjee, 2017). These occupational divisions institutionalized unequal access to economic and political power, setting the ground for postcolonial tensions between hill and valley societies.

In essence, the colonial state did more than merely redraw administrative boundaries; it implanted ideological structures of differentiation, exclusion, and hierarchy that have provided enduring reference points for contemporary identity politics. By codifying communities, imposing new boundaries, and restructuring land relations, the British left a legacy of grievances and institutional precedents which post-independence ethnic movements have repeatedly invoked. Understanding these colonial legacies is crucial for analyzing why identity-based contestations persist and why ethnic categories remain so salient in the political landscape of Northeast India (Sengupta, 2011).

### Post-Colonial Political Institutions

The transition from colonial rule to independence did not eliminate the deep structural divisions left by the British in Northeast India. Instead, post-colonial political institutions often preserved and sometimes intensified these legacies, amplifying the region’s identity-based tensions. State-building in Northeast India has unfolded as both a project of integration and exclusion, marked by constitutional frameworks, administrative restructurings, and citizenship policies that have all shaped ethnic politics. One significant strategy was the reorganization of states responding to ethnic demands, resulting in the creation of Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), and Mizoram (1987), through territorial concessions to accommodate specific

aspirations (Ramakrishnan, 2018). While granting recognition and autonomy, these changes also fueled further mobilization as new groups saw ethnic assertion as a path to political recognition (Baruah, 2020). As a result, reorganization institutionalized identity politics rather than resolving underlying conflicts.

Constitutional mechanisms like the Sixth Schedule provided for autonomous district councils in tribal-majority areas, meant to safeguard cultural rights and local governance (Phanjoubam, 2016). Despite their promise, uneven functioning and limited fiscal autonomy frequently generated dissatisfaction; some communities viewed the councils as avenues of marginalization instead of empowerment (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Similar demands arose in non-Sixth Schedule areas, producing multiple, overlapping claims to protection and autonomy.

Citizenship policies further cemented identity politics. Large-scale migration from Bangladesh into Assam and Tripura sparked fierce debates about belonging and exclusion. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise in Assam demonstrates how institutional frameworks define citizenship and mediate identity, with indigenous groups seeing these measures as bulwarks against demographic change, while migrants faced insecurity and loss of rights (Roy, 2019). This deepened the insider–outsider divide through bureaucratic and legal channels. Reservation policies also reshaped ethnic identity's contours. Scheduled Tribe status conferred benefits in education, jobs, and representation, sparking competition among groups such as the Koch-Rajbongshi and Tai Ahoms who sought similar recognition (Saikia, 2017). The quest for official status often hardened boundaries that might otherwise have remained porous. Meanwhile, militarized governance through laws like AFSPA produced a climate of alienation, with security measures inadvertently generating perceptions of exclusion and second-class citizenship among affected communities (McDuié-Ra, 2017). The mix of autonomy provisions and repressive laws embodies the contradictions at the heart of post-colonial governance.

Overall, post-colonial political institutions have been central in shaping the region's identity politics. Through administrative restructuring, selective autonomy, citizenship definition, and reservation regulation, the state has operated as a source of both recognition and exclusion. These institutions provided the structure within which ethnic identities were mobilized, politicized, and contested in the decades following independence (Roy, 2019).

### **Migration and Demographic Shifts**

Migration stands as one of the most powerful influences shaping the ethnic identity politics of Northeast India. Here, demographic change is inseparable from questions of belonging, cultural preservation, and political entitlement, making population movements far more than a purely social or economic phenomenon. Both transnational and internal migrations have brought about significant demographic shifts, igniting conflicts that remain unresolved. The most prominent form has been cross-border migration, particularly from present-day Bangladesh. The British colonial state dramatically encouraged migration from East Bengal into Assam's Brahmaputra valley to expand agriculture, especially in tea and wet rice cultivation, laying the groundwork for potent demographic transformations (Weiner, 1983). This process continued beyond Partition in 1947 and escalated during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, leading to another wave of refugees entering Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya (Hazarika, 2000). For many Assamese-speaking communities, these influxes provoked fears of cultural extinction, linguistic marginalization, and political subordination. These anxieties culminated in mass mobilization during the Assam Movement (1979–1985), which sought to “detect, delete, and deport” undocumented migrants—a testament to the depth of insider–outsider anxieties (Baruah, 1999). Tripura experienced a similar upheaval. The migration of Bengali Hindus and Muslims after Partition reversed the demographic reality, relegating indigenous Tripuris to minority status in their homeland (Chakraborty, 2019). This demographic inversion led to the weakening of cultural self-confidence among the Tripuri, as well as insurgent mobilizations to secure land rights and state protection, illustrating how migration fundamentally altered not only the population but also the power dynamics of the region. Internal migration within India has also recast ethnic politics. Nepali migration into Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Assam produced new challenges to indigenous identity. Despite Nepalis' integration into the local economy, their growing numbers brought questions of indigeneity and citizenship to the fore, especially in societies where political rights and land access are tightly bound to ethnic origin (Subba, 2015). Urban migration from other Indian states to Northeast India's cities like Guwahati and Shillong has also fueled friction, intensifying competition for jobs and sparking concerns about cultural dilution among locals (Bhattacharyya, 2018).

Cumulatively, these migration patterns have hardened the insider–outsider divide. As a result, indigenous mobilizations have increased in defense of land rights, language, and political space. Organizations such as the All-Assam Students' Union have played crucial roles in shaping these demands, transforming migration debates into platforms for broader ethnic mobilization (Phanjoubam, 2016). The ongoing centrality of migration, from the National Register of Citizens (NRC) movement to persistent demands for inner-line permits, speaks to its enduring power in shaping ethnic boundaries, political capital, and contestations over belonging in the region. In summary, migration's material and symbolic consequences have recast demographic landscapes, sharpened ethnic lines, and energized new waves of political identity and activism in Northeast India. (Subba, 2015)

### Resource Politics and Land Alienation

Resource politics and land alienation are deeply embedded in the ethnic mobilization of Northeast India, where land is not just an economic resource but a foundation of cultural identity, spiritual life, and community survival. Colonial and post-colonial interventions radically transformed ownership and control of land, forest, and water, disrupting indigenous livelihoods and reshaping ethnic boundaries. The British colonial state redefined the landscape by declaring large swathes as “reserved forests,” evicting shifting cultivators and forest-dependent groups from their ancestral territories (Karlsson, 2011). This was compounded by the rise of commercial agriculture, notably tea plantations in Assam and oil extraction in Upper Assam, which prioritized revenue and resource extraction for export over the rights of local people (Gupta, 2019). Such economic shifts fostered enduring grievances and set the stage for future conflicts rooted in resource alienation.

After independence, the pace of development accelerated resource alienation through policies favoring industrial and infrastructural expansion. Projects like the Lower Subansiri dam in Arunachal Pradesh illustrate how state-driven infrastructure often leads to displacement, loss of ecological balance, and erosion of cultural values, sparking widespread dissent among indigenous communities (Dutta, 2012). In states like Meghalaya and Manipur, mining and dam-building threatened traditional land tenure, and local resistance was often articulated as a struggle not merely for the environment but for ethnic survival, underscoring the intimate ties between resource control and identity (Vohra, 2016).

Demographic change fueled by migration further exacerbated land alienation. In Tripura, the settlement of Bengali outsiders led to massive transfers of tribal land, reducing indigenous populations to minority status and marginalizing their claims (Chakraborty, 2019). Assam’s tribal belts and blocks saw similar tensions, as immigrant expansion was perceived as a direct threat to local ethnic rights over territory, translating into demands for legal protections such as inner-line permits and tribal land reservation policies (Weiner, 1983). These legal contests reflect the enduring centrality of land to ethnic politics.

Resource-based conflicts often erupt between different indigenous groups themselves, not only between communities and the state. Competing claims over forests, grazing grounds, and mineral-rich sites generate inter-group tensions and, in cases like the Khasi-Garo disputes in Meghalaya or Naga-Kuki clashes in Manipur, are deeply rooted in overlapping claims to territory and resources (Hausing, 2015). Such conflicts fragment indigenous solidarity and highlight how resource politics can act as both a centrifugal and centripetal force in ethnic mobilizations.

The politics of land and resources in Northeast India are essential drivers and symbolic anchors of ethnic identity. The alienation of land exemplifies not just an economic loss but a threat to the cultural and communal core of indigenous societies. By transforming ownership, displacing people, and prioritizing extractive development, state and market forces have made land struggles central to ethnic mobilization. Thus, resource politics must be viewed as both a material and symbolic engine of identity-based contestations in the region (Karlsson, 2011).

### Insurgent and Armed Movements

Insurgent and armed movements have been among the most visible manifestations of identity politics in Northeast India. Since the 1950s, numerous insurgent groups have emerged, framing their struggles around ethnic survival, autonomy, and, in some cases, outright secession. These organizations not only militarized identity but also transformed it into a powerful tool of negotiation with the Indian state.

The earliest and perhaps most enduring insurgency in the region has been the Naga movement. Initiated under the Naga National Council (NNC) and later carried forward by factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), the movement articulated a demand for sovereignty rooted in ethnic distinctiveness and historical claims of independence (Phanjoubam, 2016). The Naga insurgency established a model for ethnic mobilization in the region, demonstrating how identity could be militarized to secure political concessions. The subsequent ceasefire agreements and peace talks reflect both the persistence of these claims and the state’s recognition of the insurgency’s political weight (Misra, 2016).

In Assam, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), formed in 1979, represented a shift from student-led agitations to armed struggle. ULFA framed its demand for an independent Assam around the protection of Assamese identity from “colonial exploitation” by India and demographic change due to migration (Baruah, 2020). Although weakened by counter-insurgency operations and internal splits, ULFA’s emergence highlighted how economic grievances and demographic anxieties could converge into armed identity politics (Bhattacharyya, 2018).

Manipur offers another case where multiple insurgent groups—Meitei, Naga, and Kuki—operate simultaneously, each mobilizing along ethnic lines. These groups not only clash with the state but often with one another, as competing claims to territory and recognition sharpen intra-regional divisions (Hausing, 2015). The presence of overlapping insurgencies has turned Manipur into a mosaic of contested sovereignties, underscoring the fragmentation of identity politics when militarized.

Tripura and Mizoram also experienced armed struggles linked to demographic change and ethnic assertion. In Tripura, insurgent groups mobilized against the demographic dominance of Bengali settlers, framing their struggle as a defense of indigenous land and culture (Chakraborty, 2019). In Mizoram, the Mizo National Front (MNF) waged a two-decade insurgency demanding independence, which culminated in the 1986 peace accord, one of the rare success stories of negotiated settlement in the region (Lalzirliana, 2014).



The Indian state's response to insurgency—primarily militarization under AFSPA and counter-insurgency operations—has often deepened alienation. While some groups entered peace talks, others splintered into factions, prolonging cycles of violence (McDuie-Ra, 2017). Importantly, insurgent movements have left a lasting legacy: they institutionalized the idea that ethnic identity can be a powerful bargaining chip in negotiating autonomy, resources, and recognition.

In sum, insurgent and armed movements militarized ethnic identity, turning grievances into organized resistance. They reshaped the political landscape of Northeast India, compelling the state to address demands through both coercion and negotiation. While many insurgencies have weakened, their imprint on identity politics remains enduring, as ethnic identity continues to serve as both a rallying cry and a framework for political mobilization.

### Political Parties and Electoral Strategies

Political parties have been pivotal in shaping and mobilizing ethnic identities in Northeast India, often translating group grievances into platforms for electoral success, policy articulation, and governance. Unlike insurgent movements that typically address issues through armed struggle, parties strategically integrate ethnic concerns into legislative agendas and coalition-building at both regional and national levels, balancing ethnic assertion with pragmatic political calculation. Regional parties are especially adept at harnessing local aspirations; the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam evolved out of the Assam Movement, channeling anti-immigrant sentiment into parliamentary victories (Baruah, 2020). Similarly, the Mizo National Front (MNF), originally an insurgent organization, institutionalized ethnic identity within democratic norms and dominated state politics post-insurgency (Lalzirlana, 2014). Meghalaya's Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) and other local parties have continually advocated for the interests of Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia communities, cementing ethnic concerns at the forefront of regional politics (Phanjoubam, 2016).

National parties, too, have accommodated ethnic identities to broaden their electoral appeal. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) regularly allies itself with regional ethnic parties in states like Assam, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh, supporting indigenous causes while simultaneously promoting themes of national unity (Singh, 2019). The Congress Party has adopted strategic compromises between competing ethnic interests, emphasizing mediation but anchoring success in localised concessions (Ramakrishnan, 2018). These patterns reveal a sustained instrumentalization of ethnicity in electoral politics, where identity becomes a valuable currency for securing votes.

Electoral politics has also entrenched identity legally and administratively, with reserved constituencies for Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC), institutionalizing group representation. Delimitation of seats further mirrors ethnic population distributions, creating mechanisms that both parties and communities use to maximize their leverage and influence (Saikia, 2017). Strategies built around promised protections or ethnic advocacy amplify the mobilizing power of identity in political contests.

However, party competition over ethnic identity can intensify rivalries and tension. In multi-ethnic states such as Manipur and Nagaland, shifting alliances and intra-party disputes often escalate conflicts, with battles over territory, social policy, and cultural recognition manifesting recurrently at the polls (Hausing, 2015). This competition transforms parties themselves into vehicles for ethnic assertion and negotiation, reinforcing identity as both a mechanism of mobilization and a bargaining asset. Political parties and electoral maneuvering in Northeast India have not only institutionalized ethnic identities but also magnified their significance. By channeling grievances into policies, shaping state priorities, and managing interethnic negotiations, parties actively define the boundaries and trajectory of identity politics. Recognizing their central role is essential for understanding the operation of ethnic mobilization within regional democratic frameworks (Saikia, 2017).

### Student Unions and Ethnic Organizations

Student unions and ethnic organizations have been among the most dynamic forces in the mobilization of identity politics in Northeast India. Unlike political parties that function within formal electoral processes, these organizations operate at the grassroots, voicing community grievances, advocating for cultural renewal, and lobbying state authorities. Their activities frequently bridge the divide between cultural affirmation and collective political action, cementing their centrality in the regional landscape of identity politics. The All-Assam Students' Union (AASU), established in 1967, is a leading example—originally an educational platform, it soon became the principal driver behind the Assam Movement (1979–1985), rallying mass protests, economic blockades, and civil resistance around the expulsion of “illegal immigrants” from the state (Baruah, 1999). AASU's success demonstrated the effectiveness of student-led mobilization and inspired similar experiments throughout the Northeast.

Across the region, student unions and ethnic youth organizations have played similarly transformative roles. In Arunachal Pradesh, the All-Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) has championed tribal rights, language preservation, and self-governance (Phanjoubam, 2016). The Young Mizo Association (YMA) in Mizoram blends robust social services with efforts for cultural revival, strengthening collective Mizo identity and solidarity (Lalzirlana, 2014). The Naga Students' Federation (NSF) in Nagaland is deeply involved in civil society advocacy related to Naga rights and cultural issues. In Manipur, organizations like the All-Manipur Students' Union (AMSU) and the Kuki Students' Organization (KSO) address community-specific and cross-

community educational and political demands. The Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZIP) in Mizoram, Garo Students' Union (GSU) and Khasi Students' Union (KSU) in Meghalaya, and Takam Mising Porin Kebang (TMPK) in Assam are further examples—each mobilizing youth for ethnic rights, cultural festivals, educational access, and political recognition (Misra, 2016).

Many ethnic organizations also operate as cultural custodians. They promote traditional festivals, indigenous languages, and customary institutions, linking ethnic identity tightly to collective memory and political agency. These campaigns for cultural revival often precede political mobilization, ensuring that community claims rest on an affirmed and united identity (Bhattacharyya, 2018). As educators and movement builders, such organizations shape the very language and strategies of ethnic mobilization.

These unions and organizations regularly interact with political parties and state powers, negotiating for concessions, pushing for legislative reform, or articulating new community demands. While such encounters can institutionalize ethnic claims, failures to address them frequently trigger renewed activism or protest, creating a cycle of contestation that reflects the iterative and resilient character of regional identity politics (Ramakrishnan, 2018).

In essence, student unions and ethnic organizations—spanning AASU, AAPSU, AMSU, NSF, MZIP, TMPK, KSO, KSU, GSU, YMA, and beyond—are critical catalysts of identity politics in Northeast India. By fusing cultural revival with social solidarity and direct political advocacy, they amplify and institutionalize ethnic claims. Their pivotal role highlights how identity in the region is negotiated, contested, and periodically reimagined through grassroots mobilization (Baruah, 1999).

### **Security Forces and Counter-Insurgency**

The persistent presence of security forces and counter-insurgency operations has shaped Northeast India's post-independence political reality, fueling both the suppression and stimulation of ethnic identity politics. Such interventions, intended for maintaining law and order, have often aggravated grievances, intensifying mistrust between local communities and the state. The interplay of state authority, coercion, and identity assertion reveals how security policies can entrench divisions rather than resolve them. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), enacted in 1958, remains the clearest example, granting security personnel extraordinary powers over "disturbed areas," including arrest without warrant and the use of force (McDuie-Ra, 2017). Though justified as vital for countering insurgency, AFSPA has come to symbolize state oppression for many indigenous populations, alienating communities through arbitrary detentions, alleged extrajudicial killings, and widespread reports of human rights violations—particularly in Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

Counter-insurgency operations both target and impact civilian communities, resulting in collateral damage such as the destruction of homes, economic disruption, and mass displacement (Baruah, 2020). Rather than stabilizing the region, this approach has often fueled greater mobilization along ethnic lines, as affected populations view the security apparatus not merely as an agent of law but as a threat to cultural autonomy and survival (Bhattacharyya, 2018). This defensive polarization is further reinforced when cycles of violence and armed repression are met with community solidarity and renewed narratives of historical injustice.

The relationship between security forces and local organizations is complicated. While state agencies sometimes negotiate peace with insurgent groups, mixing targeted operations with dialogue, the outcomes have been uneven. Notable accords—like the 1986 Mizo peace settlement and ongoing ceasefires with NSCN factions in Nagaland—show that negotiated engagement offers the potential for political settlement, yet the persistence of military deployments, patchy justice, and new splinter groups continually regenerate cycles of mobilization (Lalziriana, 2014). Uneven or selective policy application undermines trust, making lasting peace elusive.

Beyond immediate violence, militarization brings profound social and psychological consequences. Prolonged exposure to security forces reshapes community practices, with many ethnic groups responding by deepening defensive cultural rituals, advancing language revival campaigns, and cultivating narratives of shared victimhood (Phanjoubam, 2016). These responses consolidate ethnic identity, even as the state seeks to regulate it—demonstrating the paradox of counter-insurgency: efforts to impose order often further embed ethnic consciousness.

The role of security forces and counter-insurgency in Northeast India not only reflects the challenges of governance in a contested region but also illustrates how coercion and selective engagement can reinforce the salience of ethnic politics. By shaping everyday experiences of belonging, threat, and negotiation, state security policies influence the ways communities mobilize around identity, both defensively and assertively. Understanding this dynamic is essential to grasping the persistence and complexity of ethnic mobilization and the difficulties confronting peace and governance in Northeast India (Lalziriana, 2014).

### **Religious and Cultural Influences**

Religious and cultural dynamics play a foundational role in shaping ethnic identity in Northeast India. Ethnic identity, while articulated through language, tribal markers, or territorial claims, is deeply intertwined with religion and cultural institutions that reinforce group boundaries, galvanize community participation, and shape political trajectories. Both historical missionary interventions and ongoing movements for cultural revival have created a dynamic interplay between faith, cultural symbols, and collective identity. Christian

missionary activity in Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya between the late 19th and early 20th centuries significantly transformed regional cultures by introducing Western-style education, health care, and conversion initiatives, thereby advancing literacy and new forms of sociopolitical organization (Gassah, 2015). Becoming Christian not only brought new opportunities but also emerged as a distinctive group marker, separating converts from neighboring indigenous and non-Christian populations (Hazarika, 2000). The resulting consolidation of separate group identities provided new platforms for political mobilization across these states.

Conversely, indigenous cultural frameworks have reinforced ethnic awareness and provided communal coherence. Traditional institutions—from tribal councils to seasonal festivals and ritual practices—continue to be sites for building solidarity and guiding social conduct. The Mizo chieftainship system and the Young Mizo Association (YMA) remain pivotal in preserving culture while linking contemporary claims of community rights to deep historical roots (Lalzirliana, 2014). Communities such as the Mising, Karbi, and Khasi in Assam and Meghalaya maintain robust cultural institutions supporting unique languages, rituals, and distinct territorial affiliations (Misra, 2016).

The intersections of religion, culture, and politics are complex and multi-directional. Religious identity can influence how communities access education, employment, and social mobility, while cultural revival movements frequently serve as the foundation for demands concerning land, resources, and regional autonomy (Baruah, 2020). Ethnic organizations often mobilize political solidarity around cultural and religious narratives, reinforcing identity claims and stimulating collective action (Bhattacharyya, 2018).

Additionally, cultural and religious elements may either reduce or sharpen societal cleavages. While shared rituals and faith have sometimes enabled alliances across community lines, they have also been a source of friction, especially where competing practices overlap—such as in border zones with multiple ethnic or linguistic groups (Singh, 2019). In such contexts, cultural and religious differences act as touchstones for both unity and rivalry, steering the course of identity mobilization.

Religious and cultural factors are essential to understanding how ethnic identity evolves and is maintained in Northeast India. They sustain a sense of belonging while providing organizational frameworks for mobilization and negotiation with state authorities. Analyzing identity politics in the region, therefore, necessitates close attention to faith-based and cultural institutions as they continually shape, sustain, or transform ethnic formations (Gassah, 2015).

### **Cross-Border and External Factors**

Cross-border dynamics have exerted profound impacts on ethnic identity politics in Northeast India, making it one of the most geopolitically complex regions in South Asia. The area's international borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, and China have shaped migration, trade, insurgent networks, and cultural flows, collectively impacting local identities and political mobilizations. External influences often amplify longstanding grievances, while transnational ethnic ties present both opportunities and challenges to community activism. The Bangladesh–India border has been especially central, with historic migration from East Bengal during British rule and subsequent waves during Partition (1947) and the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) reshaping the demographics of Assam and Tripura (Hazarika, 2000; Weiner, 1983). These migrations raised anxieties among indigenous groups, who viewed them as direct threats to their cultural, political, and economic interests, resulting in landmark mobilizations like the Assam Movement and tribal agitations in Tripura (Chakraborty, 2019). The cross-border nature of these influxes intensified the sense of an “outsider” issue, linking identity politics with citizenship and security (Baruah, 1999).

Borderlands with Myanmar, meanwhile, have facilitated transnational ethnic networks. Communities such as the Nagas, Mizos, and Kukis possess kinship and historical affiliations that span both sides of the border, providing safe havens and resources for insurgent groups operating during periods of heightened conflict (Phanjoubam, 2016). Porous borders have enabled the movement of people, arms, and ideas, strengthened ethnic solidarity, and facilitated mobilization far beyond India's territorial confines. Bhutan and Nepal's roles, while less pronounced, are also significant; migration from Nepal to Sikkim and Assam has fueled disputes over indigeneity and political representation (Subba, 2015), and Bhutanese refugees have occasionally factored into identity debates in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (Singh, 2019).

Geopolitical interests and border management practices instituted by neighboring countries and the Indian state continue to influence local politics. Concerns about national security, cross-border insurgency, and smuggling have justified militarized administrative measures, most notably the Inner Line Permit system, which both restricts movement and institutionalizes ethnic distinctions. These policies, designed to manage sovereignty, often privilege certain groups while excluding others, reinforcing hierarchies along identity lines (Baruah, 2020).

In sum, external and cross-border factors both amplify and transform ethnic identity politics in Northeast India. Migration, transnational ties, and insurgent networks combine with security and border regimes to make identity simultaneously a local and regional phenomenon. For effective policy development and stable governance in this sensitive area, understanding how external factors compound local grievances and community mobilizations is essential (Chakraborty, 2019).

## Conclusion

The ethnic identity politics of Northeast India emerge from an intricate matrix of historical, political, economic, cultural, and external factors, each shaping the region's ongoing negotiation of identities. This analysis considers distinct actors influencing identity formation, including colonial legacies, post-colonial political institutions, migration flows, resource management, armed insurgencies, political parties, student and ethnic organizations, religious and cultural frameworks, and cross-border dynamics. These forces have uniquely contributed to the creation, mobilization, and contestation of ethnic identities, underscoring the idea that identity is dynamic and co-produced by continuous interaction between communities and structural powers. Colonial policies created enduring legacies by formalizing administrative classifications, enforcing territorial segregation, and alienating land from indigenous communities, setting foundations for modern identity politics through institutionalized categories and hierarchies (Karlsson, 2011). The post-colonial state extended these divisions—constitutional provisions, reservation policies, and citizenship laws offered limited recognition or autonomy, often reinforcing boundaries rather than resolving them (Saikia, 2017). Migration, both cross-border and internal, drastically altered regional demographics, sparking fears of cultural and political marginalization and prompting widespread community mobilization (Subba, 2015).

Compounding these tensions, resource politics and land alienation displaced indigenous peoples and made ethnic claims over territory and livelihoods acutely prominent (Dutta, 2012;). Insurgent movements militarized identity, while political parties and electoral systems institutionalized it in democratic practice, transforming ethnic aspirations into concrete political power (Baruah, 2020). The grassroots activism of student unions and ethnic organizations forged links between cultural revival and political mobilization, giving rise to new forms of identity assertion (Misra, 2016). Religious and cultural institutions sustained community boundaries, promoting both solidarity and differentiation among diverse groups (Hazarika, 2000).

Moreover, cross-border and external factors—migration, transnational ethnic connections, and geopolitical agendas—expand the scope of identity politics beyond domestic boundaries, turning it into both a local and regional phenomenon (Chakraborty, 2019). These multiple influences show that ethnic identity in Northeast India is neither fixed nor inherent; rather, it reflects a negotiated convergence of historical precedent, state structure, collective action, and external pressure.

Recognizing these distinct actors is essential for developing sound policy. Policy responses must be conflict-sensitive and inclusive, addressing land and cultural rights, community protection, and thoughtful management of migration and borders to resolve longstanding grievances. Durable peace and equitable development will only be possible when scholars, practitioners, and policymakers acknowledge the multiplicity of actors and the complex interdependence of their impacts in Northeast India. (Gupta, 2019)

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