



A STUDY ON ETHNIC CONFLICT IN NORTH EAST INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE STATE OF TRIPURA

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ABSTRACT

The North East region of India is known for its rich cultural diversity, with numerous ethnic groups, languages, identities and traditions coexisting in harmony. However, this region has also experienced its share of ethnic conflicts and communal violence over the years. The complexities of ethnicity and the history of inter-community tensions have contributed to occasional outbreaks of violence, leading to significant challenges in maintaining peace and stability. This article delves into the underlying factors that contribute to ethnicity-based communal violence in North East India and explores potential solutions to foster harmony and unity among the diverse communities. North East India comprises eight states with distinct ethnic identities and historical backgrounds. The region has over 200 ethnic groups, including Nagas, Kukis, Meiteis, Assamese, Bodos, and many others. The concept of ethnicity is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of these communities, shaping their language, customs, and social structures. Ethnicity-based communal violence often arises from a sense of identity and belonging. Conflicts often emerge when communities perceive threats to their identity, language, cultural, political, or economic rights. Historical grievances, land disputes, and resource competition exacerbate tensions, leading to outbreaks of violence.

KEYWORDS: Language, Identity Assertion, Ethnicity, Culture and Communities.

INTRODUCTION

The North East region of India is renowned for its cultural diversity. Comprising eight states, each with its unique ethnic identities and historical backgrounds with over 200 ethnic groups including Nagas, Kukis, Meiteis, Assamese, Bodos and others, ethnicity is deeply ingrained in the social fabric of these communities, shaping their language, customs and social structures. Ethnicity-based communal violence often stems from issues related to identity, culture and belonging. Conflicts tend to surface when communities perceive threats to their identity, language, culture, political representation or economic rights. This article explores the intricate interplay of language, identity assertion and ethnic conflict in North East India, particularly emphasising the state of Tripura. Many ethnic communities in North East India assert their distinct identities fervently. This identity assertion can sometimes lead to clashes when groups perceive their identity as being undermined or threatened by others (Schnapper, 1994). Language and Culture Language serves as a crucial marker of ethnic identity. When language and culture are endangered or marginalised it can lead to heightened tensions and conflicts within and between communities (Debbarma, 2023). Past grievances and historical injustices often related to land and resources continue to fuel ethnic tensions, and unresolved disputes can escalate into violence (Kafle, 2023).

Limited resources, including land, water and jobs, can trigger conflicts among various ethnic groups, especially when access to these resources becomes contentious (Debbarma, 2024). Ethnicity plays a significant role in politics in the North East; competition for political power and representation can exacerbate divisions and conflicts among communities. Tripura, one of the states in North East India presents a unique case study for understanding the dynamics of ethnicity-based communal violence. The state has witnessed conflicts primarily between the indigenous Tripuri community and refugees. Language, Identity assertion, historical grievances and political representation have been key factors in these conflicts. Addressing ethnicity-based communal violence in North East India including Tripura requires a multifaceted approach (Akhtar, 2018). There is a need to Promote dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms that allow communities to express their concerns and grievances peacefully. Support initiatives that preserve and promote the languages and cultures of various ethnic groups, ensuring they are not marginalised. Implement fair and transparent land and resource management policies to mitigate disputes over limited resources. Encourage inclusive political representation that reflects the region's diversity, allowing different communities to have a voice in governance. Promote education and awareness programs that foster inter-community understanding and tolerance. Ethnicity-based communal violence in North East India including Tripura is a complex issue rooted in the deep-seated identities and



historical grievances of diverse communities by addressing the underlying factors and implementing inclusive policies the region can move towards fostering harmony unity and peaceful coexistence among its rich tapestry of cultures and ethnicities

Assam

Communal conflicts in Assam often revolve around land ownership and disputes. Indigenous Assamese communities have clashed with Bengali-speaking Muslim settlers, especially during the Assam Movement in the 1980s. The movement aimed to protect the rights of Assamese-speaking residents and address concerns about land encroachments. Ethnicity: Assam is a diverse state with various ethnic groups, including Assamese, Bodos, and others. Tensions arise when different ethnic communities vie for resources, political representation, and cultural recognition. Migration: The issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh has been a significant flashpoint for communal tensions. Indigenous communities perceive a threat to their culture, language, and political representation due to the influx of immigrants.

Arunachal Pradesh

The conflict between the Chakma people and indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh is a multifaceted issue with communal dimensions. The Chakma people, originally from Bangladesh, sought refuge in India, particularly Arunachal Pradesh, due to political unrest in their home country. This influx of Chakma settlers has led to a series of regional conflicts. The primary factors contributing to this conflict include disputes over land and resources, concerns about cultural dilution and identity, political representation, and security issues arising from clashes between the two groups. Indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh argue that Chakma settlers have encroached upon their ancestral lands, leading to disputes over land ownership and access to natural resources. Furthermore, the presence of Chakma settlers with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds has raised concerns among indigenous communities about preserving their distinct identities and traditions.

Efforts to resolve this complex conflict include legal actions, dialogue initiatives, humanitarian aid, and awareness programs. However, striking a balance between protecting the rights of indigenous communities and addressing the humanitarian needs of Chakma settlers remains a challenging task. The Chakma-indigenous conflict in Arunachal Pradesh revolves around land, identity, culture, and political representation issues. It requires ongoing efforts to promote peaceful coexistence, dialogue, and equitable resource distribution while respecting the rights and identities of both Chakma settlers and indigenous communities.

Manipur

Manipur is known for its diverse population, consisting of multiple tribal groups like the Kukis, Manipuri and Nagas. Communal conflicts often stem from competition for recognition, autonomy, self-determination and resources competition among these different communities. The ongoing insurgency in Manipur has further complicated communal tensions particularly between

the kukis and the meiteis. Different insurgent groups have ethnic affiliations, and their activities sometimes target specific communities, leading to violence and insecurity.

Meghalaya

Land Ownership: Land disputes are a significant source of communal conflicts in Meghalaya. Indigenous Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia communities often clash with non-tribal groups like Bengalis and Nepalis over land rights. Identity and Religion: Communal tensions also revolve around issues of identity and religion. Instances of violence and discrimination against non-tribal residents, who may follow different religions, contribute to these conflicts.

Sikkim

Almost all issues in Sikkim originate from and end in its ethnic diversity. Lepchas, the original inhabitants are today facing extinction; the Bhutias who ruled after them are also in a minority. Nepalis, who immigrated in large numbers in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, are now in an overwhelming majority and are clamouring for their right to rule. Adding to the confusion are a large number of plainsmen, identified as "of Indian origin". The tension and bitterness created by the ethnic struggle have cut across party lines.

Mizoram

Land and Identity Disputes: Communal conflicts in Mizoram primarily involve the Mizo tribes and the Brus (Reangs). These conflicts are rooted in land and identity disputes between the two communities, sometimes resulting in violence and displacement.

Nagaland

Nagaland has been grappling with the Naga insurgency for several decades. While the conflict is primarily political in nature, it has communal dimensions, particularly between the Naga tribes and non-Naga communities residing in the state. These tensions often relate to issues of identity and political representation.

Tripura

Indigenous vs. Refugee Conflict: Communal conflicts in Tripura historically pit the indigenous Tripuri population against Bengali-speaking settlers. The tension escalated in the late 20th century, leading to the Tripura insurgency. The insurgency was mainly driven by issues related to land, ethnicity, and political representation.

In each of these states, it's essential to understand the unique historical, cultural, and political contexts that contribute to communal conflicts. Local grievances, historical injustices, and economic disparities also play crucial roles in these tensions. Addressing these conflicts requires a multifaceted approach that involves dialogue, reconciliation, equitable resource distribution, and inclusive governance to ensure the peaceful coexistence of diverse communities in Northeast India.



OBJECTIVE OF THIS RESEARCH

The objective of this research is to conduct an in-depth exploration of the interplay between language, identity, and migration in the context of ethnic conflict in Tripura, India. The study aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

- (i) To Investigate how language, particularly the use of the Roman script for Kokborok, the mother tongue of the indigenous Tripuri community, impacts ethnic identity and cultural preservation. Analyse indigenous peoples' linguistic choices, preferences, and implications for identity assertion.
- (ii) To Explore the role of language as a marker of ethnic identity in Tripura. Understand how language influences perceptions of belonging and identity among indigenous Tripuris and Bengali settlers. Investigate whether language serves as a unifying or divisive factor in the region.

NEED OF THE STUDY

The scope of this article is comprehensive and multidimensional, aiming to provide a holistic understanding about conflict. This research has employed qualitative research methods, including surveys, interviews, case studies, historical analysis, and policy analysis. Through this comprehensive approach, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of communal conflicts and potential pathways to peace and cultural diversity in Tripura.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodology was designed to investigate ethnic conflict in Tripura. This qualitative research study employed a comprehensive approach, utilising in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and secondary sources to gather data and gain a deep understanding of these intricate subjects. This research embraced a qualitative research design, which was well-suited for exploring ethnic conflict in Tripura. It employed a case study approach, focusing on Tripura to analyse ethnic conflict in Tripura. By adopting this approach, the study aimed to uncover nuanced insights that may not have been apparent through quantitative methods.

Data Collection Methods

Two primary data collection methods were central to this research:

1. In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants who possessed expertise in ethnic conflict in Tripura. Participants included politicians, civil servants, activists, and experts. These interviews provided a platform for participants to share their experiences, perspectives, and insights on ethnic conflict in Tripura.
2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): FGDs were organised with diverse groups of citizens representing various demographics, such as age, gender, socio-economic status, and linguistic backgrounds. The goal was to facilitate open and dynamic discussions on topics related to ethnic conflict

in Tripura. FGDs offered a collective perspective on these matters.

Sampling and Ethical Considerations

The study employed purposeful sampling to select participants, ensuring diversity and representation. Key informants were identified through a snowball sampling approach, harnessing the knowledge and networks of participants. Ethical considerations were prioritised, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant anonymity, and securing ethical approvals from relevant review boards.

Data Analysis and Triangulation

Data collected from interviews and FGDs underwent rigorous thematic analysis. This analysis involved identifying emergent themes related to ethnic conflict in Tripura. Triangulation enhanced the credibility and validity of findings by comparing and contrasting data from multiple sources, including secondary sources like books, academic journals, reports, and government documents.

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

"Language, Identity Assertion, and Ethnic Conflict in North East India with Special Reference to the State of Tripura" can be analysed using several sociological theories to understand the dynamics of ethnic conflict and identity assertion. Here are some relevant sociological theories:

Social Identity Theory: This theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, explains how individuals categorise themselves and others into various social groups based on shared characteristics, such as ethnicity or language. In the context of the article, Social Identity Theory can help explain how people in Tripura identify themselves with specific ethnic or linguistic groups, which can lead to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination, contributing to ethnic conflict.

Conflict Theory: Conflict theory, rooted in the works of Karl Marx and developed by later sociologists, focuses on the role of power, inequality, and competition in society. In this article, Conflict Theory can be applied to analyse how the struggle for resources, political representation, and cultural dominance between indigenous Tripuri communities and Bengali settlers has led to ethnic conflict in Tripura.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The state of Tripura experienced ethnic conflict between the indigenous people and refugee Bengali people in the 1980s, where more than 1000 people died. Tripura has a long history of ethnic diversity, cultural richness, and communal conflicts. One significant communal conflict in Tripura revolves around the indigenous Tripuri community and Bengali settlers, primarily immigrants from Bangladesh. This conflict is rooted in identity, language, and political representation issues, primarily driven by the large-scale migration of Bengali people from Bangladesh. The



indigenous Tripuri population has faced a profound identity crisis due to this migration.

Identity, Refugee and Ethnic Conflict

Historically, Tripura has been home to indigenous tribes like the Debbarma, Reang, Jamatia and many other indigenous tribe etc for centuries. However, the partition of India in 1947 and the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 led to a substantial influx of Bengali refugees into Tripura. These refugees were resettled on lands traditionally owned or occupied by indigenous Tripuri communities, triggering significant demographic changes.

The influx of Bengali settlers resulted in a demographic shift, causing the indigenous Tripuri community to witness a decline in their numerical majority. This shift posed a serious threat to the indigenous Tripuri's sense of identity. The dominance of Bengali culture and language, influenced by the changing demographics, marginalised Tripuri culture and raised concerns about its dilution. Furthermore, the changing demographics affected political representation, with indigenous Tripuri communities feeling their political influence waning. Limited seats were reserved for indigenous representatives in the Tripura Legislative Assembly, and this underrepresentation fueled demands for greater political autonomy and representation. The identity crisis among the indigenous Tripuri population escalated into communal tensions and conflicts, with disputes over land ownership, cultural preservation, and political representation. Land disputes, often pitting indigenous communities against Bengali settlers, resulted in violence and displacement. These conflicts were driven by perceived injustices and imbalances in land ownership, intensifying the demand for greater autonomy. The communal conflict in Tripura between the Tripuri and Bengali communities is deeply rooted in the identity crisis faced by the indigenous Tripuri due to the massive migration of Bengali people from Bangladesh. This conflict underscores the complexity of communal tensions driven by demographic changes, cultural preservation concerns, political representation, and land disputes, all needing careful attention and resolution.

Language and Conflict

Indigenous groups, especially those who communicate in Kokborok, have strongly voiced their preference for adopting the Roman script for their language. As the native language of the Tipra community, Kokborok carries deep cultural and historical

significance. Tripura's indigenous population has highlighted the Roman script's critical role in safeguarding and enhancing their linguistic legacy. They believe that adopting the Roman script is key to preserving their cultural identity and improving communication, education, and cultural sharing within their communities and beyond.

Proponents of using the Roman script for Kokborok suggest that it offers a writing system that is more open and user-friendly, mainly due to its alignment with contemporary technology and online platforms. They assert that the Roman script can broaden educational access, promote the broader sharing of indigenous literature and cultural materials, and significantly empower indigenous Tipra people.

Acknowledging and honoring the indigenous request to utilise the Roman script for Kokborok is essential for protecting their linguistic and cultural rights. This involves fostering a supportive environment where indigenous languages are appreciated, promoted, and placed on an equal footing with other languages in educational settings, official discourse, and cultural initiatives. The adoption of policies that favor the Roman script for Kokborok, while also embracing the region's linguistic diversity, is key to building a more inclusive and unified community in Tripura.

According to Higher Education Department survey and data, most students studying Kokborok language in 22 government colleges prefer to use Roman script for writing Kokborok language. For 2021-2022 academic session 99.95 % of students pursuing Kokborok language in 22 government college choose Roman Script for writing their answers script and for 2019-2020 academic session 99 .09 % of the students studying Kokborok language opted for answering their answers in Roman Script. Students are given a choice to answer in both the script but majority of the students choose Roman Script for writing Kokborok language in college of Tripura. Hence it clearly indicate that the students communities prefer to use Roman script for writing Kokborok language.

List of General Degree College where Kokborok Language is Taught and Total number of students studying Kokborok Subject and numbers of Student opting for Roman Script and Bengali Script for the Academic Session (2019-2020) and (2021-2022) are given below:

| S.L. No | Name of College | 2019-2020 | | | 2021-2022 | | |
|---------|---|----------------------|--------------|----------------|---------------------|--------------|----------------|
| | | Total students 19-20 | Roman Script | Bengali Script | Total studens 21-22 | Roman Script | Bengali Script |
| 1. | M.BB College, Agartala | 315 | 314 | 1 | 536 | 536 | 0 |
| 2 | B.B Memorial College, Agartala | 478 | 478 | 0 | 622 | 622 | 0 |
| 3 | Govt. Women's College, Agartala | 898 | 898 | 0 | 910 | 910 | 0 |
| 4 | Ramthakur College, Agartala | 31 | 31 | 0 | 146 | 146 | 0 |
| 5 | Govt. Degree College, Khumulwng | 840 | 840 | 0 | 1274 | 1274 | 0 |
| 6 | Swami Vivekananda Mahavidyalaya, Mohanpur | 157 | 157 | 0 | 303 | 303 | 0 |
| 7 | Dasharath Deb Memorial College, K | 878 | 878 | 0 | 1101 | 1101 | 0 |



| | | | | | | | |
|----|--|---------------|-----------------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| 8 | Govt. Degree College, Teliamura | 224 | 224 | 0 | 464 | 464 | 0 |
| 9 | Govt. Degree College, Kamalpur | 272 | 272 | 0 | 359 | 359 | 0 |
| 10 | Govt. Degree College, Gandachhara | 166 | 166 | 0 | 286 | 286 | 0 |
| 11 | Govt. Degree College, L.T. Valley | 142 | 142 | 0 | 198 | 198 | 0 |
| 12 | Ramkrishna Mahavidyalaya, Kailashahar | 258 | 258 | 0 | 196 | 196 | 0 |
| 13 | Ambedkar College, Fatikroy | 28 | 28 | 0 | 55 | 55 | 0 |
| 14 | Govt. Degree College, Dharmanagar | 91 | 91 | 0 | 167 | 167 | 0 |
| 15 | Govt. Degree College, Kanchanpur | 107 | 107 | 0 | 124 | 124 | 0 |
| 16 | Kabi Nazrul Mahavidyalaya, Sonamura | 87 | 87 | 0 | 167 | 167 | 0 |
| 17 | Rabindranath Thakur Mahavidyalaya, Bishlalgarh | 17 | 17 | 0 | 45 | 45 | 0 |
| 18 | Netaji Subhash Mahavidyalaya, Udaipur | 922 | 922 | 0 | 911 | 911 | 0 |
| 19 | Adwitya Malla Barman Smriti Mahavidyalaya, Amarpur | 284 | 284 | 0 | 489 | 489 | 0 |
| 20 | Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar College, Belonia | 280 | 280 | 0 | 416 | 416 | 0 |
| 21 | Govt. Degree College, Santibazar | 52 | 47 | 05 | 113 | 109 | 04 |
| 22 | Michael Madhusudan Datta College, Sabroom | 122 | 122 | 0 | 265 | 265 | 0 |
| | Total students (%) | 6649 (100) | 6643 (99.90) | 06 (0.09) | 9147(1 00.00) | 9143 (99.96) | 4 (0.04) |

Source: Directorate of Higher Education, Government of Tripura.

The data indicates a strong preference among students studying the Kokborok language for using the Roman script. However, the Tripura government's insistence on promoting the Bengali script reflects an attempt to assert Bengali cultural dominance over the indigenous Tiprasa community. By offering a bilingual script choice, the government creates confusion among the student community, despite the clear preference of most Tiprasa people to use the Roman script for writing Kokborok.

Sociological Implications

"Language, Identity Assertion, and Ethnic Conflict in North East India with Special Reference to the State of Tripura" highlights several sociological implications, focusing on how identity and belonging play pivotal roles in driving ethnic conflicts, and underscores the significance of identity in individuals' lives, examining how diverse cultures and languages coexist in the region. Furthermore, it delves into the sociological implications of demographic changes resulting from migration, showing how population shifts can lead to power imbalances, marginalisation, and resource competition. Ethnic conflict, a form of social conflict, is scrutinised from a sociological perspective, emphasising understanding the root causes, dynamics, and consequences of such conflicts. The article also brings attention to the intricate relationship between language and culture, emphasising the importance of preserving and promoting linguistic diversity, and discusses the sociological issue of political representation and how it impacts different ethnic and cultural groups' participation in decision-making processes. Furthermore, the article explores the sociological implications for educational policies based on research findings regarding

students' preferences for the Roman script in education, and advocates for inclusive governance as a means to address ethnic conflicts. It also touches on community dynamics and intergroup relations, subjects frequently examined by sociologists, and raises questions about cultural rights and the protection of indigenous cultures, which are central in sociological discussions about balancing minority rights with broader societal interests and values.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the communal conflicts in Tripura, rooted in identity, language, and migration issues, have had a profound impact on the indigenous Tripuri population. These conflicts have arisen due to the significant migration of Bengali people from Bangladesh, resulting in a demographic shift that challenges the indigenous community's sense of identity and cultural preservation. The dominance of Bengali culture and language and concerns about political representation have further exacerbated tensions. The use of the Roman script for writing Kokborok, the mother tongue of the indigenous Tipra community, has emerged as a key issue in this context. Advocates argue that adopting the Roman script can help preserve and promote Kokborok, facilitating communication, education, and cultural expression. The preference for the Roman script among students studying Kokborok in government colleges underscores the significance of this linguistic aspect in the communal conflict. To address these multifaceted challenges, it is crucial to foster an inclusive and harmonious environment that respects and supports indigenous communities' linguistic and cultural rights. Recognising the indigenous peoples' desire to use the Roman script for Kokborok



and implementing policies that promote its use can contribute to a more equitable and culturally diverse society in Tripura. Ultimately, finding common ground and solutions that acknowledge the historical and cultural rights of both the indigenous people and Bengali communities is essential for achieving lasting peace and harmony in the region.

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