**Tribes and the Indigenous Slot in Northeast India**

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The question of indigeneity is at the epicenter of a political debates in Northeast India today. The origins of this question go back to 19th century colonial anthropological construction of ‘hill tribes’ in the region. This production of the ethnic other fossilized with the passage of time as colonial administrators came to map their identity, customs and culture. In this brief blog article I wish to contend that the critical question of identity in Northeast India remains opposed between colonial official representation and anthropological understanding embedded in global indignity discourses and decolonial epistemologies developed by anthropologists post 1947. Therefore, in the post-independent period the political debates changed as Indian anthropologists came to create their other from within in the northeast adding the ‘tribal development’ category replacing colonial ‘improvement’.

During the early decades of the 20th century colonial administrators turned into anthropologists within the Chief Commissionership of Assam, commissioned various studies to understand the life and culture of Ao, Angami, Lotha, Khasi, Kuki, Garo and other groups to better administer hill tribes. Over a period of time (1910-1940) through ‘tribal monographs’ hill administrators developed in-depth knowledge of their kinship system, marriage, clan structure, beliefs and rituals. This reinforced classification of ‘tribes’- as indigenous to the soil and separated from ‘caste communities’. Their culture and beliefs were used as a yardstick to measure their development. The peasant caste communities of Assam were perceived as more advanced because they performed setteled agriculture. Leading colonial anthropologists such as [Christopher von Furer-Haimendorf](https://www.therai.org.uk/archives-and-manuscripts/obituaries/christoph-von-fuerer-haimendorf) in his book *the Naked Nagas* observed that in the hills the Naga tribes were ‘less advanced’ than their neighbouring brothers who performed settled agriculture.

The major difference between colonial ethnography carried out in mainland India and Northeast can be defined by the nature of political intervention directed at extending political control over frontier territories through military surveys [(West 1994).](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02757206.1994.9960858?journalCode=ghan20) Thus, tribal ethnography in the northeast developed in distinction to mainland ‘revenue ethnography’ (Morrison 1984) as [‘frontier regime’](https://www-cambridge-org.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/ED2B8E0F1DFD37807766DCA4725B5F91/9781108686716c8_p179-206_CBO.pdf/frontier_regime_and_colonial_rule.pdf) (Gilangamba 2019). Even when tribute payments were forced on slash and burn *(jhum)* farmers they were more political than financial (Lotha 2007). Colonial hill administrator such as [J.H. Hutton (1885-1968)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Henry_Hutton) and [J.P Mills (1890-1960)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Philip_Mills) were instrumental in honing the divided between tribal and non-tribal, hill and plains people and caste and non-caste population in Northeast as their work was [bound up with the marginality of the hill region, which influenced an ethnographic tradition with its own foci, contextualized by personalities, interests and careers of serving officers.](https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.1080/02757206.1994.9960858?needAccess=true)

In the post-independence period, the debate on tribal right to land intensified as the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis other tribes pushed for autonomy and self-determination.

According to [Kriti Kapila (2008: 121),](https://rai.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2007.00481.x) ‘The two categories, caste and tribe - and the lists of groups so classified - were taken directly from the Census of India of 1931, which was conducted under the direction of J.H. Hutton, the Cambridge anthropologist.’ In the post-independence period, the debate on tribal right to land intensified as the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis other tribes pushed for autonomy and self-determination. During the 1950s, as the British anthropologist left the scene, two schools of thought came to confront one another. One was led by [Govind Sadashiv Ghurye (1943)](https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=pTNmCIc9hCUC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=G+S+Ghurye+The+schedule+tribes&ots=g0MByk2Bog&sig=WeHdWqBZZK0JoX0Ag1znKHwtZpc&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=G%20S%20Ghurye%20The%20schedule%20tribes&f=false) who was the eminent anthropologist in western India, Bombay University. He proposed integration of tribal identity and its assimilation within mainstream Indian society. This was contested by [Verrier Elwin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tribal_World_of_Verrier_Elwin), Oxford educated social activist who contributed to missionary work in central India and joined the Indian national movement with Mahatma Gandhi. Elwin vouched for tribal protectionism. The different worldviews of Ghurye and Elwin on the tribal question was shaped by their training and episteme. While Ghurye was embedded in Indology, he saw integration as the way forward and proposed “unity in diversity”. Elwin on the other hand, championed the [plurality of tribal epistemology](https://www.soas.ac.uk/south-asia-institute/events/seminars/file126893.pdf) and their ontological understand of nature and culture that was distinctly different from the people who lived in the plains (within the caste groups). Elwin’s point of view was supported by India’s first premier Jawaharlal Nehru who appointed him as an advisor on tribal affairs for Northeast India, and later he was anthropological adviser to the government of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) based in Shillong.

Elwin worked tirelessly in coalition with other hill administrator anthropologists such as [Nari Rustomji](https://parsikhabar.net/individuals/remembering-nari-k-rustomji/13408/) (trained in Cambridge) to develop the [*panchsheel*: five point programme for tribal development](https://praveenkalikeri.wordpress.com/2019/10/11/tribal-panchsheel/) in the region. Elwin and Rustomji were known as ‘idealist humanists’. Elwin in particular presented the tribes as autonomous and needing protection from the corrupt influence of the plains. He ensured special status for the tribes of the region. During this period the Anthropological Survey of India also carried out many studies on the tribes of Northeast that were based on biological anthropological work and their studies were limited to developmental issues focusing on kinship structure, dissent, marriage and social norms. The 1950-80 period also saw major turmoil in Assam and most of the hill districts where the Nagas along with other hill tribes were calling for self-determination and autonomy from the union government and plain populations, who were seen as immigrants and outsiders. The tea plantation *Adivasi* workers who came to the region as indentured labourers were also seen as outsiders as they were not the [sons of the soil](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/38966). This process of differentiation and articulation of sons of the soil identity based on colonial categories of ‘caste’ and ‘tribe’ reflected [‘the politics of belonging’](https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=z_Pe0z1ta_8C&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=politics+of+belonging+daniel+rycroft,+UEA&ots=i89Xz_L0m7&sig=s0boJ5LYzhJvnGTeESZuFJ1BD44#v=onepage&q=politics%20of%20belonging%20daniel%20rycroft%2C%20UEA&f=false) in which *adivasis* in the Northeast were seen as a odd category- nowhere people.

These political charged questions were addressed differently by local scholars in the northeast that also reflected their agency and perspective as stakeholders to the entire debate on indignity and tribal right to land. For example, the eminent historian of Assam H.K. Barpujari who was awarded a PhD by the University of London (1949) in his writings declared the Nagas as vessel chiefs to the Ahom kingdoms and maintained a subservient status. While in the literatures of Hamlet Bareh we observe that he vouches for the [Inner Line Permit (IPL)](https://www.epw.in/journal/2018/7/special-articles/colonial-construction-frontier.html) created by the British to protect the interest of the hill tribes from the influence of the tea planters, plains peasantry and non-tribal caste population. It is interesting to note that both academics had very distinct approaches towards establishing their identity and to represent their community: the later representing Khasi tribe of Meghalaya, who gained autonomy from Assam after the creation of a separate state in 1971. Bareh's PhD thesis awarded by Guwahati University (1963) was titled [*The Origin and History of the Khasi People*](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwij6c73-N7qAhXiWhUIHV3aDoQQFjAFegQIAxAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fdspace.nehu.ac.in%2Fbitstream%2F1%2F7798%2F1%2FThe%2520history%2520and%2520culture%2520of%2520the%2520Khasi%2520(H%2520Bareh).pdf&usg=AOvVaw35HskpzV6lrsEwetYpb_2a) where he gave an insider's account of the Khasi matrilineal society, lineage and history. He also became editor of the state gazette where he explored the cultural and social history of hill people. While his predecessor H.K. Barpujari was an Assamese nationalist who wished-for pan Assamese identity. The pan Assamese identity is today challenged strongly by the Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, Moran, Sonowal Kachari, Deori, Mishing and other numerically small tribes of Assam. Similarly, forerunners of Indian anthropology like [D. N Majumdar](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=HmnTDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT520&lpg=PT520&dq=D.N.MAJUMDAR+1968+STUDY+ON+GARO+SOCIETY&source=bl&ots=kGB_smDe7o&sig=ACfU3U3NwDNMgbkUF4nYQMNsay_mKuRRxA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwixtZfFrurqAhWCr3EKHdcoCWoQ6AEwCnoECAsQAQ#v=onepage&q=D.N.MAJUMDAR%201968%20STUDY%20ON%20GARO%20SOCIETY&f=false) who studied the Rondang Rabha and Son Koch of Garo Hills classified his focus of enquiry into social organization, descent and kinship structure, thus avoiding the more sensitive political questions confronting tribal identity. There was a genuine deficit in the study of political anthropology across Northeast as the debate came to settle the ‘tribal’ ‘non-tribal’, and [‘caste-tribe’ continuum](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=z_Pe0z1ta_8C&pg=PA5&dq=caste+tribe+continuum+surajit+sinha&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjMqeiHr-_qAhU3QxUIHbp2Dr8Q6AEwAXoECAUQAg#v=onepage&q=caste%20tribe%20continuum%20surajit%20sinha&f=false) through ‘village’ and ‘community’ based socio-cultural ethnographic research on smaller hill tribes. These studies were inspired by other works in Central India (Surajit Sinha’s fieldwork among the Bhumij) who tried to break away from the colonial tradition of distinguishing ‘tribe’ from ‘caste’ as distinct stand-alone categories. But they did engage in establishing a new narrative of otherness defined by what we know today as Scheduled Tribes enshrined as a ‘development category’ of a secular republic- "domiciled sons of the soil" enshrined in the [Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution and Article 244 and 371 (A)](https://theprint.in/theprint-essential/what-is-6th-schedule-why-it-allows-parts-of-northeast-to-be-exempt-from-citizenship-bill/331404/). In this new nomenclature, the tribal communities of Northeast India distinguished themselves from central Indian groups who were described as *adivasis*. As [Sanjeeb Barua](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjQnIfr3uDqAhVaUBUIHY9_BgYQFjAEegQIAxAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sup.org%2Fbooks%2Ftitle%2F%3Fid%3D29094&usg=AOvVaw0raC47S6_LvvupZFTQTTk-) rightly puts it, in the post-independence period the northeast was imagined within the nationalising paradigm as a development and militarized frontier by state’s draftsmen and anthropologist.

While development became the panacea for progress among state agencies and donors in post independent Northeast India, for the tribal communities ethnic identity, ethno-nationalism and racial difference played a more important role in defining their belongingness and attachment to land.

During the 1990s the sons on the soil debate merged with indigeneity and indigenous rights movement that gained international attention in Latin America with ingenious peoples’ struggle over land, water and forest aggravated by the rapacious transnational capitalist destruction of Amazonian and Ecuadorian culture. According to sociologist Virginius Xaxa, [tribes in northeast India faced two waves of Colonialism-One from the British and one from non-tribal Indian population](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WqcBwbafoWTFZ4ct1e4cFJNenexD3klP/view). The idea of the post-colonial, he argues, does not exist in the tribal world. [Xaxa](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4408077?seq=1) observes that “a tribe is a whole society like any other society, with their own language, territory, culture, customs, and so on. Hence, as societies, tribes must be compared with other societies and not with caste, as has been the case in sociological and anthropological writing.” He proposes a new perspective to the identity and ethnicity struggle in Northeast India by arguing that all tribes should join hands as part of “political solidarity”. This he feels is necessity in order to challenge the common problems of exploitation collectively faced by scheduled tribes and *adivasis* in India. He proposes indigenous solidarity based on these grounds and call for international movement against the state and social elites and thus define them as ‘indigenous’.

Other India anthropologists like [B.K Roy Burman](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4394606?seq=1) and [Andre Beteille](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/204717?journalCode=ca) have argued against painting tribes with the same brush. They prefer to historically situate each tribe as they developed over time negotiating with the colonial and post-colonial state and argue that the distinction between caste and tribe was not so watertight as is presented through census data and other administrative apparatuses of the state. They are critical of the development state that has presented tribal development narrowly as an economic development problem devoid of the socio-cultural realities of tribal societies. [Joy L.K. Pachau](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1472586X.2016.1260350) has indicated through her visual ethnographic work how the agency of the indigenous subject should not be seen as subservient to knowledge-power hegemony exercised by colonial and post-independent anthropological construction of tribal identity. She argues persuasively using everyday portraits of the Mizo tribe how they self-fashioned themselves in ways that reflect their worldview - a perspective from within. This approach explores tribal agency and acknowledges that everybody has their own way of looking at the world around them. The discussion of [*de-coloniality*](https://www.dukeupress.edu/on-decoloniality) in India’s ethnographic literature adds to this new style of anthropological writing.

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