

# North East Indian Diaspora: Formation of Regional and Ethnic Identity

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## Abstract:

Region is one of the most important elements influencing the state, economy from geo-political perspectives. The North-East Indian diaspora has emerged as a distinct community shaped by the region's unique historical, cultural, and political realities. Encompassing diverse ethnic groups from states such as Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, and Sikkim, migration from the region has been driven by educational aspirations, economic opportunities, and socio-political upheavals. In metropolitan Indian cities and global destinations, individuals from the North-East encounter forms of marginalization and racial prejudice, which simultaneously challenge and reinforce their shared sense of identity. This paper investigates how diasporic communities articulate both ethnic roots and an overarching regional identity beyond their homeland. It highlights how cultural practices, languages, festivals, and collective memory serve as tools of belonging, while also adapting to hybrid forms shaped by interaction with host societies. Particular attention is paid to the intersection of ethnicity and region, analyzing how notions of "North-East Indian" identity are reconfigured to respond to stereotypes and to foster solidarity across diverse tribal and linguistic groups. Through this exploration, the study contributes to debates on diaspora, identity politics, and minority assertion in contemporary India.

**Keywords:** *North-East India, Diaspora, Regional identity, Ethnic identity, Migration, Cultural adaptation, Minority representation*

## 1. Introduction

India is the country with "unity in diversity." The land of multiple religions, languages, cultures, festivals, customs and ethnicity. The meaning development and formation of diaspora as a concept is always associated with the migratory flow of population that still hold strong connections with their origin by prolong preservation of their culture. Despite the affirmed understanding that their identity is fashioned by various trajectories of migration of various social groups, the diaspora as a concept referring to this type of mobility of population have always added to the creation of multiple strands of communities physically alienated from their homeland- both voluntarily and involuntarily. At times, they also add to the complexity of human phenomenon particularly in terms of social relations and ideas related to culture, time and space (Gaikwad, 2014). Today, with the highly diverse and complex process identified as the outcome of globalization, the existence of a closer relationship between contemporary diasporic community with their homeland have brought forward the realization of the potential that this. Community has both as an agent of development and peace as well as non-state actors that is found mobilized and activated through their romanticized connection with the homeland social forces. Furthermore, the complexity of such a relationship is increasingly bound up by the fact that for the diasporic community, territory is not important or the territory that is of significant importance for them is the space over which their ethnic group have control upon.

## 2. Background of Study

In the context of their changing character, over the last two to three decades, various debates over issues related to 'diaspora' either as a concept or phenomena have shaken various fields of social sciences to a great deal and due to that today some of the disciplines are arguing for a reconstruction of their methodology particularly in the way research are to be carried out about such massive phenomenal formation of this ever-growing identity. In most of these mounting debates, some of the major concerns that are of significant implication to social sciences are that of the debates on the issues related to the increasing emergence and recognition of this flowing population with constant reference to their new challenging position. From one of traumatic histories when the home nation considers their existence beyond the border as a burden that is best forgotten, today diasporas have transformed themselves as a social identity with manifested ability capable of bargaining in the international relations as well as indicating great deal of potential for investments. In the present scenario they have also transformed to accommodate various groups of migrants and ethnic communities with acknowledged or forgotten typology of histories enabling for the emergence of "new diaspora. In the meanwhile, various groups that once defined themselves as "ethnic minorities" are now increasingly entering into the domain of transnational or global network of Diasporas.

### 3. Rationale of Study

In the Indian case, such a phenomenal transformation from that of the classical cases of indentured coolitude (Marina Carter & Khal Torabully, 2002) or labour diaspora (Robin Cohen, 1997) to the present day skilled and professional diaspora have led to the increasing emphasis in public discourse- over their indisputable potential not only at home but in the global economy as well. However, this ever-increasing population of diasporic community also brings forth the question relating to their projected trans-ethnic identity because despite the constant call for identifying themselves as only 'Indian Diaspora'<sup>1</sup> with multiple direction of migration, today this community seems rather more inclined in asserting their grassroots social relations. Although the Indian state building project insist all through its political history on a unified Indian identity, yet even in the course of the changing trajectory of political development, India is still being described as a 'nation and its fragments' or an 'invented nation' (Gijbert Oonk, 2007), where the idea of the unity is still a construction which is at best referred to as 'unity in variety' or 'unity in diversity'. In the same way, Indians diaspora does not so much identify with India as a nation but with a 'homland', that is the specific region where migrants or their descendants come from. They often refer to themselves as Bengali diaspora, Gujarati diaspora, Telugu diaspora, Assamese diaspora, Meitei diaspora, Naga diaspora etc. In this context their complicated ethnic, racial, socio- political and Cultural relations that constitute this indubitable 'transnational cultural agents' at times provide new dimension to the way perception over politics is being asserted at home. At times the paradigm of developmental state especially in the age of liberalization is also seen as against the original aspiration of the local populace. Often the sentimental imagination of a homeland as reflected by the diasporic community is associated with memories, myth and vision of the past which further lead to complexity of cultural productions because of the type of consciousness developed over the compression of time and space (D. Harvey, 1989).

The entry of minority ethnic groups from the North-Eastern region that often affirm their own distinct ethnicity and racial identity as different from those of the rest of India especially in the post-colonial Indian political system augment the argument for the arrival of complex ethnic, racial and cultural Indian diaspora. In fact, the arrival of these historically and politically isolated minorities to which the ministry of Indian Overseas today see as potential role models, give rise to new kind of mobilization and identity politics emerging which also encompasses issues of structures of social relations and institutional embeddedness. This is accompanied by the phenomenal change in the understanding of ethnic migration and settlements. The vogue assertion to local grassroots identities and histories inevitably bound up in diverse fragments of culture and place exhibited by these diasporic communities from the region also intensify the conflict of imagination between the old and new connections particularly in the aspects of cultural connotation, nationalism, development and economic potential. The dominant narrative of 'Indianness' aspired as part of the nation building process among the de-territorialized population have often not found enthusiastic acceptance among any diasporic community originating from the northeast region. On the other hand, over the years with the increase of their population in the places of settlements it is seen that these people often organized themselves away from home on the basis of their local homeland<sup>2</sup>. Back home too they maintain their connection with the country primarily by engaging not so much with national problems but with local aspirations.

### 4. Objectives of Study

- To analyze the socio-cultural and political factors driving migration from North-East India and their role in shaping diasporic experiences across national and transnational contexts
- To examine the processes through which diasporic communities from North-East India negotiate, reconstruct, and sustain ethnic and regional identities

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<sup>1</sup>The High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora Report, particularly those issues relating to the Post Colonial Diaspora overall reflect only the direction of the flow of Indian population without much reference to their places of origin.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the examples of such are the emergence of groups like Assam Society of America (ASA), an organization of the Assamese people that help in facilitating between the state government from home with the investors across the globe and also organizes cultural events not only in America but also in other parts of the world; the formation of Friends of Assam and Seven Sisters (FASS), an organization mostly supported by the Northeast RRIs and which had also organized the North East India International Meet in Guwahati in January, 2010 to facilitate philanthropic activities and investment opportunities; the increasing popularity of the Khasi Professional and Academic International Network (KYPIAN), an international network that encourages Meghalaya diaspora to invest at home by particularly stressing on environmental friendly development and many more such organization that reflect the aspiration of the diaspora from the region to use their own local culture as they try to assimilate in new societies.

- To explore how collective practices such as memory, language, festivals, and community networks contribute to the articulation of a shared “North-East Indian” identity

#### **5. Narratives of ethnicity and regionalism among North East Indian Diaspora**

Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*, published in 1991, suggests that Nations are not only the political entities but also 'imagined communities'. Sixty-three years after independence, how have the North Easterners imagined themselves within and without the Indian state? One way of answering this question is by looking at the way people from the region have reproduce their arts and culture away from home as much as they assert and reassert their cultural, social and political difference at home. During the whole exercise of identifying themselves as citizens of the largest democracy in the world, North easterners have often been guided by some 'imagine subjects' which often remain to be at play. These subjects include those related to the beginning and end of their boundaries in juxtaposition with their emotional domain over what they constantly argue as distinctness of their identity, origin and culture thereon. This is particularly so poignant with the people from the region as they form a group of that society which not much penetrated and as such being culturally and historically so isolated from the main stream Indian culture until the arrival of the British colonizers is one such argument in place. The other being that despite having adopted Indian citizenship, the distance, in diasporic imagination has further enhanced their local identity due to various processes of identity formation while being abroad. Furthermore, the processes of imagining home development have often been narrowed down to local philanthropic economic activities which are often the case which is resonant in all the cases of South Asian diasporic communities. So, the issues of 'belongingness and national identity often entrapped this community as they develop their own culture while experiencing their diasporic identity while being away from home.

The diasporic settlements in the host nations do not totally separate them from their roots, but instead like the general trend of most diasporas, the North East Indian diaspora belonging to this region often emphasize on the strong links that not only remain but gradually become deeply attached to them. As is common to most transnational communities, the extended family-as network and site of memory- is the critical conduit between two locations. For example, most of the Nagas, both of the present Nagaland and from the hill trace of Manipur, often insist that they have kept alive in exile their idea of what a home is for them and they argue that they maintain a Naga cultural identity of having a unique culture that cannot be minimized within the Indian cultural framework and which is also different from that of the other North Easterners, either because historically they have not been colonized, or because their philosophy of struggles have been contextualized in such a manner narrowing down to the idea of the commune. Another example is that of the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos of Meghalaya, who remain affirmed to the imagination of their home as a commune where female members are often regarded highly in their matrilineal family system. Therefore, any distortions of the conventional idea of the cultural tradition make them somewhat lost in the realm of how they should associate their identity as distinct from the general idea of Indian family system.

These types of examples can go on but the point is that since the region have been almost accepted as the valley of heterogeneous struggles to contain cultural contamination it indicates that, among the so-called ethnic minorities away from home, against the general perception-that they would be found difficult to adjust among themselves at home- they are often held together as one diasporic group. Particularly, in times of crisis the common idea that they are part of a region that follow a certain liberal trait of social realities and in spite

of constant strife that may be exhibited at home the sense of isolation among the larger framework of Indian diaspora which is primarily due to the lack of contacts otherwise complicated by the social system like caste, they gradually adopt what might be called as associational identification with the cultures of origin remaining strong. Even in the second or third generation, this kind of empathy does exist and as such the places of origin sometimes no longer remain the only source of identification. Therefore, the umbilical ties may be extended in boundary but always remain strong especially when the imagination of returning or investment in developmental projects become part of the diasporic connection with their homeland.

Identity formation among the diasporic communities always becomes multiple alongside an associational connection with a particular idea of 'home' there are other centripetal forces. For instance, for some young professionals their identities as north easterners are made aware to them only after they have migrated from their homeland. Such formation of identity as against their own ethnic profile are not often easy especially when the homeland of their imagination often turns out to be hostile because their diasporic imagination is often contrasted with real experiences which could be due to fast changes that globalization has brought about making it turn beyond all recognition (Gaikwad, 2016). On the other hand, they are seen as having had the natural and spontaneous chains of connection disturbed by their diasporic experiences. Therefore, as pointed

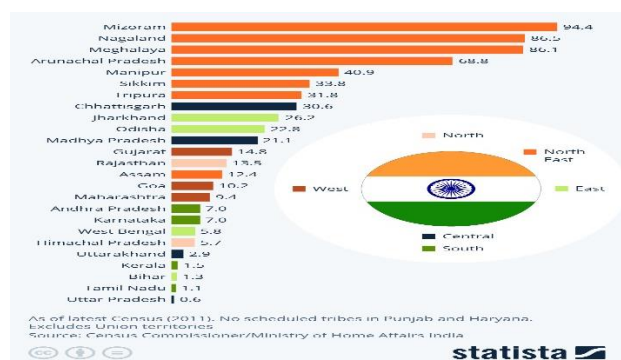
out, they find it easier to call upon their regional location when the needs arise. Under such a situation the idea of connecting home could mean resorting to regional development due to the fact that history somehow irrevocably intervened.

Coming back to the issues of ethnicity and how this is being reproduced in the receiving societies, it should be noted that the mobility of population from the region is closely associated with the structure of social relations and institutional embeddedness. Therefore, the general trend of assertion, due to reasons associated emotional attachment or due to some bitter experiences in the past, one finds that the trend of assertion to their grass root connections originates in the diverse fragments of culture and place (Gandhi, 2002) resulting in the people often resorting more to ethnic groups rather than a common identity that could have brought them more recognition (Horowitz, 1985). In such a situation, ethnicity, along the line of their homeland often become the organizational resources and ideological differences and to which history has taught us that such activism has not always indicated positive outcome for the region especially in the age of cultural liberalization. There have been instances where due to such assertion and the support of such ethnic-centric political mobilization by the population away from home there have been breakdown of exchange of cultural understanding, lack of interaction and exchange of mutual respect as well as intolerance of cultural differences. What makes such and identification more volatile and intractable is their heterogeneity or diversity. The structure of social relations and institutional embeddedness not often ending only within the parameters of common good of the society but in the heterogeneous society of north east India, what is seen is the invocation of even internal factors. For instance, the organizational resources and ideological differences set forth by the continuous prevailing colonial advancement in the promotion of identity formation of the people often influenced the mobility of the people. When cultural reproduction is in such a way as to reflect the predominant influence of the western religion, sometime internal conflict between modernization and tradition is reflected in the diasporic community. For those who attach nostalgia with the loss of tradition, they may produce the imagination of home as against those who appreciate the benefit they gain through modernization. The first group therefore, see cultural alienation as the result of increasing professionalism. The later would see the increasing urbanization and upsurge of middle class as a way in which society would progress. In such a context therefore, they form a conflicting force within each community whereby ethnic identity is multiplied and as such complicating the already complex notion of social relations.

## 6. Discussion

The North-East Indian diaspora reflects a dynamic negotiation of identity that emerges at the intersection of ethnicity, region, and wider socio-political realities. Migration driven by education, employment, and political unrest places individuals in urban Indian centers and transnational spaces where they encounter both opportunities for upward mobility and experiences of marginalization. These encounters often sharpen a sense of shared belonging among diverse ethnic groups from the region, leading to the re-imagination of a collective “North-East Indian” identity that transcends tribal and linguistic divisions. At the same time, individuals seek to preserve distinct ethnic traditions through language use, festivals, food practices, and digital networks, indicating that regional solidarity and ethnic specificity coexist rather than collapse into one another. Diasporic consciousness is further shaped by stereotypes and racialization, pushing migrants to assert identity more visibly as a form of resistance. Community associations and student organizations play an important role in this process by creating safe spaces of cultural continuity. Overall, the diaspora becomes both a site of cultural preservation and transformation, revealing how identities are fluid, negotiated, and strategically mobilized in new environments.

Figure 1: Tribal Identity in North-East India



(Source: Census 2011- Govt. of India; Statista)

The above figure represents a comparative overview of the percentage of Scheduled Tribe (ST) population across various Indian states based on the 2011 Census, highlighting significant regional variations. Northeastern states dominate the list, with Mizoram (94.4%), Nagaland (86.5%), and Meghalaya (86.1%) showing the highest tribal populations, followed by Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. In contrast, several states from the North, Central, West, and South regions reflect substantially lower ST proportions—states like Uttar Pradesh (0.6%), Tamil Nadu (1.1%), Bihar (1.3%), and Kerala (1.5%) report minimal tribal representation. The visualization categorizes states by region (North, North East, East, West, Central, and South) and underscores the concentration of tribal communities primarily in the North-East and parts of Central and Eastern India, while Western and Southern states show significantly lower percentages.

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, revoking the arguments made by Guruharpal Singh that "Arguably the Indian Diaspora today has become the premier subject of theoretical reflection in ways that not only mirror the 'otherness' apparent in traditional approaches to the study of migrant communities, but also provide the most innovative new departures for theoretical insights in the humanities and the social sciences" (Parekh, Singh & Vertovec, 2003). This argument holds water when there is an acknowledged understanding for the need of innovative departure that could invoke the variables available in our diversities. a certain amount of truth not only in the case of the Indian diaspora but also for the rest of the South Asian diaspora because of their social formation, historical consciousness and cultural production. However, as pointed, innovative departures require the variables available in our diversities. India is diverse and so too its migrants and because of this small and newly formed diasporic community finds it hard to reproduce their identity and culture and so they have to adjust to local circumstances. Under such conflicting levelling without their grassroots identity at the host countries, Migrants have found it rather more comforting to emotionally engage themselves to their region whenever they participate in any development contributions and this is one of the reasons that most of the young and rather small diasporic communities directly participate in bringing development in various social sectors to their home locality than to rather invest in other profit-making sectors. However, along with that kind of assertion to regional identity. This community still find a great deal of strength and inspiration from their own local cultures and as such they adjust in the receiving society accordingly as much as they adjust with their idea of homeland between region and local ethnic identity. In this respect, when Steven Vertovec proposes three meanings diaspora particularly referring to South Asians he associates the meaning with social form, type of consciousness and as a mode of cultural production.

The Indian diaspora is also referred to with their experiences of discrimination and exclusion, their cultural diversity. Various scholars argue that there is some root that bridge between the local and the global. However, the local that is often referred to in most cases in the imagined or desired 'Indianness' which is missing from the imagination of most of the diasporic community as they find it more comfortable to associate with their region than India as an idea of a nation. This indicate the multiple consciousness which is often becoming even more complicated when mixed with the triangular relationship between homeland, host country and diasporic imagination along with complex multiplicity of original space. Under such context, when being argued that diaspora carry along with them cultural affinities, the argument should often relate to that imagination of "Indianness" which misses the gap of the local diversity and in this context the argument that Indians carry with them or reproduce their cultures often seem to mean Indian sentiments but with local connotation.

## **Notes:**

For instance, the High-Level Committee on Indian Diaspora Report, particularly those issues relating to the Post Colonial Diaspora overall reflect only the direction of the flow of Indian population without much reference to their places of origin. Some of the examples of such are the emergence of groups like Assam Society of America (ASA), an organization of the Assamese people that help in facilitating between the state government from home with the investors across the globe and also organizes cultural events not only in America but also in other parts of the World; the formation of Friends of Assam and Seven Sisters (FASS), an organization mostly supported by the Northeastern NRIs and which had also organized the North East India International Meet in Guwahati in January 2010 to facilitate philanthropic activities and investment opportunities; the increasing popularity of the Khasi Young Professional and Academic International Network (KYPAIN), an international network that encourages the Meghalayan diaspora to invest at home by particularly stressing on environmental friendly development and many more such organization that reflect the aspiration of the diaspora from the region to use their own local culture as they try to assimilate in new societies.

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