

Discrimination against the Marginalized Hill Tribes of North-East India: An Everlasting Legacy

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Abstract. Society changes rapidly due to both external and internal factors. This change is necessary to cope-up with its demand. The change reshapes and remoulds society and tags a new feather on the crown of society. The culture and society of the hill tribes of Northeast India are no exception. A process of re-orientation and adjustment of the overall socio-cultural setup has been brought about by the incursion of numerous external influences into the life and culture of the Northeast Indian hill tribes. The Northeastern region is one of the most diverse regions of India so are its people. It is a utopia for more than 220 tribes. The tribes are differentiated on the basis of color, caste, creed, etc. The hill tribes namely Poumai, Kuki, Khasi, Garo, Koch, Lushais, Hmar, Mara, Pawi, Lothas, Angami, etc. are marginalized. In the offices of the then-British-ruled administration, the disadvantaged tribes are given the lowest position. Christianity brings the beacon of light to the region. It can be expected that with the Christianization of the land, the distinctions and discrimination would have vanished. But that is not the case. Within the Northeast region emerges two opposite classes. One section enjoys the privileges and the weaker section remains deprived and marginalized. The present article aims to highlight this distinction which is visible even in the 21st century.

Keywords : North-east India; marginalized tribes; tribal culture; society.

Society has been changing rapidly due to both external and internal factors from time immemorial. Arnold Toynbee regards such changes as results from the encounters of various cultures through the process of 'challenge and response' (Kearney, 33). The Northeast Indian society and culture is no exception to this rule as here people from different cultural background comes as well as mix and mingle with the native tribes. In multicultural societies, all over the world, some people are discriminated against for a variety of reasons such as physical features, colour, language, religion, caste, etc. Apart from these, each society has individuals who are both economically and educationally backward and

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retain a low position in the hierarchy. The inhabitants of Northeast India comprise of many marginalized communities such as Adi, Monpa, Sherdukpen, Meitei, Tangkhul, Poumai, Kuki, Khasi, Garo, Koch, Lushais, Hmar, Mara, Pawi, Lothas, Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, etc. These marginalized tribes retained lower posts in British administration only because they are tribes. Marginalization is a basically collection of actions that pushes people or groups to the margins of the political arena, social discussions, and economic transactions (Jahan). A set of identification markers are applied to a group to tag the status of the marginalized community. These identification markers include language, race, culture, belief systems, homelessness, profession, caste, skill, etc. Northeast India is the home to more than 220 tribes that includes Adi, Monpa, Sherdukpen, Meitei, Tangkhul, Poumai, Kuki, Khasi, Garo, Koch, Lushais, Hmar, Mara, Pawi, Lothas, Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, etc. Among the 220 tribes, the hill tribes face the difficulties and challenges most. Society identifies people in relation to their profession. It creates a binary that divides people. Sometimes society isolates some groups based on their occupations and successfully propagates the notion among members of that group that they were born to perform a particular lower-class occupation. As a result, those people are unable to socialize with people of higher social status and cannot rebuild their own self-esteem. Tamsula Ao in her *These Hill Called Home* and Easterine Kire in *The Naga Village Remembered* provide a glimpse of this society. Ao's novel shows how the Nagas were treated by the British. A pen picture of the Naga village is drawn by Kire that illuminates the unique Naga culture, religious faith, language, and profession, etc. For the preservation of such tribes and the improvement of their socioeconomic and socio-political conditions, a great deal of research, discussion, and debate is necessary. Although several research institutes in India and overseas have previously taken the initiative to examine the area, the majority of the research has focused on problems of violence, insurgency, and migration, leaving these delicate subjects to the sideline.

Northeast Indian Society: A Profile

Northeast India refers to a geographical area of British imperial construction. Before the 19th century, it never existed as a frontier to any political state system, whether in South Asia, East Asia, or Southeast Asia. Historically before the arrival of the British, India's Northeast region was inhabited by a group of Mongoloid communities who had migrated from east and south-east Asia. The term Northeast India carries much worth as it refers to seven sibling states of India. The phrase 'the land of

seven sisters' was first used in a radio interview by Tripura-based journalist Jyoti Prasad Saikira in January 1972, just after the new States' inauguration (Barpujari 1). The frontier is connected with the rest of India by just a 20-kilometer land corridor. Because of the physical aloofness and the center's stepmotherly attitude towards it, Northeast was isolated from the rest of India for a very long period, developing its own unique culture, history, and social order. Northeast India at the time of independence consisted of three states. Manipur and Tripura princely state, while the majority of the area known as Assam Province was governed by the British. "Accordingly, Nagaland became a separate state in 1963, followed by Meghalaya in 1972. Mizoram became a Union Territory in 1972, and achieved statehood - along with Arunachal Pradesh in 1987" (Barpujari, 2). Recently Sikkim comes into existence in 2000. Northeast India shares 96 percent international border and India's stake is only 4 percent (*Expansion of North East India's Trade and Investment with Bangladesh and Myanmar*). Due to this, it gradually turned into a cultural cauldron. People arrived, mixed, and mingled with the tribes from both inside and outside the boundaries of mainland India. The region developed into a multi-racial land with more than 220 tribes, the majority of which adhere to Christianity. Hinduism is not widely practiced. It symbolizes the mingling of the opposing worldviews of Hinduism and Christianity. The atmosphere of the region gradually changed with the pace of its exposition to the outer world. But what has remained the same is the socio-economic condition of the land's inhabitants. Although initiatives were taken to reshape and stabilize the economy to change the life of the people. Barpujari wrote that the Mahalanabish Model and its implementation mechanism, license-permit system, and the central government's direct interference in the developmental projects effectively promote growth (2). But because of the lack of proper execution of the plan, the condition of the land remains in a sorry state. The educated youths of the land failed to bag white-collar jobs at the government offices as jobs were not easily available. Even after gaining their freedom, the hill tribes lack access to quality education. The Northeast Indian hill tribes' emerging realization of the need for education is a relatively new phenomenon. The principle of equality and camaraderie still exists as an ideal. Tribal occupations have separated society into several groups.

Marginalized Communities of Northeast India

The social hierarchy places these tribes at the bottom of the list. They have been a disenfranchised group from ancient times and have their own socioeconomic structure. These tribes are mostly linked to

occupations like hunting, pottery manufacturing, knitting, etc. They labour for the luxurious lifestyle of the privileged yet receive little in return. They are not allowed to marry the highborns of the society. They are treated in a manner comparable to that of Shudras and Chandalas in Brahman-dominated societies. Following is a succinct overview of a few disadvantaged groups:

– **Angami:** Angamis are the fourth largest tribal group in Northeast India. They are discriminated against because of their traditional dress code, long hair as well as for their physical structure and gesture. The Angamis recognize themselves as Tenyimia which means the swift walker. They have their own language. They are divided into four clans and each clan is further divided into subclans. They have their own language. Their religion is actively monitored by the village priest. The Christians and British regarded them as pagans of India. Lower jobs in British administration were given to them.

– **Ao :** The Ao is an important Naga tribe. There exist rich mythical stories regarding the origin of the Aos. About the Ao's origin, Julian Jacob wrote, "they possess a large number of traits that connect with the Austronesians of Oceania, including a throwing game not found amongst other Naga tribes but reported in Fiji (13)." Traditionally, the village chief was in charge of protecting the customary rules and practices of the community, preserving communal peace, and defending the community against outsiders. The presence of distinctive norms and taboos in the society differentiates Ao from the other tribes. As per their own religious belief Kire writes "before community worship began, all visitors and guests were requested to leave the village, and new guests were not allowed entry on that day. It was taboo for villages to go anywhere or do any work so that their god could bless them" (Kire, 76).

– **Chakhesang:** According to the Naga scholar, V. Nienu the Chakhesang tribe possesses rich culture and tradition that includes legends, music, dance, customs, etc. Honesty, morality, and social harmony define the distinctiveness of these people and their culture (Kire, 80). They are originally a group that includes Chokri, Kuzhami, and Sangtam. Chokri and Khezha are still members of the original whereas Sangtam has split off into its own tribal group.

– **Kuki:** The Kuki is one of the oldest tribes of Manipur, Tripura, Assam and Mizoram. They have migrated from China during the construction of the Great wall of China. The chief, who is also the community's founder,

is in charge of running the Kuki village; the chieftainship is transmitted hereditarily. Prior to their conversion to Christianity, they engage in the rite of headhunting. Although men and women are treated equally in the Kuki tribe, there are specific arenas that are exclusive for men. They believe in animism and practice animal sacrifice to appease the spirits.

– **Rengma:** Rengma is one of the Naga tribes. They migrated to these hills in the early 1880s. They show faith in the animist religion and also worship spirits. Both men and women used to wear ornaments. They are discriminated on the basis of their skin colour, animist religion, language, and peculiar festivals (Expert).

– **Khasi:** The Khasi people make up the biggest ethnic group in Eastern Meghalaya, parts of Bangladesh, and parts of Assam. They have a distinctive lifestyle, and their social mores diverge from most of the tribes. Nearly all the Khasi people followed an indigenous tribal religion before the intrusion of Christian missionaries. It is pretty uncommon to come across a society that is centered around women and matriarchy at a time where patriarchal culture rules the world. The Khasi tribe has developed a matrilineal tradition that places women in a key role in matters like inheriting riches and adopting family names after marriage.

Most of the tribal groups struggled for their survival. They are simple, ignorant, and also illiterate. But they are aware of medicinal plants. The Aghami and Ao Nagas were classified by the British as criminal tribes because they frequently engaged in conflict with neighboring tribal settlements to demonstrate their superiority. They even declared war on the British administration. They seldom participated in intra caste marriage and lived in jungles, shifting locations for agricultural and safety reasons. The rest of the society treats them differently because of their inconsistent behavior and terrible living conditions.

Marginalization in the 21st Century

The idea that India, the world's largest democracy is a society without race is a myth. Racism and discrimination exist in every corner of the world, so also in India. The unleashing of power and privilege by dominant racial groups leaves the less powerful with shattered lives and this trend is gradually increasing. In the past, racism and prejudice in India were largely justified by the caste system and colonial preconceptions based on race to support the conquest and erect administrative structures and education (Sitlhou and Punathil, 95).

Regardless of whether acquired through birth or naturalization, citizen status provides no safeguard when the powerful decides to drive out the weaker members of society. The residents of Northeast India are those who live in remote areas. From the beginning of the colonial era, the inhabitants of this outlying area were seen as untamed and ferocious, and it was commonly thought that they committed horrific and violent crimes. People from Northeast India who have migrated to major cities in the 21st century in search of better education, employment opportunities, and quality of life are now the victims of racism and discrimination. Folks who relocate from India's Northeastern periphery to the major cities enter into a social and cultural context that is completely different from that of their mountainous region. Naturally, people struggle "to adapt to the irreversibly changed circumstances, which makes them unsettled and frequently subject to complications. The post-independence insurgencies in the area led to North-East Indians being stereotyped as uncivilized and unruly. The continued political struggle for indigenous self-determination challenges the supremacy of the Indian state and has also painted the region and its people as undesirable" (Karlsson and Kikon, 450). Media contributes a lot in increasing the social alienation of the Northeast Indian people as it possesses the power to control the narrative about the region and its people. The bloodshed, insurgencies, and political unrest are frequently highlighted by Indian newspapers and television, while the region's good features are hardly covered. Due to erroneous perceptions held by mainstream Indians about the Northeast Indian people, the confrontation grew as a result of differences in culture. It led to prejudice in the form of passing sexual remarks, taunting, molestation, and being mistaken as foreign tourists visiting India at tourist attractions, museums, etc. Even though the person genuinely hails from the Indian nation, "pejorative names like "Momo" and "Chinky" are frequently used in public and other names like "Chinese" are frequently used in an attempt to identify the Northeast Indian inhabitants as foreigners". (Sithou and Punathil, 95). People from Northeast India regularly receive death threats because of the similarities between their visual appearance and those of the Chinese people. Sanjoy Hazarika, a renowned scholar of North-East India in his book *Strangers No More* mentions the injustice that the North-East Indian people have to tolerate even in the 21st century. In the section of his book *Strangers No More: The New Indians* he shows how a Northeast Indian boy Nido was beaten by a mob in Delhi, in 2013. Hazarika writes:

Eighteen-year-old NidoTanium walked into Rajasthan Paneer Bhandar to ask for directions. The shopkeeper made fun of his hair, which was streaked blonde. Furious at the insult, Taniam smashed a glass counter in the store. Such insults were not new for those from the Northeast who, despite Supreme Court edicts, government diktats, and assertions by human rights groups were still often treated as second-class citizens, snubbed as 'Chinkies' because of their facial structure and regarded as promiscuous because they mingled easily with each other. (Hazarika, 333)

Role of the Christian Missionaries to reform Northeast India

In Northeast India, especially among the tribal groups, Christian missionaries have been crucial in combating and eliminating discrimination. Due to their distinctive cultural practices, dialects, and beliefs, many tribes in Northeast India have historically experienced discrimination and marginalization. By encouraging social justice, access to education, and healthcare in many communities, Christian missionaries have sought to alleviate these problems. By giving tribal children access to education, Christian missionaries have contributed to the eradication of discrimination. Northeast India's indigenous populations frequently have limited access to formal education, which can exacerbate cycles of discrimination and poverty. The possibility to fly to assist to escape the cycle of poverty and become leaders in their communities has been demonstrated through the establishment of schools and educational programme by Christian missionaries in these communities. Christian missionaries have also tried to improve Northeast India's access to healthcare and address health inequities. Christian missionaries have contributed to the reduction of health disparities that fuel prejudice and marginalization by offering medical care and advocating healthy lifestyle choices.

Overall, through advocating for social equality, offering educational opportunities, and enhancing access to healthcare, Christian missionaries have been instrumental in combating discrimination in northeast India. Even though there is still much to be done to completely eradicate these, Christian missionaries' endeavors have significantly advanced this cause.

The Christianity in Northeast India became the beacon of Renaissance. It gradually become the integral part of change for the region. The Treaty of Yando that was signed between East India Company and Burma in 1824 resulted in the inclusion of this region to the mainland of India. The Northeast Indian region was assisted by the missionaries in learning to walk and stand on their own feet. They set up churches, first at Nongsawlia, Meghalya in 1846. They gradually brought the people under the roof of Christianity. The incorporated within minds of the tribes the necessity of sound health and good education. The influence of Christian missionaries and Churches not only affected the translated manuscripts of the tribes' everyday life style but also the omniscious presence of them is very clearly visible in the writings of the first-generation English writer of the region. Tilottoma Misra observes that Christian missionaries "took the lead in ushering in a print culture by establishing orienting presses and bringing out textbooks, books on grammar, and Christian literature and journals in the local languages" (Introduction xiv). The missionaries to some extent affected the social and cultural life of the tribes of Northeast India. Researchers who do not believe in Christianity have long assumed that Christianity destroyed Northeast Indian tribal cultures. Missionaries contributed almost nothing to the process. J.H Lorrian represented this view and wrote:

It seems a great pity that those most interesting links with the past should be lost, as we hold that the Christians should be the Lushais of the Lushais (now Mizo), we are trying to get them to be foremost in reviving these innocent and picturesque customs. We are anxious that the heathen should know that, in seeking to Christianise them, we are not doing so with the intention of denationalizing them. (Lorrian, 164)

Lorrian again wrote, "the worship of the almighty God must be a natural and spontaneous outcome from the heart and soul" (165). Mostly speaking, the missionaries did not disrupt regional traditions. The tribes were treated honourably and with respect. Most of the time, it was said that Jesus Christ was greater than all spirits. They were motivated by Christian teachings that emphasised equality, and brotherhood. Christianity was essential in eradicating the differences between the tribes with regard to things like language, religion, economic standing, and

colour of the skin. The missionaries concentrated on addressing societal inequities related to religion and social justice through broad preaching.

Role of the Government

The discrimination against Northeast Indians gradually had reached its apex and it became difficult for the Northeast Indian people to find accommodation in metro cities like Delhi, Pune, and Bangalore. The murder of Nido in 2014 added fuel to the fire. Various organizations that include Control Arms Foundation of India (CAFI), Manipur Women Gun Survivor Network, Northeast India Women Initiative for Peace (NEIWIP) and other student leaders as well as political leaders compelled the Government of India to look into the matter deeply and take necessary steps to resolve the issues. Government of India has set up a committee in February 2014 that was headed by M.P Bezbaruah to address the problems and find a suitable resolution so that they can breathe smoothly and freely with in the Indian nation. The M.P Bezbaruah Committee recommends the following actions to eradicate discrimination :

1. Insertion of new sections into 153C and 509A in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) to strengthen the legal framework against racial discrimination.
2. Setting up of a special helpline no. 1093 for people from North East India.
3. Setting up a panel of seven lawyers, of whom five are to be women, to provide legal assistance to people from North East India.
4. In order to educate the people about North East India, universities have been advised that the history of the region and their participation in the freedom movement of the country should be taught at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and for this purpose the curriculum be changed. It is expected that the topic will be taught by specialized teachers who have qualifications and knowledge of northeast history and culture. An advisory board will also be set up to advise on the curriculum and required qualifications of teachers.
5. Appointment of a nodal police officer and a police station for North East Indians to register complaints immediately.

6. A relief fund for helping victims of hate crimes, given under the Delhi Victim compensation Scheme 2011. (Pulla et al. 26)

Conclusion

The superiority complex is heavily infused by colonialism and progressively accepted as normal. By preaching and creating churches and educational institutions, it is evident from the explanation above that Christian missionaries had taken steps to eradicate this from the area. Change is the fundamental actuality that everyone should embrace, and it is challenging to strictly adhere to the prior values, ideas, and culture. For this reason, it is critical to treat the culture, language, worldview, and other defining characteristics of the voiceless and the socially marginalized with the same respect and seriousness as those of the voiced and socially recognized. The mission of the Indian nation-states should be to unify all its residents under the notion that they are all the sons and daughters of India.

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