

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

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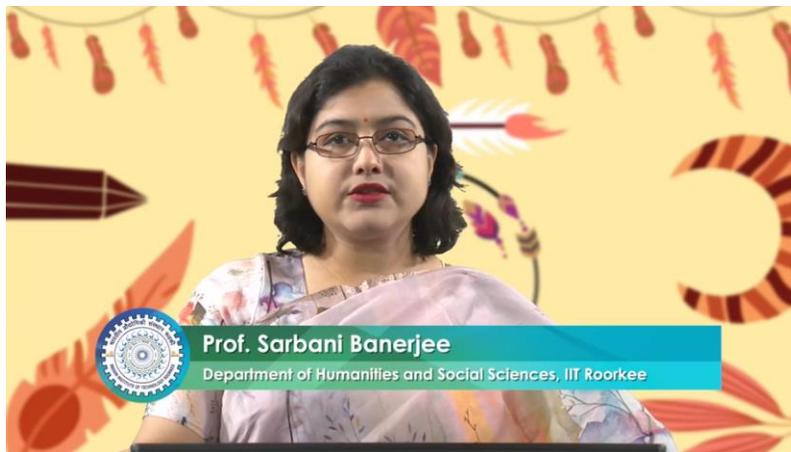
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Lecture19

Lecture 19: Tribal Uprisings during Colonial Rule in the Northeastern Region

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Tribal Studies, Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Approaches. So today we are going to look at the tribal uprisings during colonial rule in the northeastern region of India. According to scholar and critic K. Singh, tribal movements in the northeast are distinct from those in the rest of India, forming their own category owing to the region's unique geopolitical location and history.



Many border tribes historically served as bridges or buffers, sharing ethnic and cultural ties with groups across international lines. Events beyond these frontiers have significantly shaped the Northeast's So here we have to understand the dynamics of borderland culture, where the borderland people are not exactly familiar with or aligned with the mainland politics or culture of their respective nation—the nation within whose borders they belong. They have a shared culture in terms of linguistic affiliation, social

practices, and habits, and so they are somewhere left in the midway of two abutting, adjacent nations, and they draw from both.

Introduction

- According to K. S. Singh (1983), tribal movements in the Northeast are distinct from those in the rest of India, forming their own category due to the region's unique geopolitical location and history.
- Many border tribes historically served as bridges or buffers, sharing ethnic and cultural ties with groups across international lines. Events beyond these frontiers have significantly shaped the Northeast's situation.
- Furthermore, the region remained somewhat separate from the colonial politico-economic system, maintaining relative isolation from mainland cultural trends and the major events of the independence movement.



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That makes this dynamic quite interesting. And we see that there is this shifting, a culture that is in a state of flux. And for economic opportunities, or other incentives, the borderland people keep traversing, keep moving between their own nation—the nation they belong to—and the abutting or adjacent nation, right? Many border tribes have served as bridges.

Therefore, they have acted as buffers. What is more, we see that the region remained historically somewhat separate from the colonial politico-economic system or the larger events that were happening in the nation did not directly affect the northeastern part of India. So, the northeast maintained relative isolation from mainland cultural trends and the major events of the independence movement. Here, it is noteworthy that the non-regulation administration, which is a system developed based

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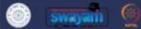
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on experiences with the 1820s tribal revolts in the still-troubled Arakan Hills, was applied across India. However, the non-regulation administration's implementation ironically led to the increased isolation of the northeast region. By non-regulation system or administration, we refer to a kind of system that was characterized basically by limited British intervention and reliance on local chiefs in the northeastern states of India. And this, however, proved to be a less effective and more exploitative model compared to the regulation system. So, when non-regulation was implemented, when British intervention in these areas became minimal and the chiefs were mainly ruling or

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- Notably, the non-regulation administration, a system developed based on experiences with the 1820s tribal revolts in the still-troubled Arakan hills, was applied across India. However, its implementation ironically led to the increased isolation of the Northeast region.
- The non-regulation system, characterized by limited British intervention and reliance on local chiefs, proved to be a less effective and more exploitative model compared to the regulation system. The revolts in the Arakan hills, fueled by resentment towards British policies and exploitation by non-tribal elements, led to the implementation of this less interventionist system.



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administering those areas, those domains, it did not necessarily become a more effective setup. It went on to become exploitative compared to the regulation system where British intervention administration had its direct control. The revolts in the Arakan Hills, fueled by resentment towards British policies and exploitation by non-tribal elements, had led to the implementation of this less interventionist system, which in the future did not turn out to be very beneficial or successful. The geopolitical context and the region's relative detachment from mainland Indian politics and culture have shaped the dominant movements in the Northeast, which are political in nature, pursuing goals from self-governance to complete independence and utilizing strategies ranging from peaceful protest to armed conflict.

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Critic and scholar S. N. Dubey highlights that the people from Manipur, the North Kachar Hills in Assam, and Nagaland launched a potent anti-British movement in the year 1931. What made this movement stand out was its fierce anti-colonial stance, coupled with its ability—despite its focus on ethnic identity—to draw attention from Indian nationalists, particularly from a leader like Jawaharlal Nehru. The 1935 Constitutional Reform Act, alongside the spread of modern education and the gradual rise of a small, educated middle class among hill and plain tribes, played a significant role in forging a stronger sense of shared tribal identity and alliance.

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- The **1935 Constitutional Reform Act**, alongside the spread of modern education and the gradual rise of a small, educated middle class among hill and plain tribes, **played significant roles in forging a stronger sense of shared tribal identity and alliance.**



From the mid-1930s onwards, the representation of tribal communities in the Provincial Legislative Assembly, particularly concerning the 1935 Act, became a central issue. Prominent hill and plain tribes such as the Nagas, Khasis, Bodos, Miris, Kacharis, and Deoris used platforms such as the Naga Club, the Sain Khasi, and the Tribal League in order to articulate and express their demands. The Aham League, formed after the 1935

Act in the Brahmaputra Valley, also reflected a growing ethnic identity. Some members later tried to unite Upper Assam's Mongoloid group

in the Ahomtai Mongolia Parishad. Dubey also informs that the unification of Naga tribes was seriously pursued by Charles Percy, a British administrator, in the year 1945, which led to the formation of the Naga Hills District Tribal Council. The Naga Hills District Tribal Council was later renamed as the Naga National Council in April 1946. at Wokha, which coincided with the emergence of ethnocentric nationalism.

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The first half of 1946 also saw the creation of the Garo National Council and the Mizo Union, which would later unite as the Eastern Tribal Council in 1952 and afterward evolve into the All-Party Hill Leaders Conference, or APHLC, in 1960. According to scholar Thongkhohal Haokip, the Northeast's initial contact with the British East India Company had taken place in 1792, back in 1792, which was the end of the 18th century, when the king of Assam sought commercial benefits through amicable relations. However, repeated Burmese invasions had compelled the Ahom king to request aid from the Company, that is, the East India Company, which led to the ultimate defeat of the Burmese.

Consequently, Assam was annexed by the British Indian Empire as a non-regulated province in October 1838. The extension of colonial borders beyond existing settlements in the Chittagong Hill Tracts as well as in Tipera spurred further increased cultivation and settlement deeper into the hills, leading to more conflicts with the Kukis. As the British administration tried to settle populations from outside the local communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and sought to cultivate the lands, capitalize on them for greater monetary benefit, it resulted in escalated tribal conflicts.

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- Jangkhomang Guite (2013) observes that this massive migration, with an estimated 750,000 workers brought to Assam between 1860 and 1900, dramatically altered the social and demographic landscape and disrupted the previous symbiotic relationship with the hill communities, also exposing the laborers to border conflicts in the 'dead zone.'



In Kachar, this expansion was accompanied by the transportation of thousands of largely coerced laborers from various parts of India to work on the burgeoning tea plantations, and later these workers would be known as tea garden laborers. Even a very offensive word, 'bagania,' was used for them, something they themselves never liked. They thought it was an offensive term for them. Jangkhomang Guite observes that this massive migration, with an estimated 750,000 workers brought to Assam between 1860 and 1900...

had dramatically altered the social and demographic landscape and fabric of Assam and had disrupted the previous symbiotic relationship with the hill communities, also exposing the laborers to border conflicts in the dead zone. Even against the formidable force of British imperialism, the tribes of the Northeast continued to react violently toward the attacks on their traditional way of life by foreign rulers. A major revolt, known as the Kuki uprising, had begun toward the end of 1917. The British attempt to recruit hill tribes for World War I labor triggered resistance.

Kuki Rebellion of 1917-19

- Even against the formidable force of British imperialism, the tribes of the Northeast continued to react violently to the attacks on their traditional way of life by foreign rulers. A major revolt, the Kuki uprising, began towards the end of 1917.
- The British attempt to recruit hill tribes for World War I labor triggered the revolt, and it was additionally fueled by their forceful control policies and ongoing oppression.
- The revolt stemmed from the British policy of controlling hill tribes through force, which had led to ongoing oppression and harassment.



This further fueled the Kuki rebellion, exacerbated by their forceful control policies and ongoing oppression. The Kuki revolt stemmed from the British policy of controlling the hill tribes through force and coercion, leading to sustained oppression and harassment. Critic Essence Pandey writes that in December 1917, the Thadou Kukis openly rebelled and raided the Imphal Valley. Simultaneously, the Kukis gained an ally in Manipur named Chingakamba Sanachouba Singh. Chingakamba Sanachouba Singh supported the Kuki rebellion and claimed supernatural abilities.

Chingakamba joined the rebellious Kukis and declared his right to the Manipuri throne. On December 19, 1917, Kukis from the Ulecha hills and nearby villages, under Sanachouba's plan, attacked the Manipur State Forest toll station in Imphal. The Assam Rifles and Burma Military Police attempted to suppress the Kuki revolt with outposts. However, it persisted partly because the British had armed the Kukis against the Nagas. These Kukis were not merely foot soldiers.

They had the sophisticated arms given to them by the British rulers. The Kukis' jungle warfare, tactics, and skills additionally hampered the British efforts. During this rebellion, the British launched a large military operation in November 1918, which was led by a brigadier general under Lieutenant General Sir Henry Keat to suppress the Kuki rebellion. By May 20th, the rebellion was ultimately crushed, and its leaders were all captured. So from here, we will move on to the Ziliangrong movement that took place between 1930 and 1932.

After the 1891 British conquest of Manipur, the hill tribes faced new taxes, forced labor, as well as travel allowances imposed on them for the British officials. Despite these economic burdens and their loyalty toward the administration, the British offered no protection during the Kuki Rebellion. According to Gangmumei Kabui, the Ziliangrong

movement was a counterproduct of the British colonial rule and their general apathy towards the Zeliangrong Naga tribes of Manipur during and after the Kuki rebellion. This movement covered three tribes: the Zemei, Liangmei, and the Rongmei tribes. Amidst a context that demanded social unity, security from alien intruders, religious reform, as well

as political cohesion, a young leader named Jadonang arose and launched a movement that embodied all these goals and features. During the 1930s, Jadonang and subsequently Rani Gaidinliu pursued political emancipation by driving out the British as well as the Kukis from their lands, who were both considered outsiders. Their religious program focused on reforming the traditional religion by eliminating irrational customs. Socially, they strived for inter-village and inter-tribal peace and the integration of all three tribes. Jadonang's initial religious concepts later evolved into what is known as the Heraka cult.

And it is now led by Rani Gaidinliu. So we see that Jadunang, as I said, was a very important figure who arose among the tribes at this critical phase. And he was the proponent of the Heraka cult. The Zeliangrong movement shifted to a purely peaceful approach with the formation of tribal organizations such as the Kabui Samiti in the year 1934, the Kabui Naga Association in the year 1946, the Zeliangrong Council in 1947, and the Manipur Zeliangrong Union in 1947 as well.

So, to conclude, these movements, which ranged from constitutional efforts to armed insurgency, were shaped by the Northeast's unique geopolitical situation and its relative isolation, as well as cross-border ethnic ties, which distinguish the communities from those in other parts of India. The legacy of this period includes both resistance to colonial authority and the complex formation of regional, ethnic, and political identities, which continue to shape the Northeast in recent times. So, with this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let us meet with a new topic and another round of discussions in our next lecture.

Conclusion

- These movements, ranging from constitutional efforts to armed insurgency, were shaped by the region's unique geopolitical situation, its relative isolation, and cross-border ethnic ties, distinguishing the communities from those in other parts of India.
- The legacy of this period includes both resistance to colonial authority and the complex formation of regional, ethnic, and political identities that continue to shape the Northeast today.



Thank you.