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## A Quest for Ethnic Identity of Linguistic Minority Tribes in Northeast India: Understanding from the Political Philosophy of B.R. Ambedkar

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### **Abstract:**

*Northeast India, with its rich cultures, religions, and linguistic diversity, is home to several ethnic groups that have long struggled to preserve their unique identities in the face of language, culture, socio-political, and economic marginalisation. Drawing inspiration from B.R. Ambedkar's visionary ideals for minorities, this paper examines the identity crisis faced by linguistic minority tribes in Northeast India, focusing on the tension between cultural preservation and linguistic assimilation into the dominant section of the society. It includes his vision of empowering linguistic minority tribes through inclusive policies, education, and recognition of their rights for ensuring equality, fraternity, and justice in Indian society. The study also examines the endangered languages of India, as recorded by UNESCO, of which more than half belong to the Tibeto-Burman family from northeastern India. It highlights their historical neglect, inadequate representation, and policies favoring majority languages, which have further aggravated their oppression, leading to a loss of linguistic heritage, followed by a loss of culture, and a fractured sense of identity. It involves the steps taken by the Government in safeguarding the Identity of linguistic minority tribes and their limitations.*

**Keywords:** Ethnic Identity, Linguistic Minority tribes, Endangered languages, Identity crisis, Marginalised.

### **Introduction:**

The northeastern region of India comprises diverse cultures, religions, and languages, and is a home to more than 200 ethnic groups, of which many have long struggled to preserve their unique identities in the face of language, culture, socio-political, and economic marginalisation. Among them, the linguistic minority tribes are one of those that face several challenges in preserving their cultural heritage, language, and identity due to socio-political marginalisation, economic neglect, and cultural assimilation. The colonial legacy of divide and rule, along with post-independence policies

that favored majority languages, has further widened the marginalisation of linguistic minority tribes in the region. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of “Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger (2010)” had mentioned 197 endangered languages of India. Out of which 81 are vulnerable (where decreasing numbers of children are being taught the language), 65 are definitely endangered (where the youngest speakers are young adults), 06 are severely endangered (where the youngest speakers have already passed middleage), 42 are critically endangered (where only a few elderly speakers remain), and 05 had already been extinct. More than half of the endangered languages belong to the Tibeto-Burman family, hailing from northeastern India. The rest are from the Austro-Asiatic languages, Dravidian languages, Kra-Dai languages, and the Indo-Aryan languages. From here, it is evident that the northeastern region of India, comprising several linguistic minority tribes, requires special attention to preserve their languages and unique identity. The present paper seeks to explore the Identity crisis faced by the Linguistic Minority tribes of northeastern India through the lens of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s philosophy on freedom for the oppressed section of society, with the objective to ensure unity and integrity of the Nation.

B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, championed the cause of the oppressed and marginalised sections of society, advocating for their rights and dignity. During the drafting of the Constitution of India, on September 25, 1947, in one of his famous speeches to the Constituent Assembly, he stated that “minority must always be won over. It must never be dictated to”. Here, he emphasised the importance of engaging with and persuading minority groups rather than imposing decisions upon them. To him, the divine right of the majority to rule the minorities according to the wishes of the majority is completely irrational and anti-nationalist. Nationalism, in his perspective, should mean freedom from internal oppression and from external domination. For these reasons, he sincerely devoted his life to the cause of inhuman practices towards the depressed and marginalised section of society, such as the untouchables, agricultural and industrial workers, religious minorities, linguistic minorities, etc. He is of the view that a nation cannot be formed without society rather than that of the state.

If any nation is to be free in reality, then it should include the freedom of different classes comprised in it, particularly of those who are treated as the servile classes. This idea aligns with his broader vision of ensuring equality, fraternity, and justice in Indian society. His vision of a just and egalitarian society provided a compelling framework for understanding and addressing the identity crisis faced by linguistic minority tribes in northeastern India.

### **B.R. Ambedkar’s view on Linguistic Minorities:**

B.R. Ambedkar was a strong advocate of the rights of linguistic minorities. His advocacy for linguistic states aimed to protect minority languages from being overshadowed by dominant ones,

ensuring equal development for all. He also emphasised the protection of minority rights, arguing that smaller linguistic and cultural communities should be given constitutional safeguards to prevent their marginalisation. The inclusion of provisions like Article 29 and Article 30 in the Indian Constitution, which safeguard the cultural and educational rights of minorities, reflects his influence.

The Constitution of India recognised Hindi and English as official languages and 22 Scheduled Languages as per the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India. The rest of the languages are to cope with the mainstream languages at the center and states, for all official correspondence, to maintain the unity and integrity of the nation. B. R. Ambedkar's perspective is not to grant each of them an official status, but as mentioned under Article 30 of the Constitution of India, his dream is to grant religious and linguistic minorities, the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their own which includes the right to determine the type of institution, its affiliation, and the right to appoint staff. No state should discriminate against any educational institution on the grounds of its minority status while granting aid. Minorities, too, should adhere to reasonable regulations that the state may impose in the interest of maintaining the quality of education, ensuring welfare, or preventing maladministration. Keeping in view the diversity of the nation, he is in favor of providing adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups, as mentioned under Article 350A of the Constitution of India.

Ambedkar was also a strong proponent of decentralised governance and autonomy for marginalised communities to protect their identity. His vision is reflected in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which grants autonomy to tribal areas in northeastern India through Autonomous District Councils (ADCs). However, many linguistic minority tribes within these autonomous regions still face challenges in maintaining their distinct identity due to the dominance of larger ethnic groups. For linguistic minorities in northeastern India, he believed that cultural preservation is a key aspect of their struggle for identity and recognition. This includes the documentation and revitalisation of indigenous languages, the promotion of traditional arts and crafts, and the celebration of cultural festivals. It also involves the creation of cultural institutions and the support of cultural initiatives that promote linguistic and cultural diversity. Ambedkar's vision calls for a society that values and respects all cultures, providing a space for each community to thrive and contribute to the nation's cultural fabric. His ideas on linguistic reorganisation of states, minority rights, and social justice hold significant relevance for the linguistic minority tribes of Northeast India.

### **Identity crisis faced by Linguistic Minority tribes in Northeast India:**

The linguistic minority tribes of northeastern India have historically been neglected due to colonial policies, post-independence national integration efforts, socio-political marginalisation,



weak economic infrastructure, and a lack of institutional support. During British rule, the administration of northeastern India was divided into excluded and partially excluded areas under the Government of India Act, 1935. This Policy of the British left the tribal communities backward politically, economically, culturally, linguistically, and educationally. The British gave more focus on the trade routes, tea plantations, and resources available in the valleys and plains rather than the hilly tribal areas. Instead of direct governance, the British often relied on local chieftains or village headmen to manage the hilly tribal areas.

After independence, India's language policies favoured dominant regional languages, marginalising smaller tribal languages. Attempts for linguistic homogeneity often gave rise to various protests, such as the Assam Official Language Act of 1960, which imposed Assamese as the official language of Assam, creating resentment in the minds of the linguistic minorities, which in turn led to the formation of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram on a linguistic basis. Regional languages were used as the medium of instruction in schools, excluding other tribal languages. In addition, during that period, most tribal languages practiced oral traditions for which tribal scripts and literatures were not given importance. Although Christian missionaries played a major role in introducing education and scripts for some tribal languages (e.g., Roman script for Khasi and Mizo), a large part remained without schools, without script, leading to linguistic marginalisation and educational disadvantages. Some tribes struggled to gain recognition under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, which grants official status to languages. It has been seen that the post-independence period was a struggle for recognition, autonomy, and language preservation of the linguistic minority tribes of northeastern India.

The lack of government support for tribal languages in schools led to a language shift toward dominant languages. When a language is not taught in school, they are likely to become extinct or be absorbed into the larger section of society. As they lack administrative support, they are not being used for economic and official purposes, and in the long run, they are not likely to be passed on to future generations. The loss of language inevitably leads to the loss of culture, including performing arts, social practices, rituals, and festive events, traditional crafts, and the priceless legacy of the community's oral traditions and expressions, such as poetry and jokes, proverbs and legends. It leads to cultural assimilation into the dominant section of society.

Economically, the linguistic minority tribes have weak infrastructure, as most of them reside in the border region where there are no proper roads, communication, internet connectivity, power supply, clean drinking water, hospitals, colleges, universities, or industries. A few of the schools available are run by Christian Missionaries or by other private individuals. The Public Schools and High schools run by the government are less effective. Therefore, aspiring youths are compelled to leave their hometown to pursue a professional course or for graduation, post-graduation, or any other

degree. This directly obliged them to mingle with other dominant sections of society, where they eventually get absorbed into the main stream cultures and languages. Besides, knowledge of regional languages is also made mandatory to avail state government jobs.

Various products, such as areca nut cultivation, on which the tribal populations heavily rely in Tripura, do not have good market opportunities. The traditional way of weaving, handloom, handicraft, and potteries lack marketing and infrastructure support. As this requires much effort, it becomes difficult to compete with modern technologies. Government intervention is necessary to promote these small-scale industries.

Many linguistic minority tribes have been displaced due to infrastructure projects, such as dams, highways, and mining etc. Large-scale hydroelectric projects, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, have displaced indigenous groups such as the Idu Mishmi and Khamti without fair compensation. Oil extraction in Assam and Arunachal has benefited large corporations and the central government, while local communities receive minimal economic returns.

Politically, the linguistic minority tribe lacks representatives and has little say in elections. They remain politically suppressed by dominant groups, mainstream parties, and even insurgent movements, and their grievances remain unheard. Political alliances often ignore tribal demands, favoring dominant ethnic groups (e.g., Meitei dominance in Manipur, Assamese dominance in Assam). Political parties exploit linguistic and religious identities to secure votes, often by making hollow promises before elections.

Although the linguistic minority tribes had settled in the hilly regions of northeastern India before the formation of the Forest Act, 1878 and 1927, most of their dwelling places were declared as forest lands. As there is a lack of revenue records, the numbers of the minority groups are not listed in the Scheduled Tribe list of India. For example, in the Barak Valley region of Assam, there are several minority tribes, but as per the government records, very few tribal communities are listed. Those unlisted groups have a blurred sense of identity, and whenever they seek any job opportunities, their identity is questioned and often denied greater opportunities. While some communities have gained political recognition through the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, many smaller minority tribes that do not fit in the Sixth Schedule region still struggle for fair representation and rights.

To some extent, the state administration is also responsible for the political and economic exploitation of the linguistic minority tribes. The demarcation of states left several tribes to be minorities in their respective states. Such as the Ranglong tribe (which is categorised as a critically endangered language by UNESCO), with an approximate population of 10000, live in a compact region yet divided into three states – Assam, Mizoram, and Tripura. Forming a microscopic number in the state, they are again put under several constituencies, which crippled them in every aspect of

their life. The delimitation of constituency benefits dominant groups at the cost of minorities.

Educationally, students from linguistic minority tribes, especially in most regions of Assam during the 1950s to 1980s, experienced significant changes in their personal names officially recorded by parents. This is because many Bengali and Assamese teachers find difficulty in pronouncing tribal names and give them names that are easier for them to pronounce. For example, from a tribal name “Ngirchunril Ranglong” to “Amor Ranglong”, “Ringkamli Ranglong” to “Kabita Ranglong”, etc. Similar cases have been seen among other linguistic minority tribes as well. In this way, they often lost the beauty of their names that is inherent in their culture.

### **Role of Government in addressing the identity of Linguistic Minority Tribes:**

The Government plays an important role in addressing the identity crisis faced by the linguistic minority tribes of northeastern India. Alongside the constitutional safeguards for the linguistic minorities, several schemes have been launched to protect and promote linguistic minority tribes.

The Government of India has initiated a Scheme known as “Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages of India” (SPPEL). Under this Scheme, the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore, works on the protection, preservation, and documentation of all the mother tongues/languages of India spoken by less than 10,000 people, which are called endangered languages. The University Grants Commission has also initiated two schemes for the protection of endangered languages, namely ‘Funding Support to the State Universities for Study and Research in Indigenous and Endangered languages in India’ and ‘Establishment of centers for Endangered Languages in Central Universities’. Under these schemes, seven State Universities and nine Central Universities are being funded by UGC.

The Ministry of Minority Affairs has initiated “Prime Minister’s New 15-Point Programme,” which focuses on education and skill development for minorities, including linguistic minority tribes. It has also introduced “Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)” which provides quality education for tribal students in their mother tongue.

The Tribal Research Institutes (TRIs), which are functioning in various northeastern regions of India to conduct research and document indigenous languages, such as folk tales, folklore, etc. The Ministry of Education, through the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, has promoted multilingual education, allowing tribal students to learn in their native languages.

Besides the Government, the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as Zubaan Foundation, People’s Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), North East Centre for Technology Application and Reach (NECTAR) are actively functioning in documenting oral histories, surveying, and digitising linguistic minority tribes of Northeast India.

### **Limitations:**



Despite various schemes and initiatives taken by the government to preserve the linguistic minority tribes of northeastern India, there are several challenges in their implementations, such as:

- Due to poor infrastructure, many schemes fail to reach the remote tribal region.
- Bureaucratic delays and corruption hinder effective implementation.
- Linguistic minority tribes lack awareness about these schemes.
- Government policies prioritise major tribal languages like Bodo, Khasi, and Mizo, while smaller languages like Aimo, Koirang, and Ranglong receive less attention.
- Limited funds are allotted for language preservation programs.
- Only a few mother tongues are being taught in primary-level schools.
- Trained teachers in tribal languages are lacking.
- Linguistic minority tribes lack script and literature, which are not taught in schools.
- Many tribal youths prefer dominant languages, i.e., English, Hindi, Assamese, Bengali, for better economic opportunities, which ultimately leads to a shift in language.
- Urban migration reduces the number of native speakers in rural areas.
- Some tribal languages lack official status, limiting their inclusion in government programs.
- Most schemes are top-down, without consulting tribal communities.

#### **Suggestions:**

- More funds should be allotted to improve their culture, script, and literature etc.
- Grant Scheduled Tribe status to unrecognised linguistic minority tribes.
- Awareness should be given to tribal communities about the schemes.
- Document and promote endangered tribal languages through cultural initiatives.
- Stronger land protection laws for linguistic minorities.
- Article 30 of the Constitution of India should be implemented effectively.
- Provide entrepreneurship support for minority tribal communities.
- Ensure fair representation in state legislatures and autonomous councils.
- Ensure equal distribution of benefits and development projects.
- Provide skill development programs for marginalised minorities.
- Use of AI and digital tools to document and promote endangered languages.
- Encourage local markets to empower smaller tribes.

#### **Conclusions:**

India, with a history of colonial rule and partition, faced several challenges in maintaining the unity and integrity of the nation, most significantly the northeastern region of India, which has been fragmented by diversity. B. R Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, is aware that nationalism could be achieved only by providing freedom to the oppressed and weaker sections of

society. Constitutional rights are laid down for the linguistic minority tribes in the Constitution of India, and various schemes have been initiated by the government. However, proper planning and implementation are found to be lacking. While some tribes, such as Mizo, Naga, Khasi, etc., successfully carve out political or cultural spaces for themselves, other smaller tribes continue to fight for their voices to be heard. Grassroots-level implementation should be given priority to uplift the various smaller tribes. Preservation of minority languages is necessary as it is one of the markers of identity. Loss of language leads to loss of culture and identity. The beauty of diverse cultures, languages, and religions should continue to remain alive to attain nationalism among the diverse groups of Northeast India.

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