

**IDENTITY POLITICS AND INSURGENCY IN ASSAM: ISSUES,  
THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

**SYNOPSIS**

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## **Introduction**

The Northeast of India has historically been one of the most strategically significant yet politically peripheral regions of the country. Despite its abundant cultural, linguistic, and ecological diversity, the region has suffered from prolonged neglect, economic marginalisation, and uneven political integration. These systemic inequalities have fostered social tensions, economic disparities, and political instability, creating fertile ground for insurgency and unrest. Assam, often regarded as the “gateway” to the Northeast, encapsulates this duality of vibrancy and vulnerability. On the one hand, it possesses a rich cultural heritage and ecological bounty; on the other, it is a region marked by persistent cycles of ethnic conflict, insurgency, and political contestation. The crises in Assam cannot be understood solely as outcomes of underdevelopment or administrative inefficiency. Instead, they are rooted in deeper structural issues of identity, recognition, and autonomy.

The historical antecedents of Assam’s conflicts are deeply entwined with colonial policies. The partition of Bengal in 1905, followed by the promotion of migration for tea plantations, disrupted pre-existing social hierarchies and reinforced ethnic divisions. Colonial census practices, which imposed rigid categories of identity, created enduring frameworks for social and political differentiation. Following independence, the Indian state attempted assimilationist policies that often failed to recognise the plurality of Assam’s communities. The Assamese Official Language Bill of 1960, which sought to establish Assamese as the sole official language, exemplified this failure. While intended to unify the state administratively, the policy inadvertently alienated non-Assamese and tribal communities, sparking resistance and cultivating a sense of exclusion. This inability to accommodate diversity has repeatedly manifested in both constitutional and extra-constitutional movements, often escalating into violence.

The Assam Movement of 1979–1985, spearheaded by the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU), remains one of the most significant mass movements in post-independence India. It was primarily driven by concerns over illegal migration, cultural identity, and political marginalisation. The movement culminated in the Assam Accord of 1985, which sought to address these issues, but its partial implementation left deep grievances unresolved. The subsequent emergence of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in the 1980s, with its

secessionist aspirations, and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), advocating ethnic sovereignty, reflected the growing fragmentation of political and social identities. These insurgent movements were not only reactions to the Indian state but also outcomes of intra-state ethnic competition, highlighting the multi-layered nature of conflict in Assam.

The dynamic interplay between Assamese nationalism and ethnic assertions by Bodos, Karbis, Koch-Rajbongshis, and other communities has produced a fragmented landscape of competing identities. This fragmentation challenges conventional narratives of centre-periphery conflict, revealing that insurgency in Assam functions as a political language of identity-based exclusion and misrecognition. Contemporary debates over the National Register of Citizens (NRC), the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and the 2020 Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) Accord further illustrate the ongoing relevance of identity politics.

The central thesis of this study posits that insurgency in Assam is best understood as a political manifestation of exclusion and historical grievances, wherein identity simultaneously acts as both a tool of protest and a site of conflict. This research, therefore, seeks to answer three key questions: How has identity been constructed and politicised in Assam? How has identity-driven contestation facilitated insurgent mobilisation? And how has the state responded to these challenges through mechanisms of repression and accommodation?

## **Scope of the Study**

The issue of insurgency in Northeast India, particularly in Assam, represents a profound challenge to Indian federalism and democratic governance. The post-independence linguistic reorganisation of states, intended to align administrative boundaries with ethno-linguistic realities, paradoxically intensified fragmentation within Assam's multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society. While historical, geographical, and socio-economic factors contribute to the persistence of conflict, identity politics remains the central driver of insurgent mobilisation in the region.

The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, designed to safeguard tribal autonomy, has often produced overlapping jurisdictions and competing sovereignties, engendering mistrust between hill and plain communities. Similarly, policies promoting Assamese linguistic and cultural primacy alienated tribal and non-Assamese populations, intensifying demands for autonomy and

sovereignty. These structural tensions illustrate that insurgency in Assam is not simply a reaction to state neglect or economic deprivation but a complex negotiation over recognition, identity, and political authority.

Partition in 1947 further exacerbated these tensions by dislocating populations, introducing new demographic pressures, and generating anxieties over cultural and political domination. Historical and contemporary migration has frequently served as a flashpoint, fuelling debates over belonging and exclusion. Assamese nationalism, originally rooted in linguistic pride and cultural preservation, hardened into exclusionary politics during the anti-foreigner agitation of the late twentieth century. These developments provided fertile ground for insurgencies, resulting in the proliferation of militant groups across the state, each representing distinct ethnic, linguistic, or regional identities.

Although militancy has declined in recent decades, identity-based assertions remain strong. Peace accords such as the Assam Accord (1985) and the BTR Agreement (2020) have offered partial resolutions but failed to address the structural and historical causes of unrest. Contemporary debates surrounding migration, the NRC, CAA, and continued ethnic assertions suggest that without inclusive governance and genuine political recognition, the recurrence of insurgency remains a tangible possibility. This study, therefore, situates Assam as a site where historical legacies, state policies, and identity-based claims intersect to produce recurring cycles of conflict and contestation.

## **Literature Review**

### **Identity Politics and Recognition**

The theoretical foundation of identity politics emphasises that identities are socially constructed, relational, and historically contingent. Constructivist perspectives, such as those of Wendt (1992), highlight that identities emerge through social interaction, negotiation, and contestation. Taylor (1995, 2021) underscores that recognition is essential for human dignity and justice, noting that misrecognition can damage self-esteem and perpetuate marginalisation. Parekh (1996, 2001) and Kymlicka (1991, 1995) further elaborate that minority rights and intercultural dialogue are crucial for sustaining plural democracies.

Social constructivists argue that repeated interactions and institutional practices naturalise identities, often reinforcing hierarchies or exclusions (Berger and Luckmann, 2016). Giddens (1991) contends that threats to familiar cultural frameworks provoke defensive, anxiety-driven identity politics. These perspectives resonate with the Assam case, where migration and linguistic policies fostered insecurity and catalysed political mobilisation. Postcolonial theorists such as Fanon (1963) and Memmi (2013) demonstrate that colonial domination leaves enduring psychological and political legacies, shaping post-independence struggles for autonomy and recognition. Yuval-Davis (2011) emphasises the contested and politicised nature of belonging, highlighting how identity functions simultaneously as a marker of inclusion and exclusion.

In the international arena, scholars such as Mearsheimer (2017), Smith (1998), and Anderson (2020) examine nationalism and collective identities, linking them to both internal mobilisation and interstate competition. This body of work situates identity politics as a product of historical marginalisation and as a driver of contemporary political and social conflicts, illustrating the theoretical relevance to Assam. Identity politics is both a product of historical exclusion and a driver of contemporary conflicts.

### **Insurgency in Assam**

Assam's insurgencies have been examined from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Sanjib Baruah (1999, 2020) analyses how grievances over migration, deprivation, and political exclusion catalysed insurgent mobilisation, showing that insurgency in Assam is less a question of material scarcity than contested identity and political marginalisation. Udayon Misra (2017) explores demographic changes and linguistic-cultural conflicts, demonstrating how these factors shaped Assamese identity and produced cycles of unrest. Nani Gopal Mahanta (2013) provides an organisational perspective on insurgent groups, while Jaideep Saikia (2009) examines transnational linkages, highlighting the external dimensions of Assam's militancy.

The proliferation of groups such as ULFA, NDFB, BLTF, and KNV underscores the fragmentation of ethnic assertions into armed struggles. These movements reveal that insurgency in Assam functions as a medium through which communities articulate their anxieties over cultural, demographic, and political exclusion. The multiplicity of groups also illustrates the

intra-state tensions between Assamese nationalism and ethnic aspirations of hill communities, highlighting the complex interplay between local grievances and broader state dynamics.

### **State Responses and Peace Accords**

The Indian state has responded to insurgency in Assam through a combination of coercive and negotiated strategies. Military measures, exemplified by the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), have often alienated local populations while seeking to suppress insurgent activity (Kumar, 2018). Peace accords, including the Assam Accord (1985) and the BTR Agreement (2020), have attempted to reconcile ethnic demands with state sovereignty, but studies by Ghosh (2016) and Hazarika (1994) suggest that these agreements frequently address symptoms rather than root causes.

Scholars such as Srikanth emphasise that insurgency cannot be reduced to law-and-order challenges but must be understood within the framework of identity politics. Komol Singha demonstrates that migration and ethnic movements generate hybrid identities, complicating efforts at peacebuilding. Navin Murshid critically examines the construction of Bengali Muslims as “foreigners,” showing how political narratives can manufacture internal “others” to create temporary cohesion while perpetuating exclusion.

### **Research Gap**

Despite the rich literature, gaps remain. Existing works often treat identity politics and insurgency separately, without fully analysing their intersection. Studies have concentrated on specific groups like ULFA or NDFB, but very little on other insurgency groups in Assam. Post-insurgency governance, insurgent reintegration, and peacebuilding remain underexplored. This research fills these gaps by combining theory with field-based analysis, examining contemporary challenges like NRC and CAA.

### **Research Questions**

1. What factors led to the rise of insurgency in Assam?
2. How has the question of identity evolved, leading to an identity crisis?

3. Did the Centre and State governments fail to eliminate insurgency, and why?

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design with some quantitative elements. It adopts an exploratory case study approach, using historical analysis, ethnography, and policy evaluation.

**Primary sources** include:

- Field surveys and semi-structured interviews with former insurgents, policymakers, security officials, and civil society leaders.
- Focus group discussions with affected communities.
- Archival research of government records, accords, and legal documents.

**Secondary sources** comprise scholarly books, journal articles, reports from think tanks and NGOs, government documents, and media archives. Analytical methods include thematic and discourse analysis of insurgent narratives, policy debates, and media coverage. Theoretical frameworks are drawn from constructivist, postcolonial, and structuralist traditions, particularly Wallerstein and Gurr, to link economic marginalisation and identity assertion.

## **Chapter Scheme**

- **Chapter 1: *Introduction*:** The introductory chapter lays the foundational groundwork for the thesis by articulating the primary research concern: the complex entanglement of identity politics and insurgency within the socio-political landscape of Assam. This chapter argues that the region has long experienced a structural tension between the centre and the periphery, manifesting in repeated movements for recognition, autonomy, and cultural preservation. While Assam has often been viewed through a security-centric lens in both academic and policy discourses, particularly in relation to insurgency and separatism, this thesis contends that such a reductionist approach fails to capture the layered and historically embedded processes that have shaped both identity formation and

insurgent politics in the state.

- **Chapter 2: *Theoretical Framework*** The second chapter develops recognition, identity, and postcolonial state formation theories. The chapter opens with an interrogation of dominant theories of identity, drawing from cultural studies, political theory, and postcolonial scholarship. It argues that identity is not an intrinsic or biologically determined essence but a historically situated, politically constructed, and socially mediated process. This understanding challenges essentialist perspectives and aligns with constructivist and dialogical approaches to identity.
- **Chapter 3: *Identity Politics in Assam***: This chapter traces colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary transformations of identity politics. The third chapter undertakes a comprehensive historical and political genealogy of identity politics in Assam, situating its evolution within the broader trajectories of colonial governance, postcolonial state formation, and contemporary regional contestations. The argument advanced here is that identity in Assam has never been static or singular; rather, it has been continuously shaped and reshaped by structural conditions, administrative interventions, and popular mobilisations. The chapter contends that the roots of identity-based contestations in Assam lie deep in the colonial period, when British administrative practices and demographic engineering initiated a chain of disruptions that would have long-lasting implications.
- **Chapter 4: *Insurgency in Assam***: Chapter four delves into the multifaceted evolution of insurgent movements in Assam, arguing that insurgency must be understood as both a political language of dissent and a product of historical exclusions. It offers a comprehensive analysis of the rise, trajectory, and transformation of major insurgent groups, most notably the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and other insurgent groups. A key contribution of the chapter lies in its analysis of the Indian state's inconsistent response to insurgency. The state's approach has oscillated between militarisation and co-optation, with peace accords often

failing to address the root causes of conflict.

- **Chapter 5: *Fieldwork and Findings*:** Drawing on extensive fieldwork conducted across various districts of Assam, the fifth chapter constitutes the empirical backbone of the thesis. It explores the lived experiences of individuals and communities directly and indirectly impacted by insurgency and the processes of post-conflict transition. The field data, gathered through in-depth interviews, semi-structured conversations, and participatory observation, provides a granular understanding of how conflict is experienced, narrated, and remembered at the grassroots level.
- **Chapter 6: *Conclusion*:** The final chapter of the thesis synthesises the empirical findings and theoretical insights to present a forward-looking framework for understanding and addressing the enduring legacies of insurgency in Assam. It argues that while overt armed resistance has declined, the structural and symbolic conditions that catalysed insurgency remain unresolved. These unresolved issues, if not addressed with sensitivity and political imagination, continue to pose significant threats to democratic deepening and social cohesion in the region.

Through this structure, the thesis reinterprets insurgency in Assam not merely as a breakdown of law and order but as a political language of exclusion, rooted in historical misrecognition and identity contestation.

## **Conclusion**

This synopsis underscores that Assam's insurgency cannot be understood comprehensively without analysing the politics of identity. From colonial administrative practices to post-independence policies promoting linguistic homogenisation, the failure to recognise diversity has repeatedly precipitated resistance. Insurgency in Assam represents not merely demands for autonomy or sovereignty but a deeper struggle for recognition, dignity, and belonging.

By integrating theoretical perspectives with field-based research, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of insurgency in Assam. It contributes by linking identity politics to the trajectories of conflict, critically evaluating state responses, and proposing pathways toward inclusive governance and sustainable peace. Unless identity-based grievances are addressed through democratic recognition and political accommodation, any peace in Assam will remain fragile, provisional, and susceptible to renewed contestation.