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# Who is Indigenous in Assam? Politics in the Vernacular

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*Claims to Indigenity in Assam are usually treated with sympathy. The exceptions, though, tell their own story.*

The word ‘indigenous’ is more salient than ever in the politics of North East India. Political claims based on being indigenous or autochthonous to a place receive sympathetic attention from almost all state governments.

India’s central government rejects the notion that the international legal concept of Indigenous People – rooted in the political conflicts of white settler colonies – applies to India. It considers the country’s entire population to be indigenous to India. The official ambivalence about the concept is eloquently articulated by Indian officials in international forums. However, this has not inhibited central governmental authorities in matters of domestic policy. Their response to the positive stance of state governments towards claims of indigeneity is generally one of acquiescence or active support.

In July 2022, in a surprise move, Assam's cabinet officially recognised five Assamese Muslim communities as *khilonjia* – ‘indigenous’. Assamese Muslims see themselves as distinct from the numerically preponderant group of fellow Muslims in the state – those of East Bengali descent. Some Assamese Muslim leaders claim that this numerical disadvantage has led to the community’s cultural misrecognition and political marginalisation in modern-day Assam.

> Privileging autochthony over Assamese language competence or even citizenship status [… lowers the standing of Muslims of East-Bengali descent] on Assam’s politically salient insider-outsider continuum.

Identifying 'khilonjia Muslims' as a distinct group, whatever its legal import, involves differentiating them from Muslims of East-Bengali descent. The forefathers of this latter group had migrated to (undivided) Assam over the past hundred years or so, both before and after the Partition of 1947. The vast majority of Muslims of East-Bengali descent are Indian citizens and, in the Brahmaputra Valley, are native speakers of Assamese. By privileging autochthony over Assamese language competence or even citizenship status, it lowers the latter’s standing on Assam’s politically salient insider-outsider continuum.

A few months after Assam's decision, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma termed Bagh Hazarika – the celebrated Muslim associate of the 17th-century Ahom commander Lachit Borphukon – a “fictitious character.” Borphukon has long been a powerful symbol of Assam’s autonomous past; he commanded the Ahom forces that defeated the vastly superior Mughal army led by Raja Ram Singh of Ajmer in the battle of Saraighat in 1671. In the Assamese telling of the story of Saraighat, Bagh Hazarika served as Borphukon’s top lieutenant in that battle. The traditional chronicles of Assam, known as buranjis, also describe the invading army not as Mughals or Muslims but as Bangals or Yavanas (Sharma 2004: 176).

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By challenging the historicity of Borphukon’s Muslim associate, Sarma seeks to tell a Hindu majoritarian counter-narrative to the conventionally told story of Assamese regional patriotism. The belittling of an Assamese Muslim hero came across as an attempt to put the community in its place—reminding it of its position as a religious minority. This makes the recognition of the community as khilonjia seem half-hearted.

## Inclusions and exclusions

The Assamese word ‘khilonjia’ was originally restricted to matters of land and property use. A 'khilonji ghor' is a person’s ancestral home. The word has now acquired the politically charged meaning of an original, indigenous, or autochthonous inhabitant of geographical Assam.

Khilonjia is both inclusionary and exclusionary. It is inclusive of all ethno-cultural communities regarded as having ancestral roots in geographical Assam, irrespective of the languages they speak, their caste, tribal, or religious affiliations. But the borders of exclusion are equally apparent. People descended from 19th- or 20th-century immigrants are not considered khilonjia.

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In his essay on 'Politics and the English Language' (1946), George Orwell wrote of political words that get abused or "used in a consciously dishonest way." A person may have his private definition of a word, but "allows his hearer to think he means something quite different."

'Khilonjia' suffered this fate during the 2016 state assembly election campaign that saw its first widespread use in electoral politics. In that election, the BJP and its regional party allies promised a 'khilonjia sarkar' in Assam – a slogan that was instrumental in bringing the BJP to power in the state. The implicit contrast was to a government beholden to 'immigrant power' or non-khilonjia interests.

Talk of a 'khilonjia government' could not have been reassuring to BJP's traditional supporters in Assam's Barak Valley, where the population is predominantly Bengali speaking. The party's sympathetic view of Hindus crossing the Partition border as 'home-coming' – no matter when a person may have crossed the international border created in 1947 – is crucial for its support among Bengali Hindus, since many of them are Partition refugees themselves or their descendants.

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In the 2016 election, when campaigning in the Barak Valley, BJP's national politicians did not talk of a khilonjia sarkar. Instead, they promised that they would amend Indian citizenship laws to put Hindu refugees on a path to citizenship. But in the parts of Assam, where the word khilonjia had resonance, there was no talk of amending citizenship laws. Instead, BJP politicians promised to implement the "Assam Accord in letter and spirit" – an implicit promise not to put post-1971 refugees on a path to citizenship.

'Khilonjia sarkar', then, was nothing more than a brief chapter in the ruling party's longstanding pursuit of a cultural-political agenda grounded in its majoritarian conception of the Indian national project and managing its political fallout in Assam.

## Adivasi, but not Scheduled Tribe

What does this selective enthusiasm for the cause of Indigeneity say about the traditional agenda for Indigenous People's rights? The status of the Adivasi community in Assam provides an interesting test case.

Unlike in the rest of India, North East India's recognised Scheduled Tribes do not self-identify as Adivasi. They prefer 'tribal' as self-identification. Only the descendants of tea workers brought as indentured labourers to Assam – who are not officially recognised as Scheduled Tribes – self-identify as Adivasi. Though known to have been recruited from amongst the "aboriginal tribes of central India," the Census of 1891 classified them only as 'labourers' and separated them from the category of 'forest and hill tribes' – groups that were indigenous to the territory of colonial Assam.

> "Is there any community in this world named after a commodity?"

The legacy of that policy continues to this day. The effects of the exploitative labour practices of 19th-century plantation capitalism have reverberated across successive generations of tea workers. The Adivasis are among the region's most deprived groups today. To no small extent, this is the result of the precedence accorded to indigeneity over citizenship and successful cultural adaptation into local societies.

Adivasi activists reject phrases like 'tea tribes' or 'ex tea-garden workers' traditionally used by governmental agencies to describe them. As Adivasi activist and poet Kamal Kumar Tanti asks poignantly: "Is there any community in this world named after a commodity?"

The term Adivasi has a special appeal to this community because its original use in its contemporary sense as an equivalent of the global category 'Indigenous People' was by tribal leaders of Jharkhand, which many of Assam's Adivasis regard as their original home.

Since their ethnic kinsfolk in their places of origin are recognised as Scheduled Tribes, Adivasi activists argue that they should have the same official status in Assam. Their long-standing efforts to gain this recognition, however, have not borne fruit. Their claims have not received the sort of attention that Indigeneity claims have.

Globally oriented anthropologists and activists engaged with Indigenous Peoples' struggles recognise that when an idea becomes vernacularised it can acquire forms and meanings of its own in individual locales. Translations in such matters, however, are not just one-way from the cosmopolitan-global to the vernacular-local. A term such as 'khilonjia' carries folk meanings and associations that resonate powerfully amongst locals, but they may not have much to do with the international category's intended meaning.

Is it possible that the politics of Indigeneity in Assam and North East India is now on a different track from that of the global Indigenous Peoples paradigm?

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