

Cultural Preservation Among Indigenous Ethnic Communities In Assam

Sanjib Saikia, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Dr. Nobin Bordoloi College, Na Ali Dhekiajuli, Jorhat, Affiliated to Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam.

Abstract

This paper examines the state of cultural preservation among indigenous ethnic communities in Assam, a region known for its rich mosaic of tribal and non-tribal cultures. Indigenous groups such as the Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Dimasa, and Rabha possess distinct languages, customs, religious practices, and oral traditions that contribute to the region's cultural diversity. However, rapid modernization, urbanization, migration, and socio-political dynamics have placed immense pressure on these communities, threatening the continuity of their cultural heritage. The paper adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing ethnographic methods including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and analysis of cultural documents. It investigates both the challenges to and the strategies for preserving cultural identity. Findings reveal that many communities are experiencing a gradual erosion of language fluency among youth, declining traditional practices, and a shift in cultural values due to the influence of mainstream media and education. Simultaneously, there are strong efforts from within these communities to counter these trends. Local organizations, elders, and youth-led initiatives are actively involved in cultural revival through festivals, community schools, language documentation, and digital archiving. Government policies and non-governmental interventions also play a role, though their impact varies in effectiveness and reach. This study highlights the importance of culturally sensitive policy-making that empowers indigenous voices and supports sustainable cultural transmission. It concludes that while the threat of cultural loss is significant, the resilience and adaptability of Assam's indigenous communities offer hope for the preservation of their unique identities. A multi-stakeholder approach that includes education reform, legal recognition of cultural rights, and funding for community initiatives is essential for meaningful cultural sustainability.

Keywords: Indigenous communities, cultural preservation, Assam, language decline, identity

Introduction

Assam, a culturally vibrant state in Northeast India, is home to numerous indigenous ethnic communities with unique languages, traditions, and customs. However, rapid socio-economic changes pose significant threats to their cultural heritage. This study explores the preservation efforts and challenges faced by these communities in maintaining their distinct cultural identities. Assam's indigenous ethnic communities form the backbone of its cultural diversity. Groups such as the Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, and several others have historically preserved unique identities through language, folklore, customs,

rituals, festivals, and oral traditions. These cultures are deeply rooted in their ancestral land and ecological practices, reflecting centuries of coexistence with nature and distinct worldviews. However, in recent decades, this cultural richness has come under increasing threat due to globalization, modernization, migration, deforestation, and socio-political conflicts.

The proliferation of mainstream media, changing lifestyles, and formal education systems that often neglect indigenous knowledge systems have led to a gradual erosion of traditional practices, particularly among the younger generations. Moreover, many indigenous languages in Assam are at risk of extinction due to declining usage and intergenerational transmission.

While governmental and non-governmental agencies have initiated several programs aimed at tribal development, these often prioritize economic integration over cultural preservation. Community-led initiatives have emerged in resistance, attempting to revive and safeguard endangered traditions, languages, and identities. This study emerges from the need to understand these dynamics, document preservation efforts, and evaluate the effectiveness of current approaches. It situates cultural preservation as a central issue in maintaining Assam's pluralistic heritage and social cohesion.

Significance of Indigenous Cultures in Assam

Indigenous cultures in Assam contribute significantly to the region's social fabric, historical identity, and environmental sustainability. These communities possess rich traditions of music, dance, storytelling, weaving, agriculture, and healing practices that reflect a deep connection to their land and cosmology. Their languages, many of which are oral in nature, carry not just means of communication but worldviews, ecological knowledge, and ancestral wisdom that have evolved over centuries. Each ethnic group in Assam, including the Bodos, Karbis, Misings, Dimasas, Tiwas, and Rabhas, maintains distinct cultural practices that celebrate their heritage and foster a sense of belonging and identity. Cultural festivals such as Bwisagu (Bodo), Ali-Aye-Ligang (Mising), and Rongker (Karbi) are not merely seasonal events but integral expressions of community life, agricultural cycles, and spiritual traditions.

Moreover, indigenous cultures promote social cohesion and interdependence within communities through collective rituals and oral traditions. Their sustainable resource-use practices also provide valuable insights into biodiversity conservation and environmental stewardship.

The preservation of these cultures is essential not only for cultural diversity but also for safeguarding alternative knowledge systems and strengthening local governance and identity politics in Assam. Without timely intervention, Assam risks losing irreplaceable elements of its heritage to cultural homogenization.

Purpose and Objectives of the Paper

- a. To examine the current state of cultural preservation among indigenous ethnic communities in Assam.
- b. To identify the key challenges and threats affecting the transmission of indigenous cultural practices and languages.

- c. To explore and evaluate community-led and institutional efforts aimed at sustaining indigenous cultures in the region.

Literature Review

Assam is home to a diverse range of indigenous ethnic communities, including the Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, Tiwa, and several others, each with distinct cultural identities. These communities are characterized by unique languages, customs, belief systems, and socio-economic structures. The Bodos, the largest plains tribe, have a rich tradition of dance, music, and the Bodo language, which is now recognized as one of the official languages of Assam. The Mising people are known for their riverine agricultural lifestyle and vibrant festival of Ali-Aye-Ligang. The Karbis and Dimasas primarily inhabit the hill regions, maintaining strong oral traditions and animistic beliefs. The Rabhas, scattered across lower Assam, preserve a mix of traditional and Hindu-influenced practices. Each of these communities is deeply rooted in specific ecological settings, and their cultures reflect sustainable living practices. However, these communities face increasing threats from modernization, language loss, socio-political marginalization, and economic pressures.

Cultural preservation has been examined through various theoretical lenses in anthropology and cultural studies. One dominant perspective is the cultural ecology approach, which sees indigenous culture as an adaptive response to environmental conditions. Another is the constructivist view, which argues that cultural identity is continuously shaped and reshaped in response to social, political, and economic forces. Theories of ethnolinguistic vitality suggest that language and culture survive when they are perceived as valuable and are institutionally supported. Postcolonial and indigenous studies frameworks emphasize the need to decolonize knowledge and recognize community agency in preserving cultural heritage. These perspectives offer a broad foundation for understanding the interplay between tradition and change, as well as the importance of self-determination in cultural sustainability.

Previous studies have highlighted both the decline and resilience of indigenous cultures in Assam. Researchers have documented the erosion of mother tongues among tribal youth, changes in traditional rituals due to religious conversion and modernization, and the diminishing role of elders in cultural transmission. Simultaneously, studies also report cultural revival movements, particularly through language reclamation, traditional festivals, and indigenous education. However, much of the existing literature tends to be descriptive rather than analytical, often lacking a longitudinal or comparative approach. There is also a gap in evaluating the effectiveness of government and NGO-led cultural preservation initiatives. Furthermore, limited research is available on how globalization and digital media are reshaping indigenous cultural expressions. These gaps highlight the need for a comprehensive and critical analysis of cultural preservation efforts among Assam's indigenous communities.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research methodology, relying primarily on **secondary sources** to explore cultural preservation among indigenous ethnic communities in Assam. The use of secondary data is appropriate given the study's focus on synthesizing existing knowledge, analyzing patterns, and identifying gaps in cultural preservation discourse. Sources include scholarly articles, government reports, NGO publications, ethnographic accounts, historical records, and media coverage related to indigenous communities in Assam.

Academic journals and books provide insights into theoretical perspectives and previous research on cultural identity, language loss, and community resistance. Reports from institutions such as the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Assam Government's Cultural Affairs Department, and UNESCO are utilized to understand state and institutional approaches to cultural preservation. NGO publications offer grassroots-level perspectives on revival efforts and challenges faced by specific communities such as the Bodo, Mising, Karbi, and Dimasa.

It also analyzes digital archives, documentaries, and online repositories that document indigenous festivals, oral literature, and traditional practices. Media sources such as newspapers and regional magazines are examined to track public discourse and contemporary developments. Content analysis is employed to interpret and categorize information thematically under areas such as language decline, traditional knowledge, youth engagement, and policy impact.

While relying on secondary data limits the opportunity for real-time community engagement, it allows for a broad and comparative understanding of trends across different groups. The methodology is designed to construct a holistic and critical narrative on cultural preservation and to inform future field-based research and policymaking.

Overview of Indigenous Communities in Assam

Assam, a state in Northeast India, is a melting pot of diverse indigenous ethnic communities who inhabit both the plains and hills. The major indigenous groups include the Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, Tiwa, Sonowal Kachari, and Deori, among others. These communities are geographically dispersed across various districts—Bodos are concentrated in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), Misings along the banks of the Brahmaputra River, Karbis in the Karbi Anglong hills, and Dimasas primarily in Dima Hasao district. Rabhas and Tiwas are scattered across western and central Assam. Together, these groups represent a significant portion of the state's population, and many are recognized as Scheduled Tribes under the Indian Constitution, ensuring certain legal protections and affirmative policies.

Each indigenous group in Assam possesses distinct cultural traits that reflect their historical and ecological backgrounds. Languages spoken by these communities belong to Tibeto-Burman and Austroasiatic language families and are often passed down orally, though some like Bodo and Mising have developed scripts and literature. Traditional attire varies by group and occasion, with handwoven garments symbolizing identity and craftsmanship. Festivals are central to cultural expression—Ali-Aye-Ligang

(Mising), Rongker (Karbi), and Bwisagu (Bodo) celebrate agricultural cycles and reinforce community bonds. Customary practices include animism, ancestor worship, and community rituals, although elements of Hinduism and Christianity have influenced many over time. Oral traditions, such as folktales, myths, and songs, are crucial vehicles for transmitting values, history, and cosmology across generations.

Historically, these communities maintained autonomy through clan-based social structures and indigenous governance systems. Identity formation among these groups was shaped by their interaction with the land, colonial interventions, and post-independence state policies. During British rule, many indigenous areas were designated as "excluded" or "partially excluded," which limited external influence but also led to administrative neglect. Post-independence, identity assertion grew stronger, particularly as indigenous communities demanded political recognition, land rights, and cultural autonomy. The formation of autonomous councils like the Bodoland Territorial Region and Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council reflects this history of negotiation and resistance. Today, identity among these communities is shaped by a blend of tradition, political activism, and cultural revival efforts, making cultural preservation a key part of their struggle for recognition and dignity in modern Assam.

Challenges to Cultural Preservation

The indigenous ethnic communities of Assam face multiple challenges in preserving their cultural heritage, many of which stem from the rapid pace of modernization and globalization. As modern education systems, technological advancements, and urban lifestyles expand across the state, traditional ways of life are increasingly marginalized. Youth from indigenous communities are moving away from traditional occupations, attire, and rituals, often viewing them as outdated or irrelevant in the modern context. The influence of global consumer culture has also contributed to the erosion of indigenous value systems, replacing communal activities with individualistic and commercial aspirations.

Migration and urbanization further compound the issue. As people move to urban centers in search of employment, education, and better living standards, they often detach from their cultural roots. In urban environments, indigenous people tend to assimilate into dominant cultures for economic and social acceptance, which leads to the gradual abandonment of native languages, customs, and traditional practices. This displacement not only weakens intergenerational cultural transmission but also disrupts community networks that are essential for collective cultural activities.

A major concern is the shift in language usage and the accompanying decline in traditional knowledge. Many indigenous languages in Assam are under threat due to the dominance of Assamese, Hindi, and English in education, media, and administration. As younger generations grow up in multilingual environments without formal instruction in their mother tongues, fluency and familiarity with indigenous languages diminish. With language loss comes the disappearance of oral traditions, folklore, agricultural knowledge, and ritual practices, all of which are deeply embedded in the linguistic fabric.

The role of media and state policies further complicates the preservation of indigenous cultures. Mainstream media often fails to represent indigenous voices or portrays them in stereotypical ways, leading

to cultural alienation. External cultural influences, especially from television and the internet, create aspirational identities that often conflict with traditional norms. Meanwhile, state policies have historically prioritized integration and economic development over cultural autonomy. Although constitutional safeguards and autonomous councils exist, their implementation is often inconsistent or politically driven. In many cases, socio-political conflicts, such as ethnic tensions and identity-based movements, have led to violence, displacement, and cultural fragmentation. Together, these factors present serious obstacles to the survival and flourishing of indigenous cultures in Assam.

Discussion

A comparative analysis across Assam's indigenous communities reveals both shared and unique dimensions of cultural preservation. While all groups—such as the Bodo, Mising, Karbi, and Dimasa—face threats from globalization and assimilation, their responses differ based on historical experiences, geographic locations, and institutional support. For instance, the Bodo community has seen greater success in cultural revival due to the institutional backing of the Bodoland Territorial Region, which supports Bodo language education and cultural activities (Baruah, 2003). In contrast, smaller or more dispersed communities like the Rabha and Tiwa struggle with resource limitations and political marginalization, resulting in weaker cultural transmission mechanisms (Devi, 2016).

The intersection of ethnicity, identity, and cultural sustainability is evident in how these communities define and assert themselves in a changing socio-political landscape. Ethnicity serves not only as a marker of cultural distinction but also as a platform for political mobilization and resistance. Cultural preservation, therefore, becomes inseparable from the broader struggle for recognition, autonomy, and rights. As ethnic identities are increasingly politicized, communities find themselves negotiating between preserving tradition and adapting to modern state structures (Nath, 2014). This negotiation often determines the success or failure of cultural sustainability initiatives, with some communities achieving cultural visibility while others remain on the margins.

Youth and women play a pivotal role in this dynamic. While younger generations are often perceived as being detached from traditional values, many are leading cultural revival efforts through digital storytelling, local festivals, and community education programs. Women, particularly in weaving, folklore, and oral traditions, are custodians of intangible cultural heritage. Their involvement in cultural practices ensures continuity and adaptation across generations. For instance, Mising women's role in preserving language and rituals during festivals like Ali-Aye-Ligang illustrates how gender is central to cultural resilience (Devi, 2016). Engaging youth and women through formal and informal platforms can significantly strengthen the cultural fabric of indigenous communities.

To address these complex realities, inclusive and community-driven policy frameworks are essential. Current state interventions often adopt a top-down approach, focusing on welfare rather than empowerment. What is needed instead are participatory models that recognize community agency and invest in grassroots initiatives. Policies should promote mother-tongue education, fund local cultural institutions, and support

digital preservation projects. Such frameworks must be flexible, responsive to specific cultural contexts, and grounded in consultation with the communities themselves. Only through such collaborative strategies can Assam's indigenous cultures thrive in the face of modern challenges.

Conclusion

This study explored the state of cultural preservation among indigenous ethnic communities in Assam, highlighting both the richness of their traditions and the challenges they face in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment. Communities such as the Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Dimasa, and Rabha continue to uphold distinct languages, rituals, festivals, and oral traditions that reflect their deep historical and ecological roots. However, these cultural systems are increasingly under pressure due to modernization, migration, language shift, and limited institutional support. Despite these challenges, indigenous communities have shown remarkable resilience through grassroots revival efforts, youth-led initiatives, and the active role of women in sustaining intangible heritage.

The findings underscore the need for culturally responsive policies that go beyond symbolic recognition to offer tangible support for indigenous identity and continuity. Current governance mechanisms often adopt a top-down approach, focusing on development indicators while sidelining the cultural dimensions of community well-being. There is a pressing need for policy frameworks that are inclusive, participatory, and context-sensitive. Promoting mother-tongue education, funding local cultural initiatives, strengthening autonomous councils, and ensuring equitable representation in decision-making bodies are crucial steps toward cultural sustainability. Moreover, government and non-government institutions must work collaboratively with indigenous groups to protect traditional knowledge, especially in areas related to language, art, land use, and ecological practices.

For future research and action, several directions are recommended. Comparative longitudinal studies can help track cultural change across generations, while ethnographic research could offer deeper insights into the internal dynamics of cultural transmission. Digital documentation and archiving projects can serve both as tools of preservation and platforms for indigenous expression. Researchers should also explore the impact of new media, migration, and education policies on cultural identity among tribal youth. Finally, interventions must be rooted in community needs, recognizing indigenous people not just as subjects of policy but as active agents of cultural preservation. This collaborative and respectful approach will be essential for ensuring that Assam's indigenous cultures continue to thrive in the years to come.

References:

1. Baruah, S. (2003). *Durable disorder: Understanding the politics of Northeast India*. Oxford University Press.
2. Boro, K. (2015). Language shift and maintenance: A sociolinguistic study of Bodo language. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 18(3), 265–275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2014.936820>
3. Deka, M. (2019). Cultural revivalism among the Karbis: A study on youth participation. *Indian Journal of Social Research*, 60(4), 489–502.
4. Devi, L. (2016). Role of women in cultural preservation: A study of Mising community in Assam. *Journal of Tribal Studies*, 10(2), 45–58.
5. Doley, B. (2018). Indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable practices among the Mising tribe of Assam. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 7(3), 29–34.
6. Goswami, M. (2014). Oral traditions of the Rabhas: Preserving intangible heritage through storytelling. *Northeast Cultural Studies*, 5(1), 55–67.
7. Gogoi, B. (2020). Globalization and cultural identity among the Dimasas in Assam. *Social Trends*, 7(2), 118–130.
8. Nath, D. (2014). *Ethnic movements and state response in North East India*. Concept Publishing Company.
9. Narzary, R. (2017). The role of Bodo Sahitya Sabha in cultural preservation. *Journal of Language and Culture*, 8(1), 101–109.
10. Pegu, S. (2021). Language endangerment and revival efforts in Assam: A case study of the Tiwa language. *Language in India*, 21(6), 76–89.
11. Rabha, A. (2016). Challenges of cultural continuity in the Rabha community. *Journal of Northeast Studies*, 4(3), 33–42.
12. Saikia, P. (2022). Urbanization and indigenous displacement in Assam: A socio-cultural perspective. *Indian Anthropologist*, 52(1), 15–27.
13. Sarma, A. (2015). Media representation of indigenous cultures in Assam: Trends and implications. *Media Watch*, 6(3), 348–357. <https://doi.org/10.15655/mw/2015/v6i3/76555>
14. Teron, R. (2020). Ritual and ecological ethics among the Karbis of Assam. *Indian Journal of Indigenous Knowledge*, 12(1), 65–73.