POLITICAL IDENTITY AND CULTURAL PRESENTATION AMONG TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: The present study examines the relationship between political identity and cultural presentation among tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh. The state is characterized by diverse tribal groups with distinct cultural practices and linguistic traditions, where identity is closely associated with culture and community belonging. In recent years, processes of modernization, political participation and increasing use of common languages such as Hindi and English have influenced the ways in which identity is expressed and negotiated. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on field-based data collected through semi-structured interviews, informal discussions and participant observation. Respondents include community elders, youth, students and local opinion leaders from different tribal communities. The findings suggest that political identity in Arunachal Pradesh is not static but continuously shaped through cultural symbols, social interaction and contemporary political processes. Cultural practices function both as markers of tradition and as instruments of political representation. The study concludes that identity formation in the region reflects a process of negotiation between tradition and modernity.

Index Terms — Political Identity, Cultural Presentation, Tribal Communities, Arunachal Pradesh, Qualitative Study.

I. Introduction

Political identity has become an important area of discussion in contemporary social and political studies, particularly in culturally diverse and multi-ethnic societies. Identity is not only shaped by political institutions or administrative structures but is also influenced by cultural practices, social relationships and collective experiences. In many societies, culture functions as an important medium through which individuals and communities understand belonging, representation and participation in political life. As societies undergo processes of modernization, education and social mobility, the relationship between culture and political identity becomes more complex and dynamic. In the context of Northeast India, questions of identity have historically been connected with ethnicity, language, territory and community traditions. The region is characterised by significant cultural diversity where different ethnic groups maintain distinct social practices while simultaneously participating in broader political systems. Scholars have increasingly argued that identity in such contexts should be understood as an evolving process shaped through interaction between traditional institutions and modern political structures. Changes brought by democratic participation, expansion of education and increasing inter-community interaction have contributed to new forms of identity expression across the region.

These transformations have made it necessary to examine how cultural practices continue to influence political identity in contemporary settings. Cultural symbols, social customs and community traditions often remain central to political representation, even as societies adapt to changing social and political realities. Understanding this relationship between culture and political identity becomes particularly significant in regions where cultural diversity forms the foundation of social organisation. In this context, Arunachal Pradesh provides an important setting to examine how political identity is shaped, expressed and negotiated through cultural presentation in everyday social and political life.

1.1 Background of the Study

Arunachal Pradesh represents one of the most culturally diverse regions of Northeast India, where multiple tribal communities coexist with distinct languages, customs, belief systems and social practices. Cultural identity in the state has historically been rooted in tribe, locality and customary institutions, which continue to influence everyday social and political life. The diversity of cultural traditions has not only shaped community relationships but has also played a significant role in defining collective belonging and political participation in the region. Scholars have observed that ethnic identity in Arunachal Pradesh is not a fixed category but evolves through continuous interaction between traditional institutions and modern political structures **(Sen Gupta, 2019).** Historically, many communities in Arunachal Pradesh maintained relatively autonomous socio-political systems based on customary

practices and community authority. However, with the expansion of the modern state and democratic political institutions after independence, traditional forms of governance gradually interacted with new administrative and political arrangements. This transformation contributed to the emergence of new forms of political identity, where cultural belonging became closely linked with representation, recognition and participation in formal political processes. Studies on the transformation of the region have highlighted how state expansion and modern governance reshaped existing social structures while simultaneously encouraging communities to rearticulate their cultural identities in political spaces **(Baruah, 2020; Singh, 2025)**.

In contemporary Arunachal Pradesh, political identity is often expressed through cultural symbols such as festivals, traditional attire, language use and community practices. Culture functions not only as a marker of tradition but also as a medium through which communities assert visibility and legitimacy within the political sphere. Research on identity politics in Northeast India suggests that struggles for recognition and belonging are frequently articulated through ethnic and cultural expressions, especially in multi-ethnic societies where multiple identities coexist **(Haolai, 2022)**. At the same time, processes of modernization, education and increased mobility have brought significant changes in cultural practices and identity formation, particularly among the younger generation. The spread of common languages such as Hindi and English has facilitated communication across tribal groups but has also contributed to gradual shifts in linguistic and cultural practices. Recent studies focusing on youth in Arunachal Pradesh indicate that many young people experience tension between preserving indigenous language and adapting to wider social and economic opportunities, leading to new forms of identity negotiation rather than complete cultural loss **(Rimmo, 2025)**. Furthermore, contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasises that identity in Arunachal Pradesh should be understood as a dynamic and negotiated process rather than a static cultural condition. Cultural expressions, literary developments and social changes in the region reflect ongoing interactions between tradition and modernity, where communities continuously reinterpret their cultural heritage in response to changing socio-political realities **(Kara, 2024).**

Therefore, understanding political identity in Arunachal Pradesh requires examining how cultural presentation operates within political and social contexts. The interaction between culture, politics and modernization has created new spaces where identity is expressed, negotiated and sometimes redefined. This study attempts to explore these processes through a qualitative approach, focusing on how tribal communities present and understand political identity in contemporary Arunachal Pradesh.

1.2 Statement of the Problem
Arunachal Pradesh is characterised by strong cultural diversity where political identity has traditionally been shaped through tribe, customary practices and community belonging. In recent decades, however, rapid social change, expansion of education, democratic political participation and increased interaction with outside societies have influenced the way identity is expressed and understood. Cultural symbols such as language, festivals, dress and traditional practices continue to remain important, but their meanings are increasingly negotiated within modern political and social contexts. Scholars studying ethnic identity in the Northeast have noted that identity formation in the region is undergoing transformation rather than disappearance, as communities adapt to changing political and socio-economic realities **(Baruah, 2020)**.

At the same time, the increasing use of Hindi and English as common languages of communication has created new patterns of interaction among different tribal groups. While this has strengthened inter-community communication and political participation, it has also contributed to concerns regarding weakening of indigenous linguistic and cultural practices, particularly among younger generations. Recent studies focusing on youth and language in Arunachal Pradesh indicate that identity is increasingly shaped by education, employment aspirations and wider social exposure, leading to a complex relationship between cultural continuity and modern adaptation **(Rimmo, 2025).**

Despite these transformations, many existing studies tend to examine cultural identity and political processes separately. Limited attention has been given to understanding how cultural presentation itself becomes a medium through which political identity is constructed, represented and negotiated in everyday political life. As a result, there remains insufficient qualitative understanding of how individuals and communities interpret their political identity through cultural expression in contemporary Arunachal Pradesh.

1.3 Research Gap
Existing literature on Arunachal Pradesh and the wider Northeast region has significantly contributed to understanding ethnicity, tribal politics and cultural diversity. However, most studies have focused either on ethnic movements, governance structures or cultural preservation independently. There is comparatively less research that examines the intersection between political identity and cultural presentation at the community level through qualitative field-based approaches. **Sen Gupta (2019)** highlights the role of education and elite formation in reshaping ethnic identity, while **Haolai (2022)** discusses identity politics in a broader Northeast context; yet detailed empirical studies exploring everyday cultural expression as part of political identity formation in Arunachal Pradesh remain limited.

Furthermore, recent social changes such as language shift, youth mobility and expanding political participation have created new forms of identity negotiation that are still insufficiently documented in academic research. The absence of focused qualitative studies that capture lived experiences, perceptions and cultural meanings creates a gap in understanding how identity operates in contemporary political spaces. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by examining political identity through the lens of cultural presentation, using qualitative field-based data to understand how identity is constructed and negotiated among tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh.

1.4 Research Objectives
The present study aims to examine the relationship between political identity and cultural presentation among tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:
1. To examine the nature and formation of political identity among tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh.
2. To analyse the role of cultural practices and symbols in political representation and public life.
3. To understand how processes of modernization, education and language shift influence identity formation, particularly among the younger generation.

4. To explore how cultural identity is negotiated within contemporary political and social contexts.

1.5 Research Questions

The study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. How is political identity formed and expressed among tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh?
2. In what ways does cultural presentation influence political representation and participation?
3. How do modernization and changing linguistic practices affect cultural and political identity among youth?
4. How do individuals and communities negotiate between traditional cultural values and contemporary political realities?

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Concept of Political Identity

Political identity refers to the way individuals and communities understand themselves in relation to political structures, power relations and collective belonging. In multi-ethnic societies, political identity is often shaped through shared history, cultural practices and social experiences rather than only through formal political institutions. Contemporary scholarship increasingly views identity as dynamic and socially constructed, changing according to social interaction and political context. In the context of Northeast India, identity is frequently linked with ethnicity, territory and cultural recognition, where communities seek representation and visibility within democratic frameworks **(Baruah, 2020).**

Recent studies have argued that political identity should not be understood as fixed or permanent, but as a process that evolves through negotiation between tradition and modern political realities. **Sen Gupta (2019)** observes that in Arunachal Pradesh, the emergence of educated youth and expanding political participation has contributed to new forms of identity articulation, where traditional cultural belonging interacts with modern political aspirations. This perspective is important for understanding identity formation in societies experiencing rapid social change.

2.2 Culture and Political Representation

Culture plays a significant role in shaping political expression, particularly in regions where social organisation is closely connected with community traditions. Cultural symbols such as festivals, dress, rituals and language often become markers through which communities' express collective identity in political spaces. Scholars studying identity politics in Northeast India note that cultural expression frequently functions as a means of asserting recognition and legitimacy within broader political processes **(Haolai, 2022)**.

In Arunachal Pradesh, cultural presentation is visible not only in social life but also in public and political events, where traditional practices are used to represent community identity. Studies on cultural transformation in the region suggest that cultural practices are increasingly reinterpreted in contemporary contexts rather than simply preserved in traditional forms. **Kara (2024)** highlights that cultural expressions in Arunachal Pradesh reflect adaptation and continuity simultaneously, indicating that communities actively reshape cultural meanings in response to social and political change.

2.3 Identity, Language and Social Change in Arunachal Pradesh

Language occupies a central place in identity formation in Arunachal Pradesh due to the presence of multiple tribal dialects. The growing use of Hindi and English as common languages of communication has facilitated inter-community interaction and administrative functioning. However, scholars have also pointed out that language shift may influence cultural transmission and identity perception, especially among younger generations. Research focusing on youth and language preservation in the Tani communities indicates that young people often negotiate between maintaining indigenous linguistic identity and adapting to wider educational and economic opportunities **(Rimmo, 2025).**

At the same time, modernization and increased mobility have contributed to new forms of social interaction that reshape traditional identity boundaries. Studies conducted in the Northeast region show that identity transformation does not necessarily imply cultural loss; rather, it reflects adaptation to changing socio-political conditions **(Baruah, 2020)**. This understanding is important for analysing contemporary political identity in Arunachal Pradesh, where traditional and modern influences coexist.

2.4 Research Gap

Although existing literature has contributed significantly to understanding ethnicity, culture and politics in Arunachal Pradesh and the wider Northeast region, most studies examine these aspects independently. Limited research has explored how cultural presentation itself becomes a medium through which political identity is constructed and communicated in everyday political life. Furthermore, qualitative studies focusing on lived experiences and perceptions of different social groups, particularly youth and community members, remain comparatively limited. Therefore, the present study attempts to bridge this gap by examining political identity through cultural presentation using qualitative field-based data.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology section explains the research design and methods used for conducting the present study. Since the study aims to understand political identity and cultural presentation through experiences, perceptions and social practices, a qualitative research approach has been adopted. The qualitative method allows deeper understanding of social meanings and interpretations associated with identity formation in a culturally diverse society like Arunachal Pradesh.

3.1 Nature of the Study

The present study is qualitative in nature and exploratory as well as descriptive in design. The study focuses on understanding how political identity is formed, expressed and negotiated through cultural practices among tribal communities. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate as the study seeks to analyse social meanings, lived experiences and community perceptions rather than numerical measurement.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of members belonging to different tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh. The respondents include community elders, youth, students and local opinion leaders who are actively engaged in social and cultural activities. A purposive sampling method has been adopted in order to select respondents who possess knowledge and experience related to cultural practices and local political processes. The selection of participants was guided by the objective of obtaining diverse perspectives across age groups and social backgrounds.

3.3 Data and Sources of Data

The study is primarily based on field-based primary data. Data has been collected through:

- Semi-structured interviews with community members and local opinion leaders
- Informal discussions with youth and students
- Participant observation during cultural and social interactions

In addition to primary data, secondary sources such as books, research articles, government reports and previous studies related to Arunachal Pradesh and Northeast India have been used to support analysis and interpretation.

3.4 Method of Data Analysis

The collected data has been analysed using thematic analysis. Responses and observations were carefully examined to identify recurring themes related to political identity, cultural presentation, language use and identity negotiation. The interview transcripts and field notes were organised and coded using qualitative data analysis procedures, and the coding process was assisted by qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA/NVivo) to systematically classify responses and develop themes. The themes were then interpreted in relation to existing literature and theoretical perspectives on identity and culture. This method helped in understanding patterns and meanings emerging from the experiences of respondents.

The following section presents the findings derived from thematic analysis of field data.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented thematically in accordance with the objectives and research questions of the study. The analysis is based on responses collected through interviews, informal discussions and participant observation. The themes emerging from the field data reflect the ways in which political identity and cultural presentation are experienced and interpreted by members of different tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh.

4.1 Theme I: Tribal Identity and Political Belonging
(Related to Objective 1 and Research Question 1)

Objective 1: To examine the nature and formation of political identity among tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh.
Research Question 1: How is political identity formed and expressed among tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh?

This theme emerged from the analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with community elders, local opinion leaders and youth participants. The findings are further supported by informal discussions and observations recorded during community gatherings and cultural interactions. Interview transcripts and field notes were carefully reviewed and coded, and recurring ideas related to tribe, community belonging and political participation were grouped under the present theme.

The analysis indicates that political identity among respondents is strongly associated with tribal affiliation and cultural belonging. Many participants explained political participation in terms of representing community interests rather than individual political ideology. Community elders particularly emphasised that customary practices and collective decision-making continue to influence local political behaviour. These responses suggest that political identity is often understood as an extension of cultural identity.

At the same time, differences were observed between generations. Younger respondents described political identity in broader terms, including education, employment opportunities and regional development. Informal discussions with youth indicated that while tribal identity remains important, political belonging is increasingly influenced by exposure to education and wider social interaction. Participant observation during social events also reflected the continued importance of community symbols in shaping political interaction.

The findings therefore suggest that political identity in Arunachal Pradesh is not static but is continuously shaped through interaction between traditional community structures and contemporary socio-political realities. The theme highlights a process of gradual transition where cultural belonging remains central, but new forms of political understanding are emerging among younger generations.

4.2 Theme II: Cultural Symbols in Political Representation
(Related to Objective 2 and Research Question 2)

Objective 2: To analyse the role of cultural practices and symbols in political representation and public life.
Research Question 2: In what ways does cultural presentation influence political representation and participation?

This theme emerged from the analysis of semi-structured interviews with community members and local opinion leaders, supported by informal discussions with youth participants and participant observation during cultural programmes and public gatherings. During the coding process, repeated references to traditional dress, festivals, rituals and cultural performances in political and public settings were identified and grouped under the present theme.

The analysis indicates that cultural symbols play an important role in expressing community identity within political spaces. Many respondents explained that cultural presentation during public meetings, celebrations and political events reflects unity and collective belonging. Participants noted that the use of traditional attire and cultural performances during public programmes helps communities maintain visibility and recognition in a multi-tribal social environment. These responses suggest that culture functions not only as a representation of heritage but also as a medium of political communication. Participant observation further supported these findings, where cultural elements were frequently integrated into formal and informal political gatherings. Respondents also highlighted that cultural presentation has gradually adapted to contemporary contexts. Cultural practices are increasingly organised and presented in

structured forms during public events, indicating that cultural expression is being reshaped in response to modern political and social expectations rather than remaining unchanged.

The findings therefore demonstrate that cultural presentation in Arunachal Pradesh operates as both a symbolic and practical resource in political representation. Cultural identity is actively performed and communicated in public spaces, reflecting an ongoing interaction between tradition and contemporary political processes.

4.3 Theme III: Language Shift and Identity Negotiation among Youth
(Related to Objective 3 and Research Question 3)

Objective 3: To understand how modernization, education and language shift influence identity formation, particularly among the younger generation.

Research Question 3: How do modernization and changing linguistic practices affect cultural and political identity among youth?

This theme emerged from semi-structured interviews conducted with youth and students, supported by informal discussions and observations recorded during social and educational interactions. During the coding process, recurring responses related to language use, education, communication and cultural belonging were identified and grouped under the present theme. Particular attention was given to how young participants described their relationship with indigenous languages and wider communication practices.

The analysis indicates that language plays a significant role in shaping identity among younger respondents. Many participants acknowledged that Hindi and English have become important for education, employment and interaction with people from different tribal backgrounds. Respondents frequently mentioned that the use of common languages makes communication easier in educational institutions and public spaces. However, at the same time, several participants expressed concern that reduced use of indigenous dialects may affect cultural continuity in the long term. Informal discussions revealed that young people do not necessarily view language change as cultural loss but rather as a practical adjustment to contemporary social realities. Many respondents described their identity as a combination of traditional cultural belonging and modern aspirations. Participant observation also indicated that cultural practices such as festivals and rituals continue to be valued even when everyday communication increasingly takes place in Hindi or English.

The findings therefore suggest that identity formation among youth in Arunachal Pradesh reflects a process of negotiation rather than replacement. Young individuals selectively maintain cultural practices while adapting to modern educational and social environments. This indicates the emergence of hybrid forms of identity where traditional cultural roots coexist with changing linguistic and social practices.

4.4 Theme IV: Negotiating Tradition and Contemporary Political Reality
(Related to Objective 4 and Research Question 4)

Objective 4: To explore how cultural identity is negotiated within contemporary political and social contexts.
Research Question 4: How do individuals and communities negotiate between traditional cultural values and contemporary political realities?

This theme emerged from the combined analysis of semi-structured interviews, informal discussions and participant observation conducted across different social settings. During the coding process, recurring responses related to change, adaptation, preservation of tradition and participation in modern political processes were identified and grouped under this theme. Respondents across different age groups reflected on the need to balance cultural continuity with changing socio-political realities.

The analysis indicates that respondents do not perceive tradition and modernity as opposing forces. Community elders emphasised the importance of preserving customary practices and cultural values for maintaining social cohesion and collective identity. At the same time, many participants acknowledged that participation in contemporary political institutions and administrative systems requires adaptation to new forms of governance and communication. This reflects an ongoing adjustment between inherited cultural norms and modern political expectations. Informal discussions and participant observation further revealed that cultural practices continue to be maintained in social and ceremonial contexts, while political participation increasingly operates through formal democratic structures. Respondents described this process as necessary for ensuring both cultural continuity and social development. Rather than abandoning tradition, communities appear to reinterpret cultural practices in ways that remain meaningful within present political and social conditions.

The findings therefore suggest that political identity in Arunachal Pradesh emerges through a continuous process of negotiation between tradition and contemporary political reality. Cultural identity remains an important foundation, but it is actively reshaped through interaction with modern education, governance and social change. This process results in flexible and adaptive forms of identity that allow communities to maintain cultural distinctiveness while engaging with broader political structures.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study examined the relationship between political identity and cultural presentation among tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh through a qualitative approach. The findings of the study indicate that political identity in the region is closely connected with cultural belonging, community practices and shared social experiences. However, political identity cannot be understood as fixed or unchanging. Instead, it reflects a dynamic process shaped by interaction between traditional cultural structures and contemporary socio-political developments.

The study shows that cultural presentation continues to play an important role in political representation and public life. Cultural symbols such as festivals, traditional dress and community practices function not only as expressions of heritage but also as mediums through which communities assert recognition and participation within political spaces. At the same time, processes of modernization, education and increasing use of common languages have influenced identity formation, particularly among younger generations. The findings suggest that these changes do not necessarily result in cultural loss, but rather in the emergence of adaptive and negotiated forms of identity. An important contribution of the study lies in highlighting that identity in Arunachal Pradesh is shaped through negotiation between continuity and change. Communities attempt to preserve cultural distinctiveness while simultaneously engaging with modern political institutions and social realities. This interaction produces flexible forms of political identity that allow individuals and communities to maintain cultural roots while responding to contemporary challenges.

The study also suggests the need for greater attention towards cultural preservation initiatives, particularly in relation to indigenous languages and local cultural practices, while recognising the practical importance of social and educational mobility. Future research may further explore comparative perspectives across different tribal communities or examine the role of digital communication and media in shaping contemporary identity formation in the region.

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