



Exploring In-Group Bias and Its Implications for Tribal Political Behaviour in Modern Democracies: The Case of Tripura

Monika Molsom¹ & Vanlalmuana Darlong²

Abstract:

This article examines how in-group bias shapes tribal political behaviour within modern democracies, focusing on Northeast India and particularly the state of Tripura. Drawing from social identity theory, postcolonial frameworks, and contemporary studies of digital politics, it analyses how historical marginalisation and cultural distinctiveness generate strong group cohesion, collective memory, and identity-based mobilisation. Among tribal communities, in-group bias often serves as a psychological and cultural defence mechanism against perceived existential, political, and economic threats. However, it simultaneously empowers these communities by fostering self-determination, democratic participation, and collective identity assertion. The analysis also explores how digital technologies reinforce ethnic consciousness, facilitate mobilisation, and cultivate “virtual tribes” that amplify narratives of belonging and exclusion. The study concludes that while identity-based politics can enhance democratic inclusion and representation, it also risks deepening social fragmentation and polarisation if not aligned with inclusive and dialogic democratic frameworks.

Keywords: In-group bias, Tribal politics, Identity politics, Political Psychology, Indigenous mobilisation, Modern democracy.

Introduction

Democratic theory has long envisioned the citizen as a rational, autonomous actor engaged in the pursuit of impartial collective interests. Yet, real-world political behaviour is deeply infused with affect, memory, and the psychological necessity of belonging (Huddy, 2001). Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the politics of tribal and indigenous communities, whose identities are shaped by centuries of survival, resistance, and negotiation with power. Tribal politics rests on a foundation of shared ancestry, territory, customs, and collective remembrance characteristics that differentiate tribal identities from other social groupings and imbue them with existential intensity. In-group bias, understood as a preference for one's

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Tripura University, Email ID- monika.polscience@tripurauniv.ac.in

² Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Tripura University, Email ID- vmuanadarlong@tripurauniv.ac.in



own community and a tendency to regard out-groups with suspicion or competition, animates much of this political behaviour. Far from a mere psychological relic, in-group bias for communities marginalised by colonial and postcolonial structures is a strategic orientation, reinforcing solidarity, group self-worth, and demands for recognition and justice (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Brewer, 1999). This article situates its analysis within India's Northeast, a region marked by ethnic diversity, historical contestation, and dynamic patterns of migration and land transformation. Tripura, once a tribal-majority kingdom and now a site of demographic inversion, offers a unique lens through which to explore the interplay of collective memory, insurgency, and democratic assertion. With the advent of digital technologies, tribal identity assertion has transmuted into new forms. Social media not only facilitates mobilisation but also cultivates virtual "tribes," echo chambers, and digital narratives of resistance and pride (Lim, 2017; Pariser, 2011). This phenomenon, termed digital tribalism, adds a contemporary layer to traditional patterns of in-group cohesion. By weaving together social psychology, indigenous theory, and empirical case studies, this article assesses how in-group bias shapes not just political behaviour but the broader prospects for inclusion, contestation, and pluralist democracy.

Theoretical Foundations

Social Identity Theory

Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT) emphasises that group membership contributes profoundly to one's self-concept, emotional well-being, and behaviour. Through the process of categorisation, identification, and comparison, even artificially constructed groups display preference for in-group members and derogation of out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In tribal contexts, group boundaries are far from nominal; they extend into domains of language, territory, cosmology, and generations of historical experience. This intensity elevates in-group bias from a cognitive tendency to a lived political practice, crucial in contexts where external threats or trauma are prominent (Brewer, 1999).

Postcolonial and Indigenous Frameworks

Postcolonial theory underscores the political construction of identity, situating tribal and indigenous consciousness within a history of domination, stereotyping, and state-driven marginalisation (Chakrabarty, 2000; Guha, 1999). Colonial ethnography often 'fixed' tribal identity, while postcolonial states have reproduced notions of backwardness and paternalistic governance. Indigenous frameworks, however, foreground epistemic sovereignty the right of communities to define their own ways of knowing, governing,



and belonging (Smith, 2012; Coulthard, 2014). Within this context, in-group bias becomes resistance rather than exclusion, a strategic response to cultural erosion and territorial dispossession.

Digital Tribalism- Digital tribalism refers to the reformation of ethnic and cultural belonging within online environments. Social media platforms allow dispersed members to create symbolic bonds, circulate narratives, and mobilise around group identity (Lim, 2017). Algorithms tend to cluster users by interest and affiliation, intensifying emotional bonds and sometimes antagonism towards “other” communities, particularly when narratives of grievance, pride, or trauma are prevalent (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). In Northeast India, the phenomenon of digital tribalism has enabled youth-driven activism, online cultural preservation, and rapid political communication, but also significant echo chamber effects.

Tribal Politics in Modern Democracies

Global Indigenous Movements

Across liberal democracies, tribal politics centres on demands for land rights, political autonomy, cultural revival, representation, and historical justice. The Native American movements in the US, the Māori assertion in New Zealand, and the Aboriginal protests in Australia reflect the global momentum of indigenous self-determination (Niezen, 2003; Kymlicka, 2007; Smith, 2012). These movements derive their strength from robust in-group bias, which enables collective action, mobilisation, and negotiation with state structures. Land rights are often the non-negotiable core of indigenous mobilisation, as territories anchor not just economies but cosmologies, identity, and spiritual life. Cultural preservation, including the revitalisation of endangered languages, artistic traditions, and ceremonies, further amplifies group cohesion. Political autonomy, sought through recognition, self-governing councils, or federal arrangements, ensures representation and voice. Transitional justice initiatives such as treaty settlements, public apologies, and reparative commissions address the legacies of historical trauma and seek redress.

These dynamics are seen in movements such as the Standing Rock Sioux’s resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline (land and environment). Māori struggle for treaty recognition and language revival. The Uluru Statement from the Heart in Australia for constitutional inclusion.

Tribal Identity in India

India’s tribal politics are complex and multi-layered, reflecting diverse historical trajectories and contemporary pressures. The Scheduled Tribe (ST) classification, defined and catalogued through colonial and postcolonial processes, comprises hundreds of distinct communities with unique languages, customs,



and territorial claims (Karlsson, 2011). Tribal communities in India have often mobilised for customary land rights, resisting state-driven displacement associated with resource extraction, developmental projects, and the expansion of settlements (Guha, 1999). Resistance manifests in various forms from social movements and legal litigation to insurgency and negotiation for federal autonomy. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which grants autonomy to certain tribal areas in the Northeast, represents an institutional response to demands for self-governance and protection of customary law. Cultural revival, including efforts to document folklore, festivals, and traditional knowledge systems, operates both as empowerment and political claim-making (Chatterjee, 2020).

The Northeast region stands out as a landscape of “ethnic laboratories,” shaped by colonial cartography, migration, militarisation, and nationalist movements. States such as Nagaland, Mizoram, and Tripura reveal distinct patterns of tribal assertion, often triggered by demographic transformations, resource contestation, and the historical experiences of armed conflict and peace negotiation.

The Case of Tripura

Tripura’s political landscape is a vivid illustration of how demographic shifts produce identity assertion and in-group bias. The state, once a tribal-majority kingdom under the Manikya dynasty, underwent a dramatic transformation in the mid-20th century as refugees fled the Partition and post-independence violence in neighbouring regions. Massive migration resulted in dramatic demographic inversion, making tribals a minority in their own land and heightening perceptions of marginalisation and cultural loss. This context fuelled waves of insurgency, ethnic mobilisation, and, more recently, democratic assertion. The rise of the Tipra Motha party and the consolidation of the “TIPRASA” identity reflect renewed efforts at unification and political voice. The demand for “Greater Tipraland” encompassing constitutional guarantees, land protection, and cultural autonomy demonstrates how historical memory informs current mobilisation. The movement is characterised by Youth-led mobilisation, particularly via social media and digital platforms. Assertion of cultural heritage, including language, festivals, and historical narratives. Court battles and public demonstrations for constitutional safeguards and greater political representation. The interplay of emotional attachment, collective trauma, and strategic mobilisation exemplifies how in-group bias is both shaped by and shapes the political possibilities for Tripura’s tribal communities.



In-Group Bias and Tribal Political Behaviour

Community Solidarity and Emotional Identity

In-group bias is a crucial factor in building and sustaining community solidarity among tribal groups. Shared rituals such as festivals, traditional rites, and collective commemorations reinforce emotional bonds and create group boundaries salient to political mobilisation. Symbols, language, and folklore become repositories of collective memory, acting not just as cultural markers but as rallying points for political action (Fearon & Laitin, 2000). Politically, these solidarity networks translate into loyalty toward community-centric parties and leaders. Decision-making, voting behaviour, and resource assertions frequently prioritise in-group benefit over national or class-based claims. Emotional mobilisation around cultural symbols flag, ancestry, origin myths often catalyse grassroots movements and electoral performance.

Democratic Participation and Representation

Notably, identity-driven mobilisation can have positive implications for democratic participation. Increasing tribal presence in legislatures, local councils, and federated autonomous bodies reflects the transformative impact of in-group Cohesion. Such inclusion not only diversifies institutional representation but empowers communities long denied voice and agency (Chatterjee, 2020). In Tripura and Northeast India, expansion of tribal representation is seen in the rise of indigenous parties, reserved political seats, and participation in policy-making structures. The strategic use of group bias transforms previously disenfranchised populations into active contributors to democratic discourse. This also offers psychological benefits, collective dignity, recognition, and restoration of historical pride.

Digital Mobilisation and Echo Chambers

Social media platforms Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram have revolutionised tribal political mobilisation. Youth-driven movements employ digital spaces to share cultural pride, historical memory, demands for autonomy, and critiques of the dominant narratives. Crowdsourced documentation of oral histories, online cultural festivals, and digital advocacy campaigns collectively enhance community resilience and visibility (Lim, 2017). However, the algorithms that organise these platforms tend to intensify in-group bias by clustering individuals in echo chambers. Such clustering magnifies grievances, narrows dialogue, and may accelerate antagonism or mistrust with out-groups. The digital environment, while enabling solidarity, can



also stifle open discourse and constructive engagement across ethnic and cultural boundaries (Sunstein, 2017).

Democratic Implications

In-group bias among tribal and indigenous communities is instrumental in empowering those historically marginalised within democratic frameworks. Its primary impacts include: Enhanced political participation and representation for formerly excluded communities (Huddy, 2001). Strengthened bargaining power in federal or multicultural democracies, as unified voices negotiate more effectively for rights and resources (Chakrabarty, 2000). Preservation of cultural heritage languages, customs, knowledge systems is crucial for collective dignity and resilience against majoritarian homogenisation (Smith, 2012). Psychological empowerment through restoration of pride and identity, countering centuries of colonial stigma and postcolonial neglect.

Challenges

Yet, the ascendancy of identity mobilisation brings attendant risks: Heightened inter-ethnic polarisation and erosion of trust, particularly where resources or territorial claims are contested (Fearon & Laitin, 2000) political fragmentation, as emotional populism crowds out issue-based policy debate and consensus-building. Echo chamber dynamics and algorithmic clustering propagate misinformation and intensify identity-driven populism (Pariser, 2011). Risks of emotional politics overshadowing rational policy discourse, making governance more difficult and divisive. The democratic challenge, therefore, is not to suppress identity but to transform its mobilising energy into frameworks of pluralism, reciprocity, and constructive contestation. Institutional innovations dialogic platforms, intercultural education, shared governance structures are vital for harmonising group assertion with the broader imperatives of democratic stability.

Conclusion

In-group bias is both a psychological impulse and a deeply political response to exclusion, trauma, and hope for justice. For tribal communities in modern democracies, the lived experience of marginalisation transforms group attachment from mere sentiment to a vehicle for collective agency and negotiation. The Indian Northeast, and Tripura in particular, dramatize how demographic change, memory, and mobilisation produce new political realities, from insurgency and unrest to digital activism and democratic assertion. The digital age has magnified the emancipatory and divisive potentials of identity politics. Virtual tribalism



allows previously dispersed communities to connect, mobilise, and narrate shared experiences on an unprecedented scale. But it also risks echo chambers, polarisation, and the narrowing of perspective. Ultimately, the future of democratic harmony in multicultural societies depends on balancing in-group assertion with pluralistic dialogue, inclusive frameworks, and mutual recognition. This shift requires not just institutional reform but affective education, intercultural engagement, and the cultivation of a shared political imagination that honours both difference and commonality. For policymakers, the implications are clear: sustainable democracy is not built on suppressing in-group bias but rather on harnessing its energies for inclusion, representation, and mutual dignity. The experience of Tripura and Northeast India offers valuable lessons on both the promises and perils of identity mobilisation. In enabling both participation and division, in-group bias calls for critical engagement, structural innovation, and the persistent nurturing of trust across boundaries.

References

- Brewer, M. B. (1999). *The psychology of prejudice: In-group love or out-group hate?* Journal of Social Issues, 55(3), 429–444.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference.* Princeton University Press.
- Chatterjee, P. (2020). *I am the people: Reflections on popular sovereignty today.* Columbia University Press.
- Coulthard, G. S. (2014). *Red skin, white masks: Rejecting the colonial politics of recognition.* University of Minnesota Press.
- Fearon, J., & Laitin, D. (2000). *Violence and the social construction of ethnic identity.* International Organisation, 54(4), 845–877.
- Guha, R. (1999). *Savaging the civilized: Verrier Elwin, his tribals, and India.* University of Chicago Press.
- Huddy, L. (2001). *From social to political identity: A critical examination of social identity theory.* Political Psychology, 22(1), 127–156.
- Karlsson, B. G. (2011). *Unruly hills: Nature and nation in India's Northeast.* Berghahn Books.
- Kymlicka, W. (2007). *Multicultural odysseys: Navigating the new international politics of diversity.* Oxford University Press.
- Lim, M. (2017). *Freedom to hate: social media, algorithmic enclaves, and the rise of tribal nationalism in Indonesia.* Critical Asian Studies, 49(3), 411–427.



- Niezen, R. (2003). *The origins of indigenism: Human rights and the politics of identity*. University of California Press.
- Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the internet is hiding from you*. Penguin Press.
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.

Publisher's Note: *The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the publisher or editorial board. The publisher assumes no responsibility for any consequences arising from the use of information contained herein.*

