NAVIGATING THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RACE AND ETHNICITY WITHIN ASSAM'S INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES: UNRAVELING IDENTITY, INDIGENEITY, AND BELONGINGNESS

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1. Introduction

The state of Assam is nestled in the northeastern part of India along the banks of the Brahmaputra River, sharing borders with Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan, Nagaland, Bangladesh, Tripura, Mizoram and Meghalaya. As such, the state is home to numerous communities and races that are intricately woven into its multifaceted identity. Assam's demographic is thus a complex amalgamation of diverse racial and ethnic identities that collectively contribute to its rich and vibrant cultural heritage. The state's cultural diversity is deeply rooted in the multiple sociopolitical waves brought by monarchy, colonialism, migration and revolutionary movements. The concept of social and political identities of these indigenous communities are rather controversial topics that require extensive research and multiple perspectives. The state houses diverse indigenous groups such as Bodo, Rabha, Karbi, Mishimi and Miri who coexist while having certain distinct cultural identities (Assam State Portal, 2023). On that account, the notion of identity portrays an exotic tapestry with the amalgamation of multiple racial stocks such as Aryan, Indo-Iranian, Mongoloid and Indo-Burmese. The present study embarks on a quest to explore the intricacies of culture and unravel the layers of identity by focusing on "indigeneity" as the central topic. This research will focus on a meta-analysis approach to collect relevant data and information on the topic.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Historical Overview of Identity, Belongingness, Indigeneity and Rights in Assam

The history of Assam traces back to the pre-colonial period when the state was home to diverse indigenous tribes sharing distinct identity traits. The historical influence of the "Ahom

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Dynasty" which ruled the state for about six centuries is heavily felt by contemporary communities through folktales and myths (Chadha, 2019). The identity and territoriality of Assamese tribes are significantly influenced by colonial rule which began in the early nineteenth century. The colonial period was a milestone that changed the outlook of identity and territorial belongingness in Assam, with Bengali labourers migrating to the state to work in tea gardens. The large-scale migration of Bengali labourers brought considerable demographic changes in Assam and caused agitation among indigenous communities. As divulged by Baruah (2003), the "Assam Movement" that originated in 1979 and continued till 1985 was particularly influenced by the pent-up anger among communities regarding illegal immigration and violation of indigenous rights. In the post-colonial era, numerous controversies originated questioning the controversial identities of Assamese residents who illegally migrated from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Hence, the very notion of identity has been a topic of significant debate when it comes to the indigenous communities of Assam.

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The concept of identity and belongingness is a broad topic that encompasses diverse perspectives. Narrowing down literary evidence to demarcate the ideologies of the Assamese population can be quite challenging; however, significant bodies of literature can be found that highlight the way different tribal populations view their identities. To study the notion of belongingness and community in Assam, Kikon (2017) conducted ethnographic fieldwork along the foothills of Nagaland and Assam to collect everyday accounts of indigenous or "adivasi" villagers in a "militarised landscape". The research focuses on Adivasi accounts from a historical perspective to generate insights into how alliances between communities led to the formation of ethnic identities. The author drew conclusions from the fieldwork conducted between 2007 and 2011 regarding ethnographic articulations of belongingness and the political experiences of

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communities. Kikon (2017) identifies three essential aspects of identity and belongingness from his fieldwork: the political discourse of indigeneity, the constituents of belongingness and social relations based on solidarity.

2.2. The political integration of Assamese societies in the pre-colonial and the post-colonial period

Assam was an individual region mainly characterised by several small kingdoms and diversified ethnic communities in the pre-colonial era before 1826. It has been observed that the "Ahom Dynasty" ruled this particular province for centuries and played a pivotal role in integrating several ethnic groups within the region to form civil societies (Chadha, 2019). The kings of the "Ahom Dynasty" promoted the Assamese language, built a centralised administrative system and fortified a particular sense of Asammes' identity. The huge expansion of the Ahom kingdom led the administrators to split the entire kingdom into numerous indigenous communities into the broad Assamese political framework and culture.

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The Assam province came under the control of the British colonial government in 1826. British administrators gradually consolidated their control over the Assam region which led to political and social changes in this region. The new policy and social norms introduced by the British government in Assam had a significant impact on the social fabric of this region. The introduction of railway projects, tea plantation culture, and multiple infrastructural development projects influenced and attracted people from other parts of India to Assam which enhanced diversity in the population (Sharma, 2020). The integration of social communities in Assam accelerated after the independence of India in 1947. The "state of Assam" was formed in the year 1947 and brought different ethnic communities under the single state government administration.

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During this period, a significant challenge arose resulting from the tensions that built among native Assamese speakers against those who migrated from Bengal and parts of present-day Bangladesh.

The research of Das (2012) points out that the colonial interests of administration and economy had a substantial impact on the territorial reorganisation of Assamese indigenous communities. During the colonial period, Assam witnessed a rise of Hindu and Muslim Bengalis alongside the emergence of Marwari communities and tribes from central provinces. Through the rise of ethnic pluralism in the state, indigenous communities of Assam started demanding the preservation of social identity through movements. Since the pre-colonial period, Assam has been home to diverse ethnic groups; however, the need to preserve autonomous identities during the post-colonial period led to the demand for separate states. This demand was essentially put forth by the "All Tribal Organisation" (ATO) and the "All Party Hill Leaders Conference" (APHLC) as a voice against making Assamese the official language of the state (Gogoi & Gogoi, 2022). This incident again questioned the notion of identity and indigeneity among the tribes of Assam, a conflict that increased in the coming years with more people migrating to the state.

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2.3. Research Gap

Although existing literature on the research topic provided some crucial insights into the notion of identity and ethnicity among Assam's indigenous communities, limited studies have focused on exploring the intersectionality of race and ethnicity. The present research will essentially focus on understanding the intersection between the identity attributes and explore the notions of identity, belongingness and indigeneity.

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2.4. Research Objectives

This research will primarily investigate the intersectionality of race and ethnicity among Assam's indigenous communities and explore the question of belongingness and indigeneity to analyse the evolution of identity crisis. The following objectives will be used to address the research aim:

1. To examine the historical and socio-cultural context of race and ethnic identity in Assam's indigenous communities.
2. To assess the impact of regulatory frameworks and government policies on the identity, belongingness and indigeneity of Assamese communities.
3. To investigate the process of identity formation in Assam's indigenous communities and understand the impact of urbanisation and globalisation.
4. To expound on the "intersectionality" of race and ethnic identities based on different social markers of identity.

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2.5. Research Questions

- ***RQ1:*** How have historical events and sociocultural factors shaped the concepts of ethnic and racial identity within the indigenous communities of Assam?
- ***RQ2:*** To what extent did government policies, regulatory frameworks and political interventions influence the "identity, belongingness and indigeneity" of Assamese communities?
- ***RQ3:*** How did urbanisation and globalisation influence the formation of identity and belongingness in Assam's indigenous communities?

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- ***RQ4:*** How do social markers of identity intersect with race and ethnicity to contribute to the identity formation of communities in Assam?

2.6. Hypothesis

- ***H0:*** Governmental policies and legislative regulations do not have an influence on the racial and ethnic identities of Assamese indigenous communities.
- ***H1:*** Governmental policies and legislative regulations have a significant influence on the racial and ethnic identities of Assamese indigenous communities.
- ***H0:*** The intersectionality of "race and ethnicity" with social identity markers does not have an impact on the notions of identity formation, territoriality and belongingness among Assam's indigenous communities.
- ***H2:*** The intersectionality of "race and ethnicity" with social identity markers does have a significant impact on the notions of identity formation, indigeneity and belongingness among Assam's indigenous communities.

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3. Research Methodology

3.1. Theories

The study is going to focus on indigeneity, belongingness, race, ethnicity and social evolution in the Assam region of North-East India. In this regard, the theoretical concept of social constructionism is realistic in the evolution of society with respect to time. As per the studies of Rees et al., (2020), social constructionism refers to a sociological theory that mainly points out that ethnicity, race, gender and other social characteristics are not biologically determined or inherent but rather constructed by cultural and social influence. Specifically, these

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categories are created by humans while shaped by historical, societal and cultural influence. As per the views of Ingram et al., (2019), social constructionism argues that the differences between distinct ethnic and racial communities are not dependent on the genetic inherent differences; however, these differences are the product of power dynamics and social interactions. Henceforth, the relationship between different racial and ethnic groups can be reshaped over time depending on the renegotiation and redefining of social meanings. Social practices over time legitimise social discrimination, hierarchies and inequality. These socially constructed discriminations and inequalities can be addressed and reduced through equitable and including political, cultural and administrating outcomes.

"Critical Race Theory" (CRT) is another critical theory that sheds light on the social discrimination and intersection between trace, ethnicity and other societal factors. It evaluates both social and legal frameworks that assess the pervasive role of systematic racism in communities. As per the consideration of Rufo (2021), "Critical Race Theory" argues that racism is deeply integrated into social institutions and overall structure rather than considering it as individual bias. It concentrates on the historical nature of the social racism that influences the control of "power and privilege" based on the intersection of race. Intersectionality is the key perspective of the CRT which acknowledges that individuals can face discrimination based on gender, class, race and other social factors. Thus, CRT is considered a critical tool for addressing and understanding systematic "racial injustice".

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3.2. Theoretical framework

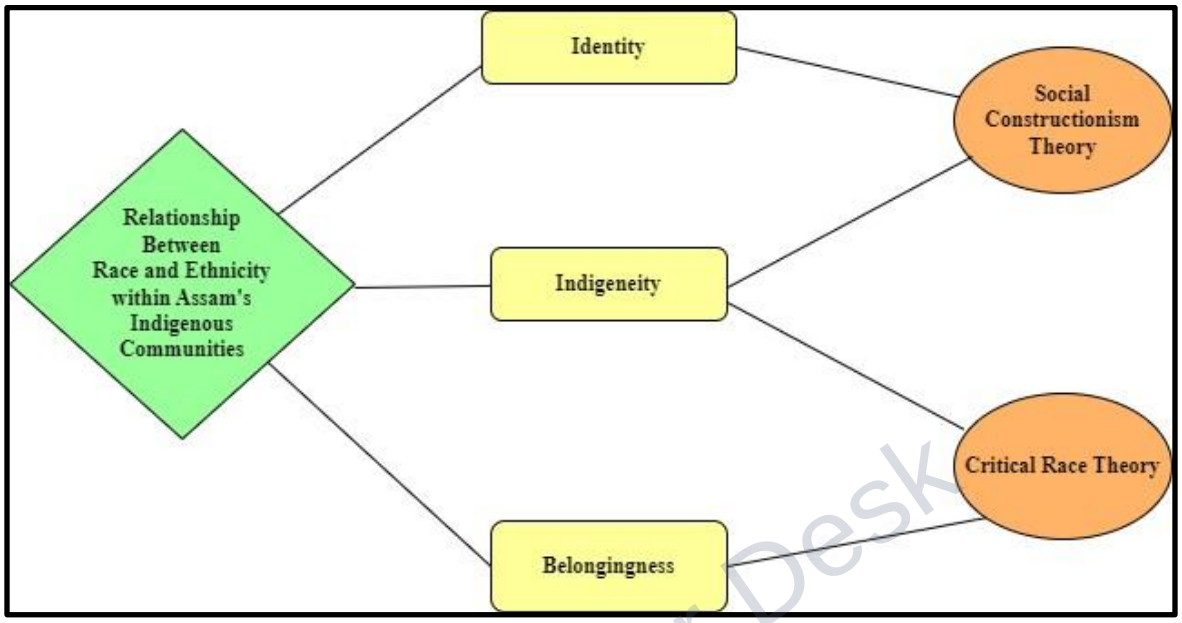


Figure 3.2.1: Theoretical Framework

(Source: self-developed)

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3.3. Approach to the Problem

The research seeks to investigate the impact of sociocultural, historical, and political factors on the identities of Assam's indigenous people along with assessing the senses of their beliefs in an evolving and diverse social landscape. Henceforth, finding out the complex relationship and intersectionality between ethnicity and race within Assam's indigenous communities has been identified as a multifaceted problem. It is important to select the most suitable approach for the research to obtain maximum meaningful information and find out construction answers against the articulated research questions. As opined by Young et al., (2020), deductive research approaches help in finding meaningful insights by collecting relevant information and assessing articulated hypotheses. Therefore, the deductive approach will be

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followed in this sturdy to minimise the recognised problem. Two hypotheses have already been constructed against the null hypothesis based on the existing theoretical concept to test them with the help of analysing collected data. It will help in gathering relevant information to meet research objectives by minimising the research problem.

3.4. Data Collection

Collecting authentic and relevant information on the research topic is considered one of the most crucial parts of the research methodology in terms of accomplishing research objectives. As per the studies of Sileyew (2019), data collection can be broadly categorised into two parts, namely primary data collection and secondary data collection based on the data source. Primary data is collected directly from participants through surveys and interviews. On the contrary, secondary data is gathered from existing secondary sources such as journals, articles and websites. Furthermore, data can be divided into two segments qualitative and quantitative based on the ability to express in numeric value. Here, the researcher will follow the secondary qualitative data collection method to collect adequate qualitative information from existing secondary sources. Here, PICO and PRISMA frameworks will be used along with specific inclusion-exclusion criteria to select the study systematically by incorporating meta-analysis. An empirical metanalysis will be conducted to select relevant studies to collect valid information on the research topic.

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3.5. Data Analysis

It is necessary to choose the most suitable approach for analysing collected data for synthesising key findings efficiently. Therefore, the accomplishment of research objectives majorly depends on the procedure of data analysis. As opined by Grodal et al., (2021),

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qualitative data analysis helps in evaluating the key concept of the study according to the articulated research objectives by focusing on evidence-based authentic data. Thus, qualitative analysis will be conducted here to synthesise key findings based on specific themes that follow the research questions.

3.6. Scope of the study

Assam is considered one of the most diverse states situated in North-East India in terms of cultural context, race, ethnicity and indigenous belongingness. The political, administrative, regulatory and societal factors significantly changed the unravelling of indigeneity, identity, and belongingness throughout the years. However, the people of India merely know about the intersection of race and ethnicity and diversity among the indigenous communities present in Assam. Therefore, the study has an enormous scope to gather and assemble relevant information on the research topic to develop a better insight into Assam's indigenous people, and cultural and societal aspects. Besides this, there is a significant scope for exploring the eventual evolution of the social, historical and cultural context associated with Assam.

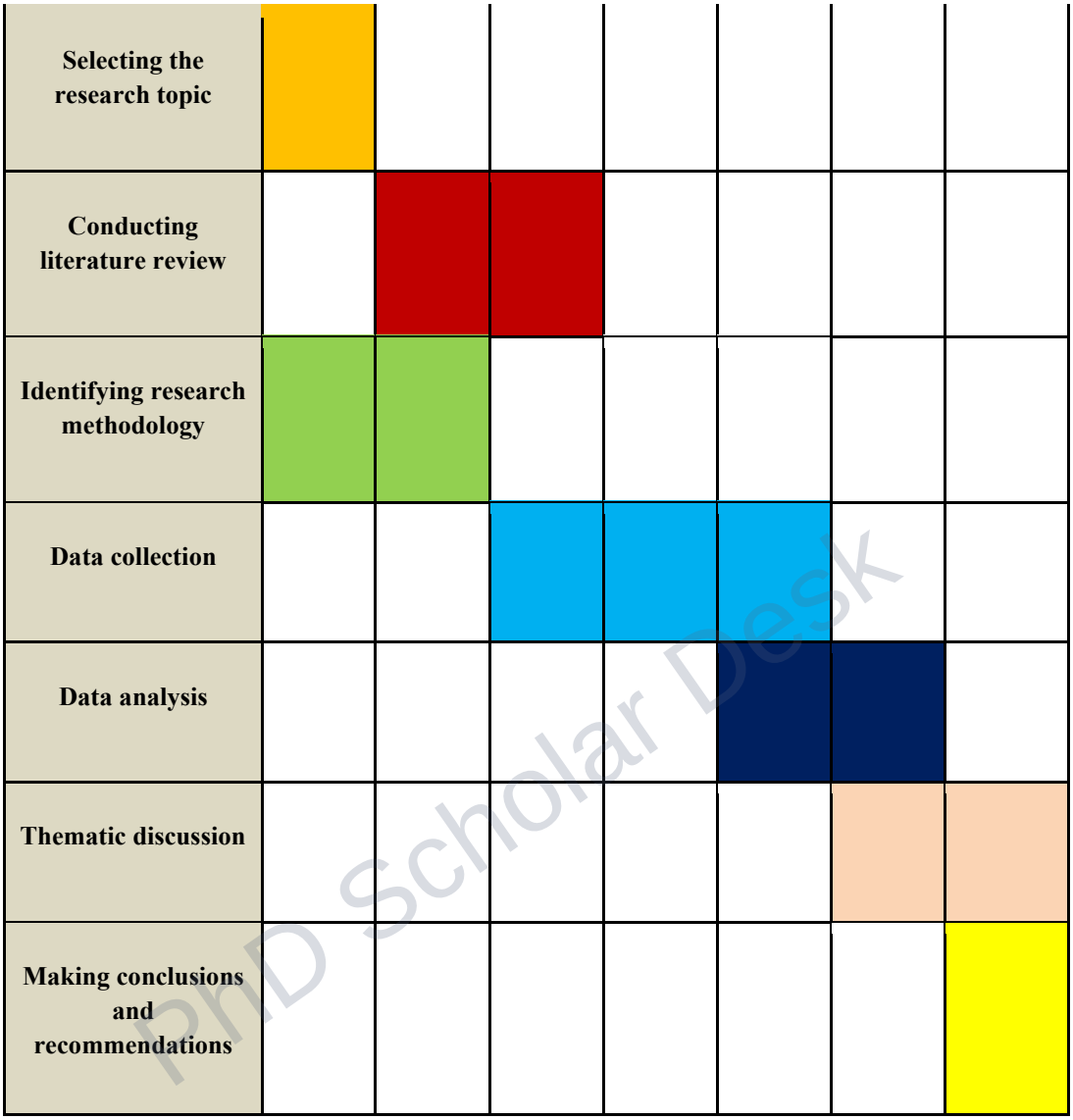
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3.7. Research Timeline

An overall time of 7 weeks has been estimated to complete the whole research and draw meaningful conclusions on the research topic.

Activities	1st week	2nd week	3rd week	4th week	5th week	6th week	7th week

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Figure 3.7.1: Research timeline

(Source: Self-developed)

3.8. Research Significance

Assam is one of the most significant regions in India that is known for its indigenous and diverse groups with distinct historical, cultural and racial attributes (Biswas & Das, 2023). Therefore, understanding the differences and inclusiveness between race and ethnicity of

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Indigenous people is important to identify the intersection of integrity, and belongingness in Assam. The research will cover policy and administrative implications throughout the years including pre-colonial and post-colonial eras. Along with this, social cohesion will be illustrated while considering the evolving portrait of the social-cultural perspectives in Assam. Henceforth, the study is valid and significant as it will provide in-depth insights into unravelling the belongingness and identity of the indigenous people of Assam along with racial and ethnic intersections, and social, historical and political aspects.

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