



Contested indigeneity: Hybrid categories and the politics of tribe recognition in Nagaland

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Abstract

This paper examines the contested recognition of the Rongmei as an “indigenous Naga tribe” in Nagaland, situating the debate within broader anthropological and political discussions on indigeneity and Scheduled Tribe (ST) status in India. Drawing on the 2012 recognition and its subsequent withdrawal in 2017, the study highlights how competing claims by tribal councils and civil society organizations reveal the ambiguities and tensions inherent in defining indigeneity. While opponents framed recognition as a threat to resource distribution and the rights of dominant tribes, the Rongmei emphasized historical misidentification, cultural affinity, and political marginalization. The paper argues that these contestations produce hybrid categories that conflate global discourses of indigenous rights with local frameworks of affirmative action. By analysing the interplay of legal criteria, historical narratives, and material interests, the study demonstrates that indigeneity in Nagaland is negotiated, and deeply tied to state politics. Ultimately, the case demonstrates how indigeneity functions both as a powerful tool for marginalized groups and as a site of exclusion, reflecting the complexities of identity-making in contemporary Northeast India.

Keywords: Scheduled tribe, indigeneity, tribe recognition

Introduction

In 2012, the Government of Nagaland recognised the Rongmei as an “indigenous Naga tribe” of the state, allowing the issuing of Scheduled Tribe certificates (STCs) and Indigenous Inhabitant certificates (IICs) to those whose names appeared in the 1963 electoral roll. This decision, however, sparked intense opposition from major tribal councils based in Nagaland, who argued that the Rongmei did not meet the criteria of indigeneity. They opposed the recognition by arguing that the Rongmei tribe’s demand for an “Indigenous Naga tribe” status was not genuine and ‘demanded for the immediate de-recognition of the Rongmei tribe as a Tribe of Nagaland’ [1]. After mounting pressure on the government from opposing tribal councils and civil society organisations, the government in 2017, withdrew the recognition of the Rongmei as an “indigenous Naga tribe” of Nagaland, while stating that they would continue to enjoy the benefits of an “indigenous inhabitant”. The Rongmei belong to the Naga ethnic group, and can be found living in the Northeastern states of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland in India. Their legal recognition, however, varies across these states. The Rongmei are recognised as a Scheduled Tribe in Assam and Manipur, but not in Nagaland, where they lack official rights despite residing there. In Nagaland, they can be found living particularly in the rural areas of Peren district and in the urban centres of Kohima and Dimapur.

Recognition as an indigenous Naga tribe in Nagaland entails significant rights, including land ownership rights, access to reservation benefits in state employment and education, and eligibility to contest elections in reserved constituencies. For the Rongmei, who settled in Nagaland prior to 1963 – the year it attained statehood – there exists no alternative mechanism to obtain Scheduled Tribe certificates for employment and education, either within the state or beyond. Consequently, members of the community are excluded from the constitutional provisions of affirmative action not only in Nagaland but across India. The question

of recognition, therefore, assumes critical importance for the Rongmei in securing both legal entitlements and socio-political inclusion.

The debate over the recognition of the Rongmei tribe has revolved around the themes of indigeneity and Scheduled Tribe status, highlighting the varied interpretations attached to these concepts. This paper seeks to analyse how different claims-makers have understood and articulated these notions of indigeneity in the local context. It situates these interpretations within the broader anthropological debates on indigeneity and the Scheduled Tribes framework in India and its implications to Nagaland. By examining both the arguments against and in favour of recognition, and the subsequent exercise of the Registry of Indigenous Inhabitants of Nagaland (RIIN), this paper demonstrates how the question of indigeneity, through political categories of identification, undergo a process of negotiation and redefinition in response to shifting political and social pressures. What emerges as a result, are hybrid categories that reflect a conflation of global and local ideas, having significant implications towards drawing new lines of identity.

To explore this issue, the paper first reviews anthropological debates on indigeneity, highlighting the varied positions scholars have taken up, ranging from essentialist critiques of the concept to arguments for its political utility. It then situates these debates within the Indian context, where indigeneity is conflated with categories such as “adivasi” and Scheduled Tribes, which further creates complexities in definition. It then proceeds to the case study of the Rongmei recognition in Nagaland, examining both the arguments against recognition, centred on legal criteria and resource concerns, and the counter-arguments advanced by the Rongmei, which emphasize historical misidentification and cultural affinity. It then moves to an analysis of political categories within the state’s affirmative action policies that are undergoing a process of redefinition, leading to creation of new categories in hopes of appeasing social unrest and

removing ambiguity and confusion, and showing how recognition debates intertwine cultural claims with material interests. Finally, the discussion connects the Rongmei case back to broader theoretical debates, before concluding with the argument that indigeneity is situational, contested, and negotiated. While being a powerful tool for the protection and emancipation of tribal and marginalised groups, it can have essentialist tendencies that can function in a way that was unintended.

Anthropological Debates on Indigeneity

The concept of indigeneity has long been debated in both anthropology and international law, reflecting its contested character. Scholars have approached it from different perspectives. A notable intervention came with Adam Kuper's *Return of the Native* (2003), where he argued that the term "indigenous" is essentially a new label for "primitive," thereby reinforcing outdated hierarchies rather than dismantling them. In his view, culture has become a substitute for race. Kuper critiques indigeneity as an essentialist construct rooted in colonial anthropology, suggesting that it echoes arguments made by far-right groups in Europe who claim that descendants of the original inhabitants of a country should enjoy privileged rights to its resources. He warns that such claims risk fuelling ethnic conflict. For Kuper, indigeneity lacks theoretical rigor and may perpetuate domination by treating socially constructed differences as fixed and natural. His critique of indigeneity sparked strong responses from scholars and activists who saw it as their ethical responsibility to defend the rights and survival of indigenous communities. Among them are Kenrick & Lewis (2004) who responded to Kuper and argued that his critique overlooks the context of discrimination faced by indigenous peoples, who have appropriated the concept as a means to highlight their marginalisation, dispossession, and the resilience of their social, economic and religious practices. They suggest a relational approach to indigeneity that takes into serious account the power relations between marginalised groups and the state. A third perspective, or a middle ground, is offered by Alan Barnard (2004) who defends the usefulness of indigeneity as a political and legal tool. While acknowledging the problems with definition, he emphasizes that indigenous rights discourse can empower marginalised groups by providing a framework for recognition and redistribution. For Barnard, the value of indigeneity lies not in its theoretical precision but in its capacity to mobilize claims for justice.

Global institutions over time have been shaping the discourse on indigeneity. The concept of "indigenous peoples" came to prominence in the 1970s as part of global human rights and international law discussions. This is particularly through the International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention No.169 (1989) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) which was passed in 2007 in the UN General Assembly. These frameworks define indigenous peoples as those marginalized by colonization and who continue to govern their lives through distinct cultural institutions. Among other criteria, these frameworks rely on self-identification and cultural distinctiveness as a fundamental criterion that groups can use to identify as indigenous or tribal peoples. While the concept of indigenous peoples serves as a legal framework for asserting the rights of those who identify

with it, it is only binding on nations who have ratified the ILO and UNDRIP documents. India has not ratified the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Its position is that the concept of "indigenous peoples" lacks clarity. The government maintains that the term applies primarily to countries where certain groups are explicitly recognized as indigenous in contrast to non-indigenous populations, a framework which is applicable to the western contexts in which the concept emerged. Consequently, India argues that the concept is not applicable to its own situation.

Indigeneity & Tribe in the Indian Context

In the Indian context, the concept of indigeneity is a complicated matter. Xaxa (1999) states that in India, the term "indigenous peoples" has long been intertwined with the use of the word *Adivasi*, a vernacular expression that literally means "original inhabitant" and is commonly applied to tribal communities. Related terms such as "aborigines" and "autochthonous," were also used to refer to the tribal population both in scholarly writings and administrative discourse. However, historical record complicates the claim to view all tribes as indigenous peoples since it can be argued that some tribes arrived later than non-tribal populations (Xaxa, 1999:3591). Beteille (1998) adds that unlike settler-colonial societies in the west, from where the concept has emerged, tribal and non-tribal populations in India have coexisted and intermingled for millennia, making the indigenous and settler dichotomy difficult to apply in the country. For this reason, he insists that the idea of indigenous peoples must have some basis in the territory inhabited by them in the past and the present (1998:190) and not based only on their position of discrimination and oppression. He cautions that the category of "indigenous peoples" risks slipping into an essentialist framework when detached from historical and social context. Such essentialism, by treating identity as fixed, can generate confusion and serve as ideological fuel for those who seek to organize society along rigid notions of blood and soil (1998:191).

In India, the notion of "indigenous peoples" has been consistently challenged by the state. The Indian government maintains that all citizens are indigenous, arguing that the concept is derived largely from Western historical experiences and inapplicable to the Indian context. Instead, India recognizes "Scheduled Tribes" as a constitutional category, defined not by theoretical criteria but by official scheduled lists of communities who are entitled to specific protections and benefits. Despite this opposition towards the concept of "indigenous peoples", many tribal groups have increasingly embraced the label of "indigenous," both in domestic discourse and at international platforms such as the United Nations, where it carries legal and political weight. Karlsson (2003) describes this as occupying the "indigenous slot," a strategic positioning that allows marginalized communities to frame their struggles in terms of global rights and recognition, even as the term remains contested within India. Though the term is not recognised by the Indian state, the judiciary in some cases, have recognised indigeneity as a tool for the assertion of rights of *adivasis* such as in the case of Plachimada's struggle against Coca-cola company (Parmar, 2016) and the Niyamgiri case between the Dongoria Kondh tribe and Vedanta mining company (Chandra, 2016). As Baviskar (2006) observes,

once concepts like *Adivasi* and indigeneity are created, they take on a life of their own, shaping identities and claims in ways that are different from their intended meanings. This is exemplified in Karlsson's (2013) explanation that the idea of indigenous peoples takes on a different meaning especially in Northeast India. In the state of Meghalaya, hybrid categories such as "indigenous tribe" emerged because as a result of the conflation of two frameworks for rights and political claims. One framework is the Scheduled Tribes status, which provides constitutional protection and affirmative action benefits, and the other is the global indigenous peoples' rights movement, which emphasizes self-identification, cultural distinctiveness, and autonomy. The Rongmei recognition issue reflects a similar dynamic to that discussed by Karlsson (2013). The issue of Rongmei recognition in Nagaland illustrates how hybrid categories emerge both to support and to resist claims of tribal status. These contestations can be interpreted through claims-making processes that are inherently cultural and political, as will be discussed in the following sections.

Rongmei Recognition in Nagaland/parameters for indigeneity in Nagaland

The conceptual ambiguities in the Indian context become particularly visible in the case of the Rongmei tribe, whose recognition and de-recognition in Nagaland illustrates how state classifications and local politics intersect and create new ideas of indigeneity and identity. In 2012, the Government of Nagaland announced that Scheduled Tribe and Indigenous Inhabitant certificates would be issued to Rongmei individuals whose names, or whose ancestors' names, appeared in the 1963 electoral roll and were listed in the report of a committee to look into the issue, which identified 1,313 persons. This recognition came after numerous representations were submitted by the Rongmei community to the state government, following which a rigorous enumeration process was undertaken beginning in 2007, to identify and verify the eligible Rongmei in Nagaland, culminating in their formal recognition in 2012.

The year 1963, when Nagaland state was created, was taken as the benchmark year to qualify an indigenous person in Nagaland. More specifically, there are two important conditions by which indigeneity is defined in Nagaland. Firstly, the Constitution (Nagaland) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1970, lists five communities recognised as Scheduled Tribes in the state. They are Naga, Garo, Kachari, Kuki, and Mikir. Secondly, the 1977 Government of Nagaland notification lists out criteria to qualify as "indigenous inhabitant" in the state of Nagaland for the purpose of employment. The notification states that a person or their parent/guardian 1) should have been entered in the Electoral Roll published on 5.12.1963; 2) should have been paying house tax prior to 1/12/1963; 3) should have acquired property and *patta* (land ownership document) on it prior to 1/12/1963. In order to qualify as an "indigenous inhabitant", an individual would have to qualify any one of these criteria to show they have "permanently settled" in the state prior to 1963. As a result of these two conditions, Scheduled Tribe certificates and Indigenous Inhabitant certificates are issued to eligible persons of the state. Nagaland, being governed by Article 371A under the Indian constitution, grants special rights to its citizens over their land, customs and resources. Consequently, "non-indigenous" persons are prohibited from purchasing or owning land, and ineligible for reserved

employment positions advertised by the state government. Therefore, to access state benefits in Nagaland, individuals must possess an Indigenous Inhabitant certificate and a Scheduled Tribe certificate from Nagaland.

Despite the government's insistence that the recognition was accorded only to the 1313 enumerated individuals of the Rongmei community who have been living in Nagaland prior to 1963, the decision provoked strong opposition from major tribal councils, including the Zeliang Peoples Organisation (ZPO) and the Nagaland Tribes Council (NTC). Over a period of years beginning from 2012, press statements from tribal bodies and civil society organisations, as well as opinion pieces from individuals were published in local news media, expressing views on the Rongmei recognition and its implications in Nagaland. The following section will briefly examine the positions held by those for and against the recognition and how these views point towards the local understanding and perceptions of indigeneity in the present context.

Arguments against Recognition

The government's decision to recognise the Rongmei was met with strong opposition and examining the claims and arguments against the recognition will reveal how indigeneity as a concept is perceived in Nagaland. Among the chief opponents of the recognition was the Nagaland Tribes Council (henceforth NTC) which was formed in 2013, as a response to the Rongmei recognition and what it saw as a weakening of the Naga Hoho, the apex tribal body of the Nagas across Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and Myanmar. The NTC stated that it was formed as the tribal apex body of Nagaland, amid the eruption of social unrest for want of justice in 2013, particularly concerning the Rongmei tribe recognition and government's contemplation to recognise other Naga tribes from outside the state ^[2]. At the time, Naga Hoho faced considerable backlash for its recommendation to the government for the recognition of the Rongmei. Its legitimacy as a representative of all Nagas was questioned because it was alleged that the Naga Hoho had more members from Manipur than from Nagaland, leading to decisions that favoured the Nagas of Manipur over those in Nagaland ^[3]. It no longer saw the Naga Hoho as being representative of the Nagas within the state of Nagaland. At the launch of the NTC, its convenor stated that it was the aspiration of "every aboriginal Nagas of Nagaland" to have such a platform and that their objective is to "foster unity, brotherhood and fraternity amongst the Naga brothers of Nagaland" ^[4].

In writing about the construction of collective identities of local organisations, Achumi (2023) argues that different Naga organisations build their identities by drawing on cultural traditions and geographical divisions. For example, the Nagaland Tribes Council (NTC) grounds its political memory on the year 1963, when Nagaland became a state, and uses the state's official boundaries defined by India as the foundation of its political arguments. In contrast, the Naga Hoho looks further back, grounding its collective memory in the creation of the Naga Club in 1918 and the Naga National Council (NNC) in 1945, both of which emphasized the goal of uniting all Naga territories. This helps explain to some extent, the differing positions of the NTC and the Naga Hoho with regard to the Rongmei tribe recognition.

The groups who opposed the recognition advanced three major lines of argument, namely, the legal criteria for inclusion, judicial precedents for recognition and concerns over rights and resources of those in Nagaland. The NTC and Zeliang Peoples Organisation (ZPO) argued that the Rongmei did not meet the requirements set out in the Government of Nagaland's 1977 notification. According to an RTI report, it was claimed that no Rongmei names appeared in the electoral rolls of Peren districts in 1963, therefore, there was no empirical basis for recognition. However, the government clarified this by stating that the RTI referred specifically to the name "Rongmei" in electoral rolls, and not to clan or tribal identity. They noted further that present day Dimapur and Peren districts were sub-divisions under Kohima until they were carved out in 1997 and 2003 respectively. They stated that the absence of district specific records in 1963 could not be interpreted as evidence of Rongmei absence ^[5]. The NTC further accused the government of overruling its own fact-finding committee, which had concluded that the Rongmeis' entitlement to reservation benefits did not equate to indigenous tribal status. Such statements reflected the ambiguity of the categories of identification between "indigenous inhabitant" and an "indigenous Naga tribe". Moreover, lack of clarity over the privileges and benefits that each would be entitled to, added to the confusion. The NTC also cited the 2003 Gauhati High Court case T.A. Rongmei and others vs. State of Nagaland, in which the petition for inclusion of the Rongmei tribe was dismissed for lack of merit. This court ruling was used to argue that recognition had already been legally rejected, and that the government's 2012 decision was politically motivated rather than grounded in law.

However, underlying these arguments was a deeper concern over rights and resources. In 2013, the Nagaland Post reported that the government was considering recognition applications from other tribes such as the Mao, Poumai, and Tangkhul, who, like the Rongmei, are recognized as Scheduled Tribes in Manipur but not in Nagaland. In response, the NTC Media Secretary stated in a press release "The Rongmei Tribe recognition has already created precedence. Henceforth, when any Naga tribe from outside Nagaland State applies for the same, (it) has to be treated at par with the Rongmei lest it would be discrimination. Rongmei tribe recognition has opened the floodgate, now the Nagas of Nagaland would be overwhelmed as has happened in the last recruitment drive of Graduate Teachers of 2012 in Peren District as a consequence of recognition accorded to Rongmei Tribe." ^[6]

They warned that recognition would set a precedent for other tribes outside Nagaland to demand similar status, thereby putting at risk, and the rights of the existing 16 recognized tribes. They pointed to the recruitment of graduate teachers in Peren district in 2012, where Rongmei candidates allegedly benefited from reserved seats, as evidence of how recognition could disadvantage dominant tribes. Such views that fear the loss of control over rights and resources are not uncommon. In 2013, few government officials stated that jobs in the government have reached a saturation point ^[7]. Nagaland has not had a good track record with its unemployment rate. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) recorded a 19.2% unemployment rate for the year 2020-21, against the national average of 4.2%. Even more concerning was the unemployment rate among

its youth (15-29 years) which stood at 55.2% in the same year. Tribe recognition was therefore seen not only as a political move and a neglect of procedure, but more importantly, it was framed in the language of threat to the "aboriginal Nagas of Nagaland", particularly with respect to reservations in employment and education. The opposition to Rongmei recognition was not merely about procedural compliance of granting ST status but about safeguarding the political and material interests of dominant tribes within Nagaland.

Arguments for Recognition

In response to the opposition, the Rongmei Council of Nagaland (RCN), representing the Rongmei community in Nagaland, advanced a series of counter-arguments that framed their exclusion as a historical and political injustice. The Rongmei community in Nagaland assert that their presence in Nagaland prior to 1963 has been well documented in the form of government land records, official record of village set up and official appointment of Village headmen which they say is proof of qualifying the 1977 criteria set by the government of Nagaland. The RCN claimed that their tribal status in Nagaland was due to historical neglect and misidentification. They argued that the Rongmei were excluded from recognition at the time of Nagaland's statehood because they were subsumed under the broader "Zeliangrong" identity, which combined Zeme, Liangmai, and Rongmei tribes. However, only Zeme and Liangmai were recognized as "Zeliang" in Nagaland while the Rongmei were left out, a decision the RCN described as "ignorance induced by deception" ^[8]. They claimed that this misidentification delayed their rightful recognition for decades, despite their cultural and historical ties to the Zeliangrong and Naga community. The Rongmei emphasized that this breakdown of the Zeliangrong identity in Nagaland left them politically marginalized. Unlike the Zeme and Liangmai, who gained recognition under the "Zeliang" label, the Rongmei were rendered invisible in state classifications.

The RCN also pointed to the shared descent, traditions, and cultural practices of the Zeliangrong people, who inhabit contiguous areas across North Cachar Hills in Assam, Tamenglong district in Manipur and Peren district in Nagaland. They argued that the Rongmei presence in Nagaland was not accidental but part of longstanding cross-border exchanges and community ties. For instance, in 1965, the Zeliangrong Tribal Council (ZTC) sent out an appeal to its community members inviting them to the Zeliangrong area of Nagaland with the aim of fostering unity among its people and a promise of providing cultivable land. The Zeliangrong Tribal Council (ZTC) was formed in 1947 with representatives from the Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei tribes of Manipur state and the Naga Hills district. It was formed in view of the close ethnological and cultural ties between them and aimed at furthering the economic, social and educational and political advancement of the tribes. Though the ZTC was formed in 1947, the Zeliangrong identity is based on much more than just a political organisation. A movement in the 1920s, which advocated a Naga Raj through the ousting of the colonial government, came to be known as the Zeliangrong movement, founded by Haipou Jadonang and carried on by Rani Gaidinliu. The Zeliangrong people trace their ancestral origins to Makuilongdi, located in present-day Senapati

district of Manipur (Pamei, 2001). Their migration story says that population growth and its effects resulted in the parting ways of three brothers, Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei. This shows that their collective identity is rooted in deep cultural and historical narratives of ancestral origin stories and migration traditions.

In addition, the RCN countered the opposition's reliance on the Gauhati High Court ruling by noting that the case was dismissed on the grounds that the matter was not within the court's jurisdiction. Under Article 342 of the Constitution of India, modification of scheduled lists could only be done through an act of Parliament and not by the courts. They argued that the court directed them to pursue recognition through the Government of Nagaland, which eventually granted it. In their view, this demonstrated that the recognition was legally valid and consistent with constitutional procedures. These counter-arguments reveal how the Rongmei framed recognition as a corrective measure to historical misidentification, a restoration of cultural legitimacy, and a necessary step toward political inclusion.

Hybrid Categories

The Rongmei demand for recognition was rooted in their identity as Nagas and their desire to be included under the Naga entry of the Constitution (Nagaland) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1970, on account of their having permanently settled in Nagaland prior to 1963. The 1977 government notification, introduced to determine who qualified as an "indigenous inhabitant" for state employment, was viewed by the Rongmei as the criterion under which they were eligible. This created a misperception among the public leading to the labelling of two categories – "indigenous inhabitant" and "indigenous Naga tribe" – complicating the recognition process and shaping the debate around the Rongmei claim. The claims and counter-claims towards the recognition demonstrated confusion and ambiguity over the status and meaning of these categories, particularly concerning what the privileges and benefits of each entailed. Because the issue of indigeneity in Nagaland is directly tied to jobs, education and land rights, a public discourse was generated around the need to safeguard the interests of the indigenous inhabitants of the state from the threat of outsiders. Although the "indigenous inhabitant" category was introduced for the purpose of employment, over the years, the indigenous inhabitant certificate became essential for eligibility to avail scholarship and seat for professional and technical studies, stipends, government schemes, loans and so on, all in the interest of promoting the welfare of the "indigenous inhabitants" of the state.

To appease the mounting opposition on the Rongmei recognition, in 2017, the state government withdrew the recognition of the Rongmei as one of the "indigenous Naga tribes" of Nagaland. However, it stated that the "1313 people belonging to the Rongmei tribe, identified through special enumeration process as having permanently settled in Nagaland prior to 1963... would continue to enjoy the status, privileges and entitlements of indigenous inhabitants of Nagaland" [9]. Therefore, the status of the Rongmei in Nagaland was altered from an "indigenous Naga tribe" of Nagaland to an "indigenous inhabitant". However, there was still no clarity on what the differences in privileges and benefits would entail for the two categories, if any.

Subsequently, the Nagaland government announced in 2019 that it would undertake an exercise to compile a master list of all indigenous inhabitants of the state, known as the Register of Indigenous Inhabitants of Nagaland (RIIN). The government stated that the primary objective of this initiative was to prevent individuals from obtaining fake indigenous inhabitant certificates [10], thereby protecting the integrity of indigenous identity and rights in the state. In the same year, the government constituted a Commission to examine all the issues relating to RIIN and to make necessary recommendations.

Following the recommendations of the RIIN Commission Report, the Nagaland government in 2024 notified [11] that "indigenous inhabitant" certificates (IICs) would be issued only to citizens belonging to any of the 15 recognised Naga tribe [12], as well as to the non-Naga [13] tribes, as listed in the Constitution (Nagaland) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1970. Eligibility further requires that the individual be a resident of the state and be able to trace their antecedents to a recognised village in Nagaland. According to the RIIN Commission Report, an indigenous person in Nagaland is therefore, "one who has roots in a village that has its own land" (p. 43). In the Nagaland Village and Tribal Council Act, 1978, "village" is defined as an area recognised as a village as such by the Government of Nagaland where the land in the area belong to the population of that area or is given to them by Government of Nagaland, if the land in question is a Government land or land given to them by the lawful owner of the land and where, the village is established according to the usage and customary practice of the population of the area. According to the 2021 survey of villages in Nagaland, the areas inhabited by the Rongmei in Dimapur district are not list as recognised villages. This implies that the Rongmei no longer qualify as "indigenous inhabitants" according to the new criteria which, in addition to the pre-existing criteria, makes mandatory the tracing of one's ancestry to a recognised village within the confines of the state of Nagaland.

During the time of the Rongmei recognition, the conditions for qualifying an indigenous inhabitant were reliant on the fulfilment of the 1977 notification for "indigenous inhabitant" which stipulated the conditions for determining status of "permanent settlement". Subsequently, an order in 1983 [14] further added that a person in addition to fulfilling the 1977 criteria, should belong to one of the 5 tribes listed in the Constitution (Nagaland) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1970. In a litigation case, in Zeliang Peoples Organisation vs. State of Nagaland [15], the state government, while defending the decision to recognise the Rongmei as an "indigenous Naga tribe" of Nagaland, stated that the Rongmei fulfilled the criteria for indigenous inhabitant according to the 1977 notification. Further, the Rongmeis, on account of belonging to the Naga ethnic group, were recognised as one of the Naga tribes under the Naga entry in the 1970 ST Order. Based on these points, the Rongmei, more specifically the 1313 enumerated individuals, were recognised as an "indigenous Naga tribe" of Nagaland. However, the recognition was withdrawn in 2017 by the government. With the proposal for RIIN to be implemented, the eligibility or qualification for an "indigenous inhabitant" has further been amended wherein an individual needs to be able to trace their ancestry to a recognised village within Nagaland. This leaves the Rongmei in Nagaland in a precarious state regarding their political status.

However, in view of the presence of other tribal and non-tribal communities that have settled in Nagaland prior to 1963, the RIIN Commission recommended a separate category called “Permanent Residents” for whom Permanent Resident Certificates (PRCs) would be issued. This category was defined as those belonging to any person or “tribe, other than the 18 recognised tribes of Nagaland, who are citizens of India and who have settled in Nagaland and owning land in Nagaland, prior to Statehood” (RIIN Commission Report, p.36). The rights and privileges of “permanent residents” include the right to own immovable property, right to conduct business and avail loans against property, will not be subject to and Inner Line Permit (ILP) and the right to contest in the Dimapur Municipal elections that fall under Dimapur-1 constituency, the only non-ST constituency in Nagaland. These rights do not extend to reservations in employment and education.

Exclusive Indigeneity

The categories of “indigenous inhabitant” and “indigenous Naga tribe” is unique to the state of Nagaland and does not feature anywhere else in the country. What is evident here is that these categories emerged as a conflation of the Scheduled Tribes framework and the global indigenous peoples’ rights discourse. On one hand, the category functions as a state-led affirmative action measure that grants legal entitlements. On the other, the idea of indigeneity has been informed by the indigenous peoples’ discourse to justify the usage of the categories as evidenced in the RIIN Commission report ^[16]. In recent years, pressures from tribal organizations, particularly following the Rongmei recognition, have compelled the state to redefine these categories, aiming to resolve ambiguities and bring clarity to their classification of political categories. As a result, the proposed RIIN exercise and the recommendations for new categories of “indigenous inhabitant” and “permanent resident” have created deep divisions within the Naga identity. It reflects what Sudipta Kaviraj (2010) writes, of societies moving from “fuzzy” to “fixed” societies, on account of communities getting enumerated, creating in the process hybrid categories. He argues that modernity did not simply liberate communities but restructured them in ways that intensified divisions. These hybrid categories emerged and were used by the local populations to position themselves as differently to others, particularly the non-tribals and Nagas from neighbouring states, in order to have exclusive rights over constitutional benefits.

Indigeneity, as is demonstrated in the case of Nagaland, operates across multiple overlapping levels, and the Naga struggle illustrates this complexity well. At the global international level, Nagas frame their independence movement within the discourse of the global indigenous rights, emphasizing self-determination and drawing support from transnational organizations like the UN, International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs (IGWIA), and Asia Indigenous Peoples’ Pact (AIPP). At the national level, particularly in the India’s northeast, indigeneity is mediated through the state’s recognition of communities as Scheduled Tribes. This dynamic is demonstrated by the case of Darjeeling (Chhetri, 2017) & (Middleton, 2013) where communities, not ordinarily recognised as tribal, apply for Scheduled Tribe status. These communities are then required to showcase traits of “backwardness”, “shyness”,

“primitiveness”, etc. according to the modalities set by the government, thus, reflecting Kuper’s ‘return of the native’. Finally, at the most localised level, indigeneity becomes a contested category within and between tribes, such as the “indigenous inhabitant” debates among Nagas in Nagaland or the “indigenous tribe” between Khasis and Koch in Meghalaya (Karlsson, 2013). Here, the emphasis shifts from ethnic distinctiveness to issues pertaining to rights and privileges accorded in the state’s affirmative action policies. These layered meanings reveal how indigeneity can simultaneously unify groups under a global identity while also fragmenting them within narrower territorial and political contexts. The result is the emergence of hybrid categories like “indigenous Naga tribe” or “permanent residents” that blur the lines between the global and local understandings of indigeneity.

Localised hybrid categories, such as those emerging in Nagaland, underscore what anthropologists like Bêteille and Kuper have long cautioned against, that is, the danger of reducing indigeneity to an essentialist construct that treats tribes as static, bound to fixed notions of time and space. When indigeneity is narrowly defined through state-sanctioned qualifications, it risks oversimplifying and obscuring the complex histories and evolving identities of tribal societies. This takes the concept away from its originally intended purpose of empowering marginalized and tribal groups to voice their rights and directs it instead towards reifying rigid boundaries. Rather than addressing historical injustices or challenging state-centric narratives that undermine indigenous communities, such frameworks, as Srikanth (2014) argues, can be misused to consolidate the dominance of tribal majorities or “autochthonous” groups. In this way, indigeneity becomes less a tool of emancipation and more a mechanism of exclusion, reinforcing the state’s authority to define belonging. Ultimately, these rigid formulations undermine the fluid nature of indigenous identities and deepen divisions between ethnic and tribal categories. They reveal a paradox within the discourse of indigeneity in India, wherein it possesses the capacity to unify communities on a global scale while simultaneously fragmenting them within local contexts.

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