

RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

Comprehensive Analysis of Tripura's Indigenous Communities:Socio-Political Dimensions and Contemporary Challenges

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.67060/jssl.vol.1.issue.2.5>

Pages 70–83

ABSTRACT

This research paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the indigenous communities of Tripura, one of the eight states constituting India's northeastern region. Tripura is home to nineteen officially recognized Scheduled Tribes, comprising approximately 31.8% of the state's total population. The paper examines the complex socio-political landscape of these communities through multiple analytical lenses: historical foundations of tribal identity, colonial and post-colonial transformations, constitutional provisions and their implementation, land and forest rights, the political economy of displacement, insurgency and its aftermath, and emerging development challenges. Drawing upon primary data from government reports, ethnographic literature, and secondary scholarly sources, this study argues that despite significant constitutional protections afforded by the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India and the establishment of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC), indigenous communities continue to face structural marginalization rooted in demographic changes, economic underdevelopment, land alienation, and political disenfranchisement. The paper concludes by identifying policy pathways and recommendations that could bridge the gap between constitutional intent and lived reality for Tripura's indigenous populations.

Keywords: Tripura, indigenous communities, Scheduled Tribes, Sixth Schedule, TTAADC, land alienation, political autonomy, Northeast India, socio-political challenges, tribal rights

1. Introduction

Tripura, the third smallest state in India, occupies a geopolitically significant position in the northeastern region, sharing an approximately 856-kilometer international border with Bangladesh on three sides (Bhaumik, 2009). This geographic encirclement has profoundly shaped the demographic, economic, and political trajectory of the state. Prior to Indian independence, Tripura was a princely state under the rule of the Manikya dynasty, and the indigenous Tripuri peoples constituted the demographic majority within their ancestral homeland. However, the partition of British India in 1947 and the subsequent merger of Tripura with the Indian Union in 1949 initiated a cascade of socio-political changes that

fundamentally altered the relationship between the indigenous communities and the state apparatus.

The influx of Bengali Hindu refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) dramatically transformed Tripura's demographic landscape. According to the Census of India (2011), the tribal population, which once constituted the majority, had declined to approximately 31.8% of the total state population of 3.67 million. This demographic transformation has been accompanied by significant land alienation, economic marginalization, and cultural erosion, generating conditions for sustained political conflict and insurgent activity throughout the latter half of the twentieth century (Datta, 2004).

The nineteen Scheduled Tribes of Tripura—including the Tripuri (Borok), Reang (Bru), Jamatia, Chakma, Mog, Lushai, Garo, Khasia, Bhil, Munda, Oraon, Santhal, Lepcha, Uchai, Halam, Noatia, Koloi, Murasing, and Mogh—constitute a rich mosaic of linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity (Government of Tripura, 2020). Each community possesses distinct socio-cultural practices, traditional governance systems, and historical relationships with the land. Yet, they share common experiences of structural marginalization within the post-colonial Indian state.

This paper is organized into eight substantive sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 provides a historical overview of tribal communities in Tripura. Section 3 examines the constitutional and legal framework governing tribal rights. Section 4 analyzes land rights and displacement. Section 5 addresses political representation and autonomy. Section 6 discusses insurgency, conflict, and peacebuilding. Section 7 examines socio-economic development challenges. Section 8 explores cultural preservation and identity politics. The paper concludes with policy recommendations in Section 9.

2. Historical Overview of Indigenous Communities in Tripura

2.1 Pre-Colonial Period and the Manikya Dynasty

The indigenous peoples of Tripura have inhabited the region for millennia, with historical chronicles such as the Rajmala documenting the continuous rule of the Tripuri Manikya dynasty from the fourteenth century (Chakraborty, 2012). The Rajmala, composed in Bengali verse by court poets, provides invaluable documentation of tribal customs, governance, and the complex negotiations between the Manikya rulers and the diverse tribal communities within their kingdom. Traditional governance among tribal communities was organized

around the chowdhury system, a hierarchical structure of village headmen who mediated disputes, organized collective labor, and maintained customary law.

The pre-colonial economy of Tripura's indigenous communities was characterized by jhum (shifting) cultivation, forest resource collection, hunting, and artisanal production. These subsistence practices were intimately connected to a cosmological worldview that regarded the forest as both a material and spiritual resource (Singh, 1998). The relationship between tribal communities and the land was governed not by individual property rights but by collective usufructuary arrangements embedded in customary law and enforced through traditional institutions.

2.2 Colonial Transformation

The formal incorporation of Tripura into the British colonial sphere began in the early nineteenth century, though the state retained its status as a princely state under indirect British suzerainty. The colonial period introduced significant transformations in land tenure, taxation, and political administration (Deb, 2007). The introduction of the Bengal Tenancy Act and related legislation imposed individualized land ownership concepts that were fundamentally at odds with indigenous collective land tenure systems. This legal transformation created conditions for land alienation that would intensify dramatically in the post-independence period.

The colonial period also witnessed the first significant waves of Bengali migration into Tripura, as the Manikya kings encouraged Bengali settlers to develop agriculture in the plains regions. This migration was perceived by the indigenous communities as encroachment upon their traditional territories, generating early tensions that prefigured later conflicts (Bhaumik, 2009). The colonial administration's classification of tribal communities as 'backward' and in need of 'upliftment' established a paternalistic governance paradigm that continued to shape state-tribal relations in the post-independence era.

2.3 Post-Independence Demographic Transformation

The partition of British India in 1947 and the subsequent creation of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) produced massive refugee flows that profoundly transformed Tripura's demographic composition. The state, surrounded on three sides by the new nation of Pakistan, became a primary destination for Hindu Bengali refugees fleeing communal violence and economic disruption. Between 1947 and 1971, an estimated 600,000 refugees entered Tripura, fundamentally altering the ratio of tribal to non-tribal populations (Bose, 1990).

The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War produced a second major wave of refugees, further compressing the demographic and spatial margins available to indigenous communities. By 1981, the tribal population had declined from a pre-independence majority to approximately 28.5% of the state's total population (Census of India, 1981). This demographic transformation was accompanied by the progressive alienation of tribal lands in the plains regions, pushing indigenous communities into the more marginal hill areas and generating conditions for political radicalization.

3. Constitutional and Legal Framework for Tribal Rights

3.1 The Sixth Schedule and TTAADC

The constitutional framework for the protection of tribal rights in Tripura is primarily established through the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India, which provides for the creation of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) with legislative, executive, and judicial powers over specified matters (Basu, 2019). The Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC), established in 1985 under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule, covers approximately 68% of the state's geographic area and encompasses the predominantly tribal hill regions. The TTAADC has jurisdiction over matters including land management, forest management, regulation of shifting cultivation, use of waterways, regulation of money lending and trading, and administration of customary law.

The TTAADC consists of 28 elected members and two nominated members, with elections conducted every five years. The Council has the power to make laws on specific subjects, subject to the assent of the Governor of Tripura. While the Sixth Schedule arrangement represents a significant constitutional recognition of tribal self-governance, scholars have identified several limitations in its practical implementation. The concurrent jurisdiction of state and central governments over matters within the ADC's purview frequently creates administrative conflicts and undermines tribal authority (Fernandes & Pereira, 2005).

3.2 The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 represents a landmark legislative intervention designed to redress the historical injustice of forest land alienation experienced by tribal and other traditional forest-dwelling communities. The Act recognizes both individual and community forest rights, including the right to reside in and cultivate forest land, the right to collect and use minor forest produce, and the right to protect and manage community forests (Ministry of

Tribal Affairs, 2006). In Tripura, the implementation of the FRA has been uneven, with significant gaps between the volume of claims filed and titles granted.

According to data from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2023), as of March 2023, Tripura had received 1,14,508 individual forest rights claims, of which 71,246 had been distributed. Community forest rights claims faced more significant implementation challenges, with institutional barriers including inadequate Gram Sabha functioning, limited awareness among claimants, and resistance from forest department officials impeding the recognition of collective rights (Saikia, 2011).

3.3 The Panchayati Raj and Tribal Self-Governance

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment of 1992, which established the Panchayati Raj system as a third tier of democratic governance, contains a specific provision (Article 243M) exempting the scheduled areas covered by the Fifth and Sixth Schedules from its purview. However, the interaction between traditional tribal governance institutions and the formal Panchayati Raj system has created institutional ambiguities in Tripura's non-ADC areas (Xaxa, 1999). The Tripura Panchayati Raj Act provides for the participation of tribal representatives in local governance, but the integration of customary institutions with formal democratic structures remains incomplete.

4. Land Rights, Alienation, and Displacement

4.1 The Dynamics of Land Alienation

Land alienation—the transfer of tribal lands to non-tribal ownership through sale, mortgage, encroachment, or legal mechanisms—represents one of the most critical socio-economic challenges confronting Tripura's indigenous communities. The process of land alienation in Tripura must be understood within the context of the massive demographic influx described in Section 2.3. As Bengali settlers occupied the fertile plains regions, tribal communities were progressively displaced toward the hill areas, where subsistence agriculture under jhum cultivation systems provided diminishing returns (Datta, 2004).

The Tripura Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act of 1960 and its subsequent amendments contain provisions for the protection of tribal land rights, including restrictions on the transfer of tribal land to non-tribal persons. However, these protections have been inadequately enforced. Field studies conducted by Fernandes and Pereira (2005) found that both formal and informal mechanisms of land transfer—including fraudulent sale deeds, mortgage-based

dispossession, and adverse possession—had resulted in substantial tribal land loss despite the formal legal protections in place.

4.2 Development-Induced Displacement

Beyond refugee-driven demographic pressure, Tripura's indigenous communities have also experienced displacement driven by infrastructure and development projects. The construction of the Dumbur Hydroelectric Project in the Gumti River basin in the 1970s displaced an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 persons, predominantly members of the Reang (Bru) tribal community (Bhaumik, 2009). The rehabilitation of these displaced persons was inadequate, with many families receiving neither adequate land nor livelihood support, contributing to conditions of structural poverty and political grievance that later fed insurgent movements.

The displacement of the Bru (Reang) community represents one of the most protracted displacement crises in Northeast India. Following the ethnic violence of 1997, approximately 37,000 Bru persons fled to relief camps in Mizoram. After more than two decades of negotiations, the Central Government announced a settlement package in January 2020 that would facilitate the permanent resettlement of Bru families in Tripura with provisions for land, housing, and livelihood support (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020). The implementation of this settlement has been ongoing, with scholars noting both the humanitarian significance of the resolution and the complex questions of land allocation it raises in a state where tribal lands are already scarce.

5. Political Representation and Autonomy

5.1 Electoral Representation

The Constitution of India provides for the reservation of seats for Scheduled Tribes in the state legislature and the national parliament. In Tripura, 20 of the 60 seats in the State Legislative Assembly are reserved for Scheduled Tribes, representing a substantial allocation relative to the tribal population proportion. Additionally, the Tripura East Lok Sabha constituency is reserved for Scheduled Tribes. Despite this formal representation, scholars have questioned whether elected tribal representatives have been effective advocates for indigenous interests or whether party political discipline has constrained their autonomy to represent community concerns (Bhatt, 2016).

The political dynamics of tribal representation in Tripura are complicated by the diversity of tribal communities and their sometimes divergent political interests. The major political

parties—the Indian National Congress, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and the Bharatiya Janata Party—have all sought to cultivate tribal constituencies through a combination of developmental promises, cultural patronage, and strategic alliances with tribal-based political organizations. The Indigenous Peoples' Front of Tripura (IPFT) emerged as a significant tribal political organization, forming a coalition government with the BJP in 2018 that ended 25 years of CPI(M) rule (Chakraborty & Das, 2019).

5.2 The TTAADC and Self-Governance Challenges

While the TTAADC represents the principal institutional expression of tribal self-governance in Tripura, its effective autonomy has been constrained by several structural factors. First, the financial dependence of the ADC on the state and central governments limits its capacity for independent policy-making and implementation. Second, the concurrent jurisdiction of state and ADC governments over key matters—including forest management and land administration—creates institutional conflicts that frequently disadvantage tribal communities. Third, the capacity limitations of the ADC's administrative machinery, including shortage of qualified personnel and inadequate infrastructure, constrain the quality and reach of services delivered to tribal communities (Deb, 2007).

The demand for a separate state for tribal peoples of Tripura—articulated most forcefully by organizations such as the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and, in its political form, by the IPFT's demand for implementation of the Indigenous People's Act—reflects the perceived inadequacy of the existing autonomy arrangements. The IPFT's demand for a 'Tipraland' state was a significant electoral issue in the 2023 Tripura Assembly elections, though it was not ultimately successful in mobilizing sufficient political support to alter the constitutional framework (Goswami, 2023).

6. Insurgency, Conflict, and Peacebuilding

6.1 The Origins and Trajectory of Armed Insurgency

Tripura experienced sustained armed insurgency for several decades, emerging from the convergence of tribal land grievances, demographic displacement, political marginalization, and the availability of arms in the broader Northeast Indian conflict landscape. The Tripura Tribal Volunteers Force (TTVF), established in 1978, was among the earliest armed organizations articulating tribal grievances. It was succeeded by the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) and the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), which became the primary insurgent organizations through the 1990s and 2000s (Bhaumik, 2009).

The insurgent organizations articulated a political agenda centered on the reversal of demographic transformation, expulsion of Bengali settlers from tribal areas, and the establishment of an independent or autonomous tribal state. Their methods included targeted killings of non-tribal settlers, attacks on security forces, extortion, and forced displacement of Bengali communities from tribal areas. At the peak of the insurgency in the late 1990s, Tripura was designated one of the most insurgency-affected states in India, with thousands of casualties and widespread internal displacement (Singh, 2005).

6.2 Counter-Insurgency and Peace Process

The Indian state's response to insurgency in Tripura combined military counter-insurgency operations with political and development initiatives. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), while applied in Tripura as in other northeastern states, was revoked in 2015 following a significant reduction in insurgent activity, representing a recognition of the improved security situation. The surrender of major insurgent leaders and the peace negotiations conducted by successive state and central governments resulted in the progressive demobilization of armed groups through the 2000s (Datta, 2004).

The rehabilitation of former insurgents has been a contested aspect of the peace process. State government rehabilitation packages provided former militants with financial assistance, vocational training, and support for economic integration. However, scholars have noted that the structural conditions that generated insurgency—including land alienation, demographic imbalance, and political marginalization—have not been fundamentally addressed, raising questions about the durability of peace (Goswami, 2023).

7. Socio-Economic Development Challenges

7.1 Poverty, Livelihood, and Economic Marginalization

Despite India's overall economic growth and specific tribal development programs, Tripura's indigenous communities continue to exhibit significantly worse socio-economic outcomes compared to the non-tribal population. The Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) of 2011 indicated that tribal households in Tripura had higher rates of poverty, lower educational attainment, and more limited access to essential services compared to non-tribal households. The tribal districts of Tripura—Dhalai, North Tripura, South Tripura, and the TTAADC areas—ranked among the lower-performing districts on composite development indicators (Planning Commission of India, 2011).

The primary livelihood of a substantial proportion of tribal households continues to be jhum (shifting) cultivation, despite its declining viability due to reduced fallow periods, soil degradation, and market integration pressures (Singh, 1998). Government programs to promote the transition from jhum to settled cultivation—through land development, irrigation, and horticulture promotion—have had mixed results, with some communities successfully integrating into commercial horticulture (particularly rubber cultivation) while others have experienced livelihood disruption without adequate alternatives.

7.2 Education and Health Outcomes

Tripura's tribal communities have historically faced significant barriers to education, including geographic remoteness, poverty, cultural and linguistic barriers, and inadequate school infrastructure in tribal areas. The state government and central tribal development programs have invested substantially in expanding educational access, and the tribal literacy rate has increased significantly from 18.5% in 1961 to 67.7% in 2011 (Census of India, 2011). However, significant gaps remain between tribal and non-tribal literacy rates, and dropout rates at the secondary level continue to be disproportionately high among tribal students.

Health outcomes among tribal communities reflect the interaction of poverty, geographic remoteness, cultural practices, and health system limitations. Malnutrition rates, infant mortality, and maternal mortality indicators remain above state averages in predominantly tribal areas. The National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5, 2019-21) data for Tripura revealed that while the state overall had made significant progress on maternal and child health indicators, tribal areas continued to show higher rates of stunting, wasting, and anemia among children and women (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2021).

7.3 Forest Economy and Minor Forest Produce

For many indigenous communities in Tripura, the forest economy—encompassing the collection and sale of minor forest produce (MFP), medicinal plants, bamboo, and timber—represents a critical livelihood component. The nationalization of bamboo and timber trade, and the imposition of state controls over forest produce marketing, has historically disadvantaged tribal forest-dependent communities. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 and subsequent MFP pricing support schemes have sought to improve tribal access to forest economy benefits, but implementation challenges remain significant (Saikia, 2011).

Tripura is India's largest bamboo-producing state, with vast bamboo resources concentrated in tribal areas. The development of bamboo-based industries—including bamboo handicrafts,

construction materials, and emerging applications in textile production—represents a potential pathway for tribal economic development that is ecologically sustainable and culturally resonant. The Tripura Bamboo Mission has initiated interventions in this direction, though scaling and market linkage challenges remain (Government of Tripura, 2020).

8. Cultural Preservation and Identity Politics

8.1 Language, Literature, and Cultural Heritage

The indigenous communities of Tripura possess rich traditions of oral literature, music, dance, and material culture. The Kokborok language, spoken by the Tripuri (Borok) people—the largest indigenous community—was recognized as an official language of Tripura in 1979, though the medium of script (Roman versus Bengali script) has been a contested political issue. The recognition of Kokborok as an official language represented a significant symbolic victory for tribal cultural rights but has not been accompanied by adequate investment in Kokborok medium education or literature development (Chakraborty, 2012).

Other tribal languages in Tripura, including Reang (Kaubru), Chakma, and Mog, lack official recognition and face more severe pressures of language attrition. The intergenerational transmission of tribal languages is weakening under the combined pressures of dominant language media environments, mixed-language schooling, and the economic incentives for assimilation into Bengali-medium economic and social networks. Linguistic anthropologists have documented accelerating language shift among younger generations of multiple tribal communities (Xaxa, 1999).

8.2 Traditional Institutions and Customary Law

The traditional governance institutions of Tripura's tribal communities—including the village-level chowdhury system, clan-based dispute resolution, and community forest management practices—represent institutional resources for self-governance that have historically been inadequately integrated into formal state governance frameworks. The relationship between customary law and state law in matters of marriage, inheritance, land tenure, and dispute resolution creates institutional ambiguities that frequently disadvantage tribal community members, particularly women (Basu, 2019).

The gender dimensions of traditional institutions merit specific attention. While tribal communities in Tripura have historically accorded women somewhat greater social latitude compared to caste Hindu norms—including participation in agricultural labor, market trade, and community rituals—customary inheritance laws generally favor patrilineal transmission

of land and property rights. The intersection of customary law, formal state law, and Hindu personal law creates complex legal terrain that tribal women must navigate in matters of land inheritance and marital property rights (Fernandes & Pereira, 2005).

8.3 Religion and Identity: The Seng Khasi and Tribal Religion Movements

The religious landscape of Tripura's indigenous communities reflects both the persistence of indigenous religious traditions and the significant impact of Christian missionary activity and Hindu reform movements. The majority of the Tripuri people practice a form of indigenous religion known as Garia puja or Tripura religion, centered on the worship of Garia (the deity of prosperity) and other nature spirits. Christian mission activity, primarily among the Reang, Halam, and Chakma communities, has contributed to both the preservation of tribal languages (through Bible translation and literacy programs) and tensions with traditional communities resisting missionary influence (Deb, 2007).

The Hindu nationalist political project's engagement with tribal communities has been a significant dimension of recent political dynamics in Tripura. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and related organizations have promoted the 'Hinduization' of tribal religious practices through ghar wapsi (homecoming) programs aimed at reconverting Christian tribal members and incorporating indigenous religious practices into a pan-Hindu framework. These efforts have generated communal tensions in some tribal areas and represent a significant dimension of the identity politics confronting indigenous communities (Goswami, 2023).

9. Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

9.1 Strengthening Autonomous Governance

The findings of this analysis point toward several priority areas for policy intervention. First, the institutional capacity and financial autonomy of the TTAADC must be substantially strengthened. This requires both enhanced fiscal transfers from the state and central governments and a clearer delineation of jurisdictional authority that reduces the scope for state government encroachment on ADC prerogatives. The Fifth Finance Commission recommendations for enhanced devolution to ADC bodies, if fully implemented, could significantly improve the Council's capacity for service delivery and self-governance (Basu, 2019).

9.2 Land Rights Enforcement and Rehabilitation

The protection of tribal land rights requires both stronger enforcement of existing legal provisions against illegal land transfer and a comprehensive review of historical land alienation

with a view to restoration or compensation. The implementation of the Forest Rights Act needs significant acceleration, with particular attention to community forest rights claims and the establishment of functional Gram Sabhas in TTAADC areas. The Bru resettlement process, while a positive step, requires sustained monitoring and support to ensure that resettled families receive the land and livelihoods promised under the 2020 settlement agreement (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020).

9.3 Economic Development Pathways

Economic development strategies for tribal communities must be grounded in the ecological and cultural contexts of specific communities rather than generic development models. The promotion of non-timber forest produce value chains, bamboo-based industries, and sustainable tourism represents potentially viable pathways for tribal economic development that build on existing resource endowments and cultural assets. Targeted interventions to improve tribal access to credit, market information, and technical assistance—through dedicated financial institutions and cooperative development—could significantly improve economic outcomes (Planning Commission of India, 2011).

9.4 Cultural and Educational Preservation

The preservation and revitalization of tribal languages, oral traditions, and cultural practices requires sustained public investment in multilingual education, community-based documentation projects, and the institutional support of tribal cultural organizations. The introduction of Kokborok and other tribal languages as mediums of primary instruction, with adequate teacher training and curriculum development, is essential for both educational quality and cultural preservation. The establishment of tribal cultural institutions—museums, cultural centers, and research institutes—with meaningful community governance and control could serve as anchors for cultural revitalization efforts (Chakraborty, 2012).

9.5 Conclusions

This research paper has examined the socio-political dimensions and contemporary challenges confronting Tripura's indigenous communities through multiple analytical perspectives. The analysis reveals that the situation of Tripura's tribal peoples is characterized by a fundamental tension between the formal constitutional recognition of tribal rights—through the Sixth Schedule, forest rights legislation, and electoral reservations—and the material reality of ongoing land alienation, economic marginalization, cultural erosion, and political underrepresentation. This tension is not unique to Tripura but reflects broader patterns of indigenous rights in postcolonial states where the imperatives of national integration,

economic development, and demographic change have frequently overridden constitutional commitments to indigenous autonomy and welfare.

The resolution of these tensions requires not merely technical policy interventions but a fundamental reorientation of the state's relationship with indigenous communities—from a paternalistic model of tribal 'development' to a rights-based framework that recognizes tribal communities as rights-bearing subjects with legitimate claims to territorial autonomy, cultural self-determination, and economic justice. The path toward such a reorientation is necessarily long and contested, but the direction of travel is clearly indicated by both the constitutional framework and the normative standards of international indigenous rights law, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), to which India has expressed support.

The experience of Tripura offers important lessons for broader debates about the accommodation of indigenous rights within post-colonial democratic states. The persistence of structural marginalization despite formal constitutional protections demonstrates that institutional design alone is insufficient without the political will and administrative capacity to implement rights on the ground. The active mobilization of indigenous communities themselves—in legal advocacy, political organization, cultural revitalization, and economic enterprise—represents the most essential element in any project of indigenous rights realization.

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