

Social Assertion and Ecological Citizenship: Emerging Voices of Scheduled Castes in Assam's Environmental Movements

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Abstract

This study examines the **emerging ecological agency and social assertion** of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Assam, focusing on their participation in environmental movements and engagement with ecological governance. Despite constitutional protections, SC communities have historically been marginalized socially, economically, and environmentally, with limited access to land, water, and decision-making institutions. Employing a **qualitative-descriptive research design**, the study draws on field interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory observations across selected districts of Assam with significant SC populations, supplemented by secondary data from census reports, policy documents, and environmental studies. The analysis integrates **Political Ecology, Environmental Justice, and Subaltern/Dalit perspectives** to conceptualize SC participation as **eco-political assertion**, linking social inclusion with ecological citizenship. Findings reveal that SC communities, while facing systemic exclusion, caste-blind policies, economic vulnerability, and gendered constraints, are actively asserting their rights through grassroots initiatives, self-help groups, and community-based environmental projects. The study highlights the **intersection of social marginalization and ecological vulnerability**, demonstrating how SC engagement transforms ecological risk into collective action and civic agency. The paper concludes with **policy recommendations** for inclusive environmental governance, caste-sensitive disaster management, and intersectional interventions targeting women, youth, and economically vulnerable SC groups. By foregrounding the voices of marginalized communities, this study contributes to the **discourse on environmental justice, social equity, and participatory governance** in North-East India.

Keywords: Social assertion, ecological citizenship, empowerment, environmental movements, Scheduled Castes, Assam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

Assam, situated in the northeastern region of India, is renowned for its rich ecological diversity, encompassing floodplains, wetlands, forests, and riverine ecosystems. This ecological richness, however, is accompanied by persistent environmental challenges, including recurrent floods, soil erosion, deforestation, industrial pollution, and climate-induced vulnerability. While these ecological risks affect all residents, **Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Assam historically experience compounded marginalization**, shaped by centuries of caste-based exclusion, limited access to land and water resources, and socio-economic deprivation. Their settlements are often concentrated in environmentally fragile zones, such as

riverbanks, floodplains, and industrial peripheries, rendering them particularly susceptible to environmental hazards.

Problem Statement

Despite constitutional safeguards ensuring equality and affirmative action, SC communities remain **underrepresented in environmental movements and decision-making processes**. Their perspectives, needs, and voices are frequently overlooked in the formulation and implementation of ecological policies. This lack of representation not only limits their ecological agency but also perpetuates historical patterns of social and environmental marginalization, reinforcing systemic inequalities in both resource access and governance.

Rationale

Investigating the participation of SC communities in Assam's environmental movements provides a critical lens to understand how **marginalized groups negotiate social power, assert ecological agency, and engage in civic action**. By documenting their emerging roles in grassroots environmental initiatives, this study highlights the interplay between social assertion and ecological citizenship, revealing how SC communities transform vulnerability into collective action. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of **subaltern environmental engagement**, offering insights for policy interventions that are socially inclusive, ecologically sustainable, and sensitive to historical inequities.

Objectives:

- Examine SC participation in environmental movements in Assam.
- Explore the concept of ecological citizenship in marginalized communities.
- Identify challenges and opportunities for social assertion through environmental activism.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Context

1. **Ambedkar, B. R. (1948)**. Ambedkar's foundational work on caste marginalization provides critical insights into the **historical and structural exclusion of Scheduled Castes (SCs)** in India. He emphasizes how social hierarchies systematically denied SCs access to land, education, and political participation, creating enduring vulnerabilities. This framework is essential for understanding the **intersection of caste and ecological marginalization**, as SC communities are often relegated to environmentally fragile lands and excluded from decision-making processes that affect their livelihoods and ecological security. Ambedkar's analysis provides a lens to interpret SC participation in environmental movements as a struggle for both **social recognition and resource rights**.

2. **Blaikie, P., & Brookfield, H. (1987)**. Blaikie and Brookfield's **Political Ecology framework** elucidates the complex relationship between **power structures, social organization, and environmental change**. Their approach highlights that environmental degradation is not merely a natural or technical phenomenon but is often **mediated by social hierarchies**, economic inequalities, and political exclusion. In the context of SC communities in Assam, this framework helps analyze how caste-based marginalization intersects with ecological vulnerability, shaping **unequal access to resources, differential exposure to hazards, and restricted participation in environmental governance**.

3. **Dobson, A. (2003).** Dobson introduces the concept of **ecological citizenship**, linking **environmental responsibilities with civic rights**. The framework emphasizes that true citizenship involves **both rights to a safe and sustainable environment and responsibilities toward ecological stewardship**. For SC communities, this concept frames their participation in environmental movements as an expression of **agency and active citizenship**, where engagement in local conservation, disaster management, and policy advocacy represents a claim to both ecological and social rights.
4. **Guha, R., & Martinez-Alier, J. (1997).** Guha and Martinez-Alier explore the **politics of environmentalism in India and the Global South**, emphasizing that environmental struggles are deeply **entwined with social and economic inequalities**. They argue that marginalized communities, including SCs, experience **disproportionate ecological burdens**, yet their voices are often excluded from mainstream environmental discourse. This perspective is crucial for analyzing how **subaltern participation** emerges in grassroots movements, revealing forms of **resistance, negotiation, and social assertion** within ecological struggles.
5. **Schlosberg, D. (2007).** Schlosberg's **multidimensional Environmental Justice framework** identifies three core components: **distributive justice** (equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens), **procedural justice** (fair participation in environmental decision-making), and **recognitional justice** (acknowledging marginalized groups' rights and identities). This framework provides analytical tools to evaluate **SC inclusion and exclusion** in environmental governance, highlighting how injustices are reproduced not only through material deprivation but also through **institutional neglect and social invisibility**.
6. **Spivak, G. C. (1988).** Spivak's Subaltern Studies perspective emphasizes the **structural silencing of marginalized voices** and the difficulty of having subaltern concerns recognized within dominant discourses. Applying this lens, SC engagement in environmental movements can be understood as a **strategic negotiation of space, rights, and recognition**, where grassroots activism becomes a medium to make their ecological and social grievances visible, and to challenge **hegemonic environmental narratives** that often ignore caste-based inequalities.
7. **Robbins, P. (2004).** Robbins extends Political Ecology by explicitly linking **environmental change with social power relations**, showing how marginalized groups are often excluded from **decision-making, access to resources, and adaptive capacity**. His approach emphasizes that environmental vulnerabilities are **politically produced** rather than merely natural, providing a lens to analyze how SC communities in Assam are disproportionately affected by floods, industrial pollution, and land dispossession while simultaneously being **excluded from governance mechanisms**.
8. **Bell, D., & Russell, D. (2012).** Bell and Russell expand on ecological citizenship by connecting it with **participatory environmental governance and social justice**. They highlight the **importance of grassroots activism** in enabling marginalized communities to assert their rights and responsibilities within ecological systems. Their work underscores that SC engagement in Assam's environmental movements is not only a **form of ecological stewardship** but also a **vehicle for social empowerment**, enhancing both local governance and collective agency.

2.2 Empirical Context

Empirical studies on environmental movements and the socio-political participation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Assam reveal the complex intersection of ecological vulnerability, social marginalization, and emerging forms of agency:

1. **Baruah, S. (2003).** Baruah examines environmental and socio-political conflicts in Assam, demonstrating that marginalized communities, including SCs, are frequently excluded from **resource governance and ecological decision-making**. The study highlights how socio-political hierarchies and institutional neglect restrict SC access to natural resources and participation in local environmental management, setting the stage for persistent ecological and social inequities.
2. **Saikia, P., et al. (2012).** This study documents the plight of SC communities in **flood-prone areas**, revealing recurrent displacement, loss of livelihoods, and inadequate institutional support. The research emphasizes the **ecological vulnerability of SC populations** and their limited voice in disaster preparedness and management, illustrating the interplay between social marginalization and environmental risk exposure.
3. **Hussain, R. F. (2014).** Hussain highlights **community-led ecological initiatives**, particularly in wetland conservation, noting the **emerging participation of marginalized groups**. The work provides early evidence of SC ecological assertion, showing how grassroots engagement serves both environmental protection and social recognition, despite systemic exclusion from formal governance structures.
4. **Das, S. K. (2014).** Das presents empirical evidence of SC settlements located near **industrial peripheries**, where communities experience **health hazards, livelihood disruption, and minimal representation** in grievance redressal mechanisms. This study underscores the intersection of industrialization, ecological risk, and caste-based vulnerability, highlighting the **need for inclusive environmental policies**.
5. **Saikia, N., et al. (2015).** This research emphasizes the role of marginalized communities, including SCs, in **community-led forest and river conservation projects**. It documents strategies of **social assertion through environmental activism**, showing that SC engagement in ecological projects strengthens collective identity and enhances socio-political visibility.
6. **Bora, S., et al. (2016).** Bora et al. analyze SC participation in **eco-development programs**, demonstrating that collective mobilization not only promotes ecological sustainability but also fosters **social recognition and empowerment**. Their work highlights the dual outcomes of environmental engagement: conservation outcomes and the assertion of social rights.
7. **Das, E. K., & Baishya, D. (2017).** This study examines **participatory disaster management**, documenting SC communities' limited inclusion in planning and decision-making processes. It also highlights **innovative coping mechanisms**, such as community-based resource sharing and localized early warning systems, which reflect adaptive ecological citizenship despite structural exclusion.
8. **Kumar, D. (2018).** Kumar provides case studies on **SC-led initiatives** in afforestation, river cleaning, and eco-awareness campaigns. The research highlights **emerging ecological citizenship practices**, where SC communities engage proactively in environmental stewardship, asserting both ecological responsibility and social agency.
9. **Henga, N., & Banik, G. G. (2019).** This study documents how marginalized communities, particularly SCs, **articulate social and ecological grievances** through grassroots activism. Their findings link environmental justice to social justice, showing that SC participation transforms ecological vulnerability into platforms for **collective advocacy and rights assertion**.
10. **Hussain, R. F. (2020).** The most recent work emphasizes the **increasing visibility of SC participation** in policy advocacy, eco-clubs, and collective action. It highlights how ecological

vulnerability is transformed into **social and political agency**, demonstrating a shift from passive victimhood to proactive engagement in environmental governance.

Summary Insight: These empirical studies collectively illustrate that SC communities in Assam, while historically marginalized, are increasingly engaging in **grassroots environmental movements**. Their participation reflects a **convergence of ecological stewardship and social assertion**, highlighting the emergence of **eco-political consciousness** that challenges structural inequalities and fosters inclusive environmental governance.

2.3 Identification of Research Gap

While existing studies highlight environmental challenges, grassroots activism, and social marginalization in Assam, there remains a **critical gap in integrating caste dynamics with ecological citizenship and environmental participation**. Most research focuses either on general environmental movements or on socio-economic vulnerabilities of SC communities, without examining **how Scheduled Castes actively assert their rights and agency within environmental movements**. Furthermore, there is limited empirical documentation of **emerging SC voices in policy advocacy, eco-clubs, and community-led initiatives**, especially in the North-East Indian context. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing the intersection of **social assertion, caste-based marginalization, and ecological citizenship**, providing both theoretical and empirical insights into SC participation in Assam's environmental governance.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on an **integrated theoretical framework** to examine the intersection of caste, social assertion, and ecological participation among Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Assam.

1. **Integration of Environmental Justice and Political Ecology:** Political Ecology (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Robbins, 2004) and Environmental Justice (Schlosberg, 2007) are combined to analyze **power relations, resource access, and distributive inequities**. This integration helps explain how SC communities are systematically marginalized in both environmental governance and resource allocation, and how ecological vulnerabilities are shaped by socio-political hierarchies.

2. **Incorporation of Subaltern Studies and Dalit Environmentalism:** Drawing on Subaltern Studies (Spivak, 1988) and Dalit Environmentalism (Ambedkar, 1948; Guru, 2009), the framework foregrounds **social assertion, agency, and resistance** among marginalized groups. It emphasizes SC communities as **active participants** in environmental movements, negotiating recognition and ecological rights despite historical exclusion.

3. **Conceptualizing "Ecological Citizenship":** Ecological Citizenship (Dobson, 2003; Bell & Russell, 2012) links **rights, responsibilities, and participatory governance** with social assertion. For SC communities, ecological citizenship is expressed through **grassroots mobilization, advocacy, and collective action**, representing both an exercise of agency and a claim to equitable inclusion in environmental decision-making.

Integrative Perspective: By combining these three strands, the study conceptualizes SC participation as **eco-political assertion**, highlighting the simultaneous pursuit of **ecological stewardship and social justice**. This framework enables a nuanced understanding of how marginalized communities negotiate agency, assert rights, and engage in sustainable environmental governance.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- **Research Design:** Qualitative-descriptive and analytical.
- **Study Area:** Selected districts of Assam with significant SC participation in environmental initiatives (e.g., Nagaon, Dibrugarh, Cachar).
- **Sampling:** Purposive sampling of SC participants in environmental movements, NGOs, and community organizations.
- **Data Collection:**
 - Primary: Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participatory observation.
 - Secondary: Government reports, NGO records, environmental policy documents, media archives.
- **Data Analysis:** Thematic and discourse analysis to identify patterns of participation, assertion, and citizenship.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Informed consent, confidentiality, cultural sensitivity.

5 OBJECTIVE-WISE ANALYSIS

Objective 1: To examine SC participation in environmental movements in Assam.

Findings: Field research reveals that Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Assam are increasingly active in grassroots environmental initiatives, including afforestation drives, flood management campaigns, river cleaning, and pollution advocacy. In districts like **Nagaon, Dibrugarh, and Cachar**, SC participants often organize through self-help groups, NGOs, and local community collectives.

Analysis: This participation represents a shift from **passive ecological vulnerability to active agency**, challenging historical patterns of marginalization. Political Ecology explains this as a negotiation of **power and access**, where marginalized groups assert influence over resource governance. SC involvement also exemplifies **subaltern environmental activism**, demonstrating how social hierarchies are contested through ecological engagement.

Implication: SC engagement in environmental movements reflects an **emerging eco-political consciousness**, highlighting the potential of grassroots participation to reshape local ecological governance and challenge systemic exclusion.

Objective 2: To explore the concept of ecological citizenship among SC communities.

Findings: SC participants frame ecological citizenship not only in terms of environmental protection but also as a claim to rights, resources, and representation. For instance, their participation in river cleaning campaigns or afforestation initiatives is coupled with demands for **secure land tenure, water rights, and equitable disaster relief**.

Analysis: Drawing on Dobson (2003) and Schlosberg (2007), ecological citizenship among SCs integrates **rights, responsibilities, and recognition**. However, caste hierarchies mediate who can exercise these rights. SC communities demonstrate that ecological citizenship is **negotiated and contested**, not automatically guaranteed by formal policies.

Implication: Understanding ecological citizenship through a caste lens emphasizes the importance of **participatory inclusion** and recognition in environmental governance, beyond formal legal provisions.

Objective 3: To identify strategies of social assertion and collective agency.

Findings: SC communities employ diverse strategies to assert their ecological and social rights:

- Formation of **grassroots collectives and eco-clubs**.

- Engagement in **advocacy networks** linking local issues to state-level policy.
- Use of **community mobilization and public protests** to draw attention to environmental hazards affecting SC settlements.

Analysis: These strategies reflect what Subaltern Studies identifies as **everyday resistance and agency** (Spivak, 1988; Rege, 1998). By organizing collectively, SC communities challenge both ecological neglect and social marginalization, transforming vulnerability into **assertive citizenship**.

Implication: Social assertion through environmental activism enables SCs to claim both **ecological space and political recognition**, forging pathways for inclusive environmental governance.

Objective 4: To analyze barriers and challenges to SC ecological participation.

Findings: Despite growing participation, SC communities face persistent constraints:

- **Socio-political marginalization** limiting institutional support.
- **Caste-blind environmental policies** that fail to recognize differential vulnerabilities.
- **Economic precarity** restricting capacity for sustained engagement.
- **Gendered burdens**, particularly on SC women who manage households while participating in ecological initiatives.

Analysis: These barriers demonstrate how **structural inequalities intersect with environmental risk**, reinforcing the cycle of exclusion (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). Political Ecology underscores that participation is conditioned by **access to resources, political networks, and social capital**.

Implication: Addressing these barriers requires **intersectional, caste-sensitive, and gender-responsive interventions** to enable full SC participation in environmental movements.

Objective 5: To interpret the implications of SC environmental activism for social assertion and policy.

Findings: SC ecological activism transforms traditional marginalization into **eco-political assertion**, linking environmental engagement with broader social justice claims. It challenges dominant narratives that frame SCs as passive victims, demonstrating **agency, innovation, and leadership** in resource management.

Analysis: Integrating Political Ecology and Environmental Justice frameworks, SC activism highlights how **citizenship is performed and negotiated** in ecological arenas. This participatory model expands conventional understandings of environmental governance, showing that social inclusion is essential for sustainable outcomes.

Implication: Policy frameworks must **institutionalize SC participation**, support grassroots leadership, and recognize marginalized voices in environmental decision-making. Sustainable development and social equity are inseparable in contexts where caste and ecology intersect.

Overall Analytical Insight: The analysis demonstrates that **Scheduled Castes in Assam are emerging as active agents of ecological citizenship**, translating environmental engagement into social assertion and political recognition. Through grassroots mobilization, advocacy, and collective action, SC communities challenge ecological neglect and caste-based marginalization simultaneously. However, **structural barriers—caste hierarchies, economic precarity, and gendered vulnerabilities—limit the full realization of ecological citizenship**. True environmental justice in Assam requires policies that integrate social inclusion, participatory governance, and recognition of subaltern voices, ensuring that marginalized communities are both stakeholders and leaders in shaping sustainable ecological futures.

6. CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Assam face multiple **interconnected challenges** that limit their participation in environmental movements and constrain the exercise of ecological citizenship:

1. **Socio-Political Marginalization and Limited Institutional Support:** Despite constitutional safeguards, SC communities remain underrepresented in environmental governance bodies, such as forest committees, pollution boards, and disaster management authorities. This lack of representation restricts their ability to influence decision-making, access resources, or secure institutional support for ecological initiatives.
2. **Caste-Blind Environmental Policies and Bureaucratic Hurdles:** Many state-led environmental programs and eco-development projects adopt a universalist approach, neglecting the differential vulnerabilities of SC communities. Procedural complexities, bureaucratic delays, and lack of caste-sensitive frameworks often prevent SC participation and the equitable distribution of benefits.
3. **Economic Vulnerability and Environmental Risk Exposure:** SC households are frequently concentrated in flood-prone areas, degraded industrial peripheries, or marginal lands. Limited land ownership, low-income livelihoods, and dependency on informal work exacerbate their exposure to environmental hazards, reducing their capacity to engage in sustained ecological initiatives.
4. **Gendered Responsibilities and Constraints:** Within SC communities, women disproportionately bear the burden of ecological and social responsibilities, such as fetching water, managing households during floods, and coping with industrial pollution. Gendered labor roles, combined with social marginalization, restrict women's participation in leadership and decision-making within environmental movements.

Summary Insight: These challenges highlight the **structural inequities** shaping SC ecological engagement. Addressing socio-political exclusion, economic precarity, bureaucratic barriers, and gendered vulnerabilities is essential for enabling meaningful participation and realizing **inclusive ecological citizenship**.

7. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, several **policy measures and interventions** are proposed to enhance the participation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in environmental movements and strengthen ecological citizenship:

1. **Promoting SC Representation in Environmental Decision-Making:** Institutional mechanisms should ensure the inclusion of SC members in forest management committees, pollution control boards, disaster management authorities, and local environmental governance bodies. Enhanced representation will enable SC voices to influence policy, advocate for equitable resource distribution, and participate meaningfully in ecological decision-making.
2. **Integrating Caste-Sensitive Frameworks into Environmental Policies and Disaster Management:** Environmental and disaster management programs must adopt **caste-sensitive approaches** that recognize differential vulnerabilities, ensure equitable access to resources, and provide targeted support for marginalized communities. This includes tailored flood relief, rehabilitation schemes, and livelihood protection initiatives for SC populations.
3. **Supporting Grassroots Ecological Leadership and Community-Based Initiatives:** Policy interventions should actively **strengthen community-based organizations and eco-clubs** led by

SC communities. Capacity-building programs, funding support, and technical assistance can empower marginalized groups to take leadership roles in environmental management and advocacy.

4. **Designing Intersectional Interventions for Women, Youth, and Economically Vulnerable SC Groups:** Policies should account for the **intersection of caste, gender, and economic vulnerability**, providing targeted programs for SC women and youth who often face the greatest ecological and social burdens. Initiatives could include eco-entrepreneurship, vocational training, environmental education, and participatory planning platforms to enhance agency and resilience.

Overall Insight: Implementing these recommendations can facilitate **inclusive environmental governance**, reduce structural inequities, and transform SC ecological vulnerability into active **eco-political engagement**, ensuring that social justice and environmental sustainability are pursued in tandem.

8. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the **emerging ecological agency and social assertion** of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Assam. Empirical evidence demonstrates that SC communities are not merely passive victims of environmental degradation but active participants in grassroots environmental movements, engaging in afforestation, river cleaning, disaster management, and advocacy for ecological rights. Their participation reflects a growing **eco-political consciousness**, where social marginalization is challenged through collective action, negotiation of rights, and ecological stewardship.

The findings reaffirm the **interconnectedness of social assertion, ecological citizenship, and environmental justice**. SC engagement illustrates that meaningful environmental governance requires not only technical interventions but also inclusive, caste-sensitive, and participatory frameworks that recognize the rights, responsibilities, and agency of marginalized communities.

For future research, there is a need for **longitudinal studies tracking SC environmental mobilization over time**, as well as **comparative analyses across North-East India** to understand regional variations in ecological participation and social assertion. Such studies will deepen insights into how marginalized communities transform ecological vulnerability into **sustainable social and environmental empowerment**, advancing both theory and policy in the domain of environmental justice.

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