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Everyday Multiculturalism In Tripura: A Case Study Of Agartala City

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ABSTRACT

Agartala, the capital city of Tripura, is a unique city in Northeast India. where many different ethnic and religious groups come together, creating a rich society. This paper explores the concept of Agartala as a "salad bowl," a place where many cultures thrive. Both the indigenous population and the Bengali community live side-by-side, each keeping their own distinct traditions. In recent years, the city has become a place where stories clash. Political actors claim 'ownership' of the land, using different versions of ethnic history. These stories have created fear and tension, threatening the long peace between tribal and non-tribal residents. However, the study shows that Agartala's daily life tells a different story, one that contradicts these divisive political claims. The study examines shared public spaces, religious sites, fairs, expos, food and festivals, demonstrating a strong culture of living side-by-side. The study concludes that Agartala doesn't belong to just one community. Instead, it's a shared inheritance for everyone who lives there. By calling the city a 'shared space,' the research offers a counter-narrative to the ethnic conflicts common in today's politics. The study suggests that maintaining this diverse society is key to the state's stability and economic growth.

Keywords: *Everyday Multiculturalism, Agartala, Salad Bowl Theory, Ethnic Coexistence, Social Fabric, Urban Integration*

Introduction

Agartala is the capital city of Tripura, located in the northeastern part of India. After its merger with the Indian Union in 1949 under the Part C category of the Indian constitution framework, it gradually progressed as a full-fledged state since 1972. Accommodating a multi-ethnic section of people. The population of Tripura is classified into two major groups: the indigenous tribal people and the non-indigenous people. Who had been living and co-existing in the state since its ancient civilisation much earlier than merger agreement of 1949.

Agartala, since gaining its capital status after its merger, has become the administrative and economic hub of the space. However the problem that is revolving in the state politics of Tripura is the claiming of ownership- "who is the owner of Agartala", a highly communicated by the political actors to fracture the very essence of peaceful coexistence among diverse groups. This political narratives of ownership had manufacture fears among the common people of the state, who travel to Agartala for education; health; economic opportunity; and improve standard of living. Here the study is highlighting the problem of narrative building where there are two major political

narratives – on one side are the indigenous tribal political narratives, where they believe that Agartala was historically the land of the tribals, which was slowly encroached upon by the immigrant population from East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. On the other hand, we have the political narratives of non-indigenous people, who believe that the space was gradually developed through their labour over several ancestral generations. This “contentious memory making” is further used by my political actors to capitalise the narratives through strong communication vacuum for political gains. To understand these problems, the study examines whether Agartala, as a capital city, is a disputed space or a space where people coexist and thrive together under a multicultural political framework.

I. Conceptual and theoretical framework

Multiculturalism as a political framework has evolved from a descriptive idea of pluralism to a much more normative legal instrument to manage the societal problems in the post colonial state building. Will Kymlicka, in his seminal work, “Multicultural Citizenship”, argues that multiculturalism serves as a tool for integrating multi-ethnic groups of people by acknowledging their distinct cultural rights within the state. The theory of salad bowl and melting pot of multiculturalism is vital in analysing how Agartala city is classified, whether it is a salad bowl or a melting pot. Salad bowl is a theory which used to describe how in a society each ethnic groups keep their own cultural markers just like fruit or vegetables salad when kept in a bowl. whereas the melting pot is totally opposite from the salad bowl, it is a process when the multi ethnic groups assimilate together by integrating them into a singular strong national identity by erasing their distinct ethnic social markers. In the context of Agartala city, the salad bowl theory provides a much more effective analytical lens to examine how the people in Agartala maintain their distinct culture while also participating with other groups of people without melting in a single pot.

Agartala is a space composed of diverse multi-ethnic groups of people, sharing common urban spaces and lifestyles. However, the political narratives had created a contentious memory making. it is termed used to describe how various political actors manipulate historical accounts and symbols to construct competing memory making, and manipulate the past history, effectively turning monuments and public spaces into sites of ethnic contestation . For instance, the neglected state of historical sites, such as the simlang at Battala, illustrates how ruins are transformed into "ethnicised sights" that highlight geographic divisions to serve specific ethno-nationalist agendas . These manoeuvres reflect a broader "multicultural vulnerability," as minority communities increasingly perceive their unique heritage and rights as endangered within their own ancestral homelands . Understanding this memory making by the political actors is critical to examine the tension faced by the common people of the state.

Everyday multiculturalism is a theory use by scholars to shift the focus from top-down state policies toward the everyday interactions that define urban life, such as encounters in marketplaces or shared public facilities . By examining these everyday social exchanges, the study moves beyond the ideological-normative debates surrounding state-level multiculturalism to understand how the people in the urban spaces coexist together. This examination reveals that, while narrative buildings through political actors emphasise division among the people, the everyday ground realities of the city often tell different stories in ways that challenge the "melting pot" expectation, in which distinct ethnic identities are paradoxically preserved rather than erased (Berray, 2019, p. 145). In the case of Agartala, the study further examines how the people in day-to-day life counter these political actors narratives through memory making and engage in cross-cultural exchanges

that basically lead to social cohesion and harmony. These day-to-day interactions show that the urban social identities of the people are not defined by the ideologies that flow through the medium of communication, but instead are shaped through cross-cultural engagement among communities (Leider, 2021, p. 41).

Glocalisation is an important term used to analyse how, in the period of globalisation and mass industrialisation, the traditional food practices transform gradually as they adapt with the urban spaces in Agartala, showcasing a cosmopolitan landscape (Roy, 2020, p. 5). Glocalisation is a political sociology framework in understanding how the interaction of food and multi ethnic communities in urban spaces plays a vital role in negotiating the cultural differences while also maintaining social harmony effectively through cultural markers (Das, 2025).

The theory of social capital is an essential mechanism for analysing how informal networks and civic engagement among Agartala's residents foster mutual trust despite the broader political polarisation. These framework enable the residents of the urban spaces to mitigate ethno-religious division through the mechanism of shared economic and civic collaboration among communities (Bayat, 2010, p. 246). Furthermore, social infrastructure serves as "contact zones" where rigid ethno-nationalist agenda is mitigated by the pragmatism of everyday transactions among people (Hiebert et al., 2014, p. 29). These contact places are the highly day of day moving space such as market and transit hub (Wessendorf & Farrer, 2021, p. 3). which help to manage the cultural differences in the urban spaces (Neal et al., 2018, p. 77). which enable the communities or individuals to negotiate their identities through community bonding despite the political narratives building to bring disharmony within the society (Chatterjee, 2025). In this way, the urban space will be able to foster cultural diversity through negotiation among the communities (Abbas & Khattab, 2025, p. 2).

This analytical and theoretical framework can be used to understand how in the urban space of Agartala it manages multi-ethnic cultural diversity in a contested political narrative building.

II. Agartala as Everyday Multiculturalism

Agartala is not just a capital city of tripura, with high buildings and flyover but its a space where both indigenous and non-indigenous groups live together peacefully and negotiate their coexistence through social exchanges promoting a sense of brotherhood. Agartala has a population of over 6 lakh under the Agartala Municipal Corporation administration. People come to these urban spaces for education, healthcare, jobs, economic opportunity and living standards. Historically, the spaces had faced demographic transition following the 1947 partition of India and merger with indian union, eventually led to successive waves of migration, further leading to cultural fusion of indigenous and non indigenous cultural in urban spaces. where the historical princely town transformed into an urban complex hub where both the ethnic communities thrive together (Ghoshal, 2021).

a. Existence of Multi-Religious space

Religion plays a significant role in human life through its values and customs that govern social conduct. The study shows that Agartala is a space of shared spiritual practices where diverse religions exist. Some of the major religions are - Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Sikh and Buddhist. This shows the cross-cultural coexistence of different beliefs living together in the urban space. The presence of temples, churches, mosques, gurdwaras, and monasteries exemplifies a secular framework that transcends mere institutional pluralism to foster "commonplace diversity," where

shared neighbourhood proximity normalises religious difference as a mundane facet of urban existence .

The coexistence of multi-religious worship places for the believers such as Shri Jagannath temple, the church situated in the mission compound Ad Nagar, Agartala, TBCU, the Gedu Mia Masjid, The Venuban Buddha vihara and Gurudwara Sahid reflect a shared religious heritage in the urban spaces of Agartala city where people follow and practices their own customs and traditions by promoting religious pluralism and strengthening the core values and ideas of secularism in a multi-ethnic society (Kumar, 2024, p. 5; Debbarma & Behera, 2025).

b. Shared Urban spaces

Shared urban space is a concept championed by urban architect Jan Gehl, emphasising the development of public spaces through proper planning that will promote engagement in social interaction across diverse multi-ethnic communities. These spaces will act as a social mobiliser through a day-to-day contact zone where people from different communities will together participate in daily social activities. This interaction among the communities will transform the public spaces into a zone for social harmony (Chakraborti & Debbarma, 2025). In this way, the communities of urban spaces will engage in daily activities through integration rather than the pursuit of social integration (Geel & Beyers, 2018, p. 7).

The spaces, such as Heritage Park, Oxygen Park, Children's Park, Nehru Park, Dimsagar, the Albert Ekka War Memorial and many more, play a vital role in bringing social cohesion in the urban spaces. These provide a friendly space where families and children come together and promote collective sense of belonging within the urban space framework(Saha et al., 2020). further act as a markers for shared community integration by fostering social capital and day to day interaction among communities and individual (Qi et al., 2024, p. 171). Promoting these day-to-day interactions through shared public spaces will further encourage the cross-pollination of cultural practices in an urban space (Saba & Gupta, 2025).

Furthermore, the integration of these shared public spaces will reduce urban segregation, ensuring that it fosters social cohesion rather than hindering it (Mulya & Schäfer, 2023, p. 104476). These shared spaces serve as a place of democratic dialogue through civil engagement and mutual cooperation among the multi-ethnic communities of the city. By building these spaces, it allows the communities for day-to-day interaction, further mitigating the political narratives, building tensions, and countering it through social cohesion (Harikrishnan & Doyle, 2024, p. 107323). Beyond these shared public spaces, another important marker is the marketplaces where both tribal and non tribal communities interact on a day-to-day basis.

c. Marketplaces as a social mobiliser

Another important marker is the Marketplaces, which play an important role in mobilising the rural and urban settlers for trade and commerce in the urban space of Agartala. Though the Bengali community occupies the mass space of Agartala and has larger market access, in recent times, there has been an increase in tribal hawkers and vendors. Showing a clear role in shared economic growth contribution in the designated spaces. Traditional agricultural products directly from the Jhum cultivation bring new, diverse indigenous flavours and crops to the urban economy space. These further established the intercultural exchange of commodities between rural production and mass urban consumption. The tribal communities' indigenous knowledge system in the cultivation and harvesting of crops further leads to cultural collaboration through shared learning. Some of the

important marketplaces are Lake Choumoni, Chandmari, Nanda Nagar, Abhoy Nagar, Gol Bazaar, Battala, Hawkers Corner, Mb Tilla Market, BijoykumarKaipeng Bazaar, Batkara and many more places serve as examples where there is day to day interaction in the marketplaces promoting peaceful coexistence among the tribal and non-tribal hawkers and vendors without any social conflict in the space.

Furthermore, in the fast-growing globalisation and urbanisation, the emergence of shopping malls such as - Bag Bazaar, Smart Bazaar, Trends, Vishal Mart, Kolkata Bazaar, Polo Mall, Sasta Bazaar, Max Bazaar and many more tells us different stories that residents from all over the state regardless of their ethnic identities, engage in shared consumption, further promoting a sense of social cohesion. These marketplaces act as an intersectional zone where people from multi-ethnic identities participate to bridge tradition and modernity by promoting the exchange of goods and information across all sections of society (Chandra, 2019, p. 17). These spaces provide a platform to the artisan to exhibit their cultural heritage while fostering Cross-ethnic social cohesion (Hasan, 2025). It also offers the tribal population to participate in the urban economy through a sustainable pathway by revitalising traditional handloom and handicrafts (Sentienla& Debnath, 2026).

This framework will be significant to the tribal women who are heavily reliant on street vending for financial autonomy and socio-economic empowerment (Medoze&Deori, 2025). These dynamics show a pattern where women across northeast India utilise street vending as a strategic mechanism for poverty alleviation and improve housing facilities despite having infrastructure barriers (Medoze& Dutta, 2024). These commercial spaces also promote individual livelihood opportunities through fostering economic interdependence between the mass urban consumer and rural producers (Kenye &Faishal, 2025). Thus, marketplaces in Agartala are not only about economic activity, but also constitute vital space for cultural dialogue and the reinforcement of social capital among diverse ethnic groups (Jha, 2014). Further promoting a unique Multi-ethnic cultural synthesis (Nath et al., 2024). Festivals and puja are other markers moving beyond the commercial Marketplaces.

d. Festivals and Puja as a driver for social cohesion

Festivals are an important driver in mitigating social tension through shared celebrations, further fostering multi-ethnic identity, through shared inclusive spaces where multi-cultural rituals and public celebration often take place (Oriakpono& Onah, 2025). The celebration of multiple festivals throughout the year in the urban space of Agartala, such as Diwali, Holi, Durga Puja, Kali Puja, BasantiPuja Saraswati Puja in educational institutions, the tribal-based puja such as Baba Garia Puja, Hojagiri, Kharchi Puja, and many more, fosters a sense of togetherness through culture regardless of different political opinions. When such festivals are organised, people from across the state visit Agartala to witness the vibrant cultural synthesis in the urban space. These festivals and puja act as a driver for cross-cultural dialogue among communities. further fostering mutual understanding among people through collective participation (Rutagand, 2024). This further shows how in a multi-ethnic urban space people from various ethnicities actively engage in inter-cultural exchange through community activities, effectively mitigating the political ethnic divisions and fostering a shared sense of belonging (Tulibaleka et al., 2021, p. 79).

Moreover, these community gatherings at the times of festivals act as a properly managed urban space where people from diverse multi-ethnic communities negotiate their cultural differences through dialogue, showing that mutual cooperation further strengthens social parameters against social tension (Doley &Koiyam, 2025). In this context, the spaces promote secular values and ideas

through festivals and community participation, transforming the social gathering into a social bond zone (Saxena et al., 2020, p. 1602). These urban public spaces where shared festivals are hosted further foster recognition among the diverse, desperate, multi-ethnic groups (Quinn et al., 2020, p. 1881). Such spaces further help in unifying different cultures, maintaining their distinct social markers in a complex multi-ethnic society (Nirzalin et al., 2023, p. 152).

A discussion with the urban dwellers during the 2026 Holi festivals at Astabal ground tells different stories, while political narratives are built to divide the society in the space where the festival and puja plays are vital drivers for social cohesion among the different ethnic groups. Similarly, the indigenous tribal festival, such as Baba Garia, celebrated across the Agartala urban space, shows that tribal traditional customs and religious beliefs are also integrated in the broader urban space, further promoting the multicultural fabric of the city. For instance, the celebration of Saraswati Puja in educational institutions such as Tripura University plays a significant role in unifying diverse sections of people through cultural celebration, gathering and collective participation. The case of the university shows that it's not only limited to enrolling stakeholders of the institution, but people residing around the campus also gather to celebrate the events. It also shows how mutual respect among diverse communities creates a better environment in the educational space of the urban city of Agartala. These forms of events reflect a multicultural urban space that fosters multi-ethnic solidarity among communities (Wiranto&Setyawan, 2025). These further comprehend the uses of public spaces to foster social harmony through intergroup mixing and mutual recognition and cooperation over the rigid social norms (Quinn et al., 2022, p. 143).

e. Fairs, Cultural events and Expos

Fairs and expos, often organised by the government, play a significant role in mobilising the people, where people come and visit and gather to engage with diverse offerings that stimulate interaction among various demographic segments (Winter & Kim, 2020, p. 1670). These events leverage art and culture-based attractions to brand public spaces as unique, inclusive destinations that encourage residents to form new common habits and shared emotional bonds (Hama & Helmy, 2024, p. 12019). The Saras Mela, an initiative by the Government of Tripura, plays a significant role in supporting artisans and facilitating cultural exchange between rural and urban populations (Hasan, 2025).

The swadeshi fair 2026 organised by the AMC (Agartala municipal cooperation) also plays a significant role by promoting regional goods, arts and craft keeping in view the nation vision of Aatmanirbhar Bharat eventually fostering cultural unification in the space through shared urban and rural interaction. on the otherhandThetripura industries & Commerce fair 2026 help to further focus on the enterprise, innovation, entrepreneurship, regional growth and overall communities development in the state. Similarly, the international expos further highlights that the regional and local cultural interaction is not only limited to agartala urban space but extend to global communities through the support of state government support (Chandra, 2019, p. 17).

Furthermore, the Agartala book fair festival 2026, hosted in the Hapania ground, not only shows the buying of books but also fosters multi-ethnic integration, where people from all over the state visit and exchange their culture and tradition. The availability of foods in the venue of book fairs also play significant role as it build a pattern of social cohesion between tribal and non tribal in the space (Winter & Kim, 2020, p. 1670). And also the cultural events hosted in the Astabal playground show the capacity of Agartala urban space potential in unifying the multi-ethnic communities through cultural events, further promoting sustained community engagement in the urban space

(Quinn et al., 2020, p. 1881). These gathering of communities in the public spaces can help the venue transform into a social networking space, where it will promote social sustainability and mutual recognition through their day to day interaction (McClinchey, 2020). As a result Agartala urban city planning is design in such a way that it can be used for a multifunction venue to ensure that public amenities remain accessible and inclusive across all communities, thereby reinforcing the city's social resilience (Afzali et al., 2022, p. 111; Luonila et al., 2023, p. 9).

Furthermore, the utilisation of urban public spaces with multiple events helps to balance the historical cultural preservation alongside meeting the needs of the contemporary urban expectation (Kapil & Varghese, 2023). The 2026 IPL (Indian Premier League) final match between RCB (Royal Challenger Bangalore and GT (Gujarat Titans) fan park set up in Astabal Play ground also reflects how sporting events contribute to the urban social mobilisation, transforming standard public grounds into venues that attract diverse crowds and further neutralise sociopolitical divides (AP et al., 2026; Mazur-Wodarczyk et al., 2025, p. 5).

f. Food as an everyday interaction

Food is another everyday multicultural marker in the case of Tripura. It plays an important role as it acts as a fuel for the living organism's body to function effectively. However, in political sociology, food is not only about fulfilling the needs of the human body, but it also plays a significant role in cultural exchange among different multi-ethnic communities. In Agartala, urban space plays a significant role, where in the streets, food vendors and restaurants provide a space where communities from different multi-ethnic and linguistic backgrounds negotiate their shared identity (Srivastava & Gupta, 2026a, 2026b). The space has evolved into a destination where both tribal and non-tribal communities showcase their diverse culinary skills. This gastronomic interaction reflects not only the flavour of the foods that are exchanged among communities, but it also highlights the cultural distinctiveness, further reflecting the "salad bowl" model of multicultural integration in a shared urban space rather than getting assimilated, forming a "melting pot" (Srivastava & Gupta, 2026).

The concept of glocalisation is increasingly evident in Agartala, characterised by the co-existence of Western, regional, and indigenous culinary traditions. The city's gastronomic landscape shows a diversity in food variety, such as the Indigenous tribal dishes Awaan bangui, berma, chakwi, wahanmosodeng, tohanmosodeng, gudok, and mwkhwi, served alongside traditional Bengali cuisine and western fast-food staples like burgers, chicken fries, and pizza. This blending of culinary skills shows the cross-cultural engagement that is evolving through food. Furthermore, the rise of digital initiatives and development of online food delivery apps such as Zomato and Swiggy has further played a vital role in the exchange of traditional foods, where individuals and families sitting from home can easily experience tribal, non-tribal and western cuisine. making the culinary skills and tradition not get isolated. This pluralism of food culture in the urban space also reinforces economic development and cultural distinctiveness in the city.

Moving beyond the economic aspects, the communities using the shared dining spaces in restaurants also offer an expression of mutual respect, carefully navigating dietary taboos to ensure inclusivity across all religious and ethnic fabrics (Ali, 2017, p. 41). These culinary skills of the various communities are not limited to mere commodities but transform food into a social construct that reduces the potential for monopoly in urban space, rather than fostering diversity (Jacob & Chattaraj, 2022, p. 2). Further allowing the urban dwellers to celebrate their distinct cultural identities while fostering solidarity through the recognition of local gastronomic cultural

heritage (Samjaila&Khongshun, 2025). Moreover, due to the advancement of technologies, the digital documentation of the traditional recipes serves as a vital tool for preservation, while maintaining the authenticity of indigenous preparation (Roy, 2020, p. 1). Thus, the digital initiative for documenting and archiving the traditional ancestral knowledge system acts as a form of cultural resilience, ensuring that indigenous food culture survives even as contemporary globalisation shifts local consumption patterns (Banerjee, 2025).

Findings from the Study

The following findings are drawn from the study-

Agartala functions as a "salad bowl" where indigenous tribal and Bengali communities live together while keeping their own unique cultures. This allows different groups to participate in city life without losing their original ethnic identities.

Political actors from different parties sometimes create tension by claiming the ownership of Agartala space and history by one community. However, the study shows that the daily lifestyle of the people and common social interactions often prove these divisive claims are wrong

Shared urban public spaces such as Parks and Marketplaces act as a day-to-day interaction among ethnicities, building trust through daily activities like shopping, walking, jogging or relaxing.

Shared religious sites and festivals, such as the religious cities and various Pujas, are powerful social drivers for social unity. These events make living with different beliefs feel like a normal and peaceful part of city life.

Food acts as a social marker as it unites communities through shared traditional tribal dishes, Bengali cuisine and alongside western foods which are enjoyed by everyone. Furthermore, sharing of dining at public spaces and digital food apps help people connect faster with each other, fostering mutual respect and celebrating their diverse cultural heritage.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn from the study-

The government should promote the idea of Agartala as a "shared space" that belongs to everyone. This narrative can help stop ethnic conflicts and reduce the impact of divisive political talk.

The urban space planner should design more public spaces like parks and community spaces to further encourage people to interact in day-to-day movement. Building such public spaces will further promote a strong community bond and sense of belonging across multi-ethnic groups in the Agartala urban space.

Encouraging and supporting tribal youth to learn and sell traditional crafts and handloom products. which will provide them with steady jobs while also keeping important cultural traditions alive.

Local authorities and state government should improve and recognise informal markets where tribal and non-tribal vendors work side-by-side. Better market facilities will help the economy grow and encourage more cooperation between different communities in the state.

Festivals and cultural events should be supported because they allow people to learn about and respect each other's customs as it break down negative stereotypes and make the community more united.

Conclusion

The study shows that Agartala predominantly function as a salad bowl by accommodating multi-ethnic communities within a shared urban space. Rather than getting assimilated into a homogeneous culture or moving the urban space into a conflict zone. The urban space shows that the day-to-day negotiation among diverse multi-ethnic communities continues to coexist through mutual recognition and respect. Agartala as a urban space serve as an example of "everyday multiculturalism" where the communities from different ethnicities maintain their own distinct culture and preserve them while integrating into broader urban dynamics through balanced approach.

The narrative manufacture by the political actors through the medium of communication such as mass media and social media of claiming ownership by one particular ethnic group creating a sense of fear among people stand to be totally opposite as the ground reality of Agartala urban spaces shows totally different stories where the communities from different ethnicities are building the space as a shared heritage through cultural engagement and mutual respect among each other in the public space. The case study of Agartala offers a unique study of cross-cultural interaction among the multi-ethnic communities engaged in fostering social cohesion through its multifaceted urban space. Moving beyond the political narratives.

Furthermore, the study concludes with an inquiry into whether the government can actively promote Agartala as a shared space for all residents of Tripura. Rather than prioritising any single majority group. By prioritising equitable development in education, health, and economic sectors, Agartala could serve as a model for other urban centres where divisive rhetoric threatens to trigger ethnic violence. Future research should investigate whether everyday multiculturalism can function as a framework for state-building to strengthen Tripura's multi-ethnic community fabrics.

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