

**MAKING OF IDENTITIES:
A CASE OF THE BODOS AND SANTHALS IN ASSAM (1840s - 1990s)**

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
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MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

BENU MUSAHARI



Centre for Historical Studies

School of Social Sciences

Jawaharlal Nehru University

New Delhi- 110067

India

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DECLARATION

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I, **Benu Musahari**, declare that the dissertation entitled “**Making of Identities: A Case of the Bodos and Santhals in Assam (1840s-1990s)**”, submitted by me in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of **Master of Philosophy** of Jawaharlal Nehru University, is my bonafide work. I further declare that the dissertation has not been previously submitted for any other Degree of this university or any other university.

BENU MUSAHARI

(Candidate)

CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Prof. Bhagwan Josh
(CHAIRPERSON)

Dr. Sangeeta Dasgupta
(SUPERVISOR)

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Jawaharlal Nehru University

New Delhi

Benu Musahari

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INTRODUCTION

In 1905, British scholar administrator Edward Gait stated that ‘in the histories of India as a whole, Assam is barely mentioned...’¹ It would not be wrong to say that the situation has not changed much at present. Assam has remained at the margins, both geographically as well as allegorically. If one enters Assam from ‘mainland’ India by train or road, he/she is struck by the verdant greenery of forests, tea plantations and the quaintness of the natural scenery. But jarring this serene image are gaudy, eye catching and provocative slogans in graffiti on walls, vehicles and posters, which proclaim the names of various organisations and their ‘separatist’ demands. Assam, a state endowed with natural beauty, has over time become synonymous with two things- its world famous tea, and its infamously obdurate and prolonged movements of identity assertion. These two aspects might seem unconnected at first glance, but on taking a closer look, it becomes evident that the establishment of the tea industry in the region, and the subsequent assertion movements are interlinked issues. Take the example of the recent ‘ethnic conflict’ between the Boro and Santhal communities, which deals with the processes of identity formation that these two communities have undergone and continue to undergo. These processes involve their identification variously as ‘tribals,’ ‘indigenous people,’ and ‘immigrants.’ These terms are woven into the narratives of self-assertion of the Bodos and Santhals. While both these groups are recognised as ‘tribes,’ in the context of Assam and the recent conflict, the two groups have resorted to the use of the term ‘indigenous people’ for themselves. The appropriation of the term ‘indigenous people’ by the Santhals notwithstanding, they are referred to as ‘immigrants’ by the Bodos and other local groups keen to distinguish themselves from the former.

¹ E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam* (1905; Guwahati: LBS Publications, 1983), p. viii.

By employing the recent spurt in hostilities between these two 'tribal' communities as an entry point, to my study, I have focused on the larger question of how identities get coalesced, made, and unmade, over different points of time. The crystallisation of different groups into fixed categories, as well as their marginalisation has led to an analysis and questioning of such categorisation by scholars in recent times. These categories are reinvented and imbibed by different groups in their quest for the formulation of a distinct identity for themselves. Linked to, and based on prevailing ethnological and anthropological currents during the colonial period, such processes were also contingent on ground experiences, negotiations and expediencies. While the entry of the imperial power in the region led to the categorisation of people and places into distinct groups, the introduction of the tea plantations further created closed zones which led to the intensification and hardening of identities of various groups. Through these three focus points, of the colonial enterprise of production of knowledge and identifying and marking out different groups, the establishment of a regimented plantation economy, and a study of the conflict between the Bodos and the Santhals, I have attempted to historically trace the process by which identities get fixed, coalesced, and reinterpreted.

The process alluded to above is a delicately intricate one but certain broad themes can, nevertheless, be identified. One such strand is that of colonial knowledge production. During the colonial period, vast and ambitious projects were commissioned, with the intention of classifying the various communities found in the subcontinent. This led to the systematised identification and categorisation of people and their grouping into distinct 'castes' and 'tribes,' in which each group was attributed with particular corresponding characteristics which were objectified and magnified. In the context of

colonial India, Nicholas Dirks'² study on 'caste' has established the close link between knowledge production and authority over the colonized. Dirks argues that the category of caste as a universal and hierarchical construction was invented by the British. The census was the tool for colonial administrators to universalize and racialize caste. Further, the colonized people were induced through the data collection process of census operations to group themselves into a particular caste. This process went hand in hand with prevailing ethnological trends to attribute specific characteristics and behaviours to the various caste groups.

The establishment of colonial rule in Assam led to the commissioning of surveys, census operations and enumerations which slotted the different communities into 'castes' and 'tribes.' Within this imperial machinery of knowledge production the Bodos were designated not simply another rung in the tribal ladder but as 'primitive' and inferior to 'Hindu' Assamese people. Ajay Skaria³ means precisely this when he argues for a nuanced understanding of 'tribe,' emphasising it as a construct brought about by colonial rule. By the enterprise of identification, imagination and magnification of some specificities, different 'tribes' were slotted on a prescribed list. Different societies were placed in a hierarchical rank, the 'primitives' or 'aborigines' were placed at the lowest rung in the civilizational hierarchy- remnants from a past that had been left behind by modern times. Tribals were now set aside from other 'caste' Hindus. Within this scheme the Bodo 'tribals' began to be described as migratory agriculturists, animists, who inhabited specific marginal areas. They were juxtaposed against 'Hindus' who inhabited the fertile plains and practised settled agriculture. In this manner, groups began to be associated with specific kind of spaces.

² N. B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002).

³ A. Skaria, 'Shades of Wildness: Tribe, Caste, and Gender in Western India,' *Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 3 (1997).

It would however, be erroneous to suppose that this imperial machinery of knowledge production steamrolled unbridled. Nor was the enterprise as cohesive and unified as the official records made it look. The state's efforts at classifying and ordering the colonised society, through census operations, were confronted and contested by various social groups. These groups resisted, appropriated and modified the social categories of the colonisers. This has been the subject of a study by Vinita Damodaran⁴ who argues against studying the colonial discourse on ethnicity and categories as a uniform monolithic one, and stresses the existence of a far more complex relationship of the colonial rulers with the natives. The officials did not just invent categories; they were in continual engagement with the local people and their 'indigenous' ideas of space and territory rather than merely creating figures of isolated 'tribals.' She contends that colonial engagement with the colonized helped to institutionalise 'tribal' autonomy and the protection of 'tribal' rights. Colonial modernity provided avenues for the expression of the peoples' views, opinions and demands, facilitating the growth of an autonomous and assertive identity amongst Bodos.

Alongside this state sponsored exercise of information gathering flourished another unofficial one. The missionaries and their understandings of 'tribe' too played a significant role in creating a distinct identity of the Bodos as a 'tribe.' While it is true that much unofficial literature that was produced during this period drew heavily for illustration and analysis on the materials generated by the census of India, the two processes differed with respect to their objectives. As opposed to official census operations which sprang from the need of administrative expediencies, missionary writings were usually personal narratives arising from the close, often, first hand interactions that occurred between them and the local people. Propelled as they were by

⁴ V. Damodaran, 'Colonial Constructions of the 'tribe' in India: The case of Chotanagpur,' *The Indian Historical Review* 33, no. 1 (2006).

their fundamental purpose of gaining converts the missionaries dispensed with the official idea of ranking the colonial people into hierarchical slots. They did however differentiate between different groups with the motive of identifying potential converts. They differentiated the 'tribes' from the Hindus and Muslims. They portrayed the 'tribes' as 'savages,' and their customs and practices were termed as 'heathen.' In the writings of many of the missionaries the 'tribes' were portrayed as simple, truthful honest beings, unblemished by caste prejudices. Nicholas Thomas⁵ argues that if the 'tribes' had been intrinsically 'savage,' the project of conversion itself would have been rendered redundant. Hence, the presence of both savagery and qualities of essential humanity like truthfulness and simplicity and childlike qualities were emphasised, to justify conversion. Thus, the Bodos were described as 'savages' and 'demon worshippers,' different from the Hindu and Muslim 'civilized heathens.' They were extolled, on the other hand, for their truthful and independent spirit.

The approaches mentioned above did work independently of each other and often times missionaries and other ethnographers borrowed from existing discourses on 'caste' and 'tribes'. This has been pointed out by Dasgupta⁶ who argues that missionaries drew upon larger debates and theories that were prevalent in the colonial period and in turn, contributed to the process of knowledge production. The missionaries differentiated between 'tribal' people who converted to Hinduism and those who did not. For the missionaries, the latter were 'genuine' tribals, untainted by lack of contact with their more 'civilized heathens'. The missionaries then, in the process of identifying the 'genuine' tribal, proceeded to textualize the oral traditions, standardize the language and

⁵ N. Thomas, 'Colonial Conversions: Difference, Hierarchy, and History in Early Twentieth-century Evangelical Propaganda,' *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History* 34, no. 2 (1992).

⁶ Sangeeta Dasgupta, 'From 'Heathen Aborigines' to 'Christian Tribes': Locating the Oraons in Missionary Writings on Chotanagpur,' in Tanika Sarkar, Pius Malekandathil and Joy L. K. Pachau, eds., *Christianity in Indian History: Issues of Culture, Power and Knowledge*. forthcoming.

narrate a definite history of the 'tribes.' A new narrative was constructed in which the marginalised status of the 'tribes' was attributed to the connivance and avarice of the Hindus and Muslims. In this endeavour, they relied on ethnographic texts. The missionaries thus distinguished between the Bodos who had converted to Hinduism, designating them as 'semi-Hinduised aborigines,' while those who did not take to Hinduism were taken to be the 'genuine' Bodos. The language, oral traditions and history of these 'genuine' Bodos were then standardized and textualized. Thus, through missionary endeavours, a standardized community with a history was recognized.

While the population of Assam was thus being classified, surveys of land and explorations for natural resources were also carried out in order to assess the potential of the state for revenue generation. The 'discovery' of tea gave the most promising outlook for generating revenue, and the colonial administration gave a lot of encouragement to the taking up of land for its cultivation. Ethnological trends, colonial ethnography and missionary representations went hand in hand in the sustenance of the tea plantation economy in colonial Assam. Racial explanations were adhered to while searching for a suitable labouring class for the tea gardens. While the local people were rejected as unsuitable- the Assamese as 'indolent' and the 'tribals' as 'intractable'- the 'aboriginal' immigrant labourers were identified for their proclivity for hard labour.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the region of Chotanagpur saw a massive increase in labour emigration drawn chiefly by the tea plantations of Assam, and also by the coalfields of Jharia and Hazaribagh. The former category of emigration was of a permanent type while the latter was seasonal in nature. A study done by Mohapatra elucidates how race and ethnicity became determining factors in deciding which labourer

reached the tea plantations and which the coalfields. Mohapatra⁷ compares the two types of emigration, and points towards the aspect of ethnic stereotyping. He observes that the bulk of the migrants to the tea gardens were drawn from the ranks of the ‘aboriginal tribal’ groups inhabiting Chotanagpur, while ‘semi-aboriginals’ and ‘landless castes’ flocked to the coalfields. He roots these contrasting stereotypes in the different requirement of work processes in the coal mines and the tea gardens. The ‘aboriginal tribal groups’ were the tea planters’ favourite due to their ‘long-standing tradition of jungle clearing’ and ‘their passive adjustment to the rhythms of plantation life.’

Kaushik Ghosh⁸ argues that Mohapatra did not dwell on the issue of race and labour, and almost seems to replicate the race discourse on labour that was adhered to by the colonizers. The notions of ‘caste’ as civilised and ‘primitives’ as uncivilised were grounded through the discourse of coolie labour, much before the advent of discourses on race which categorised the native people in to ‘castes’ and ‘tribes.’ The transformation of the fierce ‘tribal’ figure to that of a docile plantation labourer was an act which hinged on the logic of the ‘civilising mission of colonial capitalism.’ Ultimately it was the greater degree of control that could be exercised over immigrant labour compared to local labour, which was the reason for the preference for the former type.

Jayeeta Sharma⁹ similarly argues that colonial racial explanations have to be understood in context of colonial practices in order to comprehend how the local ‘tribal’ groups like the Kacharis and then the immigrant Chotanagpur people were portrayed as labour reserves. The term coolie acquired specific racial connotations. She positions her

⁷ P. Mohapatra, ‘Coolies and Colliers: A Study of the Agrarian Context of Labour Migration from Chotanagpur, 1880-1920,’ *Studies in History* 1, no. 2 (1985).

⁸ K. Ghosh, ‘A Market for Aboriginity: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India,’ in G. Bhadra, G. Prakash and S. Tharu, ed., *Subaltern Studies X, Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹ J. Sharma, *Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011).

gaze from outside the gardens, that is, from the context of the Assamese intelligentsia. It would however be worthwhile to try and study how identities were reformulated and congealed *within* the garden itself. The isolated nature of the plantations and the lack of contact with the locals only served to crystallize social prejudice against plantation work as well as the migrant workers. The community came to be denoted by various terms such as 'tea tribes,' 'baganiya' and 'adibasi.' The closed plantations helped create a homogenous class of people, their identity rooted in the work they did.

Gradually, Assam's expanding agrarian frontier and the colonial government's wasteland settlement policies encouraged the 'time-expired' coolies to settle down in the province. Cultivators from outside the province were also encouraged to take up land and practise settled agriculture in Assam. The province was also opened up through rail, road and water in order to facilitate the tea, oil and timber exports from and labour imports into the province. Due to the improved *transport* facilities, the entry of other groups of people like Marwari traders and East Bengali cultivators into the province was accelerated. Assam became a land frontier attracting large-scale immigration.

The colonial administration, guided by the notion that distinct groups of people occupied distinct, marked out spaces, and also by the need to protect its tea gardens located in the vicinity of 'savage' raiders, implemented various forms of restrictions and delineations in the region, like the Inner Line Regulation. Post independent India inherited, among other things, the colonial policy of according the status of 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' areas to 'tribal' inhabited areas, especially in the hills regions, which were based on the notions of certain communities being 'backward' and needing protection. The plains areas, however, were not protected by such exclusionary rules.

Complexities born out of such unique situations in the region can be held responsible for the situation of ferment and turmoil that the region continues to undergo.

Sanjib Baruah¹⁰ debunks prevalent notions that explain northeast India's insurgencies with a general theory that they are related to the end of isolation and the relatively late arrival of modernity to the area- 'an odd thing to say about an area that went through enormous capitalist transformation in the nineteenth century.' With difficult situations created by the influx of immigrants over different periods of time, and the laggard state of economic development, 'ethnic Assamese' assertions were initiated. It led to an attempt to establish the Assamese language as a metonym for the region. But the contradiction between this ideal of a linguistically based state and the reality of multiethnic Assam led to assertions by the other communities that began to see itself as distinct from this group of 'ethnic Assamese.' A contestation of hardened identities was created with different groups posing an internal challenge to this project of creating an all encompassing Assamese identity, the strongest challenge in recent years being presented by the Boro community. He also argues that the assertions within the state of Assam by communities like the Bodos borrow credence from the breakup of the erstwhile Assam into numerous states based on linguistic division.

Yasmin Saikia,¹¹ similarly contends that the economic marginalisation of the north eastern region is at the root of the identity politics there. She sees the assertion movements among the 'tribes' such as the Bodos as a claim for distinction from the 'caste Hindu' Assamese, who in reality, are seen by them to harbour aspirations of maintaining linkages with the Indian state. She gives a nuanced understanding of such identity assertions as attempts in the present to construct or destruct an identity. She

¹⁰ S. Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Y. Saikia, *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai Ahom in India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

describes them as political 'presentist' project involving the act of remembering and constructing a past, through collective memory, in order to become a people with a history in the present. History and memory are thus, according to her, contingent tools intimately associated with the implementation of power, both being acts of creation.

Thus, colonial and postcolonial legacies have led the 'tribes' to reinvent their identities as essentially non-Indic, as is the case with the Bodos. At the same time, the anxiety on the part of many of these numerically small peoples of the northeast of becoming minorities in territories that they had historically regarded as their own has been a recurrent theme in the politics of the region. The large scale immigration that the region witnessed was the basis for such anxiety. Basumatary¹² emphasises the centrality of the notion of territorial boundary to the imagination of the identity of a community. The assertion of the Bodos of being the original 'autochthones' in the past is held to legitimise the political claim to a territory in the present, which is based primarily on a feeling of victimhood. The exclusivist nature of the self-assertion movement has led to the targeting of the other minorities in the imagined homeland of the Bodos, particularly the Santhals. The peculiarity in the case of the conflict between the Bodos and the Santhals is that both the contentious groups are designated as 'tribes.' Though generically both 'tribal' and 'adivasi' carry the same meaning, the Bodos differentiate themselves as 'tribals,' the original inhabitants of Assam, as different from and superior to the adivasi Santhals, who are 'immigrant' population. The presence of the Santhals in the imagined territorial space of the Bodos and the resistances put forth by the former to the assertion of the Bodos, serve to create a dilemma in the apparently legitimate demand for Bodoland, imagined by the Bodo movement, making the gap between the contemporary reality of mixed ethnic settlements and the romance of a Bodo homeland

¹² A. Basumatary, 'Fashioning Identities: Nationalising Narrative of the Bodoland Movement', *Eastern Quarterly* 4, no. II (2007).

glaring. This has supposedly led some extremist elements to try and achieve a form of ethnic cleansing by targeting settlements of 'immigrant communities' that have settled in these historically Bodo areas.

Narzary¹³ argues that instead of just focusing on the conflict, one should focus on the reasons for the marginalisation of 'tribals' in the area, thus implying more deep seated resentment caused by faulty governmental policies than mere communal antagonism. He also stresses the fact that the recent spate of hostilities between the two communities needs to be seen in context of their interdependence and inter-relationship dating back since the settlement of the immigrant Santhal community in the vicinities of the areas inhabited by the Bodos.

Picking on these points, I take the argument further. I attempt to locate the emergence of a culture of assertion among the Bodos to an earlier period and not merely as a reaction to Assamese chauvinism. I also focus on the voice of the Santhals, which has been so far silent in the narratives of the clashes. Through this, I argue that the identity assertion movements, with their emphasis on the imagery of a historical homeland aggravate the process of identity making. In fact, such a process has been accelerated among the Santhals post the clashes.

Thus, one finds that the colonial legacy of actively abetting immigration into the province of Assam, has led to adverse repercussions in the present context, leading to the articulation of demands for autonomy. How a community deals with and incorporates the idea of a distinctive identity and projects a legitimacy based on a status of 'indigeneity' drawn from antiquity hence needs to be seen critically. The relationship between economic transformations and the construction of collectivities should be thus seen not

¹³ P. K. Narzary, 'Hidden Truth of Ethnic Clash between Boro tribe and Santhals in Assam, India', *Tribal Studies* 4, no. 1 (2006).

only in context of the unequal relationship between the colonial state and the colonized, but also with the attempts of the people located on the margins to reinvent themselves in the form of a new narrative.

Schendel¹⁴ points out that while the historical roots of the term ‘adivasi’ lie in peninsular India, the term ‘indigenous people’ is more widely adhered to in the Northeastern region. The latter does not connote to cultural specificities, and implies claims to territoriality and rights that have been allegedly denied to them. Thus, it debunks notions of backwardness and wildness associated with the term ‘tribe,’ but it continues to share with it the twin notions of generalization and territorial exclusivity. Schendel raises the ambiguities associated with the term ‘indigenous people’ in context of South Asia, considering the region’s history of socio-cultural fluidity and demographic movements. He speculates that the term is a temporary conceptual refuge, connoting territorial exclusivism, which results in the marking out of the ‘outsider;’ it is thus a political tool that can be used towards self-interested aims, often arising out of xenophobic ideologies of belonging. Contending that the claims to exclusive territory are related to fuller control of resources and hence, a means to attain power, the mere creation of exclusive homelands do not provide the necessary solutions but aggravates the situation.

Due to the fact that claims based on ‘indigeneity’ are inextricably linked to notions of territoriality, and the notion of particular communities being ‘autochthones’ of a particular place, and hence, there is the constant problem of deciding as to how far back should one go in history to determine who are natives and who are ‘immigrants.’ Ultimately, any demarcation will be arbitrary and contentious. Nonetheless, the term has

¹⁴ Willem van Schendel, ‘The Dangers of Belonging: Tribes, Indigenous Peoples and Homelands in South Asia’ in D. J. Rycroft and Sangeeta Dasgupta, eds., *The Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

become a political tool for communities in their process of self-assertion, especially in the north eastern region of India, which has stood witness to a long period of marginalization from 'mainstream' India and that has festered a notion of having been grievously wronged, and at the same time, has seen a tremendous amount of migration, leading to a crisis of identity.

Drawing from these themes and discussions, I historically examine the making of identities of the Bodos and Santhals. This study is concerned with the making and remaking of identities, which in turn is linked to the idea of historicity. In the first chapter, I analyse the colonial representation of the Bodo community in Assam. I trace the arrival of the British into the region and their perception of the region and its people. The Bodos were identified as forest dwellers, and were designated as 'aboriginals' and a 'primitive' race, in comparison to the plains dwelling caste Hindus. Their traditions, customs and practices were differentiated from those of the Hindus and they were categorised as 'tribes.' The boundaries between different groups became rigidified along the geographical markers of forests and plains. Such perceptions and processes of differentiation were influenced by wider trends in colonial ethnology. With the onset of modernity and with an engagement with these projects of colonial knowledge production, a literate elite section was formed among the Bodos, which went on to create the identity of a distinct community.

In the second chapter, I look into the role played by the missionaries in the formation of a standardized community among the Bodos. Missionary enterprise further codified and fostered these differences in representations. The missionaries created distinctions between the 'tribes' and 'castes' with the aim of identifying groups suitable for conversion. The Bodos were depicted as 'savages' who needed to be civilized.

Within the Bodos itself, differences were created between the converts and the heathens. This process involved a search for a definite history, tradition and language for the Bodos. These endeavours drew from and contributed to prevalent ethnological trends. The missionaries were agents who standardised the language of the Bodos and textualized the oral traditions. The missionaries focused on both the economic as well as spiritual upliftment which helped the growth of an educated and economically advanced section from amongst the Bodo community, who would go on to play a leading role in the self assertion movement among the Bodos.

In the third chapter, I look into the process of establishment of tea plantations in Assam and bring out its connections with the process of the making certain races primitive and thus redefining their identities. With the establishment of the tea industry in the region, identities were again restructured. We have seen how the two groups of the Bodos and the 'coolies' were formulated. On the one hand, the 'tribes' were set apart from the Assamese Hindus. On the other, the Adivasis were set apart as outsiders. I also connect the plantation labour economy and the general economic and demographic changes that the region underwent, which led to the marginalisation of the 'primitive' people.

In the fourth chapter, I study the 'ethnic' clashes that occurred between the Bodos and Santhals. I link the outbreak of such community based clashes to the process of identity formation and reformation that they have undergone. I also link this process of identity reformation to the socio-economic conditions brought about by the economic factors that were discussed in the third chapter. I also focus on the fact that discourses on conflict often tend to take the antagonism between two communities as a given. Such an assumption invariably prevents us from getting at the core of the issues. This can be

avoided by tracing the changes that the people and region underwent historically. Moreover, incorporating these clashes within the grand narrative of politics and mobilization can often silence the voices of the marginalized. Moreover, in the specific case of the Bodo-Santhal clashes, the Santhal agriculturists and the adivasi tea garden labourers have been collapsed into a single category. This denies the Santhals the separate history that they have in this region. I have attempted to capture this voice in my study in order to give a fresh perspective to the issue.

For my study, I have referred to official colonial records like gazetteers, ethnographic accounts, missionary memoirs and correspondences, newspaper reports and memorandums by various organisations and official settlements. I have also conducted interviews. For chapter one, I have referred to accounts by W. Hamilton (1820), B. H. Hodgson (1847), W. N. Lees (1868), W. W. Hunter (1879), E. Gait (1905) and J. D. Anderson (1911). I have also looked at gazetteers and government files. These records are available at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (henceforth NMML), New Delhi and the Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (henceforth DHAS), Guwahati. The gazetteers are available at the DHAS and the Assam State Archives (henceforth ASA), Guwahati and the government files are available at ASA. Chapter two is based on missionary memoirs and correspondences. I have looked at Rev. S. Endle's monograph on the Kacharis (1911). I have also looked at the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society Records (henceforth ABMU), which are available on microfilm at NMML and as Baptist Missionary Magazines, available at the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (henceforth CBCNEI), Guwahati. I have also looked at Jesuit missionary records available at Vidya Jyoti College of Theology (henceforth VJCT), New Delhi. Chapter three is based on official files available at the National Archives of India (henceforth NAI), New Delhi, and ASA. I have also looked at

missionary records. Chapter four is based on a close reading of memorandums by different organizations, official settlements and newspaper reports and missionary records. Most of the documents are available as compilations in books, while some are available on the internet. The local newspapers are available at the DHAS. I have also conducted interviews of members of different organisations, NGO workers and local villagers.

CHAPTER ONE

COLONIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BODOS

Up till the second half of the 1820s Assam was an ‘unexplored province.’ Its peripheral status was emphasised as it was described as ‘a remote country (which) adjoins the province of Bengal at the north-eastern corner...(stretching) in an easterly direction to an undefined extent.’¹ After the conquest of the region in 1826, British rule in Assam was consolidated. Topographic and ethnographic surveys, decennial census operations and the production of monographs on ‘tribes,’ were means through which the hitherto unexplored region of Assam came to be known and represented. A definite history was ascribed to the region and its people. In the process, differences between distinct locations and groups of people were magnified and hardened.

In particular, there was a hardening of differences between the inhabitants of the plains regions and the surrounding forest regions of Assam during the colonial period. By reading colonial representations, certain markers can be identified, based on which such differences between people inhabiting different regions were emphasised. These markers of distinction between the inhabitants of the forests and the plains were sketched out in the spheres of habitats, livelihood practices, religions, customs, and consumption habits. Connections can be drawn between prevalent ideas of environmentalism, philology and evolutionism and the ways in which the people were classified and differentiated on the basis of these.

¹ Walter Hamilton, *A Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Description of Hindostan and the Adjacent Countries, Vol. II* (1820; rpt. Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1971), p. 740.

Such positivist approaches involved changes caused by shifts in contemporaneous intellectual trends. They were also influenced by ambiguities and uncertainties encountered in the local context, and were often challenged by the subjects themselves. These challenges were in turn the result of the colonised people grappling and reacting to the onset of modernity brought about by colonial rule.

I argue that these processes were instrumental in the representation of the Bodo community as a ‘tribe,’ distinct from other local communities. The first section deals with the colonial representation of the Assam region and the location of the Bodos within it. The second section deals with the description of the religion, customs, livelihood practices and economy of the Bodos and how they were used as tropes to distinguish them from other groups. The third section deals with the transition in the image of the Bodos and the germination of an assertive elite section from within the community.

i. Locating the Bodos

The ‘Frontier Province’ of Assam was situated on the north-eastern border of Bengal. It was bounded on the north by the eastern section of the Himalayas; on the north-east, east and south by lesser hills; and on the west by the Bengal districts of Tippera, Mymensingh and Rangpur, the State of Cooch Behar, and Jalpaiguri district.² The three westernmost districts of Assam were Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang, from west to east. The Brahmaputra river flowed through these districts and divided each into two unequal portions, about two thirds of the total area thus being on the northern bank. The areas on either banks of the

² B. C. Allen, et al., *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1911), p. 16.

Brahmaputra consisted of fertile alluvial plains. The area to the north was of sub-montane type. This was described as a flat strip of country lying beneath the Bhutan mountains, stretching from Darrang westwards to the Bengal frontier.³ This strip of land was divided off into a series of *duars* or 'doors,' through which the various passes into the hills in the north were accessed. In the direction of Bhutan there were eighteen of these *duars*, eleven on the frontier of Bengal and Goalpara, and seven, in the north of Kamrup and Darrang. Prior to British conquest, the former were held by the Bhutan king and the latter by the Ahom king.⁴ Initially, this status quo was maintained subject to the payment of an annual tribute to the British administration by the kings, but problems of arrears and trepidations into the British territory led to the outbreak of the Bhutan Wars in 1864-66 and the *duar* regions were annexed to the British territory subsequently.⁵

The atmosphere of this *duar* region was termed as 'pestilential...choked up with the most luxuriant vegetation...The trees...large, and the forests abound with elephants and rhinoceros, but the human animal...much debased in form, size, and strength.'⁶ The forests were seen as 'wild' places, and the plains as a 'fertile country' susceptible of cultivation, potentially productive but presently lying 'waste.'⁷

The Bodo community was known to inhabit this sub-montane belt. By people from other communities, they were called Mech in the western part of the *duars*. In the more eastern parts they were indiscriminately called Mech or Kachari; and again further east, they

³ Ibid., p. 513.

⁴ E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 296.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 303-304.

⁶ Hamilton, *A Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Description of Hindostan and the Adjacent Countries, Vol. II*, pp. 728-9.

⁷ Ibid., p. 740.

were called by the name of Kachari alone. These people called themselves Bodo.⁸ The first scholarly study on the Bodos was done by Brian Houghton Hodgson. He spent the large part of his career as a scholar-administrator in the Himalayan towns of Kumaon and Kathmandu and did most of his research and writing, chiefly ethnological, after his retirement in 1943, based in Darjeeling.⁹ In the first half of the nineteenth century, the favoured method for distinguishing people into groups was the comparison of languages, in order to ‘establish affinities between physically dissimilar groups.’¹⁰ Moreover, in the particular context of colonial India, the unity of the aboriginal languages as distinct from Sanskrit, was the leading doctrine of the 1840s and early 1850s, Hodgson being one of its leading proponents.¹¹ Hodgson believed that just as the unity of the Aryans had been established through philology, the unity of the aboriginal Tamulians could be established through lingual research.¹² The physical aspect on the other hand was of little consequence for Hodgson. He stated:

(The Tamulians’) physical aspect is that of osculant and vague stamp, which indicates rather than proves anything; or rather, what it does prove is general, not particular. We are thus driven back through all the media of research upon the grand stay of a copious vocabulary.¹³

It is hence no surprise that two-thirds of his work on the Bodos focused on their language, vocabulary and grammar. The last section dealt with the description of the climate

⁸ B. H. Hodgson, *On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1847), p. 142; W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II* (New Delhi: LP Publications, 1879), p. 117; Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 237.

⁹ T. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 158.

¹⁰ G. W. Stocking Jr., ‘What’s in a Name? The Origins of the Royal Anthropological Institute (1837-71),’ *Man*, New Series 6, no. 3 (1971), p. 372.

¹¹ Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, p.155.

¹² Hodgson, *On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes*, pp. i-iii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. v.

they dwelt in and their customs and characteristics, while the physical attributes were described only in the appendix. Locating the Bodos in the province, he stated:

the aborigines of the *Sub-Himalayas*, as far east as the Dhansri (river) of Assam, belong to the Tibetan stock...and...the aborigines of the *tarai* and *forest* skirting the entire sub-Himalayas inclusive of the greater part of the marginal circuit of the Assam Valley...belong...to the Tamulian stock or aborigines of the plains of India generally.¹⁴

The forests were described as ‘malarious’ and the Bodos inhabiting them as ‘remarkable races,’ distinctive in their ability to live in such a climate, who ‘not only live but thrive in it, exhibiting no symptoms whatever of the dreadful sickening aspect of countenance and form which marks the victim of malaria.’¹⁵

He goes on to draw a similarity between this ‘like capacity to breathe malaria as though it were common air’ of the Bodos with that of the Tamulian aborigines of India- the Kols, the Bhils and the Gonds- ‘all fine and healthy races of men, though dwelling where no other human beings can exist.’¹⁶ This representation is indicative of Hodgson’s attempt to locate the Bodos within the ambit of Tamulian aborigines. The ability of the Tamulian groups to ‘thrive’ in the ‘malarial’ forests was attributed to the long term effect of the environment on them. Emphasis was thus placed on the environmental influences, which were said to change human physical characteristics.

the Tamulians have tenanted the wilds they now dwell in for many centuries, because a very great lapse of time could alone work so wonderful an effect upon the human frame.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., p. ix.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 148.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

He further goes on to observe the Bodos as people who seemed to ‘avoid’ both the hills and plains and preferred to remain in the forest region.¹⁸ He attributed this to the typical aboriginal characteristic of shyness. The Bodos complained that they could not ‘endure the climate of the open plains, where the heat (gave) them fevers.’ He felt that it was a ‘mere excuse for their known aversion to quit the forest.’ He went on to point out that the Kols or Dhangars had taken to tilling the soil in ‘every part of the plains of Bihar and Bengal, in various sites abroad,’¹⁹ implying that the conditions of these aboriginal people could be changed with inducement and emphasised that the Bodos possessed ‘every good quality of the Kols, in an equal or superior degree.’

The Kols are indeed, as enterprising as industrious, and they should be employed by every European who seeks to reduce and cultivate any part of the malarious forests of India. But, it must not be forgotten, that *the very same qualities of freedom from disabling prejudices, cheerful docility, and peaceable industrious habits and temper*, which render the Kols now so valuable to us, are the *inherent characteristics of most of the aborigines, requiring only the hand and the eye of a paternal Government to call them forth, as in the case of the Kols*. Ages of insolent oppression drove the aborigines to the wilds, and kept them there till their shyness of all strangers had become rooted and intense.²⁰ (emphasis mine)

Hodgson’s generalizations and emphasis on these qualities of the ‘aborigines’ can be understood by the fact that he wrote at a time when the nascent tea industry in Assam was looking for a large labour force to clear forests for tea plantations. This point shall be taken up in the third chapter. Hence, it becomes evident that ethnographic representations may be guided by underlying motives arising from contemporaneous situations.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 151.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 148-9.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 149.

A close reading of Hodgson's text gives us an inkling of strains and contradictions emerging between philological and physiological classifications which could not be reconciled. One can discern a slight hesitation in the authorial voice when he described the physical features of the Bodos as '*faintly* yet distinctly marked type of the Mongolian family,' or as '*quasi-Mongolian*,'²¹ and hence distinct from the Kols (emphasis mine). This contradicted his hypothesis of the unity of the aborigines of India. This is indicative of the contemporaneous trend of physical characteristics becoming the defining criteria of racial classification in place of language.

By the middle of the 1850s, anthropology witnessed a shift from 'humanitarian and environmental approach to racial differences' towards a 'strictly physical and harshly racial approach to human differences.'²² There was a move towards approaches to race which rejected environmentalism, which emphasised 'in the name of science' that all men were not equal. The 'inner, unseen truth of race ("blood")' was thus believed to be disclosed through physical characteristics, not by language.²³

Colonial scholar-official Edward Gait then explicitly stated that language was 'by no means a certain test of ethnical affinity.'²⁴ He was the director of ethnography and census commissioner in the 1890s.²⁵ His book '*A History of Assam*,' was published in 1905. For him, the basic model of ethnographic research was H. H. Risley's '*Tribes and Castes of Bengal*.' He thus distinguished the Dravidian, Aryan and Mongolian races on the basis of physical characteristics. As a result, the earlier attempt by Hodgson to club the Kols and

²¹ Ibid., p. 195.

²² Stocking Jr., 'What's in a Name? The Origins of the Royal Anthropological Institute (1837-71),' p. 374.

²³ Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, p. 98.

²⁴ Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 1.

²⁵ A. Saikia, 'Gait's Way: Writing History in Early-Twentieth-Century Assam,' in R. Aquil and P. Chatterjee, ed., *History in the Vernacular* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2008), p. 146.

Bodos under the Tamulian group was abandoned. The two groups were now categorised as distinct races. The Bodos were described as belonging to the Mongolian race, with stark descriptions of physical features- a ‘short head, broad nose, flat and comparatively hairless face, short but muscular figure and yellow skin.’²⁶

Gait’s narrative of the political history of Assam is distinctive in its sympathetic appreciation and appropriation of vernacular historical sources. It made extensive use of non-Brahmanic texts like the *buranjis* or chronicles of the Ahoms and coins belonging to erstwhile ‘tribal’ polities, found in different parts of the province, especially the *duars* of Goalpara.²⁷ Gait did continue to concur with Hodgson’s view of the aborigine races being subjugated and pushed to the margins. Identifying the Kacharis as ‘aborigines,’ the ‘earliest known inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley,’²⁸ Gait narrated a history of a great race of Kachari kings who were later subjugated by the Ahoms. This was in contrast to Hodgson’s description of the Kacharis as people who were ‘still found in all their primitive unsophistication...(and did not) have any authentic ancient traditions.’²⁹ The Kachari kingdom was now described as ‘one of the strongest powers which the Ahoms were confronted with when they entered the valley of the Brahmaputra...’³⁰ In the late twentieth century, when various ‘ethnic’ self assertion movements arose in the region, which entailed a renewed interest in the historical pasts of the respective ‘ethnic’ groups, Gait’s narrative of powerful kingdoms of local rulers was appraised and appropriated, as we shall see in the fourth chapter.

²⁶ Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 3.

²⁷ A. Saikia, ‘Gait’s Way: Writing History in Early-Twentieth-Century Assam,’ pp. 149-151.

²⁸ Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 237.

²⁹ Hodgson, *On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes*, p. 152.

³⁰ *Assam District Gazetteers, Vol III, Goalpara*, 1905, p. 42.

The Kacharis now came to be seen as a ‘much more widely distributed race than was at one time supposed to be the case...occupying large areas under different names.’³¹ The ‘Kacharis’ and the ‘Meches’ in the Brahmaputra Valley and the ‘Dimasas’ in the North Cachar Hills were identified as belonging to the same Mongolian race, based on their Indo-Tibetan physical characteristics. In addition to that, they were said to belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, and thus, clubbed together as Kacharis. Hence, communities living in separate and different regions were clubbed together on the basis of race and language.

J. D. Anderson was another scholar-official who studied the Kacharis. He compiled folktales of the Kacharis in ‘*A Collection of Kachari Folk-tales*’ published in 1895. He acknowledged anthropologists’ cautions against rashly concluding that a common speech, where races are in contact, implied a common origin. The argument was that ‘everywhere, and especially among people who use an unwritten language, nothing is more common than the borrowing of a neighbouring tongue.’ But, pointing out the peculiarity in the case of the Kacharis, he stated,

we have five absolutely separate communities of semi-savage people, who nowadays are not so much as aware of one another’s existence, and yet speak what is to all purposes the same language, it is plain that they must have been united at no very distant date by some common social bond.³²

Anderson’s engagement with language as a defining factor in identifying people can be explained by the fact that he had a background in teaching languages- he used to teach Bengali language at Cambridge before he joined the Civil Services. Thus, the ‘tribes’ of

³¹ Home ‘A’ Proceedings 146-186, March 1905, Compilation of tribal and caste monographs of Assam, ASA.

³² J. D. Anderson, introduction to Rev. Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis* (1911; rpnt. Delhi: LP Publications, 1990), p. xvi.

Dimasas, Bodos, Chutiyas, Garos and Tipperas were said to have common ties, deduced from the similarity in their languages, who gradually dispersed to various parts of the province. However, ambiguities notwithstanding, differences in habitats were considered and used to distinctly designate the Dimasas as ‘hill Kachari,’ and Bodos as ‘plains Kachari’ in the official records.³³ Hence, even though they belonged to the same race, they were differentiated on the basis of habitat. In the fourth chapter, we will see how this conception of locational difference was continued in postcolonial period and led to differential grouping and affirmative action, leading to discontent among the groups which considered itself disadvantaged.

Over different periods of time, different perceptions of the Bodos were produced. While earlier, Hodgson focused on language and attempted at placing them under the Tamulian group, later on, they were classified as distinctly Mongolian. Physical differences were used to slot groups on a hierarchical evolutionary scale. They were seen as bound to particular locations. People living in the marginal forest regions were considered to be backward and placed low on the perceived civilizational hierarchy. Further, as we shall see in the following section, this notion was reinforced through binary oppositional tropes.

ii. The ‘Kacharis’ as a ‘tribe’

The categorisation of the different groups of people in the region was done on a comparative and oppositional basis. While the Kacharis came to be characterised by their locations and physical traits, their characteristics were brought out in sharp contrast to the other people inhabiting the region. Thus, distinctions were drawn between the forest

³³ Allen, et al., *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam*, p. 50.

dwelling Bodos and the plains people like the Assamese Kalitas, who were said to be ‘of reputed Aryan descent,’ having a ‘distinctly Aryan appearance.’³⁴ Comparing the physical features of the plain and forest inhabitants, the former were attributed a superior racial order than the latter. At the same time, the Bodos were seen as ‘less sober and less cleanly and less tractable than the people of the plains- more sober and more cleanly and more tractable than those of the hills.’³⁵ They came to be termed as ‘semi-savage’ inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley, in contrast to the ‘bloodthirsty’ and ‘warlike’ tribes in the surrounding mountains.³⁶ It was on this basis, that the Kacharis of the hills and plains were distinguished, as we saw.

Livelihood practices and the various modes of production adhered to by people were other markers that fed into the notions of people belonging to different stages of civilization, and were used to grade people into the hierarchised civilisational groupings.³⁷ Permanent cultivation and settled villages marked out the plains and its inhabitants as superior and more civilised than the people living in the forests who practised shifting cultivation. The Bodos were described as ‘erratic cultivators of the wild’ who had not progressed beyond the stage of nomadic cultivators maintaining

a not entirely broken connexion with the precedent condition of things; for though cultivators, all and exclusively, they are nomadic cultivators, so little connected with any one spot that the Bodo language does not possess a name for a village.³⁸

³⁴ Gait, *A History of Assam*, pp. 2-7.

³⁵ Hodgson, *On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes*, p. 192.

³⁶ Anderson, introduction to Rev. Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. xviii.

³⁷ Skaria, ‘Shades of Wildness: Tribe, Caste, and Gender in Western India,’ p. 730.

³⁸ Hodgson, *On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes*, p. 154.

Their method of *jhum* or shifting cultivation was termed as ‘destructive.’ The practice was linked inherently to their nature- the Bodos apparently found ‘in the exhaustion of the worked soil a necessity, or in the high productiveness of the new, a temptation, to perpetual movement.’³⁹ Their perennial nomadic practice was explained thus:

They never cultivate the same field beyond the second year, or remain in the same village beyond the fourth to sixth year. After the lapse of four or five years they frequently return to their old fields and resume their cultivation if in the interim the jungle has grown well, and they have not been anticipated by others...and if, another party have preceded them, or, if the slow growth of the jungle give no sufficient promise of a good stratum of ashes for the land when cleared by fire, they move on to another site, new or old. If old, they resume the identical fields they tilled before, but never the old houses or site of the old village, that being deemed unlucky.⁴⁰

The Chief Commissioner of Assam, Sir Henry Cotton’s comments on the *duars* region throw light on the prevalent notions of hierarchical structure constructed around agricultural practices. He described the practice of *jhum* as ‘the rude and temporary cultivation of the nomadic and the aboriginal tribes,’ lacking in advanced methods of agriculture. They were hailed as adept at the ‘pioneer art’ of jungle clearing, but dismissed as ‘mere woodcutters’ and ‘bad agriculturists’ overpowered by their ‘restless habits.’⁴¹ Such was the anxiety with regards to increasing cultivation of land in the *duars* region, which was so far lying waste, that administrators like Cotton encouraged colonisations of these so called ‘wastelands’ with cultivators from other parts of the country, since the indigenous groups were deemed wholly

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Revenue ‘A’ Proceedings, November 1898, Note by the Chief Commissioner of Assam on the extension of cultivation in Assam and the colonisation of wastelands in the Province, ASA.

incapable of doing so. This led to the marginalisation of the local people such as the Bodos. This shall be discussed in the third chapter.

These distinctions in agricultural practices were in turn linked to landscapes, since the mode of cultivation practised by the people differed and depended on the area they inhabited. The migratory habits of the Kacharis were justified as the result of there being ‘so much virgin soil at their disposal.’⁴² The valley was considered as a superior land, more suitable for cultivation than the submontane regions, which the tribes cultivated laboriously. In the submontane tracts the level of land was higher, and the fields were irrigated from hill streams. The Kacharis and Mech, who lived in such submontane tracts, freely resorted to artificial irrigation.

The villagers combine to construct small channels, sometimes of considerable length, through which they convey the water of the hill streams to their fields. The abundance and certainty of the crop fully repay them for the labour expended on the work.⁴³

The Kacharis were thus seen as hardy beings who resorted to such physically taxing practices like *jhum* and construction of artificial irrigation channels, in contrast to the plains people who practised settled agriculture and ‘lived without exertion’ due to the ‘inherently fertile’ nature of the soil. ‘Strongly built, stout and bold,’ the Kacharis were said to make good sepoy, forming a strong element in the military and police force.⁴⁴

While the Kachari men were seen as laborious, the image of the Kachari women as industrious beings did not go unnoticed. The Kachari woman’s various chores were

⁴² Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II*, p. 117.

⁴³ Allen, et al., *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam*, pp. 68-69.

⁴⁴ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II*, p. 36.

described in detail, it being considered characteristic of 'tribal' women to engage in much physical labour, distinct from 'the peasant's wife in the plains' who, it was said, did 'nothing but spin.'

As usual amongst nearly all rude tribes, the women have to perform the greater portion of the toil necessary to support the family. They have to assist in the field at seed-time and harvest, to husk the rice, carry water, and, above all, to weave the clothes required for the household.⁴⁵

Here we see that most of the consumption needs of the individual were met within the household itself. There was no specialisation of occupation among the people within the community.

There is no separate calling of herdsman or shepherd, or tradesman or shop-keeper, or manufacturer or handicraft, alien or native, in these primitive societies which admit no strangers among them, though they live on perfectly amicable terms with their neighbours, and thus, can always procure, by purchase or barter, the very few things which they require and do not produce themselves.⁴⁶

There were 'hardly any markets, and not much trade' amongst the Bodos. Although there were no castes or tribes in the *duars* who lived entirely by collecting and trading in jungle products, it was observed that the principal part of the trade in timber and jungle produce was carried out by the Kacharis and Meches. They were also known to produce boats and canoes, called *dingas*. However, these activities were described as 'merely auxiliary occupations and altogether secondary to their regular employment of agriculture.'⁴⁷

The absence of markets and trading activities signified the 'primitive' stage of civilization

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 118.

⁴⁶ Hodgson, *On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes*, p. 156.

⁴⁷ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II*, p. 114.

these Bodos were in. Their mode of existence was described as hand to mouth, and it was believed that their material conditions had not witnessed any progress.⁴⁸

The ritual practices and customs of people were other tropes for distinguishing them into separate groups. One way of classifying the society was to differentiate the people into ‘castes’ and ‘tribes’, the two categories seen as ‘fundamentally different.’⁴⁹ Different from Hindus, the forest people were, then, seen as ‘primitive.’ The ‘tribes’ were seen as undiscerning in their consumption habits, eating ‘flesh of all kinds, even when nearly putrid.’⁵⁰ The Kacharis did not seem to have any scruples in the matter of diet, eating ‘almost any animal food,’ and were said to be particularly partial to pork and *zau* or rice beer, their staple drink.⁵¹ They were considered to be dirty, and ‘far from cleanly in their habits.’ The cause for certain diseases prevalent amongst them was attributed to their neglect of hygiene, ‘as might be expected from their indiscriminate use of almost any description of animal food, however disgusting, and their neglect of bathing, they are almost universally affected with some sort of skin disease.’⁵²

The marriage customs of the Kacharis and Meches were described as ‘peculiar,’ and seemed to preserve the ‘most primitive form,’ of ritual, that of forcible abduction.⁵³ The Bodo society was seen as one in which everyone lived on equal terms, and there were no class or gender distinctions or discriminations involved. Women were seen to be held in high respect, and placed on an equal footing with men in every respect.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 119.

⁴⁹ Skaria, ‘Shades of Wildness: Tribe, Caste, and Gender in Western India,’ p. 729.

⁵⁰ Allen, et al., *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam*, p. 57.

⁵¹ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II*, p. 118.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 119.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

The religion of the Kacharis was described to be absent of any ‘barbarous rites’ on the one hand, and ‘tedious inane ceremonial observances’ on the other. The chief feature of the propitiation of the evil spirits by means sacrifices of fowls was considered usual among the religious rituals of ‘tribes’.⁵⁵ These forms of ‘primitive beliefs,’ were termed as ‘animistic,’ the main feature of this religion being ‘the desire to propitiate the devils that are ever on the alert to injure man.’⁵⁶ Here, we can see a distinction drawn between the ostentatious religious practices of the Hindu castes and the simple practices of the tribes.

Besides codified religion, rituals and customs, cultural achievements like literature, traditions and monuments were considered markers of a civilised society. The Bodos lacked these features, and were thus termed as ‘uncivilised’ people. The Bodo individual was described as an ‘illiterate villager,’ who was ‘quite innocent of history, and as a source of information of anything prior to the immediate present is absolutely useless.’⁵⁷

The fact that their language contains no word to express any number above eight, indicates the extreme degradation in former days as well as at the present time. They do not seem to have achieved any form of polity of their own; they have few traditions, no ancient songs, no monuments, no written character, and no literature of any kind.⁵⁸

The Kacharis, although seen as a ‘degraded race,’ were still extolled for some inherent good qualities. They were described as very simple in their manner and habits. Besides, chastity was esteemed as a virtue amongst them. They were deemed much more honest and trustworthy than the Hindu peasantry of Bengal, and also less quarrelsome. Crime was

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 118.

⁵⁶ Allen, et al., *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam*, p. 55.

⁵⁷ *Assam District Gazetteers, Vol III, Goalpara*, 1905, pp. 43-44.

⁵⁸ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II*, pp. 119.

committed on ‘comparatively rare occasions.’ They did commit thefts and even murders; but in the majority of cases, they would confess their guilt as soon as they are apprehended.⁵⁹

Thus, in contrast to the fertile valley, the ‘fuzzy frontier’ of forests were distinguished and differentiated as wild places, a ‘jungly and unprogressive tract,’⁶⁰ and the communities which inhabited these wild places came to be recognised through a discourse of marginality and difference.⁶¹ Here we find an oppositional relation between the forest areas and plains being sketched out. The contrast drawn on people belonging to geographically different spaces was thus reinforced along racial lines.

iii. Ambiguities and transitions

While distinctions came to be emphasised and magnified through binary oppositional groupings, there were ambiguities and tensions in the colonial classifications and categorisations of people. To be sure, Hinduism in general and caste in particular, were seen to be much less rigid in Assam than in Bengal.⁶² In Assam, people from marginal groups were noticed to have slowly adopted the Hindu religion. Some sections of the Kacharis too converted to Hinduism. These converted Kacharis were called Saraniyas, derived from the term ‘*saran*,’ which literally means ‘to take refuge.’ However, even though they styled themselves as Hindu, it was pointed out that the Kacharis still retained belief in a considerable portion of their old religion, and many of them regularly made sacrifices of

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 51.

⁶⁰ Allen, et al., *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam*, p. 526.

⁶¹ K. Sivaramakrishnan, ‘British Imperium and Forested Zones of Anomaly in Bengal, 1767-1833,’ *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 33, no. 3 (1996).

⁶² Allen, et al., *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam*, p. 50.

pigs, fowls, pigeons, etc. to the good and evil spirits.⁶³ The converts were said to differ from the ‘primitives’ only by bathing, calling on the name of a *guru*, and abstaining from the use of pig’s flesh and liquor.⁶⁴

The tribesmen have no special preference for their own forms of religion, and take fairly readily to Hinduism in the plains, and to Christianity in the hills. Conversion would, in fact, proceed rapidly, were it not for the natural reluctance of these primitive people to abandon pork, liquor, and the freedom of intercourse between the sexes permitted by their own religion.⁶⁵

Thus, the plains and the forests were not completely impervious to each other. For example, the fact that the Kacharis did not consume beef was a prejudice which was seen to have been imbibed from contact with Hindus.⁶⁶ Thus, the complexities arising out of interactions and exchanges that took place between different groups of people led to shifts and ambiguities in the representations of the colonised population by the colonial observers.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial project of knowledge production received an impetus with the compilation of local statistical accounts being centralised. The mastermind of this enterprise was W. W. Hunter.⁶⁷ While perusing through his statistical account on Assam and the district gazetteers that relied on it, one cannot help but notice ambiguities and tensions with regards to grouping people on the basis of religion and race. When members of a ‘tribe’ converted to Hinduism, they were designated separately from the unconverted members. For example, the Meches in the Eastern Duars of Goalpara and the Kacharis in Kamrup were identified as ‘unconverted tribes,’ while the

⁶³ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II*, p. 37.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁶⁵ Allen, et al., *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam*, p. 55.

⁶⁶ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II*, p. 118.

⁶⁷ Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, p. 199.

Rajbansis were designated as Hindu caste. It was stressed that 'Rajbansi' was only a 'high-sounding name for the 'Hinduised sections' of the Koch or Bodo tribe. All of these groups were, in fact, said to have descended from the 'Bodo stock.'⁶⁸ Such converts were also termed as 'semi-Hinduised aborigines,' while the unconverted groups were designated as 'aboriginal tribes.' Census officers too were in a dilemma on how to subdivide the Kacharis into 'animists' or 'Hindus,' since they all admitted that they ate pork. They were advised that

The imperial rule about religions is that the answer which every person gives about his religion must be accepted and entered in the religion column. This is supplemented by the following: In the case of aboriginal tribes who are not Hindus, Musalmans, Christians, etc., the name of the tribe should be entered in this (religion) column. Successive census reports and the gazetteers all show that there are many converts to Hinduism, and others on the borderland between Hinduism and Animism, who have not abandoned their old habits of eating and drinking, as well as many who continue to propitiate their old tribal spirits or gods as well as their new found Hindu ones.⁶⁹

It can be seen from such instances that the colonial officials were trying to grapple with changes taking place in society and the fluidity and ambiguity in peoples' identities that resulted from such changes. It was thus possible for colonial enterprises to be influential and affected in turn, in its interaction with the colonised.⁷⁰ The state's positivist efforts at classifying and ordering the colonised society, particularly through the census, were thus confronted by various social groups. These groups resisted, appropriated and modified the social categories of the colonisers.

⁶⁸ Allen, et al., *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam*, pp. 516-7.

⁶⁹ Education Miscellaneous 'B' Proceedings 13, November 1920, Petition from Cacharis praying for classifying them as Hindus in the forthcoming census, ASA.

⁷⁰ S. Misra, 'Redrawing Frontiers: Language, Resistance and the Imagining of a Goalparia People,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43, no. 2 (2006), p. 218.

A crucial example of such a process was the propagation of the newly founded Brahma religion among the Bodos, by one Kalicharan Mech from Goalpara. He hailed from a well to do family, with the ownership of about thirty acres of land besides a flourishing trade in timber.⁷¹ Almost all the timber merchants were Bodos at that time. The timber was shipped through the Brahmaputra to Calcutta and Dhaka. Due to his upwardly mobile economic status, conditions were suitable for Kalicharan to come in contact with cultural trends prevalent in adjoining Bengal. He was thus influenced by the philosophy of Swami Paramhansa of the Brahma sect. The propagation of the Brahma religion among the Kacharis led to the mobilisation and formulation of a new and distinct Bodo identity. Mass annual conversion ceremonies were organised from 1906 onwards, and the following decades saw the burgeoning of such mass bodies as the Bodo Mahasanmilani, as well as student organisations, which indicated the emergence of an articulate and literate youth. By 1935, a Bodo personal law code was constituted, thus standardising and textualising the rituals and customs of the Bodo community.⁷²

The local administration wrongly perceived this socio-religious movement as a standard example of the long standing Brahmanical practice of absorbing backward and marginal communities.

Within recent years a definite movement towards Hinduisation among (the Mech) community has been very marked. The new party so formed call themselves Brahmos, or the believers in Brahma, the supreme soul. They conceive the infinite as the source of light and they look upon the sun as his visible representation...They abstain from drink and characterise indulgence in it as a social and religious vice. They accept the gayatri as the most suitable form of

⁷¹ A. Boro, *Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma Aarw Bodo Somajao Bini Bihwma (Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma and His Contribution to Bodo Community)* (Gohpur: Ancholik Brahma Dharma Samaj Laichi Afat, 2005), p. 6.

⁷² Ibid.

prayer to the almighty...they have adopted the Hindu forms of idolatry and are fast becoming strict in the observance of caste rules and Brahminic rites. They thus attempt to identify themselves as a sub-caste of the Hindus.⁷³

Such an analysis tends to ignore the fact that it was the Bodos themselves who were taking matters into their own hands and setting the agenda on their own terms. The process should be seen as a reaction to Brahmanical superiority, not as a move to accept it. Hence, the concept of the Brahma dharma differed from the Saraniya dharma. David Hardiman narrates a similar process that occurred in Western India in the 1920s, where several thousand people followed the commands of a new goddess, Salabai, which involved popular mobilisation through socio-religious sanitization. Hardiman argued that describing such movements as Sanskritization or Hinduisation would be inaccurate because an inherent and crucial element of such movements was the challenge to Brahmanical notions of social stratification.⁷⁴

The privileged members of the modernizing Bodo community resented being categorized as a 'primitive' people and felt an anxiety to distinguish themselves from other so called 'savages' like the Nagas, while at the same time, challenging discourses of caste Hindu domination. This process involved the incorporation as well as reinterpretation of colonial discourses on knowledge production. As early as 1912, Kalicharan wrote to the District Commissioner of the Goalpara and the Chief Census Officer of India urging for the right of the Bodos to write 'Brahma' as their surnames, in place of 'Mech,' considered to be

⁷³ *Assam District Gazetteers, Vol III, Goalpara, 1914, pp. 2-3.*

⁷⁴ D. Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

a colloquial form of the term ‘Mlecch,’ which carried derogatory undertones.⁷⁵ Kalicharan himself dropped ‘Mech’ as his surname and adopted ‘Brahma’ in its place.

Besides changes in the socio-cultural domain, Kalicharan also put emphasis on education. He established boarding schools for students. Two boarding houses were established at Dhubri which afforded accommodation to the ‘Mech and the Brahma boys’ reading in the high schools.⁷⁶ A school in Tipkai, with a Middle Vernacular status, was started in 1914 for the Brahma and non-Brahma sects in the Bodo community. A petition signed by ‘49 leading Brahmas and non-Brahma Meches of different Bodo villages, urged for the introduction of Assamese in all schools attended by the children of their tribe.’⁷⁷ Earlier, the medium of instruction in schools was Bengali. The principle of ‘local option’ had emerged as a defining element in the colonial state’s language policy in Goalpara.⁷⁸ The people thus had a choice to choose their preferred medium for imparting education in school.

Kalicharan was also a prime mover in sending a representation of the Bodo community to the Indian Statutory Commission in 1929. The petition represented the Bodos as a distinct community, with a separate history. Alluding to the erstwhile ruling kingdom of the Kacharis, it described the Bodo people as a race of ‘born warriors,’ substantiated by the fact that many people from this community were listed in the military under the British Government. It expressed concern over the fact that

⁷⁵ Boro, *Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma Aarw Bodo Somajao Bini Bihwma (Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma and His Contribution to Bodo Community)*, p. 46.

⁷⁶ *Assam District Gazetteers, Vol III, Goalpara*, 1914, p. 3.

⁷⁷ Education ‘B’ Proceedings 300-1, October 1924, Letter from the Deputy Inspector of Schools, Dhubri, ASA.

⁷⁸ Misra, ‘Redrawing Frontiers: Language, Resistance and the Imagining of a Goalparia People,’ p. 221.

Out of one lakh and fifty thousand (Bodos in Goalpara), some thousands have been treated as Hindus which is the cause of decrease in number of the Bodo population of the district Goalpara...Bodos have a distinct civilization of their own. There should be a separate category as 'the Bodos' in the Census Report...In spite of our being in such a large number all advantages of the reform are being enjoyed either by the Brahmins or by the Khatriyas or by the Sudras.⁷⁹

In light of the advent of representative electoral politics, there was a fervent appeal for measures to ensure the representation of this community in the local councils besides requests for special treatment in the spheres of education and employment. The growth of an autonomous and assertive identity amongst the Kacharis in this period was thus facilitated by the avenues that colonial modernity provided for the expression of the peoples' views, opinions and demands.

Conclusion

Looking at these colonial records, one can notice the presumption that all 'tribes' shared characteristics that are 'fundamentally different from, and even opposite to, those of civilised people.' Thus, markers that distinguished forest-dwelling people from the plains people became markers of primitivity, and the former were classified into the universalistic category of 'tribes.' Perceptions differed over different time periods, and these processes were marked by ambiguities. Moreover, these projections came to be challenged by the colonised subjects. The advent of modernity sowed the seeds of the self projection of the Bodos as a distinct community.

⁷⁹ Memorandum to Indian Statutory Commission by the Bodo Community, Shillong, 1929, in Boro, *Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma Aarw Bodo Somajao Bini Bihwma (Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma and His Contribution to Bodo Community)*, pp. 79-84.

CHAPTER TWO
MISSIONARIES AMONG THE KACHARIS

Scholar administrator J. D. Anderson, referring to Rev. Sidney Endle- who preached amongst the Kacharis of Darrang district- gave a description of the missionary figure amongst the local people:

When Mr. Endle approached a Kachari village...he was always greeted with a joyous and often noisy welcome. He travelled on foot, and the villagers would turn out to see the *gami-ni-brai*, the 'old man of the village,' as they affectionately called him. He was often cordially invited to share in the village festivities, and it was an interesting sight to watch him seated in the midst of rough semi-savage folk, listening to the tale of their simple joys and sorrows, enjoying their primitive jokes, and, when occasion served, talking to them, as probably no one else will ever be able to talk to them again, of the matters nearest to the missionary's heart.¹

Compared to officials and administrators, missionaries shared a closer, more interactive relationship with the colonized people in their day to day transactions. Their representations of the local people then, were qualitatively different from the official descriptions. While the missionaries steered away from focusing too much on categorizing people into hierarchical and racial groups, they did indulge in identifying specific 'characteristics' in people that would facilitate conversion. Thus, sometimes drawing from, and at times contributing to ethnological enterprises, the missionaries played a significant role in the process of formation of distinct identities of different groups of people.

In general, the studies on the history of Christianity in the north eastern region have focused primarily on those communities and regions amongst which Christianity is most widespread at *present*, for example, the Nagas of Nagaland and Manipur, the Mizos

¹ Anderson, introduction in Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. xiii.

of Mizoram and the Garos and Khasis of Meghalaya. Other communities and regions have not been studied in much detail. Even if Christianity may not have a strong hold on these other regions and people, a careful study might bring to light the processes and impacts that Christianity might have had on the transformation of such communities.

I focus on missionary contributions to the making of the category of the ‘tribe.’ I examine the processes through which the Bodos or Kacharis were designated as ‘tribe’ with a definite history, language and traditions. In the first section, I trace the arrival of the missionaries into the region, and the representation of the Kacharis in their correspondences. In the second section, I look at the depiction of the conversion process of the Kacharis by the missionaries. In the third section, I look at how the missionary enterprise among the Kacharis culminated in the creation of a distinct identity of the Kacharis.

i. Arrival of the missionaries, and amidst the Kacharis

The first group of missionaries to venture into Assam in the colonial period were the American Baptist Missionaries, who were stationed in adjacent Burma at that time. They ventured into Assam in 1836 ‘simply as a step towards entering China from the west.’² The Baptist Missionaries based themselves initially at Sadiya, and gradually spread out to the other areas like Guwahati, Darrang, Garo Hills, Goalpara and the Eastern Dooars, regions which were predominated by the Kacharis.³ The Kacharis were only the third group in the valley, behind the tea plantation labourers and the Garos, in

² Rev. P. H. Moore, ‘General view of Assam,’ *Papers and Discussions of the Jubilee Conference held in Nowgong, December 18-29, 1886* (Calcutta: The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union, 1887), p. 1.

³ R. N. Mosahary, ‘Origin and Growth of Christianity Among the Boros of Assam’, *North East Indian History Association Annual Conference Minutes*, 7th session, Pasighat, 1986.

terms of propensity for converting to Christianity.⁴ The Kachari field in North Kamrup was actually one of the oldest in the history of the Council of Baptist Churches of North East India churches. Contact with the Kacharis was first made soon after the establishment of the mission centre at Gauhati in 1843. By 1849, the majority of the students in the boarding school there came from the Kacharis.⁵

As early as 1854, it was proposed to open a station with a resident missionary for the Kacharis at Mongleghai in the district of Darrang.⁶ The main consideration for selecting Mongledhai was its importance for the connection with Bhutan and Tibet. It was thought of that through the conversion of the Kacharis, the Bhutias would be won over to the mission and the latter, in their turn, would become instruments for the conversion of the whole Tartar race.⁷ Thus a new vista was opened for the realisation of the original plan of the American Baptist Mission for South Asia and Great China.

The Norwegian Mission was established in Assam with the arrival of Rev. Skrefsrud with Santhal colonists in the 1880s.⁸ Naturally, the local Bodo and other groups came into contact with them. The Salvatorian missionaries, who pioneered the Catholic mission work in Assam, entered the province through efforts to reach out to the tea garden workers of Assam, who were emigrants from the Chotanagpur region. The first group of Salvatorian missionaries from Germany, under the leadership of Rev. Otto Hopfenmueller, arrived in 1890.⁹ World War I found the Salvatorian missionaries out of Assam and gradually out of India. But it was with the arrival of the Salesians of Don Bosco in Assam under the leadership of Fr. Louis Mathias in 1922 that greater attention

⁴ F. S. Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives* (Guwahati: Christian Literature Centre, 1983).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ 'Report of the Foreign Secretary,' *Baptist Missionary Magazine* XXXV, no. 3 (1855), p. 66, CBCNEI.

⁷ 'Assam-Mission Paper,' *Baptist Missionary Magazine* XXXV, no. 3 (1855), p. 77, CBCNEI.

⁸ O. Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit: A short history of the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches 1867-1967* (Calcutta: C. D. Media Publications, 1967), p. 40.

⁹ *The Salesian Province of Mary Help of Christians- Guwahati 1959-2009* (Shillong: Don Bosco Press, 2009).

was given to evangelisation work among the local people. The first contact of the Catholic missionaries with the Bodos took place in 1928.

Thus, there were different denominations of Christian missions at work amongst the people in the region. Naturally, at different points of time, and between different denominations, as well as individual missionaries, there were variations in viewpoints, ideas and beliefs. Nonetheless, it can be asserted that there existed discernible concepts, notions and perceptions in the missionary discourse that were influenced by larger ethnological enterprises, and at the same time, contributed to the same.

With the arrival of the missionaries, markets and haats were identified as the initial places for the missionary to establish contact with the local people. They depended chiefly upon ‘meeting the people in the markets and persuading them to come to (the missionaries’) camp...every market day the preachers went and preached in the market...’¹⁰ These public places were utilized to gain the attention of the potential converts. The market place was considered convenient place for preaching,

a large open space filled with little roofs on stilts, under which the traders sat to sell their produce. There was also a large spreading banyan tree, with powerful branches almost parallel to the ground and there I decided to take my stand and preach to the multitudes.¹¹

As the missionaries got entrenched in the local setting, contrasting images of different groups of people in the region were noticed, and accordingly, their future fields for conversion were marked out. It was fervently hoped that it would lead to success in their endeavour to convert the chosen people. The ‘aboriginals’, posited at the lowest rung of the civilizational scheme, were seen to generate feelings of disgust and loathing,

¹⁰ Rev. C. E. Burdette, ‘Among the Kacharis,’ *Baptist Missionary Magazine* LXXI (March 1891), CBCNEI.

¹¹ O. L. Swanson, *In Villages and Tea Gardens: Forty Three Years of Missionary Work in Assam* (1945; rpt. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1997), p. 47.

but, crucially, a sense of superiority amongst the missionary workers, as well as a reinforcement of the uplifting potential of Christ's message.

The missionaries saw themselves as 'foreigners in the country,' with a 'great gulf between them and the natives. They saw themselves as superior to the colonized people. Thus, distinctions were made between the converts and the converters.

Our modes of life, habits and thoughts are different from those of the native Christian...Our position is much above them. We cannot bring ourselves down to them or lift them up to us. The missionary in education and knowledge is far above his native brother, and he belongs to the conquering race, the English and Americans being all the same to a native.¹²

The Cacharis were thus seen as different- different on the one hand, from the missionaries themselves, and different from the neighbouring Hindu and Muslim communities as well. To be sure, colonialism always involved constructing the colonized as wild, whether tribes or castes. The difference between them was hence, not one between the civilized and the wild; it was rather about different forms of wildness.¹³ With regards to food consumption as well, the Kachari had no limitations and restrictions, like his Hindu and Musalman neighbours.¹⁴ That Kachari, was described as 'a genuine Sadducee,' who was unaware of the concepts such as resurrection or angel or spirit. His maxim in life was said to be 'eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.'¹⁵ The differences were drawn on the basis of racial attributes, which had come to be strongly linked to physical characteristics.

The people generally known to us as 'Kacharis' differ in some material ways from their Hindu and Musulman neighbours alike in things material and moral.

¹² Rev A. K. Gurney, 'Self-support,' *Papers and Discussions of the Jubilee Conference held in Nowgong, December 18-29, 1886* (Calcutta: The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionary Union, 1887), p. 118.

¹³ Skaria, 'Shades of Wildness: Tribe, Caste, and Gender in Western India,' p. 730.

¹⁴ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. 14.

¹⁵ Moore, 'General view of Assam,' *Papers and Discussions of the Jubilee Conference held in Nowgong, December 18-29, 1886*, p. 17.

They are certainly not a tall or handsome race...shorter and stouter than the people of North West India...In mental and intellectual power, they are undoubtedly far below their Hindu neighbours.¹⁶

Distinctions were drawn between the 'wily,' 'bigoted,' socially superior, caste Brahmins, and the simple-minded, socially inferior, 'savage heathens.' The Cachari was described as an 'evil spirit or demon worshipper' who would offer cooked rice and other eatables to the 'evil spirits.' Rice beer was said to be his vice, which had 'driven his race, not only into deterioration of character but also into abject poverty and ignorance.' He was looked down upon by the Hindus and had become a 'mere hewer of wood and drawer of water for his more sober neighbours.'¹⁷ One sees here traces of the colonial project of sharpening and magnifying the differences between different races and communities. Within the larger milieu of the colonized people, the savage Cacharis, who were said to have no religion, were thus differentiated from the civilised heathens like the Hindus and the Muslims.

These 'savages' and 'demon-worshippers' were said to have their 'redeeming features,' when viewed from a missionary standpoint. The Kacharis were seen as 'ruder' and 'less cleanly in customs and dress' than the Assamese, but were at the same time extolled for their truthful and honest nature.¹⁸ The missionaries' were strongly drawn out towards these Cacharis, whose minds were said to be 'comparatively open.'¹⁹ Characterised as 'independent spirited' and 'free of caste,' these 'noble savages' were considered ready targets for Church work and action.

¹⁶ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. 1.

¹⁷ Rev. G. R. Kampfer, Guwahati, February 1924, ABFMSR Geographic Files, NMML.

¹⁸ Rev. E. W. Clarke, 'Gospel Destitution in Assam,' *Papers and Discussions of the Jubilee Conference held in Nowgong, December 18-29, 1886*, p. 219.

¹⁹ William Ward, Gowhatty, 1854, ABFMSR Correspondences, NMML.

The attitude of the missionaries towards the native people resembled the conduct of parents towards their children.²⁰ The childlike qualities of cowardice and fear of punishment amongst the Cacharis were identified. Their cause for practising an ‘animistic type religion,’ was traced to an ‘underlying principle of fear or dread, and malevolent spirits.’

*In a certain stage of moral and spiritual development men are undoubtedly influenced far more by what they fear than by what they love; and this truth certainly applies to the Kachari race in the most unqualified way.*²¹

Hence, the missionary endeavour to identify the potential converts involved the discerning of the points at which their efforts would be most acutely felt and where they would be least resisted by prejudice. Hence, the missionaries stressed that it was their ‘most important duty’ to train and utilize all the native talent possible- ‘not as agents, or helpers only, but as brethren; as independent workers. Otherwise they will not understand us, nor shall we understand them.’²²

As the missionaries set to work among the Cacharis, they envisioned the results of their intervention as bringing the ‘noble savages’ to the light. These uplifted Christian Cacharis were starkly contrasted with the heathen Cacharis, differentiated not only in the religious sphere, but in the wider sphere of social transformation.

ii. Depiction of the conversion process

The narratives of conversion processes described in missionary discourse, available in sources like memoirs, correspondences draw interesting images and typecasts. They

²⁰ Thomas, ‘Colonial Conversions: Difference, Hierarchy and History in Early Twentieth Century Evangelical Propaganda,’ p. 376.

²¹ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. 33.

²² M. C. Mason, ‘Mission Work,’ *Papers and Discussions of the Jubilee Conference held in Nowgong, December 18-29, 1886*, p. 104.

give descriptions of the deplorable conditions of the Cacharis prior to the coming of the missionaries, the difficulties that the missionaries had to face in the field, both in terms of dealing with the harsh weather and terrain, as well as the attitudes of the populace towards their attempts at proselytisation, the sacrifices and undiminished enthusiasm of the missionaries towards their aims, and the ultimate success in winning over the people as converts. Field reports and correspondences cited statistics which emphasised the success attained in expansion of the mission. From this, optimistic speculations were made as to further triumphs in strengthening the missionary work. F. S. Downs points out that the basic premise of missionary writing was that ‘no matter how difficult the challenge, no matter how base the customs of the people, conditions were not so bad that they could not be changed by sending more missionaries and giving more money to support their work.’²³

The accounts of the missionaries are replete with instances of hindrances and roadblocks that hampered their conversion work. The narratives described their constant travels even during the rainy seasons, from village to village, from tea garden to tea garden, in their vast region, along dusty or slushy roads, across paddy fields, and through forests, ‘ever harassed by malaria and tormented by leeches and mosquitoes, by heat, cold and dampness, by hunger and thirst, and not rarely, threatened by greater dangers to their lives: wild animals, cholera, beri-beri, kala-azar, etc.’²⁴

Once the Cacharis were identified as potential candidates for conversion, the missionaries wholeheartedly immersed themselves into guiding and educating the Cacharis. An essential feature of the missionaries’ accounts was the drawing of contrasts

²³ Downs, et al., *Essays on Christianity in North East India* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1994), p. 14.

²⁴ O. Paviotti, *The Work of His Hands: The Story of the Archdiocese of Shillong-Guwahati, 1934-1984* (Shillong: Archbishop’s House, 1987), p. 69.

between the conditions of the native before and after conversion.²⁵ Hence, differences were created between the unconverted 'aboriginal' and the converted 'Christian tribal.' Thus, what was heathen and what was civilised came to be marked out through this process. And the motive was to identify potential converts.

Some sections of the Cacharis had already taken to Hinduism, when the missionaries came into contact with them. Ward wrote of a large village of Cacharis near Gowhatty, where he came across a class of Cacharis called Saranias or Horonias (refuge takers) from their having adopted the Hindu religion. This section was differentiated from what he termed as 'swine eating and toddy drinking,' 'genuine' Cacharis.²⁶

The latter waste themselves in drunken carousels, and perhaps distil as much rice as they consume for food. Of course they can't be otherwise than poor, while those of the other class are comparatively wealthy.²⁷

The difference between 'aborigines' who took to Hinduism and those who maintained innocence were thus brought out. The missionaries chose to work among the latter 'virgin soil.'²⁸ The missionary fixed upon the 'natural' ties of kinship as the basic building block for conversions.²⁹ The Kachari was described as an 'intensely clannish being',³⁰ there were instances of whole villages being converted to Christianity.

However, between the lines, one can discern feelings of uncertainty and despair, caused by unfulfilled expectations and difficult conditions. The missionaries had also to face competition from other denominations. The work of the S. P. G. Society among the Cacharis in and about Tezpur was noticed by the American Baptist Missionaries and was

²⁵ Thomas, 'Colonial Conversions: Difference, Hierarchy and History in Early Twentieth Century Evangelical Propaganda,' p. 373.

²⁶ Ward, Gowhatty, 1854, ABFMSR Correspondences, NMML.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Rev. E. G. Philip, 'Historical sketch of the Garo field,' *Papers and Discussions of the Jubilee Conference held in Nowgong, December 18-29, 1886*, p. 78.

²⁹ S. Dube, 'Paternalism and Freedom: The Evangelical Encounter in Colonial Chattisgarh, Central India,' *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no.1 (1995), p. 186.

³⁰ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. 2.

described with envy as ‘a living mission, meeting with some success.’ They were eager to look in upon their work, and know somewhat of their methods and appliances, with the aim of gaining suggestions for their own field.³¹

Besides feeling of envy, there were also feelings of alarm. Since the Protestant community was small and scattered among a vast population in the plains, and the Catholics were mainly working among the immigrant tea garden workers many of whom had brought their denominational affiliation with them from Chota Nagpur, there was no significant conflict in that region.³² In the region of upper Assam, however, the situation was different. Describing a case as of a ‘serious nature,’ Rev Moore described a process where he noticed that the German mission and to some extent, the Church of England mission, had filtered in and attempted to win over the members of the churches which he belonged to for their own organisations. ‘This was especially true with regard to the Lutherans who claimed that the Gossner mission was for the Mundaris and they could not belong to any other.’³³

There were external exigencies which rendered missionary work precarious in the region. The works of the missionaries were severely hampered during the war periods, with them being evicted from their fields. Also, there were issues of funding. Moore, in his memoir describes how there came word from America saying that many churches in the Northern Baptist Convention were losing interest in foreign missionaries and that the contributions for their work were steadily decreasing during the period of entrenchment.

Retreat, when revivals were going on and more workers were needed in order to combat the unrest in the minds of the people...Indeed these were the dark ages in our missionary history...Salaries were cut, men were dismissed,

³¹ Phillip, ‘Mission work in Assam, by Other Societies,’ *Papers and Discussions of the Jubilee Conference held in Nowgong, December 18-29, 1886*, p. 212.

³² Downs, et al., p. 232.

³³ Swanson, *In Villages and Tea Gardens*, p. 103.

schools were closed, dispensary work ceased, evangelists were told to put their Bibles away and take up the plow for a living.³⁴

Besides external factors, the missionaries had to face obstacles and hindrances from the natives as well. They expressed their indignation against the proselytising activities of the Brahmins, since they perceived that it was not the Kacharis who were degraded; the missionaries believed that their natural innocence had been tainted by pressures exerted from outside the Kachari community. The innocence of the Kachari was the 'innocence of ignorance...when contaminated by civilization, much of this innocence must inevitably disappear.'³⁵ 'The curses of the Brahmins, the reproaches of their fellows and fear of the officials, together with considerations of caste,' were seen as reasons why the Cacharis would often excuse themselves from listening to the sermons. This class of Cacharis were seen to be quite as bigoted as the genuine Hindoos.³⁶ As one missionary described the situation-

there is a native official in the village of Lokhora, a bigoted Brahmin, and from his office is of great power to intimidate the people, a power which he uses against us. I was pained to find that the people were perhaps more than ever afraid to be seen listening to us...These people are taught both to shun and despise us...how strong a hold the members of this sacred order have upon the fears and reverence of even those Cacharis who have never adopted the Hindoo religion.'³⁷

Besides hostility from the Hindu priest order, the missionaries had often to face opposition from amongst the Cacharis themselves. Often, they were demoralised with the lack of enthusiasm among the people. While they came with high hopes and zeal to the mission field, the ground realities and difficulties flustered their vanity. As one missionary expressed the feelings of disappointment,

³⁴ Ibid., p. 152.

³⁵ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. 3.

³⁶ Ward, Gowhatty, 1854, ABFMSR Geographic Files, NMML.

³⁷ Ibid.

Where were the noisy drums, and the gaudy elephants and the fragrant garlands and the addresses of welcome, in which the multitudes expressed their eagerness to embrace the Christian religion? About the only ones who paid attention to me were the pariah dogs, who barked at me and snarled in fear.³⁸

While lack of enthusiasm was encountered on one hand, on the other, there was outright opposition from some of the Cacharis. It can be sensed that while the people generally welcomed such facilities as schools, and infact often requested their establishment,³⁹ but they at the same time showed aversion to conversion. It can be said that distinction was drawn by the native people between temporal and spiritual aspects of the missionary projects. Ward mentions the case of a young Cachari woman who had joined the girls' school as a day scholar.

There was no objection made to her doing this, but when after some months she declared her faith in Christ, and desire to be baptised, her relatives began to oppose in earnest. She was beaten, but with the result only that she came to the school for protection...Since her baptism, they have apparently dropped the matter, as they say she has now hopelessly broken caste.⁴⁰

The Cacharis, to the missionaries' dismay clung on to their old practices, festivities and drinking. The missionaries were warned to not be surprised 'if you find some of his former superstitions mingled with the truth which he has received in Jesus.'⁴¹ At the mission of Barpeta Road, Fr Marengo in 1936 had begun work among the Boros. He stated that although these people seemed to give 'good hope, they come over to the

³⁸ Swanson, *In Villages and Tea Gardens*, p. 48.

³⁹ Ward, Gowhatty, 1854, ABFMSR Geographic Files, NMML.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Moore, 'General view of Assam,' p. 18.

Church easily, but they also go away as easily if not properly looked after. Hence the need for catechists.’⁴²

Even though they seemed to present an ‘interesting and hopeful’ field for mission labour, there were certain principal obstacles to successful proselytization amongst the Kacharis. These obstacles were inherent features of the Kachari community. One of these features was their habit of intemperance. Ward had visited a Cachari village and found the people were open to reciprocate. On his subsequent visit however, he found them in a deplorable condition

In the subsequent visit, only half dozen came out of their houses! I made inquiry...but those of whom I made the inquiry seemed confused...they had all spent the night in drinking and carousing, so that some could not even get up, and others were ashamed to come out.⁴³

Besides a proclivity for drinking, another characteristic of the Cacharis that seemed to hinder conversion activities amongst them was their migratory habits, linked to their agricultural modes of cultivation. A village would be built in a few weeks or days, and would be inhabited for a couple of years. It may be a thickly populated region, but after a couple of years, it would be abandoned and wear a deserted look.

roving habits can scarcely fail to beget a certain fickleness of character which unfits the mind to receive or retain strong religious impressions. We want something to hold them still while we pour in Gospel truth.⁴⁴

Thus, the image of a ‘heathen’ waiting to be transformed by the missionaries is portrayed. The transformation of the individual as a result of conversion to Christianity points towards the missionary project as a benevolent entity, one that sought to civilise the ‘heathen’ through Christianity.

⁴² J. Thekkedath, *History of the Salesians of Don Bosco in India from the Beginning upto 1951-52* (Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2005), p. 1308.

⁴³ Ward, Gowhatty, 1854, ABFMSR Geographic Files, NMML.

⁴⁴ Rev. E. P. Scott, Nowgong, 1863, ABFMSR Correspondences, NMML.

The missionary is so great in the eyes of his native brother, and the latter feels so inferior in knowledge and wisdom that he does not feel like taking the lead when the missionary is near but instinctively waits for him.⁴⁵

Thus, in the process of the heathen Cacharis being differentiated from the Hinduised Cacharis, the missionaries' endeavour to classify the 'genuine' Cacharis led to the search for specific markers of identity like language, beliefs and traditions, and an authentic history. Once these markers were identified and then codified, they served as tropes for a distinct identity of a 'tribe'. This process was influenced by prevalent processes of colonial knowledge production, which resulted from an intermingling of biblical, evangelical and ethnographic theories and concepts, focusing on evolutionism, philology, physiognomy, besides a 'romantic urge and a positivist obsession to classify even the minutest of details.'⁴⁶ Through these processes, the category of 'tribe' was thus constituted in missionary discourse.

iii. Transformation and making of the Bodo identity

Learning the language of the 'heathens' was an integral part of the missionary enterprise towards gaining converts. The missionaries showed a marked enthusiasm to learn the language of the native converts, and the people always manifested great pleasure at hearing them speak in their tongue and the 'bolder ones showed great interest in helping...' the missionaries and assisting them in gathering information.⁴⁷ It was believed that the missionaries should

⁴⁵ Gurney, 'Self-Support,' p. 119.

⁴⁶ Dasgupta, 'From 'Heathen Aborigines' to 'Christian Tribes': Locating the Oraons in Missionary Writings on Chotanagpur,'

⁴⁷ Burdette, Gauhati, 17 April 1889, ABFMSR Correspondences, NMML.

become acquainted with our field; as far as practical we traverse it, that we may know the habits, customs, beliefs, prejudices, and labors of the people. We should seek to know the controlling influences among them⁴⁸

Initially, during the phase of establishing contact with the people, the missionaries focused on learning from the natives, collecting words and useful phrases, and dwelling on grammatical aspects and vocabularies. The knowledge gleaned was then used in the translations of liturgical, doctrinal, and biblical texts, initially destined for use by the missionaries in their oral work of evangelisation. The underlying motive was to help the evangelists preach to the people in their language, it was not so much about educating the illiterates. Gradually, however, ‘concern with spreading the content of the message became overshadowed by attention to formal and normative matters.’⁴⁹ Thus, the missionaries became the agents who formalised, standardised and textualised the language, chosen from the various prevalent spoken dialects. While earlier, the Kacharis were described as people ‘melting away into various dialects towards the base of the Bhutan hills,’⁵⁰ the subsequent decades saw the emergence of a standardised Boro language.

While Revs Barker, Danforth and Ward catechised and distributed Christian literature prepared in the ‘dialects’ of the Kacharis,⁵¹ Rev. Endle undertook the project of codifying and standardising the Cachari language, grammar and vocabulary, besides compiling the folklore and myths of the Cacharis. Thus, the identity of the Cachari came to be textualised, and by 1915, nearly a 1000 gospels in Kachari were said to have been sold in Goalpara alone.⁵² Thus, now mass publication of the gospel texts was undertaken.

⁴⁸ Mason, ‘Methods of Mission Work,’ p. 103.

⁴⁹ J. Fabian, ‘Missions and the Colonization of African Languages: Developments in the Former Belgian Congo,’ *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 17, no. 2 (1983), p. 174.

⁵⁰ Burdette, Gauhati, 17 April 1889, ABFMSR Correspondences, NMML.

⁵¹ 44th Annual Report, *Baptist Missionary Magazine* XXXVIII, no. 7 (1858), p. 250, CBCNEL.

⁵² A. C. Bowers, Goalpara, 1915, quoted in M. Sangma, *A History of American Baptist Mission in North East India, Vol. I (1836-1950)* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1992).

Mass publication was a practical way of making reading matter available to people who could not afford expensive books. At the same time, it established in the colony a mode of literary production and patterns of mass consumption.⁵³

Fr. Kristiansen, assisted by Boro co-workers he succeeded in translating the New Testament in the Boro language by 1937, and had it published the next year. The hymn book, a reading book, and a bible history and the church ritual were also translated and published.⁵⁴ Rev Halvorsud was also involved with bible translation work into the Boro language, together with Rev Maguram Mosahari. Fr. Zanon, in 1940s learnt the Boro language and printed the Prayer book and catechism book in the Boro language. The catechism had been prepared by Fr. Marengo earlier.⁵⁵

The main task is the translation of the Old Testament in order to give the Boros the complete bible. But this work is now sponsored by all the five Protestant Boro churches representing several dialects. A vital task is to try to work out a *standard* Boro that will as far as possible be accepted by these five churches and also by the Boros as a whole.⁵⁶

Thus, the task of categorizing and codifying the standard, textual form of a particular language, its vocabulary and grammar, was undertaken and accomplished by the missionaries. The Roman script was chosen to give a written form to the Boro language. In this way, an oral language that had till now no written form was now given a formal structure and a regular grammar, through the efforts of the missionaries.

In this process of learning the languages, the missionaries also gleaned and textualized the rich oral traditions of the communities themselves. The missionaries collected and recorded myths and traditions, folk-tales and songs, riddles and proverbs,

⁵³ Fabian, 'Missions and the colonization of African Languages: Developments in the Former Belgian Congo', p. 174.

⁵⁴ Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, p. 124.

⁵⁵ *The Salesian Province of Mary Help of Christians- Guwahati 1959-2009*.

⁵⁶ Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, p. 148.

all of which were considered to be ‘authentic’ treasure troves of a community and its culture. Thus, earlier described as a community with ‘no old authentic legends...uninformed apart from their immediate wants,’⁵⁷ the Bodos came to have their own corpus of traditions and legends. These traditions gave the community a sense of distinctiveness. With the oral traditions being given a written form, a certain fixity was assigned to them and in turn, to the corresponding community. Endle had chosen to append J. D. Anderson’s collected folk tales of the Kacharis to his monograph.⁵⁸

But myths and oral traditions of the communities, were not considered ‘history’ in the strictest sense, and were dismissed as products of ‘the Oriental love for the grotesquely marvellous.’⁵⁹ Hence, what followed was the attempt by the missionaries to trace the early history of the community. The missionaries would establish the ‘aboriginal’ communities as the ‘original settlers of the land.’ Through this tracing and understanding of history, the missionaries would consequently explain the backwardness and the degradation of these specific communities designated as ‘tribes.’ They would infer that the cause for their decline was the result of external forces and aggression. They would describe a history of exploitation and marginalisation of the ‘aboriginals’ at the hands of the rapacious and scheming Hindus and Muslims. This project served to enhance the oppositional relationship between the ‘tribes’ and the Hindus, emphasised in the missionary narratives of conversion. The depiction of the ‘aboriginal’ as the exploited and marginalised also served to justify and give credence and legitimacy to the missionary work, which aimed at the upliftment of the downtrodden ‘aboriginal’ communities like the Cacharis. As J D Anderson explicitly stated about Endle’s work,

⁵⁷ Hodgson, *On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes*, p. 184.

⁵⁸ Endle, *The Kacharis*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Mr. Endle's interest in his Kachari flock was that of an evangelist rather than that of a linguist or ethnologist, and this preoccupation has coloured his style and affected the matter of his book...⁶⁰

Through the search for a language, folk tradition and history, the Cacharis, then, were given a distinct identity. 'From creatures whose religious customs, social practices and physical appearances had been so conspicuously unfamiliar, they became part of a universalistic category, the 'tribe'.'⁶¹ Hence, while they were still considered 'heathen,' the earlier characteristic of 'demon worship' associated with the Kachari was now replaced by the concept of 'animism,' or primitive religion. The religion of the Kachari thus came to be stated as distinctly of the type commonly known as 'animistic'.⁶²

While the missionaries endeavoured to trace the history of the 'aboriginal' communities, they relied more on ethnographic texts to lend credence to their narratives than on their own first hand experiences with the people. As is evident in Rev Endle's work on the Kacharis, the author leaned on Major Gurdon's substantiations, as well as J D Anderson's work. His ideas were evidently drawn from the works of the likes of Gait and Hodgson, as is obvious from the reference list of texts supplied to him while writing the monograph.⁶³

Through this project of according the Cacharis an identity, Endle drew from prevalent notions of race theory to describe the Cacharis as akin to the Himalayan Mongoloids, who swept into the fertile valley wave after wave, establishing a powerful kingdom in the valley. The Kacharis thus came to be portrayed as a 'strong, virile race' that came early into Assam and 'built large palaces and beautiful cities.'⁶⁴ They were

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. xi.

⁶¹ Dasgupta, 'From 'Heathens' to 'Christian Tribes': Locating the Oraons in Missionary Writings on Chotanagpur,

⁶² Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. 33.

⁶³ Home 'A' Proceedings 146-186, March 1905, Compilation of tribal and caste monographs of Assam, ASA.

⁶⁴ Rev. C. C. Crozler, 1925, ABFMSR Correspondences, NMML.

described as the erstwhile ruling race of the province but were pushed up against the foothills of the Himalayas by their more sober Hindu neighbours.⁶⁵ Endle even went on to draw a parallel between the histories of Britain and Assam.

When about the middle of the fifth century the Romans finally withdrew from Britain, we know that successive swarms of invaders, Jutes, Danes, Saxons, Angles, & c., from the countries adjoining the North and Baltic seas, gradually overran and occupied the richer lowland of what is now England, driving all who remained alive of the aboriginal Britons to take refuge in the less favoured parts of the country, i.e., the mountains of Wales and the highlands of Scotland, where many of the people of this day retain their ancient mother speech: very much as the Kacharis of Assam still cling to their national customs, speech, religion, & c., in those outlying parts of the Province known in modern times as the Garo Hills, North Cachar and the Kachari Duars of North-west Assam.’⁶⁶

Endle’s work remains one of the most important texts for studying the history of the Bodo community. It is representative of the culmination of the processes of interplay between the administrative and missionary enterprises with regard to the identification and categorisation of ‘tribes.’ The missionary work of standardising the spoken language into a textualized Boro language led to the identification of the community as the Boro community, no longer the general term ‘Kachari’ applied.

Besides the standardisation and textualization of the language, history, traditions of the Boro community, the missionary enterprise also helped to generate an educated and economically advanced class from amongst the Boros. The converts were a part of the paternalistic economy which developed around the missionary and the mission station.⁶⁷

Mentions are made of how the Cacharis often served as coolies for the missionaries, who

⁶⁵ V. H. Sword, 1935, ABMFSR Correspondences, NMML.

⁶⁶ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. 8.

⁶⁷ Dube ‘Paternalism and Freedom: The Evangelical Encounter in Colonial Chattisgarh, Central India,’ p. 179.

would urge them to preach among their brethren.⁶⁸ The converts were thus, employed and incorporated directly within the mission station, as coolies, catechists, etc. Among the American Baptists, mention was made of one Apinta, as the head of the Kochari village being tax gatherer.⁶⁹ In the Santal mission of the Northern Churches, in January 1888, Siram Soren, the Santal pastor, baptized the first Boro family, a man called Thekla, his wife and two children in the Santal colony.⁷⁰ Among the Salesian Jesuits, mention is made of Rev Alichoron who became the pastor in the Gaurang mission in the 1930s.⁷¹

In 1947, Fr. A. Fedrigotti, during his visit to the institutions and mission centres in Assam, mentioned that in Barpeta Road, he was happy to see a boarding school with 1100 Adibasi and Boro boys. The school had an agricultural farm attached to it. It produced its own electricity, was equipped with 'modern agricultural machinery, and raised a great variety of crops that persuaded the boys to introduce them into their family mini-farms and helped them with food in the boarding department.'⁷²

Also, one of the most interesting facts about Christian work among the Kacharis, as emphasised by the missionaries, is that it was initiated and spread, for the most part, by groups of women,

who, even though most of them were illiterate, went from village to village telling what they knew of Christ. 'A *revival*' among the Kacharis was thus said to have spread in such a manner.⁷³

With the establishment of missionary institutions, seeds were sown for the emergence of a section of educated and economically able class of Bodos. As one missionary observed, the tendency among these people who have accepted Christianity

⁶⁸ Ward, Gowhatty, 1854, ABFMSR Geographic Files, NMML.

⁶⁹ I. J. Stoddard, 1867, ABFMSR Geographic Files, NMML.

⁷⁰ Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, p. 48.

⁷¹ Thekkedath, *History of the Salesians of Don Bosco in India from the Beginning upto 1951-52*, p. 124.

⁷² Paviotti, *The Work of His Hands*, p. 49.

⁷³ H. Smith, 1903, ABFMSR Correspondences, NMML.

was to ‘turn to business concerns and to the collecting of money to better their temporal conditions rather than seeking after spiritual uplift...’⁷⁴

Conclusion:

It becomes evident that there were differences in the methods of the missionaries from the administrators. Yet, the latter’s process of construction of identities reinforced missionary perceptions, while at the same time, the missionaries drew from the contemporary official trends of nomenclature. Thus, the interplay between these two interconnected discourses led to the creation of the ‘tribe’ as a unique and distinctive category and led to the imagination of a space for the perpetuation of ‘tribal’ identity.

⁷⁴ Bowers, Goalpara, 1915, quoted in M. Sangma, *A History of American Baptist Mission in North East India, Vol. I (1836-1950)*.

CHAPTER THREE
GARDENS, COLONIES AND BOUNDED LOCALITIES

With the incorporation of Assam into the British empire, the undertaking of surveys and tours became a regular feature in the region. In his tour of Assam in 1864-65, Major W. Nassau Lees lamented about the ‘unsatisfactory circumstances of the present state of Assam, the general scantiness of its population, its extremely unequal distribution, and the enormous extent of rich and productive land which lies waste and uncultivated.’ He emphasised the need for ‘reclaiming the wastes and bringing them under the payment of revenue.’¹ The British thus found the region potentially profitable yet lacking in initiative from the local people. Such a perspective gave a twofold prospect for the colonial administration. The argument that the local people were unable to reverse the desolation of the province was adhered to in order to justify the colonial administration’s initiatives at ‘improving’ the region and also opening up the province for immigration on a large scale.

The establishment of tea plantations in the province hinged on these two notions of ‘improvement’: revenue generation coupled with immigration from other parts of the Indian subcontinent. This process involved the identification and transplantation of a ‘suitable class’ of cultivators from outside the region. This classification of particular groups of people as ‘suitable’ or ‘unsuitable’ was based on the requirements of work in the plantations and notions of race that emerged during the colonial period. Thus, certain races were seen as more primitive and tractable than others, while others were rejected as unruly or indolent.

¹ W. Nassau Lees, ‘Reply of Major W. Nassau Lees to the Minute of Sir Cecil Beadon upon his Memorandum of a Tour through the Tea Districts of Eastern Bengal, 1864-65,’ *Bristol Selected Pamphlets*, 1868, p. 9.

With the establishment of the tea gardens, the landscape of the region also underwent tremendous changes. The peculiar nature of plantation gardens as closed spaces played a crucial role in the process of keeping the class of labourers marginalised. Also, the ‘coolies’ tied to the enclaves, came to be seen as one homogenous group, the ‘other’ of the local populace.²

For the local populace, the tea plantations marked and closed off vast areas of land. Moreover, other economic projects were undertaken which were integrally linked to the establishment of tea gardens. The same notions of improvement and revenue generation guided the colonial administration to encourage cultivators from outside the province to take up land in Assam, as well as mark and close off jungles as ‘reserve forests.’ Communication and transport services were enhanced for efficient shipment of tea and labour. It resulted in the accelerated influx of immigrants into the region. The local people came to be marginalised through these processes.

While Kaushik Ghosh and Jayeeta Sharma, in their studies of tea plantation labour, have put emphasis on primitivity and control as markers for the suitability for indentured labour, I take the argument further and emphasise that different *degrees* of primitivity were formulated to differentiate between the local and immigrant ‘tribes,’ as well as within the immigrant ‘tribes’. All these groups came to be characterised and identified through the plantation economy.

I argue that the marginalised status of the tea garden labourers as well as the local Kachari community was enhanced through these processes. The first section traces how the idea of primitivity was inextricably linked to the practice of labour recruitment for the tea gardens. The second section looks at the creation of separate bounded localities in

² J. Sharma, *Empire's Garden*.

the region, leading to the transformation in the identities of the coolie. The third section deals with the economic and demographic changes that resulted from the opening up of the province, leading to the marginalisation of the Kacharis.

i. Primitivity and Labour

As the province of Assam slowly opened up to colonial rule, it was noticed that the tea plant grew in the wild. During his tour of Assam in 1835, William Griffith, found that tea was consumed by the Singfo tribe.³ Yet, in colonial writings the ‘discovery’ of tea by the British has been highlighted. Moreover, the locally growing tea was deemed to be of an inferior quality. With the application of scientific skills and commercial enterprise, steps were taken for the ‘improvement’ in the quality of this locally available tea for the purpose of trade and profit.

The tea industry, being a plantation economy, was labour intensive in nature. Hence the question of recruitment of a large labour force is integrally linked to it. Labour recruitments to the tea plantations in the colonial period went through many distinct phases, and the sources of the recruitment differed over different points of time. Initially, gardens were worked by local labour. But in as far back as 1859, the importation of foreign labour was seen to be essential, and a Tea Planters’ Association was accordingly formed.⁴ A systematic indentured labour system was adopted. It has been suggested that it was the increase in the number of gardens which compelled the planters to look for

³ W. Griffith, *Journal of Travels in Assam, Burma, Bootan, Afghanistan and the Neighbouring Countries*, arranged by John M’Clelland (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1847), pp. 14-15.

⁴ Emigration Branch Proceedings, October 1906, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, NAI.

labour from outside Assam.⁵ Yet, on a closer look, one finds there were definite patterns in the choice of labour recruited over different points in time.

Initially, there was a demand for Chinese tea-growers. In his lecture to the Society of Arts in 1887, a scholar commented,

acting presumably on the belief that every Chinaman must be an expert in tea cultivation and manufacture, they (the tea planters) transplanted all the Chinese shoemakers and carpenters that they could induce to go from Cositollah and other bazaars in Calcutta to Assam; these men had never seen a tea plant in their lifetime.⁶

This instance gives us an indication of the colonial ruler's initial fixation with skill and expertise, which was the guiding principle of the colonial policy of importing and growing Chinese tea in Assam as well as importing Chinese 'expert' labour for this purpose. The Chinese labourers were however discarded due to their non-compliance of the orders of the planters.⁷

The local Assamese people, on the other hand, were deemed wholly unsuitable for tea plantation work. The British explained the unwillingness of the Assamese people to work by highlighting their characteristic laziness and indolence, which was attributed to racial or climactic factors. Nature seemed to compound the weakness of the Assamese people, since it provided a fertile soil where crops flourished easily. Moreover, the easy access to opium aggravated their degeneracy, it being stated that 'the utter want of an industrious, enterprising spirit and the general degeneracy of the Assamese people (were) greatly promoted by the prevalent use of opium.'⁸

⁵ Suranjan Chatterjee and Rana Das Gupta, 'Tea Labour in Assam: Recruitment and Government Policy, 1840-1880,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no. 44/46 (1981), p. 1862.

⁶ Quoted in P. Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1967).

⁷ Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, p. 38.

⁸ Quoted in Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*.

The planters now turned to the local ‘tribal’ labourers, who were noted for their ‘industriousness’ and capacity for hard work. As discussed in the first chapter, the Kacharis were depicted as inhabitants of the jungles living on the periphery of the ‘civilised’ valley region. They were considered to be ‘primitive.’ Inhabiting the marginal lands on a rugged terrain, their practices of shifting cultivation and jungle clearing led to their portrayal as a physically sturdy, hardy race, attributed with the racial endowment of thriving in inhuman climates.⁹ The ‘un-Hinduized’ Kacharis were considered as almost the only class of the local population that was ready to work on hire.¹⁰

However, due to the expansion in the tea sector, the plantations required a large permanent labour force, which they could not procure from the local populace. Although the Kacharis would agree to work for wages, they would not do so on a permanent basis. The Kacharis called themselves ‘*mon khushi* labourers, or labourers at pleasure.’¹¹ As discussed in the first chapter, migratory lifestyle was considered a characteristic feature of primitive communities. The colonial administrators tried to understand such behaviour by the Kacharis by attributing it to their nomadic lifestyle and the nature of their habitats.

The Mech or Cacharis are of very migratory habits, and seldom stay at one place or cultivate the same soil for more than two-three years; but this can hardly be wondered at, when they have so much virgin soil at their disposal. They prefer cultivating clearings in the forest when available, and grow crops.¹²

The Kacharis continued to offer themselves for employment in the plantations, but it was of a strictly seasonal nature. It was observed that when there were many brothers in a Kachari family in Western Assam, one or two usually remained at home to cultivate the family lands, whilst the rest of the brothers went to tea estates for the manufacturing

⁹ Hodgson, *On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes*, p. 148.

¹⁰ Emigration Branch Proceedings, October 1906, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, NAI.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II*, p. 117.

season, often doing double tasks day after day, and returning to the family fold in the cold season with a large and liberal supply of money at each man's disposal.¹³

According to scholars Behal and Mohapatra, the high wages demanded by local labourers was an important consideration in the resort to long distance recruitment.¹⁴ However, it must be noted that when the planters recruited the labour from outside, they paid exorbitant prices for acquiring coolies, especially to the intermediary agents. Moreover, in the later stages, with the creation of the class of time-expired labourers, there was a competition among the planters to recruit them, which led to the emergence of the so called 'bonus system' in which the planters were ready to pay high wages to experienced hands. Thus, the argument of the high wages demanded by the local labourers acting as a deterrent to their recruitment by the planters and the latter's consequent act of looking elsewhere for recruitment needs to be looked at critically.

The category of aboriginal '*dhangur*' coolies from the Chotanagpur region were prized for their proficiency in plantation work in the colonies.¹⁵ From the 1860s onwards, they began to be recruited to the tea gardens of Assam in a large-scale, systematized manner. The colonial administration justified the emigration of labourers by stating that the 'labour districts' or 'recruiting districts'- the districts from which labourers were recruited for emigration to the tea plantations in Assam- were densely populated, scarcity and famine prevailing in them.¹⁶ Mohapatra however, conclusively shows that the rate of emigration was relatively more elastic than the harvest. In a bad year, he showed, emigration rose more sharply than the fall in output, while in a good year the level of

¹³ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. 114.

¹⁴ R. P. Behal and P. Mohapatra, "'Tea and Money versus Human Life': The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations, 1840-1906," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, 1992.

¹⁵ Ghosh, 'A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India,' p. 19.

¹⁶ Emigration Branch Proceedings 20-23, June 1880, Memorial from the Indian Tea Districts Association representing the present state and prospects of the tea industry in India, NAI.

emigration fell more sharply than the rise in output. He contends that the intensification of cultivation, coupled with an increase in population, put a large number of cultivating households at the mercy of yield fluctuations, forcing emigration even when the cultivators had occupied land.¹⁷ The Catholic missionaries working among the Kols in Chotanagpur described their conditions-

The people have to toil hard to wring a livelihood out of such land and are quite dependent on the rain. When that fails or comes at unseasonable times, there is distress or even famine. They are agriculturist and have nothing to fall back on. Economy is unknown; besides, in most cases the family lands have been divided and subdivided in each generation. In some instances no further division is possible and some of the family must hire themselves out to others or emigrate. This was the condition of things when our missionaries first came among them forty years ago.¹⁸

What is interesting to note is that the shift in the conception of different groups of people considered appropriate for plantation labour changed over different periods of time and reflected contemporaneous change in notions on race and ethnology that were taking place during the colonial period. I argue that notions of different degrees of 'primitiveness' of people played the deciding role here.

Initially, the marginal communities, the Kols or *dhangurs* from Chotanagpur, as well as the Kacharis from Assam were assumed to belong to the 'Tamulian' race, as was discussed in the first chapter. They were said to share the 'like capacity to breathe malaria as though it were common air.'¹⁹ By the second half of the nineteenth century however, the two groups were considered distinct. Physiological markers came to signify distinctions between separate races. The aboriginal groups of the north eastern and Himalayan region were said to belong to the Mongoloid race, distinct from those

¹⁶ P. Mohapatra, 'Coolies and Colliers: A Study of the Agrarian Context of Labour Migration from Chotanagpur,' p. 295.

¹⁸ *Voices from India* (Kurseong: Diocese of Bengal Mission, 1922), pp. 4-5.

¹⁹ Hodgson, *On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes*, p. 148.

aboriginal groups in other parts of India such as the Kols. Also, around this time, the Kacharis were observed to be gradually shifting to a sedentarized lifestyle in the plains and were termed as ‘semi-savage’ folk, as discussed in the first chapter. They were said to have become of a ‘soft’ disposition due to the ‘enervating’ climate of the valley.²⁰ The Kols too, earlier seen as one single homogenous group, now came to be differentiated on the basis of language, into the Kolarian and Dravidian groups.²¹ The category ‘coolie’ thus came to acquire a narrow, specific racial attribution, with only certain races considered suitable for employment in the plantations.

Though the distinction between the ‘up-country’ or non-‘aboriginal’ coolies and ‘*dhangur*’ or ‘aboriginal’ coolies was not in all cases very clear, and concrete distinctions and markers of the ‘aboriginal’ *dhangur* were admittedly hard to spell out, a very general opinion was harboured that the ‘*dhangur*’ class flourished in gardens situated in ‘*jungly*’ localities, whilst ‘up-country’ coolies became sick and died in such gardens.²² The publication of texts such as the *Handbook of Castes and Tribes* gives us an indication of the formalization of the issue of labour suitability through race discourse. The Munda, Ho, Oraon, Kharia, Santhal, Kalahandi, Porja, Savara, Domb and Bhumij ‘aborigines’ were termed as ‘First class *junglis*’, the ‘semi-aboriginal’ Bhuias, Lohars, Nagabanshis, and Tantis were termed as ‘Second class *junglis*’. The ‘low caste’ coolies from the Central Provinces and the United Provinces, as well as the ‘Uriyas’ and East Coast peoples were considered wholly undesirable for emigration.²³ Here we can see the prevalence of the belief that the ‘aboriginal’ races had intrinsic ‘primitive’ characteristics like the propensity for hard labour and the ability to withstand harsh climatic conditions

²⁰ Anderson, introduction to Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. xix.

²¹ *Handbook of Castes and Tribes Employed on Tea Estates in North-East India*, Tea District Labour Association (Calcutta: Catholic Orphan Press, 1924).

²² Emigration Branch Proceedings 19, May 1875, Restriction upon employment of up-country coolies in Assam, and close season for emigration to the province, NAI.

²³ *Handbook of Castes and Tribes Employed on Tea Estates in North-East India*.

and difficult terrains. The ‘semi-aboriginal’ and ‘low castes,’ in contrast, were not as ‘primitive’ as the ‘aboriginal’ races.²⁴

Notions of race and primitivity were further hardened through the institutionalisation of a formal pricing system based on the different class groupings. The ‘aborigines’ came to be seen as physically sturdy, docile beings who could be made to work in harsh conditions for converting jungles to tea gardens. The colonial state authorized the planters to employ only ‘class I *junglis*’ from amongst Chotanagpur coolies in the red-bank tea gardens.²⁵ These gardens had dense forest covers which had to be cleared and moreover, the climate was described as ‘pestilential’. The ‘aboriginal’ class inevitably fetched the highest price in the labour market. Cultural markers of the ‘primitive’ came to be essentialized in this context. The ‘aborigines’ were described as ‘exceedingly cheerful workers, always singing and decking themselves with flowers.’²⁶ To satisfy the demands of the employers, the recruiters thus devised ways to pass off inferior coolies as first class labourers, making them ‘dress their hair on one side and stain their skin to look like aboriginals’.²⁷

Such fetishes for ‘aboriginal’ labourers led to forceful and deceitful methods of enticement by recruiters called *arkattis* and *sardars*. Such practices tended to make emigration to Assam unpopular amongst the coolies. Such sentiments of being deceived and duped are reflected in the *jhumur* songs of the labourers, such as the following-

Our names were written in the permanent book. The recruiter Shyam deceived us and sent us to Assam. We were beaten in the depot-ghar. We first saw the

²⁴ Skaria, ‘Shades of Wildness: Tribe, Caste, and Gender in Western India.’

²⁵ *Handbook of Castes and Tribes Employed on Tea Estates in North-East India.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁷ Emigration Branch Proceedings, October 1906, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, NAI.

sky in Hooghly town. We thought, we would be engaged to draw fans in Assam but the Sahibs gave us spades.²⁸

Assam came to be known as ‘the abyss in which people disappear without a trace.’ What is interesting is the perception that the ‘aboriginal’ or ‘semi-aboriginal’ people of the recruiting districts were more easily duped than the other people. It was stated that ‘if he is filled up with liquor or dosed with cocaine, he will be willing to go anywhere or do anything.’²⁹ The stereotype of the ‘primitive’ person’s weakness for intoxicants is reinforced here. The DC of Hazaribagh, one of the recruiting districts, stated that

I frequently get petitions in Court from the relations of people who have disappeared, generally boys or women. The suggestion in the petition is invariably that the person who has disappeared has gone to Assam. Hazaribagh is a district where people do not petition readily. They have to go a long way to court, and if they put in a petition it means there is a real grievance; and the fact that such petitions are put in so often as they are shows that there is a good deal of enticement practised, and this all tends to make Assam emigration unpopular.³⁰

Cases of deaths of coolies in transit from the recruiting districts to the tea districts were reported. Describing new coolies as ‘sickly,’ Partridge, Inspector of Labourers, contrasted their appearance to that of the old coolies of the garden, ‘fine stalwart people, both men and women,’ and argued that it ‘conclusively’ showed that the conditions in the transit or gardens were not to blame for deaths. According to him, ‘The voyage up will not alone cause this fearful amount of sickness; the coolies themselves must have been originally ill and debilitated.’³¹ Thus, the case of mortality was racialized. According to Col. Keatinge, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, ‘up-country’ emigrants

²⁸ P. P. Mahato, ‘Worldview of Jharkhand as Depicted in Songs of the Tea Garden Labourers of Assam,’ *Folklore* 26, no. 8 (1985). p. 146.

²⁹ Emigration Branch Proceedings 25-42, April 1913, Withdrawal of the Labour District provisions of the Assam Labour and Emigration Act from the Assam Valley District and the system of recruitment to be adopted in future, NAI.

³⁰ Emigration Branch Proceedings 1, November 1911, Alleged illicit removal of coolies to Assam from Chotanagpur, NAI.

³¹ Emigration Branch Proceedings Ibid., 1876, NAI.

'succumb more rapidly to the damp climate of Assam and Cachar than others do.'³²
 Thus, specific markers came to be associated with this '*dhangur*' class to distinguish it as 'aboriginal,' a 'recent invention'³³ of the colonial period.

Thus, economic exigencies and contingencies, and notions of race and primitivity were issues that accelerated the large scale emigration of 'coolies' from the Chotanagpur region to Assam. This class of 'aboriginal' immigrant labourers came to be entrenched in the locality, but at the same time, owing to the nature of the tea plantation system, they remained a marginalised group.

ii. 'Enclaves' and 'colonies'

As a suitable class of tea garden labour came to be identified and the plantation economy expanded, the immigration of labour proceeded on a large scale. Large increase in the total number of immigrants to the province was seen, especially during the second half of the 1890s. The years from 1895 through 1898 showed the greatest immigration compared to earlier years.³⁴

The railways and the steamer services on the Brahmaputra became the lifeline for the tea plantations. The emigrants travelled by railway to Magra railway station on the East Indian Railway, where they crossed the Hooghly river and went to Kanchrapara station on the Eastern Bengal Railway. Immigrants for Assam Proper travelled by

³² Emigration Branch Proceedings 1875, NAI.

³³ Ghosh, 'A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and race classification in the indentured labour market of colonial India.'

³⁴ Emigration Branch Proceedings, November 1898, NAI.

railway to Kaunia, and those for the Surma Valley to Goalundo.³⁵ From there onwards, steamers took the emigrants to the plantations.

Emigration was seen by the colonial administrators as a means to ease the stress on those districts of the country which were plagued by occurrences of famines, drought and land scarcity.³⁶ In addition, this immigration process was aimed at the colonisation of the hence underutilized land resources of Assam in order to enhance revenue gains. These steps by the colonial administration reflect its guiding notions of development and improvement in the material conditions of the colonized people.

The administrators chose to believe that the prospect of acquiring the ‘improved status of ‘raiyaat’ was a large factor in the emigration of agriculturists who have been squeezed marginalised by pressure on the soil in the native districts.’³⁷ That land was available in many parts of Assam for private cultivation on the Estate which required labour, or in its immediate neighbourhood, was said to be an ‘unquestionable attraction’ for the labourers.³⁸ A rare instance of the voice of a coolie being expressed can be found among the tomes of pages of the emigration files, that of one Mohan Manjhi, although how genuine or how tutored that voice is in expressing the viewpoint of the coolies, is a matter of speculation.

I am a Santal. I was 25 years on a garden in Sylhet. I was happy and had good masters...The climate is bad there. I was phuslaoed away when a youth by promise of very high wages...Santals might be glad to go there, if they were promised land.³⁹

³⁵ Emigration Branch Proceedings, No. 17, April 1886, Immigration of Nipalese into the Lakhimpur District, Assam, NAI.

³⁶ Emigration Branch Proceedings, 1875, NAI.

³⁷ *Handbook of Castes and Tribes Employed on Tea Estates in North-East India.*

³⁸ Emigration Branch Proceedings, Nos. 12-13, January 1898, Annual Report on Inland Emigration, Bengal, for 1896, NAI.

³⁹ Emigration Branch Proceedings, October 1906, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, NAI.

Besides recruiters, missionaries were identified as potential agents by officials in the recruiting districts for inducing migration to the tea plantations. There are instances of missionaries, who were active in the sphere of encouraging immigration. The Gossner Mission initiated the colonization by the Santhals and in 1867 opened a station in Koroya near Dumka.⁴⁰

In August 1880, Rev. Mr Skrefsrud, a missionary of the Norwegian Mission in the Sonthal Parganas in Bengal wrote to the DC, Goalpara, expressing the belief that if the Sonthals settled in Assam they would do so in large numbers, as the Sonthal Parganas cannot hold all. In reply, the DC, A.C. Campbell named Ripu, Guma and Chirang *duars* as suitable tracts. The first emigration began by the end of 1880 and in May 1881 there were 85 families of Sonthals with 237 souls who had formed 5 hamlets.⁴¹ A govt official who visited this settlement wrote in a letter:

The settlement is situated at the base of the Bhutan Hills...The Santals are excellent reclaimers of the jungle, and went ahead without hesitation, clearing the land and building their houses. It was a very unhealthy tract...cholera, dysentery, and above all malaria accounted for the heavy loss of lives during the first few years... but with progressing jungle reclamation, the health situation was improved.⁴²

Rev Boddington, another missionary who worked amongst the Santals, in a letter dated October 22, 1906 to Rev. Skrefsrud, commented on the improved conditions of the Santals in their new colony, as compared to their earlier conditions.

a new spirit is guiding them (Santals)...We can here in the colony see what Santals are capable of developing into when they get an opportunity of living without fear of the moneylenders...We have here a place, an almost solitary

⁴⁰ S. Mahto, *Hundred Years of Christian Missions in Chotanagpur since 1845* (Ranchi: Christian Publishing House, 1971), pp. 137-138.

⁴¹ Revenue 'A' Proceedings 139-143, September 1905, Proposed reclamation of the area reserved for the Sonthal colony in the Goalpara district, ASA.

⁴² Quoted in Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, pp. 41-42.

instance, of an aboriginal people getting an opportunity of showing what they may develop into.⁴³

The Mission initially objected to the grant of land to a tea garden in the vicinity at Mornai. Rev Skrefsrud forbade the colonists to work in the garden. As the company could not find a sufficient number of workers, it was more or less forced to give up the garden, and the result was that after prolonged negotiations, the Mission bought the Mornai tea garden as well as the adjacent Tami tea garden.⁴⁴ The Jesuits too played an active role in promoting emigration. Fr. S. Carbery urged that they should take the initiative to direct the Catholics to the ‘better gardens,’ by printing the names and addresses of such gardens and some other useful details in the Hindi Calendar.⁴⁵

Paradoxically, the garden managers in Assam were generally averse to allow the missionaries access to the ‘coolies’ in the plantations, fearing that such contact might ‘distract’ coolies.⁴⁶ Prathama Bannerjee shows how Santals and Paharias were ‘physically and territorially fenced in’ by the colonial rulers, curbing avenues for interacting directly with other people. In this manner, some people were ‘actually *made* “primitive” in colonial modernity.’ In the same manner, tea planters were also careful not to ‘localize’ the coolies, since ‘the planter’s interest lay not in settling, but in keeping the labourers “migrant”.’⁴⁷

Missionaries viewed migration as a new beginning. It was almost as if migration complemented the processes of conversion and education, in the missionary attempt at transforming and civilising the ‘primitive.’⁴⁸ It was generally perceived that the labourers

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 43-45.

⁴⁴ Revenue ‘A’ Proceedings 139-143, September 1905, Proposed reclamation of the area reserved for the Sonthal colony in the Goalpara district, ASA.

⁴⁵ Proceedings of the Conference of Catholic Missionaries held at Ranchi on the 17th and 18th October, 1920, VJCT.

⁴⁶ Swanson, *In Villages and Tea Gardens*, pp. 57.

⁴⁷ P. Bannerjee, *Politics of Time: ‘Primitives’ and History-writing in a Colonial Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 99.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 102

were in fact better off in the plantations than back home. More importantly, it was an opportunity for expanding their conversion activities. For this reason, the Assam branch of the American Baptist mission saw the coming of the Kols into the province as a positive phenomenon.⁴⁹ The ‘aboriginal’ Kols were considered to be more easily won for Christ, as they were ‘susceptible to change’ and willing to throw away their ‘charms and demon worship’ for the ‘religion of the white man who gave them labor and provided for all their material needs.’⁵⁰

There were certain individual missionaries, however, like Rev Logsdail⁵¹ of the SPG mission and Rev. C. Dowding of the American Baptist mission who protested against the miserable conditions of the coolies living in the tea gardens and had made innumerable representations regarding mortality on tea gardens in Assam and their exploitation in the form of illegal detentions and enticements. His efforts resulted in a four year report (1893-6) of tea gardens by District Commissioners, especially focusing on mortality.⁵²

Within the system itself, there were keen observances that pointed out that the wages paid to the labourers were insufficient and were not raised accordingly.⁵³ As the conditions of the labourers remained stagnant, if not degraded further, the number of assault cases by coolies on members of the garden management steadily increased, and the relations between masters and coolies on many of the plantations became a ‘public danger.’ In the case of a riot in the Rowmari tea garden, the demand for higher wages by the coolies was interpreted contrarily by the management as the ‘coolies’ being ‘thriftless

⁴⁹ Mrs. A. K. Gurney, ‘History of the Sibsagar Field,’ *Papers and Discussions of the Jubilee Conference held in Nowgong, December 18-29, 1886*, p. 27.

⁵⁰ O. L. Swanson, *In Villages and Tea Gardens*, p. 54.

⁵¹ Emigration Branch Proceedings, July 1903, NAI.

⁵² Emigration Branch Proceedings 17-18, July 1898, Rev. Dowding’s representation regarding mortality on tea gardens in Assam, NAI.

⁵³ Emigration Branch Proceedings 12-13, January 1898, Annual Report on Inland Emigration, Bengal, for 1896, NAI.

fellows' who did not save for their future, spending all the wage kept aside for eating purposes on strong liquor and consequently having to go hungry to the end of the month.⁵⁴ The image of an 'aboriginal' coolie incapable of thinking for the future, indulging in sensual pleasures like drinking and causing riots seemed reinforced in this setting.

Initially, the 'coolies' were described as 'casteless,' as emphasised by Kaushik Ghosh. Gradually, however, there was discussion on the 'pertinent question of loss of caste' among the labourers due to the nature of life in the tea gardens. Ghosh states that the arrangement of coolie settlements, were made along ethnic lines thus 'exaggerating the distance and incompatibility of the different groups of coolies.'⁵⁵ Colonial officials noted-

Most of the aboriginal and semi-aboriginal races object to close contact with men of other castes; in their own country they live in separate villages/tolas. It is repugnant to them to be obliged to live in a common barrack. Every facility will have to be given to separate castes to form their own little hamlets and assimilate as far as possible their life on the tea garden to their life in their own country. Everything possible should be done to encourage the provision of a separate house for each family, a reform which is already being affected on many gardens...when these are secured coolies should be allowed to build the class of houses they prefer, and to form the societies which are most congenial to them.⁵⁶

However, a coolie after two-three years of life on a garden was said to lose many prejudices and become accustomed to interference in many respects with the details of his daily life; caste restrictions became relaxed and discipline was no longer resented.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Emigration Branch Proceedings, 17, November 1903, Enquiry into the relations between the planters and their coolies on the tea gardens of Assam, NAI.

⁵⁵ Ghosh, 'A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India,' p. 42.

⁵⁶ Emigration Branch Proceedings, October 1906, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, NAI.

⁵⁷ Ibid.,

R. K. Kar, on the other hand, points out that in the context of tea gardens, the primary identity of the labourers is the membership of the tea labour community. Next comes the 'line affiliation,' and third, ties based on kinship and ethnicity. According to him, ethnic specificity did not seem to derive any differential treatment from the management.⁵⁸

Such a process of generalization was noticed the sphere of language as well. Marwaris, Bengali Babus and local Assamese were employed variously as managers, accountants and clerks in the plantations.⁵⁹ Missionaries preached to the coolies in Hindi and native pastors would also go amongst the coolies and preach in Assamese. They gradually came to understand and speak Assamese.⁶⁰ Overtime, this admixture of 'aboriginal,' Hindi, Bengali and Assamese languages formed the creole '*bagan baat*' or '*sadari*'.⁶¹

In all these processes a discernible feature was a certain erosion of the former identity of the 'aboriginal' belonging to a specific community to the generic 'coolie' or '*baganiya*.' These *baganiyas*, translocated and living in isolated 'enclaves,' were seen as distinct and inferior to the local inhabitants. The local people initially called them 'Bengalies,' because they had come up there by way of Bengal.⁶² The racially biased nature of recruitment went on to attribute a specific connotation to the term 'coolie.' Different 'aboriginal' communities were thus clubbed under this racialized umbrella term.

⁵⁸ R. K. Kar, 'Tea labour in Assam: A note on the problem of identity,' in S. Karotemprel and B. Dutta Roy, ed., *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India: A Multidimensional Study on the Adivasis of the Tea Gardens of North East India* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1990) pp. 121-126.

⁵⁹ Emigration Branch Proceedings 3, September 1906, Colonisation of wastelands in Assam, NAI; Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 342.

⁶⁰ Mrs. P. H. Moore, *Twenty Years in Assam: Leaves from my Journal* (Calcutta: Omson Publications, 1901), p. 157.

⁶¹ R. Thapa, 'Emergence of the Tea Garden Labourers as a Cohesive Community in Assam- A Study of their Socio-cultural and Political Affinities,' in S. Sengupta, ed., *The Tea Labourers of North East India* (New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2009) p. 45.

⁶² Gurney, 'History of the Sibsagar Field,' p. 26.

Thus, the province witnessed the formation of bounded localities in the form of plantations and colonies with state sponsored immigration from other provinces. This was guided by notions of improvement of the region as well as the temporal conditions of the people. Living in isolated, regimented and illiterate conditions, a history of shared experiences led to the creation of a marginalised and fairly homogenous community. The existence of this segregated unskilled labour class in Assam seemed conspicuous in their difference and distance from the local people. As we shall see in the final chapter, in later decades, such conditions facilitated the imagination of an identity which harked back to their places of origin in Chotanagpur.

iii. Transformations in the region: marginalised ‘tribes’

While tea gardens represented closed off locations, the plantation economy was also instrumental in creating other closed spaces in the region in general. Tea gardens were established by clearing forests invariably located in the vicinities of hills. This often brought the gardens in contact with ‘tribal’ communities living in these hills. Reports from the gardens frequently mentioned about tensions and skirmishes caused by such conditions. For example, the manager of the Bishnauth Tea Company’s gardens in Darrang described the presence of a large body of Duffalabs, ‘a savage race, which inhabit the hills at the back of the Company’s garden, encamped in the plains in the immediate vicinity...a few isolated Europeans being quite helpless in presence of such numbers.’ He described this position as unpleasant.⁶³ Major Lees too mentioned that ‘about hundred Nagas visited Soraipane, one of the out-factories of the East India

⁶³ Lees, ‘Reply of Major W. Nassau Lees to the Minute of Sir Cecil Beadon upon his Memorandum of a Tour through the Tea Districts of Eastern Bengal, 1864-65,’ p. 57.

Company, in no friendly spirit, and they caused no little anxiety to the Manager during their stay.’⁶⁴

In 1873, the Inner Line regulation was enforced to protect the colonial state’s properties from the ‘savage’ communities of the hills, as well as prohibit British subjects from venturing beyond the line into the hills.⁶⁵ The operating notion here was the perception of the hills and plains as separate and distinct socio-economic places, based on discourses of civilization and primitivity, as discussed in the first chapter. Such distinctions persisted to become a ‘permanent feature of socio-political separation between people and resources in the plains and hills.’⁶⁶ The region thus came to be chalked out into definite hills and plains regions, and the people inhabiting these regions were differentially classified accordingly.

The ‘coolies’ had limited contact with the locals. Official records tend to show that the garden population and the local populace lived on friendly terms, and that ‘there was no serious friction or quarrel between the garden people and the villagers.’⁶⁷ The villagers near the gardens complained of the gradual taking up of wasteland in their neighbourhood by tea planters. They would not take it up themselves, but they would use it for grazing purposes and draw their fuel-supply from it. The near approach of tea to their villages also restricted the custom of allowing their cattle to roam at will in the neighbourhood. In any case, they lived on the most amicable relations with their new neighbours.⁶⁸ Other observers too wrote about the inter-dependent nature of the relationship between the two sets of communities. All surplus produce by the locals was sold to the ‘ever-growing numbers’ of imported labourers on tea estates, many of whom

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 317.

⁶⁶ A. Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 71.

⁶⁷ Emigration Branch Proceedings 15-16, November 1898, Report on Labour Immigration into Assam for the year 1897, NAI.

⁶⁸ Emigration Branch Proceedings, October 1906, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, NAI.

were said to be ‘consumers of Kachari rice-beer or less harmless liquors, and who in consequence fraternised readily with their Kachari neighbours.’⁶⁹

The rapidly growing labour force in the gardens was essentially composed of immigrants and not migrants. These labourers usually settled down permanently in the province, and did not return to their original places. The colonial policy had initially not been in favour of allowing the tea garden coolie to settle on land, especially outside the land granted to the gardens. The planters were afraid that the coolies would pay more attention to their crops than to work on the garden.⁷⁰ Gradually however, there was a shift in policy which favoured allowing coolies to take up cultivation on such rice-land which were included within the land granted to the garden.⁷¹

It was felt that there was room for infinite development in the resources of Assam, and it was repeatedly pointed out that the material extension of cultivation could only happen through an increase in the population, which could only be obtained by immigration.⁷² ‘Colonization schemes’ were undertaken by the gardens. Land was given free for three or four years, and after that at half the official rates. The emigrants cleared their land and built their own houses, and got paid their wages for doing so.⁷³ The quantity of land held direct from Government by ex-tea garden coolies or time-expired coolies- coolies who had completed their contract period in the tea garden- was returned as 25,315 acres in 1888, 28,360 in 1890. The immigration of labourers to tea gardens

⁶⁹ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. 14.

⁷⁰ Emigration Branch Proceedings, November 1907, Labour immigration in Eastern Bengal and Assam for 1906-7, NAI.

⁷¹ Emigration Branch Proceedings, October 1906, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, NAI.

⁷² Emigration Branch Proceedings 15-16, November 1898, Report on Labour Immigration into Assam for the year 1897, NAI.

⁷³ Emigration Branch Proceedings, October 1906, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, NAI.

was thus seen as a gain not only to the tea industry but also to the general development of the province.⁷⁴

It was however admitted that a very large number of gardens had no land suitable near them, and from the point where the land became suitable it was already in occupation.⁷⁵ The wastelands granted to the ex-tea coolies were unsuitable for cultivating rice of the high yielding variety. The highlands where the tea gardens were situated, were traditionally low yielding, dry rice cultivating regions.⁷⁶ With limited avenues for development due to their unskilled status and financially weak conditions, the coolies remained marginalised and impoverished.⁷⁷ They exhibited a tendency towards wage earning, either as agricultural labour or non-agricultural labour, as cartmen, petty traders or domestic servants.⁷⁸ The evidence points towards the fact that they could not successfully integrate with the agricultural economy after their exit from the tea industry. The tea gardens employed casual outside labourers or *basti* labourers from the ex-tea garden labour villages. Those labourers not in regular employment in the tea estate were known as *faltus*.

Umananda Phukan, in his sample survey, observed that ex-tea garden labour population in general lived spatially apart in clusters from the other indigenous population, and the mixed castes or tribes character of the ex tea garden labour villages became the general pattern.⁷⁹ Many of the respondents could not definitely state the original province or district from which their ancestors migrated to Assam. They had no link with these original places. Only one head of the household reported that he visited

⁷⁴ Emigration Branch Proceedings 8-11, 1892 Report on labour immigration into Assam for 1891, NAI.

⁷⁵ Emigration Branch Proceedings 3, September 1906, Colonisation of wastelands in Assam, NAI.

⁷⁶ Emigration Branch Proceedings, October 1906, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, NAI.

⁷⁷ Umananda Phukan, *The Ex-tea Garden Labour Population in Assam (A Socio-economic Study)* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1984) p. 121.

⁷⁸ Emigration Branch Proceedings 8-11, Report on labour immigration into Assam for 1891, NAI.

⁷⁹ Umananda Phukan, *The Ex-tea Garden Labour Population in Assam (A Socio-economic Study)*, p. 103.

the paternal village near Ranchi some 15 years back but his visit had disappointed him because his relatives did not receive him cordially.⁸⁰ Thus, while differentiation within the ex-tea labourer group was not maintained, the distinction vis-à-vis the locals did not seem to have softened.

Santal cultivators too moved out and about their colony areas. In 1894-5 the DC of Goalpara stated that there were people other than the Santhals who held land in the Santhal colony. These were the Mech or Bodos from the neighbourhood. These Mech people came to form almost twenty-five per cent of the population of the colony. By 1899-1900 it was stated that the decrease in the population in the colony was due to Mech and Sonthals having left the colony.⁸¹ The records do not elaborate on the interrelationship that might have existed between these two communities, but nonetheless, it is evident that they moved around and shared the same spaces.

The existence of the tea industry was considered to be a 'potent factor' in the improvements of communications by rail, river and road in the province, intended towards facilitating export of tea and import of labour. In 1883, daily steamer services were established on the Brahmaputra river. The principal railway in the province, the Assam-Bengal State Railway, was opened for traffic in 1905. The Eastern Bengal State Railway had 'important extensions' on the Goalpara and Kamrup districts, which brought the province into direct railway communication with Calcutta.⁸² Thus, the region was opened up to the 'mainland.'

Another contemporaneous event was the merger in 1905 of the populous region of Sylhet with that of Assam, seen to be in need of a greater population density. An often

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Revenue 'A' Proceedings 139-143, September 1905, Proposed reclamation of the area reserved for the Sonthal colony in the Goalpara district, ASA.

⁸² E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 329.

overlooked but crucial motive for Curzon's partition of Bengal was the linking of Assam with East Bengal to facilitate the movement of population from the latter to the former, allowing Assam's 'culturable wastes' to be reclaimed.⁸³ The decade of 1901-11 thus provided a 'turning point' in the pattern of demographic and economic change in Assam. The natives of Assam were said to show 'little inclination to adopt new varieties or to improve the quality of the crops grown.'⁸⁴ The 'land hungry' jute-cultivating peasants of East Bengal now came by the thousands to colonize the 'wastelands' which were unsuitable for the cultivation of tea or wet rice.⁸⁵

Colonization schemes were thus not limited only to tea gardens, but were encouraged in general by the provincial administration. Goalpara and Kamrup witnessed an increasing influx of people into the *duars* from the neighbouring parganas of Bengal as the new soil in the *duars* was considered to be more productive. All the incomers employed themselves in agricultural pursuits.⁸⁶ The area under cultivation of jute, cotton, tobacco was said to have increased due to them.⁸⁷ Thus, the scattered hamlets of the Kacharis along the foot-hills now became intermixed with Hindu people who 'intruded into what was their (the Kacharis') undisputed home.'⁸⁸ A census officer stated that immigrants from East Bengal had 'in many instances penetrated far inland: parties in search of land have been found near the Bhutan border.'⁸⁹

The colonial administrators noticed the alarming situation in the subdivisions of Bijni and Kharija Bijni where the 'bulk of the people' were Kacharis- 'a people who are

⁸³ Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, p. 101.

⁸⁴ Allen, et al., *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1911), p. 553.

⁸⁵ A. Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam* (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1985), p. 199.

⁸⁶ Revenue 'A' Proceedings 6-8, March 1905, Colonisation in the Goalpara Duars, ASA.

⁸⁷ Allen, et al., *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam*, p. 518.

⁸⁸ Anderson, introduction in Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. xv.

⁸⁹ Census of India, 1921, quoted in S. Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 57.

at least able to look after themselves.’⁹⁰ The ‘ever increasing and determined army of East Bengal immigrants and their allies the local speculators’ were said to be making steady and progressive inroads from the south direction, taking up the cultivable lands on the ‘last-remaining agrarian frontier of the subcontinent.’⁹¹ The ‘backward classes’ like the Kacharis were seen as consequently being slowly but surely pushed back towards the submontane regions in the north. Those again who lived in the north had to contend against the tea garden population, Nepali cultivator-graziers, the incoming Kacharis from the south and also the Forest Department.⁹²

The twin incentives of gaining profits from trade in the forest produce as well as revenue generation became the primary purposes of colonial forest policies.⁹³ These socio-economic practices of the communities like the Meches or Kacharis were transformed by the demarcation of jungles as forest reserves. The mobility of such communities was greatly restricted by a ban on all residence or cultivation within the forest reserves. The colonial state perceived *jhum* cultivation to be a ‘great danger to which the forests in the Eastern Duars are exposed.’ The locals reacted against such policies. In 1874-75 two cases of forest trespass were tried, in which all the 5 persons concerned were convicted.⁹⁴ In a memorial to the colonial administration in 1904, Mech cultivators voiced their protests against the establishment of forest reserves which had led to a loss of ‘valuable privileges which they had previously enjoyed.’⁹⁵

All such processes had the result of marginalising the Kacharis. Discussions and debates revolving around the issue threw up different viewpoints. Certain officials

⁹⁰ Revenue ‘A’ Proceedings 265-288, September 1929, Protection of Kacharis in certain areas in North Kamrup from encroachment by immigrants, ASA.

⁹¹ Sharma, *Empire’s Garden*, p. 6.

⁹² Revenue ‘A’ Proceedings 265-288, September 1929, Protection of Kacharis in certain areas in North Kamrup from encroachment by immigrants, ASA.

⁹³ A. Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*, p. 5.

⁹⁴ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam Vol. II*, p. 26.

⁹⁵ Misra, ‘Law, Migration and New Subjectivities: Reconstructing the Colonial Project in an Eastern Borderland,’ *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 44, no. 4 (2008), p. 454.

suggested that the Kacharis should submit to restrictions on their right of transfer in periodically settled lands and thereafter it should be made impossible for people other than Kacharis to hold lands in such areas either as settlement holders, tenants, labourers or in any other capacity.⁹⁶

One opinion amongst the colonial officials was for restriction and introduction of dividing lines, while another opposed it. It was acknowledged that it was impossible to stem the 'flood of immigration,' so long as large undeveloped areas remained in the region. It was also believed that the Kacharis, being 'backward,' could in fact benefit from the situation.

The increased industry and enterprise which the stimulus of competition will force upon them (the Kacharis) is more likely to work out their salvation than any paternal restrictions imposed from above.⁹⁷

The influx of cash crop growing immigrant cultivators also foresaw another development. The early colonial officials observed that the entire trade of the province had been in the hands of Marwari *baniyas or kayahs*.⁹⁸ They could now productively use the capital accumulated from trading activities for financing the cultivation of jute and other cash crops, in addition to starting mills for their processing.⁹⁹ By 1911, their status was described as such-

the Kayahs monopolise the banking and wholesale business of the valley, and their shops are to be found not only in the business centres, but on every tea garden and on the paths by which the hillmen bring down their cotton, rubber, lac, and other products. The Assamese have no commercial aptitude, and have

⁹⁶ Revenue 'A' Proceedings 265-288, September 1929, Protection of Kacharis in certain areas in North Kamrup from encroachment by immigrants, ASA.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Lees, 'Reply of Major W. Nassau Lees to the Minute of Sir Cecil Beadon upon his Memorandum of a Tour through the Tea Districts of Eastern Bengal, 1864-65,' pp. 28-29; Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. II*, p. 76.

⁹⁹ Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, p. 199.

thus allowed the whole of the profits of the trade of their country to pass into the hands of foreigners.¹⁰⁰

Due to their financial prosperity at the expense of the locals, these Kayahs came to be disapproved of as ‘parasitical exploiters.’¹⁰¹ On the other hand, the Kacharis’ poor and backward status was attributed by the colonial administrators to their ‘general ignorance and improvidence.’ Thus, they continued to draw from the corpus of prevalent ethnological notions which described and fixed the characteristics of different groups of people. At the same time, they participated in reinforcing these notions from their observances and dealings with the colonized people.

Although owing to the general development of the surrounding areas they (the Kacharis) are less ignorant now than before, they continue to be as improvident as ever. When their stock of home grown produce is exhausted by consumption in the form of food and beer, they fall an easy prey to the business men and money lenders who are extending their operations here since the advent of the railway. If the immigrants who are notorious for their land hunger are also allowed to invade these tracts without any restriction, these Kacharis short sighted as they are, would not only be tempted to part with their lands when tempting prices are offered to them, but will also find no available waste lands to open out if they lose their existing lands through improvidence, as they will all be grabbed by the immigrants.¹⁰²

The Kacharis and former tea garden labourers and were thus marginalised through the implementation of various interconnected economic policies of the colonial state and their fallouts, which had their core in the tea plantation economy and the notion of agricultural improvement of the region.

¹⁰⁰ Allen, et al., *Provincial Gazetteer of Bengal and Assam*, pp. 87-88.

¹⁰¹ Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, p. 91.

¹⁰² Revenue ‘A’ Proceedings 265-288, September 1929, Protection of Kacharis in certain areas in North Kamrup from encroachment by immigrants, ASA.

Conclusion:

The establishment of the tea industry thus played a major role in opening up the province for capitalist enterprises and cultivation. Places came to be designated simply as 'recruiting districts,' 'labour districts' and 'tea districts' based on the nature of their relation to the tea plantation economy. The province witnessed an accelerated influx of varied groups of people from outside the region- 'aboriginal' labourers, Santhal agriculturists, Marwari traders, East Bengal cultivators. This changed the demographics of the region. The province was also transformed and divided into bounded locations separated from each other. The 'malarial' jungles were transformed into closed 'gardens' and 'reserved forests' and the 'wastelands' were transformed into agricultural fields. The hills and plains were closed off from each other. These processes collectively led to the marginalisation of certain groups of people and also the hardening of differences between communities placed on unequal statuses. Thus, while colonial knowledge production essentialised the image of the 'tribes,' the economic processes reinforced the marginalized status of these 'tribes.'

CHAPTER FOUR

'ETHNIC CLASHES': BODO 'AUTOCHTHONES' AND SANTHAL

'IMMIGRANTS'

In 1996-98, widespread clashes broke out between the two communities of the Bodos and the Santhals in the western districts of Assam. These clashes have been described variously as 'ethnic clashes,'¹ and 'ethnic cleansing campaigns.'² These descriptions imply that there was a certain animosity between the Bodos and Santhals, and this is taken as a given. It ignores the previous history of interconnectedness that the two communities had with each other. Subir Bhaumik terms it as 'violence by Bodo guerrillas.'³ However, this description ignores the mass base that characterised the violence. I argue that the occurrence of such violence were only a manifest symptom of a much larger and complex malaise that ails Assam. I do so by tracing and locating it within the larger context of identity assertion movements existing in the region. Burt Suykens, instead of focusing on the tropes of ethnicity and immigration, argues that the creation of internal borders within the region-political, structural as well as symbolic- in the region has led to outbreak of hostilities.⁴ In such an interpretation, the interdependent aspects of coexistence of the two communities are often ignored. Often these 'borders' were not distinct. In fact, it was the act of defining borders encompassing an imagined homeland that created situations of anomaly. I argue that it was the contradictions between an imagined ethnically homogenous homeland and the reality of shared spaces and contestations around it that created a volatile situation.

¹ Narzary, 'Hidden Truth of Ethnic Clash between Boro Tribe and Santhals in Assam, India.'

² Baruah, *India Against Itself*, p. 195.

³ S. Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery: Crisis of India's North East* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009).

⁴ Bert Suykens, 'Internal Borders and Conflict: Lessons from Bodoland, Assam,' *Conflict Research Group 5* (2006).

One misconception generally harboured by the public as well as scholars like Basumatary, Narzary and Bhowmik is that these Santals are descendants of the Adivasi tea garden labourers. The problem with adhering to such grand narratives is that it denies history and voice to the people who are being written about. We have seen in the previous chapters that the tea economy opened up the region. Missionary and official encouragement led to the establishment of Santal colonies in the colonial period. These were agriculturists and not plantation labourers. The fact that they had a differential status is evidenced by the fact that the Santhals were singularly victimised amongst the Adivasi community in the clashes. It is with this intention of unpacking generalizations and lending a space for the Santals to voice their thoughts that I embarked on a field study.

The self-assertion movement among the Bodos is often described as an ‘outgrowth of the Assam movement’ which was targeted against immigrants- a movement which ‘‘ethnicized the Assamese, as the state’s ‘immigrant’ organisations and ‘plains tribal’ organisations began challenging their authority to speak for Assam and its people’’⁵ and as ‘one of the most vociferous and violent splinter groups’ of the Assam movement.⁶ However, mobilization amongst the Bodos had already begun much earlier in the early twentieth century, and was facilitated by the introduction of separate electorates for the ‘plains tribals’ in 1935. Hence, the issue needs to be traced back further. There is no doubt however, that the Assam movement enhanced polarizations and rupture among the Assamese and ‘tribes’ such as the Bodos and made the tone of such movements more radical.

⁵ Baruah, *India Against Itself*, p. 124.

⁶ Y. Saikia, *Fragmented Memories*, p. 172.

The instances of one community perceiving others antagonistically have to be seen in a larger context. We have seen that Assam was portrayed as a region with economic potential, inhabited by primitive 'tribes' and 'indolent' apathetic races. The colonial period saw the marking out of territories as 'wastelands,' 'gardens,' 'reserves,' hills and plains, guided by economic and administrative exigencies. The agricultural communities like the Kacharis were adversely affected by these measures. The colonial government's encouragement of immigration changed the demographic structure of the province and further marginalised the local communities. The profits from the commercial enterprises were remitted outside the province. Communication and transport was improved in the region to cater to the needs of the economic enterprises. This accelerated the influx of immigrant cultivators from the neighbouring regions. It also facilitated cultural exchanges between the neighbouring regions to take place. Thus, the Brahma dharma was formulated and propagated at the beginning of the twentieth century, leading to the emergence of a nascent Bodo community, as discussed earlier. These processes have been contributory to the situation of turmoil and ferment in Assam, rooted in slow economic growth and the scramble for scarce resources.

I argue that the attempt by the Bodos to remedy their marginalised position that they endure in the in the present often shapes out through the act of imagining a greater history and identity for one's community and claiming rights on the basis of being the indigenous people of the land, which, by its very basis, is mired with ambiguities and contradictions. On the basis of newspaper reports, and a close reading of documents such as memorandums and petitions by the various organisations claiming to represent the Bodo and Santhal communities, I have tried to analyse the process of construction and projection of a distinct identity. I have also conducted interviews of people who witnessed the unfolding of the clashes from close quarters, to try and gain a more critical

perspective of the issue. The first section traces the background leading up to the clashes. The second section analyses how the clashes unfolded and was interpreted by various groups. The third section analyses how the clashes seem to manifest, and at the same time feed into magnifying the projected identities of the Bodo and Santhal communities.

i. The autonomy movement among the Bodos

We saw in the first and second chapters, the process of creation of an assertive elite section among the Bodos. The Brahma religion as well as Christian education created an autonomous space for the Bodo for earning and enjoying recognition. The nascent section of educated Bodos, especially the followers of Brahma dharma, formed associations and held conferences in order to formulate their goals and aspirations. In such conferences the Bodo leaders propounded that their community did not recognise themselves as the ‘lower class of Hindus or untouchables and...that they (were) quite independent from the Hindu community in all respects such as political, social and religious.’⁷ These leaders also stated that ‘inspite of our large number all advantages are being enjoyed either by a Brahmin or by a Kshatriya, or by a Sudra.’⁸ Here, we notice a distinction made by the Bodos between themselves and the ‘others’ belonging to the Brahmanical fold. This indirectly, but starkly emphasised their perception of themselves as distinct from and independent of that fold. In this way, they stressed their ‘tribal’ status as distinct from that of a caste Hindu. Moreover, these words indicated feelings of

⁷ Resolution adopted at the conference of Assam Kachari Yubak Sanmilani held at Titabar, Jorhat on the 12th August, 1927. Quoted in B. C. Bhuyan, *Political Development of the North East, Vol. I* (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1989), p. 106-107.

⁸ Memorandum to Indian Statutory Commission by the Bodo Community, Shillong, 1929, in Boro, *Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma Aarw Bodo Somajao Bini Bihwma (Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma and his contribution to Bodo community)*, pp. 79-84.

deprivation on being unable to enjoy a status on par with the other advanced communities of the region.

Similar feelings of deprivation were shared by other 'tribes' in the province, as is evident from the existence of numerous community specific organisations in the early twentieth century Assam. With the declaration of separate electorates for 'plains tribals' in the recommendations of the Simon Commission report, these organisations merged to form the All Assam Plains Tribal League in 1933.⁹ Most of the leaders belonged to the Bodo community. They participated in the provincial legislature, the leaders being more concerned with political representation. In 1953 the League abandoned its political character and converted itself into a socio-cultural organisation, the All Assam Tribal Sangha, the erstwhile leaders joining the Congress and other parties.

In the postcolonial period perceptions of 'tribes' as isolated, primitive communities persisted. In their effort to classify these disadvantaged communities as part of their mission to deploy affirmative action, the officials resorted to identifying such markers as primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with community at large, and social and economic backwardness as indicators of a 'tribal' community. The advisory committees set up by the Constituent Assembly in August 1947, in order to formulate rules and regulations for administering 'tribal areas' stated that

The areas inhabited by the tribes, whether in Assam or elsewhere, are difficult of access, highly malarial and infested also in some cases by other diseases...and lacking in such civilizing facilities as roads, schools, dispensaries and water supply. The tribes for themselves are

⁹ C. Bhattacharjee, *Ethnicity and Autonomy Movement: Case of Bodo-Kacharis of Assam* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1996), pg. 77.

for the most part extremely simple people who can be and are exploited with ease by plainsfolk...¹⁰

What was significant was that the hills and frontier tracts of Assam were described as distinctive in that they were ‘divided into fairly large districts inhabited by single tribes or fairly homogenous groups of tribes.’¹¹ At the same time, the sub-committee on Assam stated that there were nearly twice as many tribals living outside the ‘tribal areas’ in the plains as there were within these areas. The sub-committee did not make any specific recommendations about these people except to remark that they were being gradually assimilated to the population of the plains.¹² The circumstances of the hills were thus seen as ‘so different’ as to necessitate ‘radically different proposals’¹³. Thus, the terms ‘plains tribes’ and ‘hills tribes’ came to be used to separate and distinguish between the communities living in the hills and plains. While the hills areas came under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution, granting extensive autonomy, ‘tribal belts’ and ‘blocks’ were constituted in the plains districts. However, the honour of tribal belts and blocks were never safeguarded and ‘non-tribals’ were allowed to secure lands in those areas.¹⁴ This has been one of the main grievances of ‘tribes.’

As we saw in the first chapter, the Bodos in the plains of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang were designated as a ‘plains Kachari’ while the Dimasas in the hills were designated as ‘hills Kachari.’ Situated in such a context, the Bodos and other ‘plains tribes’ found themselves in a disadvantageous position and this contributed towards the

¹⁰ Quoted in B. Shiva Rao, *The Framing of India's Constitution: A Study*, Vol. 5 (Delhi: Universal Law Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1968), p. 574. The Sub-Committee for Assam consisted of the following members: Gopinath Bordoloi- an Assamese Brahmin Congress leader, Rev. J. J. M. Nichols Roy- a Christian Khasi leader, R. N. Brahma- a Brahma Bodo plains ‘tribe’ leader, Mayang Nokcha- a Naga leader, and A V Thakkar- a Gandhian social worker.

¹¹ Constituent Assembly Debate on 4 November 1948, *Constituent Assembly of India*, Vol. VII, 29 February 2012 <<http://indiankanoon.org/doc/864881/>>

¹² Quoted in Shiva Rao, *The Framing of India's Constitution*, p. 574.

¹³ Constituent Assembly Debate on 4 November 1948.

¹⁴ Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery*, p. 65.

emergence of self assertion movements in the following decades, which imbibed and reformulated a notion of separate identity based on difference from the plains ‘caste Hindus’ as well as the hills communities. The Bodo leaders demonstrated their awareness of the differential status given to different groups inhabiting different spaces and habitats.

The plains tribals of Assam enjoy the minimum constitutional safeguard among all the Scheduled Tribes in India. While the Scheduled Tribes living in the states other than the state of Assam enjoy the benefits of the Fifth Schedule which meant to safeguard the interest of the tribals in land, to give them protection against exploitation by moneylenders and to protect the tribal way of life, the Scheduled Tribes living in the hill districts of Assam enjoy the provisions of the Sixth Schedule, the objective of which is to protect the customs, practices and identities of the tribal people and afford them the opportunity of growth and progress according to their own genius and traditions. The Scheduled Tribes living in the plains of Assam enjoy neither the benefits of the Fifth schedule nor that of the Sixth schedule.¹⁵

This condition can be understood by reference to the colonial notions of attributing locational specificity to different groups of people. Colonial ethnology defined distinct groups of people as being indigenous to particular regions. Distinct communities were perceived to inhabit distinct, bounded localities. The hill and plains was the ‘master oppositional binary’ in the colonial project of understanding the ‘egalitarian mores and habits of many of the peoples of Northeast India- subsequently labelled tribes- within what was thought to be an essentially hierarchical Indian civilisation.’¹⁶ Thus, while the hill communities were described as ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’, the aboriginals in the plains were seen to be racially distinct from the other inhabitants of the plains, yet at the same time, were perceived as being slowly assimilated into the hierarchical caste complex, and

¹⁵ PTCA Memorandum to the President of India, Dr. Zakir Husain (Kokrajhar: Plains Tribal Council of Assam, May 20, 1967), in P. S. Datta, *Autonomy Movements in Assam (Documents), Edition-I* (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1993), pp. 119-169.

¹⁶ Baruah, ed., introduction in *Ethnonationalism in India: A Reader* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

were thus termed variously as ‘semi-savage’ or ‘semi-Hinduised,’ as was discussed in the first chapter.

The post colonial state has been unable to shrug off this colonial legacy and has imbibed the notion that distinct communities inhabit distinct locations and places that can be positively marked out. Hence, with the designation of specific communities as Scheduled Tribes, specific locations were identified as Scheduled Areas, where they said to be majority inhabitants. However, such contentions only served to create anomalous situations. The Bodos picked up this point to demand for greater rights-

Before their (the Bodos’) areas were fully exposed during the British rule to the outsiders, they inhabited their territories located closely to one another. In the hills district of North Cachar, the Dimasas are indigenous inhabitants. Apart from the Dimasas, there are considerable Bodo Kacharis in the district of the Mikir hills. But according to a strange arrangement these Bodo-Kacharis in the Mikir hills are not Scheduled Tribes, as the Scheduled Tribes living in the plains districts are not recognised as Scheduled Tribes in the hills of Assam and vice versa.¹⁷

The state government too acknowledged this anomalous situation which, it acceded, created ambiguities with regards to enumeration of the population.

In the plains of Assam it is very difficult to gauge the exact population of the tribals because of very many artificial constraints. A sizeable population representing a number of tribes, the dominant section of which live in the adjoining hills, is not treated as tribal in the plains. Again, a great number of plains tribals have not been recorded as tribal because they have accepted Hindusim, though the acceptance of Christianity has not been regarded as a bar. The bar against Hinduised tribals is also not uniformly applied.¹⁸

¹⁷ PTCA Memorandum to the President of India.

¹⁸ Director, Welfare of Plains Tribes and Backward Classes, *Tribes of Assam Plains*, (Government of India, 1980), quoted in M. S. Prabhakar, ‘Invention, Reinvention, and Contestation: Politics of Identity in Assam,’ Baruah ed., *Ethnonationalism in India*, p. 288.

It has been a consistent demand throughout the period of agitation by the Bodos to correct this 'strange arrangement' and that the Bodos in Karbi Anglong district be recognised as Scheduled Tribes. It was laid down in the Constitution that a commission would be appointed after 10 years from its commencement in 1950 to look into the administration of the 'tribal' blocks. A commission was accordingly set up in 1961. It put forward the conditions for the formation of tribal blocks: 'preponderance of tribals in the population, compactness and reasonable size, underdeveloped nature of the area, marked disparity in economic standards of people...the percentage of tribal concentration in the area proposed for declaration as a scheduled area should not be less than 50 per cent.'¹⁹ The leaders of the plains tribes centred their agitation around this perceived 'compactness of the plains tribal areas.'

Another facet of the self-assertion movement of the Bodos has been its opposition to Assamese chauvinism, mainly in the sphere of language. Jayeeta Sharma has traced the emergence of a standardized Assamese language, born out of complex interactions between colonial administrators, missionaries and local elites. The project of standardization of Assamese language simultaneously opposed the Bengali language-patronized by the colonial government for administrative purposes in Assam. It resulted in the 'exclusionary depiction' of Assamese as an Aryan language, a manifestation of the Assamese Hindu elite's desire to establish a connection with the 'broader Indic world.'²⁰ An Assamese community was established structured around this standardized language. As early as 1948, with the attainment of independence, the state government of Assam headed by the Assamese elite had expressed that Assamese be the sole language for educational and administrative purposes. They set 1960 as the deadline for fulfilling this condition. An Assamese leader expressed his sentiments as thus-

¹⁹ PTCA Memorandum to the President of India, Dr. Zakir Hussain.

²⁰ Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, p. 196.

the geographical territory of Assam can no longer be disturbed on any grounds of linguistic basis...Assamese must be the state language of the province. So the question of language is solved once and for all. The Assamese people as a whole will not tolerate any other language or culture imposed on theirs. All the languages of different communities and their culture will be absorbed in Assamese culture.²¹

It thus allowed a degree of permeability as it permitted members of other communities to adopt the language and become part of the Assamese society. M. S. Prabhakar however points out that the acceptance of the Bodos and other 'tribes' into the Assamese society was based on unequal terms. It was dependent on their acceptance of Hinduism, as well as the adoption of Assamese language and the loss of their native speech.²² With the arrival of the stipulated deadline, the Assam Assembly passed the Official Language bill in 1960. From that point, Assam seemed to lose its 'composite character.'²³

The non Assamese feel that the declaration of Assamese as official language of the State would place the Assamese speaking people in a position of advantage in many respects, particularly in the recruitment to state services as against the non-Assamese speaking population...The language question has thus caused dissension and mutual suspicion between the Assamese and the non-Assamese speaking sections of the population.²⁴

Such 'imposition' was resented by the 'people of other linguistic groups'²⁵ who did not speak Assamese. Moreover, in 1972, Gauhati University, the premier educational centre in the north eastern region, decided to introduce Assamese as the language of education in the colleges under its jurisdiction. The stance of the Bodo leaders took a more reserved stand and took the perceived imposition of Assamese culture on them as

²¹ *Assam Gazette, Vol VI* (Guwahati, 1948), pp. 581-82

²² Prabhakar, 'The Politics of a Script: Demand for Acceptance of Roman Script for Bodo Language,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 9, no. 51 (1974), pg. 2100.

²³ C. Narzary, *Dream for Udayachal and the History of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA, 1967-93)* (Kokrajhar: N. L. Publications, 2011).

²⁴ Report of the delegation of Members of Parliament to Assam on official language issue (New Delhi. August 29, 1960).

²⁵ PTCA Memorandum to the President of India, Dr. Zakir Husain.

oppressive and thus, began to distance themselves from the Assamese more starkly. In 1973, the demand for a Union Territory- Udayachal- on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra was put forward by the plains tribal leaders. Baruah points out that 'ethnic Assamese insensitivity and cultural chauvinism' that the Bodos and other 'tribes' experienced in their interactions with the Assamese resulted in alienating them.²⁶ Popular memories recall instances of racial discrimination at Cotton College and Gauhati University- the premier institutes of education in northeast India- where separate messes were arranged for 'tribal' students. Consequently, many students belonging to 'tribal' communities preferred to study in Shillong, in colleges run by Welsh Presbyterian missionaries, who worked amongst the Garo and Khasi tribes there.

Around the same time, a language agitation was put into motion by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, a cultural organisation formed in the 1950s. The Bodos were seen as essentially different from the Assamese based on linguistic considerations. The Bodos described their language as belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group, differing widely from the Assamese language...one of the modern Indo-Aryan languages.'²⁷ What is even more significant in this movement was that there was a move away from the use of the Assamese-Bengali script in writing the Bodo language and the demand was put forth for the recognition of the Roman script as the script to be used for writing the Bodo language. It was essentially led by young leaders who were educated in Shillong.

The Sabha had introduced a Bodo primer in Roman script in Bodo medium schools in 1974 on its own accord. The state government retaliated by stopping grants to these schools.²⁸ Thus, the issue of 'the adoption of a script for a language which otherwise possesses no script of its own,' where it 'should ordinarily be entirely a matter for the

²⁶ Baruah, *India Against Itself*, p. 188.

²⁷ PTCA Memorandum to the President of India, Dr. Zakir Husain.

²⁸ Bhattacharjee, *Ethnicity and Autonomy Movement*, p. 102-3.

people concerned,' was politicised and contested.²⁹ The Bodo leaders quoted from the report of the Education Commission of 1964-66, 'where the Roman script is already being used for Tribal languages the practice may be continued.' The Sabha, in its appeal to the centre, stated that

The Roman is the first script used in the Bodo language. The first Bodo primer 'Cachari Reader' and 'Kachari Grammar' were written in Roman Script and published by the then government of Assam in 1904. With these text books education through Bodo medium was imparted to the Bodo children in primary schools of Assam from 1904 to 1936. It is also the first script through which Bodo literature has been originated since pre-independence period.³⁰

As we have seen in the second chapter, the missionaries had standardized the Bodo language. The Bodos now agitated for its recognition. However, with the centre not acceding to their demand, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha settled for a compromise, in consideration of the 'wider perspective of cultural integration of the nation as a whole.' The Devanagari script was seen to occupy 'a position preferable even to that of the Roman script; because, it is the Devanagari script which associating (sic) Hindi-the key national language of India, is more extensively used than the Roman script in the country.'³¹

This points out towards the ambiguities and contradictions in the claims of the leaders in their attempts at self assertion. While on the one hand, they emphasised their 'non-Aryan' roots, they could not reconcile this claim with others in their entirety. As a case in point, one memorandum quoted from Tantras and Puranas and other ancient writings, stating that

²⁹ Prabhakar, 'The Politics of a Script: Demand for Acceptance of Roman Script for Bodo Language,' p. 2097.

³⁰ BSS Memorandum to the Prime Minister of India, Shrimati Indira Gandhi (Kokrajhar: Bodo Sahitya Sabha, 9th April, 1975), in BSS, *The Bodo, Mouthpiece of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha*, 29th Issue (Gerua: Bodo Sahitya Sabha), pp. A-15-A-22.

³¹ Ibid.

it appears certain that...the bulk of the inhabitants have always been of Non-Aryan origin...The rulers were commonly described as people belonging to the 'ashuras' and during the mythological times the unacceptable were described as 'ashuras' which are, however, Bodo names having proper meanings. At a later date, the Ashuras came to be known as Mlechas, or primitive during the British periods, and after independence as STs (Plains) under the Constitution of India...Thus, we are a part and parcel of the Great Indian Political History, but have been accorded a rather secluded view...³²

Imagining a fixed territorial area as the ruling place of their ancestors, the Bodo leaders sought to create an identity rooted in territoriality. The contemporary condition of displaced people was then blamed upon the modernist state making project. As one Bodo MLA stated:

the tribals' entry in the reserve forests were started and guided by the Government. These agreements between the Forest Department and the tribal people are called Tangiya agreements. People were made to move from place to place. As a result a new character has been imposed on the tribals, that is, the character of Beduins has been imposed by the Government on these tribal people.³³

An underlying element of the anxiety around the identity assertion movement was the constant threat of being reduced to a minority in their own region. In the 1970s and 1980s, post the formation of Bangladesh and fresh influx of masses of people across the border, the movement against foreign immigrants further intensified Assamese chauvinism. The period saw an outbreak of violence between the Assamese and 'immigrant' communities as well as the 'plains tribes,' especially the Bodos.³⁴ A younger and more radical generation of leaders emerged with the formation of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) in 1987, which went on to spearheaded the autonomy

³² UTNLF Memorandum to the Prime Minister of India (Harisinga: United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front, 1985), in Datta, *Autonomy Movements in Assam*, pp. 172-177.

³³ B. K. Basumatary, 1984, quoted in Datta.

³⁴ Baruah, *India Against Itself*, p. 134.

movement from then onwards. Throughout the region, student organisations have emerged as influential pressure groups in local politics, existing between political parties and extremists.³⁵

The assertion movement was now taken forward with the slogan for a separate state of Bodoland. This period witnessed a growth in militancy, occurrences of fratricidal violence and as well as extortions, robbery, dacoity, abduction, besides destruction of infrastructure like school buildings, roads, bridges, etc.³⁶ The administration usually responds to such violence with the deployment of the army and other paramilitary forces which invariably led to human rights abuses. There were times when ‘as many as six different military and paramilitary forces- the Assam police, Assam Rifles, Border Security Force, Army, Punjab Commandos and Black Panthers’ operated in Assam.³⁷ This further aggravated the situation, provoking the Bodos to more violence.³⁸ In a land where infrastructure and economic development is conspicuous by its absence, the only face of the Indian state that is visible to the common people is that of the armed forces armed with unlimited powers. It is no surprise that a sense of alienation prevails among the people. People who lost their lives to police atrocities were celebrated as martyrs. During the 1980s the violence in Assam reached its peak, causing a sense of frustration among the people and contributing to the ‘collapse of the concept of an Assamese community.’³⁹

Baruah and Bhaumik point out that the centre’s ad hoc policies in the northeast have been instrumental in the demand for separate homelands. The decision of the

³⁵ Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery*, p. 223.

³⁶ A rare and critical account of this phase of the movement is given by Charan Narzary in his book, which not surprisingly has been banned in the BTC. Mr Narzary himself was a founding member of PTCA and has served in the parliament as well as state assembly.

³⁷ Baruah, *India Against Itself*, p. 166.

³⁸ Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery*, p. 125.

³⁹ Y. Saikia, p. 172.

central government to ‘create new states to contain, and even pre-empt, ‘insurgencies’ in the northeast’ caused the division of erstwhile Assam into numerous smaller states.⁴⁰ As Bhowmik states, ‘If the Nagas could have a state of their own, the Mizos, the Khasis and the Garos, the Bodos and the Karbis all wanted one for themselves.’⁴¹

The ABSU came out with two pamphlets titled ‘Divide Assam Fifty Fifty’ and ‘Why Separate State?’ in 1987, which conveyed a feeling of distinct racial identity and separateness from the Assamese. Citing the works of such personalities as Endle, Gait and Allen, - which have been discussed in the first and second chapters- the pamphlets stressed that the Assamese were not the original masters of Assam. They intruded Assam only in the thirteenth and fourteenth century. It was the ‘tribals, the Kacharis and the Mongolians’ who are the original masters of Assam.⁴² They did not identify themselves as part of the Assamese community. The pamphlets also pointed out that the population of Assam consisted of Aryan, Mongolian and Dravidian origins and that the Mongolians were not Assamese.⁴³

An ardent desire for a position of equality vis-a-vis the Assamese elite can be discerned from the sentiments expressed in the pamphlets. With regards to the language question, the pamphlets suggested that since ‘the Bodos, the Kocharis, were the original master rulers’ of Assam whose language was said to be the ‘most aboriginal and widespread’ in Assam. In fact, the Assamese people should make an effort to read, speak and accept Bodo as a whole for a link language and for the integrity of Assam, instead of the opposite case.⁴⁴ Moreover, the feeling of discrimination vis-a-vis the privileges of the

⁴⁰ Baruah, *India Against Itself*, p. 91.

⁴¹ Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery*, p. 18.

⁴² ABSU ‘Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty’ (Kokrajhar: All Bodo Students Union, 1987), in Datta, *Autonomy Movements in Assam*, pp. 240-257.

⁴³ *Ibid.*,

⁴⁴ ABSU ‘Why Separate State?’ (Kokrajhar: All Bodo Students Union, 1987), in Datta, *Autonomy Movements in Assam*, pp. 258-310.

hill tribes, 'recognised as distinct political entities and given separate states and allowed to enjoy constitutional rights,' was mentioned.⁴⁵

It was emphasised in the pamphlets that presently, even though Bodos are widely spread in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Nepal and Bangladesh, the Bodos were mainly concentrated in the northern tracts of the Brahmaputra valley under the foothills of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh.⁴⁶ The proposed Bodoland territory had 'its own distinct and quite separate ethnic identity and background which is *completely different* from that of the Assamese.'⁴⁷ On this basis, it was asserted that 'the plains tribal people now want to *regain* the lost ownership and administration of Assam. That is why Assam and its administration should be divided fifty-fifty between the tribals and the Assamese.'⁴⁸

Thus, these assertions were based on a yearning for an equal status with the other groups in the region, and not impinged by the impositions of the Assamese on the one hand or the better privileges enjoyed by the hill people on the other. The process involved the imagination of a glorious past history, a process which involved the creation of a distinct and rigid, fixed identity, of a modern community in a historical territory. It implicated a denial of a history of interdependence between people and places, and a focus on the distinct spatial, racial and ethnic identity.

Hence, we find that the process in which the Assamese elite had in the past sought to distance themselves from their 'less sophisticated' neighbours by creating a myth of Aryan ancestry, a process which involved the 'shifting of the burden of primitiveness

⁴⁵ ABSU Memorandum to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Union Home Minister Buta Singh (New Delhi: All Bodo Students Union, 1989), in B. Narzary, *Upendra Nath Brahma: Life and Philosophy* (Dhaligaon: Chirang Publication Board, 2007).

⁴⁶ ABSU 'Why Separate State?'

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

onto non-elites'⁴⁹ was turned on its head by the contentions of the Bodo elites. The latter justified their assertions by 'highlighting the non-Indic aspects of their cultural identity.'⁵⁰ Thus, they reversed their earlier adoption of the Assamese language and script. At present, the Bodo students at Gauhati University are demanding separate hostels for 'tribal' students, turning the issue of discrimination and segregation experienced earlier on its head. The demand for a union territory with the Sanskritised name 'Udayachal' was discarded for the more anglicised, ethnocentric and modern sounding 'Bodoland.' Thus, the identity of the 'modern Bodo' was reclaimed from that of the 'primitive Kachari.' At the same time, this process in turn involved the transfer by the Bodo elites of this 'burden of primitiveness' onto other groups, as we shall now see.

ii. Interpreting the clashes

The assertion movement by the Bodos culminated in the state conceding in 1993 to the formation of a Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) in the Bodo dominated areas of western Assam. However, of the 3000-odd villages demanded by the Bodo leaders to be included in the council, only 1100-odd villages fulfilled the criteria of having more than 50 per cent Bodo population.⁵¹ Yet, it was provided that 'for the purpose of providing a contiguous area, even the villages having less than 50 per cent tribal population' shall be included in the council.⁵² However, the agreement proved to be a dead letter from the start because the Assam government refused to hand over to the BAC those areas where Bodos were not in a majority. Villages and towns falling within a distance of 10 km from

⁴⁹ Sharma, p. 204

⁵⁰ Baruah, *India Against Itself*, p. 178.

⁵¹ *Assam Tribune*, 15 November, 1993.

⁵² Memorandum of Settlement (Bodo Accord) 1993, in Bhattacharjee, *Ethnicity and Autonomy Movement*, pp. 335-343.

the international border with Bhutan were also excluded.⁵³ The Bodo leaders, discredited by their failure to implement the accord, said that the area demanded by the council was their 'historic homeland' and the Bodos had become a minority in some areas because of the failure of the governments in Assam to stop 'illegal infiltration' into those areas.⁵⁴

The assertion movement among the Bodos thus was a failure on two counts. It failed to secure the Roman script for its language and had to settle for Devnagari. It failed to secure statehood in the form of Bodoland, and had to settle for an autonomous council. Further, the boundaries of this movement could not be decided, and the fact that the Bodos were a numerically a minority in their imagined homeland was realised. The Bodos leaders, thus dissatisfied, renewed the agitation for a separate state, as reported in the *Assam Tribune* daily newspaper.⁵⁵ New militant organisations such as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland were also formed.

Mobilizations had been going on among other communities as well. Post independence, congress unionists had organised the tea plantation workers into the Asom Chah Mazdoor Sangh. Despite the enactment of reformist legislations, the labourers remained an economically disadvantaged group.⁵⁶ Growing dissonance with the established trade unions led to the formation of students unions in the 1990s like the All Assam Tea Tribes Students Association (AATTSA) and the All Adivasi Students Association of Assam (AASAA), which demanded ST status for the Adivasis.⁵⁷ In this scenario, the inclusion of 25 tea gardens in the proposed BAC area was resented by the ACMS. Workers of these tea gardens were said to have expressed their apprehension that

⁵³ *Assam Tribune*, 24 November, 1993.

⁵⁴ Press statement of the Bodo Peoples Action Committee, 12 October 1993, quoted in Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery*, p. 134.

⁵⁵ *Assam Tribune*, 8 April, 1996.

⁵⁶ Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, p. 235.

⁵⁷ B. Saikia, Tea Garden Community and Adivasi Assertion in Assam, 22 March 2012 <<http://www.manipurresearchforum.org/TeaGardenCommunity.htm>>

they would be subjected to harassment by the local Bodo populace after their inclusion in the Council area.⁵⁸ The Adivasi Council of Assam and the Assam Chah Shramik Parishad criticised the government allegedly for ignoring their interest, while signing the proposed BAC. It was pointed out that both the government and the ABSU leaders failed to include the Adivasi like Santhals, Mundas, Oraons, Gonds, Bheels, etc. in the ST list in spite of the fact that both Government and the ABSU leaders had supported their demand.⁵⁹

Thus, while the trajectory of the autonomy movement created sharp differences between the Bodo 'tribe' and the 'caste Hindu' Assamese, on the other hand, another kind of dichotomy was created *within* this space of the Autonomous Council. A condition agreed to while signing the Bodo Accord was that 'the government of Assam and the BAC will jointly ensure that all rights and interests of the non-tribals as on date living in BAC area in matters pertaining to land as well as their language are protected.'⁶⁰

Such hopes were however belied when outbreak of 'ethnic clashes' took place between the Bodos and Santhals in the BAC area. I stress here that such inter community clashes had been occurring between the Bodos and other communities who came under the BAC, such as the Bengalis and Muslims. The occurrence of such conflicts underline the fact that movements for autonomy and assertion often harbour various elements and groups within its overarching umbrella that differ over ideological and methodological principles that tend to get homogenised. Also, the trajectory of such identity based movements often leads to the victimisation of the 'other' inhabiting one's territorial space.

⁵⁸ *Assam Tribune*, 1 March, 1993.

⁵⁹ *Assam Tribune*, 14 March, 1993.

⁶⁰ Memorandum of Settlement (Bodo Accord) 1993.

The significance of the Bodo-Santhal clashes was in the sheer magnitude with regards to the number of victims on both sides. As the clashes spread from the immediate epicentre and spilled out to the neighbouring districts, the term ‘ethnic clashes’ came to be used to describe it and the communities involved were seen to be divided on ethnic lines.⁶¹ The perception of the ‘others’ and the feeling of hatred towards them are inevitable consequences of claiming legitimacy of an exclusive territory as part of one’s identity, a romantic imagination that conflicts with reality.

The outbreak of the clash has been explained differently in different narrative strands. It has been emphasised by the ABSU that it was not a communal riot with a design for ethnic cleansing, because ‘in many places of Assam and Bengal the Bodos and Santals have been living in harmony.’

the starting point of this incident can’t be linked to any political or communal orchestration by the Bodos. The discovery of three dead bodies of Bodo girls at a Santal dominated place named Satyapur under Gossaigaon sub-division created suspicions and misunderstanding between the two communities. Meanwhile fuel to the flame was added by inciting the Santals. As a result, the Bodos and the Santals began to fear each other...(The Santals’) political voice against the creation of Bodoland worsened the matters.⁶²

Speaking to an ex-president of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (1993-2002), Mr. Gopinath Borgoyari, a more detailed picture is drawn. Borgoyari presently runs a local school, ‘Mainaoswring Poraishali.’ I went to interview him at his school in Simbargaon, a remote village in Kokrajhar district. The compound of the school is eerily situated right next to an NDFB camp. The NDFB is presently on a ceasefire agreement with the state and its cadres have been assigned certain camp sites in the BTC area. The coexistence of a school next to a militant camp only highlights the convoluted situation in the region.

⁶¹ *Assam Tribune*, 19 May, 1996.

⁶² *Bodoland Movement 1987-2001: A Dream and Reality* (Kokrajhar: All Bodo Students Union, 2001), p. XVI.

Borgoyari draws a picture of the prevalent situation before the outbreak of the clashes. According to him, the arrival of a certain Santal leader, Theodore Kisku Rapaz, from Bengal, to contest for the legislative seat in the area led to feelings of anger among the people. Also, at this time, there was allegedly an influx of ‘miscreants’ into the area. The murder of one Satya Soren and others placed the accusatory finger on the Bodos. Borgoyari termed both these incidents as ‘government manoeuvres’ to create a tense situation in the area. The murder of Soren and others was followed by the murder of the Bodo women. Borgoyari sees it as an act of revenge by the Santals.⁶³

He describes a scenario where Santals were being mobilised and rallies were organised village to village, brandishing their bows and arrows. Apparently they were not hindered in doing so by the local administration, on the basis of the argument that these symbols were an integral part of the culture of the Santals. Paradoxically, at the same time, Bodo youth were being picked up by the police on the accusation of being militants.⁶⁴ According to Borgoyari, this did not help in easing the tense situation.

Mr. Berlao Karjee, a former ABSU leader (1996-2001), presently lecturer at Kokrajhar College, too pointed out that ‘law and order failure’ was responsible for polarisation of communal feelings.⁶⁵ This created feelings of being discriminated against in their own place. He emphasised the fact that it was the coming of Santals during election time from outside the region, which created this volatile situation.⁶⁶ Hence, one can discern a subtle distinction made between local Santal inhabitants and Santal newcomers, the latter being considered opportunistic intruders.

⁶³ Personal conversation, 19 April 2012, Simbargaon, Assam.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Personal conversation, 20 April 2012, Kokrajhar, Assam.

⁶⁶ Personal conversation, 19 April 2012, Simbargaon, Assam.

While Bodos say the women were raped and killed by the Santals, the groups claiming to represent the Santals, like the AATTSA claimed ‘a *third force* (was) instigating the Bodos and Santhals to fight each other,’ and expressed surprise that the ‘age-old amity’ among the Bodos and the Santhals had suddenly deteriorated (emphasis mine).⁶⁷ The Adivasi Cobra Militants of Assam allege that the women were prostitutes from the Bhutanese border town of Phuentsoling who were killed and left in a jungle to spark off the riots.⁶⁸ The Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples observed that *vested circles* were working overtime to create an irreparable rift between the two communities (emphasis mine).⁶⁹

The right wing Akhil Bhartiya Karyakari Mandal gave its own twist to the interpretation of the case and stated that the cause for the outbreak of clashes was ‘the mutual hatred assiduously generated by foreign Christian missionaries.’ It claimed that in actuality, the bodies were not of Bodo girls, it was a ploy to stoke the fire of hatred between the two communities.⁷⁰ Bhaumik points out that in some states of northeast India, where the church is expanding and gaining new converts, it has also covertly pandered to the militant groups, and that this has led ‘Hindu nationalist groups like the Rashtriya Seva Sangh to suspect a ‘foreign hand’ behind the ethnic rebellions of northeast India.’⁷¹ Such interpretations insisting that these clashes occur because of external mechanizations tend to ignore the issues that these communities were highlighting through their assertion movements. They shift focus from the fact that the people are demanding a share in the rights and privileges of being Assam’s legal and

⁶⁷ *Assam Tribune*, 10 May, 1998.

⁶⁸ Adivasi Cobra Militants of Assam, Memorandum to Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, 5 February 2002, quoted in Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery*, p. 136.

⁶⁹ *Assam Tribune*, 19 June, 1998.

⁷⁰ *Assam Tribune*, July 10, 1996.

⁷¹ Bhaumik, *Troubled Periphery*, pp. 50-51.

rightful citizens.⁷² The real root causes of such tumults, feelings of deprivation and a desire for improvement in their conditions are ignored, and are instead treated as law and order situations caused by ‘insurgents.’

Also, in these interpretations, one aspect that ties a common thread is the projection of these female victims. These women were stripped not only of their decency and lives, but more symbolically, of an identity. These bodies were objects, the defilement of which signified the symbolic defilement of an entire community. In the narratives of the Bodo people, thus, the bodies of the Bodo women were symbolised as the representation of the whole Bodo community, whose mutilation implied an affront to the entire Bodo community. Hence, the outbreak of the clash was explained through recourse to feelings of patriotism.

The victims of the violence, the common people, the refugees and displaced people, failed to grasp the reasons for violence on such a scale. ‘Why and how it happened does not make any sense.’⁷³ ‘We have been living together with the Santhals in harmony for ages but suddenly this carnage took place. There is sure to be some *conspiracy* behind it.’⁷⁴ ‘We are willing to come into an understanding with our ‘Santhal brothers.’ For decades they were living together peacefully...’⁷⁵ was a statement by another Bodo refugee residing in one of the relief camps.

The meta-narratives presented so far often ignore the true victims. They depict the two communities as clearly separated and independent of each other. Such a picture ignores the fact that these two communities lived in shared spaces. To gain a more coherent picture of the situation and to explore the complexities that are ignored by such

⁷² Y. Saikia, *Fragmented Memories*, p. 211.

⁷³ Quoted in Basumatary, ‘Fashioning Identities: Nationalising Narrative of the Bodoland Movement’, p. 119.

⁷⁴ *Assam Tribune*, 24 May, 1996.

⁷⁵ *Assam Tribune*, 2 July, 1996.

meta-narratives, I felt the need to interact with these people, especially the Santals, whose voices have been absent from these. Instead of presenting them merely as nameless figures and statistics, I wanted to look at how they understood the clashes, if and how it redefined their perception of themselves vis-a-vis the Bodos and how they located themselves in the region in general.

I visited a Santal village, Jaoliabari, situated in Chirang district. I was slightly apprehensive of making the visit. I was worried that the Santals would be unwilling to speak to me, considering the fact that I belonged to the Bodo community. I evidently took for granted that the feelings between the two communities would be antagonistic after the clashes. I enlisted the help of a friend, a freelance film maker and a local NGO worker who was acquainted with the villagers of Jaoliabari, to accompany me in my visit to the village. My fears, however, turned out to be unfounded. The first thing that struck me was that the name of the village was Bodo- it literally meant 'village of the mad.' The village is surrounded on all sides by Bodo villages. One has to walk for a good forty five minutes from the national highway to reach Jaoliabari, passing through a Bodo village on the way. On the outskirts of the village, we met with a group of village men busy constructing a *bund* (embankment) made out of bamboo reeds in preparation of the impending monsoon. The fields lay bare, harvest season having just got over. The villagers are agriculturists and grow paddy. Sometimes they also borrow their neighbours' plot for cultivation. In return they give them a share of their crop. They hire cows to plough their fields. Their houses are small and made of mud and thatch. The people live on subsistence and communal help. There was one tea shop in the village and no other commercial enterprise existed. There is no need to point out that the villagers were economically weak.

I went to the local primary school first, barely a shed, where the children of the village were taught by 3 teachers. Communication was not a problem- the villagers were fluent in Assamese, although they spoke amongst themselves in Santhali. I spoke to the one lady teacher there and got acquainted with her and the other teachers, all from the same village. Although they seemed reserved on the first day, they opened up on the second day, and narrated their experiences of the clashes, or '*gondogulor samay*.'

Rumours or '*urabatori*' reached their ears from adjacent villages that entire villages in Kokrajhar district were being burnt down, people were running away from their homes with nothing in their hands, just their bare lives. There were incredible and fantastic rumours in which the perpetrators behind the attacks were described as 'bulletproof-attired,' iron clad men. According to these rumours, these perpetrators were invincible- they could not be killed, neither by knives, nor by bows and arrows.⁷⁶

She recalls how the Bodo villagers from the neighbouring villages, '*sinaki manuh*' (people whom they were familiar with), came into their village and chased them, armed with *khukhri* (big knives). As they fled, the pursuers followed, calling out their names as they did, and killing those they could catch. The inhabitants of this village were lucky since they heard the rumours and most of them could flee beforehand. They left everything behind, livestock, grains, money. They did not even carry clothes with them. '*Jibon matro*' (bare lives) is all they could save. Although some lives were lost, what dealt them the most severe blow was that their entire properties were devastated and reduced to ruins.⁷⁷

Another teacher recalled how their houses and fields were completely burnt down.

Opportunist elements came and loaded up their vehicles with the properties they had

⁷⁶ Personal conversation, 22 April 2012, Jaoliabari, Assam.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

been compelled to leave behind- household items, paddy, rice, even livestock and the tin roofs were not spared.⁷⁸ Moreover, the wells were covered with stones and made unfit for drinking purposes, and the water supply pipes were destroyed.⁷⁹ The survivors made their way to the camp shelters in Sidli where they shared stories of untold horrors with people from other villages. Sopna Tudu, a middle aged farmer, recounted the miserable conditions under which they had had to live in the camps. ‘We had never faced such hardships like we did in the camps,’ he said. ‘We ate food even pigs would refuse,’ he lamented. They foraged for wild plants in the jungles, and ate whatever edible things they could find.⁸⁰

Organisations such as the Adivasi Seva Samiti, the AAASA, etc. readily extended their co-operation to the ABSU in solving the mutual hatred and fear. To bring back the lost confidence between the Bodo and Santal communities those Santal organisations worked together with the ABSU by holding meetings at different places.⁸¹ The *Assam Tribune* reported instances of Adivasi and Bodo residents conducting joint patrolling in their villages to thwart any attempt by outside miscreants to *engineer* ethnic clashes in the area (emphasis mine).⁸²

The members of this village were among the fortunate ones who could return back to their village. When they were moved from the relief camps to shifting camps, they preferred to move out of the pathetic conditions prevalent in the camps and return to their own village to start fresh in rebuilding their lives, ‘Placing all our faith in God, we returned to our home, thinking, if we have to live, let it be here, and if we have to die

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ *Bodoland Movement 1987-2001: A Dream and Reality*, p. XVI.

⁸² *Assam Tribune*, 8 May, 1998.

here, so be it.’⁸³ A large number of the victims, however, more than a decade after the clashes occurred, continued to live in makeshift camps, unable to return to their villages. In a survey conducted in Assam in August 2004, it was found that a total of 37,677 families (2,37,768 people) were staying in makeshift camps in three districts of western Assam – Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon and Dhubri.⁸⁴

NGOs like the Lutheran World Service (LWS) arrived in the riot hit areas in 1996 and carried out relief work amongst the victims in the camps. One LWS worker stated that the administration of Bongaigaon district had initially not allowed the LWS workers to commence work in this district- the administration stated that there had been no riots in the district. But the fact was that people, whether Bodos or Santals, out of fear incited by rumours, were leaving their villages in panic. There was a mass of displaced people. After repeated requests they were allowed to work amongst the displaced people.⁸⁵ The LWS has also adopted a number of Christian villages- both Bodo and Santal- as part of its Assam Riots Victims’ Rehabilitation/Development Program.

The Catholics were also not far behind in mobilising help and support. In fact, the Fr. V. M. Thomas, head of the Don Bosco Institute, Guwahati was amongst the first people to go amongst the displaced people and talk of peace and harmony.⁸⁶ The Institute launched Project CARE (Children At Risk Education) in 2001, ‘a unique intervention’ to provide educational support to the rural poor and underprivileged children, particularly of the Santal Community who were affected by the riots. Besides inmates of relief camps, the project was extended to cater to children living in abandoned villages that are far from the reach of existing government schools. Begun as basic education facilities in

⁸³ Personal conversation, 22 April 2012, Jaoliabari, Assam.

⁸⁴ *Voices of the Internally Displaced in South Asia: A Report* (Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2006), p. 14.

⁸⁵ Personal conversation, 23 April 2012, Sidli, Assam.

⁸⁶ Fr. Damien Basumatary, Principal, Don Bosco School, Kokrajhar, Personal conversation, 17 April 2012, Kokrajhar, Assam.

bamboo sheds, there are 48 CARE centres at present in Kokrajhar, Chirang and Udalguri. Seven of these CARE centres have graduated to be full-fledged institutions.⁸⁷

Despite these efforts by different organisations, the conditions of the displaced people did not improve much. Government rations were meagre and irregular in the camps, and even the rehabilitation grants were a pittance, ‘should we build a *jhopori ghor* (thatched hut) with the money or buy utensils?’⁸⁸ The disbursement process of Rehabilitation Grant cheques was completed in the month of November 2010 and the issue of monthly Gratuitous Relief to the camp inmates was also stopped and all the Relief Camps under Kokrajhar District were closed after the disbursement of the Rehabilitation Grant cheques.⁸⁹ As per the staff at the DC office, ‘The rehabilitation process has been completed. The people have been rehabilitated.’⁹⁰ However, far from being ‘rehabilitated,’ the true picture is that the government stopped the ration supply to the camps. The people were told that relief would no longer be provided and hence, they would have to leave the camp sites, as per the description of the LWS worker.⁹¹ Such was the condition of the people that they could neither remain in the camps nor return to their earlier villages. ‘Many people from the Santipur, Deosri and Runikhata camps left to settle down in the nearby Lungshung reserve forest. They were chased off even from there by the police, and their houses were burnt down. They have settled in and around that place.’⁹² Hence, officially, on paper, the displaced people might seem to have been rehabilitated, but the ground realities are much more complex and dismal.

⁸⁷ *Don Bosco Institute: Building Dreams, Shaping Lives* (Guwahati: Don Bosco Publications), p. 20.

⁸⁸ Personal conversation, 22 April, Jaoliabari, Assam.

⁸⁹ *A Brief Note on the Ethnic Violence in the year of 1993, 1996 and 1998 in Kokrajhar District*, DC Office, Kokrajhar, 2011.

⁹⁰ Personal conversation, 24 April 2012, Kokrajhar, Assam.

⁹¹ Personal conversation, 23 April 2012, Sidli, Assam.

⁹² *Ibid.*

Sopna Tudu asked a rhetorical question, ‘Did they gain anything by chasing us Santals out, and perpetrating violence against us?’⁹³ As they gradually returned to their village, some of the villagers stated that they were harassed and wrongly accused of being *ugrapantis* by their Bodo neighbours. A feeling of lingering mistrust can be discerned here. Borgoyari, on the other hand, conceded that the occurrence of the clashes had been a discredit for the Bodoland movement as a whole. The government perception of the ‘entire Bodo community as ‘*ugrapantis*’ or militants was further hardened.⁹⁴ The educator in him further expressed concern over the fact that since the Bodos were becoming a minority in their own place, they were unable to muster enough number of students for the purpose of provincializing schools in the region.

The sense of frustration emanating from the failure of the Bodoland movement, coupled with the volatile situation caused by the elections prepared the ground for the outbreak of the clashes. The discovery of the women’s bodies served as the catalyst. No doubt the violence may have been instigated by radical elements, yet it developed a mass base. The Santhals were the most proximate community to the Bodos in terms of shared space and interdependence. They thus starkly symbolised the failure of the Bodos’ attempt to gain a homeland, and the outbreak of the clashes thus imply a lashing out at this symbolic defeat.

We find that agency to the people is denied in that the responsibility for the outbreak of violence was thrown on a third outside party. The clash was thus perceived to be inexplicable in its occurrence by the common people, the organisations putting the blame on an unknown third entity responsible for causing disturbance in the hitherto non-confrontational existence of the two communities. One has to move beyond the

⁹³ Personal conversation, 22 April 2012, Jaoliabari, Assam.

⁹⁴ Personal conversation, 19 April 2012, Simbargaon, Assam.

debates around the issues of determining who the perpetrator was and what terminology to use to describe the events, in order to understand the implications of the clashes. While the event refused to be bound to any one type of narrative, the deep impact of the conflict on the people of the region can be gauged from the fact that the perceived difference between the two groups of people, the Bodos and the Adivasi/Santals are reinforced, magnified and reiterated.

iii. 'Autochthons' and 'Adivasis'- locational identities

An interesting comment made by the Santal villagers of Jaoliabari was that, 'In a way, the occurrence of the clash has been beneficial for our community. Prior to it, we Santals were ignorant and idiots. We used to be intimidated by the prospect of confrontations with the administration, the police, the courts. Now we no longer fear these institutions. People are turning towards education, they have learnt a lot from their sufferings.'⁹⁵ Tudu here uses the Bodo word '*jamba*' meaning ignorant. Fluent in Bodo language, his is an example of the shared space in which the Bodos and Santhals coexist. The occurrence of such violence has made all the parties involved more conscious and aware of their ethnic identities and caused further polarisation. An evidence of such hardening can be seen in the formation of bodies like the Adivasi Cobra Force and Birsa Commando Armed Forces that carried out retaliatory acts against the Bodos.⁹⁶ Formed on July 7, 1996, by a group of 60 Adivasi youth, *Tehelka* magazine reported that the Adivasi Cobra Militants of Assam cadres were trained in the dense forests of Shikharagarh in Kokrajhar district by ex-Army personnel from their own community. The

⁹⁵ Personal conversation, 22 Apr 2012, Jaoliabari, Assam.

⁹⁶ *Assam Tribune*, 12 June, 1998.

cadres abide by the rules and regulations of the outfit including injunctions on refraining from intoxicants and on remaining single.⁹⁷

Also, the solidarity expressed by student organisations like the Assam Tea Tribes' Students' Association and All Adivasi Students Association of Assam with the Adivasis victims show a collapsing of identities between the descendants of the tea plantation labourers as well as others who came from the same region but as settler-cultivators, not as tea plantation labourers. One could speculate that a coalescing of identities was taking place. The cause of the Santhals and the 'tea tribes' has been picked up and linked to the larger 'adivasi' agitation by the Adivasi leaders, who stress the fact that Santhals settled in Gossaigaon were part of the Santhals who were transferred from Jharkhand area by the British after the Santhal rebellion of 1856, led by Kanoo Sidhu. After the Santhal rebellion, a large group of Santhals was transferred out of Jharkhand in Chotanagpur was transferred to the forest area of Assam. Later, they were 'forced' and 'enticed' to work in the plantations as indentured labourers.⁹⁸

What is interesting here is the fact that these organisations seem to refer to the term 'adivasi' and the legacy of Birsa Munda and Sidhu Kanoo, indicating an attempt to locate themselves within a larger history of Adivasi struggle. The term 'adivasi' seems to have originated in the Chotanagpur region in the 1930s.⁹⁹ The Christian missionaries played a large role in the production of this term, through their efforts to 'generate a greater social consciousness and organise the peasantry against exploitative economic relations along ethnic lines.'¹⁰⁰ They observed the conditions of the aboriginal people in

⁹⁷ T. Rehman, 'Ethnic Strife: No Relief in these Camps,' *Tehelka*, September 2006, 21 February 2012 <http://www.tehelka.com/story_main19.asp?filename=Cr092306no_relief.asp>

⁹⁸ *Assam Tribune*, 6 June, 1996.

⁹⁹ Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*.

¹⁰⁰ A. Shah, 'The Dark Side of Indigeneity?: Indigenous People, Rights and Development in India,' *History Compass* 5/6 (2007).

the region, perceiving and projecting them as distinct from and antagonistic to the Hindus and Muslims.

They are looked upon as the lowest of the low by Hindus and Mahomedans but they have their *racial pride* and consider themselves as the *original lords and masters* of the country. They despise the Hindu artisans and professional musicians and the Mahomedan weavers, considering them of a menial class, whom they originally allowed to settle among them to minister to their wants and pleasures.¹⁰¹

As we saw in the previous chapter, till the early decades of the twentieth century, missionaries like Fr. Carberry and others played an active part in persuading the inhabitants of the Chotanagpur region to emigrate to the plantations,¹⁰² seeing the process as a part of their civilizing mission among the converts. In the next couple of decades, a shift in the perceptions of the missionaries, particularly the Jesuits, can be observed.

year after year, we see thousands of men and women constrained to leave their beloved country, either because they have lost their ancestral fields, or because the tiny plot they owned does not suffice to support them and their children...these poor emigrants are only too often fated to die in their new unhealthy surroundings, or condemned to drag out a miserable existence in a far away country, without any hope of ever returning to their beloved Chota Nagpore.¹⁰³

Rev Meudler termed the Chotanagpur region as ‘Adibasisthan,’ asserting that the land belonged to the ‘aboriginal’ inhabitants of the region, the ‘real adibasi,’ who ‘came first...wrested the land from the mouth of the tiger and the fangs of the snake...first made and owned the land in Chota Nagpur’ and thus had the right to speak first.¹⁰⁴ He gave a

¹⁰¹ *Voices from India*, p. 5.

¹⁰² Proceedings of the Conference of Catholic Missionaries held at Ranchi on the 17th and 18th October, 1920, VJCT.

¹⁰³ Sevrin, O. ‘Protection of the Land of the Aborigines’ (Ranchi: Catholic Press, 1 may 1944), VJCT.

¹⁰⁴ Meudler, E. de., ‘The Restoration of the Aboriginal Peasantry,’ (Ranchi: Adibasi Jamin Bachais Sabha, 1944), VJCT.

nanced view of the assertion of the adivasis as rightful inheritors of the land, although shorn of exclusivist tendencies- an assertion for being placed on a level of equality.

The aboriginal does not grudge living space to the 'dikku'; he is ready to welcome him as a brother, and live and work with him as a fellow citizen of the same home. But in the light of history, he first of all claims the right of the eldest son and the first born. He claims to be the real king of the country, and refuses to be kept down to the forced rank of 'carrier of water and hewer of wood', by the later arrivals in his home...the aboriginal peasant families must get from government or must get back from the zamindars and rajahs sufficient land to survive and prosper as a race that wants fundamentally to remain an agricultural race.¹⁰⁵

As we saw in the previous chapter, a colonization process encouraged by missionaries had taken place in western Assam since the 1860s. The work and settlement in the country outside the colony, in *bahre hasa*, started as a natural result of the work in the colony.¹⁰⁶ The establishment of tea plantations also encouraged the taking up of land in the vicinity of the gardens by the plantation labourers. The Jesuit missionaries stationed in Assam and working among the Chotanagpur emigrants went to Ranchi to learn from the Jesuit Fathers the way they organised their Christian Adibasis. They started the 'Chotanagpur Bank' to help the Adibasis to buy land and settle down in villages.¹⁰⁷ Thus, a link was established between the tea plantation labourers, ex tea plantation labourers and other emigrants in Assam, and the Adivasis of Chotanagpur by the missionaries.

While different legislations were enacted in the Chotanagpur region to safeguard the rights of the Adivasis, the trajectory of the conditions of emigrants took a different turn in Assam. Post independence, the Assam government clustered the coolies under the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Hodne, *The Seed Bore Fruit*, p. 103.

¹⁰⁷ Paviotti, *The Work of His Hands*, p. 69.

category of 'tea tribes' and descheduled them from the Scheduled Tribes category. They, as well the Santhals, and other colonisers like the Nepali cultivators were henceforth grouped under the category of 'Other Backward Classes.'¹⁰⁸ One can distinctly see notions of the attribution of location specificity to the identities of the Adivasis as well. Whether dhangars, coolies, baganiya, 'tea tribe,' 'ex-tea tribe,' their identities were constantly made and remade on the basis of their locations.

The most disquieting phenomenon is that approximately five lakhs (these are 1971 census figures) of Oraon, Munda, Santhal, and other such tribals whose forefathers had been brought to Assam during the last century in connection with tea cultivation have been missing from the list of tribals.¹⁰⁹

This class of people have been as much if not more deprived as the local 'tribes,' victims of a similar process of land alienation and displacement. The core of the issue is not immigration as such but 'alienation of livelihoods around which many communities have built their culture, economy and identity.'¹¹⁰ As is evident from the speech of one Bodo minister in the legislative assembly-

some people of Chah Mazdoor Gaon Panchayat Committee (complained) that ineligible people have occupied ceiling surplus lands from Hatigarh Tea Garden and they have given it to me in writing that a Kabuli (trader from other parts of India) had occupied about 30 bighas of ceiling surplus lands depriving the tribals and other ex-tea garden labourers. ...it was intimated to that 'Kabuli' that he should vacate and give the land back to the tribals...only yesterday I came to know that this 'Kabuli' had threatened the ex-tea garden labourers saying that he would not vacate and threatened them with a long

¹⁰⁸ PTCA Memorandum to the President of India, Dr. Zakir Husain.

¹⁰⁹ Director, Welfare of Plains Tribes and Backward Classes, *Tribes of Assam Plains*, (Government of India, 1980), quoted in Prabhakar, 'Invention, Reinvention, and Contestation: Politics of Identity in Assam,' p. 289.

¹¹⁰ W. Fernandes, 'North Eastern India: Land, Identity and Conflicts,' Silver Jubilee Lecture, GB Pant Institute of Social Sciences, Allahabad (May 2005).

sword...these are the problems of preserving the identity of the tribal people and their blocks and belts.¹¹¹

The adivasis thus lose their status as ‘tribes’ once they migrate out of their original habitat, very much along the lines of the exclusionary locational provisions that govern the recognition of a people as hill tribes and plains tribes. Based on this, the Santals and other Adivasis are regarded as encroachers in Bodo dominated tribal blocks, since they are not recognised as a ‘tribe’ in Assam. Obliterating and collapsing the otherwise distinct historical processes that the Santals had to undergo in comparison to tea garden labourers, they are seen as one group of Adivasis, a fact often ignored. Mr. Karjee refers to the Santals as ‘hired contract labourers’ who should have left when their terms ended.¹¹²

Amongst the Santals themselves, there is now a definite movement towards forming a modern identity. It is an initiative that came from within the community, grown out of a sense of insufficiency highlighted by the clashes. It is mostly the youth and the educated section that are concerned with this process. In the village of Jaoliabari itself, I found that the youth have formed themselves into active members of the All Assam Santhal Students Union. Speaking to the district committee president, Rajesh Tudu, one cannot help but notice a sense of enthusiasm and purpose for progress in him. Rajesh is barely in his twenties, and is presently studying graduation. His father had died due to some disease when he was very small. He stays with his mother, elder brother, younger sister and a nephew.

He and his committee members go around the village, spreading messages on the importance of education and persuading the people to abandon regressive practices like

¹¹¹ B. K. Basumatari, Annexure ‘D,’ UTNLF Memorandum to the Prime Minister of India, in Datta, *Autonomy Movements in Assam*, p. 187.

¹¹² Personal conversation, 20 April 2012, Kokrajhar, Assam.

witch hunting and other superstitious beliefs. Explaining the reason for mobilising on a more particularistic identity of the Santal, rather than the more encompassing ‘Adivasi,’ Rajesh stated that

Earlier the Adivasi leaders would come to us and tell us to move towards education and progress, but not one showed us how. This feeling of inadequacy compelled us to take the initiative. Moreover, in order to achieve progress, we need to safeguard our identity. When we have our own distinct *bhasha, niti niyom, kalakriti*, (language, customs, culture) why should we be associated with others?...Our *jati* (community) has been the same since the earliest time. We identify ourselves as that *jati*, hence, our *kalakriti* should remain the same, continuity is important.¹¹³

On being asked how they would distinguish between superstitions and traditions, Rajesh could not answer. Moreover, I noticed the lady teacher had tattoo marks on her throat and wrists. When I asked her why they were engraved and what they signified, she stated that she really did not know what they signified. She told me that she had had them since she was a child, and that this practise was no longer followed. Hence, one can infer that the community is undergoing changes, subconsciously as well as consciously.

Critiquing the Bodo people’s perception of themselves as indigenous to the region and the Adivasis as outsiders, and at the same time distancing themselves as agriculturists, different from tea garden labourers, Tudu stated

Everyone has come here from outside at some point of time, no one community took birth here. Moreover, it is not like the world came into existence here, so that man came into being here. We have been living here since the time of our forefathers, they cleared and tilled these very fields that we own and till today. Since our hearth, home and fields are here, we can most rightfully say that we belong to Assam...Not a single one amongst us

¹¹³ Personal conversation, 22 April 2012, Jaoliabari, Assam.

Santhal people labour in a single *cha bagan* (tea garden). We are cultivators, we are owners of our own land. How can you call us a tea-tribe then?’¹¹⁴

Thus, we see that the concept of indigeneity is interpreted in different ways by the Bodos and Adivasis. The Bodos distinguish themselves from the rest of the populace asserting themselves as the ‘autochthons’ of the land. One can sense that they drew upon the colonial conception of the ‘tribe’ to create or recreate a distinct identity for itself. It leans on the tropes of ‘tribe’ and ‘race’ to draw a greater history for the community. The assertion of the Bodos being the original ‘autochthons’ in the past, is thus held to legitimise the political claim to the territory in the present.¹¹⁵ Notions of shared ‘racial’ affinity are played out. The Bodos see themselves as distinct, both from the ‘caste-Hindu’ Assamese as well as the immigrant labourers, and draw similarities with groups in other parts of the state, like the Dimasas of the North Cachar Hills. References are drawn from the likes of Endle and Gait to emphasise their ‘Tibeto-Burman,’ ‘Mongoloid,’ roots and harking back to an erstwhile era of the ‘great Kachari race.’ Their demand was thus for an area which was historically identified as that which was predominantly inhabited by them, not according to present population distribution. It indicates not only demand for rights, but symbolic value of rights, an aspiration for regaining a space and status untrammelled by consequent incursions. As Borgoyari stated, ‘The Bodo movement is a movement for our survival as a community. Continuity between the past and present must be maintained.’¹¹⁶

In response, the Adivasis are now seeing themselves as one community, showing solidarity. The immigrant communities are clubbed under the umbrella term of ‘tea tribes’ or more recently, the ‘adivasi.’ Although the latter term tends to mean ‘original

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Basumatary, ‘Fashioning Identities: Nationalising Narrative of the Bodoland Movement’, p. 116.

¹¹⁶ Personal conversation, 19 April 2012, Simbargaon, Assam.

inhabitant' in general, they are seen very much as outsiders in the north eastern region of India. The leaders claim they too can be termed as 'the first settlers of the land.'¹¹⁷ Thus, it is them, they assert, who has made the land productive, hence they have a right to it. Moreover, with the discourse around 'adivasi,' and the claim of a greater history by the Santhals, by referring back more to their Jharkhandi origin, it could be pondered upon that they themselves are in a way reconfirming their outsider status.¹¹⁸ Thus, identity is restructured around their present status as coolies and migrant labourers in the state, at the same time seen as outsiders.

The peculiar situation in the case of the north eastern region is that the term 'adivasi,' remains a generic name here for identifying the migrant tribal labourers and small peasants from central India. Besides their perceived low social status in most places in North East India, the adivasis residing in these regions are considered to be encroachers or intruders.¹¹⁹ The projection of the Bodos as indigenous people of the land, with a golden past, then reinforces the subordinate status of the Adivasis. The term 'Adivasi' here then carries specific racial connotations, denoting a particular community, formed through particular historical processes. Scholar Monirul Hussain makes distinction between the 'black tribals' and 'autochthon "yellow" tribals' of Assam. He prefers to call the 'tea tribes' as 'black tribals' of Assam because this term specifies their 'racial traits,' and distinguishes them clearly from 'other Mongoloids-light yellow tribals' and other groups of Assam.¹²⁰ This is a problematic stand since this seems like a continuation of colonial logic based on race and primitivity.

¹¹⁷ G. Dungdung, 'State Sponsored Crimes Against Adivasis in Assam,' Sanhati, March 13, 2011. 30 December 2011 < <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/3313/> >

¹¹⁸ Fernandes, 'The Politics of Tribal Land in Northeast India, U. A. Shimray Memorial Lecture, Jawaharlal Nehru University, May 15, 2010.

¹¹⁹ J. J. Roy Burman, 'Adivasi: A Contentious Term to denote Tribes as Indigenous Peoples of India,' *Mainstream* XLVII, no. 32 (2009).

¹²⁰ M. Hussain, *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity* (Delhi: Manak Publications, 1993), p. 168.

The tension between these terms ‘indigenous people’ and ‘adivasi’ in the context of the north east can be discerned from the following extract-

The Adivasis i.e. Indigenous Tribal People are scattered all over India. Their major concentrations area as follows: Khasis, Nagas, Mizos, Garos, Karbis, Dimasas, Bodos, Misings, Lalungs, Deuris, Mismis, Daflas, Akas, Serekdukpens, etc. are the major *Indigenous Tribal People in North-Eastern India*; Santhals, Mundas, Hos, Kharias, Paharis, Oraons, Konds, etc are major *Adivasis communities inhabiting in a most concentrated way in Central India*; Gonds, Bhils, Kuruks, Kols, etc. are major Adivasis inhabiting the Western region of our country, and the Koyas, Todas, Banjaras and other Major Indigenous Tribal are found in South India, including Onge and others in Andaman and Nicobar Islands.¹²¹ (emphasis mine).

It has been argued that though a ‘sustained mistrust between the indigenous and non-indigenous native populations’ has been the cause of much turmoil in Western Assam, it is mainly ‘settler-indigenous conflict’ that has caused such displacement.¹²² While incidents are reported as ‘ethnic clashes,’ ethnicity is not a special requirement that transforms ordinary people into perpetrators and survivors.¹²³ However, it cannot be denied that groups choose to assert themselves on the lines of racial and ethnic solidarity and this indulgence in ethnocentric jingoism is what leads to mistrust and fear, whether real or imagined. Moreover, the creation of this indigenous-non-indigenous divide needs to be understood as a contingent act of the process of imagining a homeland.

¹²¹ Presentation by the Indigenous Tribal People of India to the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Population, Geneva, 3-7 August 1987, in *Dwimu* 1, no. 4 (2011). The delegation consisted of Samar Brahma Choudhury (MP, LS, representing the Bodo tribe), Bishop Dr. Nirmal Minz (representing the Oraon Tribe), Sharad Kulkarni (Centre for Tribal Conscientization, Poona), Dr. Ram Dayal Munda (representing Munda tribe), A. K. Kisku (representing Santhal tribe).

¹²² U. Goswami, ‘Enabling Livelihoods in Western Assam: Nobody’s Responsibility,’ *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2006), p. 63.

¹²³ Prabhakar, ‘Invention, Reinvention, and Contestation: Politics of Identity in Assam,’ p. 272.

Conclusion:

Various interrelated historical processes discussed in the previous chapters have thus led to the creation of a situation of ferment in Assam. The masses have been mobilised on the basis of specific community based identities in order to demand rights for themselves, a consequence of marginalization and scramble for scarce resources. Thus, such occurrences of clashes need to be seen in a larger context of complex, interrelated historical processes, and not merely as cases of communal antagonism.

CONCLUSION

Identity formation is a contingent process. The colonial administration created different images of different groups of people, on the basis of ordering the society, as well as meeting its need of labour in the nascent capitalist enterprises. The missionaries too categorized the colonized people into different groups in order to identify the most suitable section of the population for conversion. Amongst the local people themselves, processes of identity formation and reformation have taken place. They appropriated and redefined the colonial constructions of their identities and moulded them towards certain ends. The Assamese imbibed the notion of Aryan descent in order to connect to the greater Brahmanic fold of 'mainland' India and distance themselves from the socio-economically less developed 'tribes.' The 'tribes' in turn have incorporated and reformulated the connotations of 'tribe' as a category in order to regain their perceived loss of autonomy and history. These identities were thus in constant flux over different periods of time, and continue to undergo shifts and modifications. Identity, thus, is also a highly contested issue. Focusing on the recent 'ethnic clashes' between the Bodos and Santhals, I have attempted, in this study, to understand the problems caused by such constructed categories.

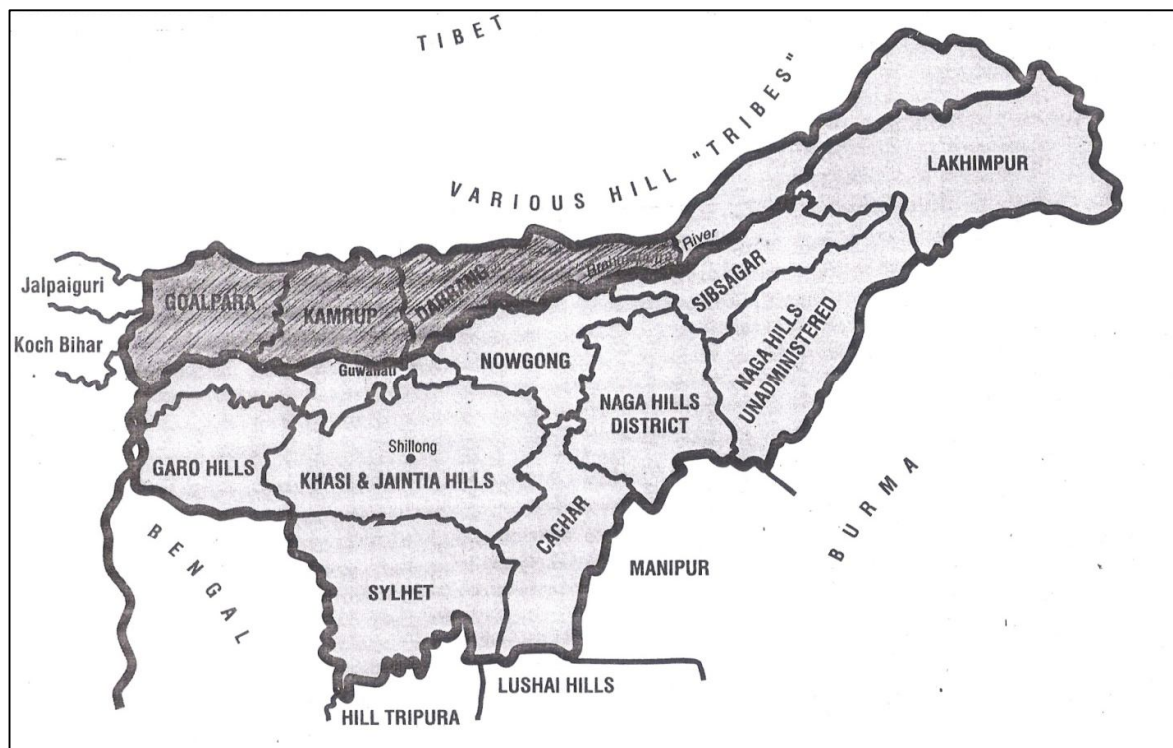
There is an 'element of contrived construction' in demands and rights based on ethnic identities. However, one does need to emphasise that although such demands may or may not be based on invention and construction, the consequences of such assertions in the lived experiences of the voiceless hundreds of thousands are painful and real. Often, seen through the events of such clashes, it becomes hard to categorise any particular group as the victim and the other the victimiser. The chaos and the feeling of incomprehension amongst the victims is something that has yet to be brought out in the

open. What happened is the kind of upheaval that one can only attempt to historicise. The issues are very much alive. The consequences and the narrative of the conflict continue to unfold. The graffiti on the walls have not faded after all these decades. Instead, new additions by new organisations are sketched on these walls over time. Hence, there is a need for further study, and the need to move beyond the colonial archive.

In my study, I have largely used official records of the colonial administration. There are drawbacks related to such records. The nature of the records is such that a comprehensive picture of situations is difficult to trace. The emigration files, for example, give very little idea about the workings of the tea plantations, and the immigrant labourers' voices are conspicuous by their absence. The labourers exist only as numbers and statistics in these files. The description of relations and interactions that might have existed between the locals and the plantation labourers do not find mention in these records. The monographs on specific 'tribes' focused singularly on the 'tribe' in question and treated them in isolation, not dwelling on the interaction between different communities.

Some of these drawbacks could be remedied by studying the vernacular literature of the region, which could provide descriptions of the relational and interactive aspects of different communities. Looking at Assamese literature would give us details on the tea garden labourers and their interactions with the local villagers. During the early twentieth century, there was a burgeoning of print literature, particularly periodicals and newsletters, in the Bodo language. Unfortunately, these exist in private libraries and efforts have not been made to locate and access them yet. They are a potential wealth of information. I have, however, used newspapers, studied various memorandums and pamphlets closely, besides conducting ethnographic research, which have added

immensely to my study. With regards to the Santhals, conducting interviews has helped provide a fresh perspective on the issue and a much more detailed study can bring to the forefront a new story.



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