

# **THE TRIBALS OF BANGLADESH : A STUDY OF THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES**

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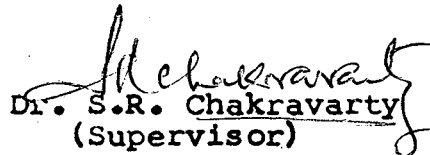
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We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiner for evaluation.

  
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## PREFACE

Bangladesh has a concentrated tribal population in the south-eastern, eastern and northern districts of the country. In the present dissertation an attempt has been made to study the tribes, living in the northern districts that is, Mymensingh, Sylhet, Dinajpur, Rajshahi and some other areas.

The Bangladesh polity has been torn by violence between the government forces and the tribals residing in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This leads to the crucial question, that why are the rest of the tribals residing on the northern borders of Bangladesh not a party to this violence. This is not to say that they are not embroiled in an adversarial relationship with the government. In fact, the Garos are fighting for ownership rights over the Madhupur Forest in the Supreme Court, despite being subjected to physical torture and kidnapping by government forces. The Hajongs and other tribals who had resisted the exploitative feudal policies of the government in the Tanka movement as late as 1950, too are no longer mobilised against the government. This is inspite of the fact that concentrated ownership of land persists, with less than 15% of the people owning

almost 51% of the land.\* Equally important has been the ethnic marginalisation. Thus, both Islam and Bengali language, have been imposed on the ethnically different tribals. Islam has specially given a major setback to these tribals who were modernising either through Christianisation or Hinduisation. In fact, in the riots of 1950 and 1965, they were deprived even of their basic right, the "right to life".

The answer can be found in the nature and extent of penetration (by external agencies) and the resultant culture contact the tribals like Khasi, Garo, Santal, Hajong, Koch, Banai, Rajbansi, Hadi, Dalu, Munda, Oraon, Manipuri and Manipuri Muslims on the northern borders have undergone. Therefore, unlike the CHT tribals which had a special status and autonomy as late as 1963, those on the northern borders have faced deeper penetration from the British rule itself. This can be gauged by the fact that CHT continues to have tribals, like Mru, Murangs, Shendus, Bonjugis, and

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\* Talukder Maniruzzaman, "The Future of Bangladesh" in A.J. Wilson and Dennis Dalton, ed., The State of South Asia: Problems of National Integration (New Delhi, 1982), p.272.

Pankhos who not only cannot read and write but also do not learn each other's dialects. In doing so they feel, they will be flouting religious interdiction, which will lead to illness and economic ruin.

It will become apparent in the course of the following chapters that a combination of demographic, geographic, religious, and political factors have contributed to the disintegration of the tribal institutions and values (of those on the northern borders), and their assimilation into the larger, non-tribal society. Though in the beginning of this assimilative process the tribals revolted now and again due to stress, the revolts grew less frequent as the years went by and tribals learnt to accept different values. Today this process has even produced "detrribalised" labourers among some tribes, who have lost all tribal values. Similarly, an elite class has evolved which is indistinguishable from the "civilized gentry".

Demographically, the migration of some tribals to India due to persecution, or death in the liberation war of 1971, or riots has brought violent changes in tribal lives. More importantly, these tribes fall in areas which were the first to come under British control, when the latter entered the north-east frontiers. Therefore, they soon came under a centralized political authority which introduced policies

leading to socio-cultural and economic change.

Religion has played an equally important role in modernizing these tribes, helping them to integrate into the larger society. Therefore, among the Garos and Khasis, Christianity introduced non-tribal values in the form of Westernization, while among other tribes Hinduisation has led to the adoption of hierarchical caste structure. However this process is not complete and tribal beliefs and institutions can still be observed among them.

The single most important factor in the assimilation of tribes has been the role of governments from British rule onwards. Thus tribal political organisation which ranged from totally uncentralized or segmentary type on one hand to relatively centralised ones, were completely replaced. Instead, strongly centralized and well-organized modern states were created. Therefore, elaborate law enforcement agencies like thana and courts were set up whose coercive power far exceeded that of earlier (tribal) institutions. Taxes were made compulsory for the use of natural resources that had hitherto been used freely. In the plains, the tribal peasants saw rapidly changing land tenure system, and imposition of Zamindari. The establishment of modern system of transport, communication, and education on one hand and banning of tribal practices like human-sacrifice, head-hunting etc. brought further social change.



With transfer of power most of these institutions were inherited by the post colonial state. However, the new state unlike the colonial one could not ensure its survival through coercive means alone, and needed to evolve a common national identity besides economic development. It is along these criteria that government's policies leading to social change must be studied. The tribals of East Pakistan and then Bangladesh have not only failed to evolve a shared national identity with other non-tribal Muslims, but also show marginal improvement in their standards of living. This is because the succeeding government by imposing Islam, then Bengali and later Bangladeshi identities have not given space to other ethnic identities. Economically, this country (itself regarded as one of the poorest in the world) has not provided adequate basic facilities like housing, hand-pumps etc. to the tribals. Therefore, the national average which has access to these facilities is much higher than that of tribals. As a result tribal integration into the national mainstream remains incomplete leaving much to be desired regarding the government's role.

Though the extent of stress felt by the tribals is lesser than in the British period since they are getting assimilated gradually into non-tribal society, it nevertheless remains. Stress among the tribals has occurred even when social change is motivated by good intentions. This is because changes are often not planned, that is, introduced after a scientific study of pros and cons of the

effect it might have on tribals. Consequently, some tribal societies in other parts of the world, unable to cope with the stress have even perished.

The following chapters have tried to bring this forth. The first chapter is an introduction which defines a tribe and tribal societies, studies how social order is maintained in them, besides outlining the nature, effect and agencies which bring about social change. The second chapter is a socio-cultural study of the various tribal groups which have been undergoing transition also due to religious factors. The third chapter focuses on the British policy which have helped in bringing rapid change, in the process also focusing on the role of Christian missionaries. The fourth chapter highlights the religious, linguistic and economic policies of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments which have retarded their development of common national identity with other non-tribals.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Definition of a Tribe and Tribal Society**

In general usage, tribe has been defined as a "primary aggregate of peoples living in a primitive or barbarous condition under a headman or a chief."<sup>1</sup> The superior overtone of this definition should be avoided or reduced greatly. Till the end of nineteenth century the word "primitive" was used to describe tribal society as childish, compared to the "advanced" West. Today, the meaning of "primitive" has undergone transition and no longer describes a tribal society as mentally and morally inferior.

While a general consensus exists among the modern anthropologists over the definition of a tribal society (which comprises of one or several tribes), a similar agreement on the definition of a tribe is absent. A tribal society is best defined in terms of form than content,<sup>2</sup> that is, in terms of little developed techniques. Therefore, a tribal society is small scale both in terms of population and social relationships, and has sometimes been referred to as "face to face society". Moreover, such a society possesses simple technology and is completely self-sufficient where people get their food and other necessities directly through their own labour.<sup>3</sup>

A tribal society has various other characteristics. It possesses a clear linguistic boundary, that is, a common language or dialect. Secondly, it generally has a well-defined political boundary. There are tribal societies which do not have government in the usual sense, that is, a centralised authority or a well defined area or group which make a political unit. In such segmentary societies, the social system functions through a balance of power and other institutional mechanisms. Thirdly, a tribal society has a cultural boundary consisting of traditional beliefs, mores etc.<sup>4</sup>

To distinguish a tribal society from a modern one, some more characteristics require mentioning. The differentiation and specialisation in a tribe is based on biological factors like age, sex and kinship rather than on relations of production. Moreover, the relations of production in a tribe are homogeneous in nature and a tribe is not stratified. Further, its economy is non-monetised because production is done to meet the domestic consumption. Lastly, all members in a tribal society are kinsmen, who maintain these ties through endogamy.<sup>5</sup>

This outline, however, is applicable only to "ideal" tribal societies which no longer exist, coming as they are under the influence of "civilised" societies. As a result

tribal societies fall at different points in the "ideal" to "assimilated" continuum.

While defining a tribe, its ethnic and cultural aspects are overlooked and it is outlined as a territorial, and politically independent unit, except when tribe and society coincide. Therefore, in nomadic society where proprietorial rights are not recognised over a certain area, the term "tribe" cannot be used to describe them in this strict sense.<sup>6</sup>

Currently, the most widely used definition has been put forth by Evans Pritchard, who worked on the Nuer tribe of Southern Sudan. According to him, the Nuer constituting 200,000 in number, shared "a common name, a common language, and a common culture" and were "divided into distinct political units". From these divided tribes he drew his definition that "a tribe is a politically organised subdivision of a wider, ethnic or cultural unit."<sup>7</sup>

#### The Notion of 'Superior' and 'Inferior' Cultures

Compared to Western societies, tribal ones continue to be regarded as "primitive" by some people. However, it must be realised that they constitute systematically organised and viable communities, which have evolved socio-economic and political institutions, suited to their local condi-

tions.

To decide whether a culture is "superior" to another depends on standards used. For example, the development of writing and complex technology have made some much richer, at least quantitatively. However, one should be cautious in using the words "better" or "worse", because of the intricacy and subtlety of the so-called "primitive" cultures. This does not imply that comparisons cannot be made, and that each culture is just as good. What is instead meant, is that holistic comparisons of cultures should be avoided and only different aspects of cultures compared. Therefore, if witchcraft and sorcery is bad due to the cruelty it entails, so is Cold War with its threat of vast devastation.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Maintenance of Social Order in Tribal Societies**

In the absence of familiar western institutions like judges, courts, etc. a tribal society, has been misconceived as being in a state of anarchy and therefore "primitive". In fact, in segmentary societies (where a government i.e. a centralised political authority or a well defined area or group comprising a political unit does not exist) this misconception is particularly acute.

Therefore, according to Sahlins, a segmentary society is in a state of potential anarchy or "Warre" and can break down any time. For him, the various tribal institutions:

kinship; the principle of reciprocity in economic relations guided not by profit motive but the need to maintain good relations; collective observance of rituals etc., all contribute to prevent this breakdown. However, the possibility of conflict can never be eliminated, because a specialised political agency like the "State" does not exist. Therefore, a sovereign State which is structurally separated from society, and has coercive power, as in modern "civilised" societies, is necessary both for social order and cultural richness.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, John Beattie arguing from a functional approach is critical of the use of western categories to study tribal political organisation. Therefore, in the latter some sort of social stability on a tribal basis may be achieved through ways other than constituted political authorities. Similarly, observance of rules are adequately maintained through means other than police and courts as in the west.

He defines political organisation as, "maintenance of ordered relations between different categories and groups of people, over a social field wider than that which is implied by each of the component categories or groups taken separately."<sup>10</sup> This wider social field can be a society, or relations between separate societies whether these are

tribal groups or nations. In other words, the external social relations of any group which is under study also fall within the sphere called "political". Since these relations are conducted usually within a particular area, a political system can be defined territorially.

In many tribal societies, this political end is achieved through specialised political functionaries which use organised authority backed by force, similar to western societies. The difference is only to the extent, that the former's political organisation is less elaborate.

On the other hand, there are some societies where neither specialised political functionaries, nor organised structure of authority backed by force exists. Yet these societies do possess some sort of political structure. Therefore, political authority may be widely spread out, e.g., among grades of elders or lineage heads. Further, instead of physical force, they may have the backing of magical or religious sanctions which ensure observance of rules.

There are still other societies called segmentary ones, where no political authority can be found. Here the political end is brought through the interaction of various institutions, which are not overtly political. What is important then, is the political end and not the means through which



it is achieved. Therefore, in every society some sort of internal order does exist over a particular territory. External relations are conducted and decisions regarding these matters are taken along generally accepted rules.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, since the method of achieving political end differs greatly between various tribal societies, a basic classification which helps in distinguishing one society from another is important. Three criteria can be outlined in this regard. Firstly, it is the degree of centralisation i.e. whether there is a centralised authority accepted by the various groups in the society, or is there no such head and where interaction between various groups and segments, instead forms a political system. Secondly, the extent of specialisation of political authority must be observed. If this is absent, it could also mean there is no overall political authority. The third criterion studies the basis of political authority. Therefore, it could be hereditary or elective or a combination of the two. These criteria, except for the first one are not mutually exclusive and it is a matter of being 'more or less'.

To study tribal societies through the centralised-uncentralised distinction is useful as long as it is remembered that this represents two poles in a scale and that tribal societies fall at different intermediate positions.

## Position of some of Bangladesh's Tribes on the "Centralised-Uncentralised" Scale

Before the imposition of centralised, colonial rule along Western lines, the tribes on the northern borders of Bangladesh possessed various types of political organisations.

### Garos

Among the Garos those settled in the plains had lost much of their traditional lifestyles and been reduced to the status of ryots by Choudhries. The hill Garos, however, retained almost all their tribal features. A study of their political organisation reveals strong uncentralised features. Therefore, the institution of Akhings among hill Garos were mutually independent territorial entities.

In their political relations each chief is entirely independent and governs his own dependents with the assistance of the panchayat of the head of households. There are instances to prove the mutually separable political entities of these Akhings. Different clans were in a state of inter-clan feuds and internecine warfare. Taking revenge of an old murder, adultery or insult was a clan responsibility and an inheriting trait of clan-character, so much so that "in case of any murder, the relatives of the slain are bound to demand blood for blood, and ought, ...according to Garo custom, to put to death either the murderer or one of his kindred, or at least one of his slaves, unless the council, i.e. elders of the clans succeed in bringing about a reconciliation."<sup>12</sup>

In fact, this institution is characteristic of uncentralised, societies where there is no, or any effective,

central political organisation. Where a central government exists, feuds are suppressed and the inter-groups disputes are settled by it. Therefore, it is the government which claims monopoly of force in the territory it rules.

Instead, the Garos fell in that category of uncentralised institutions, where political functions are performed by groups organised in unilineal descent. In such societies there are no "chiefs" or specific political offices though older men may use authority to a limited extent.

However the institution of blood feud is not without its political functions and maintains social order in simple societies. What is attempted through a blood feud is restoration of social harmony and not punishment of the individual concerned as in the west. This means, that if in an injured group one person is killed then in return only one life will be taken. This is called the principle of "lex talionis" the law of like for like. In fact, among the Berbers of Africa, the objective is not to kill the murderer but a victim of an equal status. For example, if a woman is killed, then the injured group kills a woman in the opponent's group.<sup>13</sup>

This institution also performs the political function of giving space to conflicting groups to express hostility towards each other, in the process also reasserting values of

group cohesion and identity. A blood feud is a group affair with solidarity based on common descent. A blood feud cannot take place within a clan since the latter's very existence depends on it. However, if a blood feud is committed against a member then there is a strong obligation to assist one's kinsmen.

Even within an Akhing no concentration of political authority could be observed. Ownership of an Akhing was in the Mahari, vested with a daughter. Managerial authority was, however, vested in the husband of the nokma (inheritress). Within an Akhing, therefore, public authority is a combination of proprietary rights and managerial privileges of the two Maharis, (that of the inheritress and her husband). This joint responsibility in one Akhing prevents any Mahari from enjoying overwhelming power.<sup>14</sup>

As the institution of nokmaship evolved his authority remained on the basis of kinship, and he was only a superior kinsman among equals. Therefore, he did not have coercive power. Further, in his economic relations between him and the Akhing members, he was more generous in giving.

On the other hand, there are many societies which have a common language and culture and are to an extent conscious of their tribal identity. However, there may be no central head where groups of small, relatively independent units

exist. These units do not necessarily have to be based on kinship or age-sets but may be politically centralized chiefdoms. Here, each could have its own chief who is politically independent of others.

Whether the individual head is a ritual, symbolic one, or political, the fact that he is acknowledged over a wider social field than family or vilage, makes it a relatively centralized society. To decide the extent of centralisation, it is important to focus on three aspects: firstly, whether the so-called king is merely ritualistic or symbolic; secondly, what is the range and scope of his authority; and thirdly, how and by whom is it acquired and what are the institutionalised restraints.

In all societies such heads have ritualistic authority but seldom is it accompanied by executive or political authority. Therefore, he is basically a means of expressing tribal unity and identity and regarded with veneration and awe.<sup>15</sup>

If it is observed that political authority is being exercised, that is, he is able to enforce his wishes regarding maintenance of order in a certain area, then two more aspects must be further studied. Firstly, what is the range till which it is politically effective. Therefore, to be centralized political authority, everybody in that area

must acknowledge his authority. Secondly, the scope is important. Here, the number of aspects which are controlled in the social lives becomes important. In this connection, the extent of force that can be used is vital.

Where political authority has been observed, it has often been delegated and redelegated leading to pyramidal structure from the king downwards. Therefore, below him may be officials, and below them village chiefs and headmen. This delegation can be on the basis of kinship or personal loyalty. In the latter type kinsmen are regarded as potential rivals.

#### Khasis

The Khasi states fell in the category of limited monarchy, before British intervention. The head of a Khasi state was a chief or "Siem". It had been established through tradition that a Siem would not take any important action without consulting and getting the approval of his "durbar". The durbar comprised of "mantris" and together with them he exercised judicial power. The Siem managed the state through his mantris. In some Khasi states, at the village level there were headmen called Sirdars who arbitrated disputes and collected gratification or "pynsuk" for the chief, which was voluntary. Further this tax was nominal and was to be used to meet the expenditure of the establishment. The

chief could draw direct income only from "raj" or state lands.<sup>16</sup>

### **Mundas**

The Mundas before British arrival lived in a limited centralised political organisation in Chota Nagpur. They originally had a self-sufficient village system with a "Munda" chief. Above the village unit was the Patti system where a few villages lived in a group. At the level of Patti was an elected "Mantri" or Patti chief to whom the Munda showed allegiance. He, in turn, gave presents to Munda. The Mantri was not superior in status or wealth to other leaders. Gradually, the post of Mantri and Munda became hereditary. Later, as a Raja emerged, he continued to be like any tribal leader. Therefore, he was given limited supplies for his household and his Court by different villages. Further, he was provided cheap military service when needed for defence and for occasional offence.<sup>17</sup>

### **Santals**

Among the Santals too, existed a headman called "Manjhi", who had a group of officials to assist him. Above the village level was the inter-village council, and still higher was the Supreme Council. This Supreme Council was

composed of elders. Further in this highest body only disputes related to payment of bride-price and conjugal rights were arbitrated.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Role of Social Sanctions in maintaining Social Order**

Besides political organisation, social sanctions are another means of maintaining social order. Social sanction means any institution a result of which is to ensure conformity to its rules. People generally observe a social sanction because they want to prevent painful repercussions. So it is the "idea" that is the deterrent factor. This 'idea' can be based on previous experience, direct or otherwise or on culturally established representations about the nature of gods, ghosts and witches. These ideas in turn are difficult to verify empirically.<sup>19</sup>

Thus tribal societies maintain social order through social sanctions rather than repressive criminal law of western societies. The various types of sanctions have been classified as Negative, Positive, Organised, Diffuse, Ritual etc., by Radcliffe Brown. He describes a social sanction as reaction of a society or a substantial number of its members to a pattern of behaviour which is thereby approved or disapproved. In case of a breach of sanction there are various methods through which disciplinary action is taken. Therefore, breaching an idea leads to action by members of a



society. For example, the offenders house may be burnt, or he may be ostracised. At another level, breach of an idea arouses fear of reprisal at the level of belief system. Therefore, wrath of ancestral ghosts is feared. This is based on belief and not on an empirical fact.

Therefore, among the Santals violation of the observance of taboos leads to fines or ostracisation.<sup>20</sup> In fact among the Koch, a group called Sankar (mixed) Koch exists. This is a group of excommunicated people who were punished for social offence like incest, adultery and marrying outside the tribe.<sup>21</sup>

### **Social Change in Tribal Societies**

All societies everywhere, have always been in a state of dynamism. The pace of change, however, has differed from one society to another. In small scale societies the pace of social change has been so gradual and imperceptible that people composing them have felt the institutions have "always been" the way their mythical first ancestor made them.<sup>22</sup>

These small scale societies, however, began to undergo radical change or transition as they came into contact with the complex and wide scale- Western societies. Various agencies like missionaries, traders and settlers were powerful influences and usually preceded the most powerful agent,

the colonial government. The colonial government brought with it new technology, which it imposed on small scale societies, leading to an extension of social relationships and other consequent changes in them. As culture contact between western and indigenous culture began taking place during colonial rule, it led to cultural diffusion called "acculturation". This term implies a two-way culture impact, but it has often been observed that the technologicaly superior cultures do not absorb much from small scale societies.

The resultant culture, after diffusion, is not an assemblage of parts where each part can be understood by placing it in the context of its origin. Instead, it is a "process of reorganising on entirely new and specific lines"<sup>23</sup> including both old and new elements. Further, an element in passing over from one context to another undergoes a transition in order to fit the new setting.

Social change often leads to stress and conflicts and some small scale societies unable to cope with it have even perished, for example, the Tasmanian aborigines etc. Consequently people like Verrier Elwin have expressed dislike for culture contact between the tribals and the "civilised" world, besides being apprehensive of the stress that accompanies social change in a tribal's life. Therefore, Elwin

says:

[T]he Highlanders do not merely exist like so many villagers, they really live. Their religion is characteristic and alive; their tribal organisation is unimpaired.... Geographical conditions have largely protected them from the debasing contacts of the plains. It has been said that the hoot of the motor-horn would sound the knell of the aboriginal tribes.<sup>24</sup>

Further, Elwin goes on to say,

The whole aboriginal problem is how to enable the tribesmen of the first and second classes to advance direct into the fourth class without having to suffer the despair and degradation of the third.<sup>25</sup>

However, it is countered that culture contact by itself is not evil, and it is the circumstances in which it takes place that lead to harmful consequences. Therefore, if a haphazard culture contact is replaced by planned one, much of the problems like exploitation of an innocent tribal by a moneylender can be overcome.<sup>26</sup>

Further, this culture contact is unavoidable as the national governments have to penetrate tribal areas to tap the natural resources for the country's economic development.<sup>27</sup> As the nations compete internationally this process is speeded up. In fact the extension of social relationships continues till a new equilibrium is reached.<sup>28</sup> That means, until the people of the tropical world enter the industrialised one on equal terms the process of social change will continue.

The process of conflict and stress due to culture contact has been analysed by Beattie from a functionalist approach. Therefore, he focuses not only on the institutional or relatively enduring relationships but also on beliefs associated with them. He first outlines the types of social institutions and beliefs that exist in society. One type according to him are the legal and moral values that are implicit in social relationships, or "what people think ought to be done". The second is the modes in which people represent themselves and their society, that is, "what they think is actually done". The third is at the level of action, and not ideas. It is the situation which can be observed by an outsider, that is, "what actually happens." Therefore, conflict and stress result when change in one or two of these is not followed by a corresponding change in others. For example, a radical change in the institution of chiefship is not followed by a change in the people's ideas about what it is, and what ought to be done. Therefore, despite change in the chief's role from a paternalistic, inter-personal one to a salaried and bureaucratized civil servant, the traditional views and expectations of the people continue or change at a slower pace. Such situations lead to stress "in" and "between" people. The former is a state of emotional disturbance, while the latter a violent manifestation.<sup>29</sup>

In trying to trace out the emergence of centralised political authority in simple societies all over the world, it has been found that no monolithic explanation exists. Therefore, change towards centralised authority can take place either through conquest or peaceful means. A ruling group from another culture has not always established itself through force. There are instances where societies lacking a centralised organisation, have invited foreigners with a reputation of good rulers and law makers, to come and rule them and arbitrate their disputes. In the South Asian sub-continent, however, a centralised political authority was imposed by force. In this way, the militarily strong and well organised foreigners came to control a populace that was far larger than them.

The sudden change in the nature of political authority leads to stress because the ideas held by and about chiefs are inconsistent with the bureaucratic and impersonal rule they are expected to perform. Earlier, in the traditional system, these chiefs based on heredity, had personal or face to face ties with their subjects. This link manifested itself in services and tributes by the people, and holding of feasts or gift-giving by the ruler. However, this was unable to be maintained under the modern system. Therefore, taxes had to be collected for the functioning of government

apparatus, schools, hospitals, roads etc.; impartial justice had to be provided; rules and regulations in various spheres had to be enforced. All these functions could be better performed by the western type civil servants than the "patrimonial" type of chiefs, existing in traditional societies.<sup>30</sup>

This changed political system has led to stress in societies. Therefore, subjects have become critical of the modern chiefs, who, they feel are no longer the same. The modern chiefs appears selfish and only interested in their salaries and promotions. Further, they no longer hold feasts, or know them personally, spending most of their time in offices. Moreover, they can be transferred from one area to another. The chiefs too complain, in turn, that people no longer respect them as they used to. Therefore, gifts and beer is no longer presented to them by the people who feel their duties are complete when taxes are paid.

This shows that both the chiefs and subjects are unable to comprehend fully the change from interpersonal relationships to an impersonal and bureaucratic one. According to Parsons,

...political authority is ceasing to be diffuse (affecting all dimensions of the subject's lives) and particularistic (conceived in terms of personal statuses and relationships), and is becoming increasingly specific (to particular spheres of the subjects' lives, such as their tax paying capacity and their conformity



to enacted laws) and universalistic (implying that the same rules apply to everybody regardless of particular relationships or statuses).<sup>31</sup>

Since these changes are not equal in all spheres, the expectations and beliefs continue even while the institutions to which they were suited have long disappeared. As a result an uncomfortable mix of old and modern ideas about government come to exist leading to stress which continues in post-colonial states.

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With change in the nature and role of political authority, the social, cultural and economic values have also been undergoing change. For example, tribals have to interact with governments, and compete in educational institutions established by it, in a non-tribal medium or language. In trying to gain proficiency in this alien language they have neglected or even forgotten their own language which was the sole method of communicating values and norms. Thus a cultural vacuum has been created.<sup>32</sup> In the economic field governments introduced the policy of industrialisation which in turn created a demand for labour. The tribals who had already started having problems due to natural factors like rising population and reducing capacity of Jhum cultivation<sup>33</sup> to meet it on the other were drawn to urban areas. This further weakened tribal institutions.

All these developments in the urban context came to be

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categorised as "detrribalisation" by some anthropologists. Others, however, disagree with this term itself since it implies non-observance or permanent rejection of tribal customs and sanctions. Therefore, Gluckman argued that it is a matter of responding to the situation with which one is confronted. A man's behaviour, as a result, would change temporarily depending on the context. However, he concedes that behaviour will not be exactly the same as before, if he had never left the village.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, it has been pointed out that tribals reassert their tribal standards and loyalties in urban areas. Therefore, people associate only with those from the same village background. Similarly, rivalry within a trade union could be between those from different ethnic backgrounds. However, a word of caution is required here, and tribal values are maintained, largely by those who visit the village regularly.

#### **Social Change: Mobility from Tribe to Jati**

Social change is also brought as tribes take on jati characteristics. This is common not only to tribes in India, but also to those falling on the northern borders of Bangladesh having interacted with surrounding Hinduism over centuries. In fact, even Garos and Khasis were Hinduising before Christianity made its impact.



Jati is a social group, which is subsumed in the Varna system, based on Hindu scripture. While varnas are four-fold hierarchical categories, jatis are a finer classification within them.

"...the process by which a "low" Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, "twice-born" castes", is called "Sanskritization". Usually such changes are followed by claims that they are higher in the caste hierarchy, than that traditionally accepted by the local community. This claim is generally made over a long period, that is, over one or two generations before the "arrival" is accepted. Sometimes a tribe or a caste make a claim which the neighbours are unwilling to accept. This disagreement between the claimed and conceded status may not only be restricted to opinion but institutionalised behaviour too. Therefore, Harijan castes in Mysore do not accept cooked food and drinking water from the Smiths who are superior to the Harijans, even if their claim of being Vishwakarma Brahmins is not conceded.<sup>36</sup>

Before outlining the changes that result from the Sanskritization process, the social, political, economic, religious and psychological bases for differences between jati and tribe must be pointed out. Firstly, in a tribe,

kinship is the most important principle. In the kin group each individual enjoys equal status and rights, and dependency and subordination is minimum. In a jati, kinship does not pervade all society. Moreover, the higher jatis try to perpetuate inequality and dependency both of lower castes and within their own families.

Politically, tribes do not generally organise themselves into strong and complex political formations since these require specialised roles and dominant subordinate relations, unlike the jatis. Moreover, in a tribal society, productive territory is shared by the kinsmen and each related has a share in that territory. Jati members, however, do not believe in this.

Economically, a tribe and jati differ on economic values. Tribesmen seldom indulge in surplus accumulation, using capital, and on market trading unlike a jati. Therefore, tribes distribute and consume a surplus much faster than jati villagers. Though this value is shared by lower jatis and tribesmen, there remains an important difference between the two. A Harijan accumulating wealth is acting in a way respected by society, but a similar act by a tribesman would come in for criticism by the society.<sup>37</sup>

In religion too, both tribe and jati differ from each other, for example, on the importance given to asceticism as

the supreme path to a good after life. Though a tribal society respects ascetism, it does not accord such importance to it unlike a jati.

The psychological factor that differentiates a tribe from a jati, is that, in the former people take direct and complete satisfaction in pleasure of the senses, whether it is food, alcohol, sex, music or dance. The higher jatis are much more restrained in these respects, and when they do indulge in it, the act is accompanied with elaborate ritual.<sup>38</sup>

The Sanskritization process often entails stress and conflict, because of the sharp difference in the value of the two types of social organisation. Once a tribe becomes a jati, its avenues of mobility increase since it competes with others to improve its hierarchical status.

As a tribal group draws towards a jati order, its members discard demeaning customs and adopt prestigious ones, for example, giving up cow sacrifice etc. Competition with other jatis brings them under further pressure to adopt more of jati values. Socially, they replace equality among kinsmen with hierarchy and dependency, and this role specialisation leads to increased productivity. Politically, the tribesmen become more open to political influence, and therefore, more politicised indulging in alliances etc. In

economic relations, generous sharing in a small society is replaced with selected sharing in a large society. Therefore, kinship sharing is replaced with jajmani relations and a cautious attitude towards merchants. In religious affairs, a tribesman shifts from a close and knowable cosmos to a vast one that is difficult to understand. Knowledge about the more complex religion is contained in scriptures which are kept by specialised jatis. As tribal religion changes some elements of tribal religion are merged with Sanskritic deities and rites. Gradually dancing inceremonies, drinking of alcohol, and youth dormitories are given up, as the tribals are taught what is morally good and bad. The tribesman who has indulged freely in pleasure, now begins to deny himself for the sake of his jati's status.<sup>39</sup>

This movement is usually not reversed. Therefore, while tribes have often become jatis, only rarely have jatis moved towards tribal life.

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## CHAPTER II

### TRIBAL SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

#### **Demographic and Ethnic Composition**

The total tribal population of Bangladesh has been estimated at 898,000, of the country's population about 1 per cent by the 1981 census.<sup>1</sup> Of this, those in the non-CHT (Chittagong Hill Tracts) areas, that is, the northern borders of the country comprise .43 per cent. This estimate is most likely an undercount, given the fact that tribals are often not placed under separate heads but included in a general category according to religious affiliation.<sup>2</sup> For example, the census of 1951 recorded the total tribal population of Mymensingh as 8,305, while that of Christians as 32,864. Since it was generally known that the then Garo population had a majority of Christians equalling 40,000 this discrepancy could be understood. Similarly, the Oraons in Rajshahi district have been returned as Hindu, as a result of which their exact number is not available. This was, on one hand due to the practical problem of categorising Oraons whether as "Scheduled Caste Hindus" or "Tribes" which are Hinduised. On the other hand political motivations guided it too. Therefore, Oraon leaders explained,



that they did it at the instance of Hindu leaders, who had come in the beginning of this century and persuaded them to introduce "Hari" in their worship as a pretense. This in turn would raise the proportion of Hindus officially recorded.<sup>3</sup>

Rectification of these categories however, would increase total tribal population to over a million only.

The problem becomes more severe when the strong possibility of tribal groups existing in the nation without government knowledge dawns near. Therefore social researchers have discovered groups in the course of their fieldwork, which government records and officials claimed did not exist.<sup>4</sup>

The district-wise distribution of tribes in the northern borders in terms of percentage is as follows: of the total of 43 per cent in 1981, Sylhet had 11.9; Rajshahi 11.6; Dinjapur, 5.8; Mymensingh, 6.4. Still smaller numbers were found scattered in the plains of other districts.<sup>5</sup>

What is significant is that except for a microscopic minority like the Manipuri Muslims and Keot Muslims,<sup>6</sup> all other tribes have ethnic identities which are totally different from the ethnically homogeneous Bangladeshi majority. Therefore Islam and Bengali language, the two pillars of Bangladeshi identity conflict with those of tribals (though

with assimilation Bengali language is being increasingly adopted). Economically too the tribals differ from the non-tribals. For example, compared to the 70.7 per cent of the nation's labour force which was engaged in agriculture only 64.6 per cent of the total tribals were similarly employed. However, 46 per cent of the total tribal women worked as agricultural labour force compared to the 32.6 per cent of the rest of the country.<sup>7</sup> This shows the cultural difference between the women from majority community and those of tribal minority. The tribals as a whole also represent an economically marginalized group. Therefore compared to the national average of 53 per cent of rural households possessing tubewell drinking water, the number of tribal households was only 19.2 per cent.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Culture, Social Organization and Social Change**

Before studying each tribe individually, it is important to delineate their broad trends. These tribes residing on the northern borders represent both varying social organizations and types of assimilative tendencies. In social organization, the matrilineal Khasis, Garos and Koch, represent a contrast to other patrilineal tribes like Santals, Hajongs, Munda, Oraon, Rajbansi, Manipuri, etc. Assimilation into the broader society has also assumed different forms. Therefore, while Christianization has been and

continues to be an important means of modernization for the Khasi and Garo, Hinduisation has performed the same role for the tribals like Hajongs, Rajbansi, Koch, Manipuri, Santal, Munda, Oraon and others.<sup>9</sup>

In the matrilineal system of Khasi, Garo, and Koch the descent is reckoned through the female in every generation (matrilineal descent), the husbands inhabit the wife's residence (matrilocal marriage) and inheritance is passed from mother to daughter. However, among Koches there is no hard and fast rule that the boy must go to his in-law's house. Compared to Khasis, the Garos have been considered only partially matrilineal. This is because of two reasons. Garos allow for inheritance to be passed through one daughter only, called "Nokma". As a result the non-nokma have come easily under the influence of their husbands who dominate economically. Secondly, the right of management of the property of nokma resides with the male. To prevent the control from dying out, the husband has the right to choose a male member of his clan to represent him, called nokrom. Though a nokrom is not the inheritor, "he is the channel through which the "motherhood" of the husband maintains its hold on the wife's property. When possible the nokrom is the son of the husband's sister, and he is expected to marry his uncle's daughter, and the widow also in case of his uncle's death. If the husband's sister does not have a son,

then he makes a male from his family nokrom."<sup>11</sup>

In fact, both Khasi and Garo no longer provide such a striking contrast to the patrilineal society, as social change or modernization has been taking place. Gradually paternal elements like men trying to control the earnings, passing the property directly to the nokrom or preferably their son, and even putting the property under their names in the government records are emerging. Thus blending of both the type seems to be taking place. On the other end of the scale is the patrilineal society where descent is reckoned through the males (patrilineal descent), wife live in the husband's house (patrilocal residence) and inheritance is passed from father to the son. This type are not only common to tribes like Santal, Hajong and others enumerated earlier, but also to the rest of the subcontinent.

The process of modernization and assimilation into the larger society has taken the form of Christianization among Khasis and Garos, and Hinduisation among others. Thus while the former has led to westernization, the latter to adoption of caste system. Yet this process is not complete and they retain many tribal features.

Thus the 10.81 literacy among female converts and 21.05 per cent among men in United Khasi-Jaintia hills in 1941 was a result of missionary activity, specially by Welsh Presbyterians who were the pioneers.<sup>12</sup> This led to the emergence

of an intelligentsia, and Khasis became doctors, nurses, teachers. Khasi literature is also considered to have developed only after the language acquired a Roman script. The early literature was mostly Christian in nature. Further, the Missionaries influenced them into taking regular baths, wearing washed and pressed clothes specially on Sundays when they went to Church. Tribal medicines and attribution of infection to God, was replaced by allopathic medicine and vaccination to prevent infections. The practice of human sacrifices began reducing from 1850 onwards, and only some instances of it took place in early twentieth century. Similarly among Garos the missionaries promoted literacy, building of modern houses, use of modern medicines etc.

Regarding the relationship of paternal tribes with Hinduism with which they have been in contact for centuries Ghurye's remarks are apt. According to him, while some tribes are already well-integrated into the Hindu society, a majority are only loosely assimilated. Further, there remains a very small section which lives in the interiors of the hills and forests which has not been in any contact with Hinduism. As a result tribes can be regarded as imperfectly integrated classes of Hindu society, or for convenience, as tribal classes of Hindu society. This implies that though the tribes are in the process of raising themselves to a

caste, they continue to retain more of tribal beliefs and organization than other castes. Thus they can be described as backward Hindus.<sup>14</sup>

This transition, however, is a two-way process, where the tribe in changing itself into a caste also influences Hinduism. For example, the ritual of Kukkuti Brata or Poultry rite has been borrowed by the Bengali Hindus from the Oraons. Here the hen produces an egg and is a symbol of fertility. Thus a barren woman can conceive. The Bhadu festival of Hindu virgins of West Bengal also appears to be borrowed from the Karam festival of Oraons. Like the branches of Karam tree (which the Oraon's believe can induce pregnancy) the Bhadu goddess is placed in the "Puja mandap". Then songs and dances are arranged around it, like among Oraons. The Bhadu is finally immersed after the ceremony is over.<sup>15</sup>

In fact the interaction between Hindu culture and the tribal one has continued for so long that it becomes almost impossible to trace its origin. Therefore, historically, as the Santal tribes came to be accepted into the Hindu society, their beliefs on magic were adopted and even further developed by the latter. An impetus to this was received specially after the eighth century when Buddhism, having been replaced as the dominant religion by Hinduism merged with the secret aspects of Hinduism. This led to the forma-

tion of secret cults which after having developed in terms of ideas and technique were re-borrowed by the Santals. Thus Ojha science or culture complex of magic underwent borrowing and re-borrowing. However this diffusion and rediffusion helped it undergo new experiences and changes.<sup>16</sup>

Meantime, under the influence of Hindu caste system, hierarchical attitudes and sanskritization among tribes can be observed. This transition from tribe to caste has been commented on by Risely. Thereby, "large masses of people surrender a condition of comparative freedom and take in exchange a condition which becomes more burdensome in proportion as its status is higher"<sup>17</sup>. This, however, has not deterred Manipuris from claiming to be of Kshatriya origin and wearing the sacred thread. Similarly the Dalu claim to be descendants of Brabubha, Arjun's son in Mahabharat, and therefore Kshatriyas. The historical conversion of Koch tribe to Hinduism and their adoption of the name Rajbansi or Bhangā Kshatriya shows, that sanskritisation can also mean the emergence of a new caste, which is an off-shoot of a standard and recognized caste, the Kshatriyas. This claim, in fact, may not be completely fictitious.<sup>18</sup> Yet another way, a tribe can lose its nature is by becoming a Hindu religious sect like Vaishnavs, Lingayats etc.<sup>19</sup> The Hajongs represent a case in point divided as they are into two religious sects, Shakta and Bhakta. Therefore while the

former worship Kali, the latter are Vaishnavs. Thus, they not only wear the sacred thread, but also regard themselves superior to Koch and un-Hinduised Garos.<sup>20</sup> Tribes like Santals, Oraon and Munda also exhibit Hindu influences. Mukherjee commenting on the Santals, says, their study over the ages shows that they have constantly tried to form a part of Hindu society, and this has been accompanied by disillusionment with their own religion.<sup>21</sup>

Modernization whether through Christianization and Hinduisation on one hand, and government policies like provision of education, transport and communication on the other, has led to social change and the emergence of an educated elite, who are "indistinguishable from the civilized gentry".<sup>22</sup> This elite has changed its style of dressing and wears Lungis, Sarees and Dhotis instead of their traditional dress. They also play modern sports like hockey, football, volleyball etc. unknown to other, tribal masses.

However, social change has also produced a lower labour class, which has completely integrated into the Bangladeshi society, and can no longer be called tribals. These were originally a section of Santals, Oraons and Mundas who were brought during the British rule to work in the tea gardens of Sylhet from Chota Nagpur and Santal Parganas by the



British. In other words, they are "detrribalised".<sup>23</sup>

#### The Garo

The Garos are inhabitants of the Garo Hills district of Assam in India and some parts of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh they live at the foot of Garo Hills along the Indo-Bangladesh border. As a result they occupy the whole northern fringe of the Mymensingh district numbering 50,000 in total. Another 20,000 Garo lives in the Madhupur forest between Mymensingh and Tangail districts. The Garos are divided into two types, the 'Achhick' or Hill Garos who live in the thickly forested areas, and the plains or 'Lamdani' Garos found in Haluaghat, Nalitabari, Sreebordi and Durgapur in Mymensingh.<sup>24</sup> The Garos are not original inhabitants of the soil and have migrated from Assam. Physically, their features are Mongolid while their language belongs to the 'Bodo' group which is apart of the Tibeto-Burman race of the Tibeto-Chinese family.<sup>25</sup>

An over-whelming majority (about 90 per cent) of the Garos follow Christianity, which they adopted towards the end of nineteenth century. However, animism continues to be practiced to a considerable extent. This can be seen in their reverence towards ancestors and worship of natural forces and deities. In the former they place food for spirits, carve memorial posts etc. for the funeral rites.<sup>26</sup> In the latter they worship Saljong (the sun), Susime (the

moon) Goera (thunder) and other such natural things.<sup>27</sup> Like other animists, Garos also believe that there are a number of benevolent and malevolent spirits. While some create the natural forces, the others influence the destinies of man and must be appeased by sacrifices lest they should inflict harm.<sup>28</sup>

The Garo are matrilineal and fall into various exogamous clans, namely Sangma, Marak, Momin, Shira and Areng. Each clan is further subdivided into smaller groups called Machong. This is divided into still smaller groups called Mahari which comprises of the most closely related people who share a residence.

Ideally, there should be members of only two Mahari in a village and the right of possession of the village common land should be vested with the wife of the founding household of that Mahari. The property is passed on through one best daughter in each generation, called Nokma. The other daughters are called Agnate i.e., non-heirs and they do not, in principle, inherit the mother's property. The husbands on the other hand possess the right to cultivate and manage the property.

The traditional source of livelihood of Garos even as late as 1955 was Jhum cultivation, with trading being secondary. Trading even before the 19th century was carried

on with goods like cotton, timber, chilly, bamboo and others being exchanged for salt, metal implements etc. from the Bengali merchants in Mymensingh.<sup>29</sup>

Even before the British rule the Garos were a dynamic group. However, this dynamism and social change was subtle in nature, and lacked the stress that accompanied sudden change in the centralized, British colonial system. Thus the Garos besides practicing Jhum cultivation also traded with Bengali merchants in the bordering plains leading to culture contact. The practice of hunting and raiding also led to interaction with different cultures. Therefore, slaves (of both sexes) captured mostly from the plains during hunting were brought back and at times assimilated into society through marriage. In this way the slaves in turn affected the society too.<sup>30</sup>

Jhum cultivation, which has been followed till mid fifties was an important type of economic organization followed by Garos. The common village land called Akking was the area where the cultivation was followed. Here, while the work of planning, organizing and sowing seeds was done by individual households (in their plots of land), preparation of the field which required cutting of trees and bushes, and then burning of them was carried out with the help of others. Therefore, communal labour and mutual

cooperation were indispensable for production. Further, permanent ownership of specific plot of land was not possible due to rotation of fields. Besides, adjustments had to be made when they returned to the same field, seven to eight years later as the number of individuals in some household would increase or decrease. Ownership of all land, in principle, belonged to the wife of the founding household in the Mahari.

The adoption of wet cultivation not only because of natural factors, and modernising work of missionaries, but more importantly the government policy have led to rapid disintegration of tribal society and their assimilation into the larger one. As the population pressure increased and the surplus land reduced the Garos began settling down. With the colonial government declaring the policy of "reserved" forests, land for Jhum cultivation became further limited. The impact of Christian missionaries and development of transport and communication both of which were established largely due to government efforts, further encouraged this trend. Under the Pakistani government a concerted effort was made to persuade the remaining Garos to give up Jhum cultivation, which they did by 1955. As a result the institution of Akhing, Agnate and matrilineal organization are either dying or weakening.

The institution of Akhing became weak as early as the British when their boundaries were demarcated for the first time by the latter. Moreover, to establish their ultimate authority over some Akhing lands the British took over some Akhings on the basis that it was "khas" land i.e., area without an owner, subject to government disposal. In fact the British authorities were arbitrary regarding the recognition granted to Akhing land, and there were cases when Akhings were de-recognized after having been recognized at an earlier date.<sup>31</sup>

As wet cultivation was taken up the institution of Akhing further weakened. Therefore, permanent and private ownership of land resulted. Shifting was no longer required and ownership was vested with those who had first cultivated it. Since cultivation had been done by the individual household with the help of plough pulled by bullocks, a method adopted from Bengali neighbours, and not the whole community this ownership right had to be recognized. Thus the institution of Akhing began withering away.<sup>32</sup>

The Garos who have adopted wet cultivation later than others, find that the best and most of the land has been occupied. This has led to divisions in the society into the rich and poor. While the rich have surplus land and need to hire labour, a practice they have adopted from their Bengali

neighbours, the poor have little or no land<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, the latter consists of sharecropper, labourers, and domestic servants in urban homes of Dacca.<sup>34</sup>

Profits of the landed class have further increased with the adoption of pineapple cultivation, and hence led to the development of market economy. Therefore, barter has been replaced by a monetised economy, alongside ideas of value, exploitation for money, financial investment, return and profit. Though the division in society along rich and poor basis has been sharpened, it has not yet led to the formation of a class structure. The Garos still claim that they are, in principle, social equals and of one community.

Influence of surrounding paternal tribes, westernization through Christianity, and government encouragement besides women's reserve when having to face tax collectors<sup>35</sup> are changing the matrilineal organizations. As a result, though property<sup>is</sup> still owned by the woman, in practice men appear to have increased their influence. Landed property, in a majority of cases is in both husband's and wife's name, while the number of husbands who are sole owners is more than that of wives. Further, in some cases land is also being passed down the males of each generation.

The status of an Agnate daughter has also undergone transformation due to shortage of cultivable land and gov-

ernment policies. Therefore, as British government came to recognize inheritance to more than one Nokma in a house hold, the traditional system started changing.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, earlier she had no share in the inheritance, but now it has become obligatory on the part of parents to give her some land. The larger share, however, still goes to the Nokma.

### The Khasis

The Khasis reside in Jaintiapur, Japlong and Tamabil besides some areas of Sunamganj Sub-division of the Sylhet district.<sup>37</sup> However, the core areas of Khasi inhabitation are the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Assam, on the Indian side of the Indo-Bangladesh border.

The Khasis can be subdivided into three groups namely, Khasi proper, War and Synteng. Those Khasis inhabiting Bangladesh come from the Synteng subdivision. The Syntengs are also called Jaintias, a name which has come from the earlier rulers in the eastern part of Khasi-Jaintia Hills whose capital was Jaintiapur.<sup>38</sup> The Jaintiapur town by 1935 became a part of Sylhet, which now, falls in Bangladesh.

The Khasis migrated to Sylhet more than five hundred years ago and formed an overwhelming majority in the 1901 census, i.e., 3083 in Sylhet out of total of 4901 Khasis in the whole subcontinent.<sup>39</sup> Even now they form a considerable portion in Bangladesh.<sup>40</sup>

The Khasis originally belonged to Burma from where they drifted southwards. Various reasons for migration to Sylhet have been put forward. Therefore, Khasis are said to have migrated after a severe flood which wrought great havoc in Assam forcing them to take shelter in Sylhet. Yet another reason has been the profitable trade that Khasis carried on with the people of Sylhet. The strong demand for Khasi goods like 'pan' in the plains encouraged them to settle down there.<sup>41</sup>

Christianity has won the largest number of converts among Khasis. However, strong elements of animism remain.<sup>42</sup> Spirit worship of both good and evil spirits is done, specially in times of trouble. Therefore, they try to avert a crisis by finding out the name of the demon who caused it, and then offering sacrifices to appease it. These sacrifices in Jaintiapur in nineteenth century included human sacrifices, where the people voluntarily offered themselves. When the supply of voluntary victims fell short, or a special sacrifice needed after a desired occurrence e.g., birth of a son, strangers were kidnapped from outside the kingdom. This practice was used as a pretext to annex the Jaintiapur kingdom by the British, when four Britishers were kidnapped for this purpose. This practice is not a result of the conversion of Raja of Jaintia to Hinduism where human sacrifices were made to the Goddess Kali. In fact, it had been



followed even earlier, when the Jaintias worshipped the Kopili River, showing animist beliefs. Later this Kopili river was replaced by goddess Kali.<sup>43</sup>

In Anthropological classification the Khasis are regarded as proto-Mongoloid group. They also have a language of their own, which they write in the Roman script. The pronunciation, however, is of Khasi dialect<sup>44</sup>.

The matriarchy among the Syntengs appears stronger than Khasis. Among the Khasis if the husband and wife are happy together, they leave the wife's mother's house after one or two children are born. Therefore, the husband moves the wife to a house of his own, and both wife and husband pool their earnings. Among the Syntengs, however, the husband does not live in his mother-in-laws house and only visits his wife there. In Jowai, the husband visits the wife only after dark and does not eat, smoke or even have betel-nut there. The idea is that since the husband does not contribute to the households earnings, it is not right for him to share their food.<sup>45</sup>

The Land Settlement Act of 1793 introduced by the British in Bengal, had its impact on the Khasis too. The Khasi villages bordering Bengal have adopted its tenure system. As a result, classes of land owners characteristically called "Zamindars", peasants and labourers have

emerged among the Khasis. The labourers come from not only among Khasis but Bengalis too, as can be witnessed in village Pratapurpunji, a village of fifty families near Jaflong.<sup>46</sup>

Further, human sacrifice is no longer practiced ever since its prohibition under British rule. The influence of neighbouring partilineal tribes has introduced paternal elements among the matrilineal Khasis. Therefore, men try to control the earnings and assert themselves. Christianity has also produced, a number of well educated Khasis and an increasing number has begun going to school now-a-days. In fact, the Khasi leader is an engineer in a fertilizer factory in Fenchuganj.

#### **The Koch and the Rajbansis**

Confusion exists regarding the origin of Hinduising Koch (who retain tribal features) and are found in Western Meghalaya and adjoining areas, like the contiguous plains of Bangladesh. These Koches claim kinship with the Koch rulers who established their empire in Western Assam in the mid-sixteenth century. Yet Koch is also a Hindu caste found all over the Brahmaputra valley.

D.N.Majumdar used the 1881 census to show that Koch were included as wholly converted to Rajbansi name. There-

fore, those who continue to use the name Koch are actually "Pani-Koch" or "smaller Koch" that is, they are Garos who have been Hinduising, and therefore "got beyond the imperfect stage of conversion, involving merely abstinence from beef". Moreover, the "Koch" name was taken from the neighbouring Koch rulers. In fact, in language the Pani Koch differ little from Garos.<sup>48</sup>

Surendra Narayan Koch, however, differs. According to him, the difference between the Koch of Western Meghalaya and adjoining areas on the one hand, and the Hindu caste found all over Brahmaputra valley on the other is one of acculturation (and not racial), in turn dependent on the degree of foreign influence.<sup>49</sup> The following outline takes this, second, viewpoint.

The Koch are one of the oldest people of India<sup>50</sup> and this tribe also finds mention in Hindu scriptures like Joginitantra and Bisvakosh, with other lower castes.<sup>51</sup> It is a geographically specific group and resides in the Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam, in North Bengal and at different places along the northern borders of Bangladesh. In fact very early in history the Koch occupied the whole of West Garo Hills and were pushed to the plains by fresh settlements of Garo, besides the need for remunerative agriculture. After much dispute the racial origin have been generally accepted as Mongoloid.

The Koch history is not without its heroes. The Koch were a recognized power north of east of Bengal and in 1550 A.D. the leader Haju, spread east-ward defeating the Kacharis, and establishing their rule which lasted two hundred years. As the Muslim rulers established themselves in Western Kamrup, Rangpur and Goalpara in the West, and Ahom rulers in Eastern Kamrup, the Koch kingdom became limited to Cooch Behar.

The grandson of Haju, Visu Sinh apostatised to Hinduism and took the name of Rajbansis. Those who refused, on finding that they were being denied a decent status under the Hindu regime, adopted Islam. Thus the Koch masses became Muslims and the higher grades Hindus,<sup>52</sup> and both called themselves Rajbansis. In time, the Muslims even gave up the name of Rajbansi, a fact which can be observed in Bogra district of Bangladesh, today.

~~They~~ Semi-Hinduised Koch tribals can be found in the Panchbibi jungles of Bogra district, bordering Dinajpur. Though they regard themselves as Hindus, and follow mainly the Hindu religion, some ceremonies borrowed from Muslims are also followed. Besides, remnants of older, superstitious beliefs have also been observed. They work as cultivators, labourers and preparers of Chira (flattened rice) and khai (puffed rice).<sup>53</sup> Their numerical strength is

30,245 which includes the Koch turned Rajbansis who also adopted Hinduism at that time. This figure excludes those who took up Islam. In social hierarchy, the semi-Hinduised aboriginals appear lower than the lowest caste like Jugis (weavers), Sunris (wine sellers), Tiyars (fishermen and boatmen) etc.

In the Mymensingh district the Koch reside in fifty to sixty villages from Kochnipara, Taokucha, Dudhnai to Rangtia, Chandubhuin, Koroitala and Gobrakura along the bank of Maljhi river which flows from the western foot of Garo hills. The Koches of Mymensingh are closer to Garos than to the Koch caste in Assam which is almost completely Hinduised.<sup>54</sup> This difference is due to acculturation over a period of time. Though these Koch speak Bengali and know the script too, their native dialect is different. The Koches of Mymensingh worship Hrishi and Joga, meaning Shiva or Durga or Hara and Parvati. They do not follow image worship, and observe their religion by offering goats, buffalows, pigeons etc. as sacrifice. To get rid of incurable diseases they worship spirits and chant mantras.

In Rangpur, there are very few Koch. Koches are dark skinned people, who work as palki-bearers, and supplement their earning with agriculture. The status of Rajbansis and Koches is lower than that of Sudras. However, the status of

Rajbansis is slowly improving as they give up "un-Hindu practices" and get educated. As a result the higher castes accept water from them sometimes. The Rajbansis follow the calling of smiths, carpenters, milkmen and domestic servants.<sup>55</sup>

The physical features of a Rangpur Rajbansi has many Mongoloid characteristics. Their Mongol type is unmistakable in areas neighbouring Cooch-Bihar. The Dravidian features are more prominent in Southern Rangpur, and have been attributed to the interaction of Koches with the Bengali speaking Dravidians in Kamrup, earlier in history.

The Rajbansis, however, claim that they are the descendants of Bhanga Kshatriyas from Arya-Varia. Therefore, in the time of Sagar Raja of Ramayana some outcaste Kshatriyas in order to escape persecutions from the Brahman warrior Parasuram, adopted aboriginal religion and culture.

Though this argument does point towards the origins of Rajbansis, it should be taken as one among more important sources.

"It may therefore, be held that the Rajbansis of Rangpur are principally of Koch extraction and belong to the Mongoloid type: that there has been an admixture of the Dravidian element, which is slight in the north and considerable in the south: and that the strain of Aryan blood is very slen-

der and not observable now.<sup>56</sup>

In the census of 1951 and 1961 the Rajbansis have been represented as Hindus. However, the precise nature of Hinduism followed by them varies according to local influences. In Rangpur they call themselves Vaishnavas, while in Darjeeling under influence of Tantric ideas they worship Kali, Bisahari, Hanuman and other gods. The Hindu influence among Rajbansis can also be observed whenever they claim themselves as Kshatriya, since they then tend to accept the twelve clans of the Hindu caste system e.g., Shandilya, Parashar, Gautam etc.<sup>57</sup>

The Rajbansis also possess tribal features. Their system of companionate marriage is similar to that among Santals, Oraons, and Bhils. The special ceremony held when a widow remarries her deceased husband's younger brother, shares some resemblances with the widow-remarriage of Muria of Central Provinces. Like other tribals Rajbansis also believe that the spirits of gods are hidden behind the mountains, rivers and forests. Further, that these spirits give life to natural objects for example rain, thunder, rainbow, food etc. The Rajbansis as a result, not only worship them but also have many legends connected with them.<sup>58</sup>

The Rajbansis speak their own dialect (which does not have a written script), besides "corrupt Bengali". In the Rajbansi dialect neighbouring influences of local dialect of Rangpur, Dinajpur, Babna, Mymensingh, Cooch-Bihar, Darjeeling and others can be discerned.

Through modernising influences like education, the Rajbansis have been gradually undergoing transition.

### **The Santals**

The Santals reside in Chapai Nawabganj subdivision of Rajshahi district and Birol, Setabganj, Panchgarh and other places of Dinajpur district.<sup>59</sup> A few remaining settlements are also found in Rangpur and Bogra districts. Their heavier concentration, however, is in Indian states like West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa etc. The Santals have migrated from Chotnagpur plateau and neighbouring districts of Midnapore and Singhbhum after eighteenth century.<sup>60</sup> Before this, information on Santals origin and migration is based on conjectures drawing heavily from Santals myths and folk songs. What is certain, however, is that the tribe belongs to the generic Munda family before it split up with the Mundas.

The numerical strength of Santals as early as 1881 was 7,427, in areas now falling in Bangladesh. The break up of Santal population in the 1931 census shows, Dinajpur having



130,328 Santals; Rajshahi, 25,591; Bogra, 5,351. In the census of 1961 the Santals were not counted under a separate head. However, it is estimated that they are in considerable numbers in Bangladesh.

Anthropologically, Santals belong to the pre-Dravidian stock, and linguistically to the Austro-Asiatic which is a subdivision of the Austric group of languages. The Austro-Asiatic group belongs to South Asia, and is distributed over the Indian and Indo-Chinese peninsula. The Santali language does not have a written script, and it was the efforts of European missionaries that resulted in some books being written in the Roman script. Some Santal publications have also used the Bengali script. In fact, among the Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Telugu and Bengali influences, it is influence of Bengali which is prominent. The Santals are bilingual and some even speak fluent Bengali besides their own language.

The Santals like other tribes are divided into twelve exogamous clans or septs, namely Hasdak, Murmu, Kishu, Hembrom, Marndi, Saren, Tudu, Baske, Besra, Pauria, Chore, Bedes. To enable the various clans to recognise each other when they meet, each clan except Pauria, Chore and Bedea has certain pass-words. These are drawn from the name of the place where they had settled earlier. These pass-words

serve the purpose of preserving the blood ties between the members of the sept, and thus unconsciously prevent incest. Therefore, despite separation through migration, these septs have been able to survive and perform their kinship function.<sup>63</sup> Further, these clans have food taboos. Therefore, a Hansdak cannot eat duck, a Murmu cannot eat Nil Gae (blue Cow).

The dormitory system or Akhara for the Santals, is also common to tribes all over the world. It not only provides for free mixing between both sexes before marriage, but is also used for religious discussions and social festivity. Sometimes, it has also served defence purposes.

The Santal society is a patriarchal society where descent is traced through the males in each generation (patriarchal descent), the wife comes to live with the husband (patrilocal marriage) and inheritance is passed through the males.<sup>64</sup> When an inherited property gets divided the sons get equal shares but the daughters cannot claim anything as a right. Usually daughters get a cow when property is divided. In the absence of sons, the father takes the property. In the absence of the father, the brothers, and if they too are unavailable then the male agnates inherit. If a man dies leaving his young sons, then the property is managed by his widow till the sons come of

age. After the property is equally divided, the mother goes to live with the youngest son. In the case of widow marrying outside the family, the male agnates manage the property till the sons grow up. In the process, a widow can demand no share.<sup>65</sup>

In religion, the Santals follow animism which is increasingly accompanied by Hinduisation.<sup>66</sup> Compared to other aspects of Santal's culture the influence of Hinduism on Santal religion has remained much lesser. Thus Santals join Hindus in celebrating Durga Puja, and Holi in the honour of Krishna.<sup>67</sup> In fact, Santals celebrate all major Hindu Pujas. The "Rasa" dance mentioned in Vishnu Puran (which portrays Krishna playing in Vraja and Vrandavan) has been described by Professor Wilson, as being most vivid among Santals. Like the Hindus, the Santals too begin their year with Falgun and end with Magh. Besides they also observe Hindu ceremonies like Salsei in Falgun, Bonga Bongi in Chaitra, Home in Baisakh etc.

Animist features are apparent from Santal's Chief deity, Marang Buru (the great Mountain). Whether in public or private, in trouble or in wealth, in health or in sickness, this deity is worshipped with blood sacrifices. The Santals also worship some evil gods who must be appeased through sacrifices, lest they should be harmful. These major deities are Kala Chandi, and goddess Kala Mahi, Chandi

and others.<sup>68</sup> These tribals also attribute superhuman powers to their surrounding natural objects like hills and mountains. Thus they have hill deities like Berha-Pat, Mangar-Pat, Buddha Pahar and others that ensure success in hunting, a peaceful journey etc.

A combination of government policies, migratory habits, interaction with Hindus and education have contributed to gradual assimilation towards larger society among Santals. As the Santals became slaves or wage labourers in Santal Parganas under the Zamindari system in the British rule it led to a gradual breakdown of traditional customs and values. Pushed further northwards after the revolt of 1855, the Santals came under Bengali influence, assimilating Bengali language and culture. Economic needs made them work in tea gardens or as wage labourer carrying loads or digging earth which they do to this day. In fact urbanisation has made such a deep impact on them, that some prefer to call them "detrribalised".<sup>69</sup> A majority, however, continue to live by agriculture. Education is further eroding tribal beliefs.

### The Hajongs

The Hajongs reside in a vast area stretching from Karaibari, Puthimari, Burohazari of Rangpur to Daskahania Sherpur, Susong Durgapur, Bangasikvada and Laur in north

Mymensingh district. It is generally believed that they have originally migrated from Burma and Indo-China and settled first in the town of Hazo. Further migration towards Goalpara, North Mymensingh and some areas of Rangpur took place under pressure to secure a livelihood.<sup>70</sup> Some Hajongs were brought to the Durgapur thana by the Susong Rajas for Khedda (elephant catching) operations. The census of 1951 put the total figure of Hajongs as 35,000. No separate census was conducted in 1961, and it is estimated that their numbers must be exceeding fifty thousand at present.<sup>71</sup> Hajongs left for India due to their persecution during the Tanka Movement after 1947, and in 1965 with communal riots.<sup>72</sup>

Anthropologically the Hajongs are regarded as belonging to pale-Mongoloid or the Austric race. Linguistically, the Hajong's language has been classified as Tibeto-Burman. This language which lacks a common script, has in the course of time been influenced by Bengali and Assamese. In fact, as assimilation in the form of Hinduisation increases they are adopting the Bengali language and its script.<sup>73</sup>

Like other tribals, Hajongs have a clan system. The two clans are known as Byabcharis and Paramarthis. The institutions of Nokpante or dormitories of Hajong is common to tribals all over the world. Further, the practice of tattoo marks over the body among Hajongs is shared not only

by other tribals but among some Hindu castes as well.

In religion, the Hajongs are animists though undergoing a strong process of Hinduisation.<sup>74</sup> This process was observed even earlier, and Francis Buchanan in 1910 wrote about the chief of a small group of Hajongs in Rangpur. The chief, he said, pretends to be a Rajbansi and refrains from eating pork or fowl, and drinking liquor and receives instruction (upbodes) from Brahmins.<sup>75</sup>

The Hajongs can be divided into two religious sects, Shakta and Bhakta. Those belonging to the former worship chiefly the goddess Kali and Kanakshya, and consume wine, meat, pork etc. The latter are also called Vaishnavas and restrict their dietary habits. Therefore, they do not drink wine or eat meat. However they do take fish, besides either vegetarian food.

Though earlier both endogamy and exogamy were practiced, Hinduisation is leading them to give up endogamy. Cases of Hajong marriage to a Coch, another Hinduising group are not uncommon even though the latter is regarded as lower in status by the Hajongs. However, no inter marriage with Garo takes place<sup>76</sup> who they regard as outside their social sphere because they have absorbed no Hindu elements at all.

Over the issue of presiding over a religious ceremony

there is a difference of opinion between the "Purohit" (Priest) and "Anapurohit" (non priest) among the Hajongs. While the former insists on a puja being performed by a Srotriya Brahmin, the latter support the Deosi system. Lately, there have been instances of Brahmin being asked to preside. However, exmples of Brahmins refusing to do so since he regarded them as lowly pariahs can also be quoted.

The acceptance as Hindus of Hajongs among the high-caste Hindus remains precarious. Though in the sanskritization process the Hajongs have donned the sacred thread or poita, it has led to a controversy. The high caste dislike the carry-over of indigenous habits of Hajongs, like wearing the sacred thread at a different time. In fact, a story current at Barhatta locality of Netrakona subdivision reveals how a Brahmin, who gave the sacred thread to Hajongs and then accepted water and sweets from them (having elevated them to a higher caste), was forced to go to Kashi for penance.<sup>77</sup>

Animistic beliefs can be easily observed from their custom of worship and appeasement of various evil spirits and demi gods. Since they believe that these evil spirits can cause diseases and other types of harm, they try to appease them by offering sacrifices of hens, goats, ducks etc. Therefore, the spirit of Mailadeo, for them, can cause

weakness or debility; Gang-sa-deo can make babies cry excessively; Chokhdhapadeo can cause high fever, etc. The worship of nature which is another common animist belief is also prevalent. Therefore the river Brahmaputra is worshipped every year with flowers and sandalwood.

The Hajongs are a socially conscious group having participated in a number of struggles specially in the Tanka movement against feudalism. This consciousness manifests itself in various forms ranging from attempts towards more education, removal of superstition, and greater sanskritisation. Therefore, during the Tanka movement the Hajongs tried to remove beliefs in witch doctors etc. and replace it with homeopathic and allopathic medicines. Education is further eroding the superstitions. Though the number of educated remains low, there is a desire among them to learn. Meantime, there is a substantial number of Hajongs who have received higher education and are presently employed both in government and non government services or teaching in schools. The impetus to Hinduisation is also received, when the more politically conscious among them try to inculcate the Bengali way of thought and culture among Hajong people, having developed the same themselves.<sup>79</sup>

There have been attempts by Christian missionaries to convert Hajongs to Christianity. The few who have been lured hail largely from the poor classes.



## The Manipuris

The Manipuris were at one time inhabitants of Manipur kingdom on the eastern border of Assam. In 1765 with Burmese invasion on the kingdom, the Manipur King Vagya Chandra Joy Singh migrated to Cachhar district of Assam. He was followed by other Manipuris who settled in Sylhet and Tippera districts, and in the Tejgaon locality of Dacca city.

The biggest Manipuri population is in Sylhet totalling over 30,000.<sup>80</sup> Their small settlements exist in areas like Masimpur and Manipurpara in the outside of Sylhet town, Bhavugachh in Moulvi Bazar subdivision, Assampara in Habibganj division and other places.

The Manipuris are divided into two groups namely Khalachai or Vishnu Purias and Meithei. However, racial intermixing over the centuries have brought ambiguity to their real identity. This is because the kingdom of Manipur has been ruled by various tribes. Therefore, Vishnu Purias who founded the Morang Kingdom were the first rulers. Gradually the Meitheis became dominant and that name was used to describe the area.<sup>81</sup> These Meitheis were people who came from China. Presently, the original Manipuris are known by this name.

Sanskritization among them can be observed by the fact

that they claim to be born out of wedlock of Arjuna and Chitrangadha. Thus they claim to be Kshatriyas of Lunar clan. With the impact of Hinduism even before 1500 A.D., the Manipuris became its followers. Their Vaishnavite beliefs and Gaudian sects can be traced to the preachings of Premadasa Thakur, a disciple of Chaitanya Dev who came to Manipur from Bengal during the rule of Vajra Chandra Singh. This influence led to important changes in their culture, and the Manipuris changed their Meithei script to the Bengali one.

Yet they did not give up their tribal beliefs, and have been influenced by both. In fact, they are making an effort to accommodate their own Puran with the Sanskrit scriptures of Hindu.<sup>82</sup> Hinduisation among the Manipuris is also apparent from other ceremonies and beliefs. Therefore, they hire a Brahmin priest to conduct their ceremonies. Idols of Radha-Krishna, Jagannatha and Gourangya are the only ones that are seen in temples. Like the Hindus, the Manipuris also prohibit endogamy, and a man has to marry outside his clan. A class of untouchables similar to the Sudra among the Hindus also exist among Manipuris.

Simultaneously, the tribal beliefs cannot be ignored. Therefore, the Manipuris are in the habit of predicting their future by signs and omens. Like other Khasi, Murung

and Magh tribes who have superstitious beliefs about an egg, Manipuris too decide about a marriage by studying the position of the cocks feet. To elaborate, after tying a cock's feet they let it fall to the ground. If the cock lifts its right feet over the left in an 'X' sign, then it is auspicious if not, then it implies harmful consequences.

However, these beliefs are getting eroded with education, and Manipuris have now begun resorting to astrology and studying religious scriptures to predict the future.

The Meithei Manipuri language has much similarity with that of Kuku-chin. Further the Meithei alphabet has been almost replaced by the Bengali one, though a national chronicle is still maintained in the older script, where every important national event is recorded.

Economically, the Meitheis not only follow Jhum cultivation but have also developed strong craft traditions. There are a large number of carpenters, jewellers and mechanics. New opportunities for education have also been taken up, and a substantial number of Manipuri children are going to school. Though social change has also been attempted through Christian missionary activity, tribals have remained largely indifferent towards this.<sup>83</sup>

#### Manipuri Muslims

There are about 6,000 Manipuri Muslims in Sylhet (while another 100,000 reside in Assam).<sup>84</sup> The Pangyon class of Manipuris which comprised the third one, besides the Meithei and Bishnupuria classes, adopted Islam en bloc and are known as Manipuri Muslims.

The conversions are said to have occurred around the sixteenth century, though there exists a divergence of views on this. A number of factors led to the adoption of Islam: firstly, the intermarriage between the Mughal soldiers and Manipuri wives; secondly, the preaching of Islam by Muslim Saints like Baba Mangar Shah; thirdly, the further advancement of Islam by the newly converts.

Despite having embraced Islam, many tribal beliefs and practices continue to exist. Thus, the Pangyons cannot marry within their clan. Moreover, they have to limit themselves to their cousins, and cannot marry from other Muslim communities if they do not find a marriageable cousin. There are other examples too, like deciding a favourable journey if breathing from the right nostril is clearly heard, or regarding a jackal crossing the road as auspicious for a journey.<sup>85</sup>

Islamic beliefs, on the other hand make the Pangyon women observe purdah and educate themselves in the holy Quran and Hadith only. Gradually, however, the impact of

western education is being felt leading to widening horizons.

### **The Mundas**

The Mundas are originally from Chota Nagpur and both migrated towards and were brought during the British period. They reside in Dinajpur and other areas of Bangladesh.<sup>86</sup> Anthropologically, they belong to Munda-Dravidian stock and linguistically to Austro-Asiatic one along with Santal, Ho and others.

It is a patrilineal and patrilocal group. In religion they follow animism with strong Hinduising features. They worship the Supreme Deity called Singa-Bonga who lives in Heavens and can be appeased through sacrifices. The Hinduised Mundas do not worship all tribal gods. Their marriage ceremony and the custom of cremating their dead is similar to Hindus.<sup>87</sup> Social change through urbanization and Hinduisation has been effected to the extent that some of them are detribalised now.

### **The Oraons**

The Oraons inhabit the Rangpur, Dinajpur, Bogra and Rajshahi districts of Bangladesh. Their population is heavy in the former two districts. However, their exact number cannot be estimated since the census of 1961 did not place

them under a separate head.<sup>88</sup> The census of 1881 indicates that the largest number i.e., 2,825 of Oraons could be found in Rajshahi out of other areas now falling in Bangladesh. Further, it shows that they were thinly spread out in various areas now forming Bangladesh like, Bogra, Pabna, Mymensingh, Chittagong, Noakhali and Rangpur.<sup>89</sup> Their time of migration to East Pakistan is not known, though it remains for certain that they have migrated from Chota Nagpur and Rajmahal in India.

Anthropologically, Oraons are classified as pre-Dravidians. Racially, anthropologists differ on whether Oraons are an offshoot of Mundas belonging to the Malpaharias of Orissa, or are Kurukhs. Linguistically Oraons are placed as Dravidians and speak Kurukh dialect which is very similar to that spoken in Chota Nagpur and Ranchi. The Oraons like other tribals have dormitories called "Dhumkuria" which is intricately linked with their religio-cultural life.

Since Oraon families do not have enough place to accommodate a family the boys sleep separately, that is, in a Dhumkuria. Similarly the young girls do not sleep in their homes with parents, and a separate building like a Dhumkuria is provided for them.<sup>90</sup> Moreover free intermixing between boys and girls (which is tacit), religious and cultural

festivals, marriage ceremonies, and even religious sermons are held there.

A combination of animist and Hindu influences can be seen among the Oraon. Therefore, the Oraon revere the sun who they believe created the Universe. However he is neglected compared to malignant spirits, which are worshipped and offered sacrifices for appeasement lest they should harm.<sup>91</sup> Besides the Sun or Dharamesh, the Oraon worship a number of gods like, god of the village, god of the household, god of pestilence etc. The Hindu influence is also visible specially in their devotional songs on Radha and Krishna, Oraon words like Kashi, Bhagwan, Gaya in their devotional songs also reveal the extent of Bengal Hindu impact.

Social change among the Oraon is discernable as various practices are withering away. Therefore, with education Ojha medicines are being replaced by the modern system of medicine. The practice of believing and interpreting dreams as foretellers of the future is also being eroded with education. The strong prohibitions almost bordering on cruelty on menstruating women is also dying down with education. There is also an attempt on the part of the socially conscious to curb heavy drinking. Economically, Oraons are usually engaged as coolies and day-labourers besides ploughing which is further leading to social

change.<sup>92</sup>

### The Dalu

The Dalu live in Mymensingh district of Bangladesh and their villages extend from Harigaon in the north to Hatipagar, Kumargati Sangra, Juglee etc. in the South even extending to Kangsa river.<sup>93</sup> Dalu settlements though small in number can also be found in western areas of Meghalaya, on the Indian side of the Indo-Bangladesh border. The Dalu are a branch of Indo-Mongoloid tribe, and claim that they are originally from Manipur. The possibility of this claim has been aroused by the fact that when the British first came to Garo Hills, they brought Manipuri soldiers with them.<sup>94</sup> Today, however, their language and culture show no trace of Manipuri language but that of neighbouring Hajongs.

The Dalus have a sect known as Pagals. This sect traces Tipu Pagla, the leader of Pagla revolt as its ancestor. They keep long hair, long beards and mustaches. The women do not use vermillion or wear Bangles made of conch shells.

Sanskritisation process is apparent in this community as it claims to be descendants of Babrubahan the son of Arjun in Mahabharat. From this they strive to establish their Kshatriya origins. Further, having embraced Hinduism



they use the services of Srotriya Brahmins, to perform their ceremonies. Their actual status is one of Scheduled Castes since the census of 1941<sup>95</sup>

### The Banai

The Banai tribes reside both in Bangladesh, and in Western Meghalaya in India.<sup>96</sup> Their numbers in both areas are very small. In the north of Bangladesh they have settled in the villages of Gouripur of Kamalakanda thana, and in the east in Galaibhanga Gabrakhali, Ailathahi, Jamgara, Nalagara, and Ranipur. They possess great similarity with the Hajongs, sharing their birth, death and marriage ceremonies. Their main source of livelihood is agriculture. The census of 1941 has accepted their Hindu status of Scheduled Caste.<sup>97</sup>

### The Hadi

The Hadis belong to branch of Indo-Mongoloid race. They reside in Kalinagar, Nalitabari and Haluaghat in the north to the Brahmaputra in the south of Mymensingh. They are tribals who have been treated as untouchables by the high castes for years now. Sanskritization is apparent when they claim to be descendants of the Kshatriya King Haihay of Surya family, noted in the Brahmin Baibarta Purana.<sup>98</sup>

The community earns its livelihood by agriculture and other activities like trading, making articles of bamboo and cane. They also work as domestic servants of zamindars besides bailiff, guards etc. Social ban on them in Hindu society, has prevented them from taking up occupations of barbers and washermen.<sup>99</sup> Thus their constant appeals to high castes, to improve their status has been ignored.

#### Notes and References:

1. Government of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Population Census 1981: Analytical Findings and National Tables (Dhaka, 1984), Ch.10, Table 1.
2. Pierre Bessaignet, "Tribes of the Northern Borders of East Pakistan" in Pierre Bessaignet, ed., Social Research in East Pakistan (Dacca, 1960), pp.173-4.
3. Ibid., p.174. As Desai further elaborates, deliberate misrepresentation, is in fact a problem common to the subcontinent after 1909, when separate religious electorates were introduced. This pressurised the religious groups to increase their numbers in census, A.R., "Tribes in Transition" in Romesh Thapar, ed., Tribes, Caste and Religion in India (Delhi, 1977), p.17.
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## CHAPTER III

### GOVERNMENT POLICY TOWARDS TRIBALS IN THE BRITISH PERIOD

#### **Historical Background of British Entry Into North-East Frontier**

The north-east frontier of Bengal has sometimes been used to describe a boundary line, but more frequently a tract which comprises hill ranges north, east and south of Assam valley as well as the western slopes of mountains that lie between Bengal and Burma.<sup>1</sup> The British having followed a policy of non-interference in the north-east frontier, were compelled to take interest in early nineteenth century, when the trouble occurred in the Court of Ava situated across the border in Burmese territory. The British felt their defense interest threatened when the Burmese who had come to help Chunder Kant, the Raja of Assam, to suppress the internal rebellion, established themselves as rulers instead. Further, they even began advancing towards Jaintia territory that bordered Bengal, after occupying Cachar. The Burmese demand that Raja Chunder Kant not be given protection in the British territory else they would invade, further angered the British against the "ignorant and overbearing" Court of Ava.

In the Anglo-Burmese War that followed on March 1824, the British emerged victorious. By the Treaty of Yandaboo,

the King of Burma gave up any claims on Assam and its dependencies and contiguous state of Cachar and Jaintia. Consequently, upper Assam passed under British rule. However, the Government of Calcutta was strictly against absolute control of the province. The absence of any worthy native ruler on whom governance could be trusted and the constant threat of Burmese invasion made the British retain strong military control of the frontier. Those areas not needed for defensive purposes or for maintaining British troops were put under the management of native rulers. Therefore, in 1832 upper Assam except Sadiya and Muttuck was placed under a protected prince Purunder Singh, who was asked to pay tribute. However, this experiment could not continue successfully and in 1838 these territories were put under British officers and made a non-regulated province.<sup>2</sup>

#### **General Policy Towards Tribes of North-East Frontier**

Under these circumstances the British entered north-east frontier and gained control of territory, that is upper Assam. In doing this, the British inherited the legacy of violent and indefinite relationship of the Assam sovereign with the surrounding "savage" tribes. The Shan dynasty of Assam which had controlled these tribes had fallen into decay in the later years. As a result the tribes had started reasserting themselves over parts of the kingdom's territory. When the British assumed power in Assam, tribal

claims of land ownership or tributary payments from the people residing in the lower part of the hills continued. Though some of these claims had been recognized by the predecessor governments (before the Shan dynasty ousted them), the British were often unable to discover whether these claims were genuine or "barbaric<sup>c</sup> cupidity". Therefore the British carried out frequent expeditions to suppress them and protect their borders.<sup>3</sup>

Despite an active policy now and then, the general policy of the British continued to be one of non-interference where the attempt was to stay aloof and leave the tribes alone. By taking complete control of the north-east frontier they did not want the responsibility of guarding an extensive frontier. Their policy as a result *varied from tribe to tribe and from time to time*,<sup>4</sup> though a general policy can be outlined. While most of the tribes came under effective control, some remained semi-independent and others were left completely independent. Complete independence was given to tribes in the extreme north and south, since they lived in an inaccessible terrain. Tribes like Garos, Sintengs, etc. were however quickly subdued since they lived in areas surrounded by British political control. British relations with the tribes were guided chiefly by security interest, in the face of potential threat by the Court of Ava. International rivalry across the Indian border with

Russian agents carrying out menacing activities in 1899, and the hinderance posed to Tibetan-British relationship by China also made Britain adopt a cautious policy of conciliation.<sup>5</sup>

From 1843 onwards, the local authorities replaced the policy of non-interference by one of slow and steady penetration. The Supreme Government was however strictly opposed to this, and tried to prevent and even reprimanded the local authorities for following an expansionist policy at such a time.<sup>6</sup> For them this policy would increase the financial crunch that they (British) faced due to wars with Afghanistan, Sindh and Punjab. Further, such a policy could create political disturbance which in turn would adversely affect the supply of labour to the tea estates. Tea industry (which had become a major source of material prosperity) would have to incur huge losses as a result.<sup>7</sup>

The policy of conciliation which the Home Government emphasized, however, could not last long and was soon replaced by a forward policy. This change was not a premeditated and calculated one, but one that was resorted to in the continuing unfavourable circumstances for the British.<sup>8</sup> The tribes burdened with a completely new system of police and revenue organization could not reconcile themselves to it. Loss of Rights over land and forests which were the

most precious of their possessions, created deep resentment. Moreover, they could not give up the tribal customs like head-hunting where a scalp was needed to honour the dead, or the practice of inter-tribal warfare which they had followed for generations. The British practice of dealing with the chiefs when actual authority lay with the Council of elders, or each individual was his own master also failed to stop tribal raids. Consequently, numerous missions peaceful and otherwise were sent out but could not yield enough positive results, as the tribes refused to submit to British authority. The policy of blockade of "duars" or mountain passes, towards tribes who depended heavily on trade e.g. Khasi and Garo, made them surrender temporarily but they would flout British authority as soon as it was withdrawn. Similarly, military expeditions proved to be a temporary restraining factor, and the tribes continued their raids and counter-raids. The British were faced with the options of total control or total withdrawal. Withdrawing completely from the hills would not have solved the British problems, because raids from the tribals would continue, arousing the possibility of even eviction of the British themselves. Therefore, even a non-interventionist like Lord Dalhousie was forced to agree that the only alternative left to them was, "to assert British authority over these tribes and to bring them under a system suited to their circumstances."

The shift in the British Government's perspective towards the north-east frontier led to a forward policy where administrative changes were carried out. The objective was to tighten the control of the local authorities over the areas that were under British control. The attempt was to establish a form of government that people would accept and which met their needs, without a substantial change in the existing institutions. Even in the defense of the frontier emphasis was to be laid on militias composed of tribes. Such an army would also be more familiar with the climate and the hilly terrain, thereby serving the British interest. Simultaneously, the British strived towards "civilizing" the tribes who lived in "utter backwardness" through various ways like Christianity, education and commerce. By doing this, the British felt they could control the tribes since purely coercive means were inadequate in bringing normalcy in these areas. Therefore, though missionaries have preceded colonial rule in many parts of the world, in the north-east they were established as a result of political decision.<sup>9</sup>

The British moved carefully towards these objectives. The immediate aim was not to bring all tribes under British control but to protect the lowlands from tribal raids. The policy of "laissez faire" was continued with regard to the inaccessible and extreme south or north. Even within areas

under British control the local authorities were directed not to interfere in the inter-tribal feuds unless it involved British subjects. As Inner Line Regulations came to be established the policy of slow but steady aggression was halted thereby greatly reducing the possibility of conflict with various tribes.

### **British Policy Towards Khasis**

Till 1835, some areas in Sylhet formed a part of the Jaintia kingdom with its capital Jaintiapur, a town in Bangladesh. The Jaintia kingdom was regarded by the British, as one of the more powerful Khasi states. In pre-historic times, the Khasis had broken up into numerous small communities under their respective heads. Depending on the chief's ambition, neighbouring communities would be brought under control till it was broken up again as decay set in and another chief grew stronger. When the Khasis were first discovered they were organized along lines similar to that in early nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Therefore while Jaintias or Syntengs had a Raja, the other Khasis shared a confederacy of small oligarchical republics.

The kingdom of Jaintia originally consisted of three parts: Jaintia hills and plains in Sylhet and Nowgong districts. The hill portion was the original home of the ruling family and comprised the Jawal subdivision and part of Shillong sub-division. The boundaries of the kingdom were formed on the east by Keerowah and Kapili rivers which separated it from Cachar, the former flowing from the southern face of the mountain





chains the Surma; and the Kapili on the north into the Kallang which latter river separated Jaintia from Assam on the north; on the west it was bounded by Khyriem State from whence the line ran southwards along Piyain and on reaching the plains was deflected in a south-easterly direction along the Baram and Telikhal rivulets in Sylhet district until it reached the Surma; on the south the Surma formed the boundary except in Satbak Porgana."<sup>11</sup>

The Sylhet district comprised the plains and contained Jaintia parganas within Kanaighat and Gowainghat tehsils.

The Jaintia kingdom first came into contact with the British in 1774 when it invaded the neighbouring Sylhet and the British retaliated by a successful expedition against them. In 1821, the Jaintia kingdom again aroused the anger of the British when an attempt was made to carry off a British subject for immolation. This time a warning was given to the king that in case of a repetition of this act, his territory would be confiscated. Since the British were pursuing a policy of non-interference in the north-east they did not provide a permanent solution to this problem, except strengthening their patrol at borders.

However, with Burmese invasion into Assam and its advancement towards Jaintia the British were galvanized into action. They insisted on an alliance with the Jaintia king under the impression that he commanded a number of Hill-Chiefs, to repel the Burmese and threatened dire consequences if he did not agree. In the treaty that followed on

10 March 1824, the British entered into a treaty of "amity and friendship" with the Raja. Further, the Raja promised to provide military assistance to the British against the Burmese, and in return was offered a part of Assam after the conquest was complete. Subsequently however, the Raja was unable to give substantial material help either in Anglo-Burmese war or in suppressing the rebellious Khasi chiefs. In fact, the British alleged that the Raja had encroached on some land in Assam in the course of war and ensuing confusion.

That there was a discernible change in the policy of the local British authorities towards the hill tribes, is obvious from the letter Captain Fischer, Superintendent of Cachar wrote to Captain Jenkins on 16 April 1832. According to him, the Jaintia territory was very fertile and capable of bringing a substantial revenue of a lakh and a half rupee. Therefore "...we have made a very unsatisfactory bargain in accepting a military service in place of tribute, and that the sooner we amend that part of our treaty the better."<sup>12</sup> This was in sharp contrast to the nature of fines and impositions made on the tribes until then. Hitherto, impositions had been made not as revenue measures but as retribution for the offence committed whether by a chief or a community, and sought to cover the expenses and trouble incurred by the administrations with due

consideration given to the payer's financial capacity. British collections had been limited to this because they realized that not only could cost outweigh the collection, but also a considerable risk was involved if tribute was demanded.

The opportunity to revise the treaty soon presented itself with the death of Raja Ram Singh in 1832. Following this the British declared that the treaty was a personal one and had elapsed with the Raja's death. They agreed to recognize the successor king on the condition that he paid a tribute of Rs.10,000 in return for the protection that the British provided him. A pretext for increasing this pressure was provided by the immolation of three British subjects before Goddess Kali in the Jaintia kingdom. In the light of past warnings the British began threatening him with dire consequences, two months after the new agreement was spurned by the successor.

The successor king defended himself against this unfair imposition of tribute on the basis that the major portion of the revenue came as personal service and only a small amount came in cash which in turn was used towards maintenance of the establishment. This was in keeping with the long established customs and the king could change this only at the cost of his throne, and even his life. In fact, the Raja was the head of a confederacy of Muntrees and could not take

any decision without prior permission of the these Muntrees or Heads of Hill States. With British refusal to recognize the new king, the latter's position vis-a-vis the Heads had grown even weaker. As a result, the Raja of Gobha who was alleged to be involved in the human sacrifice refused to surrender the culprits even at the Raja's insistence, showing latter's innocence.

After reviewing all the facts, the Agent to the Governor-General entertained grave doubts about the king's complicity in the human sacrifice. Further, he argued for recognition of the king's title and withdrawal of the tribute, because "there was no document" mentioning that the treaty was a personal one. The Governor General, however, decided otherwise holding the king responsible for the immolation and considering it as sufficient reason to annex Sylhet and take possession of the territory of Gobha. The king quietly resigned from the ownership of the rest of the territory as well and retired to Sylhet.

This immolation affair shows that instead of giving the Raja benefit of doubt in the absence of substantial evidence, he was dealt with severely so that British material interest could be met. Moreover, the very practice of human sacrifice shows that people belonged to a radically different or "utterly backward" culture. To apply the "civilized"

or western laws and procedures to them while meting out justice was unfair.

On the other hand, the Court of Directors at Home, who always stood for non-interference considered this "an act of impropriety and breach of good faith." Since the deed was already done, they directed the Governor General to treat the "unfortunate chief" with "every reasonable indulgence." They went on to reprimand that "...we desire you not on any future occasion to have recourse to so extreme an measure without a previous reference to our authorities."<sup>13</sup>

In the hill tracts, the Raja had hitherto been a nominal suzerain over nineteen petty districts. Having been deprived of territory in the plains, he decided to relinquish these as well. Fifteen of these hill districts were under a Dolloies or headman elected by the villagers, while the rest were administered by three hereditary Sirdars. The tribute given to the Jaintia king had been limited to one he-goat from each village, in addition to a few seers of rice and firewood that was needed for the yearly religious ceremonies. Further, the villagers cultivated the king's lands in turns. Some income was also probably earned through the dues that were imposed on the trade between the plains and the hills.

Despite falling under British control from 1835, the

Syntengs till 1855 were left alone. Therefore, the Dolloies still enjoyed power and heard all civil cases till 1841, and after it upto a certain limit. Similarly criminal cases which were not heinous in nature could be adjudicated by them after 1841. No taxes were levied and the traditional tribute of a he-goat continued to be paid annually.

Gradually, however the British began to complain of the extent of corruption, and the encroachment into Raj lands indulged in by the Dolloies. Clearly, the British feared the powerful Dolloies and sought to curb them. In 1853, Mr. Mills said that in keeping with the attempt by some people to assert their independence, a Police Thana should be established. This was carried out at Jowai. In 1858, Mr. Allen suggested that the Syntengs should be made to pay something in order to make them recognize the supremacy of the British government. A mild taxation, according to him, would control the aggressive tribals as it had done among the Ho of Singhbhum district.

Consequently, in 1860 a house tax was levied and within a few months the people rebelled. Though it was soon crushed it led to administrative changes. The Civil Officer posted at Cherra was given the power to remove the Dolloies for misbehaviour, but the power of the latter were simultaneously increased. All crimes had to be reported to the police, including misbehaviour of Dolloies. However,

the police was directed not to interfere in the internal affairs of the village.

The revolt had barely subsided, when the British government under financial pressure introduced another tax, namely income tax on the people already burdened with house tax. Though the tax for 1860-61 was paid, it generated great resentment against the British, which increased when headmen were also included under this tax in 1861. Further, the British auctioned the right to cut timber in certain areas to the highest bidder as a result of which the villagers could no longer procure timber, fuel, thatch etc. Though the profit British reaped was small, it had serious repercussions on the tribals for whom this was completely alien and irksome. The corrupt officers at Cherra who often took advantage of the Synteng's unfamiliarity with the Western institutions of courts and laws and reaped huge incomes, further added to discontent. Meantime, the shields and swords of the tribals had not only been taken away but were also burnt in the tribals presence after the revolt. For Syntengs, these were important heirlooms which were needed for "pujas" and for protection against wild animals.<sup>14</sup> The presence of the thana had been closely followed by the establishment of school where the Syntengs were told to become Christians or face dire consequences. These woes reached a boiling point with the behaviour of a

daroga who interrupted a religious ceremony by making people speak out and surrender their shields. Speaking on solemn religious ceremonies was strictly prohibited and the tribals could tolerate no more.

Under the leadership of the headmen (who felt sidelined under the new system) the Syntengs revolted again in 1862 and it could not be suppressed till November, 1863. Even after its suppression, a large amount of arms were not surrendered by some rebels. The British government tried to win their confidence through various ways, including using the good offices of friendly chiefs. The rebels however continued to defy the government, and demanded complete independence.

Consequently, the Government of Bengal was forced to change its views and resorted to violent suppression of the rest of the rebels. By 1864 the hills had been completely pacified. Cecil Beadon reorganized the hill administration along the policy of direct management. According to him,

A main principle to be adopted in dealing with these people when they have been made to understand and feel the power of the Government and have submitted to its authority is not to leave them in their old state, but, while adopting a simple plan of Government suitable to their present condition and circumstances, and interfering as little as possible with existing institutions, to extend our intercourse with them, endeavour to introduce among them civilization and order.<sup>15</sup>



Therefore, an English officer was posted at Jaintia Hills and he was expected to visit every village under his supervision at least once a year. Further, he and his subordinates were expected to know Khasi language so that an interpreter was not required. The village Dolloies was to be elected by the people, but also required the civil officer's approval who could remove him for misconduct. In co-operation with other village headmen panchayats were to be formed which could enjoy limited civil and criminal jurisdiction. In important cases, the British officer could revise the decision. The Dolloies and Sirdars were given the responsibility of Police falling in their jurisdiction and the Regular Police was asked to interfere only in case of a revolt or to support the authority of Dolloies. Education was also to be encouraged, and the Welsh Mission of Christian missionaries that was already established in 1841,<sup>16</sup> was to be used towards this purpose. The country was to be opened up by eight lines of road equalling 218 miles in length. The Income Tax had been almost completely removed, and though the house tax was retained, a cautious approach was adopted so that no injustice would result during assessment.

Under the British rule the rapid integration of Syntengs into 'civilization' began. Tribal organization was replaced by the administrative and economic apparatus of the

colonial rule. The authority of the Raja was ended, and that of the Dolloies greatly reduced and changed. The tribals learnt to pay tax to a centralized modern state for resources which they had always considered as their right. Social change was also introduced as the practice of human sacrifice was outlawed.

### **British Policy Towards Garos**

The Mymensingh district of Bangladesh today, has a significant population of Garos residing in its border areas. The Garos were the first tribe with whom the British came into contact in the north-eastern frontier. The Dewani of Bengal granted by Mughal emperor Shah Alam II in 1765, which gave the British the right to oversee and collect revenue from areas falling under Presidency of Bengal included estates bordering Garo Hills. The Garo Hills (where the Garo tribe resided) was surrounded by a few important estates under the control of Zamindars. These were Karai-bari, Kalumalupara, Mechpara and Habraghat in Rangpur, and Sherpur and Susung in the Mymensingh district of Bengal. The estate of Bijni was in the Eastern Duar.

### **Pre-British Period: The Mughal Rule**

Under the Mughal rule these estates had acted as a buffer between the tribes and the Mughals by maintaining

estate - police and "Barkandazes" to prevent tribal raids. While these zamindars or Choudhries acknowledged the sovereignty of the Mughal Raja, they had in turn subjugated and reduced to the status of ryots the Garo and other clans like Hajongs, Koch, Meches etc. that resided in the plains at the foot of the Garo Hills. The Hill Garos also depended on the Zamindars for the trade of their goods. A nominal tribute was given by the Zamindars to the Mughal Court, which was collected by the Fauzdar appointed for this purpose with headquarters at Rangamati, in Rangpur. The internal management of these estates however was left to the Zamindars. Through this policy the Mughals not only maintained the goodwill of locally influential persons in distant areas but were also spared the trouble of controlling an inaccessible terrain.

The tribute paid by these Zamindars was drawn from miscellaneous cesses called "sayer" and not from "mal" i.e., land revenue. This sayer was collected by taxing the traders at the local markets or "hats" established at various hill passes in their estates. Cotton, which was a major article of inland trade in eastern India was sold by the hill Garos to Bengali traders in exchange for daily necessities like rice, cows, earthern pots, salt etc. The Zamindars imposed various duties on goods and exploited the Garos. Similarly by charging exorbitant prices from them

the Bengali traders shifted the burden of tax on the Garos. Even the Fauzdar was involved in making profits for himself, little of which was deposited in the state treasury.

The excessive exploitation, together with the traditional need for human heads for funeral rites, and slaves, led to occasional tribal raids in plains. The Zamindars resorted to various ways of repelling them ranging from using the Barkandazes to bribing them.

### **British Rule**

The British on assuming power in 1765 allowed this situation to continue and followed the policy of conscious avoidance,<sup>17</sup> since they did not want this territory under direct control. However, as the conflict between the zamindars and the Garos increased with numerous raids and counter expeditions, the frontier was no longer peaceful. This led to a change in the policy of British who now wanted to intervene. Though the ostensible cause for intervening was to establish a peaceful frontier and free the Garos from the exploitative control of zamindars, the ulterior motive was British desire to tap the natural resources of the hills and increase profits from the trade of cotton. Further, the revenue of the British had suffered as the people in the plains migrated elsewhere, under attack with the tribal raids.

With the entry of British authority in Bengal, overseas mercantile trade in Garo cotton had developed. The zamindars on realizing the possibility of huge profits if they monopolized this trade, tried to become absolute middlemen between Garos and outside businessmen. Further, they began forcing the tribals to sell their goods in hats falling in their estates. The cult of colonialism introduced by the British gave a boost to this endeavour, and the zamindars embarked on territorial expansion to achieve their interests.<sup>18</sup> This expansion into the hills was followed by tribal retaliation through raids to prevent it. In 1775-76 the Zamindars of Karaibara and Mechpara invaded the hills. This brought them into conflict with other zamindars, specially those of Sherpur and Susung in the south. To increase trade in his estate, the karaibari chief, Mahendranarayan tried to prevent trading in the hats of Mymensingh by blockading hill passes. He also captured the Renghta chief whose people used to trade in Mymensingh. When the Renghta chief pleaded for British help, the latter got an opportunity to interfere in Garo affairs.

The British were in favour of removing the office of zamindar and dealing directly with the chiefs since this would enhance their profits. Therefore, in 1788, under Governor General's instructions, the collection of sayer was outlawed on the Mymensingh frontier. Further, Sherpur and

Susung were assessed like other Zamindars of Bengal and were asked to give tributes in money. For the losses they incurred with the loss of sayer they were compensated. In Mymensingh regular administration was established and the zamindars were no longer needed to provide defence since the government's forces were stationed now. However, in practice the government did not collect any dues even if it had the authority to do so. As a result the zamindars continued to levy various taxes on Garos illegally.

Meantime, on other frontiers of Garo hills tribal raids continued which now and then affected the Mymensingh frontier too. Therefore, the regulation of 1822 was passed for Goalpara side, to bring peace on those frontiers. The aim was to remove the tribals from under the control of Zamindars, and impose a new administrative set up which would nevertheless, be suited to tribal customs also. In this way tribals were to be put under direct and introduced to "civilised" life.<sup>19</sup>

#### **Permanent Settlement**

Meantime, with the Permanent Settlement of Bengal under Lord Cornwallis the terms between zamindars and Government, and the Zamindars and tenants was decided permanently. This was applied to Sherpur and Susung in Mymensingh only, since they were already under regular administration of Government

and not to the estates of Rangpur which were semi-independent. Despite assessment of the Mymensingh estates the British government remained unaware of the extent of wastelands, pasturelands etc. in these estates. Since both these estates included hill areas where Garos and other tribes lived, the absence of adequate supervision allowed the Zamindars to continue extracting illegal duties and tributes from Garos and others.

The process of "civilizing" the Garos was carried out through other effective means of education and proselytizing also. In a letter dated 27 April 1825 Scott wrote to W.B. Bayley, Secretary to the Government:

I am satisfied that nothing permanently good can be obtained by other means, and that if we do not interfere on behalf of the poor Garos they will soon become Hindoos or half Hindoos, retaining and acquiring many of the bad parts of both their present and improved creeds. I would greatly prefer two or more Moravian Missionaries of the old school who along with religion would teach the useful arts. If Government would ensure them subsistence only in the case of success or of my death, I would willingly take upon myself the expense in the first instance, and £300 per annum would suffice. Of success I have no more doubt than that, if allowed, you could make Christians of the Hindoo boys; and the great error of the Missionaries appears to me to be that of directing their attention to polished natives instead of rude tribes who are still in that state of national childhood which enables the stranger priest to act the school-master and teach them what he likes.<sup>20</sup>

Since religious neutrality was the declared policy of the government, the Secretary wrote back, "The Government could

not well give a salary to the people who might be employed in their capacity of missionaries, but they might call them school-masters and give assistance in that shape."<sup>21</sup> The Bishop Heber of Calcutta was enthusiastic about this programme. He pointed out the political advantage that the Government would draw,

...from having a tribe of hardy and warlike mountaineers in an almost inspregnable country, on the flank of our Burmese neighbours and in the rear of Bengalee subjects attached to us by the sense of benefit received, and by the still closer ties of language, religion and identity of feeling and interest."<sup>22</sup>

Accordingly, Bengali medium schools, medical centres were established, and the Garo dialect was developed into a written language with initially a Bengali, and later a Roman script. By 1912, 64% of the converts in Garo Hills were a result of these schools.<sup>23</sup>

In 1824, with the outbreak of Anglo-Burmese war the Zamindars of Mymensingh once again got an opportunity to exploit the Garos. The burden of British demand for material help in war on the Zamindars was passed on to the Garo and other peasants by levying various taxes. The tribal peasantry which was already facing feudal exploitation from the Zamindars now revolted under the leadership of Tiphu, a Fakir. Tiphu was the leader of a sect called "Pagal" by others for their belief that Tiphu and his mother possessed



supernatural powers. Therefore, the followers believed that British artillery power would prove impotent in front of their leader's powers. The strength of this sect grew as increasing number of peasants from Garo, Mech, Hajong tribes became his followers in the hope of ending Zamindar's exploitation. Tipu organized and armed his men, and in 1824 finding the British occupied elsewhere declared that the latter's rule would end soon. Under his leadership this revolt continued for a few months until it was finally suppressed by the British forces.<sup>24</sup>

The Government of Bengal in an attempt to resolve the dispute permanently demarcated the boundary between Garo and other cultivators on one hand and the Zamindars on the other. Further, a certain amount was fixed for lands under British control, which had to be paid to the government and the Zamindars agreed not to increase it in future. Copies of this agreement were distributed to the tribal chiefs, who assured that no tribal raids would take place in future. However, the British government was apprehensive and not only was Rangpur Light Infantry established but thanas were also set up in Sherpur and Durgapur in Mymensingh, besides Goalpara, Karaibari etc.

Trouble was revived on various frontiers of Garo hills as raids began. The Commissioner of Assam complained in 1859 that the British policy of closing the 'hats' whereby

the Garos would be denied daily necessities was not proving effective and he suggested military expeditions as a solution. When fresh trouble broke out in Mymensingh a strong military expedition was sent to suppress the Garos.

Yet the British government continued to follow a policy of conciliation and in 1869 in a Despatch the Secretary of State for India commented,

But however necessary it may be to teach the inhabitants of these wild districts that they are not inaccessible to the power of Government, it is very clear that we cannot hope to reclaim them from their savage habits or to introduce amongst them a higher state of civilization by the mere display of military strength. These objects can only be effected by peaceful means and by gradually increasing our intercourse with them....<sup>25</sup>

Further, he suggested various ways in which this could be achieved like learning to converse with them in their own language, or increase in their trade.

#### **Forward Policy Towards Hill Garos**

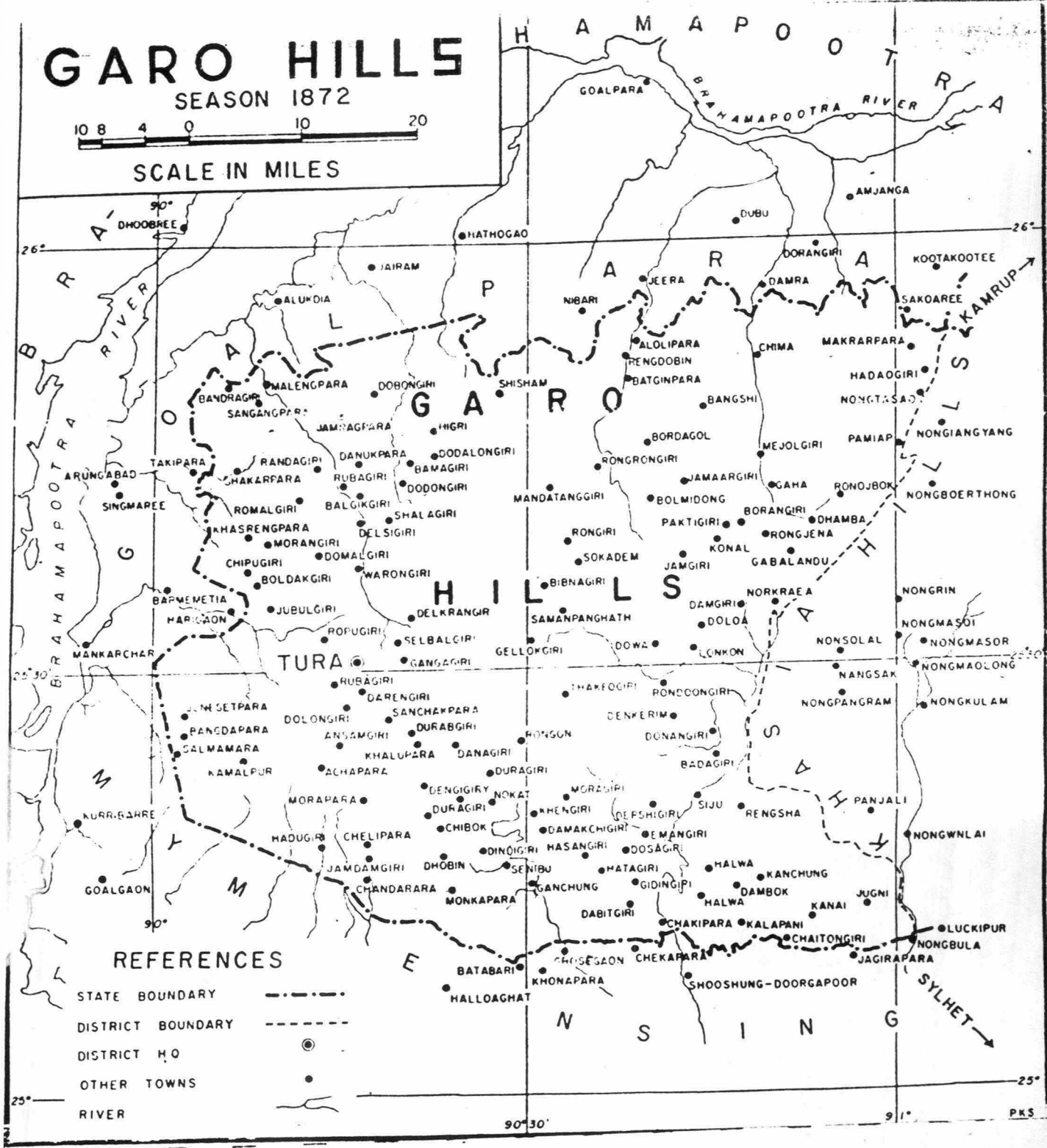
The continuing outbursts in Mymensingh like the one in December 1863 when a Hajong family was murdered by independent Garos gradually forced the latter to adopt a forward policy. The British discovered that encroachment on tribal areas by the zamindars of Mymensingh had led independent Garos to raid the plains. Therefore, a direct control of these areas which gave effect to the intention of Regulation

# GARO HILLS

SEASON 1872



SCALE IN MILES



## REFERENCES

- STATE BOUNDARY
- DISTRICT BOUNDARY
- DISTRICT H.O. ●
- OTHER TOWNS ●
- RIVER

Source:

Jayanta Bhushan Bhattacharjee, The Garos and the English 1765-1864 (New Delhi, 1978), pp 48

X of 1822 was suggested. As a result the Regulation of 1869 was passed whereby a Garo Hills district was formed with its headquarters at Tura, directly under British control. With this Act the illegal authority of the Zamindars over hill Garos was completely ended. The Garo Hills was defined as surrounded on the north and west by the district of Goalpara, on the south by the district of Mymensingh and on the east by the Khasi Hills. Further it,

...empowered the Lieutenant Governor to prevent the collection therein by Zemindars and others of cesses, etc., on and pretence whatever; and authorized him to make such compensation to these Zemindars as he might deem proper. It also provides that in case of boundary disputes the matter should be decided by such officers as the Lieutenant Governor might appoint, whose decision should be final.<sup>26</sup>

With this Regulation the government embarked on a process of slow and steady penetration. They passed various regulations which not only isolated the Garo Hills from the Bengalis in the name of "Garo-Bengalee strife", but also followed it up by a policy of colonial exploitation. Therefore the Regulation of 1876 prohibited the entry of non-tribal people for trading etc. without a licence. The Regulation of 1882 went even further, and deprived the Garos themselves of the forest resources by declaring fourteen of them "reserved".<sup>27</sup>

The British policies had socio-economic and political

impact on the Garos. As the British rule penetrated the political isolation of the Garos ended and they no longer existed as independent clans at war with one another. In fact the integration of clans led to the emergence of a Garo identity. The role of Nokmas or "Chiefs" also underwent radical transformation. They became more powerful than they had hitherto been, performing the role of Government agents. Therefore, though the affairs of the clan had always been managed by common consent, the Nokmas were now given civil, criminal and revenue authority under the district official.<sup>28</sup>

By regarding the Nokma as the owner of the Akhing when the traditional role had been one of a supervisor and custodian, the concept of private property was introduced and replaced the practice of communal ownership of property. This led to the emergence of a landed class which used labour on their cotton farms. The labour came from the ranks of landless peasantry. This in turn not only led to the introduction of money, but also the accumulation of capital in a few heads.

To "civilize" the "savage" Garos the British used administrative and other methods. The institution of nokmas was expected to end the practice of head-hunting, raids, witchcraft etc. besides collecting revenue. Education and Christianity were also important in this regard. By teach-

ing the virtues of Christianity the British believed they could be pacified. This, in turn, led to both positive and negative consequences. The positive role could be seen in the erosion of superstitious beliefs and the rising number of educated. Today, some Garos can even speak a little English, and are employed in the Armed Forces and Garo schools as teachers. The women have also been joining as nurses in hospitals.<sup>29</sup> On the negative side, is the division of Garos into Songariks (non-Christians) and Christians. As the latter began giving up many of the traditional beliefs, it led to tension between both the groups. Thus, among the Christians traditional music was replaced by Christian hymns, and folk dance by Western dances. The practice of keeping long hair, turbans, pugrees, etc. were changed. Instead, the wealthier began wearing western dresses, and the poorer shorts, skirts, etc.<sup>30</sup> In language, the introduction of Roman script reversed the cultural intermixing that had been taking place for centuries between Bengali traders and Garos.<sup>31</sup>

The economic exploitation that the British attempted after the establishment of political authority, was soon limited to imposing dues on the collection of timber and other forest resources. Therefore, the British did not develop mineral and other industries due to various problems. They found the quality and variety of cotton low, and

the geographical hindrances too many to allow tapping of mineral resources. The chief British interest these areas now met was that of security.

Since Jhum cultivation was increasingly unable to meet the growing population, and the indigenous industry had greatly suffered with no new industries developing, the limited communication that had grown became a means of migrating to more lucrative areas. The educated Garos took to white collar jobs and a middle class began emerging.

#### **British Policy Towards Other Tribes**

The other tribes like the Hajong, Rajbansi, Banai, Koch, Dalu and Hadi, also came to be affected by the changing land system under the British rule. As early as eighteenth century after the Dewani of Bengal passed under British control, the old order was replaced and the Rajas and Zamindars were put under British protection. This stressful situation led to the Sanyasi rebellion in 1763. Not only did the Hajong ancestor, Bhupal Giri, participate in it, but Charantala in the north of Sherpur was the first base of the Sanyasis.<sup>32</sup>

In 1793, a major change in the land tenure system was introduced with the Permanent Settlement. This created a class of Zamindars who were loyal to the British and

wielded substantial political power. Below the Zamindars were created talukdars, jotedars, pattanidars, etc. At times the number of intermediaries ranged from twelve to twenty five. Though the revenue was fixed, the peasants ultimately paid a much higher amount. This was because from the zamindars to the lowest official various types of illegal payments were exacted, whether through force or fraud. Therefore, the peasant paid poll tax, travel and boarding cost of the tehsildar (revenue collector), daily wages of the bailiff etc. Under this system, as a result, the peasants felt deprived even of their former land.

The tribals opposed this now and again, in early nineteenth century. Therefore, the Hajongs revolted against the compulsory elephant catching (Kheda) imposed by the Zamindars of Susong on them. This practice of selling elephants in Dacca, Murshidabad and Delhi earned the Zamindar's money and fame, while the Hajongs had to give compulsory unpaid labour. In the Hajong revolt under Mona Sardar, the Garo chiefs also joined it making it a major peasant revolt of Susong Pargana which continued for five years before it was finally suppressed. Following this revolt the practice of forced labour was stopped. Another revolt began, in 1820 when the Zamindars made forcible illegal extractions from the peasants. Two years later Tipu Pagalpanthi of Susong was invited to it in Sherpur. Though



this revolt was suppressed by the British, it was resumed. Under two Hadi chiefs, Janku Pathar and Dubraj Pathar in 1831. It was only as late as 1833 that it could be finally suppressed.<sup>33</sup>

The Tenancy Act of 1859, further served feudal interest. In the background of this Act, Tanka, Bhowali and Nankar systems of land revenue were introduced. The Tanka system was continued even after independence in East Pakistan (unlike the Bhowali and Nankar systems), and the struggle against it too was a long drawn out one extending into the post-independence era.

Under the Tanka system the tenant or the ryot had to pay the Zamindar a fixed amount of his produce for the land. Therefore, the payment was in kind. In case of poor or no crops due to unavoidable reasons like excessive rainfall, drought etc. the farmer still had to pay the fixed amount. Further, the cost incurred in fertilisers, farm implements etc. had to be born by the peasant. The Tonk land was initially leased out by the Zamindar for one year, and later on a permanent basis. Every year the Zamindar increased his share of the produce by leasing it out to the same person on a higher rent, or to another at a newly fixed rate. The Zamindar demanded half the share of the produce, and in case of failure of crops the peasant had to buy or borrow the zamindar's share of fixed amount. In case of arrear the

rent was collected along with interest and there were times when the peasant had to part with the whole produce to pay the Zamindar. Moreover, the Zamindar like the Mahajans began fixing the arrear rent on the basis of highest price of that crop. The crops, as a result, were collected on the price and interest of the whole amount. On being unable to pay, the peasant lost his oxen, cows and almost everything he owned. In case of death of a tenant his successor had to pay the arrear though the latter's ownership to Tonk land was not recognised. This Tonk system was widespread specially in Susong area and the Hajong peasants were its main victims.<sup>34</sup>

Under the Nankar system, the tenant was forced to do free labour for the Zamindars for a certain period in a month or in a year, in exchange for temporary ownership of land. The Hadis of Sherpur Pargana who were the chief victims, however, began a movement against it in 1930 drawing inspiration from Marxism-Leninism. As a result it was abolished in the British period itself.

The Bhowali system was limited to certain areas of Sherpur Pargana like Dhanshail, Bhatpur, Kanduli, Thinnagali etc. and was imposed on the Rajbansi and Hajong peasants. However, the Rajbansis succeeded in abolishing it by about 1939, under the leadership of Balai Sarkar and Kalais Sar-

kar.

The Zamindars also made huge profits by giving away on terms fixed according to the produce, the most productive land known as 'demesne' or khas Khamar lands. Further, the peasants were subjected to the Khamar system, whereby the former were often left empty handed after paying the money-lender the principal amount loaned, and interest on it. Consequently between the two world wars there was a sharp increase in the landless labourers who were evicted from lands. The tribes subjected to this were the Hajong, Dalu, Banai, Koch and Garo tribes.

Yet another commonly practiced method of exploiting the tribals was, using the reserved forests and jungles to collect taxes in exchange for forest products and grazing cattle. The system of daily or weekly hats was also used to collect taxes from peasants.

Failure to pay the taxes or return the moneylender's loans etc. led to physical torture of peasants in detention camps set up for the purpose. Here, even the women and children were not spared.

The Mundas like the others also faced radical change when the elaborate administrative and revenue system was imposed on them in Chota Nagpur. As a result they were forced to migrate to north-east India. This colonial rule

was alien to the tribals who unlike now had given only voluntary contribution to the Raja in the form of quit-rent and support during war. With the British entry excise duty, issuing of licences and revenue stamps were introduced. Further, the Raja was made a tributary in 1771, and later given the position of a Zamindar who was also expected to maintain law and order by establishing a thana.<sup>35</sup>

The woes of the Mundas worsened when the Raja Zamindar gave 'pattas' or villages to traders in return for their services. These newly formed Zamindars combined with moneylenders from outside, and corrupt police officials to evict the Mundas from their land by force or legal methods.

The Munda's ignorance of the British courts and their laws could not prove their ownership through oral evidence. Therefore by declaring the voluntary contributions of the tribals which were paid collectively, as individual rent to be paid to the feudal chief the Munda peasants were reduced to ryots. In this new revenue system loss of ownership occurred in other ways too. The reduced authority of the village "Pahan" who had always performed the role of an intermediary between the deities and the people led to a clash between him and the new village official deputed by the Government. The bickering between the two often led to a delay in the payment of rent collection, which the Zamin-

dars exploited to declare the revenue in arrear and auction the land.

Steeped in poverty due to loss of land, the Mundas began migrating towards the north-east in search of employment in the tea gardens of Assam or indigo plantations. In four years from 1864-1867 the labour in tea gardens of Assam rose to 12,369 of which more than half were tribal people.<sup>36</sup>

The upward migration of Santals in history too has been in similar circumstances. Harassed by the Mahajan, a negligent British administration whose preoccupation was revenue collection and corrupt policemen the Santals soon lost their land. From 1810 onwards the Santals began moving upward. Each time they cleared a new part of a forest and started a village the crafty outsiders would persuade them to sell their surplus land in return for loans. This would soon culminate in the outsider acquiring the best land in the village and ousting the indebted Santal.<sup>37</sup> The British in turn also made efforts to settle Santals in areas now called Bangladesh. Therefore the agricultural Santals were settled in the Chittagong hills,<sup>38</sup> besides tea plantations of Sylhet.

Thus, it can be concluded that a deep penetration into tribal life was effected through various British policies. The tribal institutions began breaking down as their assim-

lation into the larger society began, bringing with it much stress, manifested in the recurring revolts.

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## CHAPTER IV

### GOVERNMENT POLICY UNDER PAKISTANI AND BANGLADESHI PERIODS

With partition some of the tribals like Garos, Khasis, etc. became part of East Pakistan and then Bangladesh, even while a majority of their brothers remained in India. This has been described as arbitrary by some who feel the boundary demarcation made by Radcliffe Boundary Award gave little importance to ethnic homogeneity or geographical contiguity.<sup>1</sup> As a result the tribals (as a whole) constituted .64% of the total population (1971 Census), which was distinct from the ethnically homogeneous majority of East Pakistan and then Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, the political system over the years has been increasingly unable to accommodate the different ethnic identity of the tribals.

#### **Government Policy in Pakistani Period: The Role of Islam**

In the post-1947 period, Islam became one of the most important guidelines for the country's policy, which overwhelmed the non-Muslim minorities. This was manifested in the Objectives Resolution passed in March 1949 which emphasised Islam as the source of constitutional principles. Though it contained the clause that, "adequate provision shall be made for the minorities freely to profess and practice their religion and develop their cultures" it

appeared ambiguous. It was not clear who would decide what "adequate" was. On the other hand, the Objectives Resolution accepted the ultimate sovereignty of Allah, "and the authority which he has delegated to the State of Pakistan through its people for being within the limits prescribed by him is a sacred trust...." In the third clause, it was stated that the "principles of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice as enunciated by Islam shall be fully observed." Therefore once again the concepts were outlined within the framework of Islam. The fourth clause stated, "Muslims shall be enabled to order their lives in the individual and collective spheres in accord with the teachings and requirements of Islam as set out in the Holy Quran and the Sunnah." This provided that the spiritual and secular lives of both Pakistani Muslims and non-Muslims would be determined by the principles of Islam.<sup>3</sup>

The minorities in East Pakistan felt further sidelined with the subsequent developments. The Muslim League in order to derive political and financial advantages, at times connived in riots. In this way, it sought to destroy Hindu-Muslim relations and consolidate its power.<sup>4</sup> At other times, it averted a political or economic crisis by creating communal tension and declaring 'Islam is in danger' or 'Pakistan is in danger'.<sup>5</sup> For example, when the language movement began in 1952 against the imposition of Urdu, the

then Chief Minister of the Province Nurul Amin stated that Hindus besides the Pakistan National Congress had secretly led the movement.<sup>6</sup>

In the communal riots that broke out in 1950, the tribals which formed a small segment of the non-Muslim minority, also felt the adverse impact. Therefore, in the villages of Dhamai, Baradhami, Pubghat, Mandigaon, Baraitali of Sylhet district about five hundred Manipuri families were affected.<sup>7</sup> There were widespread reports of plundering, killing, rape & arson. The Santals were also severely affected, and were forced to migrate.<sup>8</sup>

As the riots had taken place on both sides of the border it led to an influx of refugees. This led to a financial burden on both the governments. The lesser importance of the tribals, when their interest conflicted with that of the Muslim Bengalis or Muslim migrants is obvious from the subsequent events. The East Bengal government in order to rehabilitate the migrants began evicting a large number of peasants of Mymensingh tribal area from their land, forcing them to take refuge in Assam. The Santals were also evicted from Santal inhabited Nachol of Rajshahi and their land was given to the Muslim migrants. Use of both police and army was made by the government to achieve this.<sup>9</sup>

In 1964, riots occurred again in East Pakistan with the loss of hair of Prophet Hazrat Mohammad from Hazratbal Mosque in Kashmir. This led to an exodus of Garos, Hajongs, Dalus from East Pakistan to India. Remarking on the unprecedented number of refugees, the Prime Minister of India in a speech in Rajya Sabha on March 2, 1964 said,

...the total number of refugee men, women and children who have so far crossed over into Assam is about 52,238. Of this number an estimated 35,000 are Christian families who belong to the Garo tribe. The reason for this exodus is that... have been compelled to leave their homes due to organised large scale looting, arson, kidnapping and forcible occupation of their lands by the members of the majority community with the connivance of the Pakistani Police and the Village Defence Corps known as Ansars.<sup>10</sup>

After looking into the cause of it, a press release of United Kingdom cited that,

Economic reasons, as well as religious intolerance, may have played a part in the persecution. Mymensingh district is one of the most overcrowded and driving out the 'foreigners' was probably a means of recovering land for the Muslims.<sup>11</sup>

#### **The feudal legacy of Pakistani Government and Ensuing Revolts:**

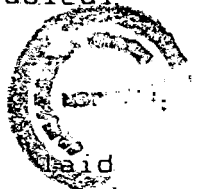
The exploitative zamindari system which was initiated in the British period and continued under the Pakistani government was another factor behind disenchantment of tribals with the East Pakistani government. The feudal process begun as early as eighteenth century in turn aroused

tribal revolts. These revolts were, however, spontaneous in nature. As the British government introduced the Tanka, Bhowali and Nankar land system under the Tenancy Act of 1859, the revolts assumed a conscious, mass-based and organised character under the influence of Marxism-Leninism. The height of this influence, and organisation was reached in the Tanka movement, which was led by the Communist Party of India. After independence, when the Pakistan government refused to do away with the Tanka system the movement was resumed and continued till 1950, when it was finally abolished. The zamindari system also sparked off a revolt among the Santals in 1950, namely the "Tebhaga Andolan". This movement followed in the footsteps of Tanka movement and was led by Ila Mitra, a member of the Communist Party of India.

#### **Tribal Revolt of Hajongs and Other Tribals in pre-1947 Period:**

The tribals first learnt to organise themselves under the Indian National Congress movement, led by Gandhiji. However, they soon felt that participation in such a movement could only provide for social change, and not a radical economic one.

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The foundation for a more radical struggle was laid after 1937, by Moni Singh, an escaped political prisoner in Susong Durgapur who set up organisations among Muslims, and Hajongs of Lengura, Bharatpur and Jigatala. Peasant con-

sciousness was further strengthened by the returning political prisoners who had meantime acquired a perspective of mass movement.<sup>12</sup> Alongside the Nankar and Bhowali movement which were begun around this time, the movement for freedom to procure fuel from reserve forests, catch fishes from marshes and abolition of tonk was started. In this movement though the role of other tribals is recognised it is the Hajongs who have been given prominence due to their "more advanced" nature. As the various demands were made, peasant organisation on an all-India level were formed. On 24 February, 1938 the first District 'Krishak Samiti' was held at Keotkhali in the periphery of Mymensingh town. It was led by Muzaffar Ahmed, one of the founding fathers of Communist Party of India. This was followed on 26 February, by a youth conference under Bankim Mukherjee, a popular trade union leader. Thus the organisation and peasant movement acquired an all-India character.

#### **Participation of Tribals in Liberation Struggle in World War II Period:**

The tribal movement progressed as it echoed the developments of the Congress movement in the World War II period. This participation showed their widening tribal loyalties, which further integrated them into a broader society.

Therefore, when the Congress movement opposed India's

participation in the World War, the tribals too opposed it, and in the process suffered repression like other Indians. Fifteen tribesmen of Susong area and seven of Nalitbari went underground, while the others mobilised people against the war. As a result the government could not get any support from the people. Till 1941, no recruitment into the army had been made and the tribals even ignored the appeal of missionaries.<sup>13</sup>

The Christian missionaries with the exception of Indian Christian missionaries had even earlier tried to influence tribals into opposing the national movement. Therefore by distributing foreign items like clothes, papers, rugs, pencils etc. they tried to inculcate a dislike for indigenous goods. Further, they had tried to discredit Indian national leaders and create divisions among the tribal people. However, they could not stem tribal participation in the national movement.

In addition, over a thousand tribals from Hazong, Dalu, Koch, Garo, Hadi and other tribes began to be trained in guerilla warfare in preparation for a revolutionary revolt any time. Committees were set up that performed civil functions like sanitation, agricultural production etc. A judicial Department was also set up which tried employees of zamindars, government servants etc. This development of peasant movement and organisation on a mass basis continued

till 1950. The Communist influence came to the fore, specially on the invasion of Soviet Union by fascist powers and the first anti-fascist conference was held at Nalitbari in 1941 under the Presidentship of Shamsul Huda.

In 1942 this area was declared a liberated area through conferences. It was liberated from the clutches of money-lenders, landlords and British imperialists and an almost independent administration was established in the north of Mymensingh covering five police stations. This liberated zone fell between Kangsa river and the Brahmaputra river, which in turn contained places like Garampara, Chaitanyanagar, Ghoshgaon, Nagerpara, Madhyamkura, Tantar and many others.

Therefore from March 1942 to January 1949 the area was administered successfully. While the whole of Bengal was reeling under the famine, not a single death from starvation was reported in this area. In fact, the common granary or 'Dharmagola' even had surplus food which was either sold or distributed in the neighbouring area. The Krishak Samity set up hospitals in Panchgaon, Bharatpur etc. A High School at Bharatpur was also set up and is still managed by the tribals. In order to remove superstitious beliefs, and the use of incantations and charms for curing diseases, the Krishak Samity introduced homeopathic and alleopathic medi-



cines.<sup>14</sup>

The movement progressed further with the holding of the Sixth Bengal Provincial Conference in May 1943, where the aim of Tebhaga struggle was declared. The Tebhaga movement later proved to be a significant movement. Further, a large number of women from peasant and middle class background also came forward and volunteered themselves as workers.

With the end of World War II the British tried to re-impose their authority and re-introduce the Tonk system, abolished four years ago. Attempts were made to collect the arrears due to money lenders. The Roman Catholic Missionaries also directed the Christian peasants to be loyal to the British government and began to create schisms among the tribal people. Consequently, some area was recovered by the British forces, while in the remaining areas a reign of terror was let loose. The tribals fought with their primitive weapons like bows and arrows against the sophisticated artillery of the British. In the process, many important leaders including women, like Rashmoni, Surendra, Sachi Roy were killed.

The Tebhaga<sup>15</sup> movement of the Barga<sup>16</sup> peasants, in progress in the Mymensingh district and Bengal, drew inspiration from these developments. A number of Hajong women like Rashmoni, Shankhamoni, Rebatī and others not only

participated in this struggle but also martyred themselves to this cause. As the R.I.N. revolt took place and the British power appeared to be weakening the success of these movement seemed imminent.

#### **Government Policy and Revolt in post-1947 period**

With the partition of India after independence these tribals became citizens of Pakistan. They rejoiced at the liberation from colonial rule and declared their allegiance to Pakistan. Both these were by celebrated hoisting, Pakistani and Communist flags. Numerous demonstrations were held under Baikuntha Gun in Durgapur, Balai Sarkar (a Rajbansi leader) in Bhatpur etc. Further, the tribals appealed to the government to withdraw prohibitory orders and warrants against prisoners, which had been issued during the British period. They also asked for the abolition of Zamindari System without compensation.

However, even after one year's duration there was no attempt made to redress these grievances. The Hajong, Dalu, Koch and Garo tribals continued to resort to constitutional methods and met Mr. Burrows, the Governor of East Pakistan. Conceding the possibility of delay due to formal enactment, the tribals requested that their demands be met through a special ordinance.

Nevertheless, the League Ministry remained unsympathet-

ic. In fact, they issued court of ward certificates to collect arrear taxes and paddy which the Zamindar demanded was his due according to the Tonk system. Further, they began using force to collect the levy and paddy. The Government also deployed the National Guards organisation in these areas to terrorise and suppress the people. This policy of violent suppression by the government began on 8 January, 1949 when twenty maunds of Tonka paddy was attempted to be forcibly seized from Nilchand Hazong of Chaitanyanagar. As the village people succeeded in resisting this attempt, the news of this began spreading to various villages. Drawing encouragement from this precedent there began similar instances of withholding paddy in other villages, like Battala village etc.<sup>17</sup>

The resistance progressed further as the Kachari offices of Chaitanyagarh in Lengura village belonging to Susong Zamindars were forcibly occupied. As news of this success spread westward resistance spread to Maizpara Union of Susong Durgapur police station, and even beyond, to Sherpur Pargana. A meeting on 28 January attended by 5,000 peasants reiterated the demand for abolishment of Tonk system without compensation. Further, local committees' participation in the collection of revenue and taxes by Government was asked for. In addition, an administration that oversaw tribal interest, inclusive of tribals that fell

outside the partial administrative reforms was demanded. The extent of support these tribals enjoyed can be gauged by the conference organised by Hindus and Muslims at Yasodal which supported the abolition of Zamindari. By the fourth week of January, at every big and small market place the campaign demanding Zamindari's abolition was in progress. By February, the peasant movement and organisation had spread from Mymensingh to the Sylhet in Sunamganj subdivision. Peasants in Bisharpasa thana area, and Mohanpur, Barchhara, Bansikunda, Laur, Radhanagar and other villages also began resisting collection of paddy and levy.

As the Government retaliated with a policy of violence, a number of tribal deaths began to be reported. In the firing at Lengura important leaders like Mangalchan and Agendra were killed. On 10th February, at Netrakona over a hundred Hajongs were killed due to police and military firing. Torture, demolition of houses, seizing of cattle and other belongings of peasants accompanied such firings. As the government's forces failed to capture the revolutionaries (who resorted to guerrilla activities), torture in the villages of innocent people by security forces began.

As the resistance continued the government inflicted further violence on the tribals by deploying even Punjabi, Pathan and Baluch forces besides the East Pakistani Rifle

Regiment. By 22 March, reports of Pakistani soldiers' illegal entry into the Indian territory of Garo Hill District of Assam in search of escaped Hajongs began coming. These forces entered villages of Naluagiri, Dasangiri, and Cherakhali and killed Hajongs in firings, besides torturing them for information.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Coincidence of Communal Riots with Peasant Resistance, and Government Policy Thereafter:**

At this time in February, 1950 communal violence erupted in both India and Pakistan. In India, it spread in the states of Bengal, Bihar and Assam. As a result there was a flood of Muslim evacuees from Bihar and Assam into East Pakistan in the months of March and April, who now demanded rehabilitation. The Government provided this in areas inhabited by the resisting tribals, and thereby met two interests simultaneously. The government not only continued its repressive policy towards the tribals, but it also began evicting them from their land and villages to accommodate the Muslim evacuees. Thus the migrants from Bihar were settled in villages falling in Susong, Durgapur and Kalma-kanda police stations. Similarly the evacuees from Assam were rehabilitated forcibly in villages falling in Haluaghat and Nalitbari police stations. The eviction of tribals was carried out by using policemen, sepoy and even about eight elephants. In about one hundred and fifty villages of

Kansa, Jhinaigati, Bankura, Kankarkandi, Manpara, Jugli, Bhubankura, Gazirvita, Ghosegaon, Maizpara, Vedikura, Jigatula, Lengura, Chaitanyanagar, Kharnoi, etc. the tribal peasants were totally evicted. In other villages, where other tribes resided, eviction was partially carried out. All young boys and headmen of villages were arrested and tortured in Mymensingh Jail Custody, as a result of which twenty five boys died and hundred developed incurable diseases.<sup>19</sup>

In an attempt to prevent this the peasants started an extensive campaign to win the support of migrant Muslims by explaining the history of Tonk struggle. They further appealed to the evacuees to settle down in the lands owned by Zamindars and moneylenders instead of those of local peasants. Though the migrants in Susong from Bihar remained apathetic, those from Assam responded positively and began settling down in lands owned by Zamindars in Haluaghat and Nalitbari. However, the League government unleashed repression on these evacuees too, and arrested a few evacuee leaders transferring them to remote areas elsewhere. The rest of the evacuees were instigated and even coerced into plundering and occupying tribal property.

Thus the government continued its policy of feudalism in the garb of rehabilitating backward evacuee Muslims. The possibility of it succeeding in suppressing the peasant

revolt in this way became apparent, when in the month of May conflict broke out between two groups over Karaitala village, one of which comprised evacuee Muslims.

In the changed circumstances, the revolutionaries considered it necessary to change tactics. By continuing the struggle, peasants belonging to the same class would be pitted against each other. In the five day conference that was held it was decided that the peasant resistance could not continue since it would adversely affect Muslim evacuees. Instead constitutional means were now decided to be adopted. Therefore an appeal was made to all the parties of East Pakistan to abolish Zamindari Tonka system.

#### **The Tebhaga Andolan**

Meanwhile, the 'Tebhaga Andolan' of the Santal and other tribal peasants was in progress against the Zamindari system under the leadership of Ila Mitra.<sup>20</sup> In 1950, the death of a police officer in Nachol in Rajshahi district, led to a reign of terror on the peasants let loose by the government. In the police and army brutality that followed, twenty-four peasants were tortured to death inside Nachol Police Station. There were reports of many peasant deaths in Nawabganj and Rajshahi jail. Their leader Ila Mitra was brutally raped and murdered, while still others fled to West Bengal.<sup>21</sup>

The struggles against the Zamindari system did have their impact and it was abolished with the Agrarian Reform Act of 1950.

#### **Policy Towards Garos of Madhupur Forest:**

With the abolishment of the Zamindari system, the Madhupur forest in 1951 was transferred from under the management of the Zamindar to a Regional Forest Officer of Government. Henceforth, the government policy was to discourage Jhum cultivation, specially after the forest was declared a National Reserve. By 1955, the Garos had almost completely given up Jhum cultivation and taken up wet cultivation which in turn brought crucial changes in the socio-economic life of Garos and speeded their assimilation. Adoption of wet cultivation, however, did not imply that they did not live from the forest also, as a result of which Garos remain reluctant to give up forest life. Though this led to a battle with the government over ownership rights of the forest ever since 1947, it assumed more serious dimensions under the Bangladeshi government. Therefore, here only Pakistani government's policies which finally led to adoption of wet-cultivation will be discussed.

After 1951, both the Jhum fields and the wet fields were declared as 'Khas' land, i.e. land under Government



ownership. The Garos were prohibited from using these Khas lands and restricted to wet fields not falling in the Khas area. In the earlier years after the Government took over land of Madhupur forest, the Garos were given 'Temporary Patta' or temporary right of usufruct to the wet fields they were allowed to cultivate. By this the successors of the holder could use the land, but could not sell it. The Government retained the right to fell the trees on this land, besides the power to recover whole or part of the plot for public use, without giving compensation. To use the lands given under 'Temporary Patta' the holders had to pay a tax every year to the Government. Later, these holders were granted complete ownership or 'Permanent Patta' as a result of which the plot could be cultivated for a few years. The stipulations of the Temporary Patta were continued and after the wet fields were surveyed the plots were put under the holder's name. This was followed by the right of the holder to sell his land and also demand compensation if the Government took it for public purposes. In practice, however compensation or alternative land has not been given.

Therefore, Government allowed the Garos to cultivate the wet fields but not the Jhum lands. However the Garos continued to practise the latter since the government found it impossible to enforce it. In 1955, Madhupur forest was declared a Reserve Forest. Further, the Forest Department

persuaded the Garo leaders to convince their people to give up Jhum cultivation so that national property would not be damaged. In return they were promised Government assistance. As a result of this, by 1955 most of the Garos had given up their traditional Jhum cultivation and taken up wet cultivation.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Government Policy in the Bangladeshi Period:**

Bangladesh came into existence as an independent state on 16 December, 1971. In the process, however, the repercussion of the arbitrary boundary division during Partition was again emphasised. In the liberation war it was estimated that three million civilians had died while thirty million were rendered homeless. Another ten million had fled to refugee camps in India. The tribals too faced adverse consequences. Thus the Garos homes fell in an important war zone, leading to death, disease and migration.<sup>23</sup>

#### **Bengali Nationalism and Tribal Identity:**

As Mujibur Rahman came to power, the Bengali identity of the citizens was proclaimed. In February 1971, at a Bengali Academy meeting Mujib declared, 'After years of struggle and sacrifice, Bengali nationalism was now a reality and Bengalis were a nation. "Joy Bangla" was not merely a slogan but it embodied all aspects of Bengal's life - politics, economy, culture and language.'<sup>24</sup> Similarly,

according to the 1972 Constitution, "the unity and solidarity of Bengali nation, which deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bengali nationalism (sic.)."<sup>25</sup> In an attempt to exclude religion from central identity of Bangladesh, Mujib made Democracy, Socialism, Nationalism and Secularism the four chief pillars of the 1972 Constitution.<sup>26</sup> In the pre-1971 period, the secular position had been used by the Awami League to distinguish itself from the ideology of "Muslim nationalism" which West Pakistan elite emphasized. Further, it had helped politically in harnessing the support of non-Muslims minorities. After independence, secularism came to denote equal treatment to religions in public affairs. The party however could not ignore the Awami ulema, who formed an important section within the party. As a result certain concessions like reallowing religious broadcasts on government radio and TV, banning of drinking of alcohol in private clubs, were made.

However, the problem of accommodating tribals, who were both non-Muslim and non-Bengali speaking remained. The tribals were conscious of their distinct identity, and their feelings were reflected in the words of Chakma leader, Manabendra Narayan Larma who said,

A Bengalee living in Pakistan cannot become or be called a Punjabi, Pathan or Sindhi and any of them living in Bangladesh cannot be called a Bengalee. As citizens of Bangladesh we are all Bangaldeshi but we also have a separate ethnical identity, which unfortunately, the Awami League leaders do not want to understand.<sup>27</sup>

This statement was in the nature of a response to the one made by Mujib in a public meeting at Rangamati in 1973, where he declared that henceforth all tribal people would be known as Bengalees and could have no other identity.<sup>28</sup>

#### **Bangladeshi Nationalism and Tribal Identity:**

When Zia-Ur-Rahman came to power there was a shift from "Bengali" to "Bangladeshi" identity. This was manifested in the amendment of the basic principles of state policy. The term secularism was removed from the preamble and other parts of the Constitution, and was replaced by the phrase, "absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah." A new clause promoting friendship with "Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity" was added. Lastly, the citizens of Bangladesh were now to be called Bangladeshi instead of Bengali. These constitutional outlines were barely changed under General Ershad, who succeeded Zia-Ur-Rahman. The Islamic orientation of the amendments, served both a political and ideological purpose. Politically, it helped in harnessing support from the extreme rightist groups which were sidelined by

Mujib's government. Economic advantages could also be drawn when Bangladesh needed aid from the oil-rich Arab countries. Ideologically, by describing the citizens as Bangladeshis they sought to meet certain shortcomings of the term "Bengalis". The word Bengali in the 1972 Constitution had defined the ethnic identity in terms of religion and language. These two criteria hardly distinguished them from the sixty million Hindus of West Bengal. The Islamic provisions provided a religious symbol, while the term Bangladeshi (instead of Bengali) gave a territorial homeland symbol. Both together, therefore, gave a multi-symbol congruence which differentiated it from India and Pakistan.<sup>29</sup>

The transition to Bangladeshi identity appears more symbolic than substantive. Though the term secularism was removed from the Constitution, it was not followed by the build up of an Islamic Republic as in Pakistan. No amendments were passed in order to bring the laws in conformity with the Quran and the Sunnah. Moreover, Zia did not allow the ulemas to wield considerable influence. When Ershad came to power he said that people alone would decide whether Bangladesh would be an Islamic republic. Though later he made Islam the official state religion, he had already clarified that these ideas would not be "introduced in the administration along the Pakistani model." Conceptually too, state religion is far removed from an Islamic State.

In Bangladesh, "Islamisation" lacks ideological coherence, and is (in practice) a haphazard distribution of funds to Islamic centres as political patronage. Therefore while Islamic centres in urban areas specially Dacca and Chittagong flourish, those in rural areas languish due to want of funds.<sup>30</sup>

While the country's national identity has developed both an Islamic (no matter how symbolic) and Bengali content, the problem of space for other ethnic identities remains. Therefore, even though the Government attempted to set up a Garo Cultural Institute in 1976<sup>31</sup> and a Tribal Cultural Academy in 1977 and claimed that one million Taka was being spent for the socio-economic development of backward areas,<sup>32</sup> these have remained superficial attempts. Further, as Bengali became the sole language (with English to be resorted to only when necessary) at all levels of national life in administration, science and technology, education, foreign visits etc.,<sup>33</sup> accommodation of tribal identity received a further setback. For example, despite many tribal languages having written scripts, "Bangla" was introduced as a medium of instruction in the Bangladesh Education System even at the primary level. Since language can be a means of economic mobility, with exams for jobs (specially government jobs), being conducted in that language,<sup>34</sup> such a move has proved detrimental to tribals. In

the educational system itself, it has been seen that there is a high drop out rate of tribals. One important reason for this has been that tribals speaking in their own language at home, find it difficult to cope with a totally different medium.<sup>35</sup> In order to rectify this trend, critics have suggested the introduction of tribal languages possessing a written script at the primary education level alongside Bengali.

The imposition of Islam has given a further setback to the assimilation of tribals into the national mainstream. This is because they have been undergoing Hinduisation or Christianisation over a long period. Consequently, not only have they faced the brunt of government policies but also developed strained relations with neighbouring Muslims. For example, it became a state religion. For example, mere adherence to Christianity has strained the relations between Garos and Muslims.<sup>36</sup>

#### **Other Policies of Government towards Tribals:**

The demographic policy of encouraging non-tribals into tribal areas, has been alleged as an attempt to convert tribal areas into one dominated by Bengali Muslims. However, the economic rationale behind such actions cannot be ignored. This policy's repercussions can be seen in Mymensingh where the tribals have been pushed back by the non-

tribals from south.<sup>37</sup> In the Madhupur forest (where Garos reside) influx of Bengali settlements equalling about 4% of the total population has been witnessed.<sup>38</sup> This is because land is a crucial factor in Bangladesh. With population exceeding 115 million on a land mass whose one-third area is flooded each year; the economy close to bankruptcy with 90% of the national income derived from foreign aid, land becomes very important in the country's economy.<sup>39</sup> Further, it is justified as being in contravention with the Constitution, that any Bangladeshi be prevented from settling and buying land in any part of the country. In an address to the UN Working Group on indigenous populations in 1983 in Geneva, a Bangladeshi spokesman said, "The people of Bangladesh have to share the available resources in an equitable manner within the severe economic constraints well known to the international community."<sup>40</sup>

Though the government is quick to defend tapping of natural resources in tribal areas, it has in turn failed to provide even the basic facilities to them. Therefore, in a country which is one of the poorest, the conditions of tribals are even worse than the population as a whole. Compared to the 25% of literacy in total Bangladesh population, the adult tribal literacy population was only 17.7%. Among the tribals those adhering to Christianity had a higher literacy, i.e., 30.8% in contrast to those following



Hinduism, Animism or Buddhism. Similarly, while 53% of rural households had tubewell drinking water amenity, only 19.2% of tribals had been provided with this. The percentage of tribals who lived in houses made of straw or bamboo were about 92.5% while those for the whole rural population was 62.4%.<sup>41</sup>

Though there are instances of governments taking measures to protect backward tribal areas, these are set aside when its interests conflict with that of tribals. This is apparent from the different policies it follows regarding the Garo and Hajongs in partially excluded areas on one hand, and the Garos of Madhupur forest on the other. The former numbering over 41,000 (in 1978) and spread over five police stations of Mymensingh, namely Sribardi, Nalitabari, Haluaghat, Phunpur, Durgapur and Kamalkanda have special rules and regulations operating for their betterment.<sup>42</sup> Yet the Garos of Madhupur too represent "backward" tribals, considering the fact that their socio-cultural and economic life is still intricately linked with that of the forest. This was expressed by a Garo who said, "we are children of the forest. We are born here, we are brought up here and we want to die here. We are so accustomed to forest life that we cannot survive if we get evicted."<sup>43</sup>

Yet the government has adopted a hostile attitude towards those of Madhupur forest. The two parties have been

struggling over ownership of land in Madhupur forest. The government has argued that majority of the land in the disputed area is either Khas (government trust land) or forest land, by the 1927 government listing of land ownership, which in both cases means that the state owns the land, and not the Garos. This is despite the fact that Garos have been residing in this area for centuries and are perhaps the first inhabitants of this forest. Over the centuries they have adapted their culture and lifestyle completely to that of the forest, and loss of the latter would prove crucial for them. The Garos too have their legal position and establish evidence of ownership, which was guaranteed by the Bengal Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950 and maintained under Bangladesh (Adaptation of Existing Bangladesh Laws) Order 1972.<sup>44</sup>

It is important at this point to explain the weak legal position of tribals if their local, customary and religious laws clash with national laws. This is because there is no specific law which directs, that respect be accorded to the former. In case the customary laws are backed by statutory authority, then the conflict is resolved by using general statute law. However, it has been found that in Bangladesh, the Supreme Court has shown little innovativeness and dynamism. The Garos of Bangladesh, therefore are in no strong position, specially since the Bangladesh (Adaptation of

Existing Bangladesh Laws) Order 1972 can be repealed, a right granted by Art. 149 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 1972.

Though the Garos have been in conflict with the Government over the land rights of Madhupur forest, ever since Partition, the situation took a new turn in 1980s. In 1986, the Government announced its objective of being self-sufficient in rubber. The Madhupur Forest area was regarded by the Bangladesh Rubber Plantation as ideal for rubber cultivation.<sup>45</sup>

In 1986 the government brought about 6,000 hectares of land under its control, and began replacing the "Sal" trees with with rubber ones. The project was encouraged by the Bangladesh Forest Industries Development Corporation (BFIDC) with the backing of Forest Department of the Bangladesh government. The basis for this expropriation of land was the republished 1984 listing, already mentioned above. The government further argues that those wanting to contest the listing should have done so within the stipulated period set by the Forestry Act, a time-limit which expired long back. To this the Garos have countered, firstly, that the listing was incorrect and based on a false map; secondly, that they were neither made aware of the republished, 1984 listing nor of the need to contest it as a result of which this provision should be struck down. It must be realised that the

Garos tribals have not completely "civilized" themselves and are therefore not regular readers of Bangladesh Gazette, where the listing was republished. Thirdly, the Garos have pointed out that regardless of the listing the developers are grabbing land arbitrarily, in areas which are not included in it. Attention has also been drawn to the ecological damage done by rubber plantations in Madhupur Forest.<sup>46</sup>

Heedless of these protests the development of rubber plantations continues in the Madhupur Forest. In fact, another proposal to start a second Rubber Development Project has also been mooted. Meantime, there have been further allegations against the government. Garos argue that land which was taken over for planting rubber, is instead being leased to private owners, a practice which was also discovered in the Rubber Plantation Development in CHT. Further, the government policy of giving preference to the "landless people" in the sale of the land, is being misused by the people who are acquiring land on fraudulent evidence of "landlessness" and are using it for other interests. Charges of corruption and bribery have been levelled against the government officials administering the project, and in one case private legal proceedings are going on against two forest officials. What is worst, however, is the harassment the Garos opposing eviction are facing. Their women are attacked, homes burnt and arbitrary arrests made against

them for disrupting the plantation development by uprooting rubber plants that have been sown in the centre of Garo paddy fields.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has a crucial role to play in the success of the government policy, being a major potential source of continued funding for the second phase of rubber cultivation. As allegations against government continued, the ADB has made a concerted effort to ensure, that the interest of the Garos are protected if it funds the project. The ADB maintains, that "as a matter of policy" they do not develop rubber plantations on land being used to grow food crops. They also clarify that they will not include land inhabited by the Garo in the project. They carried out several surveys in this disputed area, and as a result reduced the proposed area from 8,000 to 3,350 hectares. The latter figure includes 1,000 hectares already planted by the Bangladesh government. They have also provided for the exclusion of cultivable land, and uncultivable land (used for grazing, fuel-wood collection), "as far as is practically possible". However, the future of the Garos remains insecure what with a government which has expropriated land at every opportunity in the past.<sup>47</sup>

Meantime, the Garos are undergoing rapid social change. On the one hand they are losing their homogeneity, and on

the other being reduced to day-labourers on land which they once owned. Besides persecution, various other factors have contributed to it. One of them is urbanization, since Garos sell their land to pay-off their debts and expenses incurred in family marriages, medical treatment etc. The prices of land having inflated with a growing population and scarcity of habitable land, the Garos sell it and many migrate to cities too.

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## CONCLUSION

The world is today witnessing a population explosion and rapid technological advancement. Therefore, as the frontiers of civilization expand, no society including tribal ones can remain in isolation. Staying in isolation, however, does not imply that these societies are static in nature and not undergoing social change, but that the social change is a gradual process giving the impression that the society is almost exactly as it was earlier. Yet this gradual change can be discerned as tribal groups migrate over years in search of livelihood or other factors.

In areas now falling on the northern borders of Bangladesh, the tribes have undergone similar dynamism. For example, Hajongs migrated from as far as Burma and Indo-China to Bangladesh driven by economic needs. Similarly, the Koch were pushed down from West Garo Hills by fresh settlements of Garos, besides the need for remuneration. The Khasis too, settled in Sylhet when they found a flourishing market for 'pan' trade. Among the Garos, practices like head-hunting and raiding have also provided culture contact. Therefore, the practices of bringing back human heads necessary for funeral rites, or raiding whereby slaves were brought back and assimilated into society through marriage, led to social change.

However, sudden change was introduced as British colonial ~~rulers~~ assumed power. Even the nature of political authority underwent complete change. Therefore, until now political authority in tribal society had ranged from uncentralised ones as among Garos, to relatively centralised ones existing among Khasis, Santals etc. Under the colonial powers who had established themselves through coercion, centralised and Western type, impersonal institutions were introduced. The British were, however, careful not to dismantle the indigenous institutions completely and retained them in some areas to pacify the tribes. Yet, these indigenous institutions were adapted to suit British interests and hardly remained the same. Among the Khasis, the economic interest of higher revenue from Jaintiapur was met by removing the Raja but retaining local authorities like Dolloies and Sirdars. The latter's powers were, however, greatly reduced.

The rapidly changing nature of institutions produced stress among tribals who could not change their beliefs and expectations as fast. The people were disenchanted, as a result, when they were asked to pay taxes for natural resources which they had always considered their own. The newly established courts and thanas had become venues for corruption since the tribals were ignorant of the laws. The Dolloies too felt sidelined under the new system, and

later led the revolt of 1862.

Among the hill Garos too, the traditional institution of nokma was used by the British to bring peace on one hand and end to practices like witchcraft, sorcery, head-hunting on the other. Infact, the hill Garos came under any type of centralised authorities for the first time under the British. That this process proved stressful is apparent from the number of clashes that took place between government's forces and Garos. The Garo raids that prompted British suppression, were actually a retaliation against the illegal authority of the Zamindars, an exploitative feudal class created by British themselves. Thus, these feudal lords not only harassed the hill Garos but often imposed illegal dues on the plains Garos, who were peasants. The Garo peasants too, unable to tolerate the exploitation revolted in 1824 under Tipu Pagalpanthi which continued for five years.

The British policy of changing land tenure system in order to get higher revenue created tension and conflict in the plains, among Hajong, Koch, Dalu, Banai and Rajbansi peasants also. Though this finally led to the historic Tanka movement, it was preceded by spontaneous uprising, like the Sanyasi rebellion in 1763, the Hajong revolt in early nineteenth century, followed by the combined revolt in 1823 of Hajong, Garos and others.

The British used various policies to curb these recurring revolts. The immediate one was of violent suppression through its far superior arms against tribal swords and shields. In the long term, however, control was tightened through administrative methods like establishing thanas, or bringing these areas directly under their control and deepening their penetration. For easy accessibility in these areas, both for effective control and tapping resources, transport and communication was built which also speeded up social change. An important means of "civilising" or pacifying the tribes was Christianity. Thus the Christian missionaries were established to create loyalty among tribals towards the British. This could be easily witnessed in World War II period when the missionaries tried to dissuade Garos and others from participating in the liberation struggle.

Regardless of the motives, the positive aspect of Christianity can not be overlooked. By winning a large number of converts they brought education and modernization among Khasis and Garos, which in turn helped them to assimilate into non-tribal society. Thus superstitious beliefs, faith in witchcraft and sorcery was replaced by a scientific outlook. Similarly, chickenpox was no longer regarded as a favour from God's but understood as an infection requiring preventive measures. In fact, this modernization has taken

the form of Westernization among these tribals. This can be easily observed in their dress, music and other aspects. Among other tribes modernization has been brought through Hinduisation. Thus tribes like Rajbansis, Manipuris, Dalu, and others are increasingly adopting Hindu elements through Sanskritization. Therefore, while Rajbansis claim to be Bhanga Kshatriyas from Arya-Varia, Dalu claim to be descendants of Arjun's son, Babrubahan. The Hinduisation process can also be observed among Hajongs who are divided along religious sects, Shakta and Bhakta (Vaishnavs). Though at present blending of both tribal and Hindu features can be observed, the former are expected to reduce further as the various groups compete to raise their social hierarchy by becoming more "Hindu" than the other. In the process, however, tribals have also influenced Hinduism to an extent.

The impact of various assimilative processes culminated in the World War II period, when the anti-colonial struggle witnessed participation of tribals in large numbers. This showed that the tribals were learning to think beyond their narrow tribal loyalties and on a wider, national level.

However, after partition when a sovereign nation-state emerged this assimilation received a major setback through various policies of the successive governments. This does not imply that penetration and assimilation through further

development of transport, communication, education etc., was not taking place, but that in sovereign nation, assimilation into the larger society required more than that i.e., development of a sense of national identity. Even the provision of former fell far short of their expectations of a national government. Therefore, Pakistani government alienated the tribals from the national mainstream through its policy of violent suppression in the Tanka and Tebhaga movements, and imposition of Islam. The Bangladeshi government too identified national identity first with Bengali and later Bangladeshi identity, thereby completely marginalising ethnically different tribals. This has not only led to tense relations between the two communities but the former have also been deprived of their life in the past. In the riots of 1950 over 500 Manipuri families, and numerous Santals were killed. Large numbers were also forced to migrate to India. In the 1965 riots too, over 30,000 Garos had to evacuate the Bangladeshi territory. The Hajongs who had migrated in large numbers to India after the Tanka movement, did so again after the riots of 1965. As far as the Bengali language is concerned, the tribals have been increasingly accepting it through interaction with Hindus. However, its imposition as the sole language with the exclusion of others even at primary education level has created much stress. As a result large number of tribals have dropped out from schools being unable to cope with a

totally different medium. Yet, the relatively higher rate of literacy compared to earlier shows the strong urge among tribals to educate themselves despite adversity.

Lack of initiative on <sup>the</sup> government's part has marginalised the tribals economically, thereby slowing their integration into the national mainstream. The tribes live in abysmal conditions, with little access to even basic facilities like clean drinking water, housing etc. Yet, when it comes to tapping natural resources in tribal areas, it is quick to point out the need for equal sharing of resources for the country's economic development. The Garos of Madhupur Forest have had to face the brunt of this argument as they fight a legal battle over the forest's resources. On the one hand, is a matter of survival of the Garos who are completely adapted to life in the forest, and on the other hand is the government's economic objective of being self-sufficient in rubber. The position of Garos is weak in Bangladesh's legal system because national laws are given precedence over local, customary ones in case of a clash.

The Garos who are not completely "civilised" have been unable to keep upto-date with government publications. Therefore, when the government republished their ownership right in 1984, and provided a certain time within which it could have been contested, the Garos were unable to avail it. Meantime, Garos have been subjected to kidnapping,



torture and eviction, while the government recognises fraudulent claims of non-tribals for acquiring land. This leads to the question, that how is economic development which necessitates penetration into tribal areas to be accommodated with tribal needs. Since tapping of natural resources is inevitable, what is required is cushioning of its impact on tribals. For this, economic and educational standards of tribals must be brought at par with the rest of the country, through a scientific study of tribal culture. If the economic and educational advancement is attempted without any relation to culture contact, the efforts are doomed to failure. For example, food gathering and nomadic people cannot be settled to plough cultivation all of a sudden. Thus, the Birhors of India have been settled through a programme which organised them into cooperative societies on the basis of crafts of indigenous culture. Further, tribals must be left free to develop their own cultures in their own way. Thus, the national mosaic should be one where space is given to various ethnic and cultural groups to adjust and readjust, integrate and reintegrate.

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