

**MAKING OF IDENTITIES AND TRIBE: A CASE STUDY OF
BODO, KOCH- RAJBANGSHI AND TEA TRIBES**

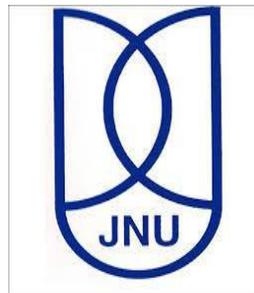
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MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation entitled "MAKING OF IDENTITIES AND TRIBE: A CASE STUDY OF BODO, KOCH-RAJBANGSHI AND TEA TRIBES" submitted by me in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of **Master of Philosophy** has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this University or any other university.

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*Dedicated To,
Mummy, Abwi, Abou, Seva and Dripjyoti*

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Abbreviations

AATTSA	All Assam Tea Tribe Students Association
ABSU	All Bodo Students Union
ACA	Adivasi Council of Assam
ACMS	Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangh
AGP	Asom Gana Parishad
AKRSU	All Koch-Rajbanshi Students' Union
AKYS	Assam Kachari Yuvak Sanmilani
ATTSA	All Tea Tribes Students' Association
BAC	Bodoland Autonomous Council
Bd.SF	Bodo Security Force
BLT	Bodo Liberation Tiger Force
BPAC	Bodoland People's Action Committee
BPF	Bodoland People's Front
BSS	Bodo Sahitya Sabha
BTAD	Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District
BTC	Bodoland Territorial Council
BVF	Bodo Voluntary Force
ILO	International Labour Organization
NDFB	National Democratic Front
PTCA	The Plains Tribal Council of Assam
PTCA(P)	Progressive Plains Tribal Council of Assam
ST	Scheduled Tribe
UNTLF	United Tribal Nationalist Front

Chapter 1

Introduction

Countries all over the world are affected by some form of national minority movements or group conflicts. We can say that masses have become more conscious of their sense of identity, be it a dominant group or numerically lesser one. The trend is that of having a strong feeling and a sense of one's identity. They are either engaged in conflicts with the state or the fellow groups sharing the same geographical space on issues ranging from numerous issues of political representation, language rights, self-government, control over resources and internal migration¹. India is a case of dispersed ethnic groups and proliferation of dispersed groups presents formidable difficulties of achieving unity and forward nation. Multiple particularisms simultaneously move in different directions each group seeks its own goals and setting its agenda on desired goals and adopt various mechanisms and techniques to achieve them. India is a plural state having diverse ethnic and cultural communities with different values and ethos enshrined in one culture which may come in conflict with values of another culture². Diversity is the most suitable term to define the present social structure of any given society. Most societies are multinational having diverse cultural and ethnic communities. Every distinct cultural practice's inherent aim is to preserve its distinctiveness in the plethora of values. South Asian states is home to numerous ethnic/nation/tribe groups, cleavages cutting across not in one unified line. It is said that "conflicts over ethnic homeland rule, the right to territorial autonomy and even nation-statehood have been played out in Asia, where there have been debates over whether federalism in general and multinational federalism in particular is the best practice to reduce or contain ethnic conflicts"³.

This phenomenon can also be understood by the term 'ethno-nationalism' which includes wide range of movements of various types be it nationalism, separatism, secessionism, sub nationalism, ethnic insurgency or regionalism. Ethnicity

¹Will Kymlicka, "*Multicultural citizenship: A liberal theory of minority rights*. (Clarendon Press, 1995), 1.

²Samuel P Huntington, *The clash of civilizations? Foreign affairs* (1993): 22-49.

³Baogang He, Brian Galligan, and Takashi Inoguchi, *Federalism in Asia*. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2009).

has gained saliency in modern times and the central feature of relations between such groups both within and between states is the struggle for self-assertion, self-aggrandizement and domination. The struggle takes the various form of mild discrimination against members of subordinate groups, genocide or coercive assimilation. In modern nation-state such conflicts are at times precipitated by the state's policy of creating homogenous society based on one dominant group. At times the creation of national culture is also at the cost of crushing or absorbing those cultural components that are economically competitive or politically threatening to the emerging national elites. Integration was crucial in the post-partition period and to bridge the differences that predominated the subcontinent. Integration in every aspect, ranging from territorial to cultural and social and establishment of national unity. Indian state has been successful in creating one political unit with which one identifies, that is, territorial identity. Ethnic phenomenon is however one such formidable challenge that has disturb the process of nation-making.

Ethnicity refers to belonging to an ethnic group, a category used to refer to a nationality, minority, a tribe, a community or culture representing a varying series of phenomenon. Subjective belief and cognitive aspect of ethnicity is given due importance in the understanding of ethnicity. From ethnicity, ethnonationalism is derived which is an ethnic based nationalism which is an important dimension in the local politics that is played out in the different corners of north east India⁴. There are many forms of nationalism, religious, cultural or civic nationalism. Predominantly when we speak about nationalism and the ideal of nation state, especially in India we tend to discuss religious nationalism like Hindutva or Civic nationalism. Ethnic nationalism has come to occupy such importance in the politics of North East India. Its exclusive nature tends to bring more discomfort than bring peace, which is usually the normative grounds on which groups fight, that is, to bring 'peace' 'harmony' and 'development'. Many cases suggest that it thwarts the process of bringing peace and development and only increases the animosity and tension in the region. It excludes from membership of the nation those people who don't share a common ethnicity, which usually means common descent⁵. They define their membership in exclusive

⁴Tribal nationalism is used as an alternative understanding in many writings to refer to the group uprising in north-east.

⁵James G Kellas, *Politics of nationalism and ethnicity* (Macmillan International Higher Education, 1991).

terms such as Bodo, Tamil, Punjabi, mainly on the believe that they have a common descent. The boundaries are drawn explicitly and maintained and entry and exit from the group is restricted. It becomes one's ascriptive identity and takes pride in being a Bodo or Tamil national.

Theories of ethnicity

Theories of ethnicity explains diverse phenomenon such as social and political change, identity formation, inter-group relation, group conflict, assimilation and nation building. Identity movements are dynamic in nature and to understand the upsurge of ethnicity it is important to know the dynamics involved. Various interpretations and meanings of ethnicity and the debate surrounding the formation, persistence and salience of ethnic identity exist. Three school of thought dominate the discourse on the phenomenon of ethnicity, that is, Primordialist, Constructivist and Instrumentalist schools.

Regarding the formation of ethnic identity, Primordialist focus on the 'biological' and 'genetic' foundation. They believe that since individuals are born into a group, they come to acquire with their fellow members the same cultural attributes⁶. The aim and motivation for ethnic affiliation is said to have come from deep psychological and physiological forces which pushes them to form ties and align because they believe in their primordial ties. This school believes in 'time immemorial', something which have existed for a very long period and their timeless existence is good enough for them to form a group. Their sense of self and search for an identity is said to be derive from their belief in old ways and subjective belief in their common descent due to similar physical characteristics or customs. Corollary to the Primordialist school is the idea that ethnic groups are clearly demarcated with strong boundary intact. It thwarts the evolution of ethnic groups according to changing time and space. Ethnic groups are attributed certain natural, immutable and unchangeable characteristics.

Ethnicity for instrumentalist is a way forward to acquire or pursue specific interest. It is not treated as given and immutable, rather it is articulated in a context or at a time. Ethnicity is used by ethnic groups to make demands and claims for political

⁶Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Vol. 5043 (Basic books, 1973).

and economic purposes. It is defined as a mechanism to alter their social standing and power structure. It is an interest group politics. Paul Brass argues that the process of nationality formation involves stages that objective differences between groups is transformed and intensified as subjective and symbolic significance. In changing modern and post-industrial societies, elite leaders use cultural symbols and emblems to negotiate for power and accrue socio, economic and political benefit. Weberian understanding tells that it is an act of 'rationally organized' instrumental injunction. Weber says the belief in group affinity is enough to have consequences on group formation as ethnic groups are 'artificially organized' and rational organization turned into a personal relationship⁷.

There has been shift from analysing ethnicity as an immutable point to understanding ethnicity from ethno-genesis, that is, from the point of its emergence to its constant changing nature. The focus is on the social construction of the identities and fluid nature of ethnicity. Kanchan Chandra says ethnicity is an elusive concept and the properties of "fixedness" and "exogeneity" has dominated the discourse on ethnicity and have come under criticism from various angle. The point at issue is that there is no coherent conceptual foundation for thinking about ethnic identity. Primordialism fails to explain why ethnic groups emerge at particular point in time and context and why ethnic conflicts happen in certain place and doesn't occur in some. Primordialism fails to explain why certain groups are much more assertive and strong in their claims and demands. While instrumentalist perspective put certain things in order while analysing ethnicity, by focusing on the objective claims and external political stimulation in group mobilization. It has theoretical validity in its own terms and foregrounds inner group politics to reveal the covet opportunistic behaviour of political elites who stands to benefit from the politics of ethnicity.

While the second group focus on the instrumental nature of ethnicity and how it can be navigated to make claims and demands, constructivists emphasizes on different element of ethnicity. They revolve their analysis on a different terrain that reveals a different understanding of ethnicity. Their major claim is that rather than emphasizing on the immutable existent of ancient tradition or revival of tribalism, collective identity or ethnic groups should be analyse in their context which explicates

⁷Max Weber, "Ethnic groups (1922)," in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (London: Macmillan press Ltd. 1996).

the idea that group identities are constructed. It emerges due to collective action, be it a minority or a majority group. It moves away from the objective markers that drew the boundaries between groups to examine the subjective elements that give rise to new boundaries. It highlights the groups consciousness of the processes of forming meanings and memory, subjectivity and representation. Elements which constitute cultural symbols and practices which are ingredients that draw individuals together to form a bond and reformulate bonds into group cohesion and reproduction, termed as cultural constructionism, are primordialism assumptions, meaning those are Primordialist basis for constructivism. Constructionism is a dominant theoretical lens to study the subject of ethnicity. It moves away from essentialism and situates ethnicity in a context to show the fluidity of the nature of ethnicity. However, constructivist school is not unified and is “a disparate collection of critical insights that questions primordialist assumptions”⁸. While its incoherence will continue to exist, Constructivism burst the bubble to make explicit the processes that goes into the formation and sustaining group identity.

Donald Horowitz discusses vertical and horizontal ethnic differentiation. In vertical system there exists ‘superordinate and subordinate’ groups. Its ensample is racial system. “The systems of race relations founded on Negro slavery in the Western Hemisphere were archetypical cases of this sort of system”⁹. In horizontal systems, groups are not ranked in relation to each other, but parallel ethnic structures exist, each with its own criteria of stratification. Ethnic coexistence is a case of horizontal order. However, though they might be placed horizontally, economically and politically they may be placed in the lower section in the structural arrangement which is a vertical structure. Breakdown of each system brings out different order, for instance, in vertical system subordinate group may dismantle the hegemonic dominance of the dominant group and bring about revolutionary changes. The social cement in the vertical system is rigid, so when the cement is broken it brings revolutionary changes. However, in the horizontal system, each group consider its own group as superior. There is a mutual ‘repulsion’ and ‘disdain’ between groups. In such situation groups are more likely to exclude parallel groups from the power

⁸Kanchan Chandra, *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*. (Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁹Donald L Horowitz, "Three dimensions of Ethnic Politics." *World Politics* 23, No. 2 (1971).

structure and create a homogeneous idealized state¹⁰. Group conflict in Assam reflects the horizontal system where multiple groups coexist but each group pursues their own collective interests and seeking to dominate the power structure.

Identifying the context

Northeast consists of geographically proximate diverse group which has witnessed multitude of violence along multidimensional level. Violent conflict in this region is widespread and the nature of group conflict has ethnic dimension. Insurgency groups gives another dimension because they engage in armed struggle for sovereign nation with respect to their groups. Such nationalistic attitude complicates the whirlpool of hostility and conflicting nature that persist in the air between groups. Ethnic conflict in this region is a complex phenomenon because there are various dimension to it. It entails groups fighting for statehood and autonomy on the same political space, fights for positive discrimination, issue of migrants. The underlying issues that run beneath the group animosity points toward complex and intricate issues, for instance, the issue of indigeneity, challenging the hegemonic and cultural categories, struggle for power in the existing limited political institutions and fratricidal killings. The other important issue that has been look over in studies on ethnicity is how we assume that groups in Northeast rest on demarcated and cultural boundaries. But further study reveals that groups in northeast are in a constant state of being created and there is a tussle in the claims of group identity. Meaning as the groups are claiming for status and recognition on a given set of objective criteria against the state, they are engaged in a simultaneous process of constructing their identity and increasing sense of consciousness. Ethnic consciousness needs to be reproduced and sustained throughout if groups are to achieve their goals and this is done through various political and cultural resources that induce and sustain the sense of being part of an ethnic group. The consciousness transforms into an inward-looking behaviour identified as ethnic nepotism¹¹. Also some define it as ethnocentrism which is a behavioural predisposition in the sense that one favours one's own group members over others. This behaviour becomes very acute typically in an atmosphere where group politics are acted out within a limited institutional structure place to

¹⁰Donald L Horowitz, "Three dimensions of ethnic politics." *World Politics* 23, no. 2 (1971).

¹¹Pierre L Van den Berghe, "Ethnic pluralism in Industrial Societies: A special case?" *Ethnicity* 3 (1976).

assuage and distribute limited resources and the prospects for tension escalates. This paper is concerned with both the ethnic identification process and ethno-political conflict as the identity formation process is central to inter-ethnic relations, especially in a mixed group space¹². Groups develop animosity in the process of accruing benefit from the limited resources. The ‘threat’ could be real or perceived, and they engaged in ‘competitive zero-sum competition’, which further intensifies and reinforces the negativity and apprehension surrounding the adversary group.

Social identity theories focus on how groups strive to acquire a positive social identity. This status is crucial especially for minority groups in relation to majority group, since they usually have inferior status. It involves getting recognition and same status as the majority group. Minorities at times feel they are being mistreated or accorded less value due to their belonging to a certain group and they strive to acquire positive social identity by claiming positions and reservations in institutions and given structure. “Group members in such situation are left whether to emulate out group behaviour to compete or adopt strategies such as claiming preferential treatment”¹³. Most groups in their struggle attempts desperately to show to relative group their worth and their legitimacy of demands and “merge easily into a politics of ethnic entitlement”¹⁴. Fight over interests and needs often transforms into fight over status and worth and concerns over who is suitable to rule and represent in the political system.

Colonial legacies and ethnic categorization

The ethnic phenomenon in North-east seems to be around ethnic categories and classification as groups fight over the pivot of nomenclatures and status. The ethno-political indigenous claims in Assam has somewhat got to do with the ethnic categorization popularized during the colonial rule. The ethnic categorization that we are specifically concerned with is the category of ‘tribe’. The ‘rule of difference’ deployed by the colonial administration relied on categorizing and dividing the communities by attributing and shaping identities. They began to use the term ‘primitive tribe’ to denote a group of people living in ‘barbarous’ and ‘primitive’

¹²Dusan Kecmanovic, *The Mass Psychology of Ethno-nationalism*, (New York: Springer Media, 1996).

¹³Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff, *Ethnic Conflict: causes, consequences, responses* (UK.: polity press, 2009), 38.

¹⁴Ibid: Cordell and Wolff, 39.

condition. The anthropological writing represented them as ‘isolated’, ‘homogenous’, ‘autonomous social unit’. This was done for administrative convenience to incorporate them into the colonial system

“they started listing Indian communities on an extensive scale since 1806 and the process gathered momentum in the course of different census operations between 1881 and 1941....in the census report of 1891, Baines arranged the castes according to their traditional occupations. Under the category of agricultural and pastoral castes, he formed a sub heading and named it ‘forest tribes’. In the next two census, i.e. of 1901 and 1911, Sir Herbert Risley and Sir Edward Gait included the so called ‘animists’. Dr. Hutton during the 1931 census followed Baines substituted the term primitive tribes for forest tribes, according to the government of India act, 1935. As per the 13th schedule to the government of India order, 1936, certain tribes were specified as backward in the then province of Assam”¹⁵.

They identified ‘tribes’ in the newly occupied Assam frontier and deployed mechanism of separate administrative boundaries to governed which sowed the seeds of ethnicized politics in the region. The differently categorized groups gave rise to conglomerate identities, for instance disparate ‘tribes’ were grouped into larger identities like ‘Bodo’ ‘Koch’ or the ‘coolie’ labourers. According to the British categorization, Bodo, Dimasa, Lalung, Chutiya belong to the category of Kachari or Bodo tribe. The racialised and homogenizing tendency of the colonial rule clubbed the disparate migrant labourers belonging to different ethnic groups under the term ‘coolie’. They also shaped the identity formation of ‘Koch-Rajbangshi’ as the classification generated controversy with the colonial administrative unable to put them under a single fixed category. This has had repercussions in the inter-community relationship with claims and counter-claims leading to a strained political situation in the new political set up. As a result, groups have broken away from the larger identity to assume new identity and given new contours to build a larger identity based on ‘imposed categories’ reshaping lines of identification.

Ethnic conflict and identity assertion in the independent India witnesses the residue of the colonial classification as groups not only claimed autonomy rights

¹⁵Pradip Chattopadhyay, *Redefining Tribal Identity: The Changing Identity of the Santhals of South-West Bengal*, (New Delhi: Primus books, 2014), 17.

based on distinct culture and practices, but they craft an identity against one 'dominant' group and orient their movement against those particular group. The plains tribal identity spearheaded by the Bodo-Kachari, consolidated the scattered groups to form a common identity and projecting common enemy, that is, the mainstream Assamese caste Hindus. Like the Bodos', the Adivasis' are also a conglomerate of different groups with different cultural practices and dialects but have assumed a common political identity. The imposed categories of 'tribes' formed by the British for common identification gave rise to inter-ethnic solidarity and raise demands for political power. The repercussion of such demand has given rise to contesting claims and political demands as demand for exclusive territory by one group has generated clash of homeland boundary land against groups who are also demanding exclusive territory. As groups come together to form a common identity, differences may unfold and groups may assume independent identities with their own narratives.

In the post-independent India, there has been continuation with the ethnic categorization developed in the colonial period in the form of 'preferential politics' which has given rise to new dynamics of ethnic processes as groups are constantly in the process of making and remaking identities. The one peculiar direction ethnic competition has given shape to in Assam is the fight over 'tribal' status. Identities are at times imposed by others without having any control over how it is shaped and defined, which then undergoes crystallization in the new context with layers of 'revision' and 'reinterpretation' heralding an unceasing process of identity construction. And gaining political and territorial dimension in the new context.

India's north-east, was a Pandora box for the Indian state to explode in the post-colonial context. Diversity as a social fact has existed all over the world in every state, however the nature of diversity in this region is unique and challenging for any researcher. The nature of diversity in this region is very complex and unique and it presents a continuous challenge to the Indian state confronting with demands for cultural recognition, protection, preferential treatment and political autonomy within the political boundaries of the state. "Accommodating the diversity with its corresponding fragmentation of the political space provides the contemporary

challenge in the northeast today”¹⁶. The Indian-nation that we have come to identify is an integration of diverse land as far as possible into a single governable entity and moving into new life in the post-independence era with its diversities jostling for space and acknowledgment, negotiating and resisting the homogenizing impulse of the nation state¹⁷. Dutta says the idea of diversity has been deployed beginning with the imperialist policy to exercise most effective control through knowledge and record and in the post-imperialist period a mode to hold a nation together. What it means is that diversity has been used as an ideology to hold together the integrity of nation. The usage of the term diversity functions to maintain peace and create a sense of belonging despite differences, albeit ‘unity in diversity’.

The political isolation of this region took the shape of colonial policy of ‘excluded’ and ‘partially excluded areas’. The colonial legacy of exclusion also finds its entry point in the form of fifth and sixth schedules in the constitution of India. To understand the problems in the northeast, it is important to trace its colonial legacy and various factors that gave rise to identity politics of many forms. Colonial administrative processes engaged in construction of diversity with mechanism like the taxonomy of classification which reified the differences. The categorization and classification practices employed by the colonial administration marked the antecedents of social identification and shaped the future ethnic mobilization in the post-colonial context. The taxonomy of labelling, identifying and differential treatment of different ethnic groups have influenced the self-understanding, social organizations and political claims of indigenous population¹⁸. Colonial census operations assigned racial and ethnic categories to individuals and groups and attaching enduring identities and having consequences for the self-understandings of the classified. Nandana Dutta says “many of the legacies of the British have had active roles in the present and have been remodelled and remoulded beyond what could be reasonably imagined”¹⁹. Detailed accounts of their livelihoods pertaining to food habits, customs, rituals as well as their historical valour were recorded and

¹⁶Sandhya Goswami, ed. *Troubled diversity: The political process in North-East India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2015), Xxii.

¹⁷Nandana Dutta, “Constructing and Performing Diversity: Colonial and Contemporary Processes”, in *Troubled diversity: The political process in North-East India* (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2015), 1.

¹⁸Ibid: Dutta.

¹⁹Ibid: Dutta.

described which later became a pool from where information could be derived in self-understanding. In the process they engaged in the task of classification and differentiation based on racial associations, between the Mongoloid ‘tribes’ and the Caucasian ‘non-tribal’ group. Monographs were produced like ‘the kacharis’ with the aim to understand the tribal group and positioned against the caste group. What is also apparent is the differentiation and homogenizing constitutive elements of the colonial process, as some groups were differentiated with the dominant caste group based on physiognomy, myriad groups were also homogenized under the discourse of ‘tribal’. Different Tribal groups came to be identified, through attributing characteristics which was applied uniformly in building an understanding of different tribal group under one umbrella term which later gave shape to the contours of categories imposed on groups.

The colonial discourse on tribal continued in the independent India’s policy discourse pertaining to the ‘tribal’ population of the new state. The premise of colonial discourse was benevolent protectionism until they were ready to be integrated into the dominant socio-political. The framers of the new constitution were put in a muddle when it came to govern the ‘wild savages’ as they couldn’t break away from the categories and underlying assumptions prevalent in the colonial discourse. It said that the

“excluded areas have no experience in local self-government institutions of the modern or statutory type ...that the people of these areas than the mere election of a representative to the legislature and the establishment of such bodies needs perhaps a period of official guidance and control”²⁰.

The statement is in coherence with the colonial notions of how they are incapable of understanding or intellectually weak to protect and manage their own affair. By putting forth the statements of the debates, the framers of the constitution continued to hold the stereotypical understanding against the ‘tribal population as

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

²⁰Shiva B Rao, *The Framing of India’s Constitution*, Vol. I, (Indian Institute of Public Administration, 1968),733.

extremely simple people who can be and are exploited with ease by plains folk...considering.....tribals simplicity and weaknesses it is essential to provide statutory safeguards for the protection of the land”²¹.

The post-colonial state continued with the protectionist policy of the colonial period, with emphasis on special administrative measures to bring the ‘tribal people upto the level of the rest of the population’²². The rigid association of ‘tribal’ population with hilly terrain is also reflected in the post-colonial framing of new policies.

“these two sub-committees were required to draw up schemes of administration for the tribal areas as well as for the excluded and partially excluded areas. As they proceeded with their labours, the two sub-committees found that a considerable proportion of the tribal and aboriginal population lived outside these areas. Thus, in Assam the total tribal population according to the census of 1941 was about 2 million, but of these 64 percent lived in the plains. In the same way the sub-committee on excluded and partially excluded areas in provinces other than Assam also found a considerable proportion of the tribal population inhabiting regions outside these areas”²³.

The dilemma concerning the inability to locate tribal group in one geographical terrain has subsequently influenced the policy on reservation and quota pertaining to the tribal. It has contributed in the incoherence of policies like giving ST status to groups who don’t enjoy the same status if they cross specific territorial boundary.

The birth of nation or nations in this region didn’t begin together. Many groups became conscious at later stage. While most of them experienced and continues to experience some form of exclusion and subjugation in the hands of colonial and post-colonial state, not every group embarked on the same period demanding autonomy. Many were nascent groups and didn’t have political resources

²¹Constituent Assembly Debates Official Report, *General summary of the reports of the excluded and partially excluded areas (other than Assam) sub-committee and The North -East frontier (Assam) tribal and excluded areas sub-committee (including the final report of the E and P.E. Areas (other than Assam) sub-committee*, Annexure XIV, Appendix D, Book No.2, Vol. No. VII, 4th November 1948 to 8th January 1949, (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2003), 202.

²²Nandana Dutta, “Constructing and Performing Diversity: Colonial and Contemporary Processes”, in *Troubled diversity: The Political Process in North-East India* (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2015), 34.

²³Shiva B Rao, *The Framing of India’s Constitution*, Vol. I, (Indian Institute of Public Administration, 1968), 761.

to contest and make claims on the state. So, what ensued groups to make such claims on the Indian state? For this we need to understand the context, the socio-economic and cultural environment. However, though groups began aggressive political mobilization only in the post-independence, their sense of identity was heavily derived from the colonial administration and should be viewed historically keeping in perspective the colonial administration. Following Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined community that it is a "complex 'crossing' of discrete historical forces; but that, once created, they became 'modular', capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations"²⁴. The communities in North-east India were not conscious about their ethnic identities, until the British administrator who came and divided along ethno-tribal identity. Colonial administration conjured up an image and identity of disparate groups to give them a homogenized identity of 'tribe' though not applied universally to groups who didn't meet the criteria of determining 'tribal'. What is significant is that besides imposing a 'tribal' identity, it helped in building a 'degree of self-consciousness', in the process giving rise to ethnic boundaries, which was prone to flexibility and change according to changing context and political atmosphere.

Therefore, anthropology as a discipline became an important mechanism at the dispense of colonial rule to govern the fuzzy society. Beginning from the 19th century, collection of data pertaining to groups classed as 'caste' and 'tribe' became dominant, with specifications of what they practice, food habits, religious ceremonies became dominant. They soon began to produce an exhaustive record listing different 'tribes', broadening and deepening the boundaries and differences among the colonial subjects, arranged and organized under fixated typologies. It was a discursive task, as groups were organized around the ideas built and influenced by eurocentrism, typifying groups as 'savages', 'semi-primitive'. A hierarchical and vertical relationship was introduced keeping in view how 'civilized or less 'civilized' groups were and on the level of integration with the Brahmanical structure. Therefore, the frontier state of colonial Assam became subject of colonial ethnography as the region's population could now be categorised along the continuum of caste or tribal.

²⁴Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (Verso Books, 2006), 48.

The conceptual boundary was soon transformed into tangible boundary, as the colonial administration began to draw physical line from the middle of the 19th century onwards. The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 introduced new regulations of 'line system' to administer the hill tracts of Frontier Assam. Such physical boundary restricted flow of outsiders into the territory beyond the line system, however, regulated and sponsored travellers, ethnographers and missionaries were allowed. Thus, began the process of stratification and division, which paved the way for ethnic formation. They were soon categorised and clustered together into distinct groups based on language and culture. The 'tribal identity' therefore seep into the self-consciousness of different community, stratifying the society based on differences and juxtaposing one another.

Manasjyoti Bordoloi in 'Impact of colonial Anthropology in Assam'²⁵ argues what aggravated the consciousness of different tribal group in the 20th century was the issue of immigration and the inability of the Assamese 'Caste Hindu' government to solve the suffering of the indigenous tribal community. A small fragment of educated middle class group emerged as a flag bearer of the indigenous tribal community against the migrant population, speaking vigorously against the ineffectiveness of the ruling government, ruled by the dominant Assamese Hindu class. Bordoloi argues, those small middle class group took matter in their own hand and looked for 'accomodative stance in relation to the colonial rule', which was reflected in the creation of Assam Tribal League, which participated in the election held in 1937.

The colonial experiment with stratification and experiment has contributed immensely in the self-identification process of ethnic formation as Richard Jenkins puts forward the idea of 'external categorization'²⁶ playing a significant role in self-identification which points us towards the institutional level at which categorization took place, in this case, the colonial administrative power.

²⁵Manasjyoti Bordoloi, "Impact of Colonial Anthropology on Identity Politics and Conflicts in Assam," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XLIX No. 20 (2014).47-54.

²⁶Richard Jenkins, "Rethinking ethnicity: Identity, Categorization and Power," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* Vol.17 (1994).

Sanjib Baruah in ‘Territoriality, Indigeneity and rights in the north-east India’²⁷ discusses about the peculiar nature of the colonial spatial order system which outline the notion of ethnicity and the defining parameters of an ethnic group ‘to a particular physical-spaces’. He argues that the current notions of territoriality and indigeneity is shaped by the colonial spatial order, which hints at the way how colonial racial and ethnic classification fixated ‘tribes’ to geography or natural habitat. Each ‘tribe’ was assigned physical spaces as their natural habitat, which meant certain group were assigned hill terrain or plain valley. The post-colonial policies still continue to hold the colonial knowledge in their official discourse because the identification of tribe is still counted according to the assigned habitats. The rigidity of such classification and identification has resulted in internal inconsistency of policies in the post-colonial context, as groups who are classified as ‘plains tribe’ are not recognised as tribes and those ‘hill tribes’ are not recognized in the plains.

What manifested post-independence in Assam is that many small groups started identifying themselves by their ‘original’ names and rejected larger identities, for instance, Bodos’ rejected the Assamese identity to identify themselves by their nomenclatures and initially went ahead with the attempt to revive the Bodo nation constituting different smaller groups. Using colonial documents and accounts as a window for identity formation, new groups rose shaping their own narratives in the quest to maintain their identity. It also coincided with the special treatment measures laid down in the constitution for the erstwhile ‘excluded’ and ‘backward areas’ and former ‘savages’.

M.S. Prabhakara in ‘Invention, Reinvention and Contestation’²⁸ discusses the proliferation of political mobilization by smaller groups in Assam, which is linked to the preferential treatment of ST category. ST category is viewed as a privilege category enjoyed by tribal group which underlies the perception of many groups seeking tribal status. Prabhakara argues that such perception has prompted smaller groups to ‘self-invent’ and ‘reinvent’ identities and has taken three forms, that is, inclusion in sixth schedule, demand for ST by ‘non-tribal’, and thirdly resistance to new membership of tribal. He argues that such demands are rising due to anxiety

²⁷Sanjib Baruah, “Territoriality, Indigeneity and Rights in the North-East India,” in *Economic and Political weekly* Vol.43, No.14 (2015). 39-44

²⁸M S Prabhakara, “Invention, Reinvention and Contestation: Politics of Identity in Assam,” in *Ethnonationalism in India: A Reader*, ed. Sanjib Baruah (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

about their identity and autonomy and that each demand clashes and impinges on the demands made by other group who also inhabit the same political space, and as a consequence 'shifting confrontation and collaboration with the 'other'.

The post-colonial identity claims in Assam is dominated by tribal identity claims and as R.K. Das says a tribe is an ethnic group which is culturally bounded but politically defined, therefore ethnicity is an articulation of cultural distinctiveness in a politically competitive environment. Groups who have been closely associated with a larger 'tribal' group may join or break away. For instance, groups who were considered part of the larger Bodo nation have choose to move away and formed separate 'tribal' identity. While this creates the situation of where groups are recognised a 'tribe' would want to maintain their separate identity and would oppose the inclusion of new group as a tribe. Various historical accounts suggest the genealogical connection of Bodos' and Koch-Rajbangshi, however, both wants to project their own 'tribal' identity. With Bodos' as already a recognised tribal group, the demand by Koch-Rajbangshi for tribal status is opposed vehemently as the former attempt to limit the boundary of a tribe.

Nameirakpam Bijen Meetei talks about how groups co-existing within the same territory are fighting for indigeneity provoking strong political mobilizations, mostly leading to armed insurrections²⁹. He attributes the current identity dynamics to 'certain historical forces that paved the way for impaired social relationships'. Focusing on Manipur and Meghalaya's ethno-linguistic identity, he traces the roots for present ethnic movements in the British administrative system and its divide and rule policy they deployed. Along with physical demarcation, ethnic groups were also divided by differentially categorizing and forming into a conglomerate identity, which further sowed the seeds for identity struggle in the post-independent context.

Chandan kr. Sharma also raises the issue of 'space-centric identity consciousness in Assam' which is a result of regulations and control initiated by the colonial rule as the 'colonial cartography' created artificial boundaries to suit the colonial administrative expediency³⁰. The colonial notions of associating territoriality

²⁹Nameirakpam Bijen Meetei, "Ethnicity, Colonial Legacies, and Post-independence Issues of Identity Politics in North-East India," in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 20:1

³⁰Chandan Kumar Sharma, "The State and Ethnicization of Space in North-East India," in *Shifting Terrain: Conflict dynamics in North-East India* (Guwahati: DVS publishers, 2012).

with indigeneity, which was discursively generated became the foundation of space-centric homeland policies adopted by the post-colonial Indian state. Such notions are harboured by both the policy makers and the local activists, which results in ‘othering’ of groups who don’t fit the criteria of ‘territoriality and indigeneity’. He argues that in a multi-ethnic space, relying on the ‘principle of recognising an identity only with an ethnic space is divisive in nature’. The Bodoland movement based on such territorial exclusivity give rise to complex situation because several ethnic groups like Koch-Rajbangshi and Adivasi groups also inhabit the space and are at loggerheads with each other on issues of ‘tribal’ identity and homeland autonomy.

Today Assam witness identity movement from three communities, Bodo-Kachari, Koch-Rajbangshi and Adivasis. Bodos’ are one of the major scheduled plain tribes in Assam spread across the region, but mostly settled along the foothills of Indo-Bhutan border. Adivasis constitute another major group consisting around more than 40 lakh population, they are the migrant labourers transported from across the region to work in the tea plantation set up by the British raj. Koch-Rajbangshi community and its origin is of some ambiguity, but they have garnered attention due to their Kamatapur demand and for ST status. They are settled across Assam and the adjoining border of North Bengal. What is central to the three group is they have undergone process of identity permutation process and are at different stages in generating identity consciousness. The Bodo-Kachari have successfully consolidated their identity which is visible in the political history of Bodoland movement beginning from the 1920’s onwards and taking new shape and course post-independence. The Adivasis or tea tribes have come to define themselves on the basis of their historical experiences of shared exploitation at the hands of tea planters. The Koch-Rajbangshis’ identity permutation is a recent phenomenon as they are still on the process to create a strong political identity for themselves.

Udayon Misra in ‘the burden of history’ sees Bodoland movement as the failure on the part of Assam government to provide them constitutional protection for the protection of tribal land³¹. He says the denial of sixth schedule to the Bodos’ early in the post-independence period is the primary cause leading to alienation of tribal land. The indecisiveness and unwillingness to solve the tribal land issue has generated

³¹Udayon Misra, “Bodoland: The Burden of History,” in *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 47, No. 37 (2012).

resentment against the ruling Assamese government. The question of Bodo identity is integrally linked to land and demography.

Sanjib Baruah in his book “India against itself: Assam and the politics of Nationality” locates the development of self-determination movement like the Bodoland movement in the context of the model of the ‘nation-state’³². Baruah places the subnational narratives within the failure and enduring tension to develop a pan-Indian narrative which can accommodate the historically constituted subnational aspirations and concerns.

Sudhir Jacob George in “The Bodo Movement in Assam: Unrest to Accord” gives a detailed account of the uprising of the Bodo movement to the formation of BAC (Bodoland Autonomous Council)³³. George illustrates the various factors that gave rise to Bodo identity movement ranging from political, economic and language issues and the culmination of BAC in the 1990’s. George says the accord was the least political affair, as it emphasized more on social, educational, economic and cultural advancement, and issues on political rights and aspirations were excluded, which sowed the seeds for further tumultuous period in the Assam.

Nani Gopal Mahanta in “Politics of space and violence” traces the militant phase of Bodoland movement and argues that the frequent conflicts have polarized the communities. Mahanta attributes the crisis in Bodoland to the structural issues which remains unresolved by the Indian state and the continuation with the “policy of ethnic insularity and ethnic homeland” has failed to take cognizance of the multicultural, multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic composite character of the region. The present structure of BTC (Bodoland Territorial Council) doesn’t provide ‘durable peace’ as it doesn’t fairly represent all the stakeholders and also the structural issues of protecting tribal belts and blocks remain unsolved.

On Adivasi identity

Hiren Gohain in “A Question of Identity: Adivasi Militancy in Assam” locates the identity struggle of Adivasis in the historical backdrop of servitude like position

³²Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the politics of Nationality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³³Sudhir Jacob George, “The Bodo Movement in Assam: Unrest to Accord,” in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 34, No.10 (1994).

marked by destitution and denial of basic freedom of movement let alone basic rights. They have been left behind due to the constraints of plantation economy and the only way to uplift and secured their future is through affirmative assistance, granting ST status. Gohain says that the incentive failure to get ST status has developed into a militant phase during the militant phase of the Bodoland movement which saw violent clashes against the Santhal group in western Assam in the mid 1990's.

Udayon Misra in his article "Adivasi Struggle in Assam" says the existence of Adivasi group has always remain peripheral physically and mentally, with very limited interaction positing as the 'other' in the landscape³⁴. However, Misra says' there has been a conscious effort on various organizations like Asom Sahitya Sabha (ASS) and All Assam Tea Tribe Students Association (AATTSA) to establish them as an integral part of Assamese nationalism. It is a slow process of coming together of two communities.

Rana P. Behal in "coolie drivers or benevolent paternalists? British tea planters in Assam and the Indenture labour system" traces the evolution of indentured labour system in the Assam plantation. Behal argues this was done through the contradictory policies of 'protecting' the interests of the labour force and legitimising the extra-legal authority. Various legislations and acts ensured the subservient position of the labour class which laid down provisions of penalty if they breached any contract. Various legislations ensured that the workforce remained "docile, disciplined and intimidated". The system of indentured like labour system was accompanied by the prejudicial notion that underline the categorising process, thus categorising them as "coolie", "primitive", and "jungly". Behal argues that "its legislative interventions were meant to 'protect' the 'ignorant' and 'illiterate' migrants' interests and at the same time to ensure the compliance of indenture contract by inserting penal provisions"³⁵.

Indrajit Sharma in "Tea tribes of Assam: Identity politics and search of Liberation" discusses the identity crisis among the Adivasis which is due to their nature of work and deprivation. Their identity crisis is further compounded by the

³⁴Udayon Misra, "Adivasi Struggle in Assam," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.42, No. 51 (2007).

³⁵Rana P Behal, "Coolie Drivers or Benevolent Paternalists? British Tea Planters in Assam and the Indenture Labour System," in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.44, No.1 (2010).

denial of ‘tribal’ identity, which has prompted them to assert their ‘tribal’ identity recently and their cultural distinctiveness. Sharma argues their persistent demand for ST status should be seen in terms of ‘liberation’ from the exploitation and discrimination experienced for over centuries³⁶.

On Koch-Rajbangshi Identity

Nandini Basistha in “modernity and ethnic identity formation of Rajbangshis” says that multiple factors gave rise to identity formation and Rajbangshis identity according to Basistha has been influenced by modernity. Basistha traces the identity transformation phases of Rajbangshis assuming different characteristics in different period. The identity crisis from low caste status affiliation in the British census instigated the Kshatriyaisation process under Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma. Basistha attributes the three modernity markers like the “industrialisation, democracy and nationalism” forces behind such move of social upliftment. In parts of North-Bengal the competition for socio-economic political rights became acute in a multi-ethnic region, which prompted the educated individuals like Panchanan Barman to generate identity consciousness by looking for accommodation in the form of ‘preferential treatment’ in government institutions. Post-independence already united by the forces of Kshatriyaisation movement, it became much easier to move forward with the demand for homeland. However, Basistha says that it is a fragile movement as they never succeeded in forming a numerically strong community. Modernity therefore became a crucial factor in the ethno-political movement of Rajbangshis³⁷.

Aim and scope of the study

The larger aim of this study is to understand the inter-ethnic dynamic ‘tribal’ politics and violence that has dominated the political scene of Assam in the course of identity movement. To understand the nature of hostilities and what generates such animosity, I have focused on the permutation process of how identities are made and unmade and the self-identification process of groups concern. As Frederik Barth defines ethnic group as a ‘population which has a membership which identifies itself

³⁶Indrajit Sharma, “Tea Tribes of Assam: Identity politics and Search for Liberation,” in *Economic and Political weekly*, Vol.53, No.9 (2018).

³⁷Nandini Basistha, “Modernity and Ethnic Identity formation of Rajbangshis,” in *Modernity and Ethnic processes in India*, ed. D.V. Kumar (Jaipur: Rawat publications, 2014).

and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order³⁸. The emergence of ethnic group identifying with particular ethnic categories has directed scholars to understand the categorization process that took place in the colonial period which has contributed in shaping the identities of groups. As M.S. Prabhakara says ethnic categories are constantly invented and reinvented by groups in their quest for distinct identity³⁹. Some ethnic struggles are fought on old categories, which are imbibed by groups to formulate their identity. Analysed and understood with the background of colonial categorization process that occurred under the discipline of anthropology and ethnological accounts which build boundaries between groups, it furthers the study by focusing on each groups self-identification process who treats the colonial accounts uncritically and build ethnic solidarity based on colonial records. New identities and boundaries are build based on colonial records giving rise to ethnic solidarity and ethnic boundaries. It wasn't only restricted to conceptual boundaries, but physical boundaries like the setting up of tea garden colonies also bifurcated the continuity of space. Colonial rule gave rise to the idea that spaces are culture and people bound and treating culture as discrete objects occupying discrete space has given rise to more problems than solution in the post-colonial context⁴⁰. Relying on colonial knowledge production and its repercussion on the post-colonial identities, I have historically trace the identity formation of three groups and the various conditions and factors that led the group to subscribe to the colonial categories of 'tribe' in making sense of themselves and analysed the current political atmosphere surrounding 'tribal' identity which has got to do more with the administrative category of ST status than any form of 'tribalhood'. The paper also tries to look at the inherent violence dovetailed with exclusive identity claims and homeland demands.

The paper broadly covers the theme of identity struggle based on colonial legacies, but also focusing on new dimensions groups acquired in their fight for recognition. In the competitive atmosphere, following the constructivist school of thought, that identities are constructed, the groups rely on various strategies of

³⁸Frederik Barth, "Ethnic groups and Boundaries (1969)," in *Theories of Ethnicity: A classical reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (London: Macmillan press Ltd. 1996).

³⁹M. S. Prabhakara, "Invention, Reinvention and Contestation: Politics of identity in Assam," in *Ethnonationalism in India: A Reader*, ed. Sanjib Baruah (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2010),

⁴⁰Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond Culture: Space, Identity and The Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, No. 1 (1992): 6-23.

‘constituting and re-configuring’ by defining the boundaries between them. Following constructivist tradition, this paper suggests that identities are permutational process and groups rely on different strategies to construct ethnic solidarity. As ethnic groups adopt various mechanism for ethnic solidarity, in the process it creates more rigid boundaries. The three groups are fighting around the ‘tribal’ identity, which has strong political implications in the political structure of Assam.

Methodology and Sources

This study follows a qualitative analysis approach, with very less quantitative data and relies on historical ethnographic accounts and documents. Primary and secondary sources have been used extensively, with little field observation and interaction with individuals from ethnic organization and individuals belonging to a specific community. Primary sources include Colonial ethnographic document records and monographs produced by individuals who were sponsored by the British structure. Primary documents also include memorandums submitted by ethnic organization to the head of the state. Secondary sources include articles, books, articles in journal, newspaper articles.

Structure

The first chapter is divided in two parts, with the first segment concerning itself with the theoretical framework to understand ethnic mobilization and boundary making process and the second segment traces the colonial roots of ‘imposed categories’ which plays a crucial role in the ethnic identification process among the three groups under study. It begins by defining various dimensions of ethnicity and keeping the concept of boundary making central with its fluid nature, there can be shifts in ‘categories’ they identify with. It tries to raise the issue of how ethnic groups at times build new solidarities giving rise to new boundaries under new category or may break away from the category to assume independent identity. It stresses that ethnic boundaries are non-static phenomenon and groups may merge together under specific conditions and environment. It tries to give a theoretical framework to locate the group solidarity of the three groups under study and the shifting of ‘categories’ in their self-identification and the inherent strategies that entails such identity making process. Using Andreas Swimmer’s theoretical proposition of boundary making

strategies as the basis, it proceeds to understand the ethnic processes and boundary making.

In the second segment of the chapter, looking at the concept of 'tribe' as an 'imposed category' as the conceptual boundary element in the identity making process, it traces the colonial roots of 'tribal' identity and critically analyses the colonial records and documents that employed classificatory practice which helped in building identities and mapping people into groups and entities. Arguing that the knowledge production by the colonial rule have impacted the identity making process in post-colonial context, the chapter studies each group separately to understand the respective categories they were imposed with.

The second chapter traces the evolution of Bodo identity making process and the simultaneous different phases of Bodoland movement dovetailed with the identity making process. Using the theoretical foundation of Andreas Swimmer's strategies of boundary making, it looks at the way Bodo identity was crafted beginning from the early 20th century with the consciousness of 'plains tribe' identity. It traces and analyses the historical remnants of colonial category of 'plains tribe' which became the founding structure to build a conglomerate identity to give way to more independent Bodo 'tribal' identity. What was central to the identity consciousness was the notion of 'tribal' identity to establish their distinctiveness from other 'non-tribal' community. It is a category that became etched and interwoven in the narratives of the groups seeking autonomy and rights. The identity consciousness was built around the idea of a strong tribal identity and the collective effort to build a kind of tribal nationalism. And subsequently it discusses the intense Bodoland movement that began from the 1980's which saw militant phase of the movement which generated inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic divide.

The third chapter is divided in two parts looking at the identity construction process of two communities: Koch-Rajbangshi and Tea tribes or Adivasis. Each group has undergone through different stages in self-identifying themselves according to the social and political milieu of the time. This chapter analyses the growth of identity consciousness among the two communities and with an aim to understand the ethnic identity formation process and boundary making and analyse the political dynamics in the present political atmosphere of competitive ethnic movement. This chapter locates

the germination of consciousness in the pre-independence period and the identity crisis abound due to certain historical factors, which acquired new dynamics in the post-independence period with change political scenario. It traces the different phases and different identities assume by both the community and the internal fragments in constructing a common identity. What is common to both the group is that they have been rallying their demand around the ‘tribal’ status in the state of Assam. It tries to raise the issue of how ‘tribal’ status is closely related to the administrative category of ST which provides political expediency.

The concluding chapter locates the emergence of contentious group politics in the political landscape of BTC with logical derivation from the preceding chapter’s discussion on identity transformation process. It discusses the contentions and issues that emerged post creation of BTC and critically locates the idea of ‘tribal’ identity and mobilization surrounding it dovetailed with the administrative category of ST which guarantees some form of accommodation in government institutions. The second section gives the concluding remarks on the identity formation study done in the preceding chapters and supplements with field observation remarks to give a sense of the ground level who become the victim of ethnic violence.

Research Questions

- 1) Understanding and decoding the sources of identity formation, through colonial historiography.
- 2) Critically engaging with the category of ‘tribal’ identity and the dynamics inherent in it having social and political implications.
- 3) What are the conditions that motivate identity formation processes and the impact on inter-ethnic relations?
- 4) Who is a “tribal” and what constitutes the understanding of “tribal” with regard to the idea of the tribal homeland and the demand for ST status by various groups?
- 5) What are the challenges of the current institutional mechanism of BTAD with repeated ethnic violence and contentious politics?

Chapter 2

Identity formation, Ethnic boundaries and Imposed categories

Identity formation is a dynamic process involving various factors and condition that give rise to its dynamism. Ethnic affiliation or group self-identification is one form of identity discourse that dominates the social and political space. There is no integrated definition of ethnicity since it is an evolving concept and ethnic groups are constantly taking new forms and shifting their allegiances according to changing circumstances. There are numerous ways to approach ethnicity and dynamics inherent to the phenomenon. Various literature has defined ethnic groups differently and have emphasized on different elements of geographical and cultural factor as ethnic phenomenon and its characteristics vary across different cases displaying varying degrees of political salience, cultural distinctiveness, historical trajectory and stability.

The scope of the chapter is divided in two parts: the first segment deals with the theoretical assumptions and concerns on issues of ethnic mobilization and ethnic boundary making and the second segment focuses on the imposed categories that came with colonial rule on the disparate groups which have been internalised by groups in their self-identification process which has a direct implications on the subsequent boundary making process that entails the ethnic groups in post-colonial context. The concern here is to give a theoretical framework for the later chapters which deals extensively with the ethnic mobilization and the boundary making process and understand the ‘imposed categories’ that came about in the colonial rule using the help of multiple disciplines of ethnography, history, anthropology to transform them into knowable subjects. The group that we are concern here is with those ethnic groups that falls under distinct categorical group dwelling in the state of Assam, who don’t identify themselves as “Assamese”, but have their own designation with which they identify.

What is central to ethnic identity is ethnic boundary acting as an identity marker, which tries to establish its distinctiveness from the ‘other’. There exist discrete group units each corresponding to their specific culture who may share a common culture and ‘interconnected differences’ that differentiates each culture from

the other⁴¹. Here, it is more concerned with the outward constituents that differentiates a group from the other. Groups may refer to their languages, customs, dress and related variants which acts as an identity marker. As Frederik Barth says when we focus our study on cultural traits, it becomes a study of different culture and not of an ethnic organization⁴². Therefore, the study is confined to ethnic process with special reference to ethnic boundary.

Defining the field

Following Max Weber, I define ethnicity as inter-subjective feeling shared based on the belief that they belong to the same social origin and culture. The belief in common ancestry and perceived common culture, myths and markers which helps in substantiating their oneness along with religious and linguistic categories. Weber say's 'the belief in group affinity, regardless of whether it has any objective foundation, can have important consequences especially for the formation of a political community'⁴³. He calls such political community 'ethnic groups who share a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation'⁴⁴.

One way of approaching ethnicity is from identity which is integral to an individual to make sense of oneself, to give values and meaning to their existence. As an individual we could be host of multiple identities and may choose to use any layer of identity when the situation demands. Ethnicity is about this identity, to make sense of oneself and live according to the values and meaning attached to the groups, it is about identifying with a group or collective that have some shared symbols, values, history, 'folkways'⁴⁵. This form of identity generally espouses strong affinity and sentiments towards ingroup members. Ethnicity in this sense is about the continuity of symbols and values that has been passed down from generation. However, just like identity, ethnicity is always changing and shifting characters. It is always in the

⁴¹Frederik Barth, "Ethnic groups and Boundaries (1969)," in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (London: Macmillan press Ltd. 1996), 1.

⁴²Ibid: Barth, 297.

⁴³Max Weber, "Ethnic groups (1922)," in *Theories of ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (London: Macmillan press Ltd. 1996).56.

⁴⁴Ibid: Weber, 56.

⁴⁵William Graham Sumner, *Folkways-A Study of The Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores and Morals*. Read Books Ltd, 2013.

process of becoming one. Identities are constantly created, reproduced, transformed and addressed. There is a plethora of politicised identities which tells us that groups capitalise on identity for political expediency.

Ethnicity is a relative concept dependent on the stigmatisation and perception of the 'other'. Ethnicity is a source of identity and just as identity changes and transforms, so does ethnicity, and it is important to understand the nature of ethnicity and its transformation. How does one become 'ethnic' or come to possess ethnic mind? Ethnic process involves stimulation internally and externally. Internal stimulation happens when at a time and space, leaders mobilise members of the group to come together and defend themselves. Externally, issues like migration, population growth, modernisation, state policies, language issues and social change has the potential to prompt them to organise and mobilise members socially and politically.

What is central to ethnic processes is the concept of ethnic boundary. Ethnic groups are constantly in a quest to establish their distinctiveness which has a direct bearing on the group boundaries. Ethnic groups are not quite clearly demarcated, but rather its fluid and fuzzy with unclear demarcations, with individuals able to switch identities and categories situationally. Situational stimulations and variations at a point of time influences the ethnic phenomenon and make certain outcomes likely. Therefore, ethnic boundary is not a static phenomenon and depending on the circumstances and specific goal at a certain point coming together of ethnic segments or breakaway may take place. Different tribes in Northeast have historically come together for an ethnic solidarity to demand statehood or some other political goals. The formation of ethnic groups and its corresponding boundaries reflects flexibility in their nature. Many tribes in northeast have fluid boundaries, be it territorial, linguistics, cultural or political and each merge with each other according to the need of the time. Frederik Barth's conception of ethnic boundary argues that boundaries do persist despite close interactions between groups and that 'ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built'⁴⁶. Ethnic groups are culture bearing units which it encloses, but it is the ethnic boundary that defines the group, the "dichotomization" that perpetuates the boundary between 'us'

⁴⁶Frederik Barth, "Ethnic Group and Boundaries," in *Theories of ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (London: Macmillan press Ltd. 1996), 2.

and ‘them’, recognising as members of ‘other’ ethnic group. Despite close interaction between ethnic groups there persists criteria and signals for identification and structuring of interaction which allows for ethnic boundaries to persist.

The dichotomization persists in a poly-ethnic situation, directing us towards the ‘interactional situation’ which influences the genesis and functioning of the ethnic group. In a multi-ethnic space, the process involved in giving rise to new ethnic solidarity and new ethnic boundaries is a continuous phenomenon and with the new emergence of ethnic solidarity, new ethnic boundaries emerge. This in a way makes ethnic boundaries a non-stagnant phenomenon, therefore it is important to analyse what gives rise to new ethnic groups and boundaries that entails the making of new groups. In discussing the different mechanisms that go into sustaining the ethnic boundary, new groups emerged and resort to various mechanisms in constructing new boundaries. New boundaries may emerge due to emerging inter-ethnic solidarity or breakaway of groups, which gives rise to independent identity based on the perceived beliefs of common origin and shared culture.

Locating the ethnic phenomenon in situational and subjective aspects, Jimmy Sanders argues that ‘ethnic boundaries are patterns of social interaction which gives rise to in-group members’ self-identification and outsiders’ confirmation of group distinction’⁴⁷. He defines ethnic boundaries in terms of social spaces where boundaries are constructed and played out in group interaction. While Frederik Barth says that it is the ethnic boundary that defines the group rather than the culture it encloses, we can’t ignore the cultural stuff that give rise to construction of subjective familiarity which then gives rise to a kind of ethnic boundary. As Cornell says ‘the shared cultural content of ethnicity’ is significant in constructing in-group members⁴⁸. In the case studies that follow this chapter, Bodos’, Rajbangshis’ and tea tribes or Adivasis have engaged in a systematic construction of ethnic solidarity with the underlying idea of collective tribalism and strictly defining who constitutes a ‘tribal’ and how they are distinct from their neighbour groups reinforcing the in-group membership and the outsiders’ confirmation of distinct ethnic groups.

⁴⁷Jimmy M. Sanders, "Ethnic Boundaries and Identity in Plural Societies," *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 327, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3069245>. Accessed on 10th January 2018, 5:53.

⁴⁸Stephen Cornell, "The Variable Ties that Bind: Content and Circumstance in Ethnic Processes," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (1996), 266, doi: [10.1080/01419870.1996.9993910](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1996.9993910).

Boundary making mechanisms

Boundaries are also classificatory in nature meaning the categorical dimension of grouping them under a broad framework of either 'tribe' or 'caste Hindus' interestingly plays out in the political domain which provides the space in claiming and contesting boundaries. Ethnic boundaries also assume a significant dimension within the intra-group space, when small segments of groups come together to form a much larger group identity. The ethnic process in North east is replete with such coming and breaking of groups according to the situational demands. While ascriptive characteristics becomes the basis for building collective sentiments, shared class position also reinforces ethnic boundaries. Following Andreas Wimmer's proposition on strategies of boundary making where he talks about five types of strategies; expanding the boundary to include a range of people; contracting the boundary; inversion; repositioning and blurring boundaries, this paper proceeds to choose strategies of 'expanding the boundary to include a range of people' and 'repositioning of one's ethnic category'⁴⁹.

The Bodo and Adivasi group under case study falls under the strategies of where groups expand the meaning of boundary to include more range of people giving rise to intergroup solidarity, whereas the case of Koch-Rajbangsi tells us the characteristics of 'repositioning' in a multi-ethnic space, where if we analyse the trajectory of identity struggles among the Rajbangsi, the strategies of 'status climbing' and changing sides is evident.

Ethnic mobilization and boundary

An internal colony framework is used to explain certain ethnic mobilization as at times 'labour market is segregated by cultural and ethnic boundaries' and 'cultural division of labour come to exists'⁵⁰. Ethnic organization and solidarity is seen as a product of specific kind of economic conditions. Such framework explains the existence of ethnic boundaries by emphasizing on the class dimension of the group to understand the ethnic solidarity that prevails. The organized tea industry of colonial

⁴⁹Andreas Wimmer, "Elementary Strategies of Ethnic Boundary Making," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, (2008): 1031-1040, doi: 10.1080/01419870801905612

⁵⁰Susan Olzak, "Contemporary Ethnic Mobilization," in *Ethnic Conflict* Vol. I, ed. by Rajat Ganguly, (London: Sage Publications, 2009), 248.

Assam helped in forging an amalgamated identity among the migrant workers who hitherto were distinct groups in their source origin. Their shared experience of colonial exploitation at the hands of the planter raj has helped in maintaining ethnic solidarity at the macro-level. Three cultural characteristics which have been attributed in maintaining their ethnic solidarity are ‘connubium, commensality and language’⁵¹. The intra-group boundaries exist with individual groups maintaining boundaries, but nevertheless they come together to give rise to interethnic consolidation which bring with itself new boundaries. The ethnic process in North-east witnesses such instances where groups belonging to linguistically and culturally similar type merges together to form a new enlarged community with its own ethnic self-awareness. The Bodos’ also began with the pan-tribal identity movement by merging groups who are believed to have a common origin and ancestry post-independence, only to crystallized into more distinctive and narrower Bodo political identity as groups splintered away to assume their own independent identity. However, the consciousness that gave rise to Bodo identity persist and shared common ancestry is still entertain when the situations demands. The Koch-Rajbangsi identity is that of a complex category, however definable, with its attempt to create a distinct Koch identity with the appellation Rajbangsi, attempting to generate a hegemonic Koch identity by breaking away from the Assamese identity where they had assimilated highly.

What is pertinent to the question of identity of a community is that they seem to have a basis on linguistic-cultural affinity or place of settlement. The search for new identity among small groups of tribes have directed them to adopt new adaptive mechanism in their strategies to reaffirm their status against other local communities. The historical records have supplemented with sufficient information regarding their social identity and nature and the relation that existed between communities. Disparate population got clustered together with the mechanism of colonial anthropology who were the subject of study and categorised and clubbed into units. What is central to the ethnic categories of the three groups is the prevalence of classificatory treatment meted by the Colonial rulers in their quest to make sense of the disparate groups in a conglomerate space. The record writing task of the colonial administration relied on the disciplines of ethnography, ethnology, anthropology and

⁵¹R.K. Kar, “Plantation workers and Hetero-ethnicity: An Appraisal of the Tea labour in Assam,” in *Political development of the North-east-part II*, ed. B.C. Bhuyan, (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1992), 86.

history, which helped in substantiating the data into selective units and attributed them the categories of 'caste' 'tribe' and 'race', transforming them into knowable subjects.

With the change in political power and new opportunities that came after the independence, the degree of consciousness among groups and in-size members increased in a political atmosphere where competition grew between communities. Such atmosphere fostered redefinition of cultural affinity and common political aspirations. One such redefinition was the dynamics of 'tribal' identity and the question of who belongs where in the 'regional ethnic-cultural scheme'⁵².

Locating the concept

The disparate group of ethnic in Assam belong to distinct cultural-linguistic categories who are identified as 'tribal' or 'non-tribal' caste group. Tribe here refers to the group who don't belong to the Hindu caste groups, a colonial discourse on tribes which has shaped the conceptual foundation of who constitute tribe in the post-colonial context. Though independent tribal communities exist, tribal communities are allied culturally and as a result the identity shift and alliance occur within the culturally allied groups. Close affinities are developed among the groups who share closer relation in terms of language and culture. They come together under one nomenclature with common political aspirations. Which reflects the rise of new boundaries and ethnic consolidation with the change in ethnic identity affiliations.

Ethnicity is a ubiquitous phenomenon with variant degrees of intensity and scope and as Abner Cohen defines it as part of a larger population interacting with other collectives in a broad social system⁵³. Ethnicity as AL. Epstein says is 'essentially a political phenomenon' organizing to struggle for power in the power structure, this explains why some ethnic boundaries are politically salient. Andreas Swimmer argues that when boundaries are salient, political alliance between co-ethnics are more likely to be formed. There may be social forces which may give more important to certain categorical distinction, for instance the classification of 'tribe' in Assam may be more appropriate for certain groups and the categorical

⁵²B. Pakem, *Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in North-east India* (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1990), 234

⁵³Abner Cohen, "The Lesson of ethnicity (1974)," in *Theories of ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (London: Macmillan press Ltd, 1996), 370-371.

classification may act as consequential and salient for the power bearing structural relations.

The concept of 'tribe' acts as a conceptual boundary following the colonial discourse and the groups who enjoy the appellation of tribe have firmly closed off the boundaries for outsiders who are not deemed as 'tribal'. As Jenkins argues, 'that externally located processes of social categorization are enormously influential in the production and reproduction of social identities'⁵⁴. In such situations 'imposed categories' become the basis to transform a category into a social identity. Jenkins terms such groups as 'ethnic categories' rather than 'ethnic groups', which is imposed by an outsider and replete with sense of prejudices and discrimination. Various theories explain such internalization through the framework of social psychology, where prejudiced categories are accepted to identify towards a more positive self-concept. Ethnic boundaries are drawn from such internalized categories, to mobilize groups and disseminate among individuals to form the basis for a collective action and resource mobilization.

Assam: Ethnic fragmentation

The idea of "Assamese" nationalism has failed to create a homogeneous acceptance among certain communities which has led to dramatically emerging of groups with their own particularistic notion of sense of belonging and different ethnic orientation. The three groups that we have chosen to discuss the ethnic identification process reveals different dynamism and characteristics. Emergence of group politics and identity is seen mostly as a failure of the process of 'social absorption' and assimilation. Many authors have attributed the rise of group politics to this phenomenon in the history of group politics. According to Sujit Choudhury in Assam 'the process of assimilation and absorption have suffered setbacks throughout the course of history'⁵⁵.

We will be concern here with 'tribal' pockets in the peripheries of Assam which have seen violence and conflicts. And it is imperative to understand the

⁵⁴Richard Jenkins, "Rethinking Ethnicity: Identity, Categorization and Power," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* Vol.17 (London: Routledge publications, 1994),197, doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1994.9993821.

⁵⁵Sujit Choudhury, *The Bodos: Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic Minority* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced study, 2007), 5.

dynamics of ethnicity and cultural identity movements and the underlying political considerations. It is a setting which is complex and intricate in nature and categorisation is difficult in an environment where new identity claims have appeared in certain historical times. And I will be exploring the complex historical, socio-cultural relations while forming identities among the three communities in this chapter: Bodo's, Adivasis, Koch-Rajbangshis. While this chapter doesn't assume that the existence of different ethnic groups naturally creates disharmony and violence, but it seeks to understand the conditionality that gave rise to ethnic politics and in the process how ethnic identification has intensified. This chapter will emphasize on the ethnic self-identification among three groups in relation to each other.

Ethnic identification is a complex process and takes place in a social context which is peculiar to the emergence of ethnicity and generally more conducive factors for rise of ethnic based identity is attributed to the existence of multicultural setting. The multicultural space becomes a salient space for such identity politics to emerge and those spaces and sites become the terrain for contestable politics and in the process creates more rigid boundaries between groups. Identification is a both subjective and objective affair and according to the psychoanalytic approach, one imitates the qualities and characteristics of another person and the values and belief standards are imbibe as one's own. It is a process that takes place at both individual subjective level and group in large. There is a kind of inter-subjective consciousness which brings them together and they share that understanding. Subjective identification takes place with a social category in the sense, identifying oneself as a member of social category, which then influence the behaviour of an individual. Corollary to this is that it leads to a strong desire to maintain group boundary. Ethnic identities have become a strong motivating factor in influencing the behaviour of individuals and group in large. Since ethnic identities serve as a useful tool for mobilizing people, it has strengthened the boundaries between groups in their struggle for power and scarce resources. The three groups that we are concerned with manifest the same pattern in developing their ethnic identity.

Story of the past

Historical account of the groups that are demanding a kind of political recognition reveal that they have an intimate history of being close ethnic kin and

socio-cultural ties. Before the onset of modernity and the notion of nation-state, the ancient political structure of the present Assam was ruled by numerous independent groups which was equivalent to small kingdoms and had controlled over tracts of land and they existed under their own chiefs and headmen⁵⁶. They were small communities surviving under its own chief of headmen. Each group had been a ruler at certain point in history and have also been subjected by subsequent ruler. The homeland demands that have gained visibility in recent times is crucial because each groups' understanding is derived from them. The current political boundaries they envisioned is derived from the areas their small kingdoms covered. The political history of Assam, historically known as Kamrupa, becomes much clearer from 4th century onwards. The Chinese Buddhist Pilgrim Hiuen Tsang who visited India in the 7th century A.D. also gives an account of the kingdom of Kamrupa.

“it must have included the whole of Assam (except perhaps the Naga hills, Lushai hills and Manipur) and Bhutan, north Bengal as far as west as Karatoya and the part of Mymensingh which lies to the east of the old course of the Brahmaputra”⁵⁷.

The kingdom of Kamrupa is one the earliest known kingdoms that existed in the present day of Assam, along with numerous other small independent kingdoms. Accounts documenting Muslim invasions throws light on the existence of small independent kingdoms. Edward gait writes ‘guided by a mech chief Muhammad Bakhtyar marched northwards along the right bank of this river (karatoya river) through a country inhabited by the Koch, Mech and Tharu tribes’. Sources like Buranjis (accounts of Ahom kings and their history) tell us the existence of independent small kingdoms. For instance, the Chutiya kings ruled in the east and the Bodo tribes in the south and south-east. And on the west was a Kachari kingdom on the south bank of the Brahmaputra⁵⁸.

The separatist movement is accompanied by a strong sense of identity formation, which means ethnic boundaries become stronger and it instil in them a strong sense of who they are and who are there kind. The political history of Assam also tells us the same pattern with ever growing separatist demand and self-

⁵⁶Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, 1906 (New Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 2011).

⁵⁷Ibid: Gait, 29-30.

⁵⁸Rai Saheb Golap Chandra Baruah, *Ahom Buranji: From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom rule,* (Guwahati: Spectrum publications, 2016)

determination movement, ethnic boundaries have become much fixated and walls shielded. However, growing consciousness is not new, but has always been under process and groups have always engineered to locate and define themselves by distinguishing themselves from the other. This has been the case with the three communities that we are concerned with. Assertion movement and the subsequent ethnic conflict that goes on has a strong bearing on the identity formation process and which continues to undergo.

Ethnic categorizations as ‘tribal’

It involves a process of identifying with various nomenclatures like ‘tribal’, ‘indigenous groups’, ‘immigrants’ and ‘son of soil’. Such nomenclatures have been woven into the narratives of identification and self-assertion. Among the three groups Bodos’ and Adivasis’ was identified as ‘tribal’ anthropologically though the first one is constitutionally recognized as a tribal and the later doesn’t enjoy the same status in Assam, though they enjoy this status in states of Central India and Koch-Rajbanshis claim to be indigenous group seeking ST status. The dynamics of their relationship is complex and since the study is limited to the institutional structure of BTAD, we will explore the dynamics of their relationship with the Bodos’, because most of the resentment and dissent and ethnic conflicts have taken place with the Bodos’ and there is a very strong political competition ensuing between groups. Their self-identification may not always receive favour from the other group and groups contest each other’s claim and position, which tells us about the complex situation these groups are placed in and how identities are constantly made and unmade at different point of time. These are categories which are constantly created and reinvented and accepted in their quest for an identity. This quest for identity has created instability and violence which comes dovetailed with identity politics. It is so the case that every identity formulation in northeast always comes with a demand for ‘homeland’, be it Bodoland, Kamatapur or their quest for tribal status.

Colonial ethnographic discourse

To understand the process of identity making and identification process we need to understand it first in their historical context. Colonial ethnography has a massive role to play in the present crystallisation of identities and boundaries because

most of the groups they derive their sense of who they are and how they perceive themselves based on the colonial knowledge production which came in the guise of ethnology. Communities were closely observed, traits were projected onto a much larger at collective level and those portrayal of labels contributed in reinforcement of categories and breathed life in the identity categories⁵⁹. It is also argued that the application of such science reified ethnic distinctions and have significance in the interaction at social and political level. In the Indian context, colonial ethnographers use of categories like caste, tribe and race have been criticize on the ground that it was just mere way of organizing and representing identity. Nicholas dirks in his critique of colonial anthropology says “caste was just one category out of many others, one way of organizing and representing identity. Moreover, caste was not a single category or even logic of categorization.... To read and organize social difference and deference-pervasive features of Indian society-solely in terms of caste thus required a striking disregard for ethnographic specificity, as well as systematic denial of the political mechanisms that selected different kinds of social units as most significant at different time⁶⁰. Arjun Appadurai’s also critiques against the ‘labelling activities’ and suggests how such activities have impacts beyond the colonial times.

The colonial interventions also shaped the discourses on tribal, which was seen as particular ‘stage of evolution’ in society and the inherent presumption was that they lived an ‘isolated, self-contained, primitive life’⁶¹. Tribal world or the groups they thought to have ‘tribal’ character wasn’t a monolithic world who behaved and showed similar patterns of behaviour, the colonial intervention only reinforced the stratification based on civilizational hierarchical values. Scholars believed that what is often labelled as colonial construction wouldn’t have been possible without the close collaboration and participation of the upper caste, Brahmanical order in the knowledge production⁶². Because, the rationale that determined how much ‘civilized or less civilized’ a tribal community was dependent on how ‘far or close they were

⁵⁹Laura Dudley Jenkins, “Another People of India Project: Colonial and National Anthropology,” in *The Journal of Asian studies* vol.62, No.4 (2003):1145. Accessed from www.jstor.org/stable/3591762 on 14th August 2017.

⁶⁰Nicholas B. Dirks, *Autobiography of an Archive* (India: Ashoka university press, 2015), 88.

⁶¹Biswamoy Pati, “Situating the Adivasis in colonial India,” in *Adivasis in Colonial India: Survival, Resistance and Negotiation*, ed. Biswamoy Pati (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2011), 2.

⁶²Ibid: Pati, 3.

from the caste Hindus'⁶³. The descriptive accounts in their effort to map the tribal world by the colonial sponsored ethnography ended up stereotyping them with characteristics which were deemed universal. Many census reports and monographs developed by colonial missionaries classed them as 'aborigines or semi-Hinduised'. It soon ended up becoming a serious enterprise as it became a pre-requisite task to administer the 'wild' tribes.

The knowledge production soon developed a discourse that was not easy to deconstruct in the post-colonial minds. And soon H.H. Risley defined tribe "as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which as a rule doesn't denote any specific occupation; generally claiming common descent from a mythical or historical ancestor and occasionally from an animal, but in some parts of the country held together by the obligations of blood-feud than by the tradition of kinship; usually speaking the same language and occupying, professing or claiming to occupy a definite tract of country"⁶⁴. The taxonomy of colonial strategies determined the way tribal was constructed. However, one can't escape the ambiguities and the grey areas that were prevalent in the categorisation strategies. The rigid classification at times encountered groups who didn't fit the criteria as the distinctions between tribes and outcaste reflected the ambiguities. Groups have been identified as 'tribes' or 'semi-Hinduised tribes' or as an outcaste. The process of integration needs to be comprehended as well because boundaries are fluid and groups are easily absorbed in the Brahmanical order. Shifting identities isn't a new phenomenon as the colonial world saw integration and absorption of 'tribal' groups into the Brahmanical fold. The Hinduisation process saw change in tribal population with groups assuming new characteristics. However, the incorporation process wasn't devoid of prejudices and stigma as they were never fully accepted in the Hindu fold, but they were given low caste status and the process 'othering' of the lower caste. Colonial epistemology was influenced by the Brahmanical values and the ethnographic surveys of tribes were concerned with juxtaposing them with caste stratification and assigning them a lower position in the caste hierarchy. Influenced deeply by the European ideas of civilization which had explicit tones of civilization hierarchy and racialism, the construction of

⁶³Biswamoy Pati, "Situating the Adivasis in colonial India," in *Adivasis in Colonial India: Survival, Resistance and Negotiation*, ed. Biswamoy Pati (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2011), 3.

⁶⁴Herbert H Risley, *Census of India*, Vol. 3, (India Office of the Superintendent of Government Publications, 1901).

difference and the idea of non-European savages had deep implications on the discourse of tribe. Vinita Damodaram argues that the imperative of the 19th century discipline of ethnology that developed in Britain to study the non-white, non-European people in colonised nation ended up conceptualising human diversity in rigidly hierarchical terms with its anthropometric studies⁶⁵.

The peripheral Assam: Imposed categories and drawing boundaries

In the colonial frontier of Assam, the entry of imperial regime and subsequent missionaries, clubbed and categorised many community as ‘tribes’ and ‘non-tribal’ caste Hindus, constructing boundaries. Data collection mechanism like census operation and ethnographic study of groups attributed traits, characteristics and behaviours to various groups helped in crystallisation and hardening boundaries. As we have already elucidated on how colonial bodies of knowledge have a deep impact in their understanding of who they are and how they perceive each other, groups have relied heavily on the systematic accounts of colonial ethnology for construction of identity. As Michel Foucault says ‘history transforms documents into monuments’ the legacy of colonial anthropology in identifying groups and contributing in forming identities is significant when we dissect the identity making process as it is interwoven in the narratives of identity making by different groups and inherent in the inter-group relation.

Discourse on tribe

To begin with, the concept of tribal has been contested by scholars which makes it difficult to define. However, in common parlance it is associated with ‘primitivism’ and ‘backwardness’, it is deployed to understand a ‘primitive’ social group. Its association with backwardness and primitivism has come to be acquired against the western values considered ‘civilized’. It implies non-western values and pitted against values which are part of civilized west. If we probe into the existence of the word tribal, it is a ‘colonial category’ a device mechanism used to classify and categorize group of people who were believed to have shared certain characteristics

⁶⁵Vinita Damodaran, “Colonial Construction of the ‘Tribe’ in India: The Case of Chotanagpur,” in *Adivasis in Colonial India*, ed. Biswamoy Pati (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011), 57-61.

for specific colonial interests⁶⁶. Before the advent of the term ‘tribe’ no other word equivalent to tribe existed. ‘Jati’ was prevalent to identify communities, however with colonial rule, the British administrators began using the term ‘tribe’. It was a mechanism deployed by the white man to expedite its administration.

So, the emergence of the concept of tribe needs to be analysed in terms of who started using it and what are the characteristics attributed to a tribal and by whom. The word ‘tribe’ began to be used by the British administrator-anthropologists when British colonialism expanded and the missionaries, traders, adventurous travelled to non-European countries and painted a romantic picture of its people which they categorised as tribes⁶⁷. This has been the similar case with India, especially in remote areas of Northeast where colonial administrators and missionaries in their government sponsored ethnographies and administrative reports frequently used the word tribes or attributed characteristics which they claimed to be tribal. Those markers and definition have been etched in the subjective and objective understanding of groups who have internalized this narrative in their identity making process. Tribes were distinguished from the castes groups in terms of cultural practices and social organizations. Official documents categorised them under different categories, for instance, the first census report of 1891 in India grouped them under ‘forest tribes’, census report of 1901 by Herbert Risley addressed them as ‘animists’ and Edward gait terms them as ‘tribal animists’ in the 1911 census and Hutton in 1921 classified under the category of ‘hill and forest tribes’ and the government of India act 1935 termed them as ‘backward tribes’⁶⁸.

Tribal society in its pristine and uncorrupted form is an idealized imaginary which is not achievable today and Fried suggests that what anthropologists study today are ‘secondary phenomena’ of tribes in the process of political evolution, which is brought about by the complex ordered of societies. The romantic picture is a creation of myth and legend pertaining to the golden age of the noble savage. Tribal communities have never existed in totality, though their social domains are separate,

⁶⁶Kamal K Misra, “On Tribe and Tribalism,” in *Tribes in India, Concepts, Institutions and Practices*, ed. Vinay Kumar Srivastava (New Delhi: Serials publications, 2013).

⁶⁷Ibid: Misra.

⁶⁸M.C. Behera, “How long a Tribe is a Tribe? Temporal Dimension in Definitional Enquiry with Reference to Tribal Situations in Arunachal Pradesh,” in *Tribes in India, Concepts, Institutions and Practices*, ed. Vinay Kumar Srivastava (New Delhi: Serials publications, 2013).

but there has always been socio-economic continuous interaction. They have undergone either under the process of ‘Sanskritization’ or tribal absorption in Hindu caste and have always interacted in the larger socio-political formations. The apprehension concerning getting submerged into larger entities or not surviving the test of time always looms around small ‘primitive’ communities.

As much as it is difficult to define the concept of tribe, it is more complicated to identify tribes. In India tribes refer to the indigenous/autochthonous people. The term indigenous is a category use simultaneously and synonymously with tribe. The ILO defines it as

“indigenous people are those tribal and semi-tribal people who are regarded as having descent from the population which inhabited the country or geographical region to which the country belonged at the time of conquest or colonisation, and who irrespective of their legal status, live more in conformity with their social, economic and cultural institutions than with the institutions of the nation to which they belong”⁶⁹.

Indigeneity involves claims concerning ‘original settlers and has nativist connotation and groups fighting over a piece of land usually follows this logic of who settled first. However, it is also associated with primitivism. Identity assertion, therefore involves dynamics of indigeneity along with demand for tribal status. What distinguishes tribal and non-tribal is indigeneity factor and most struggles between groups are fought along the lines of indigeneity.

In India, two understanding dominates the discourse on tribal, one is anthropologically defined ‘tribal’ and the other constitutional term ‘scheduled tribe’⁷⁰. The discipline of anthropology has not arrived at a consensus on the exact words to describe tribes due to wide variation in the context and content of each group. The criteria for classifying tribes varies from variables like occupational basis, geographical basis, racial basis, linguistic basis and on culture⁷¹. However, the accepted definition views it as living an isolated life with common language and

⁶⁹Accessed from http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C107, 10thMarch, 2018, 3:20 pm.

⁷⁰Kamal K. Misra, “On Tribe and Tribalism,” in *Tribes in India, Concepts, Institutions and Practices*, ed. Vinay Kumar Srivastava (New Delhi: Serials publications, 2013).

⁷¹Suruchi Tewari, “The Concept of Tribe in India,” in *Tribes in India, Concepts, Institutions and Practices*, ed. Vinay Kumar Srivastava (New Delhi: Serials Publications, 2013).

bounded by limited territorial space and sustainable economic interdependent. The conceptual frame that follows from the constitution scheduling tribes is that they are legally recognized groups enjoying state protection and some autonomy. The category of 'ST' is a special provision for the protection and welfare of recognized groups and the president of India under the article 342 can declare any group ST. The constitution nowhere defines tribes.

Article 342 of the constitution states that:

“the president may with respect to any state or union territory, and where it is a state, after consultation with the governor, thereof, by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or part or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purposes of this constitution be deemed to be scheduled tribes in relation to that state or union territory, as the case may be”⁷².

Article 366(25) states “scheduled tribe means such tribes or tribal committees or parts of groups within such tribes or tribal committees as are deemed under article 342 to be scheduled tribe for the purposes of this constitution”⁷³.

There are no criteria specified to identify ST and the issue gets more complex because certain tribes have ST status in one state and the very same group doesn't enjoy ST status in other state. It gets reduced to legal-administrative categories. The 1951 census had listed a total of 212 scheduled tribes in India, but the number has jumped to 700 from the 1951 census figure. And there continues to be demands for inclusion. Virginia Xaxa says that the question of tribal status is intimately linked with administrative and political considerations, therefore there has been constant demand for inclusion in the list of scheduled tribes of the Indian constitution.

Scheduled tribe: A site of contestation

The central contestable issue around which groups compete in their interaction revolves around the dimension of administrative category of ST in the state of Assam. The dimension that dominate the contestation between the three groups reflects the above discussed elements of tribal status and the migrants and with the background of vague concept of tribal, it is evident that there is a growing consciousness of a particular form of identity and the continued evidence of 'migrants' inhabiting the

⁷²Yogesh Atal, “A Note on the Concept of Tribe,” in *Tribes in India, Concepts, Institutions and Practices*, ed. Vinay Kumar Srivastava (New Delhi: Serials publications, 2013).

⁷³Ibid: Atal.

socio-space reinforces the feeling of encroachment of their land and in effect hardening the ethnic boundary and growing identity consciousness.

Colonial ethnography and its continued legacy

The objectives of colonial ethnography to ascertain and demonstrate in its effort to bring together the fragmented groups by means of careful comparison of the language, physical attributes, creed and customs of various groups has helped either in making new identities or breaking groups. Now, we will probe into the question of different groups and their identity making process and how it has thickened the boundaries of identity who have accepted the colonial nomenclatures uncritically and how concepts like 'tribal and indigeneity' is interwoven in their subjective understanding.

Bodo or Kacharis

The frontier area of Assam rested near the north eastern border of Bengal, bounded on the north by the eastern section of the Himalayas; on the north-east, east and south by lesser hills; and on the west by the Bengal districts of Tippera, Mymensingh, and Rangpur, the state of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri district⁷⁴.

The Bodo inhabited this vast stretch of land and were widely distributed and known by different names. In the western doars they were called Mech, in the eastern parts they were called Mech or Kachari and in the east they were called Kachari. However, they called themselves Bodo. Over different periods of time, Bodos were perceived differently, B.H. Hodgson, one of the earliest ethnographer to give an account of Bodos studied the language, grammar and vocabulary. Language was central to the identification of Bodos as he argues 'their physical and mental condition is exactly portrayed in their speech'. Hodgson distinguished between two races 'Arian and Tamulians' and he clubbed Bodos under the Tamulian race. 'The kacharis and koch of that valley are Tamulians as is proved beyond doubt by their physical attributes⁷⁵. The Tamulians in contrast to Arian is less in height, less symmetry, more

⁷⁴*The India list and India Office list*, Great Britain India Office, (Harrison and Sons publications, 1900), 346

⁷⁵B.H. Hodgson, *On the Aborigines of India: Essay the first on the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes*, (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1847), 142. Accessed from <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.93469> on 17th November, 2017.

dumpiness and flesh; in the Tamulian face, a somewhat lozenge contour caused by the large cheek bones. He observes that “bodos are numerous race and extend from the Surma to the Dhansri and thence via Bijni and the Bhutan and Sikkim Tarai to the Konki besides occupying a large portion of central and lower Assam. In his observation Hodgson emphasized that Bodos are ‘great forest dwellers’ and generally avoided the plains and the mountains.

However, over a period of time, new perception of Bodo emerged. Edward Gait in ‘A History of Assam’ which was published in 1905, distinguishes Dravidian, Mongolian and Aryan races on the basis of physical characteristics and clearly states that language cannot be the criteria to test racial affinity⁷⁶. Bodos were now categorised as Mongolian race, whose main physical characteristics are ‘short head, a broad nose, a flat and comparatively hairless face, a short but muscular figure and a yellow skin. He makes use of vernacular historical sources to offer a concise history of Assam and numerous kingdoms that ruled independently. His sources include *Buranjis* which are chronicles of Ahom rule and accounts from Mohammeden rule. Bodo dialect was part of those who spoke non-Aryan language like Kachari, Mech, Garo, Lalung, Rabha and Chutiya⁷⁷. This establishes that they are closely akin group sharing close ethnic affinity. He identifies Kacharis as the ‘aborigines’ or earliest settlers of the Brahmaputra valley and identical with the Mech community of Goalpara and North Bengal. Tracing the origin of Mech, Charu Chandra Sanyal, states that this Tibeto-Burman speaking Indo-mongoloid tribe migrated into India through Patkoi hills between India and Burma and gradually spread to different parts of Assam, North Bengal and East Bengal. They inherited the name mech because they travelled along the foot of Himalayas up to the river Mechi between India and Nepal and settled on the north bank of the said river Mech or Mechi. The Bodos of Jalpaiguri and Terai call themselves mech because they settled on the banks of the river Mechi. They settled down in the deep forests of Darjeeling Terai and Baikunthopur of Jalpaiguri⁷⁸.

Gait narrates the kingdom of Kachari standing strong in the 13th and 14th century, extending along the south bank of Brahmaputra from the Dikhu to the

⁷⁶Edward Gait, *The History of Assam*, 1906 (New Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 2011), 1.

⁷⁷Ibid:Gait, 6.

⁷⁸Charu Chandra Sanyal, *The Meches and the Totos, Two Sub-Himalayan tribes of North-Bengal*, (West Bengal: The North Bengal University, 1973).

Kallang or beyond to include the valley of Dhansiri and the tract which now forms the North Cachar Subdivision until it was defeated by the growing Ahom kingdom. The Ahom following their victory ascended the Dhansiri and penetrated as far as the Kachari capital at Dimapur on the Dhansiri, forty-five miles south of Golaghat⁷⁹. The Kachari kings also had control over the Nowgong district and the North Cachar hills who then extended their rule to the plains of Cachar⁸⁰. Such historical narratives of powerful kingdoms are well appraised and appropriated in the recent self-assertive movement. Historical events are lost glory which provides a strong impetus making ethnic demands more assertive and giving groups more legitimacy and renewed interests in their past.

The Kacharis' therefore now were believed to be widely distributed race known by different names occupying tracts of land. Kacharis and Mech in Brahmaputra valley and north Bengal and Dimasas in North Cachar district. Based on their Indo-Tibetan physical traits, they were identified as belonging to the Mongolian race and speaking Tibeto-Burmese language. Therefore, race and language became a uniting factor to club groups residing in different parts of the region. J.D. Anderson in Edward Gait's 'the history of Assam' warns against concluding that 'common speech may imply common origin' but he states viewing the peculiarity of the groups concern.

*'we have five absolutely separate communities of semi savage people, who nowadays are not so much as aware of one another's existence and yet speak what is to all purposes the same language, it is plain that they must have been united at no very distant date by some common social bond'*⁸¹.

Reverend Sidney Endle, in his monograph on Kacharis, also used the term 'kachari' in a much wider sense to include multiple tribal identities like the Tipra, the Bodo-Kachari, the Rabha, the Dimasas, the Chutiya, who over a period due to variation in habitation, fragmented out of the original stock to assumed independent identities⁸². They were differentiated against the Hindus and Muslim neighbours in

⁷⁹Edward Gait, *The History of Assam*, 1906 (New Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 2011), 301.

⁸⁰ Ibid: Gait, 304.

⁸¹J.D Anderson, forward to Edward Gait, *The History of Assam* 1906 (New Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 2011).

⁸²Sujit Choudhury, *"The Bodos: Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic Minority,"* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced study, 2007).

material and moral aspect and their peculiar face and figure showed a distinct approximation to the Mongolian type⁸³. Therefore, people living in the marginal forests were considered 'semi-savage' and placed them low in the perceived civilizational hierarchy. They were considered as 'undoubtedly far below their Hindu neighbours; for they possess neither the quickness of apprehension, nor the astonishing power of memory and characteristics of the higher castes among the Hindus'⁸⁴. Different Kachari tribes have lived in different terrain of North Eastern India and their locational variance has led to categorising of 'plain tribes' and 'hill tribes' which has given rise to different conceptual frame in understanding 'tribal' as a whole and in a corollary no cohesive policy in post-colonial period. Modes of production, customs, values and livelihood practices also became markers of their distinctiveness and reinforced their low position in the civilizational hierarchy.

The term Kachari was therefore used by the colonial ethnographers to make sense of the group belonging to the Mongoloid race who were the early settlers of the frontier Assam. However, in today's discourse the term Kachari is not used anymore, and different groups have assumed their own tribal identity. And Bodos are that one group who were known as Bodo-kachari who has assumed its own independent tribal identity much like any other 'Kachari' or Bodo group. In the new discourse 'Bodo' refers to those plains tribes of Brahmaputra valley in Assam who were mainly concentrated in the districts of Kamrupa, Goalpara, Darrang and Nagaon before the creation of BTAD⁸⁵. The present case study is of this group 'Bodo-Kachari' living in the plains of Assam who have been regarded as the indigenous population and the largest plains tribes in Assam and have witnessed constant battle in the form of sporadic low intensity conflict with other groups in their demand for autonomy.

Koch-Rajbangshi

The ethnic character of this group has been a matter of controversy and ambiguity. Their identification has rather been a complex process with various proposition from many colonial ethnographers. The term 'Koch' and 'Rajbangsi' has been used independently as well as together to identify a community. In the present

⁸³Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis*, 1911 (New Delhi: Low price publications, 2011).

⁸⁴Ibid: Endle, 1-2.

⁸⁵Sujit Choudhury, "*The Bodos: Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic Minority*," (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced study, 2007), 2.

usage, the term 'koch' denotes groups who have lost their 'original' elements and have adopted Hinduism. Grierson writes 'the very name Koch has lost its original significance and has now come to mean a Bodo who has become so far Hinduised that he has abandoned his proper tongue and in particular what he eats'⁸⁶. However, the term 'koch' appears before the appellation 'Rajbangsi' was added whose literal translation means 'of the royal family'. The alignment of Koch-Rajbangshis wasn't always preferred by many, and many Rajbangshi leaders Panchanan Burma and Hara Kishor Adhikari said that Koches and Rajbangshis were different. However, this has been attributed to the ulterior motive to give Rajbangshis a superior status to that of Koch during the 'kshatriya movement' by Rajbangshis in North Bengal⁸⁷.

The origin of Koch Rajbangshi is a matter of contestation and different propositions have been put forward tracing their lineage. The inexactness of their ethnological affinity has led many to give diverse understanding of their identity and has given rise to non-cohesive account of their identity which has in recent times, their ambiguity has led to rebuke by other groups and discrediting their claims for Kamatapur. The non-uniformity of their origin has rather helped in establishing and paving their own discourse and choosing to appropriate claims which suit their identity making process.

Colonial ethnographers employed physiognomy to categorise and group members of the community. Colonel Dalton distinguishes them on the basis of Colour and claims that they belong to the race of Dravidian, while Mr. Risley states

"The average cephalic, nasal and naso-malar indices of caste ascertained by a large number of actual measurements, seems to me to warrant the conclusion that the Koch, Rajvansi, Paliya, and Desi and other varieties by whatever names they are called are descended from a Dravidian stock, which may probably have occupied the valley of the Ganges at the time of the Aryan advance into Bengal. Driven forward by this incursion into the swamp and forests of Northern and North-eastern Bengal, the tribes were here and there brought into contact with the Mongoloid races of the Lower Himalayas, and of the Assam border, and their type may have been affected to

⁸⁶Quoted in Arup Jyoti Das, *Kamatapur and Koch-Rajbangshi Imagination* (Guwahati: Montage Media, 2009), 30. Accessed from <https://kochrajbangshicentredotorg.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/ckrsd-brochure-pdf-web.pdf> on 25th November, 2:30 pm.

⁸⁷Arup Jyoti Das, *Kamatapur and Koch-Rajbangshi Imagination* (Guwahati: Montage Media, 2009), 30.

a varying degree by intermixture with these people. But on the whole Dravidian characteristics predominate among them over Mongolian " 88.

Dr. Buchanan Hamilton claims that Koches are aboriginal of Kamrup and tribes with the name Koch belonging to the same stock and all Rajbangshis are Koch. He distinguishes them from other tribes like Meches. While Dr. W. W. Hunter in statistical account of Cooch Behar and Dr. Latham claim that Koches are connected with the neighbouring tribes of Meches and Kacharis and belong to the Mongolian race. Edward Gait in his report on the census of Assam concludes that though they don't constitute homogenous tribe, they are derived from mongoloid source.

The Koch kingdom was spread across the region comprising Northeast and Bengal and before the Koch kingdom emerged, the entire area was known as Kamrupa or Kamatapur kingdom. It is said that the Koch rulers took pride in addressing themselves as Kamateswari and therefore Koch-Rajbangshi consider Kamatapur to be their lost homeland.

To the north of the Bengal was the Koch kingdom ruled by Hajo, who founded the kingdom in the late 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century. Hajo bore no sons and it is said that his two daughters Hira and Jira was married off to a Bodo or mech chief 'Hariya Mandal' a resident of Chikangram in Goalpara district, which is presently in Kokrajhar district. B. H. Hodgson says 'hajo the founder, having no sons, gave his daughter and heiress to a Bodo or Mech chief in marriage'. Bisu was born to Hira and it was under his rule that customs and practices of Mech or Bodo were eschewed in favour of Hinduism, when brahmins came in contact with him. Bisu became Vishwa Singh and declared that he was a son of Siva who had assumed Hariya's form and Parvati in the form of Hira. Soon they renounced their tribal ways of life and began to identify themselves as Rajbangshis⁸⁹.

The historical narrative of adopting Hinduism refers to the characteristics of acquiring an identity and constructing a sense of identity. These narratives are presented in the colonial ethnographic description, which is significant in constructing the Koch identity separate from the Bodos'. What we see in colonial attempts to

⁸⁸Quoted in Harendra Narayan Chaudhuri, *The Cooch Behar state and its Land Revenue Settlement, 1903*. (Cooch Behar State press), 1240. Accessed from <https://archive.org/details/coochbeharstatei00chaurich> on 15th January, 2018.

⁸⁹Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, 1906 (New Delhi: Surjeet publications, 2011).

categorise and classify is the tension and ambiguity prevalent in their accounts. When members of a 'tribe' converted to Hinduism, they acquired new identity and were designated new names under separate category. It is with the same fervour that Rajbangshis were stressed as the Hinduised section of Bodo or Koch tribe and sometimes term as 'semi-Hinduised aborgines' and the non-converted group as 'aborigine tribes'. Identities are fluid, flexible and in that nature, classifying and categorising groups was filled with ambiguities and confusion.

Notwithstanding all the rival theories of their ethnic origin, Rajbangshis are regarded as the native Hindus of the old Koch tribe, who originally belonged to the Bodo stock. In the compilation on the 'Cooch Behar state and land revenue settlement Rajbhansis were classified under the subject tribes and placed in the subsection 'hinduised and clean'⁹⁰. Meaning that once they were 'tribes' following animistic religion and having acquired Hinduism has deprived them of their 'tribal-hood' and thus the ambiguity concerning their racial affinities. Colonial ethnographers categorised Rajbhansis as associated with Hindu caste, which is a converted group from tribes like Kachari, Lalungs, Mikir. It is argued that Rajbangshis occupied lower ranks in the Hindu caste due to their practice of widow remarriage and consumption of pork, which was objectionable practice from Hindu point of view and was considered impure, however this practice was fast disappearing.

Colonial narratives have contributed in making sense of their identity and appropriating and appraising their past glory through the eyes of colonial ethnographers. Koch-Rajbangshi identity seems to be that of a constructed identity came about through conversion from caste, religion. The appellation of Rajbangshi creates more perplexity in one's mind if we proceed to ascertain the origin of their identity as it is claimed that the whole community has become apparent from their belonging to royal family. It was only later that the appellation Rajbangshi was added to the ethnic nomenclature 'Koch' and only some sections identified with the appellation Rajbangshi as it was a means to scale up in the caste ladder. However, in Assam, some section of Koch community has completely assimilated with the caste Assamese community and are hardly distinguishable.

⁹⁰Harendra Narayan Chaudhuri, *The Cooch Behar state and its Land Revenue Settlement, 1903* (Cooch Behar State press), 120. Accessed from <https://archive.org/details/coochbeharstatei00chaurich> on 15th January 2018.

The case of Koch Rajbangshis is a typical example of where a community was 'tribal' but then began the process of 'de-tribalization' by adopting Hinduism. B.H. Hodgson commenting on the primitiveness of the Pali Koch positioned them against the 'Hindus' and their 'Arian neighbours' while giving account of their livelihood practice who use primitive tools to plough and weed their crops and domesticated hogs and poultry and consumed fermented rice liquor⁹¹. Colonial ethnography categorised groups following 'animistic' religion as tribal and those that followed Hinduism as caste Hindus. George Campbell called them 'civilized cooches' who come under the name of 'Rajbunsees'. Today the Koch Rajbangshis are demanding for Kamatapur land and demanding for the status of tribe, to be included in the list of scheduled tribes.

Kamatapur is a place in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal and the demand for Kamatapur land has aroused from the historical Kamata kingdom. The emergence of the name kamata kingdom is unexplained with many ethnographers citing that the name was changed from Kamrupa to Kamata. The demand for Kamatapur and the identity making process is significant for this study because there is a clash of boundary imagination with the Bodos' who have been demanding Bodoland. While they are spread in adjacent countries like Bangladesh and Nepal, in Assam they are concentrated in western Assam and North Bengal. According to W.W. Hunter 'Rajbangshis are believed to have formerly inhabited lower ranges of hills and to have descended into the plains some two hundred years ago, being pushed forward by the people behind'.⁹² They were settled widely in the Eastern Doar areas along the foothill of the colonial Kamrup and Darrang districts. Many petty chiefs and rulers were Koch or Rajbangshis spreading westwards ruling over central and Western Assam and North Bengal. The kingdom of Kamatapur existed in historical times and most of the chieftans' coming from Koch king and called themselves Kamateswari.

The colonial discourse on Koch Rajbangshis projects them as having a close ethnic relation with Bodo or Mech and assuming a new identity with the conversion to Hinduism. However, Colonial discourse is also ambiguous in tracing the origin of

⁹¹B.H. Hodgson, *On the Aborigines of India: Essay the first on the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes*, (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1847),146. Accessed from <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.93469> on 17th November 2017.

⁹²Quoted in Uddipana Goswami, *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam* (India: Routledge, 2014),119.

Koch identity and the addition of new appellation. While many Koch-Rajbangshis refute the claim of being ethnically close to Bodoland have asserted their difference. However, what is interesting is that many sections of Koch don't want to identify themselves as Rajbangshis and maintain their distinctiveness of being a Koch.

Tea 'tribes' or Adivasi

Vast stretches and covers of land in Assam came under tea plantation in the 19th and 20th century by the British colonials. The 'discovery' of tea in Assam by the colonials brought drastic change in the socio-economic profile of the frontier state. Two things dominated the plantation economy in this region, to generate revenue out of the fertile land of frontier and labour force. The officials in their report lamented about the condition, for instance;

"The soil is of exuberant fertility, the population sparse...and land revenue extremely light...the wants of the people are few and easily supplied....the people are naturally indolent and largely addicted to ...opium.. there is no labouring class distinct from the cultivators of the soil and dependent for existence on the wages"⁹³.

The officials found the region profitable but the problem of 'inadequate' local was needed to be resolved. It reflects their desire to transform the fertile land to economic hub and generate revenue through plantation of tea and their apprehensions and perception of the local population. Such perception gave way to two prospects; to generate revenue and resolved the issue of indolent local. This perception led to search for labour class and 'dhangar coolie' had become famous from indigo plantation in Bengal. 'Dhang' meant hillsmen and they were employed in large number in Indigo factories by the late 1830's.

As much as it connected the frontier region to the global capitalist entrepreneurs early in the colonial times, what transfigured the region was large groups of workers were escorted into the state from mainly three areas: the Santhal parganas, Chotanagpur and Chattisgarh⁹⁴. The beginning of Assam tea plantation

⁹³Quoted in Samita Sen, "Kidnapping in Chotanagpur, Recruitment for Assam tea plantations in a Tribal Area," in *Narratives from the Margins, Aspects of Adivasi History in India*, ed. Sanjukta Das Gupta, et al. (New Delhi: Primus Book, 2012),

⁹⁴Samita Sen, "Kidnapping in Chotanagpur, Recruitment for Assam Tea Plantations in a 'Tribal' area," in *Narratives from the Margins, Aspects of Adivasi History in India*, ed. Sanjukta Das Gupta, et al. (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2012), 180.

paved the way for large recruitment of labourers from these aforementioned tribal areas and opened the region for migration on a large scale. The magnitude of this migration has prompted investigations by various scholars to study and analyse their living condition which is exploitative in nature. And in the face of the identity politics which is very significant in the local politics of Assam, the status of tea tribes is of significance. Their demographic status is significant, since they form around 20% of the total population of Assam and it is estimated that lakhs of workers continue to work in tea gardens⁹⁵. Their explicit acknowledgement as ‘tea tribes’, however denying the status of ST in the state of Assam directs us to the peculiar nature of identification of tribal in India.

Categorised as ‘dhangar coolie’, large number of labourers from Chotanagpur were working in Indigo plantation in Bengal in the 1830’s and in various agricultural activities and the discovery of Assam tea plantation by the east India company in 1834, Dhangar coolie were viewed as a lucrative labour power⁹⁶. The first set of groups to be recruited to Assam was in the 1850’s and were settled in tea gardens. The preference for ‘dhangar coolies’ was explicitly stated by the British Indian administration “the dhangars are the best class of coolies to import; they are industrious, hardy and very orderly”⁹⁷.

The process of forced immigration by the colonial administration involved identification, categorisation and transportation of groups recognised and classed as suitable for the work. It involved identification based on certain notion of race and primitivity and reflected the contradictions in the colonial discourse of primitivity. Tea tribes were positioned against the local aborigines or tribes who were rejected as unsuitable to work in the plantation.

The class of labourers were kept in closed spaces surrounding the tea gardens and their nature of settlement continued to keep them marginalised. To this day if we visit tea estates, the surroundings are inhabited by them and continues to provide the

⁹⁵Indrajit Sharma, “Tea Tribes of Assam: Search for Identity Politics and Search for Liberation,” in *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol 1, No.9 (2018): Accessed from <https://www.epw.in/journal/2018/9/notes/tea-tribes-assam.html> on 5th May 2018.

⁹⁶Samita sen, “Kidnapping in Chotanagpur, Recruitment for Assam Tea plantations in a ‘Tribal’ area,” in *Narratives from the Margins, Aspects of Adivasi History in India*, ed. Sanjukta Das, et al. (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2012), 185.

⁹⁷Ibid: 186.

labour source for tea estates. The ‘coolies’ came from different communities of Munda, Oraon, Ho and Kols, yet they were settled and restricted to the clusters, in what is known as the ‘line system’ and perceived as a homogenous class of labourers, positioned against the local aborigines⁹⁸.

The plantation economy was labour intensive in nature and demanded large labour force and the process of identifying and employing labour force went through distinct phases. It was a systematic indentured labour system and it had the highest proportion of family migration and therefore better settlers. It was not out of sudden impulse that led to recruitment of labourers from across region. Their experiments with Chinese labour and local tribes had proved failure for the planters, leading to search for ‘first class jungle’⁹⁹. In the beginning, local tribes of Assam were hired to clear the dense jungles for cultivation, however they were unsuitable and inadequate.

The colonial discourse on primitivity also saw a new aspect, which added new dimension to the understanding of primitivity. A class of primitivity came to be categorised by the colonial rulers. Kaushik Ghosh says the element of primitivity was important in the process of categorization of labour class, which was the docile, suitable and adequate traits of the ‘coolies’ which was positioned against the local tribes of Assam who were deemed unsuitable, uncontrollable and undisciplined. Labourers uprooted from habitat were more amenable to control than the local workers. Local workers like Assamese and the ‘Cacharee’ dictated their own terms and services and demanded high wages. It was the inability of the colonial rulers to subdue and make them subjects to enforce plantation rules and cheap labours confounded the difficulty for British officials. In the 19th century, the colonial state failed to bring the North-eastern indigenous people under control to enforce contracts of cheap labour, therefore, planters preferred tribes who had been exposed to British civilizational endeavours. Therefore, they constructed the idea of suitable and non-suitable primitivity. Notions of primitivity were hardened and institutionalised through class groupings. W.M. Fraser says no ‘finer labourers be found than these aborigines of India’ and the emphasis on their physicality and strength was linked with their primitivity. These primitive coolies were commended for their ‘muscle,

⁹⁸Samita sen, “Kidnapping in Chotanagpur, Recruitment for Assam Tea plantations in a ‘Tribal’ area,” in *Narratives from the Margins, Aspects of Adivasi History in India*, ed. Sanjukta Das, et al. (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2012).

⁹⁹Ibid: Sen..

pluck, competence and intelligence’ and they were the ‘first class jungly’. The demand for permanent labour force led to large recruitment from across the regions as the local populace didn’t exhibit adaptability.

These Dhangar coolies were recruited in large number and settled around the closed tea estates, thus, separating them from the locals and perpetually depriving them of any benefits. The white planters therefore, positioned the coolie labourers against the ‘lazy natives’ and continued with racializing the labour class¹⁰⁰.

Conclusion

Therefore, it becomes evident that an ethnic or racial identity for the groups concerned is a consequence of legacies left behind by colonial ethnography and the self-identification process is at times replete with categorisations and classification by an outsider or imposed from others. Identifications through mechanisms like census, colonial ethnographic sketch, and missionary works became a powerful tool for labelling and categorizing groups in the region of colonial Assam. In the 19th century, missionaries in Assam resided with the natives and observed their manner of living and their customs and languages and later documented their observation, which has in a way become an integral part of group identification process. Those documents became a principal literature, providing the group concern as a window to make sense of their position and state of circumstances in which they lived. It helped them make sense of their customs and their kin’s and surrounding. Significantly, it also reinforced and strengthened their differences from their surrounding neighbours which has in the recent times of assertive movement became more monumental in their understanding of themselves. Colonial ethnographic sketch has portrayed and represented groups which reflects convergence and divergence of groups and identities and how they see each other. It becomes a sustainable material in their collective memory to reminisce and indulge in recollection of past events and make sense of their being.

The labelling of categories as ‘semi-savage’, ‘backward’, ‘primitive’ or ‘first class jungly’ went into the construction of tribal qualities and traits and their positioning against the caste Hindus further reinforced their differences. Religion was

¹⁰⁰Jayeeta Sharma, “Lazy natives, coolie labour and the Assam Tea industry,” in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 43, No.6(2009): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40285014>, Accessed on 28th May 2018, 6:34 pm.

a significant criteria to distinguish them as their 'animistic' tradition was a hallmark of their 'primitivity'. Such was the nature of identification that, in a social condition where ethnic boundaries were fluid and cultural amalgamation was current, many groups lost their status of 'tribal' when they adopted Hinduism and the began to be recognised by new names and nomenclatures, which heralded new ethnic identity. Instances of Kachari tribes assuming new nomenclatures is noticeable concurrently with their adoption of new religious practice. Adoption of new religious practice of Hinduism becomes the intervening period to reorient their group and emergence of new identities. Koch-Rajbangshi identity represents the changing self- definitions and evolving identity and presents research scholar with the dilemma of labelling them as 'tribal' or non-tribal. This is a community that has closely integrated with the dominant Assamese caste and has 'lost' its 'tribal' characteristics. And in the recent years, Koch community is engaged in the task of reversing this assimilation while demanding for 'scheduled tribe'. It is an inherent problem in conceptualising communities as the process of 'retribalisation' and 'detrribalised' is central in the process of ethnic-identification. A distinct and unique understanding of 'tribal' category was created, and reinforced and reiterated with positional location variance in the conceptual classification of groups coming under tribal and Hindu caste group. Putting labels and categorisation is always a complicated process in a climate where group's live in proximity with each other and have historically shared space.

Chapter 3

Bodo Identity: A Plain Tribals' quest for recognition

The administrative boundaries in pre-colonial period had always been fuzzy and boundary lines not defined, so was the case with ethnic boundaries. It was a nebulous affair when it came to identify rigid boundaries. Multiple kingdoms thronged the region without any centralised administration and administered the Dooar region. Ahom and Bhutanese were two major kingdoms that ruled the Dooar areas and were marked by subsequent control of the region. However, though they were stronger kingdoms, numerous small rulers existed over the territory and paid revenues to the neighbouring powerful kingdoms, to maintain their autonomy over the small size kingdoms. The coming of the colonial administration, which started building boundaries, imaginary and real amongst multiple groups such as Bodo, Koch and Adivasis, also introduced delimitations of territory and physical boundaries. The undivided province of Assam included the Barak valley, Brahmaputra valley and many hill districts like the Khasi, Jaintia, Cachar hills, Garo and Lushai hills. Chaube says it was only with the advent of the colonials that the notion of territoriality and political control became dominant in an otherwise boundary less region¹⁰¹. The modern political mechanism that came along with the colonial rule became an instrument in controlling and directing the future course of modern politics in the region which had no experience of modern politics.

The policies adopted by the colonials like 'line system', hill and plains divide and numerous other legislations like the Act VI of 1835 which attempted to bring the Khasi and Cachar hills under direct colonial rule reflect the creation of administrative areas in tribal inhabited frontier known as 'backward tracts'¹⁰². The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 introduced the inner line concept to bring the Cachar

¹⁰¹Shibani Kinkar chaube, "Interethnic Politics in Northeast India," *International Review of Modern Sociology*, vol.5, No.2 (1975): 193-200. Accessed from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41421530> on 6th October 2018, 3:33pm

¹⁰²J.N. Choudhury, "Post-Colonial policy towards ethnic minorities Of North-East India (A comparative Approach) with special reference to Arunachal Pradesh," in *Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural identity in North-East India*, ed. B. Pakem, (New Delhi: Omsons Publications,1990), 131.

districts under its new legislation. The emergence of such mechanism under the guidance of colonials meant bringing them closer to the ‘civilized’ ways of administering areas. The inner lines had been drawn to limit the movement of outsider, however, it was monitored with regulation and only colonial sponsored members like missionaries and ‘first class jungly’ were allowed to enter and settled. The movements of people were regulated and monitored and settled colonies were built to cater to the demands of the colonials. The recruitment of tea tribes for plantation economy is a case in point, they were uprooted from their original regions and forcefully migrated to work in the tea plantation and cluster of colonies were built around the tea garden to start the settlement process.

Many legislations at various point of time in colonial history came up with new labels to mark the frontier such as, ‘excluded areas’, ‘backward tracts’, which propagated the myth of protection from outsider, but in real it underwent a regulated and monitored control of influence by the colonisers in the guise of economic entrepreneurial activity, missionary work to spread the word of god. As they drew boundaries and introduced delimitation of territory, ethnic boundaries also congealed. The emphasis on administrative boundaries in colonial times congealed the boundaries between groups. They also developed a categorical difference between the hills tribes and people in plains, emphasizing the locational exclusivity in defining certain traits of groups.

This chapter will attempt to study the ethnic processes of the Bodos’, the various stages of ethnic process and boundary making.

The plains people: Dawning new consciousness

In the new India, going by the strategies propagated by Andreas Swimmer on boundary making where groups redefined and expand the boundary to include a range of people and going by the process of ethnicity in North-east, where ‘ethno-genic inter-ethnic consolidation’ happens between groups who are culturally and linguistically allied, the emergence of Plains tribal identity and subsequent Bodo political identity take the same recourse in creating a plains tribal identity and in developing a Bodo consciousness.

The banner of ‘plains’ people came to be first used in the colonial Assam to refer to a diverse set of people inhabiting along the foothills of Himalaya living in the Brahmaputra valley who were then classified under the banner of “Primitive and Backward Tribes”¹⁰³. Plain valley was populated by people belonging to different orientation, like caste Hindus, tribal, Muslims, migrant labourers. Plains population wasn’t a unified category like the ‘hill tribes’ but consisting of different ethnic groups and predominantly Bengali speaking population. Plains tribal was that lesser known ethnic group in a complex ethnic situation. Two important groups made up the plains tribal people and they were the ‘Bodo’ group and the ‘Miri’ group. Multiple small groups made up the Bodo group and they were the Kachari-Boro, Hojais, Lalung, Mech, Rabhas, Sonowal and Barmans of Cachar having same origin and the Miri group originally belonging to the hilly areas of the present Arunachal¹⁰⁴.

It was a unique administrative discourse created and used from the 1930’s onward to club together groups like the Kacharis (Bodo), Miris (Mishings), Lalung (Tiwa), Mikirs (Karbis) and Rabhas under the generic term ‘plains tribes’, as they were all valley people. Plains tribe hadn’t experience segregation administratively or territorially in the hands of colonial rule unlike the ‘hills men’. The coming together of varied communities under one roof was for political purpose. Khema Sonowal argues that the reason why the early 20th century saw tribal communities joining hand together was due to their dissatisfaction with the role of the ‘national political parties and felt socially and politically exploited and suppressed”. In the face of hill tribes receiving ‘protection’ from colonials through legislation like inner line regulation, the coalesce of groups living in the plains identifying as ‘plains tribes’ brought a new dimension to the discourse of identity of tribes. Plains tribes became a phenomenon as groups united to come together for political reason. Plains tribal was that lesser known ethnic group in a complex ethnic situation. Plains tribal identity as a consciousness grew and later competed in the electoral politics of late colonial Assam to represent tribal groups in the provincial government, under the Government of India Act 1935.

¹⁰³Khema Sonowal, *why Bodo Movement? (Guwahati: EBH publishers, 2013), 70.*

¹⁰⁴Niru Hazarika, “The Plains Tribals’ Council of Assam: A Regional Political Party,” in *Political Development of the North East*, ed. B.C. Bhuyan, et al. (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 2006), 55.

In the colonial discourse identifying tribes with a specific socio-geographical location specially hills were much common and dominant. Therefore, locating ‘tribes’ in the Brahmaputra valley as ‘plains tribes’ added new dimension to the understanding of tribal and tribal leaders of the valley succeeded in crafting a ‘tribal’ identity for varied groups together. It was a monolithic notion of ‘plains tribes’ that emerged against the dominant idea of hill tribes but soon its interests’ was opposed against the Muslims, caste Hindus, tea garden workers who also lived in plains¹⁰⁵. It was crafted exclusively to address their status in their socio-political milieu, for socio-economic empowerment and positioned themselves against the caste Hindus, as it was already established by the colonial ethnographers in their discourse of tribal identity. What is significant is that it was a conglomerated group organised into one unit under one constructed identity and it was only in the post-colonial period individual autonomous movement emerged and detached themselves from the inter-ethnic consolidation. It shaped the future course for political and socio-cultural consciousness among groups and as a result many groups sprang up on an individual basis. The Bodo movement is one such independent movement that arose out of the plains tribal movement in the post-colonial context. Bodos’ didn’t have a strong organization to take forward their issues, therefore they rallied around the idea of plains tribes. For that matter, none of the tribes had independent organization in the pre-independence era, which tells us that the political consciousness among small tribes in Assam is of a recent phenomenon and a post-independence phenomenon. They all fought under a common platform.

Educated tribal leaders in the early 20th century made efforts to ‘uplift’ the conditions of tribes by locating their backwardness and making certain progress through representation. It was done through crafting a plains tribal identity against the indigenous non-tribal and participating in the colonial modernity of electoral politics. A memorandum was forwarded to the Simon commission addressing their grievances and it reflected strongly of their growing consciousness centring on the notion of tribal identity. The Goalpara district of Bodo Association in its memorandum stated that:

¹⁰⁵Monirul Hussain, “Tribal question in Assam,” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.27, No.20/21 (1992): 1047. Accessed from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4397885> on 5th September 2017, 12:42pm

“the Bodo community forms a considerable portion of the population of the district of Goalpara and its numbers about one lac and fifty thousand. In the whole province of Assam its total number is about eight lacs. A large number of Bodos live in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Kochbehar in the province of Bengal. Out of one lac and fifty thousand, some thousands have been treated as Hindus, which is the cause of the decrease in the number of Bodo population of the district of Goalpara. The Bodos have a distinct civilization of their own. There should be a separate category for the Bodos in the census report”¹⁰⁶.

The Assam Kachari Yuvak Sanmilani (AKYS) conference held on 12th August, 1927 at Titabar, Jorhat saw representatives from various parts of Assam and tribal communities, claiming their independence from the Hindu community in all aspects, political, social and religious¹⁰⁷. It is interesting to note that the growth of Assamese nationalism also saw attempts at force conversion to return many tribal groups as Hindus. The 1931 census report tells us that the Hindu Mahasabha ventured to persuade the tribals’ to identify as Hindus, distributing leaflets among the kacharis, lalungs, mikir. Therefore, the tribal league was directed against the force of Sanskritization which was considered a threat to tribal population and their identity. At the backdrop of the demands put forward by the tribal representatives, the colonial imagery of tribes as ‘semi-savage’, backward and different from caste Hindus hung and political claims were made for protection. However, their effort to established tribal identity should signify as a process of self-identification along ethnic boundaries. The formation of ‘plains tribal’ identity is a demonstration of ‘ethnogenic interethnic consolidation’, in their quest for political power which was deemed necessary in order to develop and maintain their distinct lingo-cultural identity.

A notion of distinct plains tribal identity was conceived and had been created emphasizing its socio-geographical location. Interestingly groups inhabiting the Brahmaputra valley came together and traced their common history and origin. Though it emphasized the geographical specificity initially, the geographical overlap was visible, however, soon the tribal leaders envisioned and positioned themselves against the indigenous non-tribal groups specially belonging to the caste Hindus. They asserted collectively against the ‘other’ group which determined their basis of

¹⁰⁶Khema Sonowal, *why Bodo Movement? (Guwahati: EBH publishers, 2013), 70.*

¹⁰⁷Hira Moni Deka, *Politics of Identity and the Bodo movement, 2014* (New Delhi: Scholars World, A Division of Astral International Pvt. Ltd.)

difference and they were the ‘caste Hindus, Muslims, hill tribes and tea garden labourer’¹⁰⁸. The colonial ethnographical classification of the people of plains was therefore appropriated by the tribal leaders in constructing their identity of tribal and for political protection.

The Bodo and Bodo-Kachari has two different political connotation, the Bodo referring to the generic category of groups who are believed to have common origin and shared certain traits which binds them together, and on the other hand Bodo-Kachari now refers to that one branch of Bodo community that has come to be recognised as one of the dominant plain tribal community known commonly as Bodo and here we are specifically concerned with the ethnic processes of Bodo-kachari and the stages of ethnic transformation in their quest for identity. Bodo is one of the largest plains tribes of Assam, predominantly inhabiting the South bank of the Brahmaputra river in Goalpara and Kamrup districts and it was the representatives of the Bodo-Kachari group that spearheaded the plains tribal identity movement and Rupnath Brahma, a Bodo leader, was elected under the banner of Assam Plains Tribal League. The ‘Assam Plains Tribal League’ came into existence in 1933 as a mode of organised tribal politics and developed the ‘tribal’ consciousness among the plains inhabitants. Various associations and convention like Kachari convention, Miri convention emerged which heralded the nascent stage of tribal consciousness¹⁰⁹.

Collective tribal nationalism

By 1930’s Bodo identity took definite shape and their experience in political activities through the tribal league provided them with political consciousness. The Government of India Act 1935 opened political space providing four seats reserved to the plains tribal of Assam and power to the Bodo and other tribal communities¹¹⁰. The political activities of the tribal league were centred around maintaining tribal identity, representation through separate electorate, however, political autonomy wasn’t raised. Their main aim was safeguarding tribal interests as the political climate didn’t allow much for active political demands to be raised. Thus, the coming of Simon

¹⁰⁸Suryashika Pathak, “Tribal Politics in the Assam: 1933-1941,” in *Economic and political weekly* Vol.45, No.10 (2010). Accessed from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25664196> on 3rd March 2018.

¹⁰⁹Ibid: Pathak, 61.

¹¹⁰Hira Moni Deka, “*Politics of Identity and the Bodo movement, 2014* (New Delhi: Scholars World, A Division of Astral International Pvt. Ltd.).

commission reflected the growing consciousness of 'tribal' identity under the umbrella group of 'All Assam Tribal League'. It was an identity built against the idea of 'other' who didn't constitute 'tribal' and the consciousness was built surrounding the idea of Bodo identity as a tribe. The plains tribal league was an ardent effort on the part of tribal representatives in giving rise to tribal nationalism, which was built on the understanding of having common 'tribal' identity, common culture and common territorial bond. Plains tribal league was a collective effort to incorporate groups based on common cultural traits and identity to create a collective plains tribal nationalism. Tribal or tribe is an important marker of identity boundary providing viable bases for nationality formation. It was an identity formation process that involved constructing and maintaining boundary which relied on the conceptual foundation of 'tribe' as an identity marker and boundary.

The formation of plains tribe league was an effort to bring the mongoloid tribes and communities in one platform and to craft a tribal identity which was positioned against the caste Hindu Assamese. They envisioned their socio-economic problem a common problem among mongoloid tribes, therefore demanded for line system, which they felt without it, their tribal culture and economy would be destroyed in the hands of immigrants and the more advanced communities of plains. The stratification of the Hindu society was perceived to be at the root of deprivation of tribal and felt they were politically, socially and economically deprived.

A collective tribal nationalism was forged on the perceived notion of common social problems like lack of education and jobs. It was a mechanism to construct the notion of plains tribe as 'backward community'. Their backwardness in every aspect became a starting point to mould the future of tribal identity which is still found in the speeches of tribal leaders. Khema Sonowal argues that it was the tribal league's desire to transform the socio-economic problems of tribal people which brought radical changes in the history of tribal people¹¹¹. It generated a momentum in creating a brand of tribal identity which continued to persist in the independent India. Group assertion in Assam has since then been carried along the lines of tribal identity and their economic condition has only reinforced the image of deprived tribal opposed to the rich caste Hindus. The identity assertion began around certain social problems and

¹¹¹Khema Sonowal, *Why Bodo Movement?* 2013 (Guwahati: EBH Publishers): 28.

gradually concretise the identity by forming an ethnic association among different tribal groups believed to have belonged to the Bodo stock.

One such case which reflected the consciousness of a distinct tribal identity was Rupnath Brahma's response to the Assam temple entry bill which was introduced in the 1940.

"I have been asked by the honourable mover whether I myself and my people are Hindus or not. On this point I do not like to enter into any open discussion in this house, but this much I can tell the house that amongst the tribal people there are Christians and there are some who have adopted the Hindu religion and the rest of them have been treated as animists. I may say that they are quite independent of the Hindu society - they are certainly not so-called low caste Hindus, they have got a distinct form of religion of their own, and they do not care if they are allowed to have entrance in the temples. I think these people are not so much anxious to have access to public temples, or any temples" ¹¹².

Close co-existence with 'non-tribal' have brought about changes in their internal structure of tribal society with many following Christianity and Hinduism and rest animism. However, they have always asserted their tribalhood and difference from the Assamese caste Hindus. Rupnath Brahma's response reflects his stand on whether tribes can be termed as Hindus. They have asserted their status of tribal despite religious conversion as it is observable in one of the conditions stated by the Assam Tribal League in its agreement condition with the Assam Muslim League that "those people of the tribal communities, who have embraced Hinduism and Christianity, will be included in the schedule of the Tribals' provided they identify themselves as tribal"¹¹³. Bodo society was at a crossroad entangled by the Christian missionaries and the influence of Hinduism. Though the Christian missionaries didn't have much extensive impact, the spread of Christianity can't be denied, which came in stages. Though many individual Bodo had already converted into Christianity in the late 19th century, the mission station was established only in the 20th century in the 1927. However, colonial sponsored individual

¹¹² Quoted in Suryashika Pathak, "Tribal Politics in the Assam: 1933-1941," *economic and political weekly* vol.45, No.10 (2010): 67.

¹¹³Memorandum to the President of India, submitted by The Plains Tribals' Council of Assam, Kokrajhar, May 20, 1967, in P.S. Datta ed. *Autonomy Movements in Assam: Documents*, 1993 (New Delhi: Omsons Publications), 145.

missionaries and evangelist had already made their way among the Bodos, with Reverend Sidney Endle, the infamous evangelist who wrote a monograph 'The Kacharis'. They also left behind their legacies of introducing of formal education and the development of indigenous language, transforming the oral language into a written language. Therefore, it can be said that the missionaries in all fairness started using Bodo as a medium of 'literary expression' giving rise to Bodo literature¹¹⁴.

A handful of Bodo population are believed to have come under the influence of Hinduism, who eventually assumed a new cultural identity, known as 'Saranja' or 'purified kacharis', a social upward mobility process, who adopted the custom of Hindus and abstain from forbidden food to enhance their social position. A social reformer emerged among the Bodos to thwart the influence of Hinduism, known as Brahma movement led by Kalicharan Mech, who later became Kalicharan Brahma. In order to give a good social standing in the eyes of Hindus, he began to reform Bodo society internally by preaching on principle tenets of Brahma dharma, inspired by Vedic and Brahmanical principles. It disallowed rearing of pigs and fowls, consumption of liquor and meat, fish. The social reform thwarted the Saranja process, however, it changed the basic social customs and practices among the Bodos. It was largely infusing Hinduism with some modifications and preventing moving out of Bodos to assume a new identity. It is said that the Bodo elite rose out of the Kalicharan movement who gave new incipient to the Bodo identity and subsequently culminated into the present elite class that played a crucial role in Bodo assertion¹¹⁵.

Post-Independence Identity Assertion

On the eve of the independence, however, the sub-committees formed to provide recommendation to administer the Northeast Frontier tracts, emphasized on the hill districts and the hills men. The Plains tribal population of Assam was disregarded on the basis that it was a case of 'minority' and have assimilated highly with the plains. This reflects the association of tribal with 'hillsmen'. Their case was

¹¹⁴Sujit Choudhury, *The Bodos: Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic Minority*, 2007 (New Delhi: Indian Institute of Advanced Study), 55.

¹¹⁵Ibid: Choudhury, 61.

argued against providing any kind of autonomy similar to the hill district though plains tribe constituted around 2,484,996 according to the census of 1941¹¹⁶.

“this portion of the plains tribal is of course a population which has assimilated in high degree the life of the plains”¹¹⁷.

However, provisions for protecting the indigenous group was initiated in the form of tribal belts and blocks, to address the problem of influx of population. The fixated notion on tribes which give more emphasis on the geographically defined concept of ‘hills tribe’ were believed to constitute a separate entity from the people in plains and the issue of plains tribes were considered as Sub-nationality of Assamese and therefore plains tribe like the Bodos, the Mishings, the Sonowals, the Tiwas and the Deuris didn’t come under the provision of sixth schedule¹¹⁸.

The tribal league leaders on the eve of independence decided to give up their demand for aggressive political identity and was transformed into a socio-cultural organization the “tribal Sangh”¹¹⁹. By merging into the political mainstream of Assam, the plains tribes of Assam, their collective effort to create plains tribal nationalism also diminish. Leaders like Jadav Chandra Khaklary, Rupnath Brahma, Jogendra Hazarika joined the congress and others joined the socialist party. In the tenth and its last annual session held in Baropujia, Nowgaon in 1953, it was converted into a social welfare organization called All Assam Tribal Sangha¹²⁰. The tribal league failed to sustain itself as the platform of the tribal in Assam as internal feuds over the issue of participation in the provincial election declared by the British in 1945. Some tribal league leaders joined the congress and got elected, which saw the beginning of the end of the tribal league.

However, through the experience of political activism from late 1920’s to 1946, some of the plains tribal became conscious of their identity and language. The collective tribal nationalism of the colonial period soon transpired into Bodoland

¹¹⁶B. Shiva Rao, Vaddake Kuruppe Nandan Menon, Subhash C. Kashyap, and N. K. N. Iyengar, *The Framing of India's Constitution*, Vol. 5. Indian Institute of Public Administration; (Distributors: NM Tripathi, Bombay, 1968), 708

¹¹⁷*Ibid*:708.

¹¹⁸Monirul Hussain, “Tribal question in Assam,” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.27, No.20/21 (1992): 1047. Accessed from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4397885> on 5th September 2017, 12:42pm

¹¹⁹Hira Moni Deka, *Politics of identity and the Bodo movement, 2014* (New Delhi: Scholars World, A Division of Astral International Pvt. Ltd.).

¹²⁰ Khema Sonowal, *Why Bodo Movement?* (Guwahati: EBH Publishers, 2013), 75.

movement in the post-independence period. And the dawn of liberation saw conscious groups of Bodo asserting their distinct identity, Bodos soon began to define their nationality in terms of their distinct language and tribal identity. There was a general belief that post-independence Bodos of Brahmaputra valley would soon assimilate with the mainstream Assamese community as the census figures of 1951 and 1961 showed a decline in the growth rate of Bodo population, taking note of the fact that many Bodos identified themselves as Assamese speakers¹²¹. The social absorption by the dominant community towards the indigenous minority was inevitable and the social mobility that was inherent in shifting identities became paramount in the early years after independence.

However, the identity developments that ensued from the early 1950's with the formation of BSS which understood the integral linkage of language and tribal identity, and the political mobilization that followed in the following years after independence reversing the Hinduisation process and assimilation into the Assamese fold marked the beginning of the fracture of the Assamese identity. The first ever custodian of Bodo language the 'Bodo Sahitya Sabha' (BSS) formed in 1952, soon after independence was a literary group whose work involved the development of Bodo language and Bodo culture to maintain and safeguard the Bodo lingo-cultural identity. The common forum for plains tribal soon gave way to the emergence of numerous Bodo organisations. Just as the creation of socio-political organisation like Assam Bodo Chatra Sanmilan (1918) and All Assam Plains Tribal League (1933) articulated separate political identity and generated consciousness, organisation like Bodo Sahitya Sabha was created to spread Bodo identity consciousness in the independent India¹²².

Re-Aligning Tribal Identity

The aim of Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) was to develop an inter-community relation among ethnic tribal groups that belonged to the same linguistic group of Bodo spoken by Bodo tribes in northeast under one umbrella organisation which would then serve as a common linkage among the Bodo tribes. Similar organisation by Bodo

¹²¹Sujit Choudhury, *The Bodos: Emergence and Assertion of an Ethnic Minority*, (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced study, 2007), 2.

¹²²Khema Sonowal, *Why Bodo Movement?* (Guwahati: EBH Publishers, 2013), 49.

tribes was formed and collaborated and regular annual sessions were held by the BSS. It is directed towards the growth of Bodo language, culture and literature. It acts as the custodian of Bodo heritage while simultaneously forging the erstwhile Bodo tribes who have now assumed independent identity of their own into one common Bodo tribal identity. The idea of Bodo race or tribe is appropriated heavily from colonial ethnographic accounts and texts who were clubbed under the category of 'Kachari'. The internalisation of Bodo identity rest on the notion of tribal discourse given by the colonial official images of tribe as a separate entity which is now deeply embedded in the psychology of the educated tribals'. Bodos' and its allied tribes have always asserted their difference from the Assamese Hindus and maintain that their culture, language, customs and dress are different and that they constitute a separate Bodo nation. The boundary of who constitute Bodo was expanded to include range of groups who were believed to have derived from the same linguistic and cultural ethnoses. Independent communities were envisioned together to form a Bodo nation as groups merged together with their own ethnic self-awareness.

Some of the major demands of BSS are to "create separate directorate for Bodos, plains tribal educational institutions, provincialisation of Bodo medium schools, introduction of Bodo courses at university level and development and standardisation of Bodo language"¹²³. Its aim to unite languages and dialects of Dimasas, Kok-Boro and allied groups residing in different regions of northeast both plains and hills have succeeded in flourishing Bodo identity and they have generated the consciousness of unique tribal identity. Currently groups who were considered to belong to the stock of Bodo race are now known by different names and they have their own structure of language. Therefore, BSS represent the conscious attempt to recreate and sustain the unique Bodo tribal identity of the past and acting as an ethno-consolidating force. This represents a situation where several linguistically and culturally different ethnic groups merged together to form an inter-ethnic solidarity, with its own ethnic self-awareness¹²⁴. It was merged together to form with the hope of forming a collective Bodo nation, who were closely related nationalities historically. Termed as 'meta-ethnolinguistic' process where inter-ethnic integration lead to

¹²³ Accessed from <http://bodosahityasabha.org> on 5th December, 2017.

¹²⁴ S. K. Acharya, "Ethnic Processes in North-Eastern India," in *Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in North-East India*, ed. B. Pakem, (Guwahati: Omsons Publication, 1990), 77.

formation of 'meta-ethnic' identities, the scope of Bodo identity was enlarged to create an inter-ethnic integration¹²⁵.

The Assam official language act of 1960 which made Assamese language the official language of the state of Assam in their hegemonic project of Assamese nationalism was intensely opposed, accusing the Assam government of Assamization through an imposition of 'Assamese language and culture upon the tribals' undemocratically and violating the constitution of India". The tribal population of Assam felt threatened by the steps taken by the Assam government in making Assamese the official language. They perceived the policies taken by the mainstream Assam government as anti-tribal policy and have always claimed their difference from the Assamese community and that their separateness lies in their tribal identity as opposed to the caste Assamese. They have always position themselves against the 'Assamese' and have never conceded to Assamese identity and articulated their claim of Bodo identity different from the Assamese community. In 1963, Bodo language was introduced as a medium of instruction in primary school and in secondary stages in 1968¹²⁶. Following repressive measures to suppress the Sabha's demand for Roman script, Bodo became a written language with Devanagiri script. The peaceful mass movement demanding roman script in 1974-1975 led by Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) was met with suppressive measures from the Assam government in which 15 people lost their lives in police firing. With this, consciousness of Bodo identity gained momentum among the masses and their unceasing effort to develop a pan-Bodo language is reflected in the election of Joybhadra Hagzar, a Dimasá Kachari from North Cachar district as the president of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha.

In the succeeding years after the formation of Bodo Sahitya Sabha, a pan-tribal identity body, similar to the tribal league of the early 20th century, was formed to voice the grievances of plains tribal. The Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed in response to the declaration made by the central government that Assam will be reorganised along the federal line¹²⁷. On February 27, 1967, the Plains Tribal

¹²⁵S. K. Acharya, "Ethnic Processes in North-Eastern India," in *Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in North-East India*, ed. B. Pakem, (Guwahati: Omsons Publication, 1990), 87.

¹²⁶Hira Moni Deka, *Politics of identity and the Bodo movement, 2014* (New Delhi: Scholars World, A Division of Astral International Pvt. Ltd.).

¹²⁷Khema Sonowal, *Why Bodo Movement?* (Guwahati: EBH Publishers, 2013), 78.

Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed to articulate the demand of plains tribe residing in the plains of Assam. The memorandum submitted on 20th May, 1967 to the central government, asserting the common grievances and injustices experienced by the tribes of plain in Assam and it is only through complete autonomy that their aspirations will be achieved¹²⁸. The Plains tribal identity was conjured up once again in the post-independence context for political reasons.

It can be discerned from reading the memorandum documents submitted to the central government, its tenacious attempt to closely define who constitute the Plain tribal and why they should be given autonomy. The Bodo group constitute the Bodo Kacharis, Hojais, Sonowals, Lalungs, Meches, Rabhas, Deoris and the Barmans of Cachar. They all belong to Mongolian origin and are ‘ethnologically different from the rest of the so called Assamese people’¹²⁹. They also belong to the linguistic category of ‘tibeto-burmese’ group and categorically positions against the Assamese language which is Indo-Aryan. If we see the arguments forwarded in the memorandum, it is discernible that they want to maintain their ‘tribal’ identity, which they feel is threatened by the Assamese culture and language. And their urge to maintain and sustain their tribal identity has come in conflict with the Assamese people who time and again have attempted to impose Assamese language as official language of the state. The language policy of 1960 is one such case which led to resurgence of tribal identity by linking it to their distinct language and consequently movement for adoption of Roman script of an otherwise oral language which had never seen a written form. Under the cloak of ‘tribal’ identity, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), asserted their distinctive identity through a common platform of PTCA. It was a common platform to unite the people of Assam who were categorised as tribes continuing with the colonial categorisation and create solidarity to solve the issue of ‘backward tribals’. To quote some of the lines from the memorandum:

¹²⁸Memorandum to the President of India, submitted by The Plains Tribals’ Council of Assam, Kokrajhar, May 20, 1967, in P.S. Datta ed. *Autonomy Movements in Assam: Documents*, 1993 (New Delhi: Omsons Publications), 123.

¹²⁹ Ibid: Datta.

“the caste-system and untouchability are foreign to them” and “all the scheduled tribes of the plains Assam culturally differ from the rest of the Assamese people and have their own cultural institutions”¹³⁰.

In carving out a tribal identity, the PTCA’s effort to dissociate from caste Hindu Assamese society was evident in the memorandum submitted by the PTCA to the central government. The idea of primitiveness and isolation associated with the notion of tribe, existing independent of caste structure has fed indigenous people’s understanding of tribe in their identity claims. Their isolation and primitiveness were positioned against the ‘civilized’ Hindus in the colonial times, who now constitute the ‘mainstream’ society. And it is there isolation and exclusion from the ‘mainstream’ Assamese society which becomes a stimulation in reinforcing their ‘tribal identity. The construction of image of plains tribal identity is through the image of isolation and exclusion from the ‘mainstream society’.

Through their articulation in the memorandum it reflected the socio-economic factor that went into conceptualising tribal identity. The memorandum stated the ‘minimum constitutional safeguard’ enjoyed by the plains tribe in comparison to other scheduled tribes and persuaded for fifth and sixth schedule to ‘safeguard the interest of tribal’ and protect against the exploitation by non-tribal moneylenders and their tribal way of life’, their customs, practices and identities of tribal¹³¹. The memorandum also spoke about ‘naïve’ tribal’, describing them as ‘simple and unsophisticated’¹³². Tribal identity and consciousness became much stronger with the presence of non-tribal immigrants, and workers, traders and businessman who engaged in modern monetary economy rather than agricultural economy. All these forces were perceived as anti-tribal life and a ‘menace’ to tribal way of life. From the document one can get an idea about the priorities, for the upliftment of the socio-economic condition, educational facilities and job reservation.

The birth of Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in 1967, under the leadership of Modaram Brahma, was born with an aim of autonomy for plains tribe to

¹³⁰ Memorandum to the President of India, Submitted by The Plains Tribals’ Council of Assam, Kokrajhar, May 20, 1967, in P.S. Datta ed. *Autonomy Movements in Assam: Documents*, 1993 (New Delhi: Omsons Publications), 121.

¹³¹ Ibid., Datta, 124

¹³² Ibid: Datta, 125.

redress their grievances. The idea of autonomy was reflected in their concept of ‘Udayachal’.

*“Udayachal is our goal and urgent demand. The fate of the plains tribals’ will remain bleak till we remain tagged to the apron of the Assamese hegemony. More than often we have given reasons for the urgent necessity to give a homeland-UDAYACHAL to the plains tribals’ to be carved out of the present state of Assam. This will permit us to keep our identity intact, progress and be vigorous partners in the march forward of the country”*¹³³.

Udayachal was envisioned in the northern tracts of the river Brahmaputra along the foothills of Bhutan and Arunachal, stretching through the districts of Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Borpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh¹³⁴. The areas envisioned in Udayachal by and large were covered by the tribal belts and block, under chapter X of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act of 1886 under the colonial regime. The pan-tribal geographical entity was desired where colonial history had already shaped the discourse of tribe by marking and bringing them under the ‘protection’ through creation of tribal belts and blocks. The legacy of colonial ethnography combined with the administrative operation of record keeping is reflected in the desire for Udayachal which was envisioned along the units that had been attributed the designation of ‘tribal area’. The disparate units like Dotma tribal belt, Balaghat-Nayekgaon tribal block, Sidli tribal belt, Bijni tribal block, Santhal colony tribal block, Repu-Parbatjowar tribal belt in Dhubri and Kokrajhar district, Kharija tribal block, Bajegaon Pathar tribal block, Gobordhona tribal belt and Tamulpur tribal block in Nalbari district; Kalaigaon tribal belt, Teteli bhanguria, North Lakhimpur sub-mountain tribal belt and Abor-Mishimi-Tirap tribal belt in Lakhimpur¹³⁵. The disparate units became a unified whole under the designation of ‘tribal’ belts and blocks. While in other hill district, ‘line system’ was formulated, in the plains of Assam, tribal belts and blocks were constituted. There were altogether 33 belts and blocks, 5704 Sq.miles in area and 1,09,73,67 bighas¹³⁶. What is interesting

¹³³Samar Brahma Choudhury, et al, “On Udayachal Movement,” in *Political Development of the North East*, ed. B.C.Bhuyan, et al. (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 2006), 103.

¹³⁴Samar Brahma Choudhury, et al, “On Udayachal Movement,” in *Political Development of the North East*, ed. B.C.Bhuyan, et al. (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 2006), 105.

¹³⁵Ibid: Choudhury, 105.

¹³⁶Memorandum to the President of India, submitted by The Plains Tribals’ Council of Assam, Kokrajhar, May 20, 1967, in P.S. Datta ed. *Autonomy Movements in Assam: Documents*, 1993 (New Delhi: Omsons Publications), 126-128.

is the fact that nowhere is the word ‘tribal’ mentioned in any of the relevant provisions of the Assam land and revenue regulation, however it is presumed that such belts and blocks were constituted keeping in mind that “majority of the population in these areas must be tribals”¹³⁷. Such proposed demarcations gave fruition to the imagination of identity boundaries which was to maintain their distinct identity. However, what plagued the demand was the lack of compactness in their territorial demand with the tribal population. This factor has been a recurring reason behind the contestation and opposition towards the Bodo movement and many scholars have attributed the lack of compactness and dominance by one group to counter the claims by the ethnic group under study. However, it misses the issue of how tribal belts and blocks have been violated over the years and have been repeatedly encroached by ‘non-notified’ people. Under the Assam Land and Land Revenue Regulation Act, section 164 states that “no person to whom any land is transferred in the belts or blocks in contravention of the provision of the chapter X shall acquire any right or title in that land by length of possession whether adverse or not. They are liable to be evicted from the tribal belts and blocks which the government either in the centre or state must carry out forthwith”. In a sit in protest organised by the ‘Janajati Suraksha Mancha’, a forum of indigenous communities, stated in its memorandum that as of now ‘3,49,505 *bighas*, four *Kothas* and eight *lessas* of land in tribal belts, blocks and sub plan areas have been encroached illegally in the BTAD area’¹³⁸. As the tribal inhabitants in the tribal belts and blocks are not neatly compact but dispersed, it has become more susceptible to encroachment and permanent settlement, which has greatly reduced the tribal population to a minority. Violations of tribal belts and blocks have germinated the feeling of resentment against the ‘other’ and the inactive and inefficient attitude by the Assam government have only reinforced the sense of alienation in their land.

Demand for Udayachal, to secure the rights and interest of tribal, consolidated the tribal identity of plains. It reinforced the distinctive plains tribal identity, which was crafted in the late 1920’s of the 20th century with the formation of tribal league. It continued with the discourse of tribal identity as backward in every aspect and their

¹³⁷Memorandum to the President of India, submitted by The Plains Tribals’ Council of Assam, Kokrajhar, May 20, 1967, in P.S. Datta ed. *Autonomy Movements in Assam: Documents*, 1993 (New Delhi: Omsons Publications), 128.

¹³⁸The Telegraph, “Tribal Forum Expresses Concern,” March 17, 2015. Accessed from https://www.telegraphindia.com/1150317/jsp/northeast/story_9129.jsp.

different-ness in opposition to other communities. It came into conflict with the Assamese intelligentsia who wanted indigenous tribal to be an integral part of Assamese nationalism. The tribal leadership from 1920's onward had succeeded in forming a collective tribal nationalism, and assuming an independent identity separate from the Assamese identity. Plains tribal have become very conscious of their distinct identity and language. Monirul Hussain argues that the growth of Assamese nationality has come about at the cost of tribal identity. He says that though the population of the plains tribal in Brahmaputra valley increased from 4,43,117 in 1872 to 13, 28,743 in 1971, it has overall registered high rates of decline in the percentage of tribal population. This has come about due to the fact that many autochthon tribals' have identified themselves as the Assamese speaking individuals and gave up their tribal identity¹³⁹. According to the census conducted in year 1971, tribal population constituted 16,06,648, however tribal language speakers was 10,99,008. It reflects that many tribal language speakers have assimilated into Assamese language, thereby rising Assamese speakers and a boost to Assamese nationalism. The fear of assimilation into the Assamese community has brought about consciousness among the tribal group about their position and have slowly build an identity movement based on tribal identity. Other external factors like land alienation and encroachment at the hands of non-tribal and immigrants have only grown the consciousness of indigenous tribal. Their marginalised status has only reinforced 'tribal identity'.

The political ambition of Udayachal was short lived, as it joined hands with the Janata party in 1977 in the post-emergency period and gave up its demand for autonomy, facing backlash from tribal youth organizations. Few other organisations came up after the parent PTCA failed, for instance, 'Progressive Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA(P) and United Tribal Nationalist Front (UNTFLF) was created by few dissident members. The PTCA(P) forwarded the idea of creation of 'Mishing-Bodoland' for the two plains tribe and the UTNLF forwarded the idea of 'tribal-homeland'.

The United Tribal Nationalists' liberation front of Assam (UTNLF) formed on 19th April, 1984 by Binay Khungur Basumatary also reified the tribal identity, articulating in its memorandum that the province of Assam has always been inhabited

¹³⁹Monirul Hussain, "Tribal question in Assam," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.27, No.20/21 (1992): 1048. Accessed from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4397885> on 5th September 2017, 12:42pm

by non-Aryan origin¹⁴⁰. It demanded for a separate state with union territory status, to be created out of Assam. The idea of tribal homeland was born in an All Tribal Organisations Convention, to launch a united tribal political movement. The motivating force in a united tribal political platform was the common experience of deprivation and injustices they face as a tribal entity. The process of associative politics involves identity construction and generating consciousness, which was the 'plains tribal identity' on the grounds of similar socio-economic deprivation experience as they articulate in their demands how 'the plains tribal of Assam are deprived in the matters of employment, educational opportunities and all developmental activities'. Collective tribal nationalism was pitted against the Assamese nationalism, 'to liberate tribal land, areas, language, culture, customs and traditions from under the imposition and domination by the civilisation, culture, and language of Assamese chauvinism'¹⁴¹. Delivering a speech on the debate on resolution ratifying the constitution of India, 53rd amendment bill, 1984, which created Mizoram statehood, Shri Benoy kumar Basumatari, a Bodo legislator, expressed his concerns for the tribals' of plains who have been denied 'protective provisions' and the 'protective measures like tribal belts and blocks' have failed¹⁴².

In a series of memorandum submitted by the United Tribal Nationalists Liberation Front between 1986 to 1988, though their urge was for education, employment and land protection, they wanted a separate political identity, which was possible only with the creation of 'tribal homeland' for all the tribes residing in the plains of Assam. They reiterated their distinct entity from the Assamese identity. Their signs for political autonomy and self-determination became visible with their demand for tribal homeland beginning with the demand for Udayachal. Their apprehensions and angst against the non-tribal Assamese of being submerged under hegemonic regime is reflected in their articulation for demand of autonomy.

¹⁴⁰ Memorandum to the President of India, submitted by The Plains Tribals' Council of Assam, Kokrajhar, May 20, 1967, in P.S. Datta, ed. *Autonomy Movements in Assam: Documents*, 1993 (New Delhi: Omsons Publications), 183.

¹⁴¹ Ibid: Datta, 183.

¹⁴² Speech delivered in Assam Assembly on 27th November, 1984 by B.K Basumatari on the Debate on Resolution ratifying the constitution of India (53rd amendment) Bill, in P.S. Datta, ed. *Autonomy Movements in Assam: Documents*, 1993 (New Delhi: Omsons Publications), 186.

Fissure of collective tribal nationalism

The pan-tribal identity since the 1920's has been a creation of Bodo-Kachari tribal leaders who wanted to build a pan-Bodo identity and sentiment. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha, which has been working to develop pan-Bodo identity through developing a common Bodo language, was based on a tribal identity constructed by the colonial regime, which has been internalised by the indigenous 'tribal' leaders in constructing their identity. It was the Bodo leaders who crafted the idea of a collective tribal nationalism among the people of plains. A conscious and strong identity around the geographical location of tribes have already been built and the consciousness was generated and sustain by Bodo-Kachari leaders in the post- independence period. It envisioned a tribal state which was built around the identity of a pan- Bodo or Kachari identity used by the colonial ethnographers. It sought to create a pan-Bodo identity and the tribal homeland was based on this understanding of Bodo identity which can be traced back to the administrative category of colonial regime combined with ethnographic description.

It was only a matter of time that the collective tribal nationalism in plains soon transfigured into a Bodoland movement. The multiple efforts at resurging collective tribal nationalism broke down many times to finally give way to a more militant movement for Bodoland. While attempts to bring together the other plains tribes failed in their demand for 'tribal homeland', autonomy demand was directed towards a new route for the creation of Bodoland. The political assertion of Bodo identity reached new heights in 1980's with the All Bodo students union articulating vociferously for Bodoland and gaining new momentum while various organization sprung up adopting violent tactics.

The All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) began a forceful mobilisation of masses in large number to garner support in their demand for Bodoland along with an umbrella organization named 'Bodo People's Action Committee' (BPAC). Just as the formation of Bodo Sahitya Sabha was a landmark organisation in generating consciousness among the Bodo people, the All Bodo students' union was landmark organisation in the history of Bodo movement. It guided the 'politics and decisions' for separate state from the 1980's period onwards. With the growth of ABSU, Bodo nationalism gained new vigour in their demand for separate political identity. It

gained momentum from the anti-foreigner agitation by the All Assam Students' union, where the Bodo leaders supported the AASU agitation. However, the apprehension against the dominant caste Hindu Assamese speaking people and government to establish a hegemonic Assamese identity was soon felt and gradually ABSU leaders started disassociating from the AASU movement¹⁴³. ABSU leaders had misgivings about certain clauses in Assam accord, 'clause 6' asked to safeguard and 'to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people'. This was seen as a complete disregard of the indigenous tribal identity of Bodos', distinct from the Assamese identity. The Assam movement broke down the 'inter-ethnic fabric' of the state as many independent movements began to rise in their quest for ethnic homeland. Assamese nationalistic aspirations have its roots in the 19th and 20th century colonial times with the Assamese speaking Hindu middle class in the forefront of the anti-colonial movement, who eventually assumed a cultural and social dominance over other smaller ethnic groups in the post-independence period¹⁴⁴. However, by 1985, the distinctive identities of ethnic groups surfaced with nationalist face only to accelerate the momentum in the coming years. The 'sons of the soil' movement gave a new dimension to the nativist movement as 'sons of the soil' came to be seen exclusively referring to the Assamese Hindu middle class and soon it defined the relation of the dominant Assamese speaking community with other ethnic minorities. Proliferation of identity movement arising out of sense of alienation and fear of cultural and social dominance of mainstream Assamese community shaped the new ethnic mobilization. That is when the Bodo movement gained momentum, severely rupturing the 'inter-ethnic' fabric of Assamese identity, labelling it as an 'artificial Assamese' community who arrived in the 13th and 14th century with the Ahom rule to overturn the original rulers of Kacharis'¹⁴⁵.

In the new phase of identity movement, beginning from 1985 onwards, ABSU mobilized the masses behind its ideology of a separate state and acquired a new dimension to the earlier demands for 'tribal homeland'. The ABSU and BPAC launched a massive movement for creation of a separate state for the tribal people on the north bank area of Assam and autonomous district council in the south bank areas

¹⁴³Khema Sonowal, *Why Bodo Movement?* (Guwahati: EBH Publishers, 2013), 81.

¹⁴⁴Uddipana Goswami, *Conflict and Reconciliation: The politics of ethnicity in Assam 2014-2017* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁴⁵Ibid: Goswami, 68.

where tribal population's concentration is high. The ABSU movement from 1987 onwards were entirely directed against the Assamese chauvinism and 'anti-tribal' attitude of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). They began mobilisation programme by arousing sentiments against the Assamese chauvinism and their 'anti-tribal' policies. In a memorandum submitted in 1987 ABSU reiterated the grievances and aspirations of the plains tribe. What is apparent in the memorandum is the deliberate self-representation which is directed towards defining Bodo as 'plains tribe' and a nation. The historical categories of 'tribes' and 'Bodos' have been acquired from fixation developed in colonial Assam and their sense of plains tribes have arose from its historical memory as an instrument of assertion and power to challenge Assamese hegemony. The longstanding treatment of Bodo issue as mere socio-economic problem by the Assam government only sowed the seeds for germination of more assertive Bodo nationalist. Numerous issues and factors crept up which facilitated the sense of alienation amongst the Bodo, the demand by AASU leaders to do away with SC/ST reservation and end scholarship, reinforcing the Hindu caste prejudices, along with state brutalities, for instance the No.12 Bhumka, a Bodo village in Kokrajhar district, where stories of mass rape still haunts' the village¹⁴⁶. Memories of state brutalities and prejudicial policies only helped in building up a mass resentment against the Assam state, its mechanisms and policies.

As the Assam movement steered the concept of Assamese identity in its agitation against the immigrants, the composite Assamese identity saw fragments when ABSU became more vociferous in the identity assertion claiming its distinctiveness from the Assamese. With the organizational politics gaining much strength and vigour under the leadership of ABSU members, they launched a movement for autonomy in the form of Bodoland and released a list of 92 demands¹⁴⁷. There three major demands: formation of separate state of Bodoland on the north bank of Brahmaputra; setting up autonomous district councils in the tribal dominant areas and thirdly incorporation of the Bodo Kacharis of Karbi Anglong in the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution. The fear of losing their identity ran counter to the effort of Assamese to Assamise Assam. Udayon Mishra says that it is the overzealousness of

¹⁴⁶ Hiren Gohain, "Bodo Stir in Perspective," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.24, No. 25 (1989): 1378.

¹⁴⁷ Memorandum submitted to the President of India by the All Bodo students' union "Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty," in *Autonomy Movements in Assam: Documents*, ed. P.S.Datta, (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1993): 240-253.

the Assamese in protecting their language has alienated the tribal communities of the Brahmaputra valley¹⁴⁸.

In asserting their separate political identity, the historical narratives about their past identity is interwoven intricately in their articulation of demands for separate state. In the memorandum submitted by the ABSU in 1987, it reiterated that ‘Bodos’ are the original inhabitants of Assam, they are the sons of the soil and at one time they had been the master and ruler of Assam’ and the ‘influx of artificial Assamese began the process of silent aggression to capture administrative powers and deprived Bodo of political suzerainty in Assam’¹⁴⁹. Historical narratives in conjunction with demand for separate state is interwoven in their narration and articulation of demand. Such narrative representation become a knowledge source for the common masses and an instrument of power while articulating demands.

Fragmentation of Assamese identity

Bodoland movement has adversely redefined Assamese identity, as from the 1987 onwards the ABSU asserted themselves as distinct ‘ethno-linguistic’ community and the idea of Assamese have been critically questioned on the ground that the imposition of Assamese language is an attempt to ‘Assamise, assimilate and dominate the non-Assamese people’¹⁵⁰. Bodo consciousness didn’t take a separatist stand in the initial stage of identity building process, it was limited to gaining protective measure of fifth and sixth schedule and inclusion of Bodo language along with the Assamese in the state’s official language. With the growth of Bodo consciousness, it started challenging the idea of Assamese identity and the tribal population of Assam, specially began to assert their distinct tribal identity. It challenged the political structure, political boundaries and ethnic boundary of Assamese to redefine and restructure Assamese and political boundaries. Critically questioning the concept of Assamese nationality which was directed towards assimilation rather than integration and the unequal power relations shared between the dominant Assamese group and other ethnic tribal group became the source of agitation. The exclusion of multi-ethnic

¹⁴⁸Cited in Hira Moni Deka, *Politics of identity and the Bodo movement, 2014* (New Delhi: Scholars World, A Division of Astral International Pvt. Ltd.), 99.

¹⁴⁹Memorandum submitted to the President of India by the All Bodo Students’ Union, “Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty, Fifty- three questions and answers,” August 23, 1987, in *Autonomy movements in Assam: Documents*, ed. P.S. Datta, (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1993).

¹⁵⁰Ibid: Datta, 286.

aspect of Assam by Assamese leaders in their political project of Assamese ethno-linguistic identity led to assertion of a distinct Bodo identity. This prompted ethnic groups to disassociate from the Assamese label and secondly Assamese identity was redefined¹⁵¹.

The project of Bodo political identity rests on reverting the process of formation of Assamese identity and questioned

“who constitute Assamese community? The main constituents of the Assamese are Ahoms, Brahmins, Kalitas, Kalibortas or the fisherman class, Ganaks and the like. The Ahoms are of course not the pure Assamese as they are of Mongoloid stocks and have their own tai-language. But, at the present Ahoms have forgotten their tai-language and culture and claim themselves as the major components of so-called greater Assamese nationality”¹⁵².

What reflects in the statement is fixation on the mongoloid features as ‘non-Assamese’ which is derived from the colonial ethnographic differentiation and positioning in constructing identity of ‘tribe’ and caste Hindus. These were some of the essentialised characteristics which became apparent in a colonial environment and the efforts of the colonial officials and the ethnographers had a direct impact on conception of Bodo history. Around the turn of the century in 1920’s, the construction of tradition and history served the purpose of creating a collective tribal nationalism and subsequently Bodo identity. Colonial interaction brought the abstraction ‘Kacharis’ to create a pan-tribal identity among the multiple indigenous population of colonial Assam.

Udayan Misra says the question of Assamese identity is marked by ‘confusions and contradictions’ in their attempt to carve out a homogeneous identity in a plural and heterogenous situation as it has been plagued by challenges like demographic changes, alienation of tribal communities and the expansion of parameters to include new linguistic communities¹⁵³.

¹⁵¹Uddipana Goswami, *Conflict and Reconciliation: The politics of ethnicity in Assam*, (India: Routledge, 2014).

¹⁵²Memorandum submitted to the President of India by the All Bodo students’ union, “why separate state” November 10, 1987, in *Autonomy movements in Assam: Documents*, ed. P.S. Datta, et al. (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1993): 270.

¹⁵³Udayon Misra, *India’s North-east, Identity movements, State and Civil Society*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014): 156.

Stages of Bodoland movement

The movement led by the ABSU saw violence and was marked by bandhs, road and rail blockades and attacks on school buildings and public building. They staged many protest and organized bandhs to put pressure, however at times protest movement turn violent, for instance, the 36hour tribal area bandh declared by the ABSU from 24-25thSeptember, 1987 saw violence when volunteers were fired upon and lathi-charge by the police. The repressive measure by the state created more resentment among the Bodos, which created more favourable environment to mobilize and gain mass support for separate homeland. The radical demand saw more violence in 1988 when the 72hour bandh on 27thApril, 1988 turn violent, when the state witnesses 28 bomb blasts in Kokrajhar and Udalguri sub-division and defused 23 live bombs, leading upto arrests of hundreds of ABSU supporters¹⁵⁴. The violent phase of the struggle ‘created apprehensions among other tribal organisations like All Assam Tribal Sangha, the All Assam Tribal Students’ Union, the Lalung Darbar, and the Lalung Youth Front. The ABSU’s violent tactics in the initial stages of movement proved counterproductive to various tribal organisation. For instance, the Rabha Yuva Chatra Parishad, expressed its opposition against the division of Assam and that any attempt to solve Bodo issue should involve other plains tribe.

Since the mid 1980’s Bodo movement became more radical and militant with new organizations that took up arms and soon inter-tribal violence became apparent with the rise in fratricidal killing due to their differences in approaches and ideologies. Following from this phase onwards, Bodo regional identity consolidated and the instability associated with the emergence of groups that took recourse to violence marked a transitional phase in the history of Bodo identity assertion. The ideological differences among the PTCA and former PTCA members took a volatile turn when Bodo Voluntary Force (BVF) a wing of the ABSU, formed by Prem Singh Brahma was involved in targeting non-Bodos’ as well as Bodo who were sympathetic to PTCA and opposed ABSU led movement. Other developments like an underground militant outfit Bodo Security Force (Bd.SF) demanded a sovereign Bodoland, which

¹⁵⁴Hira Moni Deka, *Politics of identity and the Bodo movement, 2014* (New Delhi: Scholars World, A Division of Astral International Pvt. Ltd.).

was later rechristened to National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)¹⁵⁵. It was a transformation of ethnic tribal identity assertion to more forceful nationalist demand. By the 1990's Bodo identity movement became more aggressive in their demand and pose a challenge to the political structure of Assam and its boundaries and sent Assam for more than a decade long in a state of frenzy. It witnessed a significant rise in violence and militancy, killing, abduction, extortions and infrastructural destruction became rampant. Such violent tactics were met by violent suppression at the hand of the Assam state, ruled by the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), an Assamese nationalist regionalist party and the deployment of paramilitary forces leading to human rights abuses, which only increased the resentment among the Bodo masses towards the state. Individuals who died in the hands of state machinery were celebrated as martyrs whose contribution to the fight for Bodo nation were recognised and it generated a sense of pride and instil a consciousness.

The tumultuous movement soon culminated into Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) in 1993, an accord, signed by the representatives of ABSU-BPAC and the government of Assam as a solution to the 'Bodo problem'. It was an autonomous council, lesser than the demand for separate state, nevertheless it reduced the violent agitation for a while. However, problems arose on the issue of territorial boundaries included in the BAC. The determinants of territorial demarcation was that concern villages should constitute at least 50% of the population, however only 1100 odd villages fulfilled the criteria out of its demand for 3000 villages demanded by the Bodo leaders. The compactness of tribal population to make up the 'tribal homeland' failed when non-tribal group of population, for instance, United Minority Front, All Assam Koch-Rajbangshi Students' union, Bongaigaon unit and tea workers opposed the idea of inclusion in the proposed Bodoland council¹⁵⁶. However, the state conceded to the proposed council by forming BAC consisting of 2570 villages of which about 1490 villages had less than 50% Bodo population, with the exclusion of 10km stretch from the Bhutan border due to strategic reasons. The Bodo leaders dissatisfied with the arrangement continued the agitation for a separate state and witnessed fractures in the Bodoland movement. The creation of BAC didn't satisfy,

¹⁵⁵Nabin Hakhrari, *Bodoland: A Study of NDFB's Struggle for Bodo Autonomy* (New Delhi: Avi Publishers, 2017).

¹⁵⁶Udayon Misra, *India's North-east, Identity movements, State and Civil Society*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

which then gave rise to an unprecedented violence and conflicts among Bodo groups with ideological difference. Though the arrangement of BAC was lauded to bring peace and stability in the area, it soon saw the failure of the arrangement and various reactions by numerous organizations once again made it the battleground.

Bodo Security Force (Bd.SF) was rechristened to formed National Democratic front of Bodoland (NDFB) with the aim of creation of a sovereign Bodo nation. A new militant outfit also emerged dissatisfied with the formation of BAC, to demand separate state, Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLT). They gained notoriety and engaged in frequent killings with their rival groups and sabotaging public commuters specially railways since the base of BLT, Kokrajhar was the place through which railways were connected to the rest of the state. Bodo liberation tigers (BLT) carried out multiple attacks creating a reign of terror in the western Assam in the late 1990's onwards till the early 2000. This was the second phase of the Bodo movement, which saw 'militant nativism' with instances of ethnic clashes witnessed in the early 1993 and then again in 1996 and 1998, specially with the tea settler communities of Santhal. The second phase of Bodo movement characterised by militant nativism ended with the formation of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in 2003, which was seen as solving the Bodo-Assamese conflict.

However, the fallout of the assertion of pan-Bodo identity was the assertion by other tribal groups like Rabha, Mishing and Tiwa for separate autonomy within Assam within the sixth schedule of the constitution. The Assam state government fearing further breakdown with the new regionalist demand, created Rabha Hasong Autonomous council on the south bank on 10th March,1995, Tiwa autonomous council and Mishing autonomous council. The collective plains tribal identity couldn't sustain the tribal nationalism and groups assumed independent identity of their own demanding separate autonomy councils.

Nonetheless, most of them couldn't challenge the structure and boundary of Assam and neither the concept of Assamese identity, unlike the identity assertion of the Bodo. The violent struggle of Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT) finally culminated into the second accord of 2003 establishing the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD), constituted under the sixth schedule, a tripartite agreement signed among the centre, state and the BLT, putting an end to BLT's violent tactics. Following the

accord, a territorial political unit for the Bodos' was created by amending the constitution which was then only applicable to the hill districts. Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) is made up of four districts; Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Udalguri and vested the new political party Bodoland People's Front (BPF) with financial, legislative and executive powers and gave the autonomous district a constitutional status. The political power bestowed on the Bodo leadership in the autonomous districts gave a sense of fulfilment of desires as the autonomous district enjoys state like status with extensive autonomy power. However, the creation of Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD), have given new shape to the politics of identity and the way it has unfolded in recent years heralding a new inter-group relation.

The ethnic identity process is a non-static affair, as cultural distinctiveness is articulated in an atmosphere of political competition to gain access to political power. The pan tribal Bodo identity was used to serve this purpose in the early years after independence, however groups have severed ties and preferred to assert their distinctive tribal identity. The tribal groups known as Bodos' now preferred to be known by their own separate tribal identity. While it is inevitable that the recognized tribes would like to maintain their separate identities, groups who haven't been recognized by the constitution as tribes would like to draw the attention through political mobilization. This explains the rise of numerous groups in favour of separate tribal identity which is integrally linked to the demand for autonomy. It is a deliberate attempt to limit ethnicity within the social boundary of a tribe.

Conclusion

The Identity formation of plains tribe or Bodos' has been a continuous process and subsequently created the 'in- group members' by putting pieces together to create a pan-Bodo identity. The 'in-group' members were not just confined to Bodo-Kachari, but allied groups of Kachari, like Rabha, Tiwa, Sonowal, Lalung, whose origin was traced to its Bodo roots and for political reasons preferred to align themselves together based on genealogical connections. It was an associational medium to create a pan tribal identity and voice their collective grievances which soon transpired into demands for territorial demarcations. It was a systematic affair where groups were recognised belonging to the Kachari race, through colonial ethnographic description,

which has helped them built a consciousness and craft together an identity beginning in the 1920's. The second element that helped them built an identity was the geographical aspect, which was the area of 'plains'. The group of different communities that came together to trace its social origin as Bodo, came together under the platform of plains tribal league, as they lived in plains valley and not hills. The administrative category of hills tribe coined by the colonial administration, indicating towards a geographical definition of the identity of tribe came to be understood in opposition to the category of plains tribe. In their self-identification process, territorial segregation came to be emphasized, which reinforced their 'in-group' membership and 'in-group' members in plains was limited to certain racial group. The basis for racial identity was the 'mongoloid' group in opposition to the Aryan race. This categorical imperative was derived from the colonial classification of groups into mongoloid, Aryan, Dravidian using physiognomy characteristics to established differences of social origins. The plains tribal identity was therefore defined along the lines of racial identity category of mongoloid to establish its difference from the Aryan looking Assamese caste Hindus, and eventually to disassociate themselves from the Assamese label. Therefore, racial distinction and territorial segregation became the basis for defining ethnic identity which sharpened the ethnic boundaries against the Assamese identity and built a stronger in-group membership.

What is noteworthy is the reality of different groups assuming independent identities in their own language and customs, yet the plains tribal platform provided them a 'solidaristic closure'. Solidaristic closure, as understood by Parkins involves 'social relations with underpinnings of ethnic solidarity that generate and channel opportunities to a cross- section of the group'¹⁵⁷. The identity of 'tribe' was therefore reformulated to regain their past glory and autonomy in the post- colonial context to draw boundaries based on the notion of territoriality. The narratives of the past intricately woven in the present assertion of demands is reflected as a mechanism of power in their articulation and negotiation of demands.

The collective tribal nationalism beginning from the 1920's saw multiple phases of autonomy movement with new organization taking the centre stage of the movement. The reading of pamphlets and multiple memorandum submitted by

¹⁵⁷Quoted in Jimmy M. Sanders, "Ethnic Boundaries and Identity in Plural Society," *Annual review of Sociology*, Vol.28 (2002), 5.

different groups articulating their demands shows the collective effort to define plains tribal identity, appropriating the notions categorically used in colonial archives. While observing the trajectory of the autonomy movement it succeeded in establishing a distinct identity of 'Bodo tribe' against the 'caste' Hindu Assamese and mongoloid tribes versus the Aryan Hindus. In the initial years of the tribal movement in 1930's in Assam, the Bodos aligned themselves with the other tribal groups who belonged, as per colonial ethnography, to the Tibeto-Burmese language group. The political interests of the Bodos' were not independent of the other tribal indigenous population and it was only from the 1980's the political climate in western Assam changed and the Bodos began demanding for autonomy rights. It is also interesting to observe that the Kachari appellation use as a generic term to refer to Kachari groups were denounced to just assumed the independent identity of Bodos. The Bodos by the end of 20th century had already established itself as a dominant ethnic group in the Brahmaputra valley challenging the concept of Assamese identity and posing a challenge to the political boundary of Assam.

The hegemonic Assamese identity came under challenge and it saw reformulation of Assamese identity as an 'inter-ethnic' identity. With the growth of Bodo consciousness, the inter-ethnic understanding of Assamese identity also came under challenge when groups started disassociating from the Assamese label and asserted their distinct ethno-linguistic identity. Ethnic processes in Assam has been characterised by simultaneous process of 'meta-ethnolinguistic' entities and assimilationist tendencies¹⁵⁸. The Hindu Assamese caste stands at the dominant position with assimilationist tendencies towards indigenous minorities, while ethnic consciousness has given rise to process of ethnic identification and building of mass consciousness among minorities to reverse the assimilation process. The attempted force assimilation created insecurities about their self-identity, from which they started autonomy movements.

What is observable is that the autonomy movement which envisioned a 'tribal homeland' transpired into a full fledged autonomy movement for Bodoland by 1960's and over the years saw violent outburst by various organization to put pressure. The movement generated intra-ethnic divide among groups due to their ideological

differences and approaches. It also generated inter-ethnic divide and saw multiple clashes in the demarcated area, which is also inhabited by groups that have lived and coexisted together historically and the exclusive understanding of 'tribal homeland' have in a way created the sense of 'other' encroaching the 'tribal homeland', which have time and again witnessed ethnic clashes. What is also evident is the emergence of consciousness among other groups appropriating colonial categories to assert their distinctive identities and heralding the process of ethnic identity making.

Chapter 4

Identity and Issues: Koch-Rajbangshi and Tea Tribe

Identity mobilization is a contested process with claims and counter-claims within the limited structural and political space. A section of theories on ethnic mobilization deploy the logic of uneven development and inequality between groups to explain ethnic mobilization and competition. Discrimination, underdevelopment and the inability to accrue equal access to the scarce resources distributed by the state and variety of state redistributive policies like quota system may herald ethnic competition¹⁵⁹. The move to accrue limited state polices at times involves a reconstruction of identities and new alliances in the changing scenario of political climate.

In this chapter I will look at the identity construction process of Koch-Rajbangshi and Adivasis positioned against the Bodos', who have undergone a meticulous process of identity making, with the aim to understand the inter-group relation dynamics in the limited structural political atmosphere and the political implications of exclusive identity claims.

The Bodos' have asserted their distinct 'tribal' identity and distinctiveness and independence from the caste Hindu society in all aspects. Bodo have stressed their marginalised tribal status by emphasizing their independent status from the Hindu community and reiterating the essentialized characteristics of the 'tribal' that they are 'non-Hindus' which have already been discussed in the second chapter.

The legacy of colonial discourse on the concept of 'tribe', an imposed category, and boundaries based on the colonial projection of groups' have created rigid ethnic boundaries among groups in their identity articulation. Who constitute 'tribal' and who can lay claims on 'tribal' identity has become a contested issue with inter-group competition getting more intense and acquiring a new dimension in local politics. The concept of 'tribal' identity is closely linked with the legal and administrative category of ST with the enlisted groups challenging the new groups

¹⁵⁹Susan Olzak, "Contemporary Ethnic Mobilization," in *Ethnic conflict volume I*, ed. Rajat Ganguly, *et al.* (London: Sage publications, 2009), 253-256.

making such claims. Such cases also reflect the contested nature of identity and the subsequent repercussions on the electoral politics giving rise to divisive politics along ethnic/tribe lines along the ‘preferential politics’ assertion. The demand for ST status is closely integrated with the assertion of tribal homeland on a cluster of spaces and districts envisioned for some form of autonomy. The identity assertion by Koch-Rajbangshi and Adivasis should be seen in the larger context of ‘preferential politics’ and ‘tribal homeland’ politics.

Simultaneous mobilization among Adivasis and Koch-Rajbangshi began in the colonial period, with both groups having undergone a permutation process independently according to the social and political milieu of the time. However, identity assertion took a new shape in post-colonial politics with the proliferation of ethnic movement, constructing and arranging themselves to the need of the hour. So, this chapter is an attempt to understand and analyse the growth of identity consciousness among the two communities under scrutiny, with an aim to understand the ethnic identity formation process and boundary making and analyse the political dynamics in the present political atmosphere. It follows from Andreas swimmer’s theoretical proposition of boundary making strategies, that is, ‘expansion of boundaries’ and ‘repositioning’¹⁶⁰. The two groups under study have shown characteristics of expansion of boundaries to include groups and collectively repositioning to acquire a better standing in the multitiered group politics. I will first begin by looking at the case of Koch-Rajbangshi and then the Adivasi identity issue.

The imagining of ‘tribal’ homeland in the Bodoland movement saw a simultaneous identity consciousness among Adivasis and Koch-Rajbangshi, which have been attributed to the violent upheaval of Bodo movement from 1980’s by various scholars, when groups like Adivasis, specially Santhali group became target of insurgent groups¹⁶¹. The construction of ‘tribal’ identity in colonial Assam as ‘primitive and ‘backward savages’ positioned against the Hindus created rigid psychological boundaries of identity which have materialized in concrete identity walls in post-colonial period. However, recently groups like Koch-Rajbangshi have

¹⁶⁰Andreas Wimmer, “Elementary strategies of ethnic boundary making,” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2008): 1031-1038, doi: 10.1080/01419870801905612.

¹⁶¹Udayon Misra, *India’s North east: Identity Movements, state and civil society*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 229.

tried to reverse the process of ‘Sanskritization’ to create tribal credentials status in their new identity formation process.

Koch-Rajbangsi: Identity formation and contestation

Falling under the category of ‘repositioning’ in a multitiered ethnic space, in its strategies to conjure up an identity consciousness, the identity of Koch-Rajbangsi has always been one of speculation and ambiguity and contestation as they didn’t fall in any rigid category of either ‘tribe’ or ‘Hindus’ but have been clubbed under the ambiguous category of ‘Hinduised and clean’¹⁶² in colonial documents. This categorisation has contributed presently in the contentious identity of Koch-Rajbangshi which has put them in a difficult position in their identity claims against groups like Bodo and Assamese label and even against the Koch indigenous group. The Koch-Rajbangsi are also demanding a separate homeland ‘kamatapur’ to be carved out of parts of West Bengal and Assam, where the Bodos’ also claim historical legacy in parts of Assam, culminating into clash of imagined borderland.

Theories on the origin of Koch-Rajbangsi largely agree on the claim that they once belonged to the Bodo race and the social origin of Koch-Rajbangsi identity came about through conversion of caste and religion and eventually came to occupy the lower status in the caste structure of Hindu society. They are believed to be converts from different tribe groups of Kachari, Lalung, Mikirs, who are said to have denounced their tribal characteristics of animism and adopted Hinduism. The ambiguity prevalent in the racial origin and conflicting theories on Koch-Rajbangsi origin reflect the colonial minds’ dilemma and their inability to put them under a fixated category. They neither became the subject of missionary proselytization like the Kachari nor were they given a distinct sense of identity under the colonial administrative measure. This has largely contributed in the recent accounts of Koch-Rajbangsi identity claims to be invalidated by other groups, in their demand for autonomy and their inability to disassociate themselves from the Assamese identity unlike the Bodo, has thwarted their effort to create an independent identity. The colonial administration failed to attribute them characteristics of ‘tribe’, ‘caste’ or ‘race’. The Rajbangsi group didn’t meet the defining parameters of ‘tribe’ under the

¹⁶²Harendra Narayan Chaudhuri, *The Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlements* (Cooch Behar: Cooch Behar state press, 1903), 120.

colonial discourse nor were they too ‘Hinduised’ to be clubbed under the high caste Hindus, rather they were categorised under the ‘subject tribes’ with sub-categorisation of ‘Hinduised and clean’¹⁶³. On the origin of race, they have been either clubbed under Dravidian race by Colonel Dalton, while Risley, indicate towards the mixture of Dravidian and Mongoloid race. However, they have come to be closely regarded to the mongoloid race and allied groups of Meches or Garos, Rabhas, Dhimal, Hojais who are believed to have form a great Bodo race¹⁶⁴. Buchanan and Endle have classed them together under the mongoloid race and aligned them closely with the Bodo race, which has facilitated Bodo nationalist leaders to discredit their distinct identity claims. In the ABSU memorandum, the close affinity of Rajbangsi with Bodo race is expressed as that:

*‘Rajbangshis are also of the same stock of Bodo but after adoption of Hinduism i.e. Vaishnavism they have totally forgotten Bodo language and now they speak Assamese in between Bengali and Oriya languages....unfortunately though they are aware of their history they claim themselves as the pure Assamese which is contrary to their distinct identityRajbangsi are Hinduised Bodo Mongoloids’*¹⁶⁵

The pre-colonial historiography accounts that the Koch are one of the aboriginal tribes of north-east India and ruled over the valley of Brahmaputra for a significant period of time. Biswa Singh is attributed with consolidating Koch dominance over the valley with the help of his brother ‘Chilarai’¹⁶⁶. However, the aboriginal tribes of Koch came to be known as ‘Rajvamsis’ and ‘Bhanga kshatriyas’ (*Broken Kshatriya*) in parts of North Bengal after their conversion to Hinduism after coming in close contact with the upper caste ‘*Bengali Bhadrak*’¹⁶⁷. However, the appellation ‘Rajvamsi’ was added only to the groups residing in the Cooch Behar state of North Bengal and the accounts of Darrang Koch kingdom doesn’t witnessed the epithet of ‘Rajbangshi’ to Koch identity¹⁶⁸.

¹⁶³Harendra Narayan Chaudhuri, *The Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlements* (Cooch Behar: Cooch Behar state press, 1903), 118.

¹⁶⁴ D. Nath, *History of Koch Kingdom, C. 1515-1615* (New Delhi: Mittal publications, 1989), 2.

¹⁶⁵Memorandum submitted to the President of India by the All Bodo students’ union, “Why separate state” November 10, 1987, in *Autonomy movements in Assam: Documents*, ed. P.S. Datta, et al. (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1993),269

¹⁶⁶ Ibid: Nath, *History of Koch Kingdom*, 1.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid: Nath, *history of Koch Kingdom*, 5-6.

¹⁶⁸Ajit Kumar Boruah, *The Koch Kingdom*, (Guwahati: DVS publishers, 2011).

With the conversion to Hinduism, they propounded a theory of Aryan origin for their community claiming to be descendants of kshatriyas. The mythical version of their origin states that when *'they discovered that his tribesmen were kshatriyas who had thrown away their sacred threads when fleeing before the wrath of Parasuram...while Biswa himself was declared to be the son not of the humble Hariya Mandal, but of the god Siva'*¹⁶⁹. The Koch kings therefore propounded a theory claiming to be descendants of the kshatriyas. While the 'Rajvamsi' appellation was only recently added, Biswa Singh the founder of Koch kingdom attributed the kshatriya origin to Koch-Rajbanshi.

By the early 20th century, they came to be recorded as Rajvansi kshatriya and they were not categorised under 'caste Hindus' but 'Hinduised tribe'. The historiography is significant to understand the effort of Koch Rajbangshi to disassociate themselves from the Mech or Bodo tribe and to established themselves as part of the larger Hindu society. This is a complex situation because, they were once 'tribal' group and then began the process of 'detrabalisation' by adopting Hinduism and assuming a position in the Hindu society, which has provided grounds for other groups to challenge their recent claims for Schedule tribe (ST) status. Their efforts at reclaiming the lost identity is proving much difficult to established themselves as a distinct identity. While the Bodos' have maintained their distinct 'tribal' identity, Rajbangshi's are not able to claim their distinct tribal identity due to their past historical narratives.

The identity crisis of Koch is also noticeable in its inability to find a cohesive nomenclature to identify with, for they are known by different names in different parts of Assam and North Bengal, Koch-Rajbangsi, Koch Rabha in Assam or simply Rabha or Koch in Assam¹⁷⁰. Many identify themselves as Koch-Rabha in parts of Assam, while many choosing to forego their sectional identity of Koch, however maintaining their distinct tribal entity and Koch-Rabha enlisted as ST in Assam.

¹⁶⁹D. Nath, *History of Koch Kingdom, C. 1515-1615* (New Delhi: Mittal publications, 1989), 6.

¹⁷⁰ S.K. Pal, "The Koch: some issues on their identity crises," in *Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in North-East India*, ed. B.Pakem (New Delhi: Omsons publication, 1990), 211-212.

Kshatriyaisation movement

Within the complex process of shifting identities of the Koch, Koch-Rajbangshi is a group that arose when they lost their 'tribal' characteristics by adopting Hinduism. The ethnic identity formation of Rajbangshi rest on the historical past of 'Kamata-Koch' kingdom who maintained their separate political identity till independence, with the merger of Cooch Behar district to Bengal in the independent India. However, their identity crisis began when they were categorised as low caste status in British census despite ascribing kshatriya status to Koch rulers. The identity making process of Rajbangshis dates back before independence when they started kshatriyaisation movement under the leadership of Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma to christened themselves as 'kshatriyas' and uplift themselves in the Hindu fold¹⁷¹. In North Bengal, British policies brought about commercialisation which encouraged migration from different parts of region. In the face of the migration of many aboriginal groups, competition for socio-economic rights became more apparent. To this effect, Rajbangshis' responded to their surroundings by awakening consciousness among themselves which came to be known as the kshatriya movement. In the colonial structure, since they were enumerated as 'semi-tribal' and relegated low caste status, they began a movement to uplift themselves to regain their status and power. A Rangpur Kshatriya Samiti was established in 1910 which became the centre for restructuring their social image by imbibing Brahmanical values and practices directed against the Bengali upper caste dominance. This heralded a new consciousness among the Rajbangshis' and created solidarity to give rise to a new separate identity¹⁷². However, the class contradiction among the Rajbangshis' failed to generate a close consciousness and in the Post-Independence institutional arrangements they were given 'scheduled castes' status in Bengal under the protective discrimination system. In their attempt to scale the ladder of Hindu caste structure through kshatriya movements, they have completely lost their 'tribal' characteristics and their language highly assimilated with the Assamese and Bengali. The census of

¹⁷¹Nandini Basistha, "Modernity and Ethnic Identity formation of Rajbangshis," in *Modernity and Ethnic processes in India*, ed. D.V. Kumar (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2014), 204.

¹⁷²Ibid: Basistha, 204-205.

2001 recorded only 8,451 Koch speakers, reason being many have assimilated with Assamese and Bengali¹⁷³.

In parts of northeast, they are found in Brahmaputra valley, Garo hills of Meghalaya and their status varies from one state to another. They are categorised as ‘other backward class’ in Assam and Meghalaya, scheduled caste in west Bengal, while the Koch-Rabha falls under the ST category¹⁷⁴. Their attempt to create a solidarity among Rajbangshis’ failed due to their inability to create a distinct social identity which has led to a fragmented social identity. And the incoherent application of recognising one group under multiple categories in different regions by the Indian state only reinforced the identity crisis of the Rajbanshi community. The Koch-Rajbanshi have also been placing demands to give recognition to their language, stating their distinctiveness from Assamese or Bengali. The state of West Bengal recently passed the West Bengal official language (second amendment) bill, 2018 recognizing Kamatapuri and Rajbanshi as the state official language¹⁷⁵. The Koch-Rajbanshi of Assam have also been placing the same demand but political mobilization is not strong for bargain, as the Bodos’ and have raised voices against the perception that Goalparia language is a mixture of Assamese and Bengali. They have also been fighting for inclusion of their language in the eight schedule of the Indian constitution and from the 1990’s onward the political association of North Bengal and Assam have come together to launch a stronger movement. Largely, Koch-Rajbanshi movement has been peaceful and didn’t involve violent activities, however, a militant organization ‘Kamatapur Liberation Organization’ have engaged in miscreant activities, especially in West Bengal state and have gained media coverage since the ‘operation shadow’ in early 2000 to apprehend KLO activists¹⁷⁶. The Assam based Koch Rajbanshi have come under the banner of ‘All Koch Rajbanshi students’ union’ (AKRSU) to raise the issue of Kamatapuri and have proposed a map in the booklet of ‘Sukiya Kamatapuri Rajya Kiyu’ (why a separate Kamatapuri state) and have been rallying up seeking ‘scheduled tribe’ status.

¹⁷³Uddipana Goswami, *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam, 2014-2017* (London: Routledge, 2017), 24.

¹⁷⁴Ibid: Goswami, 92.

¹⁷⁵ Accessed from <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/kamatapuri-rajbanshi-make-it-to-list-of-official-languages-in-west-bengal/1083908/> on 5th April 2018

¹⁷⁶Arup Jyoti Das, “Kamatapur and the Koch-Rajbanshi Imagination,” (Guwahati: Montage Media, 2009), 19.

As M.S. Prabhakara argues that in the name of ethnic mobilization, identities are constantly invented and reinvented, groups like Rajbangshis' have undergone multiple process of construction and invention¹⁷⁷. Unlike the above mentioned kshatriya movement in the colonial period, started by few sections of Rajbangsi community to build a separate identity, in the post-colonial context there has been constant effort to turn the case around by demanding scheduled tribe status. Therefore, identity making process among Rajbangshis have undergone phases of 'detrribalisation' to 'retribalisation'.

Groups were 'tribal' in the days of yore then they began kshatriyaisation process to uplift themselves, then they started claiming the status of 'tribe' to be included in the list of scheduled tribes. Defining 'tribe' is a difficult task while in comparison to the category of 'scheduled tribe', which is an administrative category in India which bestows groups with certain benefits to uplift them socially and economically. The fixation on tribal identity by new groups claiming for ST status in contemporary political atmosphere should be seen in this light of administrative expediency and as an avenue for opportunities, politically and educationally. In contemporary political atmosphere, tribal status is not only about identity markers of groups, but a selective 'return to the past' to bring back traits which will define their unique identity which reinforces group identity and draw a boundary vis-à-vis others¹⁷⁸. The efforts to constitute a distinct identity among them is compounded by the issue of which 'tribal' past to revert back, since Koch-Rajbangshis' are believed to be converts from different tribal groups. The exclusive understanding and fixated notion of tribe by the colonials, have become the conceptual foundation for mobilizing ethnic identity markers. The Hinduized Koch-Rajbangsi's demand for autonomy based on their historical past and to create a distinct sense of identity on the basis of tribe has deepen the 'space centric identity consciousness' in the post-colonial Assam¹⁷⁹.

¹⁷⁷M.S. Prabhakara, "Invention and Reinvention of Ethnicity," *The Hindu*, January 4, 2010. Accessed from <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/Invention-and-reinvention-of-ethnicity/article13879816.ece> on 8th February 2018.

¹⁷⁸Uddipana Goswami, *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam, 2014-2017* (London: Routledge, 2017), 92-93.

¹⁷⁹Chandan Kumar Sharma, "The state and the ethnicization of space in North-east India." In *Shifting Terrain: conflicts dynamics in North-East India*, ed. by Nani G. Mahanta, et al. (Guwahati: DVS Publishers, 2012), 194.

Attributing certain fixed traits and behaviours and classification into units by the colonial ethnography combined with administrative purpose, where groups were assigned physical spaces and boundaries and the rigid classification of 'tribe' and 'Hindu' left no spaces for groups who didn't conform to the categories. The concept of 'tribe' is a universally accepted classification, but in recent times the defining parameters have come under challenge and with groups like Koch-Rajbangshis' classified as lower caste Hindus, their attempt at 'retribalization', poses a challenge to the legacies of colonial categories. Such colonial notions are continuously imbibed by groups in identity making process and their imagination of 'tribal homeland' is based on such exclusive notion. Identity formation process in Assam is complex in the sense that there is some form of elasticity and shifting terrain between 'tribe' and 'Hindus' and there lies difficulty in distinguishing and clear demarcation.

Colonial ethnographic accounts anticipating the close acquaintance of Bodo with Rajbangshis' and tracing the ethnic origin of Rajbangshis' with the Bodos' have seen refutation and contestation against the claims of same origin in their articulation and demand. They have selectively chosen to retrieve from past accounts those claims which supports them in maintaining their distinct identity, while denouncing the ones which hinders their distinct identity formation. As Nandana Dutta argues, "the colonial legacies are now inflicting identity discourses in the region" and the 'realities' through the prism of colonial legacies come alive when the political needs demand and act according to convenience through the 'availability of documents on its ways, its history, its culture', which then become tool to assert its distinctiveness¹⁸⁰. What then proceeds such process of reclaiming and reviving is giving them greater visibility and emphasis on 'age-old traditions' which inevitably involves self-construction and representation.

The imagining of past and acting or performing identities through the lens of colonial legacies is deeply rooted in the 'space-centric' identity claims, in what is known as 'ethnicisation of space'¹⁸¹. Sanjib Baruah claims the integral relationship of

¹⁸⁰Nandana Dutta, "Constructing and Performing Diversity: Colonial and Contemporary Processes," in *Troubled Diversity: The Political Process in North-East India*, ed. Sandhya Goswami (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3-4.

¹⁸¹Chandan Kumar Sharma, "The state and the ethnicization of space in North-east India." In *Shifting Terrain: conflicts dynamics in North-East India*, ed. by Nani G. Mahanta, et al. (Guwahati: DVS Publishers, 2012), 194.

‘indigeneity’ and ‘territoriality’ is rooted in the ‘foundation of the colonial spatial order, that is, the administrative boundaries, and the rules of inclusion and exclusion that prevailed’¹⁸². Though emergent of identity has been recently attributed to fears of getting ‘minoritised’, but the politics of territoriality is an outcome of the colonial rules erecting boundaries for ‘protective’ measure which is largely reflected in the continuing hold of the colonial knowledge in an independent India. What is peculiar to colonial knowledge production is the skewed understanding of ‘tribe’ and essentialised geographical attributes of either being ‘hills’ or ‘plains’ tribe. This is reflected in the post- colonial policy discourse where groups that are recognized as plains tribe doesn’t enjoy the same status in hills. For instance, Bodos’ though recognised as ‘plains tribe’ didn’t enjoy ST in the Karbi Anglong hill district, until 2016.

The demand for inclusion in ST list by groups have serious repercussion in the imagination of ‘tribal homeland’ because the imagining of homeland is always exclusive to one ethnic group and the status enjoyed by the demanding group plays a significant role in the electoral politics. The ethnically defined ethnic territory isn’t accommodative to the ST demands of other groups since it ‘conflicts with the logic of ethnic homeland’. The demand for Bodoland is one such ethnic homeland demand which has come into conflict with the demand for Kamatapur by the Koch-Rajbangshi and their demand to be included in the ST list has been further compounded by the problem of not conforming to the fixed categories of ‘tribe’ or ‘Hindus’ as they are categorised as ‘aboriginal Hinduised tribe’ which clearly didn’t fit the category device by the colonials and the remnants of the colonial discourse is pertinent to the recognition by other neighbouring groups who discredit Rajbangshis’ claim to tribal identity on the basis of colonial accounts.

The demand for recognition as a tribal community by Koch-Rajbangshi is reflective of how colonial past has helped in forging new identities and fragmentation of old ones in the new political environment. They attempted integration and assimilation with the larger Hindu society by converting to Hinduism and through

¹⁸²Sanjib Baruah, “Territoriality, Indigeneity and Rights in the North-East India,” in *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol.43, No. 12-13, 22 March (2008): 15. Accessed from <https://www.epw.in/journal/2008/12-13/commentary/territoriality-indigeneity-and-rights-north-east-india.html>? On 9th April 2018.

social movements like kshatriya movement, however, with the introduction of positive discrimination policies like SC/ST in post-colonial context, which became an avenue for economic and political benefit, groups like Koch-Rajbangshi began to revive their past 'tribal' credentials. Marc Galanter says in determining 'tribal' to be scheduled, certain ambiguous 'tribal' characteristics have been relied upon and the conceptual foundation separating 'tribal' from 'non-tribal' is filled with inconsistency and ambiguity¹⁸³. What is important is to remember that 'tribal' and 'caste' identities in Assam isn't rigid and there is some form of 'elasticity' defying the rigid classification and historically identities have been influenced and adapted as part of survival strategy by smaller groups in the midst of more powerful dominant group. Indigenous 'tribal' community have always come under influences, be it Hinduism or Christianity. The adoption of Christianity however doesn't bar groups from claiming tribal status, but Hinduised tribal is not applied uniformly, as sections of Bodo have adopted Hinduism and still counted as tribals' and other instances of Dimasa Kachari of Cachar hills district, who are predominantly Hindus, recognized as hill tribe, are some of the anomalies in the discourse of tribal identification.

In such cases, groups have contested each other's claim to tribal status and have engaged in refuting and counter claiming each other's claim. While the Bodos' have spoken against the Koch-Rajbangshi demand for ST on the ground that they are much advanced community and giving them ST benefits would only marginalised the Bodo and other tribal groups¹⁸⁴. The administrative concept of Scheduled tribe status as a protective discrimination mechanism has made it flexible for groups to mobilise for ethno-territorial demands due to lack of clearly defined concepts of categories.

Adivasi or Tea tribes: Fight for Indigeneity

The question of tea tribes is an overdue one as it is one of the longstanding agitation for recognition of their identity. The location-specific identity application has left the labour community fighting for recognition and indigeneity status. They represent the 'other' in the sea of ethnic mobilization, who is not an 'original indigenous' settler in the ethno-politic space and whose history has been submerged

¹⁸³Uddipana Goswami, *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam, 2014-2017* (London: Routledge, 2017), 107.

¹⁸⁴Ibid: Goswami, 107.

in the booming tea industry of the colonial period. One of their longstanding demand has been to be included in the ST list, as they are one of the most deprived communities of Assam. Besides demanding for constitutional provision of ST, the labour community has consolidated their own identity and consciousness and the demand for ST should be seen in the light of their attempt to trace their roots and cultural heritage.

The issue of ‘coolie’ identity is a reminder of the exploitative nature of the colonial rule and the inhuman treatment meted by the colonial officials, who were transported under severe conditions and forced to work in a state of servitude, with restricted movements, low wages, no medical facilities. Quoting J.B. Fuller, the Chief commissioner of Assam in 1901 makes us known about the indentured labour system.

“the truth is of course that serious abuses must occur under a labour system which is something of the nature of slavery, for an employee who can be arrested and forcibly detained by his master is more of a slave than servant and that these abuses are the price which has to be paid for the great advantages which has resulted from the establishment and growth of the tea industry in Assam”¹⁸⁵.

Assam tea was a colonial enterprise controlled by the white planters and British capital. The chief obstacle to the plantation economy was the labour shortage, which prompted the planter raj to import ‘suitable work force’¹⁸⁶. Beginning from 1860’s to 1920’s, ‘coolie’ labourers were recruited by the British planters from different regions of colonial India, bypassing the local workers. The local peasants from tribal communities like ‘cacharees’ participated in subordinate positions, however they didn’t prefer to stay for long duration and many didn’t find the wages attractive. The planters were not satisfied with the local workers as they proved to be ‘too independent’ and ‘footloose’ and the rate of desertion also increased. The initial experiments with local workers left the colonial Raj dissatisfied, which eventually led to rely on ‘racialised and displaced migrants’. The immigrant coolie therefore became indispensable to the Assam tea industry and juxtapose with the ‘lazy native’ who

¹⁸⁵Rana P. Behal, “Coolie Rivers or Benevolent Paternalists? British Tea Planters in Assam and the Indenture Labour system” in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.44, No.1 (2010): 31. Accessed from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27764645> on 28thMay 2018.

¹⁸⁶Jayeeta Sharma, “‘Lazy’ Natives, Coolie Labour, and the Assam tea Industry,” in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.43, No.6 (2009): 1288. Accessed from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40285014> on 28thMay 2018.

showed characteristics of ‘innate indolence’, who didn’t meet the colonial requirements of ‘regular and disciplined labour force’¹⁸⁷.

An imaginary boundary was created between the groups with the formation of garden localities where migrant labourers were settled, where the colonial state sponsored ‘coolie’ labourers from outside the province of Assam to work in the tea plantation. The boundaries kept the ‘coolies’ intact and isolated and regulated their interaction with the local indigenous community, which enforced the idea of ‘other’ and continued to be viewed through that lens. They have been pushed to the margins of society faring dismally in the human development indices and the larger society in Assam have been less accommodative towards them, with the socio-economic situation of Adivasis continuing to be the same in colonial and post-colonial context.

Assamese nationalism and stunted growth of tea labourers in colonial times

The dismal condition of the migrants in the colonial period is closely linked to the rise of Assamese middle class and the economic interest of this class. It was a small group of educated tea planters, garden workers, landowners, colonial officials and clerks who were at the helmed of the class structure and the tea plantation labourers were at the bottom of the class structure. This set of class group were also at the forefront of Assamese nationality formation process and many of them were provincial leaders of the India National Congress, therefore, they had their economic interests in keeping the labour class from the anti-colonial mass movement. They were sceptical to include the tea labour class in the mobilization against the British due to their class position and kept them away from the mass movement as many of the congress leaders were planters themselves and didn’t want to encourage labour uprising. The Assamese middle class since its inception has always been blind eye towards the tea labour class group and less accommodative towards them by halting any kind of organizational mobilization. Thus, the planting community consisted of

¹⁸⁷Jayeeta Sharma, “‘Lazy’ Natives, Coolie Labour, and the Assam tea Industry,” in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.43, No.6 (2009): 1304. Accessed from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40285014> on 28thMay 2018.

the most affluent Assamese middle class whose class dimension has always managed to keep the migrant labourers' out of its purview¹⁸⁸.

New India and Adivasis

In the early 20th century, 'timed expired' coolies increased and lived on rented government land outside the plantation. The Assam government began to lease out land to the ex coolies who became a useful labour reserve providing cheap 'faltu' (spare) labour. Hamlets emerged where former coolie workers settled alongside caste Hindus and local tribal groups, with local's becoming more receptive and accepting towards the former coolies. In the turn of the century, coolie resistance and protest also increased with as many as 141 reported cases of unlawful assembly, with the Chargola coolie walk out of 1921 grapping the most attention¹⁸⁹. Rival groups and trade unions competed to seek influence over the coolie population as the communist, Gandhian congress activists, socialists all competed to gain base among the large population. Eventually they entered into an agreement with the congress, with the trade union wing of the congress 'Indian National Trade Union' having controlled over the tea workers union. The 'Chah Mazdoor Sangh' (Tea Labour Association) and its branches were soon established by the congress workers post-Independence in 1948 and by 1958 an all Assam base organization 'Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangh' (ACMS) came into being.

In the post-colonial context, they are still at the margin of society, living in an isolated village mired with poverty and their social position stagnant even after hundred years of living in Assam. They continue to live in an appalling state of health and economic condition, with scarce literacy and unemployment and high rate of mortality rates. Real social and economic change hasn't occurred as the inability to get any job outside the plantation has made them dependent on the plantation economy without any vertical mobility. While the mainstream Assamese community have always excluded them from the social structure, it is only when they assert Assamese nationalism Adivasis are recognised as an inherent part of Assamese

¹⁸⁸ Subhash Barman, "Excluding the 'other': The Marginalization of the 19th century Adivasi migrants in Assam," in *Shifting Terrain: Conflict Dynamics in North-East India*, ed. Nani G. Mahanta, et al. (Guwahati: DVS publishers, 2012).

¹⁸⁹ R.K. Kar, J.L. Sharma, "Ethnic identity of tea labour: A case study in Assam," in *Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity*, ed. B. Pakem (Guwahati: Omsons publications, 1990): 150.

culture and society, which gives a boost to Assamese nationalism, however they have never received any substantial benefit from the ruled government over the years. Many Adivasi groups have accepted Assamese language and culture and during the census operations they are accommodated as Assamese as an integral part of Assamese nationality to maintain the dominant status of Assamese language, however the class limitation exists. The old pejorative stereotyped of 'coolie' has been abandoned to adopt new identities in the post-independence era with state conferred 'tea-tribe' and politically charged 'Adivasi' unifying the group under a common name. The deplorable socio-economic situation has forced the migrant labourers to seek redressal for their social standing, which saw creation of militant group 'Adivasi Cobra Force' threatening violent appraisal.

However, the plethora of ethnic mobilizations have witnessed violence with groups who are historically disadvantaged as well. In the course of Bodoland movement, Adivasi group Santhali in western Assam have witnessed conflict induced displacement in the 1990's when the armed group, Bodo Liberation Tigers was leading the violent phase of the Bodo movement in 1990's. Reports of constant arm conflict in the forest areas of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon district between NDFB and Birsa commando Force is reported. Infiltration and encroachment on forest lands has created anxiety about Bodo identity and militant organization of Bodo and Adivasi group have challenged each other with extreme violent consequences. As a consequence, both the communities have suffered and lost lives. The ethnic fallout is a recent phenomenon with Bodo movement taking violent turn, as no history of ethnic animosity existed between the two group. They have always lived and co-existed peacefully, with frequent interruption of ethnic clashes. In my interaction with Suniman Murmur, a resident of 'Sukharbaona' village which falls in Gossaigaon district, one of the worst affected areas of 1996 Santhal-Bodo conflict, told about the socio-economic index of the village with only five students having passed 10th standard and local people allowed to work in the respective tea estate area wise. Sukharbaona is inhabited by both Bodos' and Santhals' with people like Suniman acting as a 'local peace keeper' who speaks impeccable Bodo, who himself was affected by the 1996 conflict and had to flee to a nearby village for few months until the situation normalised. Suniman says he has never himself worked in the tea estate,

but rather works as casual labourer and also as a part time VCDC member and earning meagre income to sustain his family¹⁹⁰.

Integrating consciousness

Who are the tea tribes and how are they different from Adivasi? This question needs to be engaged in, as the political connotation of both the terms varies. Adivasi is an identity that has come to acquire a new meaning in present situation and few conceptual clarifications of tea tribes and Adivasi is demanded. The term Adivasi in the rest of the India connotes the tribal population in general sense and the indigenous people when addressed to the international audience, however in Assam it has a very limited reference to include only a specific community of tea tribes who were basically the forced migrant tea workers from Central Indian regions, whose survival and livelihood revolve around the tea estate as they were systematically restricted within the plantation locality and came to be recognized as ‘baganiya’ generically. Most of the indigenous population desire to call themselves as ‘tribal’ groups or ‘indigenous’ population rather than being accommodated under the ‘Adivasi’ category. The notion of ‘tea tribes’ acquired a social identity to set them apart from the neighbouring indigenous community, their identity lied in their occupation in the tea garden. They were kept in the indentured labour position categorically by limiting their boundaries within the plantation and regulating their interaction with other ethnic groups. Therefore, tea labourers came to form an overarching identity that brought them together as a community with shared experience and history of exploitation.

Colonial construction of a category of tribe, which brought disparate groups under one umbrella through stereotypical notion, helped build a hegemonic and overarching notion of ‘tribe’ which didn’t provide space for groups to be understood differently. In the very same manner, the colonial uprooting of migrant workers or ‘jungle coolies’, mentioned in the first chapter, happened through mapping and taming the ‘wild forests’ and they were all categorically labelled as ‘jungle coolies’. It rendered the group one hegemonic identity while ignoring their independent identities. The tea labour community isn’t a homogenous group, but an heterogenous

¹⁹⁰On a field visit to Nilaijhora in Gossaigaon district of Western Assam in the month of March, 2018.

group consisting of 97 communities¹⁹¹. The term ‘baganiya’ was used as a generic term to represent the heterogeneous group of migrant workers and didn’t represent one societal unit. Given their differences in origin, their common identity was not based on traditional social relation but the experiences shared in the perpetual state of poverty tied to the plantation system. Many have lost traces of their origin, so it became difficult for them to build an identity consensus based on traditional relationships in the new social order¹⁹². The rupture of heterogeneous identity in their transplantation from their native places to the plantation area has generated a new consciousness in the new settings. However, they have maintained strong ties among themselves through traditional practices of ‘commensality, connubium and language’¹⁹³. Ethnic boundaries among tea tribes isn’t exclusive in nature, but there is an over-riding inter-ethnic solidarity which is reflected on social occasions.

Social Interaction Within the migrant workers

The heterogeneity of the group is also reflected in their practice of caste pattern and the inconsistency and non-adherence to strict rules in their social gathering. Their new identity in the new social milieu is less influenced by their social origins and shaped more by the new experiences in the new settings. It is a group that is not devoid of influenced by caste system and the notion of traditional Hindu pattern is still found in its practices way, but it is quite independent and flexibly practice. They don’t adhere to caste hierarchy in their social gathering and the hierarchy division isn’t very clear. Some scholars have explained the absence of ‘brahmin’ or high caste which allows flexibility in their caste practice which usually is rejection of caste ranking and caste principles and have attributed caste ranking based on occupations in their places of origin¹⁹⁴. Among the migrant workers, a set of agriculturalist and non-agriculturalist migrated, which became the basis for stratification with the former assuming higher rank and the later, lower rank respectively. Agriculturalist group like Oraon, Munda, Kharia enjoyed superiority in comparison to non- agriculturalist group. The notion of purity and pollution also plays

¹⁹¹Dhruba Pratim Sharma, “Demand of tea tribes for scheduled tribe status in Assam,” in *Troubled Diversity: The Political process in North-eastern India*, ed. Sandhya Goswami (New Delhi: Oxford university press, 2015): 106.

¹⁹² Ibid: Sharma, 108.

¹⁹³ Ibid: Sharma.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid: sharma, 108.

an important role in determining their status in the hierarchy, as the consumption of pork and beef by Oraon, Kharia is viewed with prejudices. Religion was another dimension that reflected the intra-community divide with non-converted Oraon, Mundas perceiving themselves higher than the Christian groups. Many tea tribe community have also adopted Christianity which can be traced back to the presence of missionaries among sections of tea workers, while many retaining their animistic traditions.

The uprooting of labourers, therefore, through colonial mapping and christening the diverse communities like Santhal, Oraon, Munda, Gor, Kol, Bhil and Kharia as 'tea tribes' subsumed the differences between the groups, created a category of their own which separated them from the rest of the neighbouring sections¹⁹⁵. The ethnic boundaries among the tea workers were blurred in the new social milieu, with none of the ethnic groups enjoying numerical majority in the tea estate, rather there was mutual accommodation between diverse ethnic groups which was occasionally reflected in social gatherings and further enforced by the cultural practice of 'commensality' and 'connubium'. Therefore, what is discernible is the process where caste principles were in practice and the notion of purity and pollution was maintained with different forms of stratification that existed among the heterogenous ethnic groups but settling down in garden meant losing their caste identity they brought with them from their places of origin and eventually becoming accustomed to the interaction with other ethnic groups due to their nature of life in the tea garden. Kaushik gosh describes them as 'casteless' who were initially settled along 'ethnic lines exaggerating the distance and incompatibility' but gradually losing their caste identity and giving rise to an inter-ethnic solidarity, with caste principles becoming relaxed¹⁹⁶. It is said that the "absence of social connection with their places of origin has led to the relaxation of many of the social customs and rites of different communities' and have effortlessly assimilated with the local customs and culture. Some of their folklores reflect their aspiration to be an integral part of the Assamese society.

¹⁹⁵Meeta Deka, "Adivasi Identity Question in Assam," in *Troubled diversity: The political Process in Northeast India*, ed. Sandhya Goswami (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2015), 70.

¹⁹⁶Samita Sen, "Kidnapping in Chotanagpur: Recruitment for Assam tea plantations in 'Tribal' area," in *Narratives from the margins: Aspects of Adivasi history in India*, ed. Sanjukta Das Gupta, et al. (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2012).

“Assam hamani ke lage, hamani Assamke
Bhuil geli hamani, apan deshke
Sab-kuchh samajhali Assam deshke”

“Assam is ours, we are of Assam
We forgot even our native place
We look Assam as our land for all practical purpose”¹⁹⁷.

The primary identity of the labour class was their membership in the tea labour community as the ethnic specificity didn't play any role in the procurement of settlement labourers. A link language 'Sadri' also evolved among the heterogenous labour community, influenced by Assamese and Bengali speakers in their interaction in different spheres of life. Sadri or 'bagan baat' was an admixture of different language that came to be spoken by the heterogenous group, which resembled the tea workers community as one unit.

As colonial ethnography relied on fixated traits and habitations to identify and mark tribal and non-tribal identity, the migrant workers didn't fit the category and were categorised as 'labourers' in the census operations. Colonial mapping of people was not limited between tribes' but migrant workers were further divided on the basis of 'inferior' and 'superior' type of labour¹⁹⁸.

In all these process, there was certain erosion of their 'aboriginal' identity to generic terms such as 'baganiya' implying their residence in the garden and non-indigenous dimension of their origin in the state of Assam. The planter policy and management reinforced the inferior understanding of the 'coolie' living in isolated enclaves. Their position was akin to captive beings who couldn't evade the presence of 'choukidars', who were there to capture fleeing labourers. Strict labour laws had repercussion for deserters and public places were hanged with notices announcing reward for catching fleeing coolies¹⁹⁹. Bampfylde Fuller, a lieutenant governor of the then eastern Bengal and Assam in his personal account narrates the system that was

¹⁹⁷R K Kar and J. L Sharma, "Ethnic Identity of Tea Labour: A case Study in Assam," in *Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity: In North East India*, ed. B. Pakem, (Guwahati: Omsons Publication, 1990), 155.

¹⁹⁸Meeta Deka, "Adivasi Identity Question in Assam," in *Troubled diversity: The political Process in Northeast India*, ed. Sandhya Goswami (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2015), 70.

¹⁹⁹Subhash Barman, "Excluding the 'other': The Marginalization of the 19th century Adivasi migrants in Assam," in *Shifting Terrain: Conflict Dynamics in North-East India*, ed. Nani G. Mahanta, et al. (Guwahati: DVS publishers), 256-257.

open to abuses and how ‘on some gardens the coolies were virtually prisoners, being, in fact, under guard all night and came across notices posted at river ferries and railway stations describing runaway coolies and offering rewards for their apprehensions’²⁰⁰. Such declarations and abuses helped in building a general impression of the migrant labour which only reinforced the ‘inferior’ understanding of the ‘coolies’.

The forced fencing of boundaries between the labour community and the indigenous groups hardened the walls of separation and it in a sense provided an overarching sense of commonness among the tea workers. Since it was a profession not enjoyed by the indigenous group who were perceived as ‘indolent’ and ‘lazy’ by the colonial planters, it helped in developing an exclusive commonness based on shared experiences among the tea labourers. It helped in forging a generic identity of belonging to a tea labour class group known as ‘tea tribes’, which submerged their ethnic specificities, for a larger common identity. A unique economic and cultural boundary was generated by the plantation economy which has helped in building an ethnic consciousness among the tea tribes. A history of shared experiences out of their living condition in enclosed tea gardens led fairly to a creation of a marginalised common identity. Numerous acts ensured that the workers were deprived of every freedom with draconian policies which regulated their free movement. The legal provisions like Workmen’s Breach of Contract Act XII of 1859 and amended act of 1865, controlled the workers right to strike and fixed the minimum wages, allowing the planters free hand in matters related to the workers who made sure they lived in coercion and their lives akin to slavery²⁰¹.

Adivasi consciousness

The collective experience as a ‘tea tribe’ or coolie which was laden with tones of ‘othering’ and negative prejudices made way to take a definite shape in the form of an ‘Adivasi’ identity. The colonial use of categories like ‘coolie’ or ‘baganiya’ has run its course in the changing social context, giving rise to more nuanced term

²⁰⁰ Sir Bampfylde Fuller, *Some Personal Experiences* (London: John Murray, 1930), 117-118.

²⁰¹Subhash Barman, “Excluding the ‘other’: The Marginalization of the 19th century Adivasi migrants in Assam,” in *Shifting Terrain: Conflict Dynamics in North-East India*, ed. Nani G. Mahanta, et al. (Guwahati: DVS publishers), 258.

Adivasi. Adivasi has an inclusive connotation, bringing within its purview tea tribes and ex-tea tribes, referring to the;

*'aboriginal people of India who migrated to this region to work in different industrial sectors under the British and that the 97 communities are bound together by the shared history of exploitation, disenfranchisement, and acculturation with the different communities. Within this collective consciousness, the different ethnic groups have shouldered upon themselves the responsibility to protect their ethnic identity on the basis of a self-perception and self-identification as Adivasis, an umbrella term'*²⁰².

The shared colonial experience contributed to the post-colonial self-perception and self-identification of Adivasi tribal identity, an umbrella term designating both tea and ex-tea tribes. The sense of alienation, deprivation and subjugation at the hands of planter raj and the segregationist attitude which persisted in the post-independence period helped in fostering unity among the members of different ethnic groups to form a common identity. Their experiences submerged whatever nascent stratification exists in the form of caste categories to generate a strong ethnic consciousness and eventually asserting their ethnic identity, conditioned by their harsh living settlements in the tea estate, forced isolation and segregation. The exclusion of the 'other' that began with colonial planter policy continued in the post-independence which is now deeply embedded in the psyche of the wider society has influenced the emergent of ethnic consciousness among the Adivasi community.

C.S. Mullan, the superintendent of the census report of 1931, says

*'Coolies in Assam form however, separate class of the population no matter what caste or tribe they belong to and hence it seems best to treat all cooly castes and tribes under one heading, for all have one common characteristic and that is that, in Assam, a "cooly" is always a "cooly" and whether he works on a garden or whether he has left the garden and settled down as an ordinary agriculturist, his social position is nil. From the point of view of Assamese society, a person belonging to any cooly caste or tribe is a complete outsider and is as "exterior" as any of the indigenous castes I have classed as exterior'*²⁰³.

²⁰²Meeta Deka, "Adivasi Identity Question in Assam," in *Troubled diversity: The political Process in Northeast India*, ed. Sandhya Goswami (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2015), 73.

²⁰³C.S. Mullan, *Census of India*, Vol III, Assam part 1 (1931), 222. Accessed from <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.116059> on 10thOctober 2017.

Census enumerators were unable to clubbed them under one category and it reflects the position of dilemma while categorising them in the census data. For instance, 'some are castes recognized in their provinces of origin as definite Hindu castes', others would be considered castes merely by courtesy while other such as the Mundas' and Santhals' cannot be said to be castes at all but aboriginal tribal communities'²⁰⁴. The position of ex tea garden workers, who had left work in the tea estate to do other works like agriculturist were also excluded from the subject of scheduled caste and aboriginal tribes also revealed the anomaly. There were petitions and advice to include ex garden workers in the list of scheduled castes and aboriginal tribes who were believed to be 'exterior Hindu caste'²⁰⁵.

²⁰⁴Dhruba Pratim Sharma, "Demand of tea tribes for scheduled tribe status in Assam," in *Troubled Diversity: The Political process in North-eastern India*, ed. Sandhya Goswami (New Delhi: Oxford university press, 2015), 111.

²⁰⁵Ibid: Sharma, 111.

Positioning them in the new structure and demand for ST

The present identity assertion of the Adivasi community through demand for ST status, reflects their attempt to restore their lost tribal identity, rendered by the historical process of rupture between territory and culture, through forced immigration²⁰⁶. The ambiguity inherent in the conceptual foundation of colonial census enumeration data as ‘exterior caste’ or ‘depressed caste’ reinforced the exclusion of tea tribes from the larger society. The ‘invisibility’ rendered by the colonial planters and the ambiguity in scheduling them as ‘tribes’ or ‘depressed caste’ furthered their crisis of identity and sense of alienation.

The demand for schedule tribe (ST) status need to be viewed in the light of their experience as a labour community, defined by their heterogenous origins and the subsequent merging of ethnic specificities under one umbrella group Adivasi tribal identity. As the conceptual foundation of ‘tribal’ identity is integrally linked to the idea of specific habitats and the dislocation from their habitat makes them ‘lose’ their tribal identity, the question of Adivasi tribal identity renders them ‘non-tribal’ if followed by the rules of such recognition. The peculiarity of such rules in India is paramount as it determines who can claim recognition as ‘tribal’ community. Therefore, as M.S. Prabhakara says ‘the Adivasis’ fight is not so much for their recognition as a tribal community as for the restoration of the tribal identity to which they believe they are entitled’²⁰⁷. Adivasis’ fight is a fight for indigeneity, to be recognized as a tribal community, to be considered a significant part of the larger society in Assam, fighting against the label of ‘other’ to claim their due status in the social structure. A specific construction of ‘tribal’ identity began with the labour immigration policies, when administrators created typologies to measure the suitability for manual work by applying notions of physicality, places of origin and this ‘tribal’ identity was created in oppose to the indigenous local ‘tribe’ who were considered ‘indolent’ and ‘lazy’.

During the colonial rule, the Adivasi community in Assam had enjoyed ‘tea garden coolie tribes’ status and 4 seats were reserved for the community in the

²⁰⁶ T. K. Oommen, “Nationality, Ethnicity and Modernity: Clearing the Ground,” in *Modernity and Ethnic processes in India*, ed. D.V. Kumar, (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2014).

²⁰⁷M.S. Prabhakar, “Behind the Adivasi Unrest in Assam,” *The Hindu*, December 3, 2007. Accessed from <https://www.thehindu.com/> on 7th February 2018.

legislative council under the government of India Act 1935²⁰⁸. However, this act of bestowing constitutional rights was done with the motive of getting hold over the legislative seat which was reserved for the representatives of the tribes. The act of scheduling began in 1930, with the Reforms officer resenting over the fact that as many as 600,000 have been excluded, though they enjoyed the same status in their home origin²⁰⁹.

However, to add to their economic and social disenfranchisement, in post-independence they were de-scheduled from the constitutional provision of ST which they enjoyed during the colonial rule, to be stripped away of their tribal status and granted them the 'other backward class'. The plantation labour act of 1951 which was enacted to apply to all kinds of plantation economy, has been constantly violated and most plantation estate lacks basic services of drinking water, schools and health facilities. The de-scheduling of Adivasis' deprived them from certain constitutional rights and accruing them from the benefits that came along with the ST status, in terms of allotment of jobs and higher education.

Therefore, the forging of an inclusive identity among the various ethnic groups of tea workers has given rise to an umbrella group identity known as Adivasi, which acts as a platform for political actions for different units of groups. It is an inclusive identity influenced by various socio-economic factors from their long settlement in the tea estate and forced isolation. The Adivasi council of Assam (ACA), founded as 'All Assam Munda, Oraon and Santhal Sanmelan' in 1957, in Gossaigaon, Western Assam, is an umbrella organisation for different tribal communities²¹⁰. However, numerous tribal organisations also sprung up independently like the Akhil Assam Pradesh Kuruh (Oraon) Sangh, The Adivasi Santhal Samaj and The All Assam Santhali Sahitya Sabha and The Assam Munda Mahasabha, All Assam Kurmi Sanmelan, All Assam Mirdha Turi Sanmelan, all acting as pressure groups on various

²⁰⁸Subhash Barman, "Excluding the 'other': The Marginalization of the 19th century Adivasi migrants in Assam," in *Shifting Terrain: Conflict Dynamics in North-East India*, ed. Nani G. Mahanta, et al. (Guwahati: DVS publisher), 269.

²⁰⁹Dhruba Pratim Sharma, "Demand of tea tribes for scheduled tribe status in Assam," in *Troubled Diversity: The Political process in North-eastern India*, ed. Sandhya Goswami (New Delhi: Oxford university press, 2015), 111.

²¹⁰Ibid: Sharma,109.

occasions²¹¹. This is also in view with the perception of the neighbouring groups who view them as a homogenous group, with the caste/tribe identity having significance only among themselves. Various tea workers trade organization also came into being representing the tea workers as one unit, for instance The Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), the largest tea worker's trade union in Assam, the All Tea Tribes Students' Association (ATTSA) which represents the ex-tea garden workers²¹². In keeping with the trend of ethnic mobilisation in the local socio-political setting among different groups, the ethnic consciousness among the Adivasi group also arose out of its historical experience of injustice and subjugation.

With the political, social and economic background of the Adivasi community, prominent Adivasi organisation have been at the forefront demanding for ST status, which they feel would ameliorate the history of exploitation. As much as protective discrimination is viewed as avenues to uplift the social condition of historically oppressed and marginalised communities, the demand for ST among the Adivasis' reflect their fight for indigeneity. It is an indigenous assertion claiming for political identity through ST claims.

The argument generally forwarded by local indigenous group against their claim to reservation is that they are not 'indigenous' to the state of Assam, pointing towards the migratory history and citing reasons that it is not in accordance with the accepted 'principle' in granting ST status. While the fight for indigeneity is paramount along with their resurgence of their identity with cultural practices like Karam, Tusu, Sarhul and state level function organized in remembrance of Birsa Munda, a legendary hero of Chotanagpur region, an Adivasi freedom fighter, many groups have been engaging closely with the Assamese community for social mobility and it is done through attempts at Sanskritization, identifying with the mainstream Assamese caste Hindus²¹³. While it may bring about positional changes within their own community, but it doesn't guarantee a social position in the structure of the Assamese population. Recently they have garnered support from different sections of

²¹¹Dhruba Pratim Sharma, "Demand of tea tribes for scheduled tribe status in Assam," in *Troubled Diversity: The Political process in North-eastern India*, ed. Sandhya Goswami (New Delhi: Oxford university press, 2015).

²¹²Ibid: Sharma, 115.

²¹³Meeta Deka, "Adivasi Identity Question in Assam," in *Troubled diversity: The political Process in Northeast India*, ed. Sandhya Goswami (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 2015), 73.

Assamese community in their claims to ST, by stating that Adivasis' are an integral part of Assamese nationalism.

In the course of the Bodoland movement in the 1990's, when the violent phase of the Bodo movement was at its peak led by BLT and NDFB, a repetitive ethnic conflict was witnessed in the north western part of Assam between the Bodo and the Adivasis, which brought greater rift between two communities. The 1996 Bodo-Adivasi conflict in Kokrajhar, saw several thousand people displaced and rendered homeless, resulting in taking shelter in refugee camps. In May 1996, Santhals a tea tribe community in western Assam became a target, witnessing large scale displacement, killing more than 200 people and some 2,00,000 people displaced. It is evident that the trajectory of ethnic movement created sharp divide between the Bodo and the Santhal in the erstwhile BAC of 1993. Such ethnic clashes also became prominent with other migrant groups like Muslims in 1994, when 60 villages of Muslim settlers in the Barpeta district was burned down²¹⁴. Such violent clashes hints towards the idea that such autonomy assertion harbours unfavourable attitude towards the 'other' who is viewed from the lens of 'other' as someone who is impinging and encroaching the political space or at times socio-economic space. The perception of the 'other' is a significant undertone in many ethnic assertions for autonomy because it leads to the 'victimisation' of the other and in their quest for exclusivist homeland at times makes way for violent clashes.

Conclusion

What is discernible is that the two groups have gone through multiple phases of identity formation process depending on the social and political milieu. What is common to both the community is the issue of identity crisis that became acute due to certain historical factors, one giving them low caste status affiliation and the other due to their nature of work and the deliberate exclusion from the mainstream society. Among the Koch-Rajbangshi community the identity crisis from low caste status affiliation in the British census instigated the Kshatriyaisation process under Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma. However, the identity dynamics changed in the post-colonial context with new political system when they started to mobilise seeking some

²¹⁴Udayon Misra, *Identity Movements, state and civil society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 251.

form of accommodation in the government institutions in the form of reservation. The colonial categorisation has played a significant role in the making of Koch-Rajbangshi identity and somewhat contributed in the identity crisis. They have collectively resorted to different positioning and repositioning of their identity status beginning with caste upliftment and the recent demand for ST. They have persistently tried to shake off the imposed categories, but it has largely contributed to the perception by the other group towards Koch-Rajbangshi, which has led to claims and counter claims of identity. Another crisis is the inability to create a homogenous group as groups identify with different nomenclatures and as a result rupture and breakdown of identity is evident.

The identity crisis of the tea tribes or Adivasis is evidently due to the structure of tea plantation economy which has a direct bearing on the generation of 'we' feeling among the tea migrant labourers. Their shared historical experience of exploitation has led to the development of a complex process of Adivasi identity among the various linguistic and cultural group and even developing a common bridge language of 'sadri'. It is a group characterised by some form of integration and assimilation, nevertheless they have been trying to assert their 'tribal' identity by reviving their cultural practices and parading the bow and arrow symbol indicating the 'tribal' nature of the group. It is also an attempt to get rid of the prejudices and stereotypes that underline the perception towards Adivasis.

The ethnic spurt has become more contentious with the Bodoland movement as the demand for separate state by the Bodos' along the foothills of Indo-Bhutan border saw resistance from the 'non-tribal' population. During the movement and after the formation of BAC (Bodoland Autonomous Council), Assam witnessed inter community violence. The rhetoric of homeland and political imagination witnessed attacks on the 'non-autochthons' groups like the Santhals' in the 1990's. The strong territorial claims by the Bodo political organisation have always been received with apprehensions and unsettling as the resistance by the 'non-Bodos' have taken new shape post creation of BTC. The simultaneous ethnic mobilization has brewed fresh tensions with the recent creation of BTC (Bodoland Territorial Council), an ethnic 'homeland' for the Bodo population.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: Contentious group politics and violence

Tribal Identity and Politics

In the process of identification as a 'tribal' by communities enlisted in the scheduled tribe category, groups have invested the category 'tribal' with new meanings and connotations and have accepted it without any pejorative connotations. Tribal status is a means to collective political identity to claim certain rights and to distinguish and maintain differences from the mainstream Hindu community. Tribal category may be considered as means to assert distinct collective political identity, but in India, it is also integrally linked to the constitutionally recognized category of 'scheduled tribe' and the politics around the category of 'tribal' is paramount where multiple groups lay claims to 'tribal identity'. Such affirmative action designed programmes for economic and social upliftment, but it is a lucrative category around which group mobilization happen to assert their 'tribal-ness'. It is political in nature, as the Bodos' are one of the largest scheduled tribal community in Assam and has 30% of the seats reserved for the ST's in BTC. The scheduling of Koch-Rajbangshi and Adivasis will present a formidable challenge to the political dominance of the Bodos'. This is one of the crucial reasons the Bodos' have resisted their scheduling. The inter-group conflict is part of the majority politics inherent in Indian democracy.

Contentious group mobilization and politics

The Bodo, Adivasis and Koch-Rajbangshis' have undergone a similar process of identity formation on ethnic lines, a collective identity based on the notion of 'tribe'. Each group have tried to assert their identity around the pivot of tribe and group mobilization has led to contentious claims of identity. It is the face of changing social, economic and political circumstances, which gives rise to adjacent ways of constructing identity simultaneously. Narrowly conceived identities, influenced by colonial discourse, have come under challenge by groups like Adivasis and Koch-Rajbangshis' who demand for ST category. The three groups bring to light the political struggle by different groups to reassert their 'tribal' identity in a milieu where

'tribal-ness' is a special category enjoyed by certain groups. In the changing scenario of politics with the implementation of 6th schedule in Assam which provides some form of autonomy and political power, with the Bodoland movement and the creation of autonomous council in 2003, Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) has witnessed 'production of collective identities' giving rise to contentious local politics. Among the three groups that are subject of the study, Bodos' are enlisted as a 'tribal' in the scheduled list, while the rest of the two are fighting for ST status. While the struggle is not much to bring back the 'glorious and pristine, un-corrupt' 'tribal-ness', not amounting to actual 're-tribalization' but it has nonetheless resorted to colonial historiography and experiences in the identity making process, which they feel are their identity markers. The Bodos' make sense of their identity through colonial writing and ethnographical accounts which categorized them as 'primitive and semi-savages', acting as a blueprint and a mirror to them in their identity struggle²¹⁵. The Koch-Rajbangshis have undergone through multiple stages in their identity making process from Sanskritization in 19th century to the recent spurt for tribal identity and the regional demand for 'Kamatapur'. The tea tribes or 'Adivasis' represent the dark history of booming tea industry in the 19th century colonial Assam, who were uprooted from their home origin to be enslaved and made to work in an indentured labour system, which gave rise to a consciousness among the heterogenous group to create a homogenous inclusive identity called 'Adivasi', with independent tribal organizations acting as pressure group when needed. While the three groups represent the adjacent trajectory of identity making in a multi-ethnic space of Assam, creating rigid ethnic boundaries and each group articulating their own claims and demand, it had gained momentum during Bodoland movement which saw sporadic group violence and violent movement adopted by the militant outfits like BLT and NDFB of the Bodo community. While it brought about mass consciousness among the Bodos' and generated momentum, it also saw movements by different groups making their claims and demands.

While the Bodo movement gained popularity with strong leadership and close network ties, Koch-Rajbangsi and Adivasi have not been able to generate a strong movement. Though the Bodo movement gained momentum in the light of the imposed language policy by the Assam government and it was directed against the

²¹⁵ Rev. Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis*, 1911 (New Delhi: Low price publication, 1990, 1997, 2010).

homogenization attempts at the Assamese nationalist, the ethnic consciousness among the Koch-Rajbangsi and Adivasi tea tribes is a simultaneous outcome of the Bodo movement in the wake of the violent movement. What is peculiar to the Koch-Rajbangsi movement is that though they have been demanding Kamatapur state which includes geographical portions of Assam and West Bengal, they have not been able to voice strong demands against the Assam government and it is only in the BTAD region they have been much vocal about their issues, which has given rise to contentious group politics in the local politics, masking the 'Oboro Janajati Suraksha' organization. Such organizations, an alliance of communities living in BTAD, reflect their fear and apprehensions about the present BTAD, where power is enjoyed by the indigenous Bodo. The trend represents the contentious politics of space and identity that has taken precedence in the north-western part of Assam with the creation of autonomous council of Bodoland. There has been fissure of ethnic identities and the political mobilization by different communities which have aggravated the volatile political situation.

The political mobilisation by Adivasis and Koch-Rajbangshis, in their determination to create a political identity by demanding ST has challenged the normative discourse underlying the conceptions of 'tribe' and 'indigeneity'. The Bodos' have constituted tribal identity in their long struggle for statehood, meticulously safeguarding and opposing any moves to include new group in the ST list. The transformation of Assam tribal league into All Assam tribal sangha in post-independence period in 1951, as a socio-cultural forum was done with the underlying objective of safeguarding and protecting the interests of the 'tribal' community in Assam. The Assam Tribal Sangha successfully brought the diverse group together under a category which came to be defined in opposition to other categories and as markers of identity, their task was to maintain the distinct 'tribal' identity and challenge the assimilationist tendencies of the caste Hindu society. Continuing with the colonial legacies of 'plains tribal identity', they continued to uphold 'tribal' as identity marker in the new social and political milieu of independent India. Acting as a parent body of the scheduled tribes people of Assam and registered under the

societies registration Act.1860, it is vested with the power of issuing tribe certificate to both plains and hill tribes of Assam²¹⁶.

The ethnic spurt in Assam can also be explained by the competitive political rewards accrued under the principle of ‘protective discrimination’. In their quest for preferences, it has become a systematic tool for political mobilization demanding preferences on the grounds that they are educationally backward and holds lower position. Myron Weiner argues that such ‘preferential politics’ followed by the Indian government have facilitated mobilization of groups towards either preferences or extension and political struggles and backlash on the part of groups who are excluded from the preference. It also majorly influences the political process, the ways groups are organized to make claims, over the policies and the coalitions that arise in such contentious collective politics²¹⁷. The case of Koch-Rajbangshis’ can be seen in this light, where they feel deprived of the preferences in the changing political climate with the establishment of Bodoland autonomous council, which provides major political power to the Bodos’ in a multi-ethnic space. The Adivasis, on the other hand, is fighting for the restoration of their ‘tribal’ identity, which have been lost in their migration from their home origin to colonial Assam. Adivasis’ political mobilization for ST is significant because it reflects their attempt to improve their social standing in the ethnic hierarchy, aimed at not individual upliftment but the positional change of the group. There is a simultaneous mobilization by groups’ in a political environment where people fear exclusion in a historically shared space and territory. M.S. Prabhakara says such fear of exclusion has led to demand for ST which will ‘pre-empt’ such exclusion²¹⁸. And this has become a conducive factor for groups of ‘tribal’ and ‘non-tribal’ category to ‘self-invent’ and ‘reinvent’ themselves, to push for changing their official status or reclassification as ST. The obvious reasons for identity making process is political survival and advancement in a competitive sphere, where the limited resources are distributed unevenly among groups which then builds

²¹⁶Accessed from ‘tribalsangha.Org’

²¹⁷Myron Weiner, “The political Consequences of preferential politics: A comparative perspective,” in *Comparative Politics*, Vol.16, N0.1 (1983). Accessed from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/421594> on 28th May 2018.

²¹⁸M.S. Prabhakara, “Invention, Reinvention and Contestation: politics of Identity in Assam,” in *Ethnonationalism in India: A Reader*, ed. Sanjib Baruah (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 268.

the sense of exclusion and betrayal, perpetuating inter-group competition and at times violence.

Bodo constitute the largest plains tribe in Assam with approximately 1.35 million people identifying themselves as Bodos'. They form a significant tribal population in the state of Assam, having a dominant role in electoral politics, constituting 40.9% of the total scheduled tribe population in Assam²¹⁹. The ethnic competition is paramount as there is resistance from the leaders of beneficiary group to the new membership claims. Their number play a significant role in the local electoral politics, which constitute majority ST population. Given the Bodos' are listed in the ST category, they have opposed tribal identity claims by other communities. The marginality experience by each group is unique and at times reinforced by the 'ad-hoc' measures of the state which is exclusionary and results in competitive claims and demands. The inconsistency and the 'ad-hocism' of the state policy in identifying tribal communities has resulted in contested local politics, with 'official boundaries' and discourses challenged. The denial of structural representation has led to flourishing of identity mobilization among sections of population on ethnic lines, which is at times based on 'reactionary' assumption that 'ST' is a privilege category. Groups are sometimes determined to undercut the assumed privileges enjoyed by specific groups and the enlisted groups view such claims as 'encroachment on their political space'. The 'exclusionary locational provisions' in allocating ST status and the indeterminate conceptions of who constitute 'tribe' have either inhibited groups from making demands or provided space for groups in creating and forging new allegiances in the identity construction process respectively.

The creation of Bodoland territorial areas district (BTAD) following the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) movement in the late 1990's, led to the carving out of Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri and Chirang districts after signing the memorandum of settlement in February 2003. It was an autonomous territorial and political unit for the Bodos' created under the sixth schedule provision of the constitution, which was hitherto applicable only to the hill tribes. The imagining of 'homeland' and the autonomous district materializing the 'political space' for recognition of their identity,

²¹⁹Uddipana Goswami, *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam, 2014-2017* (London: Routledge, 2017).

leads to exclusion of groups who are viewed as ‘indigenous-other’. It has witnessed the upsurge and revival of identities and assertions by groups who have historically shared spaces and ethnic politics taking a territorial turn. The political unit for Bodos’ have created apprehensions and anxieties among other groups who also inhabit the same political space. The mobilization by the Koch-Rajbangshis’ who are classified as OBC presently, the demand for ST and Kamatapur state is an expression of anxieties and fear of domination. In my interaction with Mr.Hitesh Barman, AKRSU leader from Kokrajhar district expressed his dissatisfaction about the formation of BTAD as he says they were not included in the decision making process for the creation of BTAD. In a region where ethnic grouping rarely coincides with territorial segregation, the creation of political spaces and unit which make one group dominant, a wall of separation and rigid boundaries are drawn and strengthened between groups. As ethnic boundaries are constructed through mutable concepts like ‘tribe’ and ‘caste Hindus’, political units with demarcated boundary give logic to ethnic groups identity formation and persistence. Walls of boundaries become strong and we see emergence of social networks and capital which are important to sustaining and maintaining of boundaries in plural societies. For instance, organizational bodies of ethnic groups like Bodos and Koch-Rajbangshi students union are important social forces flagging the issue of ethnic identity and mobilization process. And such strong identity movements give rise to ‘ethnic-nepotism’ which results in favouring one groups’ member over another. Keeping this concept in the background it is discernible when Hitesh Barman says that many job opportunities in BTAD are always favoured for Bodo’s. It has led to more contentious nature which creates the path for shifting collaboration with ‘other’, coalescing and bringing together groups as a mechanism in the changed environment, for instance, ‘OBoro Janajati’ is a network of cross section groups and ‘Sanmilitia Janagosthiya Sangram Samithi’ (United Ethnic Peoples’ Struggle). It is an alliance of about twenty non-Bodo organizations in the BTC area along with non-Bodo tribal people who have come together to oppose the creation of BTC and Koch-Rajbangshi being one of the important constituents of such cross-section networks²²⁰.

²²⁰Anwasha Dutta, “The politics of complexity in Bodoland: The Interplay of Contentious Politics, the Production of Collective Identities and Elections in Assam,” in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, No.2 (2016).

Such demarcation has led to assertion on the parts of non-Bodo population criticizing the discriminatory treatment in the BTC and the syndrome of majority and minority debate has engulfed the legitimacy of the creation of BTC, with groups claiming that many villages included in the BTC area are non-Bodo dominated villages. Non-Bodo Suraksha Samiti have asserted against the creation of Bodoland and the bifurcation of Assam and have staged protest and declared many bandh calls against the BTC and Bodoland demand. It has only reinforced the hatred towards the 'other' which is deeply entrenched in the psyche of groups residing in the same ethno-space.

The creation of BTC has provisionally solved the Bodo conflict, but it has witnessed fresh dimension to the issue of identity and politics with the emergence of new organizational groups opposing the Bodoland movement. Political competition and the intensification of competitive claims take an unpleasant form during elections. The 2014 Lok Sabha election in Kokrajhar constituency saw strict rivalry between Bodos' and non-Bodo organization, when 20 non-Bodo ethnic and linguistic groups came together under the banner of 'Sanmilitia Janagostiya Aikkyamancha' to support and independent non-Bodo candidate, Naba Sarania, an ex-ULFA militant leader who won by a huge margin of 3,55,779 votes²²¹. This was a strong blow to Bodo community as he became the first non-Bodo MP from the Kokrajhar constituency as political competition increase the differences with ethnic groups and leading to more pluralism in previously monolithic ethnic parties and giving rise to factionalism²²². The creation of BTC/BTAD in 2003, creating an autonomy for the 'tribal' population Bodo has created quite the stir and saw tribal mobilization among different groups and any future move to create Bodoland has been expressed with strong demur. The 2014 election saw a more intensely polarized society among groups whose identities overlap 'culturally and linguistically' making them a durable feature of electoral politics in the region²²³

²²¹Anwasha Dutta, "The politics of complexity in Bodoland: The Interplay of Contentious Politics, the Production of Collective Identities and Elections in Assam," in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, No.2 (2016), 486.

²²²Ibid: Dutta

²²³Smitana Saikia, "General election 2014: Will BJP's Gains Polarize Assam Further?" in *Studies in Indian Politics* (2015), 70.

The creation of BTAD is currently passing through a critical phase, as the geopolitical space hasn't resolve the ethnicity demands among Bodos' themselves and the upsurge of non-Bodo population, Koch-Rajbangsi and Adivasis is giving rise to confrontational politics and setting the stage for violence. The ad hoc steps taken by the Indian government in resolving the issue of insurgency and signing memorandum with one party, in this case with the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) reflects the short sightedness, lacking any long term implications and intensifies group competition over the state's limited resources, politicizing along cleavages. The creation of Bodoland Autonomous Territorial Districts, an ethnic homeland, has seen repeated ethnic clashes between the Santhals and the immigrant Muslims. 'Discriminatory' policies of BTAD, 'extortion', 'intimidation' allegations have been raised against the Bodo leadership, eventually a series of protest and blockage of highways and bandhs have been declared, voicing its opposition against the creation of a separate Bodoland. Koch-Rajbangsi, one of the major non-tribal community has stepped up its demand for ST and have staged their solidarity and strength while conducting rallies and programmes beginning from 2012. When such blockage and bandhs are declared, isolated incidents of low scale violence like torching of public vehicles and injuring people have been witnessed in BTAD region. Recently, on 1st and 6th of March 2018, a widespread demonstration across the BTAD region was declared against the rumour that the ruling government of BTAD 'decided to take away the land rights of the indigenous Koch- Rajbangshi, Nepali, Santhal and Nath', only to sink down after clarification from the ruling government that no such changes have been made²²⁴. Such cases reflect the contentious and volatile political atmosphere susceptible to insecurities and violence. Though major conflicts have occurred with the Muslim migrants and Santhals, Koch-Rajbangshi, Bengali and Nepalis have not experienced violence, though setting the stage for contentious group politics.

The All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) has begun with the new phase of Bodoland movement, declaring in the 43rd conference in Banargaon that the failure of the BTC to implement the accord satisfactorily has led them to renew their demand for separate state²²⁵. And with the polarization between Bodos and the Non-Bodos and 'non-tribal' winning the ST constituency in lower Assam, which presents a

²²⁴Pratidin exclusive.

²²⁵Suryashika Pathak, "Ethnic violence in Bodoland," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.47, No. 34 (2012), 21. Accessed from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41720055> on 3rd May 2018.

formidable challenge to the 'homeland' demand, it has set the stage for more tension between groups.

The ethnic identification process need to be seen in the context of the historical processes that gave rise to complex identities based on colonial categories acting as a conceptual foundation. The issues of historical marginalization and exclusion and the political resources within the limited structure has prompted groups to mobilised based on ethnic specificities. Identity formation is a continuous process undergoing new allegiance and incorporating new constitutive elements according to the demand of the time. This paper has tried to understand the constitutive elements that went into identity construction among the three groups by tracing the colonial roots and legacies of categorisation that became a source of identification. They have reformulated and given new shape and discourse to the colonial construction of identities to meet their ends. The strict classification between caste and tribes have played out in the identity struggle of Assam and the category of 'tribe' has come to acquire a strong political identity in the present context. However, what is also inevitable is that identities are constantly changing, therefore identities are constantly in flux, shifting and collaborating and giving rise to new ethnic understanding.

Identities are also contested as is evident in the contested nature of 'tribal' identity among the three groups. Such constructed categories take new forms with new political connotations and leading to contentious group politics and at times violence. Ethnic violence arises when a marginal group wants to gain the same status and there is resistance to include them in the category. Identity formation and ethnic violence is a two-way process because ethnic violence also has potential to construct identities in more rigid and antagonistic ways. It perpetuates the antagonistic behaviour towards other ethnic groups and becomes aggressive ethnocentric.

Lives and property has been destroyed rendering many homeless for years and forcing them to take refuge in camps. In my field observation in villages like 'Nilaijhora' in Gossaigaon and Alibitha in kokrajhar, what was common to the victims of ethnic violence from across the groups was there socio-economic condition and hamlets of villages with multiple groups co-existing and sharing resources like water well. What was interesting in one of my field visit to Alibitha was individuals from both Bodo and Muslim community sat together to narrate their state of panic

stricken when they heard about violence ensuing in nearby villages, which eventually lead them to take refuge in one of the camps set up in a village school, leaving behind their homes and cattle's behind, instances of helping each other from across the community dominated the narration. They inhabited the same space, shared resources, but when the time came to take refuge, they parted ways to their 'respective' camps. Though this study doesn't make a case study of Muslim community, the same pattern was visible in Nilajhora, where Santhals' and Bodos' live harmoniously only to be disrupted frequently. They live in a continuous space, unlike the rhetoric of territory and homeland which tries to disrupt the continuity of space and culture. Such attempts at discontinuation leads to barriers and breakdown of harmonious relationship who struggle every day to make their daily livings in the margins of society. It takes them years to stabilise their livelihoods only to be disrupted again. Though they all belong to the same socio-economic status, they are seldom united on those grounds and ethnic identity take priority. Only the educated sections of groups seem to be aware of the colonial construction of identity, therefore what this study fails to incorporate is how ethnic identity is prioritise among groups and individuals who belong to the lower socio-economic condition. The class dimension has been left out in this study though I make moderate observation on why class consciousness fails to generate unity. It is my contention that in a marginal society like the one under study, ethnic identity is prioritised because class issues are associated with inward looking ethnic consciousness and transforms itself into 'ethno-class' struggle against other 'ethno-class' group. Meaning ethnic group act like a class group in their articulation of demand which is pitted against other ethnic group who is narrowly viewed with the prism of class as either privileged class or deprived class ethnic group.

This study is dominated by historical analysis of forming identities through categories to understand the groups conflict surrounding identities and have limitedly relied on field work to supplement the study with concluding remarks.

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