

**Emergence of a Tribal Identity and Politics
in Assam 1933-47: The 'Plains Tribes'
of the Brahmaputra Valley**

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Philosophy

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1999



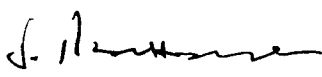
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19th July, 1999

CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation titled, **Emergence of a Tribal Identity and Politics in Assam 1933-47: The 'Plains Tribes' of the Brahmaputra Valley** which is being submitted by **Suryasikha Pathak** in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**. This is her original work and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation. This dissertation has not been submitted for the award of any other degree of this University or any other University.


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Acknowledgement

I express my sincere gratitude to my Supervisor, Professor Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, for making valuable suggestions and offering new ideas. And also for the patience he had with my unpunctuality.

At the various stages of my research, I have benefitted from discussions and consultations with Rajen Saikia, Kishore Bhattacharjee, Nandita Khadria and Indivar Deuri.

I would also like to thank the staff of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati; Central Secretariat library, New Delhi and National Archives of India, New Delhi.

I am also grateful towards my supportive parents and brother.

I would like to thank my friends, Ellora, Kalpalata, Rochelle, Bhawana, Swati, Kavita, Parnal, Sunita, Sumi, Arup, Razi, Alok and Avinash.

And lastly, I would like to thank Lima for painstakingly typing the dissertation.



Suryasikha Pathak

INTRODUCTION

Beginning with Edward Gait (*A History of Assam*, 1905) to H.K. Barpujari (*A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. IV & V 1992 and 1993) the history of the tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley have either been relegated to passing mention of the various tribes or have been confined to dealing with the emergence and decline of the tribal kingdoms of the Kacharis, Morans, Chutiyas and Jaintiyas in the ancient and medieval period. The silence about the state of tribals in the colonial period, in most of these writings, lead us to question and analyse the nature of history writing and the agenda behind it.

Most histories were of course political narrations of medieval Assam which drew extensively from the various Buranjis.¹ S.K. Bhuyan's (ed.) *Kachari Buranji* (Guwahati, 1936) is a typical example, where Bhuyan introduces the subject and gives the edited copies of old Assamese manuscripts. Their attempts were limited to locating the origins of the tribes and thereafter tracing the political history. Often remarking upon the constitution of the tribes, especially the Kacharis, and the formation and development of the Assamese society in the past, they overlooked the situation of the tribes in the colonial period.

In other contemporary works like H.K. Barpujari's *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, the mention of the tribes have been

¹ Chronicles of the Ahom period.

limited to the Kachari kingdom of Cachar, about the role of the missionaries and spread of education among the tribes.

The break from such a trend of political narrative comes with Amalendu Guha's works which include *Planter-Raj to Swaraj* (New Delhi, 1977) and *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*. (Calcutta, 1991) in his article "From Tribalism to Feudalism"² problematises the whole issue of state formation in the early medieval period. Guha locates the Assamese social formation, along with the strengthening of the Ahom monarchy, as a process of sankritisation and detribalisation. More recent works like that of Nayanjot Lahiri's *Pre-Ahom Assam* contest Guha's ideas about the role of land grants in introduction of settled plough agriculture, Hinduisation and detribalisation. According to Lahiri the nature of land grants in Assam were different and hence the social processes inherent therein were different too. Further discussions have been carried on by Sujit Choudhary³ and Vaskar Nandy and Vasanthi Raman⁴

For the colonial period of course historical literature have not attempted to transcend the absence of a history of the tribes to the present period. A. Guha's work⁵ on provincial politics of Assam though mentioning the role of the Tribal League locates tribal politics in the

² A. Guha, "From Tribalism to Feudalism" in *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, (Calcutta, 1991).

³ Sujit Choudhary, "The Bodos: The Tribe for whom history failed" in Dev Nathan (ed.), *From Tribe to Caste*, (Shimla, 1997).

⁴ Vaskar Nandy and Vasanthi Raman, "The Long Transition: The Koch Rajbanshis of North-Eastern India" in Dev Nathan (ed.), *From Tribe to Caste*.

⁵ A. Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj*, p.229.

broader political scene of the 20th century which was dominated by the Congress and the Muslim League. The emergence of tribal consciousness has been defined by Guha as a “bogey”, a dreadful spectre, and an instrument in the hands of the Congress, a divisive force in the Assamese society. Perception of the tribals and their consciousness as problematic in the social structure in many ways is a continuation of the ideas which held that the overwhelming presence of the tribals in the region gave a twist to the strong trends of sankritisation, detribalisation.

Such trends are also symptomatic of the project to construct a nationalist history of the “Assamese” people and their culture. The effort is to create a monolithic image of the ‘Assamese society which leads to discussions about assimilation in the positive sense and overlooks the negative fallout of such discourses. It cannot be denied that even history writing have conditioned by the dominant middle class concerns of that period, which were the immigrants, the Assamese identity vis-à-vis the Bengalis, tea gardens etc.

However, in the recent years some issues have come into light in vernacular literature. Dhurbajyoti Borah in his *Asamor Jan-Jati Prasanga*⁶, though in a rhetorical manner, questions a array of assumptions and opens up space for further research. Sibnath Barman’s *Asamor Janjati Samashya*⁷ develops Borah’s arguments with a adequate

⁶ Dhurbajyoti Borah, *Itihash Chinta*. (Guwahati, 1988).

⁷ Sibnath Barman, *Asamor Janjati Samashya* (Guwahati, 1995).

reference to sources. Like Borah he also locates the emergence of the tribal consciousness in the divisive policies of the colonial government. The underlying assumptions of course being that the colonial government ruptured the social fabric where the tribes were being slowly assimilated and acculturated to a Hinduised civilisational pattern. Very recent writings⁸ like that of Indivar Deuri are very political in nature being closely connected with the Bodo movement and focus mostly on the politics of the Assamese middle class and the question of ethnic identity of the tribals.

The review of the historiography has demonstrated an inadequacy of the existing literature in attempting to understand the tribes of the Brahmaputra. Most works have been silent about the emergence of tribal politics in the colonial period or about the importance of such consciousness. Works that have manifested interest essentially sought to unearth roots of the contemporary autonomy of ethnic movements and were polemical in content. Of course, it is natural that various movements struggling to establish their ethnic identity should take recourse to history.

⁸ Debabarta Sarmah, "Kuri Satikar Asamat Jati-Varna Bad Aru Asprisata," in *Natun Padatik*, 1st year, 2nd issue, 1998; Parmananda Majumdar, "Bhimbar Deuri Aru Asamer Jati Samashyat Ebhumuki" in *Natun Padatik* 1st year, 1st issue, 1998. Indivar Deuri, "Bodo Janagosthir Antardanda- Eti Artha Samajik Distipat" in *Deuka*, Vol. 4 No.1 January-April, 1998.

This work is an attempt to locate during the period of 1933-47, the efforts of the Tribal League to define and delineate tribal identity vis-à-vis various other groups. The formation of the Tribal League in 1933, under the leadership of Bhimbar Deuri and Rupnath Brahma can be said to be the culmination of associative politics of the earlier decades. The Tribal League also tried to function as umbrella organisation bringing all other associations under its control. By attempting to bring various associations of the different tribes together it envisioned the construction of a broad based identity for the tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley. Thus, the notion 'Plains Tribe' emerged which later concretised with the Government of India Act, 1935's provision for communal award. The Act provided for separate representation of the Plains Tribes community in the Assembly. The formation of the Assembly in 1937 saw the election 5 tribal representatives to the Assembly.

An attempt has been made here to study the dynamics of politics as an instrument of defining identities. Provincial politics had a bearing on how tribal identity came to be defined, because it was in this space that the tribal leaders actively participated. We shall study of the Tribal League as a mode of organised tribal politics, which offered the tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley a common platform. As a body for organised politics it articulated grievances of the tribal people such as, land alienation, lack of literacy, backwardness and it attempted to alleviate those grievances by pressurising the government. The emergence of tribal politics and identity is studied in relation to the acceptance and

denial of political space in the provincial politics of Assam. The political space provided by the communal representation of 1935 Act placed the emerging educated class in the power structure where they could articulate their nascent consciousness. At another level the emergence of a caste-Hindu based middle class politics in the province and denial of political space within it might have aided the emergence. But our focus is on the Tribal League's discourse of engendering a separate distinctive identity, not so much on the other cultural constructs of identity, which have been studied earlier.

This study comprises three main chapters. The first chapter deals with the politics of representation in colonial writings prior to 1933; the second chapter deals with the emergence of the Tribal League and provincial politics from 1933-47, and the last chapter discusses the contestation of identity focussing on some of the major issues of the 1940's. This chapter also attempts to locate the long-term trends in the colonial official and non-official writings on the question of representation and identity. It comprises a discussion of the descriptive ethnographic accounts of the various tribal communities of Assam. The core of the consideration is to trace how ideas of race, caste and tribe were applied in case of the communities of Assam. Though most of these works were general and impressionistic in nature their contribution has been considered as they represent the stereotype of limited knowledge about the tribal communities of the Brahmaputra Valley. These writings have been used as primary sources here.

General accounts of the province, its people and resources, and customs include: W.W.Hunter's *A Statistical account of Assam*, L.A.Waddell's *Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, William Robinson's *A Descriptive account of Assam*, J.P.Wade's *An account of Assam*, E.T.Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* and Montgomery Martin's *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, Vol.V, Rangpur and Assam. The more detailed works are Rev. Sidney Endle's *The Kacharis* and Sir Lyall's *The Mikirs*. Here, through the eyes of the colonial officer, writer and missionary we take stock of the social reality or how they perceived the society and the people. As have been discussed by Ronald Inden,⁹ Edward Said¹⁰ such accounts cannot be said to be entirely objective because works 'essentialised' the reality and 'imagined' and constructed categories, designed to exercise hegemonic control over the 'Other'. But as discussed by Susan Bayly the idea of narrow self-contained, so-called 'hegemonic' knowledge and data-collection is only a too familiar stereotype and in reality colonial ethnography is vastly diverse in the way it discusses 'caste', 'tribes', 'races' and 'nations'.¹¹ Though rooted in the colonial context these works give us a fair account of the situation and how various categories emerged due to different necessities.

⁹ Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (London, 1990).

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York, 1978).

¹¹ Susan Bayly, "Caste and 'Race' in the Colonial Ethnography of India" in Peter Robb (ed.) *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (New Delhi, 1995).

Another category of official documents used are the census. According to Kenneth Jones, "These documents describe, enumerate, and analyse the colonial world and are our most fundamental sources of statistical information about it."¹² And as Bernard S.Cohn observed, "Through the asking of questions and compiling of information in categories which the British rulers could use for governing, it provided an arena for Indian to ask questions about themselves, and Indians utilised the fact that the British census commissioners tried to order tables on caste in terms of social precedence."¹³ In the discussion of impact of census, we see how within the categories provided by the colonial state the subjects identified and defined themselves.

The second chapter deals with the formation of the Tribal League and role in the provincial politics. As a background to this, trends of emerging tribal consciousness prior to 1933 are also studied. It traces the growth of nascent awareness about one's identity through the activities of various associations. The second section deals with the articulation of one major issue in the legislative assembly i.e. the land question vis-à-vis the representatives of the Tribal League. Land alienation of the tribal peasantry reached enormous proportions in the

¹² Kenneth W.Jones, "Religious Identity and the Indian Census" in N.G.Barrier (ed.) *The Census in British India: New Perspectives* (New Delhi, 1981).

¹³ B.S.Cohn, "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia" in B.S.Cohn (ed.) *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi, 1994).

decades of 30's and 40's and the tribal leaders demanded protection of tribal lands through legislative measures.

The first section is discussed with the help of various memoranda and pamphlets of different associations. Though these petitions and memoranda cannot be said to be representative of all the tribal people, it was the voice of the emerging elite who would later popularise ideas of 'identity'. In the sphere where most documents are viewed from outside these documents are invaluable. But one has to be cautious in using these sources because petitions and memorandum were addressed to the colonial authorities and legal structures, their content being adapted to an imposed context. The other branch of source used for the second section comprise of the *Assam Legislative Assembly's Proceedings* from 1937-47. The Assembly debates provide an insight into how ideas and ideologies professed came to be articulated in relation to various issues. This section makes a case study of the land question; and other issues which were discussed and debated, like measures of social reform, education are further discussed in the third chapter.

The third chapter discusses various debates and contesting perception of the emerging 'tribal' identity. The Tribal League started propaganda of its own, defining 'tribalness' and attempting to transfer it to a popular idea. In spheres like census enumeration the Tribal League instructed the public through pamphlets and meetings to assert their

'tribalness'. Such efforts were condemned and contested by the Congress and other conservative sections of the society like the *Sattradhikars*. Also discussed along with the 1941 Census enumeration controversy is the debate around Assam Temple Entry Bill of 1941 and issues of education and employment. Sources used, comprise of pamphlets of the Tribal League regarding the instructions for census enumeration and Assam Legislative Assembly proceedings for the debates on the census and Temple Entry Bill. The *Teendiniya Assamiya* is used since it is reflective of the public opinion on the issues, which was overwhelmingly pro-Congress and caste Hindu middle class dominated. Arguments at various levels of legislative politics, census enumeration, organisational would be attempted to link with the broader questions how the issue of social change among tribals is closely linked with the politics and the socio-cultural programmes of the Tribal League. In general, in these chapters we address the question how the cultural discourse is related to the political discourse of Tribal identities and rights.

CHAPTER I
THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN COLONIAL
WRITINGS: PRIOR TO 1933.

Though our period of study begins with the founding of the Tribal League in 1933, this chapter attempts to locate the long-term trends in the colonial official and non-official thought on the question of representation and identity. The formation of the Tribal League can be considered a landmark event in the sphere of organized politics in the province but its inception also points to a longer history of organized and unorganized politics from the beginning of the 20th century onwards. Essential in tracing these trends is to consider the dominant ideas on the notion of 'tribes'.

This chapter will deal with the earliest works, descriptive ethnographic accounts of various communities in Assam. Knowledge of various tribes varied from actual contact with the tribes to those based on mediated information or popularly held beliefs. The underlying intention of this section is to look into the representation of the tribes in colonial writings. The question will be considered in the light of the wider debate on the nature of colonial ethnographic data collection and the question of hegemony and power connected with it. Recently, Indian historians and anthropologists have argued that colonial ethnographic literature could not have been the product of neutral and scientific observation.

Recent works, as mentioned by Susan Bayly, focus on the “complex interactions between the institution of a manipulative colonial state, and the responses of Indians to the process of data collection by tribe, caste and community.”¹ In these writings we see an effort to locate the Kacharis (Bodos), Mikirs (Karbis), Mishings (Miris), Lalungs (Tiwas), Rabhas and other communities within the framework of colonial ethnography. In most cases, observations were merely of a speculative nature; most of the works, barring a few, were general accounts of the province, its people and resources, and the customs and cultural practices.² Among the more detailed empirical accounts³ like that of Endle’s account of the Kacharis and Lyall’s on the Mikirs, a better understanding of the communities is found. Though discussion on the tribes are not central to the contents of most of these works, nevertheless they have been referred to, because they can be regarded as a stereotype of the meagre knowledge about the above mentioned communities. It also reflects the general attitude towards the ‘tribes’ that most of these writers acquired by their own observation and from

¹ Susan Bayly, “Caste and Race in Colonial Ethnography” in Peter Robb ed. *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, (New Delhi, 1995) p.166.

² In this genre are: W.W.Hunter’s, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, First Published, (London, 1879), 2nd Reprint, (New Delhi, 1982); L.A.Waddell, *Tribes of Brahmaputra Valley* First Published 1901, Reprint, (New Delhi, 1975); William Robinson. *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, (Calcutta/London, 1841); J.P.Wade, *An Account of Assam*, 1800 ed. Benudhar Sharma, 1st edn., 1927, reprint. (Guwahati, 1972); E.T.Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, First Published Calcutta, 1872, 2nd Reprint (Calcutta, 1973); Montgomery Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, Vol.V, Rangpur & Assam, (Delhi, 1976).

³ Rev Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis* (Delhi, 1990); Sir Charles Lyall, *The Mikirs* (Gauhati, n.d).

other sources.

Construction of 'Tribalness' in Colonial Ethnography

Writing about the Kacharis, Miris, Lalungs, Rabhas and Mikirs was fraught with problems for the colonial ethnographers and officials. These communities could not be easily typified and classified by virtue of their not conforming to certain notions held by the colonial authorities on caste, tribe and race. These ethnographers, officials and non-official writers, did not produce a uniform colonial discourse on the subject. As colonialism penetrated and spread, regional societies in various provinces were studied and what came to the fore in many cases challenged classically held notions of these communities. But even then it cannot be denied that the overarching structure for understanding the society at large was caste as a monolithic institution, and in relation to it were located tribes and groups in a complex interplay. A certain fluidity was believed to have existed at least in peripheral regions, in that groups, ethnographically distinctive, were conceded to be outside of the stereotypes of fixed pan-Indian caste hierarchies and of an all pervading Brahmanical value-system.

In these works we find the reflection of various ideas about caste, tribe and race. They are located within the purview of certain dominant themes and concerns of 19th century ethnography like dividing

population into more 'savage' and 'wild' casteless mountaineers and highlanders and caste bound people living in the plains, 'Aryan' and 'non-Aryan' people. Besides, people were also classified on environmental grounds where 'civilized' and 'savage' were distinguished on the basis of habitat. Of course there was no single stereotype to be ascribed to, as a variety of views existed. But as in many ethnographical works of the 19th century, the term caste, tribe, nation and race are used interchangeably and imprecisely. But "it is from this official mind, and the minds of missionaries, medics and other professional men, that we can derive a much fuller picture of the so-called 'colonial' understanding of India".⁴

Attempts to understand the 'tribes' of the Brahmaputra valley always located the communities, such as Kacharis, Mikirs, Miris, Lalungs, Rabhas, in relation to the tribes who were 'purely' tribes and the caste Hindus who were 'civilized' (in a relative sense).⁵ Officers and ethnographers like Hutton writing about tribes of Assam primarily focussed on the hill tribes, which conformed to the colonial imagination of a "tribe" being "wild" and "savage".⁶ One of the dominant trends in

⁴ Susan Bayly, "Caste and 'Race' in Colonial Ethnography", p.188.

⁵ Administratively, the hill areas were managed differently. The areas were Lushai Hills, North Eastern Frontier Province, Naga Hills; see Census of 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 for the categorisation.

⁶ J.H.Hutton, "Wild Men of Assam", *JASB*, No.2, New Series, 1931.

these accounts is the presence of a contrasting hierarchisation between (a) the more 'wild' and 'savage' hill tribes, (b) tribes of the plains, and (c) the caste-Hindu communities. For the ethnographers, the tribes of the plains were distinct from the rest of the plains population in certain aspects. Racially they were distinctively Mongoloid or Austro-Mongoloid and easily distinguishable from the Aryan population. Linguistically also speech was not 'Aryan' but was classified as Tibeto-Burman and inferior to Assamese and Bengali, which were recognised as Aryan languages. But in the spheres of religion, culture and lifestyle distinctiveness was not easily observable and pinned down. These colonial perceptions reveal, though sometimes distorted a great deal about the fluidity and complexity of the societies. And to a great extent they ineffectually tried to understand the dynamics and the continual subtle changes "reflecting shifts in the religious affiliation and ideology, as well as alterations in political and economic circumstances."⁷ A great deal of contradiction prevailed over the question as to what made a tribe. Also, ethnographers and data-collectors found it difficult to pin down ideas about the religion, and agricultural practices with precision. And though many of these ethnographers, and officials realised that the communities which they wanted to categorize as 'tribes' did not strictly conform to their notion of a 'tribe', they continued to focus on certain features and imagined and created some others to maintain the usage of the category of the 'tribe'.

⁷ Susan Bayly, "Caste and 'Race' in Colonial Ethnography", p.205.

This chapter attempts to look at the representation of the 'tribes' of the Brahmaputra Valley, and the possible reasons for such an understanding and how far this discourse could grasp the dynamics or social reality of such societies. As mentioned earlier identifying the tribes within the dynamics of social change, in opposition to caste Hindus were not a simple process but a problematic issue. Obviously 'tribes' were not easily categorized if social realities were considered.

Overt confrontation between the colonial state and the Kacharis in the 1861 riots led to a growing administrative concern within the official circle about the administration of the tribes. The murder of Lt. Singer in Phulagoree in 1861 by tribal peasants evoked serious responses which characterised the society and the rioters also. In a letter to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Major H.Hopkinson, Agent to the Governor General traces the origin "to apprehensions which had been excited in respect to the import to be levied on *Pan* cultivation, and to the duty on Arts, Trades and Dealings."⁸ To a great extent unrest among the tribal peasantry was aroused by the prohibition of opium cultivation in 1860.⁹ Government reports on the riots state the growing concern among the tribal peasants regarding taxation. They repeatedly petitioned

⁸ Home Public B, 13th June, 1862, Nos.83-87 (National Archives of India, Delhi).

⁹ See H.K.Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. vol iv & v, (Guwahati,1992-93).

and approached the Deputy Commissioner to state their grievances. These proceedings report the failure of the administration to redress these grievances, which created a situation of ferment. The peasantry organised *mels*, meetings where people gathered, often armed with lathis, to protest. Lt. Singer was killed by such a gathering when he tried to impose order and disarm them. For the first time, after the murder of Lt. Singer Phulagoree in 1861, the Kacharis and their administration was seriously considered within the framework of direct and indirect administration. This riot and protest led to the characterisation of the Kacharis as being 'semi-savage' linguistically and 'savage' in the administrative sense. The Kacharis were 'semi-savage' "speaking a language of their own and are quite distinct in race from the Bengallee and Assamese..."¹⁰ Administratively the turbulent nature led to various characterisation. "Cacharies were impatient of taxation, and a leaven of the blood-thirsty spout...."¹¹ Thus, in suppressing the riot the colonial authorities came into direct contact with the Kacharis and the unfamiliarity and distinctiveness from the Assamese and Bengalis struck them.

Various concerns and notions shaped the discourse on the tribes. Dominant themes being that of social and cultural changes which accompanied the broader question of evolution/movement from

¹⁰ Home Public B, 13th June, 1862, Nos.83-87 (NAI).

¹¹ Ibid.

'savagery' to civilisation and the various agencies of such changes. Undoubtedly the 1861 Phulguri riots were important landmark in the history of the growing interest on 'tribes'. But such an attitude is not reflected in later works especially in those where they formed a part of the general description. Of course after authority was no more strongly imposed and the people controlled, the characterization of the Kacharis also altered remarkably. J.D.Anderson, characterizes the Kacharis settled in the Duars as "like most aboriginal races of Assam, cheery, good-natured, semi-savage folk; candid, simple, trust-ful, but incorrigibly disrespectful according to Indian notions of good manners."¹²

Savagery And Civilization: Colonial Stereotypes

One of the dominant characterizations of the 'tribes' of Brahmaputra valley is that of a '*semi-savage*'. According to J.D.Anderson, "the Kacharis are the most innocent and kindly of semi-savage people."¹³ Likewise, in the introduction of L.A.Waddell's *The tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, while celebrating the wild region with a rich variety of 'savage tribes', L.A.Waddell,¹⁴ about the more 'civilized tribes' living along the river, Brahmaputra.¹⁵ Lyall also characterises the

¹² Endle, *The Kacharis*, Introduction by J.D.Anderson, p.XIII.

¹³ Ibid., p.XVIII.

¹⁴ L.A.Waddell,(1854-1938) Medical officer in the Indian Government service also mentioned as traveller and orientalist.

¹⁵ L.A.Waddell, "*Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, p.1

Mikirs in opposition to the hill tribes. According to him “the leading features of the race, in contrast with other hill tribes of Assam, is its essentially unwarlike and pacific character.”¹⁶ And therefore tribes like the Mikirs though not actually practising “head-hunting” as the “savage hill tribes”¹⁷ were in “the early stage of the wandering horde, without permanent village.”¹⁸ Further, W.W.Hunter, Waddell, and Endle characterized the tribes at another level as “semi-hinduised”. Behind such characterization lies colonial notions about the society of Assam and how populations were to be classified and enumerated. The causes of 1861 riots by the Kacharis were traced by the colonial authorities to the nature of constitution of society in Assam which was ‘heterogeneous’, hence to accommodate their stereotype of ‘wild’ tribes, it became essential for the colonial ethnographer to perceive it as a society in transition. Major Henry Hopkinson locates the dynamism in the constant migration of hill tribes towards the plains “the hill tribes who have never seen a white face...Hill tribes who have settled for some generation in the plains and who, as they spread, intermingle, at their point of contact, with the timid enervate, intriguing oppressive priest-ridden descendants of the Bengal and Shan colonists who are known as the Assamese.”¹⁹ Though it was meant to characterize only the Kacharis,

¹⁶ Sir Charles Lyall, *The Mikirs*, p.151.

¹⁷ L.A.Waddell, “*Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*”, p.1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.30.

¹⁹ Home Public B, 13 June 1862, Nos.83-87 (NAI), From Major Henry

such an image was provided, by and large, for all other plains-dwelling tribes. Waddell likewise in the introduction of his book appeals to ethnographers and scientists to record the practices of such 'prehistoric' societies still extant, but rapidly changing in face of "our advancing civilization."²⁰ He also quotes Col. Woodthorpe "...of late all the various wild tribes are fast losing their characteristic customs and adopting those of their Hinduised Assamese neighbours so quickly".²¹

Another important aspect of the discourse in Waddell, Dalton and others²² is the migration from the hills to the plains. "The rich fertile central valley and its chief tributaries seem always to have attracted the more powerful tribes from the mountains... luxurious living inevitably resulted in their degeneration and absorption by the old settlers of the plains, eventuating in their being conquered sooner or later by a more active horde of mountaineers, who again in their turn succumbed in like manner to a fresher batch of invading hillmen."²³ Thus parallel with the history of the region as a "long tale of violent inter-tribal conflict,

contd..

Hopkinson, Agent, Governor General, North-East Frontier to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal.

²⁰ Waddell, *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, p.2.

²¹ *Ibid.* p.4.

²² Census Reports of Assam for the years; 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941.

²³ Waddell, *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, p.9. Also see B.C.Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers*, Vol.VIII, Lakhimpur, (1905), pp.48-49.

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invasion and cruel extermination”,²⁴ was this notion of ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’, ‘Aryan’ and ‘Mongoloid’ races. The colonial ethnographers, writing on Assam, found the category of ‘race’ more useful in classifying the varied population than ‘caste’. When conducting the census of 1901, B.C.Allen remarked that contrary to the functional notion of caste held by Ibbetson, Nesfield, Risley, “Caste is not necessarily connected with occupation, because we find that in Assam proper, it is almost entirely matter of race”.²⁵ Such a view has been reiterated in the 1931 census of caste in Assam being a racial division. We find from Dalton to Lyall, though sometimes ‘caste’ and ‘race’ are used imprecisely, mostly the discussion focuses on the division of the ‘Aryan’ ‘Hindus’ and ‘Mongoloid’ ‘Animists’. Crucial to identifying the ‘tribes’ as ‘Mongoloid’ was to locate the history of the origin of the tribes. There was a unanimous agreement that the tribes migrated from the hills which was probably derived from the notion that ‘tribals’ ‘aborigines’ ‘semi-savage’ people are necessarily confined to forest and hills, and that the plains were not their natural habitat. Waddell discusses this phenomenon in the introduction of his book.²⁶ They also point to two seemingly contradictory processes in the movement of the tribes. First, the regression of the tribes into the hills “in face of advancing civilization.”²⁷ And secondly, a reverse trend of progression of

²⁴ Waddell, *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, p1

²⁵ Census of Assam, 1901, Vol. I (Report)

²⁶ Waddell, *Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, p.2.

²⁷ Ibid. p.2.

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'tribes' to "the rich fertile central valley and its chief tributaries" which "seem always to have attracted the more powerful tribes from the mountains".²⁸ Hunter, Endle, Lyall, and others have stressed on the question of the movement of the 'tribes'. If we consider the question historically the two above mentioned processes can be located in two different periods. Dalton to a certain extent discusses these migrations in the specific time context. He focussed on the early migrations that took place in the history, the Kacharis, Chutiyas and Ahoms who settled down in the plains. But the process of migration and movement of population did continue to very recent times, as late as early twentieth century. The discussion largely focuses on the principal groups of people the Ahoms, the Chutiyas and the Kacharis, who dominated the medieval political history.

According to Dalton, Kamrup or Assam was among the earliest settlements of the eastward expanding Aryans,²⁹ and simultaneously the Chutiyas "adopted Hindu customs, and placed themselves under the tutelage of Brahmanical priests..."³⁰ and the Ahoms too who migrated to Assam in the thirteenth century, "became proselytes to Hinduism at an early period, and, adopting the language and customs of Hindus".³¹ The

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.9.

²⁹ E.T.Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, p.78.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p.77.

³¹ *Ibid.* p.76.

evidence that there was conversion as early as the ancient period often led the ethnographers to speculate at the nature of Hinduism and 'tribal' religion in the valley. Rev.S.Endle questions the nature of the spread of Hinduism within the process of 'conversion to Hinduism' which followed the establishment of a kingdom. He writes, "it would seem that the movement was a very limited and restrictive one, confined indeed very largely to the Raja and the member of the court".³² Such an argument of course has to dealt with caution, considering that it was made by a missionary, engaged in proselytizing of the Kacharis to his own faith. Ethnographic writings on the current status of the 'tribes' in the Brahmaputra valley in late nineteenth century categorize their religion as "semi-Hinduised." According to Dalton therefore, conjecturally speaking, it was probably the ruler who strictly adhered to the dictums of caste-divided Brahmanical order at his court. The mass of the 'tribal' people probably practised a religion, which probably had elements of Hinduism, due to constant influence but retained elements of their old faith. As Dalton points the 'Hindu' influence has been so strong among the tribes like the Chutiyas and Ahoms that other than the physical distinctiveness of race nothing differentiated them from the caste Hindus.³³ The influence of living with a caste Hindu population was obvious at various levels and to different degrees. Sometimes it was in the sphere of religion as Hunter recorded, "The Miris in the plains

³² Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.7.

³³ Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, pp.76-77.

have generally abandoned the vague religious notions of their ancestors and adopted ideas put into their heads by the Assamese Gosain or Brahmanical priest, that each of them choose to adopt as their Guru or spiritual instructor...”³⁴ Waddell writing much later on the Miris also comments on evolution from the ‘maternal stage’ to a ‘paternal stage’.³⁵ In fact for him the Miris manifest a tribe in ‘transition’ from matriarchy to patriarchy,³⁶ from a ‘*primitive stage of society...*’ to one in which descent is traced through the father, *as in civilised society.*”³⁷ The levels of change and shift in beliefs and customs varied greatly from ‘tribe’ to ‘tribe’ and there were regional variations as well.

Different ethnographers observed wide ranging changes in the lifestyle of the ‘tribes’ – from dressing, to shelter and mode of cultivation. These changes were located within the purview of the ‘tribes’ settling in the plains and their interaction with the ‘caste Hindu’ neighbours. Hunter, Waddell, Endle and others in their accounts mentioned that the Kacharis, Mikirs, Miris had moved away slowly from their traditional way of dressing and constructing houses. Hunter’s description of the Mikirs of Nowgong mentions that earlier the “practice was to go nearly naked, although a few are now well clad; the men in waist clothes

³⁴ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, p.343.

³⁵ Waddell, “*Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*”, p.59.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p.3.

³⁷ *Ibid.* emphasis mine.

wrapped around the loins and hanging down to the knee (dhuti), and the females in a species of petticoat (mekhalas), in imitation of the Assamese.”³⁸ Waddell in his account mentioned that the Miris were “gradually merging into Hinduised habits so far as to live in mud huts built on the ground in the neighborhood of the Assamese”³⁹ and left living in houses built on piles. Again when recording the Mikirs he observed that in the vicinity of the Hinduised Assamese the Mikirs were rapidly giving up their ‘primitive habits’. At Kamrup near the Assamese settlements he found that Mikirs were not only “giving up their nomadic habits and forming fixed villages, but have abandoned their communal houses, and adopted separate houses for each family...”⁴⁰ Likewise, “they are adopting the style of Assamese dresses, and bazaars-made clothes...”⁴¹ Hence, we find in Waddell’s account where as he characterizes the Mikirs as a “wandering horde, without permanent village”,⁴² he also mentions that they were giving up their nomadic habits and settling down permanently.

For the colonial ethnographer, comprehending the changes and shifts in the social and cultural sphere of the tribals was more difficult than understanding the changes in their material lifestyle. Here ideas, beliefs,

³⁸ Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, vol.I p.183.

³⁹ Waddell, *Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, p.59.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p.31

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.30.

customs did not conform to strict defining lines or boundaries, and the grey area of subtle changes and of overlapping belief-systems made it very difficult for the ethnographers to document concrete information. The 'tribes' of the Brahmaputra Valley mentioned in most of the accounts are called 'semi-hinduised' but some like the Kacharis are also referred to, in the words of Mrs.P.H.Moore, as "a tribe of demon worshippers."⁴³ Endle despite his documenting the influence of hinduism on the Káchari race categorises them as distinctly 'animistic'⁴⁴ But he also writes about the extensive pantheon of the Kacharis and speculates that "only a comparatively small number are strictly of tribal or national origin, many having obviously been borrowed from their neighbours."⁴⁵ But the term 'animist' as defined in the census connotes a loose set of beliefs: "animism can, however, be more readily defined by the negative method, as the creed of those members of the aboriginal tribes who did not claim to be followers of the main recognized religions."⁴⁶

In the sphere of religion there was a complex process of appropriation and rejection going on. In the process of hinduisation, at a popular level caste Hindús appropriated many tribal deities and renamed them. Dalton writing about the religious practices of the Rabhas, mentions how

⁴³ P.H.Moore, *Twenty Years in Assam*, (Calcutta, 1901), p.81.

⁴⁴ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.33.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p.35.

⁴⁶ *Census of Assam*, 1901, p.46.

'tribal' gods 'the rishi' and his wife were "worshipped throughout Assam as the 'Bura-Buri', though, under Brahmanical influence, in most places the 'Bura-Buri' are now worshipped as if they were Siva and Durga."⁴⁷ Even the Mikir God 'Arnam' was hinduised into 'Prithi-Raja'⁴⁸ and as recorded by Endle "almost all the names are obviously borrowed from popular Hinduism",⁴⁹ for example, Kuber. Lyall notes of the tribal influences on the language and naming of God because of the interaction with Hindus. Also, "borrowing from Hinduism are equally manifest in their language, their folk-tales and their religion. Assamese words are numerous in Mikir; *Arnam Kethe* seems to be a translation of *Mahadeva*; *Jom-Arong* and the ideas linked therewith of an after-life, are strongly impressed with a Hindu stamp."⁵⁰ Writing about the beliefs of the dead, he writes, "The Mikirs have borrowed from the Hindu Assamese the ideas and the names of *Boikuntho* (*Vaikunta*, Vishnu's Paradise) and *Norok* (*Naraka*, hell); but these conceptions do not play much part in their views of a life to come. Better known, and more often mentioned, is *Jom Recho* (*Jam, Yama Raja*), the lord of spirits with whom the dead remain below ground."⁵¹

⁴⁷ Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, p.87.

⁴⁸ Waddell, "*Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*", p.32.

⁴⁹ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.49.

⁵⁰ Lyall, *The Mikirs*, p.152.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Assimilation and Its Contestation

In these accounts, the notion of a 'tribe' being 'semi-hinduised', or being under the influence of Hinduism was often qualified by statements that these influences do not transform the tribal into a 'Hindu' and that his beliefs and practices makes him distinguishable from others. In Endle's work on religion, culture and social practices are qualified with various illustrations on how parallel to the processes of Hinduisation was the contestation of such an influence and assertion of a 'Kachari' identity. The Kacharis "though largely hinduised, they still form a large, perhaps the main constituent element in the permanent population of the province. To this day one often comes across villages bearing the name of 'Kacharigaon', the inhabitants of which are completely Hinduised, though for some considerable time they would seem to have retained their Kachari customs and culture, unimpaired."⁵² Preservation of the culture and social identity, or at least the imagined satisfaction that it was preserved, was more evident in the outlying parts of the province. Lyall also discusses the persistence of certain 'tribal' customs within the Mikirs despite their tendency to 'assimilate' as mobile, nomadic people tend to do. According to him the Mikirs, being a small tribe are "extremely homogenous."⁵³ Unlike, other tribes the Khasis, Kacharis, Kukis, Nagas, the Mikirs did not fight internecine wars and therefore did not suffer disintegrating influences.⁵⁴ "Whether in north Cachar, the

⁵² Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.8.

⁵³ Lyall, *The Mikirs*, p.152.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Jaintia Hills, Nowgong, or the Mikir Hills, their tribal institutions, their language, and their national character are identical and they pursue their peaceful husbandry in the same manner as their forefathers...".⁵⁵ Despite their borrowings, especially linguistically, "they retain together with these borrowed features, a sufficiently definite stock of original characteristics."⁵⁶ Though generally as Endle notes "the Kacharis of Assam still cling to their national customs, speech, religion."⁵⁷, in certain areas they could not be distinguished from the rest of the population. For instance, in the sphere of 'domestic' life, "the Kacharis of Darrang do not differ very materially from their Hindu neighbours, to the subordinate castes of whom they are no doubt very closely allied."⁵⁸

Colonial ethnographers and writers also evinced interest on the loss of customs and language due to hinduisation. According to Endle, Kacharis who had become "more or less hinduised"⁵⁹ gave up using their mother tongue. He also locates the disappearance of certain customs like the provision of bachelor barracks as a movement away from their 'tribal lifestyle' to a more 'civilised' way. And as Waddell observed a the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy reflected among other

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ S.Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.8

⁵⁸ Ibid, p.11

⁵⁹ Ibid.p 5.

developments, in the gradual disappearance of practices like 'couvade'⁶⁰ though in some cases the would be bride-groom continued to serve for his wife for a time in the house of the girl's mother.⁶¹ As a result of the communication with the caste Hindu Assamese society, the internal structure of the organisation in the 'tribe' was altered to a certain extent, though not radically. Like Endle writing in the early part of twentieth century mentions that "totem has become a thing of the past",⁶² though not obsolete some regard for it still surviving. But it was clear from such information as was available to him, that the "internal and tribal organisation of the Kacharis (Bara) race rested in early days, very largely at least on a totemistic basis."⁶³ It is clearly evident from Endle and other accounts that the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley had experienced a flow of various ideas and cultural practices which were incorporated in one or the other form, and probably rejected at times according to the nuances of the local socio-economic conditions.

Marriage rituals were also observed to be fast losing the rigidity of a 'tribal' society. Restrictions of endogamous marriage were generally not

⁶⁰ Couvade is a ritual where the husband goes through the ceremony of mock child-birth, considered by colonial ethnographer as remnants of a matriarcal society.

⁶¹ Waddell, *Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, p.45 and 59. According to Endle among the Kacharis the institution of marriage was one of the first to be influenced by Hinduism. Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.29.

⁶² Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.29.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p.24.

observed.⁶⁴ Lyall while discussing marriage rules and polygamy mentioned changes which came about mainly because of extraneous factors. He tentatively concluded that “monogamy is the general rule, and that cases of polygamy have occurred in consequence of the effect of the example of the Assamese, and the weakening of tribal sanctions.”⁶⁵ The complexity of the situation is also reflected in Mrs.P.H.Moore’s account of missionary activity amongst the Mikirs. “The Mikirs have some curious customs. The Mikirs sacrifice chickens, goats and pigs to the demons to keep them from doing them harm.”⁶⁶ At the same time the Mikirs cremate the dead “the same as Hindus.”⁶⁷

In fact in the public sphere there were some institutions which were shared by both the Caste-Hindu and the ‘tribals’. Bihu was celebrated by the caste Hindus and ‘tribals’ though the forms of celebration varied. Dalton calls the ‘Magh’ and ‘Baisakh’ Bihu the two national festivals of the Assamese. The observances connected with these festivals have nothing to do with the Hindu religion...”⁶⁸ Endle gives a vivid account of the ‘Baisakh’ ‘April’ Bihu, “the origin of which it is not easy to account for, seem to be a “saturnalia” of much more objectionable character. The people abandon themselves freely both to drunkenness and

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Lyall, *The Mikirs*, p.20.

⁶⁶ P.H.Moore, *Twenty Years in Assam*, p.150.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.149.

⁶⁸ Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, p.80.

other forms of licentiousness and cases of known assault and riots have been known to accompany and follow these gatherings.⁶⁹ But these are not “distinctively tribal festivals characteristic of the Kacharis”⁷⁰ because both the caste Hindu and the Kacharis celebrate the festivity of Bihu.

The similarity and commonality was also evident in character and the mentality of the common people, “the rustic Hindus of the Brahmaputra valley are in temperament and habits very like the cheerful and smiling Bodo folk...”⁷¹ Although ethnographers like Dalton have documented about undistinguishability of the population we find in the writings of others (Waddell, Endle, Hamilton, P.H.Moore) existence of beliefs and practices which often differentiated, probably not radically but subtly. That is why most of these accounts mention the prevalence of witch-doctors (Ojhas) even within hinduised tribes. Likewise, Waddell observed that “...till now those tribes of the valley who pose as Hindus especially the Ahoms, Koch and Kacharis are scarcely to be distinguished by a casual observer from the Bengalis in dress, manners and language except for their lighter colour and Mongoloid eyes.”⁷² In the sphere of prescription or proscription norms of Hinduism, these

⁶⁹ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.50.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.49.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*; Introduction by J.D.Anderson.p.XIII

⁷² Waddell, *Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, p.11.

communities did not always conform to the colonial ethnographers image of an 'Aryan' 'Hindu' and therefore were called 'semi-hinduised' or 'semi-savage' or 'semi-aboriginal'.

One of the areas where these people functioned in different spaces and hence negated the rigidity was the notion about proscribed food, and ethnographers observed it with interest, because food was the area which clearly defined in the public and private spheres the ideas of 'clean' and 'unclean'. Angus Hamilton writes about the presence of such practices among Miris who had settled in Assam proper and described themselves as Hindus "at the same time they have liberal notions with regard to diet, eating pork and drinking rice beer without hesitation. Where they are not Hindus, they are Animists, sacrificing to the sun, moon and earth."⁷³ But as mentioned by Dalton conversion to Hinduism, more specifically to Vaishnavism entailed abstinence from forbidden food, "the Soronias keep fowls, but not pigs and will not eat beef; they are *cleanly in their habits*."⁷⁴ The proselytism is carried on the basis of one simple but powerful or earnest request of making them clean. But "they do not renounce the devil and all his works, but promise to abstain from pig and live cleanly."⁷⁵ Satisfied, their Hindu gurus did not interfere in certain practices like dancing "nor do they attempt to alter

⁷³ Hunter, *Statistical Account of Assam*, p.183.

⁷⁴ Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, p.82, (emphasis added).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

their customs” such as late marriage.⁷⁶ Even the Mikirs inhabiting in the fringes of caste Hindu villages were going through changes in customs, though they did not employ Hindu priests, the changes were tangible. The “foremost of all caste distinctions in practice, namely, what a person may eat or drink is beginning to show itself.”⁷⁷ But from the illustrations provided by Waddell it is also evident that such notions were not yet strongly entrenched and there were regular subversions of such norms. Though still believing and practicing rituals and customs integral to their social structure there were simultaneous trends which increasingly appeared to the colonial ethnographer deviation from a particular way of life. This complex situation was explained as the ‘tribes’ “adopting many of the externals of Hinduism.”⁷⁸ And the existence of tribal customs to contest the influence of Hinduism was regarded as a positive cultural symptom by Endle. “... They help to keep the people to some extent beyond the influence of the destructive vortex of Hinduism, in which their simple primitive virtues might otherwise be so readily engulfed, and the adoption of which in whole or in part is invariably accompanied by a grave and deep seated deterioration in conduct and character.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Waddell, *Tribes of Brahmaputra Valley*, p.3.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.45

⁷⁹ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.53.

This leads us to another area of “widely –held ethnological convictions about the consequences of forming a racial ‘composite’ through the merging of people from separate racial ‘stock’ and ‘very unequal degrees of civilisation,”⁸⁰ which was racial degeneration. Such an idea is evident in most of the writings and essentially derives from the idea that racial intermixing, migration from the hills to the plains and influence in religious beliefs adversely affects the composition of a ‘tribe’. As mentioned earlier, Major Henry Hopkinson wrote about the tribes being “in contact with the timid enervate, intriguing, oppressive, priest-ridden descendants of the Bengal and Shan colonists who are known as the Assamese.”⁸¹ Waddell discussing the migration of the tribes from the hills to the plains mentions that the ‘tribes’ that settled down in the plains “inevitably” degenerated, due to the “more luxurious living” and were absorbed by the old settlers of the plains.⁸² Such migration has resulted in a considerable intermingling of races in the valley proper and therefore none of the races preserve the ‘purity’ “whereas the mountain tribes appear to have retained their purity of stock to a much greater degree.”⁸³ Migration to the plains also located within the purview of changing habits or acquiring ‘evil’ ‘habits’, due to which the tribe might lose its vitality and physical strength. According to Mrs. P.H.Moore,

⁸⁰ Susan Bayly, “Caste and ‘Race’ in Colonial Ethnography”, p.199.

⁸¹ Home Public (B) 13th June, 1862, Nos. 83-87.

⁸² Waddell, *Tribes of Brahmaputra Valley*, p.9.

⁸³ Ibid.

“one sad result of the Mikirs coming to the plains is that they are fast learning to take opium”⁸⁴ which degenerates this weak minded people. According to Susan Bayly “the environmental theme was then taken up by Victorian ethnologists as a part of the language of racial classification in which so-called ‘civilized’ and ‘savage’ races were distinguished from one another on the basis of habitat.”⁸⁵ Such an explanation was crucial for classifying the varied population of the area and also as a justification for colonial rule and direct intervention. The climatic influence being crucial on the temperament and disposition of the people which led to a differentiated population of caste Hindus, ‘semi-hinduised’, ‘semi-savage’ tribes of the plains and the ‘blood thirsty and warlike tribes’ in the surrounding mountains. Ethnographers drew various conclusions especially with regard to change of lifestyle among the tribes. Essentially, for all of them, migration to the plains corrupts the tribes, but it also undeniably and inevitably brings it closer to civilisation, as Waddell mentions in his introduction which leads to various changes through different agencies whether the influence of Hinduism, the colonial state and the missionaries. Influence of Hinduism was essentially not perceived as a moral progress from the ‘primitive stage’ of the tribal societies but only as a step towards civilisation and

⁸⁴ P.H.Moore, *Twenty Years in Assam*, p.150.

⁸⁵ Susan Bayly, “Caste and ‘Race’ in Colonial Ethnography”, p.174.

hierarchised caste society of the Hindus.

'Tribals' and the Colonial State

Colonial ethnographers by and large saw the colonial state as the only redeemer of the 'tribals', civilising them from the fetters of a caste based Hindu society. The paternalistic attitude reinforced with the ideas of civilising is evident in all writings. Hamilton writing on the Miri and the Mishmi mission observes that ever since the advent of the British in Assam, the Miris have shown themselves amenable to civilising influences, though this quality is not shown by the hill tribes who still preserve no little independence."⁸⁶ In fact this independence of the 'war like', 'head hunting' hill tribes and problems created by geographical isolation in administration made the colonial authorities look at the tribes as 'amenable'. But administration of the plains tribes also presented severe problems occasionally and the colonial government seriously considered separate administrative set-up for them. After the 1861 revolt the idea of restoring the local administration to the traditional 'tribal' leaders was discussed. "Now if there is one rule more certain than another in dealing with such tribes, it is that they must be managed through their own chiefs or head-men, that there shall be no native officers of any stranger race between them and their European rulers. Unless it be a few selected for their special tact and influence in

⁸⁶ Angus Hamilton, *In Abor Jungles. An Account of the Abor Expedition, the Mishmi and Miri Mission* (London, 1912), p.85.

dealing with savages.”⁸⁷

The administrative concern about ‘tribes’ arose from the paternalistic colonial attitude to safeguard the ‘weak’, ‘vulnerable’ plains tribe from the caste Hindus. The administration of the district was managed by the Assamese or Bengalis, “the omlah, the police, the local revenue officers are all one or the other, and in their eyes the Cacharies and their cognates are little better than outcaste...”⁸⁸, and were exploited by them. The argument in favour of paternalism and relative isolation was more evident in the works of Endle and Mrs.P.H.Moore, the missionaries. According to Endle, the Kacharis by staying away from the corrupting influence of civilisation has preserved his innocent self, but “his innocence is the innocence of ignorance, not the innocence of experience and he is as a rule free from certain forms of evil because in his village life he has never come under any temptations to indulge in them.”⁸⁹ Contact with civilisation as manifested in a degraded form in the caste Hindu society or even “when brought into contact with ... civil and criminal courts,”⁹⁰ there is a degeneration in character and the much celebrated innocence is lost. The strong comment about the role of colonial civil and criminal courts and deep faith in customary justice

⁸⁷ Home Public (B) 13th June, 1862, Nos. 83-87.(NAI)

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.3.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

might be seen as an urge to preserve the 'tribal identity' in a traditional form. The colonial authorities assumed the role of moral guardians to the 'tribes', safeguarding them from the Hinduism and the hegemonic Assamese society. Colonial intervention not only by means of administration but also through opening up of communication between remote areas, extension of tea industry and other European interests in Assam encouraged interaction, ended isolation and brought them in contact with civilisation. The modern missionary activity among the tribe was essentially a part of the civilising mission. Mrs.P.H.Moore writing about the American Baptist missionaries work among the Mikirs discusses about hindrances in proselytising one of which was "the drinking customs of the animistic tribe, such as Nagas, Garos, Rabhas, Mikirs, Miris"⁹¹ and opium addiction. But since the Mikirs were a 'timid race' it was easy to set them in "right direction"⁹² with missionary influence. Endle on the other hand celebrates the British colonial government and the missionaries too. He illustrates the "benevolent influence of Pax Britannica to be found in the wide realm of India"⁹³ evident in the domestic functioning of "a Kachari woman working placidly and contently at the weaving loom"⁹⁴ and freeing the people from exploitation, slavery and cruel raids. The role of the colonial state

⁹¹ P.H.Moore, *Twenty Years in Assam*, p.200.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.150.

⁹³ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.21.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

in its efforts to tax home-made liquor “phatika” (crude whisky) is also lauded by Endle which according to him, is harmful to the physical, mental and moral well-being of the Kachari race.⁹⁵ Significantly, he compares the rice beer (*madh, zau*) drinking habit of the Kacharis to the drinking habits of working man in more civilised lands, for example, England.⁹⁶ For Waddell, the British occupation of Assam after the Burmese war of 1824, broke the relative isolation of these communities and gave a fillip to the process of hinduisation, and also ‘civilised’ these ‘tribes’. Discussing the dressing style, he mentions that adoption of the Assamese dress and mill made cheap cotton goods from Manchester and Bombay, which were displacing the native, was a result “more ample and decent.”⁹⁷ That the advent of colonialism brought these ‘tribes’ closer to civilisation’ is evident from such illustrations.

The Census as a Site of Contestation

The import of these ideas in ethnographic writings are evident in the politics of census enumeration in Assam. The census negated most of those fluidity presented in the ethnographic accounts because of the official necessity to categorise and classify. It also provided for the first time within the purview of colonial ethnography the scope where the

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.19.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁹⁷ Waddell, *Tribes of Brahmaputra Valley*, p.31.

subject could identify and define himself. But the identification happened only within rigidly defined boundaries of such colonial categories as caste, race and tribe, which informed the identity of these communities. The census of 1901 portrays the heterogeneous composition of the population of Brahmaputra valley as "...an Aryan Hindu population, surrounded and to some extent intermingled with semi-hinduised tribes of Mongolian origin..."⁹⁸ For census purposes it was not easy to define whom to call the 'Assamese', and Assamese castes and the indigenous tribes were clubbed together under the head 'Assamese'. The census interestingly also documents the returns in religion in terms of increase and decrease of people following Hinduism and of people returned as Animists. It was found that the number of Hindus was increasing in certain districts due to 'conversion' to Hinduism. Conversely, in districts like Goalpara the percentage of people to be enumerated as Animists had increased by 8% which was "due to more careful scrutiny by the enumerators of the claims of members of the aboriginal tribes to be entered as Hindus..."⁹⁹ Though the census tried to classify Hinduised members of a tribe and non-hinduised Animist 'tribals', there was also an awareness of the various complexities in the process as is evident by the above quoted lines.

⁹⁸ Report on the Census of Assam, Vol.I, 1901, p.1

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.42.

Another aspect of census enumeration was the problem of defining markers to differentiate 'tribes' from other communities. The fluidity of beliefs, along with regional variations, which could not be strictly ascribed to any religion, left enumerators with their own interpretations of the information available to them. Later on such fluidities and lack of distinctiveness became a powerful instrument in the hands of various groups who in alliance with the enumerators determined the community identities.

In the absence of a clearly defined religious identity, the colonial authorities eager to preserve 'tribal' customs and social structures, used language as an important marker of tribal identity. Hutton, in 1931 census report's language section has written that "apart from linguistics, the extent of the survival of tribal languages is a better index than that of the survival of tribal religion to the social cohesion of the tribe, since the test of language is easier and more definite than that of religion where the borderland of Hinduism is often vague and obscure."¹⁰⁰ Earlier, 1891 census (General Report) also discussed the dying of the tribal dialects consequent to their descent to the plains. But another aspect of language question was the bi-linguality of the 'tribal' population. "Nearly all the aboriginal tribes who live in the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley speak Assamese language in addition to their own

¹⁰⁰ Census of India, 1931, General Report, p.,349.

tribal lingo...”¹⁰¹ But surprisingly the 1901 census locates the decline of tribal dialects in the development of the province under colonialism. According to it, “The growth of tea-gardens, on which considerable Kacharis are employed, the improvement of the means of communication, and the spread of education, have all combined to produce a state of affairs, in which the tribesman finds it necessary to know some language which will be intelligible to people living outside his own village...”¹⁰² B.C.Allen in 1901 was therefore sure that successive census would only register the gradual decrease in the number of speaker of the tribal dialects. In another way, by claiming the ‘tribes’ to be bi-lingual, the colonial authorities accepted Assamese as the hegemonic language. In the case of the Miris, their ‘tribal’ dialect speakers were shown to be on a decline comparatively from 94.9% (1891) to 86.6% (1901) and even with the Mikirs there was a slight decline from 95% (1891) to 94% (1901).

By 1931 the census had become a powerful political weapon/instrument for the colonial state and the emerging indigenous middle class for articulating their respective views on the question of representational politics. Therefore increase and decrease of number of speakers of a particular language or tribal dialect had immediate results on provincial politics. Census became the politics of numbers and various tribal

¹⁰¹ Report on the Census of Assam, Vol.I, 1901, p.87.

¹⁰² Ibid., p.88.

organisations and organisations like Hindu Mahasabha contested in this space for defining identities. By 1931 controversies centering the enumeration of 'tribes' like Kacharis, Lalungs, Rabhas, Miris, Mikirs became crucial concern for the colonial ethnographer. Thus, by this time census enumeration became an important area where identities were defined and reshaped, often such changes were dictated by social and political exigencies.

Conclusion

Though representing the tribes was fraught with problems, certain ideas emerged which came to dominate the characterisation. The discourse on the tribes, focussed largely, on the question of change. Change itself was dealt within the purview of the evolutionary framework's progress of 'primitive' communities to 'civilization' and the extent of Hindu influence on the 'tribes'. These two processes were of course not perceived as mutually exclusive. An apparent and superficial duality was the paternalistic duty to 'civilise' the 'tribes', while at the same time celebrating their exclusiveness and safeguarding them from the degeneration that progressively sets in due to environmental factors and cultural contact with civilization. As Ajay Skaria writes, the duality shared a common motive and a great affinity. According to him, "There was, on the one hand, the civilizing mission, with its tasks of bringing the wild into the time of the civilized..." and "on the other hand there was primitivism, with its celebration of wildness. Thus, the Kiplingesque

Anglo-Indian jungle, a space of the exotic, opposed to the baseness of Indian civilization...”¹⁰³ Thus the noble savage. Colonial ethnographic discourse largely became a representation of differences,¹⁰⁴ juxtapositioning the ‘semi-savage tribes’ of the plains with other dominant section of the population, the ‘caste Hindus.’ In doing so they had to accept that the interaction and influence of the caste-Hindu Assamese society did provide civilizing impetus, though in a relative sense. But as B.B.Chaudhuri writes, the issue ignores the subjectivity of the tribals in emulating the Hindu cultural influences.¹⁰⁵ Mere emulation by *adivasis* of some cultural traits – religious beliefs, rituals and practices was described as growing Hindu influence or ‘Hinduisation’,¹⁰⁶ by colonial ethnographers who often failed to accommodate various complexities of the society where migrations were still taking place, and various people intermingled at different and degrees.

¹⁰³ Ajay Skaria, “Being *Jangli*: The Politics of Wildness” in *Studies in History*, 14,2, n.s, (New Delhi,1998), p.214.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.193.

¹⁰⁵ B.B.Chaudhuri, “Tribe –Caste Continuum” in Dev. Nathan (ed.), *From Tribe and Caste*, (Shimla, 1997), p.48.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*,p.51.

CHAPTER II

THE TRIBAL QUESTION: THE EMERGENCE OF THE TRIBAL LEAGUE AND PROVINCIAL POLITICS FROM 1933-47

Parallel to the efforts of the colonial state and ethnographers to define and locate the 'tribes' of the Brahmaputra valley, there was also an effort by the various 'tribal' communities to locate themselves in the socio-political milieu of the colonial state. Early twentieth century saw the emergence of various associations within these communities, which culminated in the emergence of the Tribal League in 1933. A direct cause and effect relation cannot be established between those early quasi-political organisations and the Tribal League, but their importance in shaping the nascent political and socio-cultural consciousness of the people is undeniable. The *Mels*, tribal conventions (like the Kachari convention, Miri convention etc.) matured the nascent 'tribal' consciousness which resulted in the formation of the Tribal League, as a mode of organised tribal politics. This chapter discusses of the formation of the Tribal League and its role in the provincial politics of Assam, and its own articulation of the issues concerning the 'tribal' population.

From 1920's onwards the conditions of growing political consciousness under Congress, emergence of caste associations (like Ahom Sabha, Kaivartta Sanmilan) gave impetus to the emergence of associations of 'tribal' communities like Chutiya, Moran, and the Kacharis. The

earliest associations belonged to these communities. The early twentieth century saw the emergence of political consciousness among these communities, which arose out of awareness of their own identity and of the political space of representational politics and the colonial discourse on the administration and representation of the tribes. Notions of 'protection', 'isolation', 'backwardness' and 'differentness' were key to the emergence of 'tribal' politics which can be understood in relation to the acceptance and denial of political space in the provincial politics of Assam. 'Tribal' politics cannot be solely located in the catalyst role played by the colonial state which provided the political space, and arranged for the ladders of social mobility like education and employment, but one also needs to locate it vis-à-vis the caste Hindu Assamese society. The emergence of caste-Hindu based middle class politics in the province and denial of political space within it might have aided the rise of tribal politics as well.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the pre-1933 period when various associations made conscious efforts to use political power for safeguarding the interests of their respective communities. The second section takes up the formation of the Tribal League which served as a unified platform for all the 'tribal' communities of the Brahmaputra valley, and goes on to analyse its role in the provincial politics.

Tribal Associative Activities Prior to 1933

Early in the twentieth century through the initiative of an elite and educated middle class, though numerically small and at a nascent stage, the Kacharis, the Mikirs, the Miris, the Rabhas made certain progress in comprehending the politics of rights, representation and emancipation. Various efforts were made to 'develop', 'uplift' or improve the conditions of the 'tribes' and one such effort was the reform movement started by Kalicharan Brahma in the first decade of the twentieth century. Kalicharan was an influential figure in the Bodo/Kachari society of Goalpara, being a rich landlord and forest Mahaldar. It was through his contacts with the Calcutta society that he became a convert to Brahma beliefs and initiated an emancipatory and reformist movement. Denouncing the tribal gods and goddesses and customs and rituals, Kalicharan attempted to create an alternative faith which would successfully challenge Hinduism. This was an assertion of 'tribal' identity at a time when the tribals were ascribed 'low-caste Hindus' status by the Brahmins and the Vaishnava *gossains*, or were being converted to Christianity. Kalicharan's movement did not quite develop an alternative, but in its essence it was akin to the revivalist trends of Hinduism which appeared in the late nineteenth century. The faith he propagated was monotheistic and believed in *yagna* and had in its agenda issues like prohibition of drinking and proscription of

certain food habits like eating pork and fowls.¹ He provided to his people a religion which in essence was Hinduism but was free from the rituals of its priest-ridden typical form. Also, since it did not envisage any caste division of the society, it symbolized improvement in the social position of the 'tribals'.² Though its reformist agenda appeared to be similar to the sympathetic Hindu 'assimilationist' efforts for the 'upliftment' of the tribes, Kalicharan's faith preserved a strong sense of 'tribal' identity and way of life.³ Further, though deriving its essence from the influence of reformist movements it strongly articulated the case of 'tribalness', which was not traced to the practice of certain customs and rituals but to a 'distinctiveness' rooted in from history, as also in the exclusivist, caste Hindu Assamese society. In the absence of other sources it is difficult to say to what extent did this movement prove to be emancipatory, though the claims of huge conversions were made. But it set a precedent for later social and political activities. Kalicharan, himself, remained very active till he expired in 1938. Writing his obituary, Jadav Chandra Khakhlari, member of the Tribal League, mentioned Kalicharan Brahma's efforts in ameliorating the social and economic conditions of the Kacharis. He is also said to have tried to pressurise the authorities to introduce Assamese as a medium of instruction in the schools of Goalpara district

¹ Dabendra Nath Sarma, *Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma*, (Jorhat, 1983), pp.12, 14, 23 and 25.

² Ibid., p.14.

³ Ibid. pp.16-18.

, and opposed the usage of Bengali, to the extent that he sought to prevent the Kachari students from studying the Bengali language and literature.⁴ His conception of a 'tribal' identity was not opposed to either the 'caste Hindu' identity or the 'Assamese' identity as evident from the faith he propagated, and from his stand on the language issue. In 1919 he participated in the *Bodo Chatra Sammilan*. With a view to introducing various social reforms he organised several meetings of the *Bodo Maha Sammilan*. It was under his guidance that various organizations emerged such as *Assam Kachari Jubok Sammilan*, *Bodo Maha Sammilan*, *Bodo Kachari Sammilan Assam*, *Rabha Conference*, *Bodo Jubok Sammilan* which later on actively petitioned to the Simon Commission.

The arrival of the Simon Commission in Assam 1929 generated a lot of political activism in the province. The scope to put forward their grievances and aspirations to a Commission which was reviewing the administrative set up gave further impetus to the activities of the associations. The memoranda and petitions to the Simon Commission show the presence of a strong political consciousness centering on the notion of 'tribal identity', and demands for active roles in the colonial structure as a means of emancipation. Various associations, especially of the Kachari community submitted a number of memoranda⁵ to the

⁴ *Teendiniya Assamiya*, 12 August 1938, Guwahati. Also see Debendra Nath Sarma, *Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma*, pp.29-30.

⁵ *Memorandum by the Bodo Community of Goalpara district*

Commission. The Commission took into consideration the memorandum by the Bodo Community of Goalpara, as representative of the others, to be discussed and few representatives from the 'Primitive and Backward tribes'⁶ were interviewed. These memoranda were 'prayers' for special provisions for the Kacharis, 'a backward and primitive tribe', for special provisions and demands for reservation of seats on community basis in local councils, legislatures, education and appointments. They demanded effective intervention by the colonial state and authorities to ensure that they secured their rights. The petition by the Bodo community complained that the benefits of reforms were enjoyed by the upper caste, thereby depriving the backward communities. It said "inspite of our being such a large member all advantages of the reform are being enjoyed by a Brahmin or by a Kshatriya or by a Sudra."⁷ By that logic of 'deprivation and exploitation' "in order to safeguard the interest of "the community demanded separate representative in the

contd...

(by Mr. Ghyassudin Ahmad, B.L. Dhubri). *Assam Kachari Jubok Sammilan* (by Jadav Chandra Khakhlari, Secretary) on behalf of the entire Kachari community; *Proceedings of the Conference held by the representatives of the Kachari community* from different parts of Assam held at Titabar, Jorhat, August 1928; Memorial of the Bodos, Garos and Rabhas of the Goalpara sub-division, *Boro Jubok Sammilan* (by Shyama Charan Brahma, Secretary).

⁶ The deputation of the Primitive and Backward Tribes called and interviewed which consisted of Sonadhar Das (representative- Bania Samaj); Rai Saheb Pyari Mohan Das (representative-Mahisyas); Nila-Kanta Hazarika (representative-Kaivartas); Jogesh Chandra Nath (representative-Yogis); Mahi Chandra Miri (representative-Miri); Jadav Charan Khakhlari (representative-Bodo); Mahendra Lal Das (representative-Lalungs and Mikirs) and Ramesh Chandra Das.

⁷ Binay Khungur Basumatari, (ed.) *The Plains Tribes Before the Simon Commission*, (henceforth *P.T.B.S.C.*, collected from India Office Library, London by the editor, n.d.) p.5, Also, *Memorandum by the Bodo Community of Goalpara*.

local council and one reserved seat for the Bodos in the Central Legislature”.⁸ Apart from the negative duty from protecting the ‘tribal’ these associations also called for the “special treatment at the hands of the government in matters of education and appointments.”⁹ They deplored the state of ‘backwardness’ amongst the ‘tribals’ and recognised education as a means of development and therefore put forward their demand or ‘prayer’ for free primary education and special scholarships for pursuing higher education. Education was perceived as an instrument which would challenge their backwardness and made people aware of the exploitation and inequality. For being illiterate and ignorant, “our people are always misled, they cannot understand the value of reforms, they cannot save themselves from the hands of the foreign money-lenders.”¹⁰

Education was seen as a source of modernizing change. The articulation of grievances and demands for protecting and special treatment were made on the basis of the projection of the deplorable image of a ‘tribe’. The colonial ethnographic discourse on the ‘tribes’ was applied by the emerging ‘tribal’ elite for functioning within the colonial framework. The political space provided by constitutional politics based on representation from communities made it imperative that community identities should be focussed and maintained. The

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. P.6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

colonial discourse, as discussed earlier,¹¹ divided the society into two different *areas* or *domains*. The presence of social dynamism was acknowledged along with a criticism of such mobility, loss of tradition and the need to preserve it. The 'tribal' educated and traditional elite imbibed such ideas and manipulated invented identities to function within the colonial framework. The process, as evident, can be termed as to borrow Terence Ranger's words, "progressive traditionalism."¹² The leaders, as representatives of their respective tribes, used the colonial imagery of the 'tribe' as 'semi savage', 'illiterate and ignorant' and 'backward' to put forward their political claims and also seek colonial protection. Therefore when seeking for reservation of seats for 'tribals' in the Local Boards, it was pointed out that the tribal people were "easily misled by others at the time of election and consequently people of other community are elected."¹³

In fact, the whole scheme of amelioration of these communities hinged on the basic question of providing education to the people and removing illiteracy. The tenth convention of the *Assam Bodo Chattra Sanmilon* in 1929, under the supervision Rupnath Brahma, also reiterated the necessity of education for progress and better utilisation of the opportunities offered by the colonial state. Therefore they urged

¹¹ See Chapter one above.

¹² Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa" in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (ed.) *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge, 1997), p.253.

¹³ Binay K. Basumatari (ed.) *P.T.B.S.C.*, p.7.

the people to set up schools to struggle against illiteracy, rather than depending on the government.¹⁴ Likewise, delivering the presidential address to the *Assam Kachari Jubok Sammilan* in 1929, Benudhar Rajkhowa stressed on establishing schools in every village through the people's own efforts, and by pressurising the local boards to fund them.¹⁵

Other dominant ideas were on the nature of census enumeration contesting the classification of these 'tribal' communities as low-caste Hindus, which is clearly visible in the petitions. The memorandum submitted by the *Assam Kachari Jubok Sammilan*, suggested that to regard the 'tribals' as 'Hindus' was misleading, for the latter "do not receive them into their society do not dine with them and are mostly unsympathetic with their ideas and aspirations."¹⁶ Also it was emphatically asserted that the Kacharis were never a part of the caste divided Hindu society, and were 'independent' by virtue of not being bound to the "chariot wheels of the Hindu community."¹⁷ So by the late 1920's ideas about the distinctiveness of tribal culture became an important part of what was defined as 'tribal identity'. For various reasons-political, social and economic -such distinctiveness was

¹⁴ Proceedings of the 10th Convention of the *Assam Bodo Chattra Sammilan*, 1929, pp.11-12.

¹⁵ Presidential Address to the *Assam Kachari Jubok Sammilani* by Benydhhar Rajkhowa, 1929, p.11.

¹⁶ Binay K. Basumatari (ed.) *P.T.B.S.C* p.9, (Memorandum of the Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilan).

¹⁷ Ibid., p.10.

espoused. Politically, for special representation such an identity defined in opposition to the caste Hindu social structure aided the formation and later crystallisation of idea of 'tribal' unity. The notion of a 'tribal' unity was initially conceived during this period, though the attempt was made on a small scale in imagining a unified 'great Bodo/Kachari' tribe whose past was traced through the invention of a common history. Thus impregnated with the idea of 'tribal' unity various associations circulated the ideas of forming an unified identity which was based on a distant co-extensive history, which was also the history of exploitation by the caste Hindus, who by providing limited social mobility successfully created fissures in the identity and fragmented it. One of the resolutions of the conference held among representatives of the Kachari community suggested that such communities as the Rava, Sonowal, Thengal, Dimacha and Lalong counted and recognised as the Kachari ."¹⁸ There were efforts to trace a history of origin and migration of the tribe whose "descendants are now spread all over Assam and form an important community. The Kacharis are divided into sub-races."¹⁹ They wanted the census report to enumerate these 'tribes' as one community, under one head, that is Kachari. The issue was further discussed in detail in the Presidential address by Benudhar Rajkhowa in the third conference of the *Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilan*. According to him due to migration the 'great'

¹⁸ Binay K. Basumatari (ed.) *P.T.B.S.C.* . p.13. Proceedings of the Conference held at Jorhat, 1928.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.9, Memorandum of the *Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilan*.

Kachari tribe got divided into branches, which because of geographical distances became totally separated from each other. Distances coupled with the 'pernicious' influence of Hinduism fragmented the identity of the Kacharis into proper 'tribal' and 'low-caste Hindus' like Koches and Soroniyas.²⁰ For him unity of the 'Kachari' was a political and social necessity to contest untouchability ignorance and backwardness.²¹ However, on the question of territorial transfer of Goalpara to Bengal members of the various Kachari organisations claimed themselves to be Assamese on the basis of cultural affinity.²² As mentioned earlier, Kalicharan Brahma's efforts to introduce Assamese as a medium of instruction also points to wider political and cultural identification to an Assamese identity. Though contesting the parallel project of inventing a monolithic Assamese identity on wider issues the identification was with the Assamese. This may have been promoted by the fact that Assamese were not considered as 'outsiders'. Further, this apparently conflicting identities is the presence of contradictory claims to identity may actually be viewed as 'multiple identities'. Probably, as shown by T.Ranger in the case of Africa, there was never a single 'tribal' identity, people 'moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves differently at various junctions and situations.'²³ The overlapping networks of associations did not pose

²⁰ 3rd Conference of the *Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilani*, Presidential address by Benudhar Rajkhowa, 1929, p.3.

²¹ Ibid. p.4

²² Binay K. Basumatari ed. *P.T.B.S.C* p.6.

²³ Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa" p.248.

as a problem for the 'tribal' leadership as it did not when negotiating 'tribal' identity between traditional and modern. And in the process of giving a wider and alternative definition to the idea of an Assamese identity in which they could carve out space for the Kachari identity, as well.

Tribal Politics and the Land Question

One of the major issues of tribal political assertion through the legislative politics was the land question. Land alienation was intensely debated in the legislative assembly in relation to the issues of immigration and occupancy of agricultural land by the immigrants. In the crucial decade of 1940's provincial politics was often determined by the nature of politics on the land question. Immigration from East Bengal had assumed enormous proportion in the 1930's itself. Though the colonial government encouraged the immigration as a means of settling cultivable waste in the hope of raising more revenue, the government also introduced the Line system as a means of protecting the tribals. The principle of the Line system, envisaged the drawing of an imaginary line on the land, demarcating two distinct areas and no occupation of land by the immigrants was allowed beyond that line. With this Line system, the protection of tribal land and villages were to be ensured legally. The system was introduced for the first time in 1920 in Nowgong. By 1930 it was operating in most districts of upper Assam. Since the Tribal League favoured a policy of colonial intervention for

the cause of the 'tribals' it appreciated the move on the part of the British.²⁴ But the system as it existed on paper was different from its functioning in reality. It was never strictly implemented and neither was it very effective in the absence of a strong authority at the local level. In fact revenue generating interest of the colonial state contradicted its protectionist policy towards the tribals. Even in areas where the system was enforced there was land alienation which led to the numerous sessions of questioning, adjournment motions and heated debates in the assembly.

In 1937, a resolution was moved by the Muslim League for the abolition of the Line system. Members of the Tribal League, Rabi Chandra Kachari, and Rupnath Brahma opposed the resolution, and it was eventually withdrawn. The necessity of the system as a protective measure was reiterated by Rabi Chandra Kachari in the following words, "There should be a Line system to protect the weak and backward people, without a Line of demarcation it is not possible to look into the interest of the poor people who require special protection."²⁵ The tribal representatives in the assembly thus defended the continuation of the Line system and expressed their fear that if it was abolished "crores and crores of immigrants will come in and the original ruling people of Assam will have to leave the place to jungles

²⁴ Speech by Bhimbar Deuri *ALCP*, 1940, Quoted in A. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, (1988, New Delhi), p.262.

²⁵ Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, *ALAP*, 5th August 1937.

and hills.”²⁶ This argument of endangering the tribals by letting them face the immigrants, their displacement from their areas and the crucial question of their existence in peril was repeated throughout the period of 1937-47 with growing intensity. Rupnath Brahma demanded enforcement of the Line system in Goalpara because “many tribal people in Goalpara have been compelled to leave their homes and settle elsewhere.”²⁷ Even some non-tribal members of the assembly like Naba Kumar Dutta and Mahi Chandra Bora, also condemned the efforts to abolish the Line system and criticized the government’s lack of concern for the ousted “indigenous people including the backward classes like the Kacharis and the Lalungs,²⁸ who were driven out from their villages” and had “taken shelter in the forests.”²⁹

Another aspect of the confrontation was the functioning and the motives of the colonisation scheme. The absence of any definite principles regarding immigration and accommodation of the immigrant population created further problems. The Congress perceived it as another subterfuge for operating land for the immigrants. Under the colonisation schemes the government opened up reserve lands, de-reserved forests and professional grazing reserves and in this process displaced and inconvenienced the indigenous people.³⁰ The colonisation scheme also entailed paying a premium for occupying land which the

²⁶ Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, *ALAP*, 5th August, 1937.

²⁷ Speech by Rupnath Brahma, *ALAP*, 5th August, 1937.

²⁸ Speech by Naba Kumar Dutta, *ALAP*, 5th August, 1937.

²⁹ Speech by Mahi Chandra Bara, *ALAP*, 5th August, 1937.

³⁰ Speech by Haladhar Bhuyan, *ALAP*, 24th February, 1938.

indigenous people, claimed the Congress and Tribal League representatives, could not afford to pay.³¹ However, as Khan Sahib Maulvi Sayidur Rahman said in support of the colonisation scheme legally there was no bar regarding the indigenous people occupying land.³² Members like F.W.Hockenull insisted that the indigenous people did not occupy land not because of want of capital, but because availability of cultivable lands, without paying any premium. But as claimed by others there was “practically no suitable arable land outside the colonisation areas and almost all cultivable lands have been occupied by the immigrants ” and urged the government to stop the process of settlement of lands.³³ Karka Dalay Miri, the representative of the Miri tribe in the assembly, opposed colonisation because of the growing scarcity of land which would restrict future expansion of the indigenous people.³⁴ In view of the of escalating pressure, the colonial administrators like Hockenhall asserted that there was “no real issue at all between the indigenous and immigrant population.”³⁵ The logic was that the type of land which was favoured by the immigrants was not being cultivated by the indigenous people,³⁶ that is the riverine areas. Even Purna Chandra Sarma, the Congressman, illustrated with few examples of Nowgong district the defective and biased functioning of

³¹ Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, Purna Chandra Sarma, *ALAP*, 24th February, 1938.

³² Speech by Sayidur Rahman, *ALAP*, 24th February, 1938.

³³ Speech by Mahi Chandra Bora, *ALAP*, 24th February, 1938.

³⁴ Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, *ALAP*, 24th February, 1938.

³⁵ Speech by Hockenhall, *ALAP*, 24th February, 1938.

³⁶ Ibid.

the scheme. He complained that the 'tribals' of Nowgong were without land "and there has been no consideration to those people because they are not immigrants and cannot afford to pay any premium."³⁷ It was also pointed out that the lands originally belonging to the tribal communities of the Lalungs and Kacharis, were opened for colonisation in Nowgong.³⁸ Protest against such violation of rules and regulation evoked, according to the leaders, only mild responses and often biased enquiries. For the officials, the system was working satisfactorily despite reports of violation of rules and regulations. Addressing the 1940 Budget session Beliram Das, representative of the backward castes, attacked the Saadulla ministry for its policy on the immigrants. The flow of immigrants was compared to an "invasion" into the 'lines and reserves' causing great panic.³⁹ The situation was perceived to be one of total dispossession as "the immigrants forcibly entered into the lands owned by the Assamese cultivators.... agricultural produce taken away.... fish being forcibly taken away" and the fishermen deprived.⁴⁰ Haladhar Bhuyan also demanded that government should enquire into such incidents and take immediate action to stop them.

The question of land alienation and land availability however remained problematic. The deliberation of the Legislative Assembly and the

³⁷ Speech by Purna Chandra Sarma, *ALAP*, 24th February, 1938.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Speech by Beliram Das, *ALAP*, 24th February, 1938.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

subsequent land settlement policy and conflicts over land made it amply clear that available arable land was becoming scarce.⁴¹ It was further aggravated by occupation of vast wastelands by tea gardens and constitution of professional grazing reserves.⁴² The opening up of professional grazing reserves (P.G.Rs) for the colonisation scheme is significant in relation to the problem of land scarcity. Immigrants settled not only in the wastelands and reserves but as pressure on such land increased, a movement towards the tribal villages and lands, which were comparatively sparsely populated, began. The immigrant population had increased manifold leading to a serious crisis.⁴³

The displacement of the tribals can be traced to both economic and cultural factors. Economically they were on the weaker side. Various enquiries set up by the government to look into land alienation discovered that in many cases they had sold off their lands to the immigrants.⁴⁴ It was evident when Rupnath Brahma questioned the application of Line system in Goalpara district, which had the largest population of the tribals. The Deputy Commissioner's Report stated that, "...the Line system could be pushed" because "... owing to the

⁴¹ A. Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj*, p. 281.

⁴² Rana P. Behal has discussed the problem of occupation of wastelands by tea-gardens. See, "Some Aspects of the Growth of Plantation Labour Force and Labour Movement, 1900-1947" unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (1983).

⁴³ B.N. Bordoloi, *Transfer and Alienation of Tribal Land of Assam: With Special references to the Karbis of Karbi Anglong District* (Guwahati, 1991), pp. 73-77.

⁴⁴ Speech by Rupnath Brahma, *ALAP*, 25th February, 1938; Speech by Khan Saheb Maulavi Muhammad Amiruddin, *ALAP*, 6th March, 1944.

local people's thirst for gain by the sale of lands, within their blocks to the immigrants...."⁴⁵ There were other instances when the tribals sold their lands to the immigrants and migrated to Central and upper Assam in the hope of getting rehabilitated by the governments as per its the developmental schemes.⁴⁶ Moreover the fact that the immigrants often had money invested them with more economic power, especially where possession of land was concerned. On the contrary, in the absence of cash to pay taxes the tribal peasants were forced to sell their lands. The tribal representatives emphasized on the cultural differences between the Muslim immigrant and the tribals. They argued that it would be impossible for the 'innocent', 'harmless', 'peace-loving' tribal peasant to live along with the immigrants.⁴⁷ Thus, creating settlement for the immigrants blocks near tribal villages were vehemently.⁴⁸ Karka Dalay Miri, representative of the Miri tribe, drew the Assembly's attention to government's action which displaced the Miri people of Gorumara in Sissi Mauza, Dibrugarh and also to the cancellation of pattas to Miris and Deuris, who had settled in Bahgara and Dhunagiri in Bihpuria Mauza, North Lakhimpur.⁴⁹ The immigrant peasant with his 'hunger' for land seemed to be a threat existence of

⁴⁵ Report referred in relation to the question of Rupnath Brahma regarding the enforcement of the Line system, *ALAP*, 25th February, 1938.

⁴⁶ Speech by Lakeshwar Barooah, *ALAP*, 6th December, 1941.

⁴⁷ Speech by Dhirsing Deuri, *ALAP*, 23th March, 1943; 13th March, 1944, adjournment motion by Beliram Das, 13th March, 1944.

⁴⁸ Speech by Beliram Das, *ALAP*, 13th March, 1944; Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, *ALAP*, 15th March, 1943.

⁴⁹ Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, *ALAP*, 5th December, 1941.

the to the indigenous peasantry. The attitude of the Assamese middle class and the Congress contributed to the spread of such a feeling, as is evident in Lakheswar Barooah's resolution: "The aggressive attitude of the immigrants which manifest itself in wanton trespass on the land of the indigenous population, offences against women, mischief upon the crops of the indigenous population and various other crimes disturbed the peaceful atmosphere of the local rural people."⁵⁰ The 1931 census aggravated the intensity of the whole population. The Superintendent of Census Operation, Mr. Mullan termed the coming of the immigrants as an 'invasion'. Mr. J.H.Hutton the Census Commissioner of India in his report wrote, "These immigrants who were prolific breeders and industrious cultivators are unruly and uncomfortable neighbours. These immigrants threaten to swamp entirely the indigenous inhabitants and in the course of two or three decades to change the whole nature, language and religion of the Brahmaputra valley".⁵¹

Such sense of vulnerability increased because of reported cases of forcible occupation of tribal villages and lands.⁵² But often such cases were exaggerated. Often the Assembly session received telegrams informing them of forcible occupations. For example, "Hindu

⁵⁰ Speech by Lakheswar Barooah, *ALAP*, 6th December, 1941.

⁵¹ J.H.Hutton, *Census of India*, 1931, Vol. I, p.12.

⁵² Speech by Dhirsingh Deuri, *ALAP*, 14th March, 1944; Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, *ALAP*, 18th March, 1941; Rabi Chandra Kachari, *ALAP*, 6th March, 1944; DhirSingh Deuri, *ALAP*, 26th February, 1940; Kameshwar Da, *ALAP*, 29th February, 1940.

Mahababha getting alarming reports of forcible occupation of lands in mass-scale by Muslims in Meteka Borbeal, and many other villages in Namati Mauza in Mikir Hills, Nowgong. Mikirs becoming panic-stricken at this lawlessness.” Likewise another telegram mentioned that “innumerable Muslim immigrants, Surma Valley Muslims occupying lands in Meteka Borbeal, Hatipara, Jamunagaon, Maudonga, Howraghat, Dighae-pani, Dakmaka, Chulani, Parakhowa, Sorgathi villages within Mikir Hills area, Namati Mauza, Nowgong against all previous restrictive prohibitive orders. Great consternations amongst Mikirs prevails Pray Excellency’s immediate intervention.”⁵³ Sometimes letters and petitions were addressed to the Assembly seeking intervention, and in other cases local representatives went to Shilling with the complaints demanding action. Yet, often such measures brought no solution in face of the overwhelming pressure on land. Enquiries were set up and officers often reported such complaints to be fraud and allegations against the immigrants distorted. The tribal representatives and the Congress leaders attributed this to the whole network of Muslims influence where officers were also Muslim who were supported by the Government. The members also highlighted the corrupt role played by the land revenue officials leading to the further alienation of tribal land to other peasant groups mainly immigrant peasants. In many places intervention of these officers worsened the situation. Because of the inability to comprehend complex rules about

⁵³ Adjournment Motion, *ALAP*, 13th May, 1944.

the occupation of land, they often lost out to the immigrants, who were economically more sound. Thus even genuine complaints and eviction orders were left without any action being taken.⁵⁴

Gradually from '37 to '47 such demands become more persistent against increasing violations of rules and regulations. Because of the failure of the Line system to control settlement of land and safeguard the indigenous population a committee was formed to review the functioning of the line system. The report submitted by Mr.F.W.Hockenhall, of the 'European party', emphasized that "... indigenous people alone would be unable, without the aid of immigrant settlers, to develop..."⁵⁵ But it was also in favour of the Line system and advised its tightening to protect tribal lands. The Bordoloi ministry after much deliberation agreed to evict all immigrant squatters from areas declared "protected tribal blocks", in the submontane regions. Following the committee's report, the Congress coalition adopted a Land Settlement policy which was published in a Gazette Extraordinary of 4th November, 1939. It emphasised on (a) the importance of maintaining grazing and forest reserves meant for public and ordered immediate eviction of encroachers – immigrants or non-immigrants. (b) the interests of the tribal and backward people were to be jealously guarded and with this view large blocks in sub-montane areas inhabited

⁵⁴ Karka Dalay Miri, *ALAP*, 15th March, 1943.

⁵⁵ A. Guha *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, (1988), p.261.

by tribals were ordered to be made prohibited areas. (c) due provision was made for the reservation of large areas for natural expansion of indigenous population, besides there was a proposal for planned settlement of the tribals.⁵⁶ The resignation of the Bordoloi ministry left such decisions largely unimplemented. During the Saadulla ministry the Muslim League again demanded the abolition of the Line system. Regarding the issue of protection of the tribals and for that purpose allowing the system to continue, Maulavi Syed Abdur Rauf said that "...the line system question has been harped upon by the opposition to win over tribal friends... But if they require protection, they require it against all non-tribals."⁵⁷ Most of the tribal representatives felt that the protective measures which were adopted were inadequate so far as the interests of the tribal people were concerned. The Congress criticised the Saadulla ministry during whose tenure, rules and regulations of the Line system were further violated. The Congressmen such as Purna Chandra Sarma, Lakeshwar Barooah and Gopinath Bordoloi believed in giving protection to the tribals. They feared that these "indigenous people of the province – the tribals and the scheduled castes are soon to be driven away to the hills to make room for the invading hordes of immigrants".⁵⁸ In such suggestions we find the reflection of the fear that the tribals would be pushed back to the hills which relates to the

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Speech by Maulavi Syed Abdur Rauf, *ALAP*, 26th February, 1940.

⁵⁸ Speech by Purna Chandra Sarma, *ALAP*, 26th February, 1940.

fear that whatever civilizational steps they had taken would be regressed so.

In 1940's on the issue of amending the conditions of the Line system the tribal representatives demanded legislative changes and legally evict all illegal settlers, whether they had settled before or after April 1937. In June 1940 a government resolution put a ban on settlement of wastelands with any immigrants entering Assam after January 1, 1938. This measure was taken by Saadulla due to pressure of the Tribal representatives and the Congress. The Muslim League members criticised this position of Saadulla, and as mentioned earlier no eviction took place, for there was no way to distinguish a pre- 1938 immigrant and a later 'intruder'. The Saadulla coalition ministry was throughout criticised for its anti-Assamese, anti-tribal and pro-immigrant stand, though Minister Abdul Matin Chaudhary declared officially that protection of the backward tribals was the "bedrock of their policy."⁵⁹

The issue of the Line system and protection of the backward classes came in handy for the Congress. It could use for its own political advantage the Muslim League's political motive to change the demographic pattern of Assam and presumably make it a part of Pakistan. But regarding the actual problem, the Congress could not

⁵⁹ Speech by Abdul Matin Choudhury, *ALAP*, 6th March, 1944.

bring in much changes not even pressurise the government for the speedy creation of tribal blocks. Tribal land alienation was caused not only by the immigrant peasantry but also by the caste Hindu people especially in the slowly emerging urban areas like Guwahati. Though the provisions of the various developmental schemes were open to the tribals they faced handicaps in occupying those lands. Absence of funds, implements and biased special officers were few of them.⁶⁰ Blocks continued to be opened as also the professional grazing reserves. The Congress continued to stress on the necessity of maintaining the P.G.R's and also demanded that wastelands should be measured and areas reserved for the indigenous population before settling the immigrants.⁶¹ However, the Congress national level leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru felt that immigration was an economic necessity and though not supporting its abolition wanted a relaxation of the Line system.⁶² The question acquired new dimensions when the tribal people began occupying areas where the immigrants were settled. According to Md. Amiruddin, "some 350 Mikirs, Lalungs and Kacharis headed by the gaonburas came... not only broke down the houses... set fire to most of them and turned the colonists out of their homesteads and holdings as well."⁶³ He tried to convey that the allegations against the immigrants were baseless and condemned the tribals as 'rioters' and

⁶⁰ Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, *ALAP*, 14th March, 1944.

⁶¹ *ALAP*, 6th December, 1941, resolution disapproving the Land Settlement Policy of the Saadualla Government.

⁶² A. Guha. *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, p 258.

⁶³ Speech by Md. Amiruddin, *ALAP*, 6th March, 1944.

'trespassers'. To sum up, even though, incidents which found mention in the Assembly were relatively few, the sources alluded to the growing friction and confrontations. The Congress successfully attempted to win over the tribal representatives, by focussing on Saadulla and his 'pro-Muslim politics.' Saadulla was caught between the two groups – the tribal representatives demanding protection and the Muslim League calling for the abolition of the Line system. But it was accepted at least by the Congress and the tribal representatives that the tribal peasants were losing lands, due to various reasons to the immigrants. Despite various government measures like colonisation illegal squatters settled down in villages, in forests, grazing reserves, wherever land was available. From 1937 onwards itself the tribal representative in the Assembly demanded more stringent legislation to stop land alienation and blocked efforts of the members of Muslim League to abolish the Line system.⁶⁴

During this period around the land question, the Line system and protection for the tribals a large number of political manipulations were played which led to changes in the provincial governments. Such developments made the tribal representatives defensive and the Muslim

⁶⁴ The Line system was introduced for the first time in 1920 in Nowgong. According to this device a line was drawn on the village map taking into consideration of the people inhabiting the villages and no occupation of land by the immigrants beyond that line was allowed

League offensive.⁶⁵ The Tribal League⁶⁶ representatives strongly opposed any sort of land development schemes related with the settlement of immigrants.⁶⁷ The Congress supported such an effort and backed the tribal representatives' attack on the Saadulla government. Faced with the constant and strong opposition of the Congress led by Bordoloi, Saadulla tried to woo the Muslim League to form the ministry. He could also include one of the important Tribal League leader, Rupnath Brahma in his ministry. Rupnath Brahma professedly joined the ministry for the welfare of his community and the plains tribes. For most of the supporters of the Line system its necessity was due to the underlying assumption that the Plains Tribes being 'poor', 'backward', 'primitive', 'helpless' etc. needed some protection against such encroachment of land and their displacement. Mainly due to the pressure of the Muslim League, the government continued to open more areas for settlement of immigrants through various measures (like colonisation scheme, grow more food campaign, dereservation of grazing reserves). At the same time, it promised to safeguard the interests of the indigenous people - the scheduled castes and the tribals.

⁶⁵ A. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, Chapters 6 and 7.

⁶⁶ Tribal League was mostly represented by the limited tribal elites. Rupnath Brahma and Bhimbar Deuri were its early organisers.

⁶⁷ There were series of 'Land Development Schemes' in Assam beginning from the late 19th century. These schemes broadly categorised as colonisation scheme has been discussed elsewhere. See Nandita Khaderia "Some Aspects of the Rural Economy of Assam: A Study of the Brahmaputra Valley Districts, 1874-1914" unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (1992).

During 1937-47, in the arena of legislative politics the 'tribal question' was contested and articulated in the close context of the 'land problem.' The government was compelled to redefine their policy towards the tribals vis-à-vis the land question. The tribal peasants, who were largely outside the caste Hindu Assamese peasants organisation, the ryot sabhas, found their guardians in the Tribal League. However, the failure of the land policy and protective measures in restricting the tribal land alienation forced the tribal peasants to participate in the politics of agitation. The Congress succeeded in allying the tribal representatives to check the emergence of the Muslim League in the wake of partition.

CHAPTER III

CONTESTATION OF IDENTITY: SOME MAJOR ISSUES

Introduction

The formation and emergence of the Tribal League in 1933 as a common platform of all the plains tribes also involved a parallel process in self-representation (in defining 'tribalness' by the right of being representative of the tribal people). The numerically small educated tribal elite attempted to define their 'tribal' identity as 'community of the Plains tribes', This was largely necessitated by the constitutional reforms which brought a greater degree of democracy to the political process. The principle of communal representation was extended and constitutional changes widened the franchise and introduced direct election of representatives. The Government of India Act of 1935 continued the policy of maintaining separate electorates and expanded the scope of the constituencies by adding reserved seats for Scheduled and Depressed castes. These were constituted of communities categorised in the census reports as "untouchables" and backward tribes.

As mentioned in the study of associative politics in the second chapter, there was already a consciousness about the identities of the various communities, their distinct social structures and political aspirations. Such ideas were incorporated into the discourse of the Tribal League, which provided a common political platform. The unity of the various

'tribal' communities, the Kacharis, the Lalungs, Rabhas, Mikirs and Miris, was envisioned by the Tribal League. It was a political exigency that these tribes of Brahmaputra Valley. Thus, there emerged the single, monolithic notion of the 'Plains Tribes'. Though essentially it was a geographical definitive term delineating the tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley as distinct from the hill tribes, the tribal elite and later on tribal representatives in the Assembly asserted their community's interests in opposition to the interests of other communities (the Muslims, caste Hindus, Hill Tribes, Tea-Garden labourers). The 'Plains Tribes' category was therefore invented by the colonial authorities to ethnographically classify the 'tribal' section of the population in the plains which was later, after 1935 Act, given the status of a separate constituency. The tribal elite articulated the political aspirations of their 'community'. The elite, itself a product largely of the social changes brought in by colonialism, drew heavily upon the colonial ethnographic discourse – of 'tribes' dwelling in the plains, gradually degenerating due to contact with the Hindu civilisation, slowly disappearing or rather losing their distinctive identities as a part of a long drawn historical process. This chapter analyses the Tribal League's stance on the question of the representation of the 'plains tribes'. Though it is very difficult to say how far this discourse reflected the consensual opinion of the tribal people, it is at least the voice of the emerging tribal leadership which participated in the provincial politics. The debates around the 1941 census, the 1940 Assam Temple entry Bill vis-à-vis the dominant caste

Hindu Assamese middle class attitudes and the issue of education for the tribals, provide significant insights in to the political aspirations of the tribal elite. As would be elaborated below the identity delineated by the Tribal League was not a traditional one but a modern one, where political motives played a dominant role.

The Census as a Site of Contestation: Controversy of 1941

As mentioned by Kenneth Jones, the intimate relation between the census and political identity cannot be denied. The census was used in various manner by the subjects of the colonial state who were in fact the subjects of the census itself. The census and the subject were involved in a complex relation and each defined the other and attempted to control it. As the educated tribal elite “became increasingly aware of the census, they turned to it for an official view of their own world, a view which supported many of their hopes and fears.”¹ Moreover, the census increasingly became the “arena for conflict and manipulation.”²

The 1941 census evoked strong responses from various sections of the Assamese society and led to a debate in the Assembly and in the newspapers. The Congress criticised the government for manipulating

¹ Kenneth W. Jones, “Religious Identity and the Indian Census” in N.G. Barrier (ed.), *The Census in British India: New Perspectives* (New Delhi, 1981), p.85. The role of the census in forging new identities is also discussed by Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist Among Historians and Other Essays* (New Delhi, 1994).

² K.W. Jones, “Religious Identity and the Indian Census” p.88.

the census operation so as to conceal the correct figures of the followers of different religions. An adjournment motion was called to discuss the census operations.³ The cause of discontent and tension was the changed basis of classification, a shift from religion as a matrix of classification to one based on community. Compilation for communities was done with reference to 'race, tribe and caste' and not religion as it was in the case of the 1931 census. The Congress and few others accused the United Party government of tampering with data compilation and deviating from the rules laid down by the census authority of India. It was under the Assam provincial government's instance that Mr. Marar, the Census Superintendent issued a special circular to the Deputy Commissioners and Census Officers in Assam to compile data on the basis of community. He wrote:

"the basis for community is answer to questions 3, but generally the communities are unavoidably mixed up and where community cannot be ascertained in answer to question 3, answer to question 4 will be the basis; e.g. If a Kachari has not in answer to question 3 mentioned that he is a Kachari, and is returned under question 4 as Hindu, Muslim or Christian, he will be shown as Hindu, Muslim or Christian as the case may be, but if he is returned as a Kachari against question 3 he will be entered such irrespective of his religion."⁴

The government stated that the purpose of clubbing communities professing different religions was to create a "separate entity under the constitution for the purpose of franchise."⁵ Siddhi Nath Sarma, for

³ *ALAP*, 4th December 1941: Adjournment motion in connection with the conducting of the last census operations in Assam brought by Siddhi Nath Sarma.

⁴ *ALAP*, 4th December, 1941: Adjournment motion by Siddhi Nath Sarma.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Classification of communities according to Appendix II, prepared by the Assam Government, was as follows: (1) Assam Valley Hindus; (2)

instance, clarified that as the tabulation would be done on the basis of 'community', and not on religious lines, it would simplify the problem of treatment or classification of the primitive tribes. He added that in this way their total number regardless of their religion could be recorded.⁶ This efforts on the part of the colonial government to seek out community identity corresponded to the Tribal League's own efforts to project community identity as one tribal people. And for this purpose the Tribal League carried out propaganda. As Bernard S. Cohn has observed such active interference in the process of census enumeration, because of growing "Consciousness of the significance of the census operation had reached a point where Indians were not merely content to petition and to write books: some groups set out to influence the answers which people would give in the census"⁷. A bulletin of the League was taken out with the main objective of instructing the 'tribal' people –Bodo, Kachari, Mech, Rabha, Lalung, Miri, Mikir, Deuri etc. – about enumerating themselves in the census.⁸ The importance of the census for preservation of tribal 'identity' and interests was reiterated. The political aspirations of the Tribal League

contd...

Assam Valley Muslims; (3) Surma Valley Hindus; (4) Surma Valley Muslims; (5) Scheduled castes; (6) Tribal people, Hills; (7) Tribal people, Plains; (8) European and Anglo-Indian.

⁶ Ibid. Speech by Siddhinath Sarma.

⁷ B.S.Cohn, "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia", in B.S.Cohn, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians*, p.249.

⁸ *The Assam Tribal League (Bulletin 2)*, Bhimbar Deuri, 1940 (In Assamese), p.1.

were moulded by government policies which were correspondingly influenced by these political aspirations.

There was a growing reliance on the census for supporting data for articulating political aspirations which resulted in the convergence between the census and the world it sought to describe. By 1941 the census became very closely interlinked with political issues like proving the existence of a community to validate the creation of a separate constituency. "Enumeration on the basis of community would show as a distinctive community which would enable us to demand special provisions in education in the and socio-economic spheres."⁹ It was also emphasized by the Tribal League that if special measures were not taken to ameliorate their conditions they would remain backward forever. The Tribal League's definition of Tribals was broad based and included those who were otherwise classified as 'Hinduised'. Religion was a secondary aspect of the identity. The essence of 'tribalness' was the existence of distinctive rituals and customs, rules and regulations, which were retained, therefore aiding the preservation of a distinctive lifestyle often in totality and some cases partially.¹⁰

Further, the Tribal League also emphasized the separateness and differentness of the social structure of the 'tribals' and the caste Hindu Assamese. The focus was on the 'differentness' and the commonality

⁹ *The Assam Tribal League (Bulletin No. 2)* by Bhimbar Deuri, p.4.

¹⁰ Ibid

and shared cultural practices were overlooked. They imagined two polarised societies where no intermingling ever existed. The 'independence' of the tribals from the Hindu society was claimed. The dominant idea was to engender a world view which provided political space to the educated tribal elite to emerge from an oppressive social framework. By rejecting placement in the caste hierarchy, which was perceived as degrading in the Tribal League's discourse, it sought to acquire equality on their own plane, within the restricting political space provided by the colonial state. By not subscribing to the world view of the caste Hindus the tribes had already taken a step towards redefining their identity.

The discourse contested the efforts of certain groups to classify the 'tribals' as 'Harijan Hindus', which was a ploy to club them together with the low caste'.¹¹ The Tribal League persistently opposed various moves by more conservative circles and the Congress, to categorise them as a part of the Hindu society. Such a projection was simplistic depiction of a complex social reality. It is difficult to say whether the 'tribal' leaders comprehended the complexity and how far politically motivated was the invention of the notion of two polarised societies. But in giving it a concrete shape at least in politics the census aided the crystallisation of identity.

¹¹ Ibid.

Discussing the provision of enumeration in 1941 in the Assembly the Assam government pointed out the problem of enumerating people like the 'tribals' where identities of religion and community did not converge. Commenting on the absence of clear defining categories which would establish the religious identity of the community and the related problem faced by the government in establishing the real strength of the community, Saddulla explained,

"Sir, everyone knows that the great Hindu and Muslim communities are generally known by their religion, either they belong to the Hindu community or the Muslim community. But the community of tribes who had been enfranchised under the present Constitution Act has different religions; some have stuck to their original religion, some have been converted to Christianity. But anyone who has been converted to Islam, he prefers to call himself a Muslim and forget the community."¹²

For reasons relating to transparency, to derive the full benefit of franchise the tabulation figures by communities was brought in and "those tribes who really belong to the tribe or community of tribal people were lumped together into the tabulation for tribals."¹³ The government's interests in providing representation complemented the tribal League's quest for a political and cultural identity and in the process community identity was defined minus the religious aspect. Community identity was perceived as a 'sense of belonging' to a community whose cultural practices and rites and customs transcended the boundaries of faith. Defining 'tribal' religion or religious practices also posed a problem. The community identity was recognised and overrode the religious identity.

¹² *ALAP*, 4th December, 1941, Speech by Maulavi Saiyid Sir Muhammad Saadualla.

¹³ *Ibid.*

The Congress and few others insisted that the compilations were to the instructions of the Government of India. According to them the enumeration should have taken into consideration the important factor of religion while classifying the communities. But the colonial state's interests were otherwise for the 1941 census. It aimed at simplifying complex categorisation in tabulation and wanted to "avoid in their argument provoking terms such as 'Hinduised'."¹⁴ Though complexities could be discussed by the superintendents and it was noted that some discussion on the religious affiliations of the tribals and the degree of their 'Hinduisation' would be both of interest and value¹⁵. Hinduisation alone was not the sole concern but conversion to Christianity also drew official attention, and it was suggested that "it is important to know to what degree they have entered the Christian or other fold."¹⁶

The Congress and other association and individuals strongly criticised the basis of enumeration and the method applied to do so, in the Assembly and publicly through newspapers. The Congress suspected manipulation by the Assam government and thought the tabulation to be contrary to the instruction of the government of India. It was pointed out that religion being such an important component of life no attempt to classify would be nearer to the truth and reality than one

¹⁴ *ALAP*, 4th December, 1941, Speech by Siddhinath Sarma quoting Mr. Marar's instructions to Census officers.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Speech by Rev. J.J.M.Nichols Roy. *ALAP*, 4th December, 1941.

which hinged on religion. Religion was the defining feature of a community. Through the 1941 the newspapers carried the debate on the census and in the process tried to reinforce certain dominant ideas about caste, tribe and religion. *Teendiniya Assamiya* published articles which supported the views of the Congress and the caste Hindu Assamese middle class.

The Guwahati Rajhwa (Public) Census Committee along with others published a public notice stressing that, despite the instructions of census officers and the Tribal League, the tribal population need not necessarily state their religion, as instructed, according to their *jati* i.e. Kachari religion or Lalung religion. They could enumerate 'as they were' i.e. accordingly stating their religion – Hindu, Muslim, Christian and animist. Such an appeal was made to save the interests of the 'Assamese'.¹⁷ It was also emphasized that the definition of a 'Hindu' was not narrowly confined to the people in the caste hierarchy but was wide enough to incorporate people who could be termed as Hinduised. "A lot of tribals who have been converted to Vaishnavism, Saraniyas, still stick to certain food habits like eating pork and fowls, but on that basis they should not be classed as otherwise i.e. according to their tribal name, but be classified as Hindus."¹⁸

Ambikagiri Rai Chaudhuri of Assam Siksha Prachar Samiti, appealed to

¹⁷ *Teendiniya Assamiya*. 21st January, 1941(Guwahati).

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

the tribals to think twice before enumerating themselves. He stressed on their being a part of a greater Assamese society calling them the backbone of the Assamese society and asked them to desist from supporting the community based enumeration to preserve that identity. He referred to be colonial situation and suggested that such divisive tendencies would prolong colonial domination.¹⁹

More or less similar sentiments were echoed through the articles and editorials of the newspapers. The Saadualla government came under increasing attacks from the Congress. The Congress, accused the then provincial government, of using the census as an instrument to encourage fissiparous tendencies.²⁰ The Tribal League was also criticized for being a pawn in the hands of the colonial government.²¹ The Saadualla government and the Muslim League were accused of attempting to alter the demographic structure of the society, in a bid to join Pakistan.²² The overarching concern was the decrease in the population of the Hindus. The concern towards the tribals arose from the fear of growing immigration from East Bengal and census showing 'alarming' increase in the population of the Muslims.²³ The only way visible to the middle class leadership to maintain a demographic balance, was to conflate the figures of Hindus with the figures of the

¹⁹ Ibid. 10th January, 1941.

²⁰ Ibid. 19th September, 1941.

²¹ Ibid. 21st November, 1941.

²² Ibid. 19th September 1941.

²³ Ibid. 29th September, 1941.

plains tribes population. And that section of the population was by 1940's largely conscious of census enumeration and its politics, and unwilling to be herded into categories which denied their 'differentness'.

By 1940's due to various factors like Congress mass mobilisation and the party's growing importance in provincial politics, the strengthening of the notion of an 'Assamese nationality' was visible. Therefore the middle class and the Congress by and large perceived 1941 census as an attempt to undermine 'Assamese nationality'. The census became an important site for contestation of identities for various groups and there was propaganda to spread their own views and to contest other parallel propaganda i.e. by the Tribal League and the government. In the public debate the question of representational communal politics was not taken into consideration. Efforts were made to invent and imagine a monolithic Assamese identity, which was dominantly 'Hindu' and speaking the Assamese language.

In *Teendiniya Assamiya* itself, the Garamur Sattradhikar representing a liberal trend, condemned the conservative sections of *Gossains*, for still maintaining forms of restrictions and untouchability. "Even converts were not allowed within the precincts of *Namghars* and *Kirtanghars* (temples), interdining was strictly forbidden, thus alienating the community of tribe who did not strictly conform to the rules and regulations laid down. Within the private sphere many upper

castes did not quite strictly follow proscribed and prescribed norms like prohibited consumption of intoxicants, fowl and pork.”²⁴ Thus, the hereditary and hierarchical notion of purity was denied. More conservative propagandists like the Hindu Seva Sangha wanted that people irrespective of their being different communities should return themselves as Hindus.²⁵ The 1941 census was perceived as an attempt of the government to fragment the unified Hindu community by stressing more on community identity than on religion. These propaganda urged the Lalungs, Rabhas, Kacharis, Mikirs and other communities to demand to be classified as ‘Hindus’ as opposed to ‘tribals’. Editorials in the newspapers also addressed the same issue. It was conceded that there was nothing novel or wrong in calculating the tribal population but doing so solely on the basis of community and not qualified by religion gave a distorted impression of the reality, like sharing a huge increase in the tribal population.²⁶ The increase and decrease in the 1941 census was viewed by the Assamese middle class as a deliberate miscalculation and misconstruing of instruction.

Protest against such calculation also came from the tribals, as well. Many tribal communities protested against being classified as ‘animists’ or according to their tribes. The Sonowal Kacharis were for example stated to be hinduised for a long time and followers of rules

²⁴ Ibid. 29th September, 1941.

²⁵ Ibid. 17th January, 1941.

²⁶ Ibid. 31st October, 1941, Editorial.

and regulations of Hinduism, and had priests officiating the rituals.²⁷ Various associations of the tribal communities like the *Assam Bodo Sammilan*, *Assam Kachari Sammilan*, *Assam Miri Sammilan* were not consulted by the Tribal League to discuss the issue of enumeration²⁸ and therefore the latter could not be said to represent all the tribes. Some sections of the Kacharis refused to be classified as 'tribals' along with Miris, Deuri and Mikirs. The tribal representatives were criticised for attempting to distort reality by categorising all 'tribals' *en masse* together under one head. The Rabhas asserted that they be recognised as a separate community and not be treated as a branch of the Kachari tribe. It was argued that religion-wise they have to be classified either as Hindus, Christians or Animists.²⁹

Other than Congress, the Christian representatives in the Assembly opposed such a classification. "Figures given in the last census are defective and incomplete in as much as that Christians have been shown at such a low figure! The word 'community' itself cannot be explained, it is a misnomer. When we mean a community, whether religion is to be taken into account or the race, that is a question which very few people will be able to explain."³⁰ In the face of such evident protest from various sections Rupnath Brahma, member of the Tribal League and then a minister in the United Party Government, claimed

²⁷ Ibid. 21st January, 1941.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 10th January, 1941 and 17th January, 1941.

³⁰ Ibid. Speech by Mr. C. Goldsmith. *ALAP*

that to present before the house “the exact feelings of the tribal people on the matter.”³¹ The Tribal League’s position was reiterated in the Assembly. “As regard the tribal people of the plains they have their own Tribal League and there is a feeling, and indeed there had been a solemn resolution of that League to the effect these tribal people should be shown together irrespective of any religion and they feel that unless and until that is done their future is doomed and they will stand nowhere.”³²

He also denied the reports that tribal people in some places had protested against classification on community basis and emphasized the fact that “the existing Tribal League is the only provincial organisation under which all the plains tribal people of the province function.”³³ According to Rev. L. Gatphoh classification on the basis of community brought out the strength of the tribal people and contradicted the impression given by censuses till 1941 “that tribal people in Assam were a dying race or races.”³⁴

against the manner in which the census was conducted, was led by people like A.V. Thakkar, a Gandhian. He who called the division on the basis of community a ‘strange phenomenon’ and segregation by religion was “vitiating by this queer and

led by Rupnath Brahma, *ALAP*.

led by Rev. L. Gatphoh, *ALAP*.

unauthorised instruction passed on by the Assam Census Superintendent.”³⁵ He also questioned the basis of classification which clubbed various tribes under one head, the plains tribes. “But under the new classification, now adopted in 1941, they are all classed as aborigines or one community of tribals, (unless they declined to fill in column 3 for race or tribe) though there is nothing like one community but a number of (more than 20) communities, each tribe being a community by itself.”³⁶ He also criticised the colonial state’s communal award, facilitated by the 1935 Act, which granted separate representation to the tribals for the first time. “They have since 1935 got *certain political rights and importance*, a tribal gentleman and a tribal lady M.L.A’s are included in the Cabinet, (by the Congress Coalition government only the former and by the present non-Congress government both) and *a wave of awakening* has come over them.”³⁷

The great increase in the number of population returned as tribals is explained not in the positive aspect of identity consciousness but as politically motivated. “Thus religious faith and cultural affinity have proved to be nothing before political power, supported by an ukase (sic) of the Assam Census Superintendent.”³⁸ Thus because of the colonial state’s policies and the tribal elite’s manipulation, the tribes who sought to assimilate and were “slowly absorbed amongst Hindus

³⁵ A.V.Thakkar, “Census of Assam Tribals” in *Man in India*, Vol.21, 1941, p.243.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.244.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.246.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

on one side and among the Christians for the last fifty years on the other, must have *en masse* swung to the 'Tribal Community'." ³⁹ As a rejoinder to the comment, the editor published a note, which defined 'tribal' in context of community, and noted that

"As the word 'tribal' in the present Census is not used to indicate religion but only community or tribe, I think, the Assam Census Superintendent would appear to have been quite correct in classifying as aborigines such aboriginals In fact it is advantageous to the aborigines to be classified as such and injurious to them to get themselves returned as Hindus. For by becoming Hindus they sink into the degraded class of 'Harijan' or 'Depressed classes'. Moreover, by recording themselves as 'aboriginals' or '*tribals*' they stand a chance of political advancement. For in the next India Government Act, an increase in the recorded number of aboriginals is expected to ensure them a larger number of seats in the Legislatures. We think that lovers of aborigines should rejoice rather than grieve over the recorded increase of 'Tribals' or 'aborigines' in any Province." ⁴⁰

The Temple Entry Issue

The Tribal League's efforts to distance itself from caste Hindu Assamese society in carving out a 'tribal' identity was also evident when the Assam Temple Entry Bill was introduced in the Assembly to be debated in 1940. Ghanashyam Das, the mover, regretted the fact that most temples were not open for some sections of the society, the so-called depressed and backward classes. According to him, temple entry was not restricted in the past and came into existence only recently. He

³⁹ Ibid., The communities he specifically mentioned are the Brahmas of Goalpara, Saranuyas of Kamrup and Darrang, Lalungs of Nowgong and the Miris of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.

⁴⁰ Editorial note as a rejoinder to A.V.Thakkar's comment on the Assam Census in *Man in India*, Vol.21, 1941, p.247.

illustrated how the Vaishnava preacher Sankardeva believed in equality and that is why “even a *javan* like Jayahari Ata, a Miri like Bolai Ata, a Bhot like Damudar Ata and a Kachari like Ram Ata were given equal status in his religious society....”⁴¹ His treatment of the tribes reflective of a dominant trend, place it in the hierarchy of the caste structure and the discourse of ‘upliftment’ defines them as low-caste Hindus. The preconceived assumption bracketed the tribals with the low-caste Hindus, who were denied entry into most temples. The dominant Assamese caste Hindu society did not perceive the plains tribes as a separate entity, especially where a programme of upliftment was concerned. Such an attitude is evident in Ghanashyam Das’ speech: “... in the Doul festival in Barpeta a man having sympathy for his fellow brothers cannot bear to see the sight when the tribals and depressed classes are refused, with harsh words, entry to the Kirtonghar. You cannot look at their eyes when they return with tears running down their sad faces.”⁴²

He compared the equality shared by tribal and non-tribal representatives in the Assembly house where he saw no apparent distinction between Rupnath Brahma, Rabi Chandra Kachari, Rohini Choudhuri and himself. The presence of discrimination in the social structure would not allow the above mentioned tribal representatives’ access into any temple. He pointed out that, “if my friend M.Rabi

⁴¹ Speech by Ghanashyam Das. *ALAP*, 29th February, 1940.

⁴² *Ibid*.

Chandra Kachari wants to enter the Barpeta temple, he will also get no access there. Is it not painful, sir, and is it not humiliating? Should this distinction remain?... No matter, sir, their sympathy with me for their depressed and tribal classes will suffice....I have a duty. I should perform that duty.”⁴³

Doubts were raised by the government to what extent would the Temple Entry Bill benefit the tribals. As Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri questioned whether the bill would help the Kacharis and other animist.⁴⁴ He also stated the Bill’s definition of a Hindu which was defined as “one who is such by birth and religion and one who is a convert into it,”⁴⁵ excluded the tribes. By that logic “the animists will be clearly excluded by this definition of the term ‘Hindu’”. So this Bill will not at all give them any right.”⁴⁶

Rupnath Brahma, then a Minister in the provincial government, representative of the Tribal League classified his organisation’s position regarding the question whether the tribes can be termed as Hindus and whether if the Bill would benefit the tribes:

“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

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Speech by Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri, *ALAP*, 29th February, 1940.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

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.*"⁴⁷

Another member, Gauri Kanta Talukdar, rejected the necessity to classify the tribals separately as 'animists', such categories being largely colonial constructions:

"It is a matter of great regret that following blindly the Christian Missionaries and their friends, the European writers and some of our own countrymen are calling the tribal peoples 'animists'. Sir, I vehemently protest against the use of the expression 'animists' in the case of our brethren of the tribal communities. It is a misnomer, it is an insult levelled against these people to call them animists...who has been using this expression? Has it not been done by the missionaries with the object of exploiting these peoples? Is this not a surreptitious attempt to alienate a portion of our brethren from the Hindu fold?"⁴⁸

He used a broad definition of Hinduism, as given by the Hindu Mahasabha, which was inclusive of all religions which had originated in India. According to him the 'simple' act of calling oneself 'Hindu', (irrespective of practices and rituals), made one 'Hindu' and such a notion of distinctive religious identity because of its all inclusive paternalistic nature. Rupnath Brahma's denial of the positive effects of the Temple Entry Bill for the tribal people came under attack from the populist notions of 'Hinduisation' obtained any claim of social upliftment of the Congress. According to Ghanashyam Das, Rupnath

⁴⁷ Speech by Rupnath Brahma on the Assam Temple Entry Bill ALAP, 29th February, 1940, (emphasis mine).

⁴⁸ Speech by Gauri Kanta Talukdar. ALAP, 29th February, 1940.

Brahma represented only the tribal elite and was 'modern' in his views and therefore did not attach importance to entry into a temple. Brahma's opinion was called a personal viewpoint and not representative of the voice of the tribal people. The tribal society being a part of the wider Hindu society there were, asserted Gauri Kanta Talukdar, "people who are religious minded and who like to worship God inside a temple", and they should not be deprived of that right."⁴⁹

Issues of Backwardness, Education and Employment

In the Legislative Assembly, through the articulation of aspirations of the Tribal League members, the construction of another image of the 'Plains Tribes' took shape. The dominant image is of a 'backward' community. In the speeches of the tribal members we find a sense of self-depreciation, which drew heavily from the internalisation of colonial, official and ethnographic images of the tribes. "The sense of cultural inferiority integral with the term 'tribal society' enunciated by the colonial ethnology was too embedded in the psychology of the educated tribals to inspire them... Not surprisingly, the tribal leaders consciously presented themselves as 'backward' people before the statutory commission amounting to negation of their own culture."⁵⁰ By virtue of not being a part of the dominant mainstream culture the appellation of 'backwardness' in various aspects, subsequently,

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Joseph Bara, "Western Education and Rise of New Identity: Mundas and Orans of Chotanagpur, 1839-1939" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 12, 1997. P.789

entitled 'protection' and special provisions so that such conditions disappear. It was stressed that the tribes not only inhabited 'backward tracts' but were backward in every aspect, be it in education or other social conditions. The reasons of 'backwardness' according to Rabi Chandra Kachari, could be partly attributed to internal inability or handicaps to progress and partly (probably most importantly) "due to indifference of our more fortunate brethren and to want if proper encouragement at the hands of the government."⁵¹ The necessity of "protection and special treatment - real and substantial"⁵² for large tribal population, which was 'poor, weak and ignorant' is the dominant mode of articulation.

Therefore, education and employment was perceived as modern means of empowerment and social emancipation by the tribal leaders. The emerging tribal elite, who constituted the Tribal League perceived modern education as empowerment. There was the realisation that in order to create and , preserve an identity one needed the aid of instruments like education. As one tribal member of the Assembly observed: "At present, education is the most vital problem for the tribal, backward and scheduled castes people. They now feel what is education and they are now realising that without education they are nobody and nowhere in the civilized world."⁵³ So within the scope of

⁵¹ Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, *ALAP*, 7th August, 1937

⁵² Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, *ALAP*, 14th March, 1944.

⁵³ Speech by Karka Dalay Miri *ALAP*, 2nd March, 1938.

provincial politics, another aspect of assertion by the representatives of the Tribal League was for securing the right to education. The level of education in colonial Assam was quite low,⁵⁴ and the Plains Tribes were lagging behind in this aspect more than other communities. So with the communal award of 1935, and with their own representatives in the Assembly, demands for better educational facilities and opportunities were put forward. These demands were mostly for setting up more schools in tribal areas, increase of funds, reservation, scholarship and free studentship for tribal students. Bhimbar Deuri, one of the founding member of the Tribal League and also member in the Legislative Council, while discussing the various problems of the tribals, also focussed on the question of education: "Amongst these problems – the amelioration of the condition of the masses, the eradication of the opium habit and the spread of education among all classes, particularly among the backward classes, are the most urgent needs..."⁵⁵. But cognition of the problem and acting upon it were two separate processes. The initial jubilation among the tribal elite for the communal representation in the Assembly and over provincial autonomy soon evaporated. It was evident that development under the colonial government would not be easy. Rupnath Brahma's speech during a budget session reflects this attitude, "Now-a-days we hear a great cry in the country for the upliftment of these backward people,

⁵⁴ A.Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*. pp.56-64. In these pages he discusses the growth of the middle class.

⁵⁵ Speech by Bhimbar Deuri, *ALCP*, 11th March, 1933.

we have been given to understand that the government also have taken up special responsibility for safeguarding of the interests of the minority people...But it is surprising that nowhere in the budget we find any specific provision for the upliftment for the backward tribal' of the plains."⁵⁶ In fact inadequate budget allocation for education and grants to fund schools were perennial problems. Rupnath Brahma, another tribal representative in the Assembly, expressed his disappointment and dissatisfaction in such a situation: "We expected this time our popular and responsible government would come forward with definite scheme for education of the backward tribal people of the plains, but unfortunately to our utter dis-appointment no specific earmarked provision has been made for the plains tribals in the present year's budget also... It is a known fact that the tribal people of the plains are the most backward people in the whole province and I think government greater responsibility for the education of these people. If there is no definite move from the government for education of these people, then I think all nation-building projects will be left far behind in Assam."⁵⁷ Not much was done to address those grievances and conditions did not improve radically as evident in Rabi Chandra Kachari, another representative's speech: "...The tribal people of the plains are very backward in the point of education. But we find a small amount of Rs.8000 has been earmarked for the expansion of primary education among the tribal people of the plains. This money is quite

⁵⁶ Speech by Rupnath Brahma, *ALAP*, 9th August, 1937.

⁵⁷ Speech by Rupnath Brahma, *ALAP*, 18th February, 1938.

insufficient because on average only 4 schools from each of the 12 subdivisions will be benefited from this grant. But in each subdivision we have got more than 50 lower primary schools. We are also neglected by the local boards, as we cannot be properly represented in the boards. So I request government to earmark a sufficient amount for the expansion of education in the tribal areas of the plains, so that we may have a special impetus in education.”⁵⁸ The reliance on ‘liberal’ policies of the colonial state to improve their conditions and civilise them soon disappeared and most of the tribal representatives lamented that after more than a century of British rule in Assam there was a lot to be done yet. Karka Dalay Miri, representative of the Miri tribe, complained that though hill tribes and the Muslim students were conferred free studentship and scholarship, no such special provisions had been accorded to the Backward Tribals of the Plains.⁵⁹ Another member, Purna Chandra Sarma pointed to the lopsided flow of funds: “While money is being poured for wastage in sectarian education in Madrasas and Maktabas he dreams to possibly bring in a bill for taxing education of the Mikirs, Lalungs, Kacharis and Miris and the ex-garden labourers - for whom he could not find even a score of thousand.”⁶⁰

The backwardness was due to these circumstances of absence of supportive provisions. According to Karka Dalay Miri, groups like the Miri, Kachari, Deuri, Lalung, Khampti, Mikir etc were backward in

⁵⁸ Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, *ALAP*, 22nd March, 1941.

⁵⁹ Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, *ALAP*, 17th August, 1937.

⁶⁰ Speech by Purna Chandra Sarma, *ALAP*, 26th February, 1941.

education due to the absence of adequate number of schools.⁶¹ Khorsing Terang, representative of the Mikir Hills, stressed that education was necessary to transform the 'inhibited, animal like Mikir', into a proper civilized human being.⁶²

The tribal representatives came up with various solutions to the problem of providing education. It was suggested that such problems could only be solved if the government established a lower primary schools in every five to six villages. In many areas the local people (i.e. the tribals) took the initiative to open schools in the hope that such venture schools would be taken over by the local board. But not many schools were taken over by the local boards and very few scholarships were provided. Another demand was that a special officer for education of these people should be appointed, as it was done for the Muslims. Under such pressure the Congress Ministry, when in power, improved the funding of tribal education.⁶³ It was also decided that eight tribal students receive free studentship. The earlier norm was that out of thirteen free studentship eighteen would be for the Muslims and rest to others.⁶⁴ Lack of adequate funding and disinterest on the part of the colonial authorities observed by the tribal representatives and the Congress members criticised the motives. "Instead of giving us better facilities for education they have given us facilities for opium

⁶¹ Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, *ALAP*, 17th August, 1937.

⁶² Speech by Khorsing Terang, *ALAP*, 10th August, 1937.

⁶³ Out of Rs.50,000, Rs.29,000 was kept for the tribals.

⁶⁴ *ALAP*, 26th February, 1940.

pills and some doses of liquor only”.⁶⁵ Haladhar Bhuyan, Congressman, pointed to the self interest of the colonial government in their policy towards the tribes, for whom nothing was done till the declaration of provincial autonomy. The awareness of the tribals on the necessity of education was also attributed to the spread of Congress message since 1921.⁶⁶

Conclusion

Thus, by the 1940's the Tribal League had reified the idea of a distinctive tribal identity, mostly for political and social reasons. Therefore on various issues it came into conflict with the Congress and other groups. It is apparent that the tribal elite, the progressive traditionalist, in envisioning an identity constructed a discourse of backwardness and 'differentness' in opposition to other communities.

The controversy around the census gave rise to sharply defined notions about religion and identity. The Tribal League's support for the community based enumeration bereft of any religious content, illustrated the strength of the idea of a 'unified 'plain tribes' as a political category. Likewise, in the Temple Entry issue the clear position maintained by tribal leaders, as not being a part of the Hindu society, also points towards efforts of engendering identity in opposition to the caste Hindu society.

⁶⁵ *ALAP*, 2nd March, 1938.

⁶⁶ Speech by Haladhar Bhuyan, *ALAP*, 5th December, 1935.

As evident from the discussion, such an image was contested at various levels and probably cognisance of the social complexity the Tribal League invented an identity which was modern and political in its underpinnings. By urging the tribals to classify themselves according to their community, instilled a new sense of identity which was officially recognised (because of the census) and aided the emergence of a modern political identity. The consciousness about necessity to progress, reinforced this identity. It revolved around the question of rights, not traditional and customary, but modern rights of education, employment and equality. Thus the Tribal League by 1940's strongly entrenched in defining the 'tribes' and securing their rights.

CONCLUSION

The attempt of this study was to address certain questions relating to the issues of identity formation of the Plains Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam. The focus was not on history of the Tribal League or on politics *per se*, but on how different spheres or avenues were used by the tribal leaders to articulate identity. The formation of a tribal identity, as evident by the discussion in the preceding chapters, took shape at two levels simultaneously. At one level colonial ethnography, in the act of categorising/classifying the population, by attributing certain characteristics created an 'image' of the tribes in its discourse. Another parallel trend was the caste Hindu attitude towards the tribal communities. The other level of identity construction was based on how the tribal elite and leaders conceived their entity as tribals.

The discussion in the first chapter has showed how by the nineteenth century colonial ethnographers, official and non-official, had established certain ideas which came to dominate the characterisation of the tribes. Though representing the tribes was fraught with problems, attempts were made to locate the tribes within the purview of the framework of 'savagery' to 'civilisation' transition, where the question of change through the agency of Hinduism and the colonial state played a crucial role. Colonial ethnographic discourse largely became a representation of differences, in the juxtaposition of the

'semi-savage tribes' of the plains with the dominant section of the population, the caste Hindus.

Self-representation by the tribal leaders was of course not in pure opposition to the other levels of perception, the colonial state's and the caste Hindu middle class's. In fact, the reified idea of identity that emerged appropriated and internalised certain images of the colonial and caste Hindu imagery and rejected certain others. As discussed in the second and the third chapter such partial appropriations were often defined by contemporary political context.

Growing consciousness about being a 'tribal', in the political space provided by the colonial state, led to a denial of commonality and shared practices with the caste Hindu. It was claimed that certain tangible changes (for example, giving up of certain customs, way of dressing, or food habits) did not transform the tribal into a 'Hindu'. Early associative politics of the tribes gradually distanced itself from being identified as 'Hindu' or 'Hinduised'. The census became a site of contestation for officially defining and claiming identity. By 1930's and 40's groups and communities actively interfered in census enumeration, not merely through writing petition and books but also by organizing meetings and participating in mechanism of enumeration itself. The active intervention of the Tribal League in the 1941 census has discussed elaborately in the third chapter.

It is quite obvious that along with the tribal leaders' urge to emancipate the tribes by instilling in them a sense of identity, the provision of communal representation of the 1935 Act crystallised the notion of the identity of the Plains tribes. It saw the election of tribal members to the Legislative Assembly and their articulation of various issues concerning the tribal people aided the concretisation the Plains Tribes identity. As the debates around the census enumeration and the Temple Entry Bill demonstrated, tribal identity increasingly tended to get defined by self-perception. Such an effort was contested from various spheres due to the Tribal League's tendency to club all 'tribals' together. But at the political level such an identity continued to exist and function since the separate constituency of the Plains Tribes community gave an institutional form to tribal identity and consciousness.

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