Tribal Politics in the Assam: 1933-1947

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The term “Plains Tribal” was first used by the colonial rulers in Assam to lump together a diverse set of people defined in semi-geographical and semi-sociological terms. It was taken up and crafted into an identity in the competitive politics of late colonial Assam by representatives of tribal groups who successfully welded this diverse set into a unified political and social category. This article traces the emergence of the “Plains Tribal” in the political map of Assam and shows how it came to be defined partly in opposition to other competing social categories and partly in terms of internal markers of identity.

The structure of bourgeois politics introduced by the colonial state in India was limited and restrictive. Despite the hegemony of large nationalities in it, a number of marginal groups could squeeze a space for themselves in this politics. While the hill tribes of north-east India were constrained by colonial laws barring them from active politics, the plain tribes were not. Taking advantage of this, the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley activated themselves in the political arena. Interestingly, these tribes initially united into a conglomerate group to struggle for socio-political empowerment as well as fight the hegemony of caste Hindus. The focus of their politics was around issues of defining and constructing a “tribal” identity, refusal to be absorbed into the Hindu caste society, temple entry, access to land, displacement from traditional habitation areas and general backwardness. This article focuses on how the tribal leadership constructed a united platform based on a generic identity to fight for these issues in the colonial period, before disintegrating into individual autonomy movements of each tribe in the post-colonial period.

Associative Politics Prior to 1933

“Plains Tribes” is a term used in the contemporary political and administrative discourse from the 1930s when it was introduced by the British as a generic term clubbing the valley tribes like the Kacharis (Bodos), Mikirs (Karbis), Miris (Mishings), Lalung (Tiwa) and Rabhas together. Its continued usage by the tribal leaders is indicative of the appropriation of the term in an attempt to unify these varied communities on a single platform for political purposes.

Parallel to the efforts of the colonial state and ethnographers to define and locate the “tribal” 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. The early 20th 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 sociocultural consciousness of the people is undeniable. The Mels, inspired 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.

From the 1920s onwards, growing political consciousness with Congress mobilisations and emergence of caste associations (like Ahom Sabha, Kaivartta Sanmilan) gave an impetus to the emergence of associations of “tribal” communities like Chutiya,
Moran, and the Kacharis. Early in the 20th century, through the initiative of an educated middle class, the Kacharis, Mikirs, Miris and Rabhas made certain progress in comprehending the politics of rights, representation and emancipation. In their effort to “develop”, “uplift” or “improve” the conditions of the tribes, various attempts were made by this emerging leadership to locate the reasons for their backwardness and to introduce reforms in social practices. Kalicharan Brahma, Sitanath Brahma Choudhary among the Kacharis and Samsonsing Ingti among the Mikirs were the real pioneers. Their attempts to redefine tradition, adjusting to colonial modernity, were also the first steps towards the construction of the tribal identity.

The arrival in 1929 of the Simon Commission in Assam provided them the scope to put forward their grievances and aspirations to a royal commission for the first time. The memoranda and petitions presented to the Simon Commission show the presence of a strong political consciousness centring on the notion of the tribal identity. Various associations, especially of the Kachari (Bodo) community, submitted a number of memoranda4 to this commission. The commission took into consideration the memorandum by the Bodo community of Goalpara and few representatives from the “Primitive and Backward tribes”7 were interviewed. The petition by the Bodo community observed that the benefits of reforms were enjoyed by the upper castes, thereby depriving the backward communities.8 In order to safeguard their interests, “the community demanded separate representative in the local council and one reserved seat for the Bodos in the Central Legislature”.9 They deplored their backwardness and recognised education as a means of development and fight against exploitation. They complained that they were illiterate because “our people are always misled, they cannot understand the value of reforms, they cannot save themselves from the hands of the foreign moneylenders”.10 The leaders, as representatives of respective tribes, used the colonial imagery of the tribe as backward, semi-savage, ignorant to put forward their political claims and for seeking colonial protection.11 The 10th convention of the Assam Bodo Chattra Sammilon in 1929, under the supervision of Rupnath Brahma, reiterated the necessity of education for progress and better utilisation of the opportunities offered by the colonial state. Therefore they urged the setting up of schools to struggle against illiteracy, rather than depending on the government.12 Likewise, delivering the presidential address to the Assam Kachari Jubok Sammilon in 1929, Benduhar Rajkhowa stressed on establishing schools in every village through the people's own initiative, and by pressurising the local boards to fund them.13

The leadership also contested the classification, in the census reports, of these tribal communities as low caste Hindus. The memorandum submitted by the Assam Kachari Jubok Sammilon, suggested that to regard the tribal as Hindu 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 aspiration”.14 They 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”.15 So by the late 1920s ideas about the distinctiveness of tribal culture became an important part of what was defined as “tribal identity”. 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. Interestingly, they also refused to totally severe this identity from the Assamese one. 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.16 As mentioned earlier, Kalicharan Brahma's efforts to introduce Assamese as the medium of instruction also point to a parallel political and cultural identification to an Assamese identity.

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. The numerically small, educated tribal elite attempted to define their tribal identity as a “community of the Plains Tribes”. The Tribal League envisioned the unity of the various tribal communities. Thus, there emerged the single, monolithic notion of the “Plains Tribes”. Though essentially it was a geographical term delineating the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley as distinct from the tribes who lived in the hills, the tribal elite, and later tribal representatives in the assembly, asserted this community's interests in opposition to the interests of other communities (like the Muslims, caste Hindus, hill tribes and tea garden labourers). The “Plains Tribes” category was invented by the colonial authorities to ethnographically classify the tribal section of the population in the plains, which was later, after the 1935 Act, given the status of a separate constituency. The tribal elite appropriated this construction to articulate their political aspirations.

Tribal Politics and Land Questions

Tribal land alienation was intensely debated in the legislative assembly in relation to the issues of immigration and occupancy of agricultural land by the immigrants. Immigration from east Bengal had assumed significant proportion in the 1930s. 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 in 19207 as a means of protecting the tribes. The Line system envisaged the drawing of an imaginary line demarcating two distinct areas and no occupation of land by the immigrants was allowed beyond this "line". It was introduced in Nowgong and by 1930 it was operating in most districts of upper Assam.18 The Tribal League saw it as a colonial intervention to safeguard tribal lands.19 But the system did not work in reality in the same manner as it existed on paper. It was never strictly implemented, nor was it very effective in the absence of a strong government authority at the local level. Despite its existence there was land alienation, which led to numerous sessions of questioning, adjournment motions and heated debates in the assembly.20

In 1937, the Muslim League moved a resolution for the abolition of the Line system.21 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 interests of the poor people who require special protection.” 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 for the jungles and hills”. This argument, of endangering the tribal by letting them face the immigrants, 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”. 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 criticised the government’s lack of concern for the ousted indigenous people including the backward classes like the Kacharis and the Lalungs, who were driven out from their villages and had “taken shelter in the forests”. Under the colonisation schemes the government opened up reserve lands, de-reserved forests and professional grazing reserves, displacing the indigenous people. The colonisation scheme also entailed paying a premium for occupying the land, which, the Congress and Tribal League representatives claimed, the indigenous people could not afford to pay. However, as Maulvi Sayidur Rahman said in support of the colonisation scheme, legally there was no bar for the indigenous people occupying land. Members like F W Hockenhull insisted that the indigenous people did not occupy land because of the ample availability of free cultivable lands to them, and not because of want of capital. 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. Members like F W Hockenhull insisted that the indigenous people did not occupy land because of the ample availability of free cultivable lands to them, and not because of want of capital. 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. Karka Dalay Miri, the representative of the Miri tribe in the assembly, opposed colonisation because of the growing scarcity of land, which would restrict further expansion for the indigenous people.

In view of the escalating pressure, colonial administrators like Hockenhull asserted that there was “no real issue at all between the indigenous and immigrant population”. The logic was that the type of land (char-riverine land) favoured by the immigrants was not being cultivated by the indigenous people. Even Purna Chandra Sarma, the Congressman, illustrated with examples from Nowgong district the defective and biased functioning of the scheme. He complained that the tribes 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”. It was also pointed out that these lands originally belonged to the tribal communities like the Lalungs and Kacharies which were opened for colonisation in Nowgong. 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 Sayid Muhammad Saadulla ministry for its policy on the immigrants. The flow of immigrants was compared to an “invasion” into the “lines and reserved areas” causing great panic.

The deliberation of the legislative assembly, the subsequent land settlement policy and conflicts over land made it amply clear that available arable land was becoming scarce. It was further aggravated by occupation of vast wastelands by tea gardens and the opening up of professional grazing reserves for occupation. As the anti-displacement voice grew stronger, various enquiries were set up by the government to look into land alienation by tribals. These discovered that, in many cases, the tribal sold off their lands to the immigrants. The Deput Commissioner’s report stated that there were other instances where the tribals sold their land to the immigrants and themselves migrated to central and upper Assam in the hope of getting rehabilitated by the government under some developmental schemes. The absence of cash to pay taxes also forced the tribals to sell their lands. The tribal representatives emphasised the cultural differences between the Muslim immigrants and themselves and opposed creation of immigrant settlements near tribal villages. Karka Dalay Miri, representative of the Miri tribe, drew the assembly’s attention to the displacement of the Miri people of Gorumara in Sissi Mauza, Dibrugarh, and also to the cancellation of pattas (land records) to Miris and Deuris, who had settled in Bahgara and Dhunagiri in Bihpuria Mauza, North Lakhimpur. The Assamese middle class and the Congress also articulated fears that “land hungry” immigrants were a threat to the existence of the indigenous peasantry. This was evident in Lakheswar Baroiash’s resolution, The aggressive attitude of the immigrants which manifests 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.

The 1931 census aggravated the tension on the question of demographic balance. The superintendent of census operation, M Mullan termed the coming of the immigrants an “invasion”. J H Hutton, the census commissioner of India in his report wrote, These immigrants, who are 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. The sense of vulnerability increased because of reported cases of forcible occupation of tribal villages and lands. But such cases were often exaggerated. For example, the Hindu Mahasabha claimed that it was “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 (were) becoming panic-stricken at this lawlessness”. Another telegram mentioned that “innumerable Muslim immigrants, Surma Valley Muslims occupying lands in Meteka Borbeal, Hatipara, Jamunagon, Maudonga, Howraghat, Howraghat,
Dighae-pani, Dakmaka, Chulani, Parakhowa, Sorgathi villages within Mikir Hills area, Namati Mauza, Nowgong against all previous restrictive prohibitive order. Great consternations amongst Mikirs prevails. Pray Excellency’s immediate intervention.” The tribal representatives and the Congress leaders attributed the land-grabbing to the connivance of Muslim government officers and the immigrants. Thus, they protested, even genuine complaints and eviction orders were left without any action being taken.49

Gradually from 1937 to 1947 such demands become more persistent against increasing violations of rules and regulations. A committee was constituted to inquire into the working of the Line system. The report submitted by F Hockenhall, of the “European party”, emphasised that the “…indigenous people alone would be unable, without the aid of immigrant settlers, to develop….60 but it was also in favour of the Line system and strong measures 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 4 November 1939. The points it emphasised were (a) the importance of maintaining grazing and forest reserves meant for public use 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 large blocks in sub-montane areas inhabited by tribals were ordered to be made prohibited areas; and (c) due provision was to be made for the reservation of large areas for the natural expansion of indigenous populations. Besides these, there was a proposal for planned settlement of the tribals.51

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 the protection of the tribals and for that purpose allowing the system to continue, Maulavi Syed Abdur Rauf said, “…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”.52 Most of the tribal representatives felt that the protective measures that were adopted were inadequate so far as the interests of the tribal people were concerned. The Congress criticised the Saadulla ministry for failing to provide protection to the tribal. They feared that these “indigenous people of the province – the tribal and the scheduled castes are soon to be driven away to the hills to make room for the invading hordes of immigrants”.53

In the 1940s, on the issue of amending the conditions of the Line system, the tribal representatives demanded legislative changes and laws to evict all illegal settlers, whether they had settled before or after April 1937.54 In June 1940 a government resolution put a ban on settlement of wastelands by any immigrants entering Assam after 1 January 1938. The Saadulla ministry was continuously pressurised by the tribal representatives and Congress members inside and outside the assembly to prohibit the settlement of wastelands by immigrants coming after 1 January 1938. The Muslim League members opposed this 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, through its minister Abdul Matin Choudhury declared officially that protection of the backward tribals was the “bedrock of their policy”.55

In this period the debate was around the question of land alienation. As the question of the Line system and protection of the backward classes became a contentious issue, the Congress used this as a political instrument against the Muslim League, though its own concerns remained suspect with the Tribal League. Due to the absence of funds, the tribals could not avail various developmental schemes.56 Blocks continued to be opened as also the professional grazing reserves. The Congress continued to stress on the necessity of maintaining the professional grazing reserves and also demanded that wastelands should be measured and areas reserved for the indigenous population before settling the immigrants.57 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.58 The conflict around the land 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 (village headman) 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.”59 He tried to convey that the allegations against the immigrants were baseless and condemned the tribal as “rioters” and “trespassers”. The Congress successfully won over the tribal representatives, by focusing 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. From 1937 onwards, the tribal representatives 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.60

1941 Census as the Site of Contestation

The 1941 Census refrained from providing religious classification in Assam. 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. It evoked strong criticism from various sections of Assamese society and led to a debate in newspapers as well as in the assembly. The Congress criticised the government for manipulating the census operations so as to conceal the correct figures of the followers of different religions. An adjournment motion was called to discuss the census operations.61 It was under the Assam provincial government’s insistence that K W P 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 the answer to questions 3, but generally the communities are unavoidably mixed up and where community cannot be ascertained in answer to question 3, 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.62

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.”63 Siddhi Nath Sarma, for 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.64 These efforts on the part of the colonial government to seek out community identity corresponded to the Tribal League’s own efforts to project the community identity as one, unified, tribal people. And for this purpose the Tribal League carried out propaganda. A bulletin of the League was taken out with the main objective of instructing the tribal people about enumerating themselves in the census.65 The Tribal League’s definition of tribal 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.66

Further, the Tribal League also emphasised the separateness and different-ness of the social structure of the tribals and caste Hindu Assamese. The focus was on two polarised societies where no intermingling ever existed. The “independence” of the tribal from the Hindu society was claimed. 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 worldview 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 perceived as a ploy to club them together with the low castes.67 The Tribal League persistently opposed various moves by more conservative circles and the Congress, to categorise them as a part of the Hindu society.

According to the Congress and some others, the enumeration should have taken into consideration the important factor of religion while classifying the communities. The colonial state claimed that it wanted to simplify complex categorisation in tabulation and wanted to “avoid in their argument provoking terms such as ‘Hinduised’.”68 The superintendents, though, could discuss complexities and it was noted that some discussions on the religious affiliations of the tribals and the degree of their Hinduisation would be both of interest and value.69 Hinduisation was not the sole concern but conversion to Christianity also drew official attention, and it was suggested, “...it is important to know to what degree they have entered the Christian or other fold”.70 The Guwahati Rajhowa (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”.71 It was also emphasised 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. It was observed, “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.”72

Ambikagiri Rai Chaudhuri of the Assam Siksha Prachar Samiti appealed to the tribals to think twice before enumerating themselves. He stressed on their being a part of a greater Assamese society calling them its backbone 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.73 More or less similar sentiments were echoed through the articles and editorials of the newspapers.74

The Saadulla 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.75 The Tribal League was also criticised for being a pawn in the hands of the colonial government.76 The Saadulla government and the Muslim League were accused of attempting to alter the demographic structure of society, in a bid to join Pakistan.77 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 data showing “alarming” increases in the population of Muslims.78 The only way visible to the middle class leadership to maintain a demographic balance was to confine the figures of Hindus by adding to it the numbers for the plains tribe’s populations.

The 1941 Census was perceived as an attempt of the government to fragment the unified Hindu community by stressing on community identity than on religion. This propaganda urged the Lalungs, Rabhas, Kacharis, Mikirs and other “communities” to demand classification as “Hindus” as opposed to “tribals”. Editorials in 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, not qualified by religion, gave a distorted impression of reality, like showing a huge increase in the tribal population.79

Protests against such calculation also came from the tribals as well. Many protested against their classification as “animist” or according to their tribes. The Sonowal Kacharis were, for example, stated to be Hinduised for a long time and followers of rules and regulations of Hinduism, and had priests officiating the rituals.80 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 enumeration81 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.92 Other than the Congress, the Christian representatives in the Assembly opposed such a classification as, “Figures given in the last census are defective and incomplete inasmuch as that Christians have been shown at such a low figure. The word ‘community’ itself could not 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.”93 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 that he would present before the House “the exact feelings of the tribal people on the matter.”94 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.”95 He also denied the reports that tribal people in some places had protested against classification on community basis and emphasised the fact that “the existing Tribal League is the only provincial organisation under which all the plains tribal people of the province function.”96 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.”97

Protest against the manner in which the census was conducted, was registered by people like A V Thakkar, a Gandhian. He also called the enumeration on the basis of community a “strange phenomenon” and questioned the 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.”98 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 separate representation to the tribal for the first time...we have since 1935 got certain political rights and importance, a tribal gentleman and a tribal lady MLAs 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.”99

The great increase in the population returned as tribal is thus 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.”100 This 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 on one side and among the Christians for the last 50 years on the other, must have en masse swung to the ‘Tribal Community’.”101 As a rejoinder to the comment, the editor published a note, which defined tribal in the 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 aboriginal. 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 ‘Harjian’, or depressed classes. Moreover, by recording themselves as ‘aboriginal’ or ‘tribals’ they stand a chance of political advancement. For in the next Indian 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.102

**Entry to the Temples**

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 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 illustrated how the Vaishnava preacher Sankardeva believed in equality and that is why “even a Javan like Jayahari Ata, a Mirl like Bolai Ata, a Bhot like Damudar Ata and a Kachari like Ram Ata were given equal status in his religious society.”103 His treatment of the tribes was reflective of a dominant trend, placing them in the hierarchy of the caste structure and the discourse of “upliftment” which defines them as low-caste Hindus. The preconceived assumption bracketed the tribal with the low-caste Hindus, who were denied entry into most temples. The dominant Assamese caste Hindu society did not perceive the plains tribals as a separate entity. 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 tribal 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.104

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,

> if my friend M Rabi 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 surface…. I have a duty. I should perform that duty.105

Doubts were raised by the government about the extent that the Temple Entry Bill would benefit the tribals. Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri questioned whether the bill would help the Kacharis
and other animists. 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” 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.” Rupnath Brahma, then a minister in the provincial government and representative of the Tribal League, clarified his organisation's position whether tribes can be termed Hindus and whether the bill would benefit them:

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

Another member, Gauri Kanta Talukdar, rejected the necessity of classifying the tribal separately as animists, such categories being largely colonial constructs:

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 tribals 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?

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 because of its all-inclusive paternalistic nature. Rupnath Brahma's denial of the positive effects of the Temple Entry Bill for the tribals people was criticised by the Congress, with its populist claims for social upliftment. According to Ghanashyam Das, Rupnath 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 was, asserted Talukdar, "people who are religious minded and who like to worship God inside a temple", and they should not be deprived of that right.

**Education as a Means to Empowerment**

In the Legislative Assembly, through the articulation of the Tribal League members, the construction of another image of the plains tribes took shape: the 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.

By virtue of not being a part of the dominant mainstream culture the appellation of backwardness in various aspects, subsequently, 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 want of proper encouragement at the hands of the government.” The necessity of “protection and special treatment – real and substantial” for large tribal populations, which were “poor, weak and ignorant”, was the dominant mode of articulation.

Therefore, the tribal leaders perceived education and employment as modern means of empowerment and social emancipation. 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 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 casts people. They now feel what is education and they are now realising that without education they are nobody and nowhere in the civilised world.

So within the scope of 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, and the plains tribes were lagging behind in this aspect more than other communities. So with the communal award of 1935, and 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 in 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 focused 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...

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, Nowadays we hear a great cry in the country for the upliftment of these backward people, 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 tribes of the plains.
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 disappointment 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 has 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.109

Not much was done to address those grievances and conditions did not improve radically as evident in Rabi Chandra Kachari’s speech.

...the tribal people of the plains are very backward in the point of education. But we find a small amount of rupees, 8000, has been earmarked for the expansion of primary education among the tribal people of the plains. This money is quite 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.110

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 Mīrī 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.111 The backwardness was due to the absence of supportive provisions. According to him, groups like the Mīrī, Kachari, Deuri, Lalung, Khampti, Mikri, etc., were backward in education due to the lack of adequate schools.112 Khorsing Terang, representative of the Mikir Hills, stressed that education was necessary to transform the “inhibited, animal like Mikir”, into a “proper civilised human being”.113

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 one lower primary school in every five to six villages. In many areas the local people (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 actually 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, increased funding of tribal education.114 It was also decided that eight tribal students will receive free studentship. The earlier norm was that out of 13 free studentship eight would be for the Muslims and rest to others.115 Lack of adequate funding and disinterest on the part of the colonial authorities was observed by the tribal representatives and the Congress members who criticised their motives, “Instead of giving us better facilities for education they have given us facilities for opium pills and some doses of liquor only”.116 Haladhar Bhusan, 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 regarding the necessity of education was also attributed to the spread of Congress’ message since 1921.117

Conclusions

By the 1940s the Tribal League had refied the idea of a distinctive tribal identity, mostly for political and social reasons. The tribal elite, in envisioning an identity constructed a discourse of backwardness and different-ness in opposition to other communities. Though on the latter there was consensus, on the former it came into conflict with other political organisations like the Congress. On issues of land alienation, displacement and deprivation also the tribal leadership received the support of the Congress. 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 unified plain tribes as a political category. Likewise, in the temple entry issue the clear position maintained by tribal leaders, of not being part of the Hindu society, also points towards efforts of engendering identity in opposition to the caste Hindu society. In this, it came into conflict with that section of the Assamese society which believed that the Assamese community was endangered from the immigrants and was trying to build a greater Assamese nationality. This Assamese intelligentsia wanted the tribals to remain an integral part of the Assamese nationality. The tribal leadership had the option of either recognising the ties with the Assamese and accept a subordinated position in a caste society, or move away from it and claim independent identity which would ensure development and empowerment. It is the negotiation of this relationship that has defined politics in colonial and post-colonial Assam to a large extent.

NOTES

1 The word tribe is used with the understanding that its definition is contested and it does not necessarily denote a fixed social identity. Rather than putting the term in quotation marks throughout the text, I will simply use it as it stands.

2 The British encountered two categories of tribes in north-east India: those who lived in hills and those in plains. The concept of plain tribe was coined to sharpen the differentiation. The earliest possible reference was by Ethnographer Endle (The Kacharis, London, 1911). The phrase continued to be used in the post-colonial period.


5 Debendra Nath Sarma, Gurudev Kalicharan Braham (Jorhat 1983); Chitra Mahanta, Sinhaburush Sutanath Braham Choudhury (Jorhat 1981); Samsing Hanse, Jananayak Samsonsing Ingti (Jorhat, 1st Published 1985, 2nd 1990).

6 Memorandum by the Bodo Community of Goalpara district (By Mr Gyassudin Ahmad, B L Dubhi). Assam Kachari Jukob Sambilan (by Jadav Chandra Khakhari, Secretary) on behalf of the entire Kachari community; Proceedings of the Conference held by the representatives of the Kachari community for details of studentship the Muslims and rest to others.115

from different parts of Assam held at Titabar, Jorhat, August 1928; Memorial of the Bodos, Garos and Rabhas of the Goalpara Sub-division, Boro Jukot Sammilan (by Shyama Charan Brahma, Secretary).

7. The deputation of the primitive and backward tribes called and interviewed which consisted of Sonadhara Das (representative-Bania Sama); Raj Saheri Piyari Mohan Das (representative-Mahishya); Nila-Kanta Hazarika (representative-Kaivarta); Jogesh Chandra Nath (representative-Yogisi); Mahi Chandra Miri (representative-Miri); Jadav Charan Bhakiali (representative-Bodo); Mahendra Lal Das (representative-Lalungs and Mikiris) and Ramesh Chandra Das.


9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
13. Presidential Address to the Assam Kachari Jubok Sammilani by Benudhar Rajkhowa, 1929, p. 11.
15. Ibid, p. 10.
17. The idea of Line system was mooted in 1916 and formally introduced in 1920 as a measure to segregate areas specified for indigenous people and immigrants. For further see Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, New Delhi, 1977, Saajal Nag, Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationality Questions in Assam 1937-1941, New Delhi, 1990.
18. Report of the Line System Enquiry Committee Vols 1 and 2 (Hockenhill Committee), Shillong 1938.
20. Adjournment motion on account of recent vast raids by immigrants in certain villages of Howly Mouza in Barpeta subdivision, Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings (henceforth ALAP), 29 February 1940: Resolution disapproving the Land Settlement Policy of the present government ALAP, 6 December 1940.
22. Speech by Rabu Chandra Kachari, ALAP, 5 August 1937.
23. Ibid.
25. Speech by Naba Kumar Dutta, ALAP, 5 August 1937.
26. Speech by Mahi Chandra Bora, ALAP, 5 August 1937.
27. Speech by Haladhar Bhuyan, ALAP, 24 February 1938.
30. Speech by Mahi Chandra Bora, ALAP, 24 February 1938.
31. Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, ALAP, 24 February 1938.
32. Speech by Hockenhill, ALAP, 24 February 1938.
33. Ibid.
34. Speech by Purna Chandra Sarma, ALAP, 24 February 1938.
35. Ibid.
36. Speech by Beliram Das, ALAP, 24 February 1938.
39. 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.
40. Speech by Rupnath Brahma, ALAP, 25 February, 1938; Speech by Khan Saheb Maulavi Muhammad Amriddin, ALAP, 6 March 1944.
41. Speech by Lakheshwar Baroah, ALAP, 6 December 1941.
42. Speech by Dhirising Deuri, ALAP, 23 March, 1944, adjournment motion by Beliram Das, 13 March 1944.
43. Speech by Beliram Das, ALAP, 13 March, 1944; Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, ALAP, 15 March 1943.
44. Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, ALAP, 5 December 1941.
45. Speech by Lakheshwar Baroah, ALAP, 6 December 1941.
47. Speech by Dhirising Deuri, ALAP, 14 March 1944; Speech by Karka Dalay Miri: ALAP, 18 March 1941; Rabi Chandra Kachari: ALAP, 6 March 1944; Dhir Singh Deuri, ALAP, 26 February 1940; Kameshwar Das, ALAP, 29 February 1940.
48. Adjournment Motion, ALAP, 13 May 1944.
49. Karka Dalay Miri, ALAP, 15 March 1943.
51. Ibid.
52. Speech by Maulavi Syed Abdur Rauf, ALAP, 26 February 1940.
53. Speech by Chandra Sarma, ALAP, 26 February 1940.
54. Adjournment motion on account of recent vast raids by immigrants in certain villages of Howly Mouza in Barpeta subdivision, ALAP, 29 February 1940; Budget Discussion, ALAP, 6 March 1944.
55. Speech by Abdul Matin Choudhury, ALAP, 6 March 1944.
56. Speech by Rabu Chandra Kachari, ALAP, 14 March 1944.
57. ALAP, 6 December 1941, resolution disapproving the Land Settlement Policy of the Saadulla Government.
59. Speech by Md Amiruddin, ALAP, 6 March 1944.
60. The Line system was introduced for the first time in 1920 in Nowgong. ALAP, 4 December 1941: Adjournment motion in connection with the conducting of the last census operations in Assam brought by Siddhi Nath Sarma.
61. ALAP, 4 December 1941: Adjournment motion by Siddhi Nath Sarma.
62. Ibid, Classification of communities according to Appendix II, prepared by the Assam government, was as follows: (1) Assam Valley Hindus; (2) 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.
63. Speech by Siddhi Nath Sarma.
64. The Assam Tribal League (Bulletin 2), Bhimbar Deuri 1940 (In Assamese), p. 1.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. ALAP, 4 December 1941, Speech by Siddhi Nath Sarma quoting Mr Marar’s instructions to Census Officers.
68. Ibid.
69. Speech by Rev J M Nichols Roy, ALAP, 4 December 1941, Marar’s instructions to Census Officers.
70. Teendiya Assyamiya, 21 January 1941 (Guwahati).
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid, 10 January 1941.
73. Teendiya Assyamiya (Guwahati) and The Assam Tribune (Guwahati).