

Tribal Politics in Assam: From line system to language problem

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Abstract

Colonial geography of Northeast India reveals the fragmentation of the hills and plains and how it shaped the tribal politics in the region. Assam is a unique space to study the struggle of tribal against the mainstream political front as it is the last frontier of the subcontinent with a distinctiveness of ethnic mosaic. The tribal politics in the state became organised through the self determination of tribal middle class in terms of indignity. The question on indignity is based on land and language which are the strong determinants in the political climate of Assam. This paper tries to argue on the significance of the line system and how it was initially used to create the space for organised tribal politics in terms of land rights. From line system to landlessness the tribal politics is going through different phases of challenges and possibilities by including the demands for autonomy and idea of homeland. The Ethnic identity is indeed directly linked with the region's unique linguistic nature that becomes fragile in terms of identity questions.

1. Introduction

The discourse of 'tribal politics' was first used by the colonial rulers in Assam which carries various socio-political backgrounds in the history of Northeast in general and Assam in particular. It became a question of identity in the late colonial Assam originating from the meaning of 'tribe' to the representation of 'indigenous people'. The tribal politics began to challenge the hegemony of caste Hindus in the beginning and then transformed to tribal autonomy in the post-colonial period. Beteille(1998) argued Hinduism is indigenous to India and the transformation of tribes to Hindu shaped the tribal politics.

Bhimbor Deuri first raised the questions on tribal issues regarding their primary rights and attracted the national political parties to the tribal questions in undivided Assam. The concern about ethnic identities created the sphere of tribal politics and prioritised

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the political and social sense of power. Local organisations including the Kachari Sanmillan, the Koch Rajbongshi Sanmillan grew and finally formed the ‘Tribal League’ in 1933. Bhimbor Deuri was the founder General Secretary of Assam Plain Tribal League. As an organised common platform, the Tribal League raised issues on politics of rights, representation as well as emancipation with a nascent consciousness by an educated middle class in the early twentieth century. Kalicharan Brahma, Sitanath Brahma Choudhury among the Kacharis and Samsonsing Ingti among the Mikirs were the pioneers in the process.

Led by Kalicharan Brahma Bodo leaders submitted a memorandum to Simon Commission, demanding a separate political set-up for the indigenous and the tribals of Assam. They declared, ‘Socially they (the Bodo) are regarded as untouchables. To call them Hindus will be a misnomer in as much as the Hindus do not receive them into their society, do not dine with them and are mostly unsympathetic to their ideas and aspirations. They are, therefore, an isolated backward community’¹. They also blamed that the upper caste Hindus were enjoying the political power by keeping them in a backward space.

The Tenth Convention of the Assam Bodo Chattra Sanmilan in 1929, under the supervision of Rupanath Brahma brought the message that there is a necessity of education for the development of the tribal areas². The Sanmilan decided to set up schools by themselves rather than depending on the government. Following the similar steps, Benudhar Rajkhowa while delivering the presidential address of Assam Kachari Jubak Sanmilan in 1929 raised the issue of establishing schools by people’s initiatives. The memorandum submitted by Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilan acknowledged that the Kacharis were never a part of caste-divided Hindu society.³ The cultural interpretation of tribal repeatedly raised the question of ‘tribal identity’ which eventually contested in terms of “indignity”.

The discourse of ‘Plain tribe’ covers the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley, and they are distinct from the tribes who live in the hills. The Tribal League indeed leads the argument of self-representation, self-determination and local control. The other representation was that the section of educated, tribal elite. Sanjib Barua (2005) described the dilemma between the hills and plains as non-state space and state space respectively. The hills became a non-state space and referred to ‘illegible space’ despite the existence of significant local political formations.

¹ Memorandum by the Bodo Community of Goalpara district (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.

² Proceedings of the 10th Convention of the Assam Bodo Chattra Sammilan, 1929, p. 11-12.

³ Presidential Address to the Assam Kachari Jubok Sammilani by Benudhar Rajkhowa in 1929, p. 11.

³ Speech by Hockenhall, ALAP, 24 February 1938.

2. Line System and the Issue of Land

Tribal politics negotiated with the question of land and line system. Line system introduced in 1920 was a clear demarcation between two areas where the immigrants were not allowed either for occupation or cultivation. Under the Line System, “a line was drawn in the districts under pressure [from immigrants] in order to settle immigrants in segregated areas, specified for their exclusive settlements” (A.Guha 2006:167). Nowgong district was the first to follow the line system, and by 1930 the system was spread in the entire upper Assam. Tribal League termed it as a colonial intervention for the protection of tribal lands⁴.

“A conference of district officials held at Shillong in 1928 decided that the number of lines should be reduced, simplified and straightened... with the objective of allocating, considerable blocks of land community-wise” (A.Guha 2006:168). It indicates the greater administrative control over the process which is also a racial segregation between the aboriginal inhabitants and the immigrants. Guha also implied that it is responsible for the divisive nature of “greater Assamese identity” followed by the question ‘*Axomiya Kun?*’ (Who are the Assamese?).

“Who are the Assamese?” is a question that gained its rationale from the perception of danger to culture and community, felt against the influx of a people who seemed to be reaping all the benefits available under the colonial government” (N. Dutta 2012:174). Guha noted that decline of the indigenous population of the Valley by about 7.7 per cent, and the corresponding increase in the non-indigenous population had been distinct. Besides immigration, there was also an inter-district migration (A. Guha 2006:31). He concludes, “As a result of... these population movements...and epidemic havoc...two major demographic changes took place during the years 1874-1905: i) a shift in the ethnic composition of the population and ii) a change in its spatial distribution over the districts” (Ibid. 31-31). Even the nation-state “imagines and represent itself as a land, a territory, a place that functions as the site of homogeneity, equilibrium, integration,” Barua (2005), which reflects, in Kachig Tololyan’s words, the vision of hegemony-seeking national elites. By using Tololyan’s view Barua analysed the domestic tranquillity in a territory from the perspective of national elites based on the differences being “assimilated, destroyed, or assigned to ghettos”.⁵ Using Barua’s argument this paper makes an attempt to understand this political process in Assam, in the imagination of hegemony-seeking pan-Indian elites which is also an example of an internal challenge to the self-representation of the Assamese sub-nationalism.

The problems of immigration and their occupancy in the agricultural areas reflect the alienation of land from the tribes to the immigrants. Muslim League strongly opposed the line system in 1973. On the other hand, Rabi Chandra Kachari and Rupnath

⁴ 18th Report of the Line System Enquiry Committee Vols 1 and 2 (Hockenull Committee), Shillong 1938.

⁵ Toloyan, Kachig.1996.

Brahma were in favour of the system. Rupnath Brahma raised the example of Goalpara where many tribal people had to shift from their native land and settled elsewhere⁶. They implied,

*'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'*⁷.

Colonial administrator Hockenhill claimed that the *chars* or riverine land is not favoured by the indigenous population⁸. Congressman Purna Chandra Rabha pointed out that the lands of Nowgong district originally belonged to Lalungs and Kachari community but the report of the Deputy Commissioner that the tribals sold off their lands to the immigrants and settled in upper and central Assam⁹. As the line system failed to mitigate the situation and tension between the immigrants and the indigenous people, a committee was formed from 1937 to 1947. The report submitted by the committee focused on the impact of immigrants and land alienation and recommended for the protection of the tribal lands. The Congress government under Bordoloi Ministry declared 'protected tribal blocs' and adopted a land settlement policy on November 4, 1939. The significant points of this policy were as follows (Guha, 2006):

- a) The immediate eviction of encroachers in forest reserves either by immigrants or by non-immigrants.
- b) Dominated tribal areas ordered to be made prohibited areas.
- c) There are some provisions for the natural expansion of indigenous people.
- d) Proposing for the planned settlement of the tribals.

There were various reasons for the support of Tribal League towards Bordoloi Ministry (Das, 1983) including the demand for a separate electorate for the tribal people. Their demands also included reserved seats for the tribal in the Legislative Assembly as well as Legislative Councils. All tribal irrespective of creed, culture, and religion should be enlisted as a tribal which was the last demand of the Tribal League which later become a source of several debates in the tribal politics of Assam. However, this support lost much strength when in the later phases, the Tribal League protested against the Bordoloi Ministry for not including a tribal member in his ministry though they were given the assurance before the election. During the conference of the All Tribal Party Leaders held at Shillong on 6, 7, 8 July in 1946 they forwarded the following demands:

1. To send a tribal representative to the Constituent Assembly.
2. To induct one minister and a Parliamentary Secretary in the Central Ministry.
3. Making reservations for posts in Government service for the tribals.

⁶ Speech by Rupnath Brahma, ALAP, 5 August 1937.

⁷ Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, ALAP, 5 August 1937.

⁸ Speech by Hockenhill, ALAP, 24 February 1938.

⁹ Speech by Lakeshwar Barooah, ALAP, 6 December 1941.

Because of these demands, Gopinath Bordoloi inducted Bhimbor Deuri and Abdul Rashid into his cabinet during 1946. In the meantime, Sri Jogendra Nath Hazarika, the president of All Assam Hills and Plains Tribal Student's Union was inducted in the Nehru Ministry as the Parliamentary Secretary for foreign affairs.

The resignation of the Bordoloi ministry stalled the implementation, and the newly formed Saddulla ministry yet again demanded the abolition of the Line system. In 1940 the tribal representatives demanded legislative changes to fulfil the conditions of the line system and evict the illegal migrants. Eventually, Congress demanded the measurement and reservation of the wastelands for the indigenous people¹⁰. Jawaharlal Nehru however maintained his support to immigrants as he deemed it to be an economic necessity and was in favour of the relaxation of the Line system which became ambiguous for the local tribals.¹¹ The genesis of the conflict of in tribal areas can be traced back to the Line system.

3. The Idea of Separateness

The 1941 classification and its effort to find out the community identity helped the Tribal League to be united as a group. The Tribal League defined 'tribal' as broad-based categories where religion was a secondary aspect of identity. Moreover, the Tribal League focused on the characteristics of 'separateness' and 'differentness' between the tribal people and the caste Hindu Assamese. The contestation starts with the hegemony of being 'Hinduised' or following 'Christianity'. However, in this case, Hinduisation was not a concern but conversion to Christianity was seen as a threat to the mainstream Assamese. The Tribal League played a significant role in the political scenario of Assam during the time and were staunchly opposed and protested against the grouping of Assam with West Bengal while after the independence they merged with the Congress Party.

The formation of Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in 1967 carried the demand for a separate state named 'Udayachal' for the plain tribal of Assam after the formation of Nagaland. The demand for a separate administrative unit 'Udayachal' which was to be carved out of Assam and granted Union Territory status for Assam's plains tribes was made in 1968. Sentiments based on their political rights and identity contributed to the formation of the PTCA (Borbora:1989). An agreement was signed between the Janata Party and the PTCA before the general elections of Assam in 1978 for sharing of seats. In the general elections of the State Legislature of Assam in 1978, the Janata Party begged fifty-four seats while the PTCA gained only four seats and in the post election coalition, the PTCA withdrew its demand for a state of Udayachal. This was the first non-congress Government in Assam after independence and included twelve Cabinet ministers along with four ministers of State which include three Cabinet Ministers from Tribal representatives and PTCA. A conference was held on tribal

¹⁰ Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, ALAP, 14 March 1944.

¹¹ Resolution disapproving the Land Settlement Policy of the Saadulla Government, ALAP, 6 December 1941.

issues at Dispur where Prime Minister Morarji Desai assured the development of the tribal people of Assam. The meeting helped to understand the necessity of reservation of services and posts for tribal and the Assam Schedule Caste and the Scheduled Tribes Act, 1978 was passed in Assam Legislative Assembly. During its short tenure, the Janata Government addressed the tribal sentiments and concerns and this could put on hold the demand a separate state by the Plains Tribal Council (Borbora:1989).

The All Bodo Students' Union, formed in 1967, emerged as a formidable force in the 1970s. Under the leadership of Upendra Nath Brahma, the group succeeded in inclusion of Bodo as an official language of Assam. The 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of an identity politics that pitted "sons of the soil", or populations identified as indigenous, against "illegal immigrants". In these years, the All Bodo Students' Union made common cause with the All Assam Students' Union, which was spearheading the agitation against alleged illegal migrants from Bangladesh. However after the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, All Bodo Student Union Under the leadership of the late Upen Brahma resumed the old demand for separate Bodo state under the slogan "Divide Assam fifty-fifty".¹² The Assam Accord left Bodo leaders feeling marginalised and in 1988, the All Bodo Students' Union made a formal demand for a separate state, Bodoland. The tribal politics in Assam took a new turn after the fragmentation of PTCA to Progressive PTCA and the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985. However, the commitments of the accord to protect the 'identity and heritage of the Assamese people' is still criticised based on the difference between the people who live in Assam and 'the Assamese people'.¹³ Barua(2001) also identified one of the legacies of the Assam Movement which he termed as a sustained crisis of governmental legitimacy that continues till date. The Plains Tribal Council of Assam argued that tribal blocks are scattered all over the state and indeed they did not support the demand 'divide Assam fifty-fifty'. However, the ABSU did not support the alliance of PTCA with Janata Party in 1978 which reflects that there were differences within different Bodo groups. To weaken the strength of the PTCA, Congress extended its support to All Assam Bodo Student Union (ABSU). The PTCA believed that a 'Bodoland' is not the aim of all tribal groups and it is the first step of fragmentation of the tribal power within the state. The eight-member committee constituted after the fourth round of tripartite talks did not include members from other tribal representatives including the Mishings, Rabhas, Lalungs, Deoris as well as Sonowal Kacharis.

The Bodo leadership blamed the Assamese mainstream for the non-recognition of the tribal in the wider socio-political scenario of the state. In the later phase of their demands, the introduction of Autonomous Districts under Sixth Schedule brought a new dimension to tribal politics. ABSU (1982) mentioned,

'One of the most responsible factors as to why the tribal have become alienated from the mainstream of Assam is the attitude of the Assamese people. The Assamese people have never accepted the tribal as a part and

¹² ABSU (All Bodo Student Union) 1987.

¹³ I borrow the statement from Sanjib Barua's India Against Itself, pp.116.

parcel of Assamese community and society in a real sense, though they give a motivated slogan of Greater Assamese Nationality. As for instance, a Goswami Brahmin family will never allow or agree to give its daughter for a social marriage with a tribal youth. They hate the Bodos calling (them) as Kacharis.’¹⁴

The historical process of ethnic change in Assam is intrinsic in the majority-minority questions in an ethnically diverse community. After the Assam Accord, it was clear that the demands for autonomy by Bodos became violently contested in between the definitions of nations, nationalities and homeland. The Bodos were not in favour of the Clause 6 of the accord which had promised safeguards to protect the cultural identity of “the Assamese people”. The meaning of the term “Assamese people” turned into controversial rather than covering the composite significance of the “indigenous” population. The Bodo leaders had worried about the legitimacy to the nuisance of Assamese language and culture on Bodos by following the clause. Secondly, the leaders were opposed to the clause of the Assam Accord that promised evictions from the protected public lands. Though the leaders of the Assam movement indicated the “foreigners” settled on those lands, but in reality, during the first AGP government, the attempt to evict the illegal settlers from protected forests led to the eviction of some Bodos. This was a major turn which also reinforced the demand for the Bodo homeland.

However, the non-recognition of the tribal is not only a reason but it also assisted to extend the gap between the dominant Assamese and the marginalised tribal population in the state. The non-recognition is one of the primary reasons for raising the demand for autonomy in the aftermath of Assam Movement by several tribal groups.

“a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion if the people or the society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm; can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.”

(Taylor 1994:25).

There are many similarities to be seen between the Assam movement and the Bodo movement in terms of political mobilisation. Bodo movement followed the same framework of the campaign like the Assam movement by mobilising a large number of people behind a political demand (Barua: 2001).

“The Assam movement’s major theme of “indigenous peoples” protesting the presence of “foreigners” also touched the chords among the Bodos, though not quite in the way the leaders of the Assam movement may have intended”(Barua,2001:188).

¹⁴ ABSU 1987, pp.35.

Taylor's interpretation of 'non-recognition' is a feature of the history of the Bodo movement. In an essay titled "Obstacles in the Relationship of Tribals and Non Tribals" Baliram Senapati(2000), an intellectual of the Tiwa/Lalung tribe of Assam defines the "indifferent attitude" of the non-tribal towards tribal. Drawing the narrative of "dominant community-minority community", he refers to political attempts to divide and rule to break up tribal from one another.

The demand for autonomy and its different narratives about homeland has been critical about 'Assamese identity'. "The movements of various communities to assert and protect theirs, what is commonly called, 'ethnic' identity, are the most significant aspects of the contemporary socio-political reality of India's North East" (A. Baruah 2005:17). The memorandums submitted by different tribal groups during 1980s carried the grievances about the chauvinism of the Assamese.

"The present agitation in Assam in the name of foreign nationals has threatened the linguistic minority communities including the tribal people of these to hill districts (Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hills)," and "made no secret of their intention and determination to destroy the language, culture and tradition of the minorities as well as the tribal in Assam" (Memorandum demanding an autonomous state comprising Karbi-Anlong and North Cachar Hills in Assam, under the provision of Article 244[A] of the Constitution of India)¹⁵.

The structure and the imaginative model of the nation-state in the post colonial period attempted to integrate many ethnicities into the homogeneity of the nation and the identity problem is an offshoot of this (Dutta:2012). The identity as a matter of crisis is linked with the colonial cartography of the region.

"In Assam, because British policies involved the insertion into the region of the communities belonging to other regions and, more importantly, to other linguistic and culturally distinct grouping, the question of migration has always been part of the imagination of an 'identity always in crisis.'" That is, the formulation or articulation of identity has always been in resistance, beleaguered, under threat either from the universalist and homogenising design of the nation-state or from influx from Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh." (N.Dutta 2012:143)

4. Language as a Part of Identity

Assamese nationalism like most of the Indian sub-nationalisms has been based on a language. The same characteristic is also inscribed in case of Bodo sub-nationalism. The Bodo middle class geared up the ethnic consciousness of Bodo language identity. Axom Xahitya Xabha and the Bodo Xahitya Xabha are the two dominant organisations that have not only promoted the cultural and literary sentiment of Assamese and Bodo

¹⁵ Datta 1993.

respectively but also strongly influenced the politics of the state. One of the most visible characters of the desire to differentiate Bodo as a part of the dominant cultural politics is the language. The Bodo Xahitya Xobha launched the agitation demanding the adaptation of the Roman script for the Bodo language in 1974-75.¹⁶ Bodo was not a written language in the past, and it had been written using the Assamese script. The demand for the Roman script by the Bodo Xahitya Xabha was not supported by the Central government and eventually, the script selected was Devanagari which is almost a pan-Indian script. Though Assamese was easier than the Devanagari, the Bodos could not ingest their pride as their movement was primarily against the Assamese script.¹⁷

The Axom Xahitya Xabha or Bodo Xahitya Xabha emerged as the two main bastions to protect and safeguard the Assamese and Bodo language. Language is a medium of expression and communication that binds people together. Census 2011 Language Data reveals that the percentage of Assamese and Bodo speakers to the total population in Assam has declined while the percentages of Bengali and Hindi speakers in the state have increased over the decade 2001-2011¹⁸. The Ethnic identity which is directly linked with the region's unique linguistic nature thus becomes fragile in terms of identity questions. It also dilutes the idea of "ethnic Assamese" and the demands for the separate homeland within the complex structure of Indian federalism. The idea of "ethnic Assamese" cluster around the "cultural hegemony" as Gramsci (1999) has pointed towards the relation between culture and power under capitalism. Gramsci also stated that "every language contains the elements of a conception of the world". The available vocabulary helps to mark the boundaries of permissible discourse, discourages the clarification of social alternatives, and makes it difficult for the disposed to locate the source of their unease, let alone remedy it".¹⁹ The concept of cultural hegemony helps to raise the question of "who has power?". Indeed, the hegemonic culture, as Gramsci described, depends not on brainwashing of "the masses" but on the tendency of public discourse to make some forms of experience readily available to consciousness while ignoring or suppressing²⁰.

5. Conclusion

The colonial history of the region reveals the history of changing land relation and changing demographic feature of the state. The demographic changes were accompanied with land alienation. One redressal measure taken up for halting land alienation was "Line system" that supposedly protected the tribal land from the

¹⁶ Barua. 2001.

¹⁷ Chanda 1988.

¹⁸ The percentage of Assamese speakers in the state further declined to 48.38 in 2011 from 48.80 in 2001. On the contrary, the percentage of Bengali speakers increased to 28.91 in 2011 from 27.54 in 2001. The number of Bodo speakers declined to 4.53 per cent in 2011 as compared to 5.89 in 2001. However, in 1991, the percentage of Assamese speakers in the state was 57.81 per cent and that of Bengali was 21.67 per cent.

¹⁹ Gramsci, as quoted in Joseph V. Femia, Gramsci's Political Thought (Oxford,1981).

²⁰ Lears Jackson T.J.1985.

immigrants. But in reality, the line system could not deliver the desired protection. Though the “tribal belts and blocks” remain a part of the Assam’s land system, the record of the illegal transfer of land from the “tribals” to “nontribals” is abysmal.²¹ The process of “detrribalisation” continues in tribal areas for various public purposes. For instance, Assam’s capital city of Dispur which was a part of “tribal” block was taken over by government for establishing the new administrative headquarter of the State. Tribal villagers settled since the 1980-1990s in villages Kangkan Nagar, Doni Polo, Yusuf Nagar, Kailash Nagar in and around Amchang forest area in Guwahati were being evicted in the name of protection of the Eco Sensitive Zone²².

Thus, the historical process of ethnic change in Assam crossed over different geographical as well as socio-political layers. One cannot find the same thread of pan-Indian nation building but the region has been moving through a process of building a cultural-territorial identity. These identities are contested between the geographical and sociological spaces of different tribal groups. Indeed, the post-colonial ethnic changes cannot be ignored in the state which is the last land frontier of the Indian sub-continent bearing huge immigration.

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²¹ Bordoloi, B.N 1991.

²² Most of the families of these villages are migrated from flood-affected regions in Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Majuli after losing their lands. The Gauhati High Court had ordered a stay on the eviction drive in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary, but 408 houses have already been demolished by the state.

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