

**TRIBAL, NON-TRIBAL BOUNDARIES IN  
ASSAM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO AREAS OF  
BODO CONCENTRATION**

**ABSTRACT**

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*Thesis*

At a very broad level, the tribes and non-tribes seem to have occupied different resource areas, characterized by distinct environmental setting. The dividing line between these areas too represents the boundary between two ethnic groups. However, this dichotomous representation is only indicative and static as a picture. The changing relationship between the tribes and the non-tribes as well as their interaction continuously modifies the morphology of the boundary existing between them over space. Broadly, two types of morphology can be postulated. First, it may be a dichotomous distribution such as an uninterrupted or unceasing distribution of the tribal or non-tribal population in a particular pocket. They may be found interspersed with each other in villages having a dominance of either of the two segments. This nature of transition acquires divergent forms depending upon the degree and intensity of non-tribal penetration into the areas once inhabited exclusively by the tribes; interaction between the tribes and the non-tribes and the intensity of their interdependence.

The present research is an attempt to understand the nature of boundary existing between the tribes and the non-tribes. The attempt here is to examine the issue more specifically related to the tribes distributed in plain areas. Unlike the spatial distribution of the tribes and the non-tribes in sharply defined ecological units leading to much sharper boundary line existing between them, the morphology of such boundaries in the case of plains-tribe are expected to be not only complex in their forms, but also that they are more dynamic and subject to continuous changes and modifications arising out of an equally complex relationship between the tribal and non-tribal population sharing similar resource base. The present research aims at identifying specific forms of boundaries that

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separates the areas of tribal habitations from that of non-tribal habitations in diverse ecosystems such as those in the plains.

It is assumed that the identification of the changing morphology of tribal non-tribal boundaries shall have to be examined at the lowest level of spatial aggregation. Perhaps a village level analysis of the distribution of those two social groups shall unravel the true nature of the boundary existing between them. It is also assumed that the various types of boundaries existing between the tribes and the non-tribes shall reflect the diversity of interactions between the tribes and the non-tribes. The areas of transition between the tribes and non-tribes shall reveal the effects of spatial processes of spillover, overlap and interpenetration between the groups. In this context, it may be pertinent to scrutinize the process of redistribution of tribal population consequent upon the process of spatial shift of the two groups in order to examine whether the tribal population is dispersing or moving out reducing the concentration or due to infiltration of non-tribal population diluting tribal concentration pattern. It is also proposed to get an insight into the socio-economic factors inherent in the process of redistribution of tribal population as well as its possible consequences and implication for the tribal people.

Given the nature of the problem, the state of Assam, which supports a significant proportion of its tribal population, distributed both in its hilly as well as plain areas, provides an excellent case study for the present research.

The tribes living in the valley areas of Assam have been living with other non-tribal communities since time immemorial and there has been a great amount of cultural give and take between the tribes and the neighboring non-tribal communities. On the other hand, the habitats of the hill tribes are largely separated from the habitats of other

non-tribal communities, but tribes dwelling in the valley live amidst non-tribal communities.

The broad objectives of the present research is to analyse regional variation in the distribution of tribal and non-tribal population in Assam at various levels of spatial aggregation; to identify areas of tribal concentration and the nature of transition in the boundary between the areas of tribal and non-tribal concentration; to get an insight into the pattern of redistribution of tribal population with specific reference to the Bodos and to study the causes and implications of changing morphology of tribal non-tribal boundaries.

The study proposed to test the following hypotheses: (i) the tribal groups living in the hills are expected to maintain largely exclusive territory leading to a form of boundary that represents a dichotomous distribution. However, the tribal groups located on the plains are unlikely to maintain such exclusiveness in their distribution. The morphology of the boundary between the tribes and the non-tribes in the case of plain tribes would assume transitional forms; (ii) distribution of the tribes and the non-tribes and the nature of transition existing between their areas of concentration have undergone rapid changes in the plain areas. The morphology of tribal non-tribal boundary in such areas would embody evidences of overlap and interpenetration. Cases of interpenetration would be far more likely in the areas of tribal concentration. The non-tribal population, given its dominant social and economic position would be in a better position to make inroads into areas of tribal concentration. The tribal population in turn is likely to squeeze further into smaller areas or spread into areas of marginal lands, leading to a process of significant redistribution of population.

Relevant data for the present research have been collected from both secondary as well as primary sources. The major source of secondary data pertains to the Census of India. The primary data has been generated through field investigation conducted at selected villages located in the study area.

Since the scope of the study includes temporal element, changes in the morphology of tribal non-tribal boundary has been examined for three points of time viz. 1961, 1971, and 1991. In order to examine the specificities of transition in the tribal non-tribal boundary, proportion of tribal population has been represented through a series of choropleth maps at district and block levels to identify main areas of concentration of tribal population. This exercise is repeated for all the three points of time to indicate the shifts in the areas of tribal concentration if any. Based on these maps, a typology of tribal concentration has been identified to indicate the areas having consistently rising tribal concentration, areas experiencing consistently declining tribal proportion and areas which have a constant proportion of tribal population over the years.

At least one district from each category has been taken as a sample to investigate village level patterns in tribal non-tribal distribution and the changes therein over the period of investigation. The specific method of identification of morphology of tribal non-tribal boundary consists of drawing a series of village traverses depending upon physical and socio-economic criteria. A typology of the existing boundaries has been attempted. The investigation in the second stage consists of specifically addressing a particular tribe, i.e. the *Bodos*. The third stage of the research involved selection of a few villages for field investigation. The number of such villages depended upon the types of morphology in the distribution of Bodo and the non-Bodo population. The information

has been collected on household basis to determine varying socio-economic reality in different transitional areas of Bodo concentration.

The contents of the dissertation are organized into seven broad chapters. The introductory chapter includes a brief statement on the choice of study area, an outline on the methodology adopted as well as an overview of literature available on the topic of research. Regional distribution of tribal population in the study area at the district level is analyzed in the second chapter while the village level distribution is attempted for selected districts in the third chapter. The fourth chapter makes an attempt in the identification of the typology of tribal non-tribal boundary using village traverses. The fifth chapter is devoted to an understanding of the process of redistribution of tribal population in Bodo areas. The socio-economic and demographic problems in transitional areas in Bodo dominated district is analyzed in the sixth chapter. The final chapter provides the summary of the research findings.

An understanding of the spatial variation in the distribution of the scheduled tribes in Assam led to the following broad generalizations:

Tribal population remains constant over 61- 71 but increases subsequently by the year 1991 revealing natural increase in the tribal population relative to the non- tribal population.

Distribution of the scheduled tribes is highly uneven over the districts providing insights into the nature of tribal non- tribal boundary in the present and indicating about the nature of such boundaries in the past.

A hill and plains pattern in the concentration of tribes is clearly discernible. The tribes are far more concentrated in the hills of Mikir, Karbi and Cachar Hills and in those plain districts of Assam located north of Brahmaputra.

The boundary line demarcating the areas of the tribal and the non-tribal concentration is far more clearly defined in Southern Assam with a line that demarcates the hills from the Barak Plains. The tribes and the non-tribes seem to have developed two types of boundaries depending upon the ecological setting of their habitats. The plains and the hill pattern are evident. The Barak Valley and the Cachar/Karbi Hills generally represent exclusive boundaries between the tribes and the non-tribes wherein the former is exclusively dominated by the non-tribes while the latter constitute an area of exclusive tribal dominance. On the other hand, in the Brahmaputra plains the boundary between the tribes and the non-tribes appear to be a complex one indicating overlap and transition. The fact that the share of tribal population has increased in some districts while in some it has become less may be due to influx of non-tribal population into the tribal dominated areas. It is in the Brahmaputra plains that the struggle for the resource base between the tribes and the non-tribes may be a continuous affair as both the groups share similar resource base and whatever differences exist within this vast plain may have played a major role in the redistribution of these two groups making the boundary not only complex but also a constantly changing one. The boundary appears to be a static between hills and plains but highly dynamic within the plains.

The tribal proportion as a whole increases northwards with the exception of the Karbi and Cachar Hills which retain its dominant tribal character. These hilly areas however seem to have been affected by large- scale non- tribal incursion particularly

during 1961-71 decade. However, the process seems to have been partially reversed in the following decades. It is possible that there has been a considerable withdrawal of the non-tribal population from these areas once again changing the ethnic composition of these hills in favour of the tribes. The demand for a separate Karbi state to be carved out of Assam must have had a base in the large-scale infiltration of non-tribal people into the area during 1961-71 decade and must have played a key role in the decrease of non-tribal population in the following decades.

The discontinuity in the concentration pattern of scheduled tribes in the valley is indicative of organized attempts by non-tribal segments into areas of formerly high concentration of scheduled tribes. There also appears to have been a process of squeezing of tribal population into the present areas of their high concentration as a direct outcome of present communities infiltrating into those traditional habitats of the tribes, which have relatively higher potential for agriculture.

High concentration of scheduled tribes in the extreme northwestern corner is surrounded by very low concentration of tribal population. The boundary between the tribal dominated area and the non-tribal area is a sharp one because districts surrounding Kokrajhar support a very low concentration of tribal people. The district of Kokrajhar could have been a contiguous area with another area of high tribal concentration and i. e. the region lying north of the Brahmaputra but most probably the people of tribal origin from the boundary area were possibly pushed both ways. Another demarcating line between the tribal area and the non-tribal area is the region lying south of the Brahmaputra River. This region stands out as an island of tribal concentration in the midst of non-tribal dominated areas surrounding it. The Karbi Anglong block in a way

shares a similar boundary with respect to the non-tribals as is the case with Kokrajhar. As a whole, the concentration of tribes gradually increases towards the north. It seems obvious from the analysis that there has been a northward pushing of the tribal segment of the population. Only the Karbi hills have retained its dominant tribal character due largely to the fact that the low agricultural potential of these hills has not been attractive to the peasant groups. The case of Cachar hills too is comparable with that of the Karbi hills though the concentration of tribal population in this district is as high. However, the proportion of the non-tribal segment is only marginal in this district.

There seems to have been substantial changes in the ethnic composition of the areas where the tribes are largely concentrated. This change has been towards an increasing presence of people of non-tribal origin thereby reducing the numerical strength of the scheduled tribes in the total population. This has been responsible for the general unrest among the tribal people in the areas of their high concentration. The demand for a separate Karbi state or the demand for Bodoland are partly linked to the process of this ethnic change in the areas of concentration of the tribes.

The village level analysis in the changing proportion of the tribal population in three selected areas lead the following broad conclusions:

In an area (Kokrajhar district) characterized by an increasing proportion of scheduled tribes over the years, it is seen that there has been a significant rise during 1971-91 period, in the proportion of such villages which are exclusively or dominantly tribal in their ethnic composition. Conversely, the proportion of exclusively non-tribal villages has decreased significantly. This is a sufficient proof of redistribution of population along ethnic lines, whereby ethnically mixed villages are becoming fewer

over the period. The ethnic divide between the tribes and the non-tribes, which was not so clear before 1971, is becoming more sharply defined by the year 1991. This fact of ethnic divide is clearly reflected on space when the village level data is shown on the map. The map clearly reflects a more sharply defined boundary between the tribes and the non-tribes as ethnically homogenous areas are in the process of forming. A dichotomous distribution of the tribes and the non-tribes is slowly replacing an earlier pattern of a tribal-non-tribal boundary, which was more of an overlap. The region to the north is getting more homogenous in terms of tribal concentration while the south is becoming more homogenous in terms of non-tribal concentration. An analysis of the population growth pattern reveals unprecedented growth of population in fewer villages, mostly located in the areas of tribal concentration and very high negative growth in a large number of villages. This is a sufficient proof of large-scale inter village transfer of people along ethnic lines, a process not very different from what is known as "*ethnic cleansing*".

In an area (Karbi Anglong) that has experienced substantial fall in the proportion of scheduled tribes over the years, is an area characterized by hilly environment, and is a traditional habitat of the tribes too shows a pattern identical to what was observed in Kokrajhar though with some modification. In fact, the pattern of ethnic divide is even more sharpened in this area when compared with Kokrajhar. The area has experienced penetration of a substantial number of people of non-tribal origin thereby changing the ethnic composition of the area in favour of the non-tribal segment. This kind of a change seems to have had its effects in creating ethnically homogenous areas as far as the tribes are concerned as a defense against non-tribal infiltration. The tribal non-tribal boundary within this area thus is being sharply defined than ever before. However, there is a

difference in this ethnic divide when viewed over space in terms of a boundary between the tribes and the non-tribes. In spite of tremendous inter village transfer of people along ethnic lines; no separate or exclusive tribal and non-tribal territories have been formed. This is perhaps due to the nature of hill topography, which has not permitted exclusive ethnic territories to emerge though such clusters are not few. The tribal non-tribal boundaries in this area does not therefore present itself in the form of a sharply defined line but as small clusters defining territories of the tribes and the non-tribes dispersed all over the block.

In sharp contrast to these two areas of high tribal concentration and experiencing either a rise or fall in the proportion of the scheduled tribes, the pattern in the distribution and growth of tribal population in an area (Barpeta) that has a relatively low share of scheduled tribe population that has undergone little change over the years provides a stability in the boundary between the tribes and the non-tribes. In this plain area there is hardly any evidence of redistribution population. It is mainly an area of ethnically mixed villages characterized by a boundary, which displays either overlap or transition.

A comparison of the three case studies reveal interesting patterns as far as redistribution of population along ethnic lines and the nature of boundary between the tribes and the non-tribes is concerned. In Kokrajhar district characterized by increasing conflict between the two ethnic groups and in an area that has forested tract to the north and plain areas in the south, the redistribution of population has taken place in a manner to create ethnically homogenous areas in these two physical regions separating the tribal areas of the north from the non-tribal areas in the south. The boundary line between the

tribes and the non-tribes thus is acquiring the character of a dichotomous nature wherein the physical boundary is also the ethnic boundary. This kind of a boundary is not visible in the case of a hilly terrain represented by Karbi hills where the redistribution along ethnic line is far too evident. Here the boundary line between the two groups is getting sharply defined but in terms of clusters of exclusive tribal territories followed by clusters of non-tribal territories. This however depends on the ecology of the area and the internal variation in the nature of topography. In the plain areas however, none of these processes are operative and the boundary between the tribes and the non-tribes remain an elusive one.

While the former two areas represent a model of increasing conflict between the two ethnic groups in entirely different contexts, the latter is a case of stability, cooperation and assimilation between the two groups. It is clear from the analysis that the spatial patterning in the distribution of the two groups and the resultant (and changes in) boundaries seem to be a function of the social processes.

### *Village Traverses*

The following broad conclusions may be made from the analysis of morphology of tribal non-tribal boundaries based on village traverses drawn latitudinally as well as longitudinally:

Majority of the traverses in the Kokrajhar Thana of Kokrajhar district reveal that large number of villages not only recorded high share of tribal population in 1971 but also in 1991. The traverses resemble plateaus like form with a slope that falls abruptly on either one or both sides. In some traverses the slope is more like cliffs. These indicate that the morphology of the boundary in these traverses assume dichotomous distribution at the

village level. The sharp fall in the share of tribal population from one village to another village bears testimony to this conclusion. Villages which have low concentration of tribal population are generally located in the non-tribal dominated areas. Only a few villages in this Thana recorded a low concentration of tribal population.

A north-south comparison of the profiles reveals a broad pattern of consolidation of the tribes in the northern sectors while the southern sector retains a conglomerate picture of transition. It appears that the tribes from the south have selectively moved to the north to make it more ethnically homogenous. The non-tribal population has relocated itself from the north on pressures from the ethnic divide. The profiles clearly reveal the process of ethnic redistribution in a north-south divide in the Thana. The longitudinal traverses show much more confused picture as far as the boundary is concerned. However, the north-south divide is somewhat clear in most cases.

The traverses of Howraghat Thana of Karbi Anglong district portray a similar picture with that of the Kokrajhar Thana. The traverses show a high share of tribal concentration in some villages in 1971 but after two decades there was a steep fall. The morphology of boundary between the tribes and the non tribes show substantial changes due largely to the effects of non-tribal infiltration into the area and a subsequent withdrawal of these people from some areas. Sudden rise and sudden fall in the share of tribal population indicate growing tendency of a dichotomous nature of tribal and non-tribal boundary.

It is evident from the latitudinal cross sections that the southern sector has seen a much more vigorous redistribution of population along ethnic lines than in the north. The morphology of tribal non-tribal boundary across the northern traverses remains more

stable. The tribal population in the south has established its supremacy in the south by displacing the non-tribal population living in this area.

Unlike the case in Kokrajhar, the Karbi Anglong case seems more confused as far as the morphology of tribal non-tribal boundary is concerned. This is however is not surprising considering the conclusion arrived at the earlier chapter. While it was pointed out that the ethnic divide is more sharply defined in the case of Karbi Anglong district, it was also found that this ethnic divide was not fully translated on space. In fact the extreme ethnic divide took place in making more ethnically homogenous villages in the district, but they were found in small clusters within the district. No broad zones of tribal territory or for those matter non-tribal territories were formed. This is why the morphology of the tribal non-tribal boundaries on the traverses analysed do not show any clear cut north-south or east west ethnic divide.

It is evident from the traverses in Sorbhog Thana of Barpeta district that the villages recorded almost the same share of tribal population for both the census years. The share has remained static for the past three decades and so the boundary between the tribal and the non-tribal segment is characterized by overlap and smooth transition. The traverses usually show a picture of a very gradual slope. This area being a plain area did not support large concentration of tribal population and is mostly inhabited by peasant communities. No such drastic changes have been observed in this place for the past few years. The morphology of the boundary that exists between the tribes and the non-tribes in this Thana reveals a transitional character where the villages are more ethnically mixed. Not much redistribution is visible as indicated by largely unchanging profiles of tribal proportion in the total.

It may be noted here that the Barpeta district does show a pattern of stability as far as the morphology of tribal non-tribal boundary is concerned. None of the villages on the traverse show complete domination of tribal population. In fact most of the villages are ethnically mixed. The profiles also reveal very little changes over the years. The north-south or east west profiles are not too different in their morphology.

### *Ethnic Cleansing in Bodo Areas*

The pattern in the distribution of the tribes and the non-tribes in the Bodo dominated areas has been analysed by taking into consideration the situation in Kokrajhar district only. The distribution at the village village level and changes therein has been understood by classifying the the population into three broad ethnic groups, namely the Bodos (Scheduled Tribes), the Santhals (the Scheduled Castes) and the others (non-Bodo, non-Santhalis).

Available data shows that there have been tremendous transfers of population among the three different ethnic groups namely the Bodos, the Santhals, and others. The Santhali as well as the Bodo population seems to have dispersed over more villages over the period of twenty years. The real decline in the presence of the non-Santhali, non-Bodo presence is rather alarming. The 'others' had a much wider presence in the villages of the district in 1971 but their presence was highly restricted in 1991 indicating substantial erosion to their widespread presence in the district. The Bodos substantially increased their presence in many more villages. Likewise the Santhalis too got dispersed into more villages in this period. It appears that the vacuum created by the Bengalis, Nepalese and Assamese people was filled by the Bodos and the Santhali people in this period.

The most glaring fact about Bodo consolidation and control over the area and ethnic homogenization is revealed from the fact that the Bodos by the year 1991 had exclusive presence in 139 villages from only one in 1971. This is a clear indication that in 138 villages the Bodos have been successful in evicting the non-Bodo population with whom the Bodos had been living for centuries. The fact that there has been a corresponding decline in the exclusively dominated villages of the Santhals clearly indicates that it is this segment of the population which has been evicted from their traditional habitations. The Santhali and the other ethnic groups seem to have lost the battle and have redistributed themselves in a manner to protect themselves in a fewer villages within the district or have taken shelter in the Relief camps. The spatial patterning in this process of redistribution of ethnic groups reveals greater homogenization of ethnic areas within the district. The analysis reveals a step towards ethnic cleansing though the pattern would certainly be clearer when the village level data for 2001 census would be made available.

### *Socio-Economic Problems*

Only two villages in Kokrajhar district were selected from the transitional areas for an in-depth study of the socio-economic problems if any faced by the people living in such areas. The villages were selected at that boundary which demarcated the dominantly tribal areas from that of the dominantly non-tribal areas. The first village (Debargaon) consisted of majority of the Bodo tribes while the second village (Kumguri) consisted largely of the non-Bodo population including Assamese, Bengalis and Nepalese. Socio-economic problems observed in the two villages were more or less similar, related to lack of good roads and communication facilities, educational and health infrastructure etc.

Surprisingly, inter ethnic clash which has been dominating the political scene in this district did not find a place in these two villages. The people however lived in fear of a possible clash that may take place due to the transitional nature of their location. Interestingly a majority of the people in both the villages made a remark that the development in their village is lacking mainly due to transitional location of their villages and lack of co-operation between diverse ethnic groups who are suspicious of each other due to the recent political development. On being asked if they would like to move out of their village if the ethnic situation worsens, none wanted to do so and a majority opinion in the Bodo Village was that a separate Bodoland would bring overall prosperity to the region. Such an opinion was muted in the non-Bodo village.

The conclusions arrived at this thesis adequately prove the hypotheses stated in the first chapter. In spite of serious problems of data and limitations flowing from rapid administrative changes the research made a humble attempt at identifying the possible boundaries between the tribes and the non-tribes in plains of Assam. The findings cannot be conclusive and further research at micro level is required to get far better picture of the rapidly changing ethnic situation. This is a task for future research in this area.

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