

IDENTITY OF ADIVASIS IN ASSAM



Ed. Thomas Pulloppillil

The complex population of the tea gardens of North East and particularly of Assam baffles many. They are generally known as tea and ex-tea garden population of Assam. But they loathe to be known by their profession. This book speaks of the larger section of this population that has been brought from the Chotanagpur Plateau of Bihar. These are tribals with rich cultural, linguistic and social heritage. This book is an attempt to introduce to the outside world the extraordinarily hard working people, their history and culture.

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ADIVASIS OF JHARKHAND REGION IN ASSAM: AN INTRODUCTION

Thomas Pulloppillil

INTRODUCTION

North East is a mosaic of various cultures and peoples. It is situated in "one of the greatest routes of migration of mankind."¹ The migration process that began with Bodo tribes in the 4th century B.C.² is not a finished phenomenon. Even today the migrants from the erstwhile East Pakistan attracts the attention of various organisations of North East. The tribals of Chotanagpur, unlike the rest were unwilling migrants to this land of blue hills and green valleys. Their migration began in 1841 and continued to our own days.³

Among the sixty one tribes and forty castes in the tea plantations in Assam, the Oraons, the Mundas, the Santhals, the Kharias and other Chotanagpur tribals are the earliest recruits. Their migration started from mid nineteenth century and continued up to about mid-twentieth century. After 150 years of the arrival of the Tribals of the Jharkhand region to the North East, it is but natural that these people find their proper place in the North Eastern spectrum. So far scientific studies on this section of the people is minimal.

North East is in a flux. The society is undergoing unrest and experiencing violence. Every ethnic group and cultural entity is trying to define itself. The tribals of Jharkhand region in Assam and Bengal are at a critical juncture too. They have to define a role for themselves in the social, cultural, political and economic life of North Eastern India.

This matter, it would appear, has some urgency. The political scenario of Assam has contributed to this exigency. The recent emergence of the Boroland, Lalung, Karbi and Mishing

Autonomous Councils have accelerated this feeling of necessity. What should be the relationship of the tribals of Jharkhand region in Assam with the other inhabitants of the various autonomous councils? Or should the cultural identity that it seeks for itself be distinct from the other peoples living within the boundaries of these autonomous councils and states? What would be the nature of relationship that its leaders – both secular and religious have to work out with the rest of the population?

TRIBALS OF JHARKHAND REGION OR PLANTATION WORKERS?

Some clarifications are needed. In the first place the term Jharkhand. Jharkhand is also known as Chotanagpur. Chota (chutia) Nagpur was a division of the British-India's Bengal province. The Chotanagpur plateau is an offshoot of the great Vindhyan range, and its mean elevation is upwards of 2000 ft. above sea level. Chotanagpur division consisted of five British districts namely, Hazaribagh, Ranchi, Palamu, Manbhum and Singbhum and two feudatory states Kharsawan and Saraikela. (Please note that Santhal Parganas did not belong to this grouping.) The Chotanagpur states were formerly nine in number, but the five states of Chang Bhakar, Korea, Sirguja, Udaipur and Jashpur were transferred from the province of Bengal to the Central provinces in 1905, and the two Orea speaking states of Gangpur and Bonai were attached to the Orissa Tributary States.⁴

The 'cultural area of Jharkhand' consists of Purulia, Bankura and Midnapore district of West Bengal; Ranchi, Palamau, Singbhum, Hazaribagh, Gumla, Giridh, Dhanbad and Santhal Parganas of Bihar; Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Sundergarh of Orissa and Raipur and Jashpur districts of Madhya Pradesh.⁵ The present day Jharkhand Area Autonomous Council⁶ consists of 18 districts of the state of Bihar.

Often the term Adivasi is used for the tribals from the Jharkhand region. The term 'Adivasi' may not be scientifically correct nomenclature for the tribals of Chotanagpur.⁷ As B. Pakem has pointed out, terms like 'Aborigines', 'Adivasis', 'Jatis', 'Adimjatis' and 'indigenous peoples' are interchangeable.⁸ As a suitable term to indicate these tribals is lacking, we have chosen to call them "tribals from Jharkhand."

Now the question arises. Why only the tribals of Jharkhand were considered for this book? Is not the existential situation of the tribals of Jharkhand same as that of the rest of the so called Tea and ex-Tea garden labourers of Assam and Bengal. In the first place, such a grouping is based on class, not on anthropology or culture. Indeed in the political and economic field such a grouping would add to strength and unity. The tribals from Jharkhand share not only the same geographical background but also same cosmogony and many aspects of culture as well.

TEA TRIBES AND TEA CASTES

An important distinction has to be made between the castes and tribes.⁹ The ground of distinction lies in the twin bases of ethnicity and occupational specialisation. Castes are ranked in accordance with the degree of ritual purity ascribed to members and to their activities. According to L.M. Srikant there are three characteristics that separate castes from tribes.¹⁰ They are the primitive way of living, habitation in remote and less easily accessible areas and nomadic habits and love for drink and dance. The definition was further modified thus; tribal origin, primitive way of life and habitation in remote and less easily accessible areas and general backwardness in all respects. This definition of the tribe could only be considered as of a government servant whose function was to make available to the tribes economic benefits from the government and is far from accurate.¹¹

Anthropologists consider a tribe an ideal state, a self contained unit with a linguistic and political boundary and a common culture.¹² From this definition it would appear that a tribe is basically different from a caste in that, the caste does not have a culture of its own but is part of the Hindu culture and a caste is not confined to a territory as in the case of a tribe. And here lied the crux of the problem.

Dalton, one of the renowned anthropologists of British India, groups all the non-Aryan tribes under two heads, viz. the Kolarian, or those who speak a language allied with that of the Kols, Santhals, Mundas and their cognates and the Dravidian, or those who speak a language allied with the Tamil or Telugu.¹³ The tea and ex-tea garden population is composed of these two and more tribes and castes.

There are three linguistic elements in the tea plantation people, namely (i) Kolarian speaking like the Munda, Ho, Santhal and the Kharia, (ii) Dravidian speaking groups, like the Oraon, Kondh, Gond and the Malpahariya and groups speaking Oriya, Bengali and Hindi or dialects of these languages.¹⁴

TRIBE AND ETHNICITY¹⁵

An 'Ethnic group' is a broader concept. 'Ethnic group' is a group of people sharing an identity which arises from a collective sense of a distinctive history, culture, customs, norms, beliefs, traditions and usually a common language.

Ethnicity is the term used by social scientists to indicate a particular group within a national group following main patterns. According to Julian V. Bromley, ethnic process consists of six different types.¹⁶

**Ethno-transformational/
ethnogenic process**

1. Ethnogenic divergence, where an ethno-social organism (tribal) is isolated from individual parts of a large ethnos.
2. Inter-ethnic consolidation which is the negation of the process of ethnogenic divergence.
3. Ethnogenic mixing.

**Ethno-revolutionary/
non-ethnogenic process**

1. Inter-ethnic consolidation where the intensity of cultural distinctions among the ethnographic groups belonging to an ethnos is on the wane.
2. Inter-ethnic integration or homogenisation where a new ethnos comes into being from various ethnolinguistic communities through a meta-ethnolinguistic entity.
3. Assimilation as the last ethnic process is a combination of the transformatory process from the standpoint of the ethnos that is being assimilated, and evolutionary from that of the assimilated ethnos.
(This is the ethnic process where as a result of the interaction between two groups of the people one group is dissolved and acquires new ethnic attributes of the other group)

Here are some examples of the ethnogenic process:

1) An instance of Ethnogenic divergence is the various Naga or Mizo tribes. 2) The integration of the Khasi ethnos from the four tribes or the Garo ethnos from twelve tribes is a good example of Inter-ethnic consolidation which is the negation of the process of ethnogenic divergence. 3) The Zeliangroups of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland is the result of Ethnogenic

mixing. Zeliangroung is a mixed group of the Zemei, Liangmei and Rongmei tribes of Nagaland. The prefixes of each of these tribes are taken and combined to form this new name.

Non-ethnogenic process too has some very good examples in the North East. 1) Inter-ethnic consolidation takes place where the intensity of cultural distinctions among the ethnographic groups belonging to an ethnos is on the wane as in the case of the Upper Assamese and the Kamrupi Assamese. 2) Inter-ethnic integration or homogenisation is the process where a new ethnos comes into being from various ethnolinguistic communities through a meta-ethno-linguistic entity. E.g., the Nagamese among the Naga tribes, the Khasi language among the Khyntriams, Pnars, Bhois and Wars. 3) Assimilation which is the last non-ethnogenic process is a combination of the transformatory process from the standpoint of the ethnos that is being assimilated, and evolutionary from that of the assimilated ethnos. In other words this is the ethnic process where as a result of the interaction between two groups of people one group is dissolved and acquires new ethnic attributes of the other group. In Assam we have the example of the Ahoms, Morans or Chutiayas who had been assimilated by the Assamese; the Jaintias by the Khasis in Meghalaya; the Raaltes, or Paites by the Mizos in the state of Mizoram.

Such process can be traced in the growth of nationalism among the various peoples of the world.

ETHNICITY AND THE TEA TRIBES AND CASTES

Is it possible to term the tea tribes and tea castes as undergoing either of these processes? Has the ethnic process that we were speaking of reached a stage where the tea tribes and tea castes have attained such a state of absorption that we can speak of a single ethnic community?

Language plays a significant role in this process. As far as the tea community is concerned this is an important lacuna

that has to be remedied. The emergence of Sadri as the mother tongue of the vast majority among them is of significance from this point of view.

Does it mean that the tea tribes and castes have become one ethnic group? The answer seems to be no. According to some authors tea labour and ex-tea labour form a multi-ethnic group. The identity that has emerged through a common food, dress and a common lingua franca (Sadri) and festivals like Karam and Sarhul, seem to be very relative one.¹⁷ The authors point out to the emergence of various organisations to safeguard the culture and language in order to establish group identity and heritage in a multi-ethnic settings.¹⁸

THE POPULATION OF THE TRIBALS OF JHARKHAND IN THE PLANTATIONS OF ASSAM AND BENGAL

It is not possible to know precisely the size of the tea garden and ex-tea garden labour population. Haralaika¹⁹ in 1975 indicated that labour leaders estimate the number as 30 lakhs. R.K. Das²⁰ wrote in 1931 that in 1900 A.D. the population in tea gardens of Assam including men, women and children was 6.62 lakhs. It might not include ex-tea garden labourers settled in the villages upto that time. But in the absence of any other scientific information, this may be taken as a base. A rough estimate on the basis of recruitment and natural growth indicate that in 1971 there were about 30 lakhs of tea garden and ex-tea garden labour population of which about 16 lakhs are ex-tea garden labourers. The total population of Assam according to the 1991 census is 22,294,564. The all India population growth rate was 23.50%. Thus there should be a total of about 3,690,600 tea garden and ex-tea garden labour population. That is little more than 16% of the total population of Assam.

CONCLUSION

This collection of papers is intended to offer a panorama of Adivasi life – in particular, the tribals of Jharkhand in the North-East. The papers on the tribals of Chotanagpur in the plantations of Assam and Bengal are from the social, cultural and religious point of view. These papers, we hope would generate much light and warmth; light for well informed, though-out solutions to the problems that plague the people of our concern here and warmth toward the people and their problems.

Notes

1. J.H. Mills, Assam Review, March, 1928, p.24 Cf. Also, S.L. Baruah, A Comprehensive History of Assam, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985, p.3.
2. The Kacharis are the earliest known indigenous inhabitants of Assam, Cf. S. Dutta, The Matak and their Kingdom: Castes and Tribes of Assam, Chugh Publications, Allahabad, 1985; E.A. Gait, A History of Assam, Reprint Guwahati, 1981, p.299; N.N. Acharyya, op.cit., p.211; H.H. Risley, The Tribes and Castes of Bengal, Calcutta, 1872, p.247.
3. Umanad Phukan, The Ex-Tea garden Population of Assam, Delhi, B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1983, p.18.
4. Cf. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th Ed., 1910, S.V., 'Chota Nagpur', pp.272.
5. Pashupati Prasad Mahato, "World view of Assam Tea Garden Labourers from Jharkhand", in S. Karotemprel and B. Dutta Roy, Tea Garden Labourers of North East India, Shillong, Vendrame Institute, 1990, pp.131-142. Some of these districts are since divided.
6. The Jharkhand movement was founded in 1938. In 1938, the 'Jharkhand Mukti Morcha', was formed in the heavily tribal region of South Bihar.
7. "The tribals of India regard themselves as the oldest inhabitants of the Indian Peninsula – Adivasis. They are spread practically all over India; though they prefer the hilly tracts and the forests." S. Fuchs, "Liberation movements among the tribals of India," in Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation, Paul Puthanangady, ed., Bangalore, Indian Theological Association, 1986, p.199.
8. B. Pakem, "Ethnicity and Ethnic Processes in North East India", in The Shillong Times, Vol.LI, No.80 (Nov.2, 1995), p.4.
9. "In English, as in French, there was for a long time no distinction between caste and tribe, and a confusion with the ancient division of Indian society into four categories," Louis Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its implications, Trans. Mark Sainsbury, Weidenfeld & Nicolson (also University of Chicago Press) 1970; Homo Hierarchicus: Le Systeme des castes et ses implications, Paris, Gallimard (collection Tel); 1979, p.22.
10. L.M. Srikant, Report of the Commission for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes for the period ending 31st December, 1951.

11. It would be useful to say a word about 'etic' and 'emic' views. The analytical assessment about others is called the etic view whereas an emic view is what a people think of themselves.
12. Andre Beteille, 'The Definition of a Tribe', in Tribe, Caste and Religion in India, Romesh Tapar, ed., The Macmillan company of India Ltd., 1977, pp.7-14.
13. Wheeler, op.cit., p.8.
14. Cf.AA. VV., Castes and Tribes on the Tea-Estates of North-East India, Gurgaon, Vintage Books, 1924, Reprint, 1989.
15. For the ideas on Ethnicity I owe a great deal to Prof. B. Pakem, Vice Chancellor of NEHU.
16. Julian V. Bromley, Ethnic Process, 1983; Also by the same author, Theoretical Ethnography, 1984.
17. R.K. Kar & J.L. Sharma, Ethnic Identity of Tea Labour: A Case Study in Assam, in Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in North East India, B. Pakem, Ed., Omsons Publications, Guwahati, 1990, p.159.
18. The same idea can be found in Sunil Pio, Identity Problem Among the Tea Garden Labourers in Assam, in Proceedings of North Eastern India History Association, Thirteenth Session, Shillong, 1993, p.369.
19. Haralalka, S.S., Tea Garden Labourers of Assam, Dhubri, People's Publishing House, 1975.
20. Rajani Kanta Das, Plantation Labour in India, Calcutta, 1931, p.20.