

Spatio-Temporal Distribution of Tribes of North East India with Special Reference to Assam

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As history is related over the time and geography is related over the space, to study history of ethnic groups of a region should have knowledge of area where they settle or migrate. Though North East India (comprising seven states) is constituent of Indian Union, yet most of the inhabitants are ethnically similar to the neighbouring countries of Burma, Tibet, Mongolia and Thailand. The people of this region settled over space in different time. Non-Aryans are much more older settlers than the Aryans. Non-Aryans in this region are termed as 'tribes'.

The word 'tribe' has not been defined in the Constitution of India, but Article 342 reveals that the President of India may only specify certain scheduled areas of tribes. Article 46 of the Constitution of India provides that,

*The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation."*¹

The interpretation of the above phrase indicates that the social injustice against and exploitation of people belonging to scheduled caste and scheduled tribe are being perpetuated since past. Here if we take the case of scheduled tribes of North East India, then question will arise, what percentage of the total population is deprived of given facilities. How and when these people came to this region and settled over to make large ethnic group.

In search of the source materials about the people of North-East India in a temporal perspective one may take the help of mythology, a few archaeological remains, traveller's account and history. Prehistory and protohistory is till silent. The recent archaeological findings throw some glaring clues and facts about the ethno-socio-

cultural history of the people in the past. Besides, we may refer to works of E. Gait, Hunter, Rev. Endle, S. K. Bhuyan, K. L. Barua and L. W. Shakespeare.

The Mahabharata written between 1000-1500 B.C. mentioned the name of North East India as Pragjyotisha, later came to be known as Kamrupa. Some sketches about its people, their socio-economic and political institutions are to be found in this epic. The earliest inhabitants of this region was *Kiratas*. The fight between Ghataka (the king of *Kirata*) and *Naraka* (the king of Videha) thus began the early invasion of North East India by the Aryans. The Aryans demonstrated their supremacy by establishing their first kingdom in the plains and *Kiratas* were pushed back to the hills. Though there is no authentic historical account of the time of *Naraka* but some historians wanted to date back as far as 3100 B.C.² The famous archaeological remains of the temple of *Kamakhyā* at Nilachal in Gauhati and the temple of *Kasaikhati* at Sadia considered to be non-Aryan though they are now accommodated among the Aryan deities.

Huien-Tsang, who visited Pragjyotishpura in the seventh century A.D. described about the route from Pataliputra to Pragjyotishpura and also wrote about the behaviour of people of this region. Written records in chronicles or *Buranjis* were available since Ahom rule of 1228 A.D. onwards. During the 600 years rule of Ahom there were about 18 invasions and incursions by the armies of the rulers of Delhi and Nawabs of Bengal. But they could not succeed all the time due to the inhospitable natural conditions. The British ruled over this region about a century till 1947.

Invaders in different period proclaimed their supremacy with their culture gradually leading to the assimilation of non-Aryan and Aryan culture in North East India. A translation of the *Yogini Tantra* shows the inhabitants of the North East Region was termed as Mleccha or aborigines. Sukapha, the first Ahom conqueror of Assam with his followers left their womenfolk in their Shan homeland, married from among the women of the conquered tribes (Morans, Barahis and Chutias). The children out of mixed marriages known as *Ahom*³ and later known as *Assamiya* or Assamese. Edward Gait mentioned in his book,

that language is no real test of race. The Ahom have abandoned their tribal dialect in favour of Assamese, and Rabhas, Kacharis and other tribes are following their example. The reason in these cases is partly that Assamese is the language of

the priests, who are gradually bringing these rude tribes within the fold of Hinduism, and partly that it is the language of a higher civilization." ⁴

The Chutias are the offshoot of the Kachari tribes as Shakespeare ⁵ stated but no longer exist in Census of India as tribes. Likewise Koch tribes, allied to the *Kacharis*, whose homeland was Cooch Behar spread their kingdom upto *Kamrupa*, neither recognised as tribes, nor high caste, declared as hinduised *Rajbansis*. So also many Sonowal Kacharis of Upper Assam became Hindu and feel proud themselves as non-tribes.

Linguistically, the tribes of North East India may be divided into two major groups: They are (i) the Tibeto-Burman (of Tibeto-Chinese Family) and (ii) Austro-Asiatic. The lone Khasis of Mon-Khmer group belong to Austro-Asiatic Family. The rest of the tribes, Naga, Kuki, Mizo, Garo, Bodo, Arunachalese etc. belong to the Tibeto-Burman sub-family.

Khasis are the oldest inhabitants of North-East, while Aryan entered into this region much later. In between, Boro, Garo, Chutia and Moran of Tibeto-Burmese group entered into North East India. The Austric-speaking matriarchal Khasis and Jaintias are believed to have entered North-East India from West China. They migrated over this region around 1000-500 B.C. ⁶ At present they live in isolated Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. The recent studies of B. M. Das ⁷ (1970, 1978) established the fact, that though Khasi-Jaintias were originally from Australoid stock the present physical affinities indicate of Mongoloid strains because of the possibilities of long term assimilation with Mongoloid people. Still Khasis retained their Austric languages for their matrilineal societies.

Earlier there was much similarities between Garos and Boro-Kacharis. As Garos took shelter in the hills for about hundreds of years, their socio-cultural affinities gradually changed. Khamti, Phakial, Aitonia etc. of Tai-Siamese communities entered in the 16th and 17th centuries to the Burhi Dihing and Luhit valleys. Lusai (Mizo), Lakher and Pawi entered in the 17th and 18th centuries to the North and Eastern Mizoram, while the Chakmas and Reang is still being migrated since the beginning of this century.

The spatial distribution of tribes over this region varies place to place in the states. Boros occupies lion share with their total population by 5,09,006, followed by Khasis (4,66,499), Garos (4,11,532, Mizos (2,70,312), Karbis (1,98,973) and Mishing (1,80,684).

Boros are sparsely distributed along the foothills of Bhutan and extend from North Bengal, Goalpara, Kamrup and a part of Western Darrang district. They are thinly populated in western Nowgong district also. As the Khasis and Garos have their homeland Meghalaya, Naga has their homeland as Nagaland, Mizos has Mizoram and Arunachalese stay in Arunachal Pradesh. But the people lived in congruent areas adopt mixed culture. For example, Lyngngam living along the border of Khasi and Garo Hills acquired different socio-cultural traits. Rengma Nagas living near the Karbis between Jamuna and Kaliai is tending to merge into Karbis by adopting Karbi culture. Likewise Mao-Nagas of Northern Manipur are acquiring culture of Manipuris. Though Mizoram has their distinctive boundary still some Mizos are found in Cachar-Manipur border upto Upper Barak Valley. There are many examples of tribes living in congruent areas who gave up their own cultures to some extent and have taken up new cultures by close contact of non-tribals. These are Ravas, Mishing, Deuris of Assam, Hajongs of Garo Hills, Chakmas of Tripura etc. It proves that multiculture heterogeneous tribes exist in the North-Eastern Region while monoculture is not possible in the uneven topography of this region. Mishing who were originally hill tribes of Arunachal came down to the plain areas of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar district and settled permanently are merging gradually with Assamese culture.

In the Arunachal Pradesh, Gallong as the largest group (36,864) occupy the large area between the Siang and Subansiri river. Nishis (33,857) are settled in the western parts of the Subansiri District. Wancho (28,640) and Nocte (about 20,000) occupy very small tracts in the Tirap district. Adis (27,151) consisting the subgroups of Minyong, Padam, Posi and Pangi spread over the eastern part of the Siang district. The Idu, Digaru and Miju Mishmis, weach with lest than 10,000 population occupy vast territories in the Lohit District. In addition some smaller group like Ashings, Akas and Mema are localised in very small territories.

Considering the tribal population of North East Region it is found that they comprise only 22.19 per cent of the total population. Mizoram recorded highest (94.26%) while Assam shows lowest (10.99%) tribal population which is far below the average of North-Eastern Region (Table 1). Demographically, all hill states of Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh are tribals majority but in the valley region of Assam, Manipur and Tripura, tribals are in minority.

Table 1: Population of North East India

State	Total Population	Scheduled Tribes	Percentage of tribal population
Arunachal Pradesh	467,551	369,408	79.8
Assam	14,625,152	16,06,648	10.99
Manipur	1,072,753	3,74,466	31.18
Meghalaya	1,011,699	8,14,230	80.48
Mizoram	332,390	3,13,299	94.26
Nagaland	516,449	4,57,602	88.61
Tripura	1,556,342	4,50,544	28.95

Source : Census of India, 1971.

A micro level study of all police stations of Assam has been carried out on tribal population, so that a clear picture of tribal dominating area can be marked. Significantly both the bhill district of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar are dominated by tribals. While only one police station (Sadiya P.S. of Jonai) out of 115 police stations dominated by tribals. Only three P.S. of Goalpara district namely, Kokrajhar, Sidly, and Dudhnai, four P. S. of Kamrup district, namely, Barama, Tamulpur, Paneri, Udalgiri; two P. S. of North Lakhimpur district namely, Dhakuakhana, Dhemaji and only Majuli of Sibsagar district brought under second categories of tribal population, but shows below 50 per cent. All these tribals pockets are scattered here and there for which any groups of tribals cannot claim majority in Brahmaputra valley as spatial distribution does not permit geographically.

When India became independent the old Assam was partitioned by separating Sylhet from Assam. The Government of free India again followed the British divide and rule policy. Only a couple of decades back Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal States were curved out of Assam. The VI Schedule of India's Constitution mature and germinate the forces of separatism which undermines the very spirit of national integration. We feel that in the name of language and customs or ethnic group there should be no further division of Assam.

Notes & References

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