

# Adivasis and the Culture of Assam

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The study covers the historical identity of Adivasis (Santhals) since pre-historic period and their role in forming the composite culture of Assam. It discusses the literary and cultural aspects development of the Santhals. The book may be found useful by researchers and students in this area.

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Harka Bahadur Chhetri

**Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata**



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# Contents

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
CHAPTER I	
Introduction	9
CHAPTER II	
Adivasis in Assam	36
CHAPTER III	
Traditional Beliefs and Outlook	64
CHAPTER IV	
Village Life and the Tea-Garden Life	77
CHAPTER V	
Literary World	89
CHAPTER VI	
Mixed Culture of India	100
CHAPTER VII	
Development Programmes	141
BIBLIOGRAPHY	149
INDEX	150

## Chapter I

# Introduction

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### PART I IDENTITY

#### **Historical Background**

The word 'Adivasi' i.e. the primitive people means people of the earliest times; of an early stage of social development; early man, early culture — simple, old fashioned, having undergone little development, early weapons, *e.g.* bows and arrows, spears, early painters on sculptor or the period before the Renaissance, etc.<sup>1</sup>

The word 'Adivasi' is a generic term, an adjective of a genus; common to a whole group or class, not special. It is communal, simple, classic and vast, an early stage of human kind. In the primitive stage, they were called Adivasis. The identity of the indigenous people rests on two vital factors, space and speech. Space stands for their habitat, the geographical territory, their ancestral homeland. They have the total right on the part of the 'Mother Earth', as they call her, passed over to them by their fore fathers. The land (Jamin), the water (Jal) and the forest (Jangal), that their habitat contains, belongs to them. Since time immemorial, they have had total control over their land and whatever lies beneath and above. The term 'speech' denotes manner of speaking. Man is the only animal that

has the faculty of speech. Our thoughts are expressed by speech. "Man has been called 'tool using animal' and no doubt all progress of culture is due to the increased use of tool and implements in the conquest of nature to make life happy and comfortable. The material history of man is an account of progress from a 'tool—less state to the present state of complicated machinery'".<sup>2</sup>

History, therefore is a record of a the achievements of man.

### **I. Stone Age**

It was first stage of civilization when man arrived at the stone age. Fire had already been discovered. The nomadics had tasted burnt flesh, which provided them the knowledge of preservation of fire. Slowly, cultivation and taming of animals started in a simple way. While man's curiosity increased, they felt shortage of many things. In the primitive stage of man, there lived Kol, Saotal, Bheel, Munda, Oraon, Gond etc. In the south of India, Vindhya, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and some other parts of the areas, were inhabited by black, curly-haired, short but flat-nosed people. These people had customs of burying the dead. They are believed to be related with the black people of Africa who were known as Negroes. This was proved in the map of Rome, found in the 800 B.C. In the year 8000 B.C. some people entered India from the north and north-west of Beluchistan, crossing Mesopotamia, known as Dravid. History makes clear that these people worshipped earth, snake, tree etc., At some later date, they defeated and conquered the people living in the south India. The Dravids settled in the south. Their generous mind preserved affinity with the defeated, and in course of time, they kept marital, language and cultural relations with the primitives or the Adivasis.<sup>3</sup>

Language, is one of the most important forms and medium of human behaviour. When we listen to an unknown language, it conveys no sense to us, though it carries the message to certain people who understand. There are a large number of languages. Some of those have scripts and some having none and are known

as spoken languages. We like to begin our discussion about the evolution of spoken languages known as Kol (Santhal or Santhal) language in India.

In order to find out the antiquity of this KOL lingual people, we have to depend on the latest Anthropological findings of Dr. Biraja Sankar Guha (Govt. of India) as stated in his “Racial elements in the Indian population” (Oxford pamphlets on Indian Affairs, No. 22).

### **Movement**

The findings in short are:

That there is no proof of the inception of human beings in India and all the population of India, since pre-historic stone age, migrated in different times and in different groups from different countries.

1. The first group of such people came in pre-historic stone age from Africa via Arabia. They are known as Negrait or Negribotu.
2. The second group of such people came and spread all over India and beyond India as far as Malanesia, Polenesia etc. from West Asia and were known as Proto-Austroid people, i.e., KOL people in like Munda, Santhal, Gond, etc.
3. The third group of people known as Mediterranean race came from Greece, Agean Islands, Miser, Palestiain, Syria, Asia Minor etc., and entered in three batches.
4. The fourth group known as Western Brachycephals entered in three batches from Mesopotemia and Asia Minor.
5. The next group known as Nordic people entered via Iran and Afgansithan from Mediterranean area.
6. The Last group of people known as Mongoloid entered from the east and north of India, crossing the Himalayan range.

All these people may be called Proto — Austroid or Austric group of people.<sup>4</sup>

“Austic language was spoken in India in ancient times before the arrival of Aryans. There are references to them in the old Sanskrit literature. The Austic people spread all over the Reverane plains in India, particularly the Gangetic and also possibly the Indus basin and they built the basic agricultural civilization of India. Many of their religious ideas, rituals and ceremonies have continued down to the present times having been absorbed on composite Aryans. Non — Aryan culture which is the basic of Hinduism as known in ancient Sanskrit as a Nisads (Nihadas). Some of their tribes were also called Bhillas and Scholas (Modern Indian Bhills and Scols) besides Pulinds, Matangas, Samanpalas (Modern Indian Santals, Santhals or Santhals) Mundas (Modern Indian Mundaries and Pundas (Modern Indian Punds) etc.,”<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Adivasi: A Generic Term

About the first group of Negribotu people, presently there is no trace of them in India. It is said that they have mixed with other groups and have lost their separate identity. However, the existence of second group of Kol people and their language may be called as the most ancient proof and form of the Indian population and language. They are known as ‘Adivasi’; meaning the oldest inhabitants. There are 133 sub-communities of Adivasi people in India, at present. These Kol people are sub-divided mainly into clans like — Munda, Santhal, Gound, Khond, Sabar, Bhumij, Birhor, Kurku, Kora, Godob, Ho, etc. But such sub divisions were not in existence in the pre-historic days. These are the developments of later days. All of them use almost similar words with variation in pronunciation. More than 50 per cent of these people speak Santhali language. Santhal language of Kol people may be accepted as the main stream of their language.

At the same time, the Santhals were the largest, most integrated and possibly the most resilient tribe in Eastern India. They are Indo-Melanese by race and in speaking, a non-Aryan language, Santhali, they had antedated both Aryans and Dravidians and to a great extent were unaffected by either Hindu or Muslim practices.

Linguists found some semblance of Greek words in the ancient Indian inscriptions. Some such words, as deciphered with the help of Kol language, show that the language of these people also originated from the same source and they also came from Greece, Aegean Island, Misir etc. and had stayed there for a long time.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Santhali Language: Phonology and Phonetic Transliteration

The historians and the Anthropologists believe firmly that the Santhals i.e. the Kol people were the greatest tribal people in India. Records and proofs show that prior to the Dravid or Aryan civilization in India their language had impressed other world languages in word formation. Different countries have adopted different rules in creation of Prakrit language words. But all languages framed the words from Mono—syllabic Kol words to Multi-syllabic prakrit words, after some reformations in phoneme. All such improved languages discarded the verbal tense suffix and case endings of Kol language without any substitution. Instead they have used the suffix, infix, prefix and particles etc. to indicate the tense or case ending, though all those languages maintained and followed some rules of the grammar of Kol language.

#### ***The Phonology and Phonetic Transliteration of Kol (Santhal) Language***

##### *Phonology*

##### **Vowels In Kol (Santhal) language**

O, a, i u, e, o

improved Languages

Sonants — Nil

##### **Letters**

As created new in

$i + i = \bar{i}$

$U + U = \acute{U}$

Santhals = Nil

oi ' oi  
ou = ou  
Ri  
Li

Consonants

Velar guttural

K, Kh, g, gh, ñ, n

Glottal - h

Visarga — In Vedic  
literature

Palatal - C, ch, J, Jn, n', y, e, s

Cacuminal — t, th, d, dh, r

- rh;  
s+ s= s (Retroflex)  
N + n = n

Dental — t, th, d, dh, n, r, l, s, t'

Bilabial — p, ph, b, bh, m, j, p', w

Also created large number of compound and complex letters

e.g.

Ko + Lo = KL o + I = Kli + I = KLi

Kor + u = Kru + u = krû

Kari + I = Kri

Ko + Ko = Kko

Bairi = Bri and so on.

*Note:* This is not an exhaustive list. The break up of words in different languages may be noted.

### **Phonetic Transliteration**

The symbols are generally employed by the Roman script. These symbols are given below:

## Vowels

o-	Open.vowel like Eng	—	Morning. Pot, dot
a.-		...	Father
i-		...	give
I+1	Resultant used as	....	î
U =	Resultant used as	....	Put
U + U =	Resultant used as	....	û
E =			Bend
O =			Bore
Ri			Ri
Li			Li

## Consonants

- (a) Nasalization sounds — on the top of a letter as in â, ô, ù etc.,
- (b) A dot below to show the caluminal accent as in t, tho, s, n,r, rh, d, dh, etc.,
- (c) An accent to show the palatal sound as in, ñ, s<sup>ç</sup>
- (d) A dot on n' used, sound like ng in Eng.
- (e) An accent or dot on k ë + p on the right top used to show the character is checked consonant.
- (f) Checked consonant — k<sup>ç</sup>, e are unexploded sounds and t', p are half exploded sounds
- (g) Aspirated sound shown by — h added kh, dh, ch, etc, Visarga sound shown by h at the end of a word.
- (h) G — used always as hard sound like — Gay and y — semi consonant like J in Eng.
- (i) N - a palatal sound like gn — in Eng
- (j) Vowels changes in euphonical combination for harmonic sequence
- (k) Where no diacritical marks are used the pronunciation is with some reservation, the same as in English.<sup>7</sup>

### A. Comments of the Historians

The spoken language of the mediteraranean race is from the same KOL language words, as can be seen from the meaning of Hittet script inscriptions of 1500 B.C. from Mesopotamia and Babylon.

The third group of people also left the place of origin and stayed in Mediterranean area for a long period before they moved to India, and in their speech language use was the same as Kol language in pre-historic period.

Though the Anthropological findings have not supplied us the idea about the place of origin of human being of the world, yet, in order to find out the place of origin of human beings we may place two names, and the meaning of which according to Kol words, will help to determine the place of inception of man—kind and also the reason as to how they spread throughout the world since pre-historic period.

- (a) German = the original human being.
- (b) [Jar= original, unvarnished + Manwa > Man= Human being]
- (c) Perasya = yes, to set going [parsao = to set agoing + ho> ye= yes, also]
- (d) The actual meaning of the word Kol-is, Kol= to send.

It shows that this tribal race was named as Kol because they were sent to different countries of the world, systematically through Persia, who set them agoing since pre-historic days and the inception of human being was some where in Germany, where the language of all people was only one. The movement of people, since pre-historic periods occurred due to increase in population.

But at long intervals, some of those transferred population again had to change their residence and moved from one country to another or from one place to other for various reasons like—sectarian clashes, natural calamaties, increase of population, land hunger or some other unknown reasons and spread over throughout

the whole world. Such movement of people from one place to other, is continuing since pre-historic period.

The people who came to India are known as Kol, and those who went to England are known as—Celt, and those in France are called as 'GoL. Thus, the human beings were spread throught out the world, and the difference in complexion, appearance, height, culture, food, mode of living etc., differed to a great extent due to different climatic conditions and natural influences of different countries on the people, the condition of temperature, wind, rainfall, light, altitude or environment played a great part.

With the advancement of culture and civilization, the modification and improvement of the language occurred in different ways in different countries; but the root and source of the language was the same. This is the reason—as to how Kol language got its connection with the languages of the world and why linguists find common ground between the different languages of the world.

It is also to be noted that a class of people never shared the fruits of the advancement of civilization or culture and remained satisfied with the ancient form of status of the language. Now after thousands of generations, the difference between them and the advanced people of the world has become distinctly spectacular, when it is natural to think that they are of a different race of people. Let us consider if our first generations were civilized men? If not there is no other alternative but to agree with the above findings and that at the period of inception of human beings or even a few centuries after, there was no different race, language or culture, as in modern days, for the mankind. The meaning of the words England, France, Italy, Greece, Europe, Asia, Africa, China, Russia, Iran, Iraq, Bharat—Bongodesh etc, have clearly been defined with distinction. The concept prevailing in India about the name of Bharat, from the name of the king Bharat, is not correct. The meaning of Bharat is one which peels off fear i.e. a fearless man, or a militant person.

[Bho = Fear + rot = to peel off.] Another word here, may be brought for clarification in this context. The meaning of the name

of the great poet of ancient Greece—Roman < Homor = To mourn and speak, to wail etc.,

It has been stated before that the Linguists found similarity of words amongst different languages of the world and they came to the conclusion that these languages have some common tribal language. But they failed to identify that particular tribal language and they had to set some imaginary form of tribal language as root words of various languages. On this matter, let us place below a few kol word which may be considered as root words, showing the common word source of the developed languages. Words of different languages may bring support to this significance.

### **B. Similarity: Original and Sprout Words**

The following chart may clear the root word and its usage in other languages that the Adivasi (Kol) language had influenced world languages:

<i>Kol</i>	<i>Eng</i>	<i>Lat</i>	<i>Hittet</i>	<i>Vedic</i>	<i>Sanskrit</i>
Suroj/Suraj	Sun	Solis	Suros	Surya	Surya
Bongo	Bonga	Deus	Bogo	—	Bhogo
Og	Fire	Ignis	—	—	Ogni
Enga	Mother	—	—	Mata	
Emga					
Ema					
Baret	Brother	Frater	—	—	Bhrata
Manwa	Man	Homo	—	Manav	Manav

There are many such other words in different languages which originated from the root words of Kol language.

Before the discussing the fourth to sixth group of people, who entered India in 2nd millennium B.C. let us consider about the Sindh-Civilization, which was a creation of these three groups of Indian people; as there was no people other than them in India at that time. Not only this Sindh civilization but there were other

ancient civilisations, too, in India prior to this one. All the ancient civilizations were from these three groups of people. The meaning of some place names and some other ancient inscriptions etc., of India, as deciphered with the help of Kol words noted below with expectation to get some historical facts are given below:

- (a) Mohenjodorho = oh, readiness for a strong hold (fort)  
[Mohenj = readiness +ho>o = oh + dorho = strongly, strong, + ok>o = suffix]
- (b) Horoppa = to guard the alighted twister (fort)  
[Horho > Hor = To guard+op = to alight + pak > pa = to wist + ak > a = suffix]
- (c) Larkana = A a chain like construction  
[Lar = once round like a chain + kana = a verbal these suffix indicating present tense]
- (d) Ilora = The inception is secretly covered [Ilok'>ILO = Secretly covered, feathered + or= Inception + ak'>a = suffix]
- (e) Mathura < Mathore = Honourable place
- (f) Lahore = To dig to sink  
[La = To dig + horok > horo = to sink]
- (g) Kusan < Kusian = owner of enormous grain"<sup>8</sup>

There are many words which trace their origin from the Kol words and were later on, used in other local languages.

“According to Anthropologists the fourth group of people, known as western—Brachycephals; said to be Mediterranean race entered India, approximately in the 2nd Millenium B.C. from Mesopotamia.

There are reasons to believe that this ethnic group of people were the Dravidians. According to the opinion of James Hoernell, regarding Dravidian (the origin of the ethnological significance of Indian boat designs, Memories of the A.S.B. 1920, Vol. VII, No. 3, pp. 225-26) is that they belong to the Mediterranean race, and that they lived at some period of time in Mesopotamia, and under

pressure of Akkadians or Semites, they pushed towards India by way of Balochistan (where the Brahui language marks their presence) and spread along the Indus and Ganges valleys, before pushing towards south and absorbing there primitive Negrito and Proto-polynesian population.”<sup>9</sup>

The historical findings makes it clear that there is no contribution of these Dravidian language to Vedic literature of India. There is not a single sentence which can be said to have been taken from Dravidian language in Vedic literature, while in Sanskrit literature, there is enough contribution of the Dravidian words.

On the other hand, when the Dravidian language words are compared with Kol words, it is found that the root and source of the language are the same. Some such words are placed to prove the point.

Word similarity:

<i>Kol</i>	<i>Tamil</i>	<i>English</i>
Kodi	Kodi	Twenty
Ina	Inatu	This
Isara	Isara	To hint
Orak	oraivu	Home
Nasti	Natti	no, nothing

The fifth group of people of Aryans, brought with them the highly cultured languages like Vedic and Prakrit etc., But the meaning of the word—Arya is misunderstood by the linguists. P.C. Mitra said that this was a term of address in ancient days, when kings or sages met. The meaning of the words. Iyo, Arye, as deciphered with the help of kol words comes as Iyo Arye = Hark ye, salutation to the freeman/Hark, solutation to ye the free man.

[Iyo = Hark ye + Arak > Ara = Free (person) + Johar > joha = salutation + ho > y = yes, + e = he / him]

“So, this word does not indicate to be the name of any race of people; it is used only when to wish each other. The work on ancient languages, proves that Vedic and Prakrit languages and literature were in existence in India, since a time, much prior to the entry of 4th or 5th group of people in India in the 2nd millennium B.C. The theories of Hoernell or Griarson about the presence of Aryans in India do not hold good. The existence of such highly cultured languages in India, simply surprised them and these languages could not be deciphered properly by any linguist nor they could find out the root and source of these languages. According to P.C. Mitra, the Vedic and Prakrit literatures, as deciphered with the help of Sanskrit language words, are totally wrong and imaginary, because both Vedic and Prakrit literatures have roots in Kol Language.”<sup>10</sup>

From the Anthropological findings and the comments of the historians, it is found that all the languages of the world have developed from of Kol language of Austric group of people. From the various recorded proof of Kol languages, about those Persian, Chinese, Indian etc. primary ancient improved language which may be called Prakrit language, according to the meaning of the word prakrit. But now many improved languages have abolished the use of unexploded sound of Kol language. They have abolished the constant nasal sound of Kol language.

Mesopotamia, as P.C. Mitra said, was a place of people of Mudas and other Kol people, as the meaning of the word Mesopotamia conveys. So in groups, Negraits and Kol people together changed their residence to the forest area of Mesopotamia and other places near Mesopotamia. The meaning of the word Drabir, conveys the change of residence to forest areas.

It may also be marked that, according to Anthropological findings, Dravidians entered India in three batches and their language too, was in a same form as the Kol language. The reason is that they changed their residence to different areas in Mesopotamia, Asia Minor and near about places. By the influence of local speech and their language changed according to the present forms of Tamil, Telugu and Kannada etc.

The 6th group of Mongoloid people, entered from China, crossing the Himalayan ranges and also via Burma. A large group of people known as Cam entered India from China-Vietkong/Combodia. Some groups can be compared in Kol and Cam and their meanings:

<i>Kol</i>	<i>Cam</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
Hon Hon	Hon Hon	Wide, long, high
Bhak	Bhag	To divide
Farak	Farak	difference
Duno	Duna	double

### ***C. Tribals: Integral Part of the Country's Population***

The culture and civilization of a country, where various communities with their distinct cultural traits live, develop as a result of the assimilation of the various cultures and civilization. In a society where tribals and non-tribals live together, its culture and civilization can be enriched only through the evolution of a composite patterns.

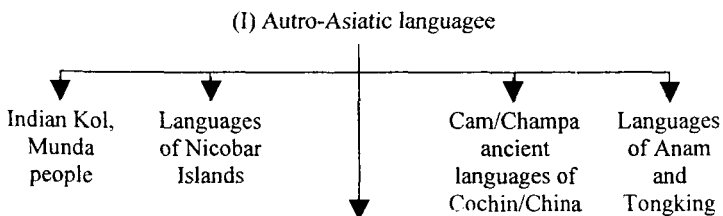
The Indian sub-continent has the second largest tribal population in the world. Many of the tribal communities have been living in this country since the pre-Aryan period. We come across names and descriptions of various tribal communities in the ancient Indian Literature like the Vedas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Rig Veda speaks of the Asuras. The tribal groups such as the Nishadas, the Gadrajs, the Sabers, the Nagas, and the Yaksas etc, are mentioned in the Ramayana. The Mahabharata also refers to the Kiratas, the Mundas etc. In the Bhagwat Purana, there is a story about the origin of the Kols, the Bhils and the Mushars.

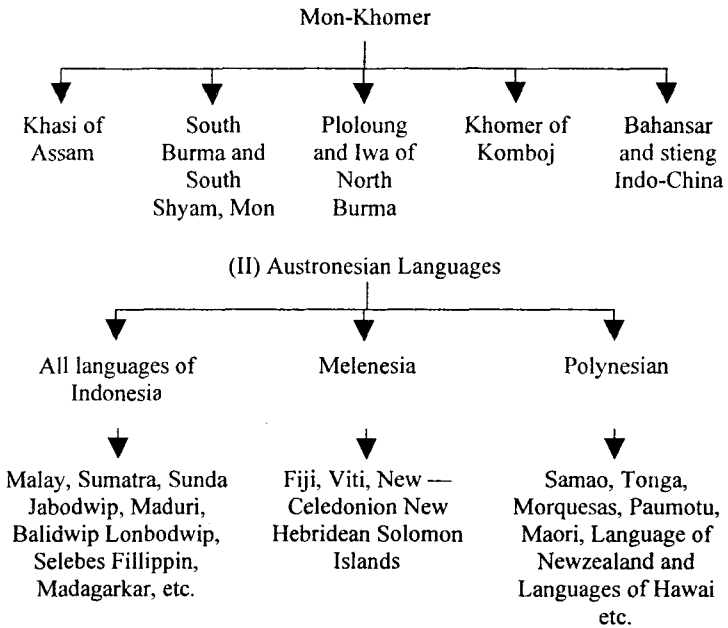
Many of the tribal communities in India are still living in the jungles, hills or in the isolated regions. But in earlier period, most of them lived in the plains. In order to save their culture, heritage and identity, they left the plains and settled themselves in isolated jungles and hills far away from the areas where there are now non-

tribal settlements. Sometimes they had directly or indirectly been forced to leave the areas they were living in. According to L.P. Vidyarthi and B.K. Rai, the tribals in India “in the early historical period appeared to have lived in a state of internal movement. Crossing across the country and their movements were generally guided by the river valleys, and destinations were the hills and forest regions of the country”. “During the medieval period, the tribal people, inhabiting different parts of India, were either disturbed by the then Mohammedan rulers or regional rulers or both”. In support of this view, Vidyarthi and Rai have put forward some historical proofs as to how and why the tribes like the Bhils of Western India or the then Banjaras of North India, took shelter deeper into the hills or migrated to some other regions”.

But inspite of the fact that the tribal people had to leave the areas where they once had been living and migrate to different regions away from those inhabited by plains people, they remain an inseparable part of the nation. Indian civilization and culture is, to a great extent, typified by the confluence of tribal and non-tribal socio-cultural streams, though both the tribals and non-tribals have retained some of their original distinctive traits. Thus, we find in India an uninterrupted co-existence of unity in diversity. In other words, the people inhabiting this country, though diverse in some respects, can be considered to belong to the same society or community. It is aptly remarked, “Each section of population contributes to the making of the nation in the same manner as each flower helps to make a garden”.<sup>11</sup>

The given chart may make clear the language—family of the above mentioned people:





Speech or language, movements of people and their origin have brought to the conclusion of Kol language as the root of all".

#### Recorded proof of Kol language

1. All the people of India migrated from different countries of the world and therefore languages of India have close relation with the other languages of the world.
2. It already has been discussed that since the inception of human beings the Germans gradually spread throughout the whole world; therefore, all the languages of the world have been rooted from one language.
3. It has also been stated above that the common tribal language of origin was Kol Language.
4. The first scripts of different countries introduced in ancient times, must have been Kol language and subsequently improved and developed languages of the world are the improved forms of Kol (Santhals) language.<sup>12</sup>

## PART II

**The East India Company**

Indian history goes back to many centuries before the Christian Era. Not surprisingly, the course of this long history was not even and uniform. For a long time India was not a country but was made up of many kingdoms. There were times when vast portions of this sub-continent came under the rule of one empire. The country was invaded many times by foreigners and some of them settled down here, became Indians, and ruled as Kings and Emperors. Some of them, on the other hand, plundered and looted the country and went back with the riches that they were able to collect. There were periods of great achievements; there were times of stagnation and misery. But when we remember that the East India company in India and India's freedom struggle refers to the recent period of Indian history, when Britain was ruling over India and the people of India were fighting to overthrow foreign domination and become free.

***I. British Rule in India: 1757***

“British rule in India may be said to have started in 1757 when, at the battle of Plassey, forces of the East India Company defeated Siraj-ud-Daula, the Nawab of Bengal. But a powerful national struggle, against the British Imperialism developed in India during the second half of the 19th century and the first of the 20th century. The very nature of the foreign rule resulted in nationalistic sentiments arising among the Indian people and produced the material, moral, intellectual and political conditions for the rise and development of a powerful national movement. The basic characters of British rule in India indicate the clash of interests, and its impact upon the Indian society”.<sup>13</sup>

## ***II. Nature of British Rule***

From 1757 onwards the Britishers had used their control over India to promote their own interests. It passed through several stages in its long history of nearly 200 years. The nature of British rule and imperialism, as also its politics and impact, changed with the changing pattern of Britain's own social, economic and political development.

The other important consideration was that the company required large amount of money to wage wars, both in India and on the high seas, and to maintain normal forces and armies and forts and trading posts in India. Neither the British Government nor the East India Company possessed such large financial resources. To overcome this stagnation, the company through local taxation in its coastal fortified towns such as Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, expanded its territories to levy more taxes. It needed immense capital for the investment in industries and collected revenues or taxes from trade and agriculture. To do all this was nothing but to plunder the Indian peasants and agriculturists.

“Both the objectives—the monopoly of trade and control over financial resources—were rapidly fulfilled, and beyond the imagination of the Directors of the East India Company when Bengal and South India rapidly came under the company's political control, during the 1750's and 1760's.

The East India Company now acquired direct control over the state revenues of the conquered areas and was in a position to grab the accumulated wealth of the local rulers, nobles and zamindars. For example, from 1765 to 1770, the company sent out of Bengal nearly 33 per cent of its net revenue in the form of goods.<sup>14</sup>

## ***III. Impact on Agriculture***

British rule and its impact on India created conditions for the rise of a powerful anti-imperialist movement and for unification of the Indian people into a nation. The policies followed by the British

rulers in India affected, mostly the agricultural and the agrarian classes.

The introduction of two major land revenue and tenurial systems, like Zamindari system (later, a modified version of the same Zamindari system was introduced in North India under the name of the Mahalwari system) and Ryotwari system created private landlords possessing some, but not all, of the rights of private property on land. They were made complete masters of the village communities. The peasant cultivators were transformed into tenants at will. Under the Ryotwari system, the government collected the revenues directly from the individual cultivators, who were recognized in law as the owners of the land they cultivated. Whatever the name of the system, it was the peasant cultivators who suffered.

No doubt, the British Government set out, after 1813, to transform Indian administration, economy and society to achieve exactly these ends. The introduction of modern education in 1813 was extended in 1833. The introduction of steamships on the rivers and improved roads and the large network of railways linking after 1853, linked nearly 28,000 miles. The modern postal and telegraph system greatly facilitated the business transactions. They developed but at the same time plundered and exploited the Indian agricultural classes.

#### ***IV. Pitiable Conditions of the Peasants***

The poetical description was picturesqued in the book 'Krishna' about their conditions of torture and domination as well as exploitation of the peasants. But the peasants, through revolt and revolution, sang songs of the greatness of the country. Revolt started in many parts of the country.

#### ***V. 1st Peasants Revolt***

The peasants of India faced hardship of the government's

suppression and domination. The revolt of 1855 made Siddu Murmoo, Kanoo Murmoo (Siddu + Kanu) the first martyrs. The revolutionaries, fled away to the East Bengal, Tripura, Nepal and Assam. They settled wherever they could. At the same time, the revolts in Tea plantation in Assam, started after 1837 A.D. The people who were brought as workers and labourers from outside Assam after 1860, came from Ranchi, Birbhum, Singbhum and the present areas of Jharkhand through the sea route and rail. Till 1950 they came as labourers and the numbers became 6 lakhs 15 thousand out of which 9 per cent (57, 498) were the local labourers.

More than half of the Adivasis are engaged in Tea plantations in Assam, at present.

The Impact of British rule, thus, led to the evolution of new structure of agrarian relations that proved extremely regressive. The result was prolonged stagnation in agricultural production. The dismal agricultural picture showed falling of production by 14 percent per head between 1901 and 1939, compared to the earlier 24 percent.

### ***VI. The Tribals: Before Independence***

“Twenty Lakhs or 26.7 per cent of the total population are tribal people who are unfit to live a civilized state of life and in all constitutional rights of minority should belong to the civilized section of the population, who are either Hindus or Muslims numbering 80 lakhs”.<sup>15</sup>

“But tribal life, in general, is characterised in simplicity, hospitality and benevolence. We should not forget that they are our own kinsmen and non-tribals can learn many good lessons from their way of life”.

Minoo Masani, in his famous, ‘Our Growing Human Family’ speaks of the Negros of the Hottentot tribe in Africa, eating raw flesh of wild animals. If any number of this tribe, when alone, has been able to kill an animal, he raises three loud calls inviting all his fellow tribals, who can hear him to share with him the flesh of the animal that he has killed.

Thus, it can be safely remarked that the tribals are not lacking in the basic human quality i.e. fraternal co-existence among themselves.

It is important to note that there are some common elements of distinct cultural traits among the different tribal communities. Also it is not difficult to trace a commonness in the economic life-style. To understand a particular region like Assam, therefore, one needs to go into the tribal pattern and mode of socio—cultural and economic life of different tribal communities in the world.

### *1. Tribal Uprisings*

The tribal people, spread over a large part of India, participated in hundred of uprisings. They resented the extension of British control and the intrusion of the colonial administration. And, most of all, they objected to the transgression in their simple and sheltered lives by the money lenders, traders and revenue farmers who were the instruments of the British in bringing the tribal people within the influence and control of colonial economy and exploitation. The rebellions of the tribal people were marked by immense courage and sacrifice on their part and veritable butchery on the part of the official machinery leading to suppression. Lakhs died in unequal battles between angry, but disorganized men armed with such primitive weapons as axes, bows and arrows on the one side and the disciplined regiments of the British Indian Army, equipped with the latest weapons of war. Among the numerous tribal revolts those of the Kols from 1820 to 1837, the Santhals in 1855–56, the Rampas in 1879 and the Mundas from 1895–1901 stand out.

The barbarous behaviour of the police and the army, at that time, is remembered to this day by the people of Assam. The high land revenue assessment led to a series of peasant riots in the plains of Assam. All these movements country wide in the 20th century, grew into a discontent of the peasant masses and was merged with the general anti-imperialist discontent and their political activity was expressed in the wider national movements.

The first political association in Calcutta as Land Holders Society in 1838, failure of the Revolt of 1857, the Indian Association in 1876 and the first session of Indian National Congress, 1885 had done much in organizing the masses, both civilians as well as the peasants. The magazines like Nildarpan—1860, Amrit Bazar Patrika, the Indian Mirror, the Sanjivani, Bengalee, Hindu, Swadeshmitran, the Andhra Prakasika, The Kerala Patrika, the Kesari, The Tribune, The Koh—l—Noor, Akbariani: etc, highlighted the movements of the mass organizations.

### **VII. Freedom Struggle**

The Freedom Struggle of India voiced for the removal of poverty, for the modernization of Indian life, internal economic development, administrative reform, reform of the official attitude etc. which resulted in the evolution of common political and economic programmes that united the different sections of the people. The anti-partition movement in Bengal, the growth of militants, nationalist movement and the rise of revolutionary terrorism, bonfire of foreign cloth in Bombay did much to further the goal of Independence.

#### *Reflection of Anti-peasants Attitude*

To live peacefully and in the defence of their life, many revolutionaries left their birth place in Bihar, Orissa, and in the West of Bengal in the middle of 19th century. The simple people of nature, agriculture, soil or water lived since the time immemorial, were shattered with their hopes and aspirations from the said places to unknowns destinations. The common people as well as the peasants left their homeland. They came to Assam, Tripura, Nepal and other near and farther places seeking safe haven. Their movements were not at any particular time but was spread phase

wise and settled wherever they liked i.e. river banks, forest areas and jungles. This process continued upto 1850.

Assam came under British rule in 1826 with the Yandabu Treaty. The migration of common people to Assam, in general and of Adivasis in particular, started after the peasant movements. They migrated for their livelihood even before they were brought to North Eastern states by the East India Company. The East India Company brought them to work in Tea-gardens, coal mines, factories and industries and for the construction of Railway lines.

### PART III

#### **Assam and the Asamese: Historical Background**

In the pre-historic times, the Kingdoms of Prgjyotisha or Kamrupa, which extended southwards as far as the Bay of Bengal, and its western boundary was the Karatoya river. According to Yoginitatra, the country lying to the east of the Karatoya river is called Kamrupa, which is said to extend from the Karatoya river on the west to the Dikhu on the east and from the mountain of Kanjagiri on the north, to the confluence of the Brahmaputra and Lakhya rivers on the south, that is to say, it included roughly, the Brahmaputra valley, Bhutan, Rangpur, Koch Behar, the North-East of Mymanshigh and possibly the Garo Hills. The whole country was divided into four parts, viz., Kamapith, Ratnapith, Subarnapith and Soumorpith. The present Kokrajhar district of West Assam was located in Ratnapith”.

#### **(a) The Assamese: A Composite Term**

In Indian history, Assam was first known as Pragjyotishpura and then Kamrupa. The word Assam, is of modern origin. In the Vaishnav literary history, it has been used as Asom, Assam, Ahom, etc, that came from the Ahom rulers in Assam who came from Burma i.e. Mynamar. After the year 1826, the word Asom or Assam

has been used extensively. The people of Assam use 'Asom' in their own language even today. The historians have said that the word is means as not equal i.e. A+ soma or Asom, in modern Assam. It is a place of unequally mixed culture of Ahom dynasty, chutiya dynasty, koch-kachari dynasty and the Barah-Bishnu Banshi prior to the Ahoms. Some say that from the Bodos that the word has come for Ha-Sam. In Joginitantra, the word in the sixteenth century 'Saumar' was used to denote the Ahom kingdom and the people.

The Ty-Ahoms of the Burmese used 'Kham' as a title. The kings recognized this title to the Ty-Ahoms as Ty-Kham -Ti., TY-kham-yang, Sam-Ang-Khan, Keng-Kham etc. as the smaller states. 'Aa-Kham' was known as an independent state. After the thirteenth century first the Mughals and then the Britishers entered Assam and then came the mingling process of the Aryans-Non-Aryans—Dravids—Kirat—Nishada etc. This was the starting point of ethnicity in the then greater Assam.

The word 'Assam' does not limit itself to any particular area, for, the geographical Assam and the historical Assam never reconcile. By the same theory, the political Assam and the cultural Assam is also quite different. People who came, settled, born and brought up here are the Assamese. Thus, in this Assamese community and culture, almost all the main sects of the people of the world are found mingled and the new community has come into existence, which is an ideal example for other states of India.

### ***(b) Tea Plantations in Assam***

Before going to focus on Santhals in Assam, in particular, it is necessary to highlight the people who were compelled or compulsorily brought to Assam after 1837. That year the British government started Tea plantations in Assam by employing people like Kachari, Rabha, Garo and Nepali; but they were not successful. The newly formed Assam Tea Company used Kachari, Raba, Kuki and the local Moran and Matak people as labourers, but that too was not successful. Labourers who came from Kamrup, Goalpura and

Garo hills' Bodo—Kacharis and Mech of Nepal, left the working tea gardens and started their own occupations of agriculture. In the first twenty years, no doubt, some labourers of Chhotnagapur were brought to work together with the local labourers. There is still a village in the district of Sivasagar where only Nepali people have settled as Ex-tea garden labourers. Ultimately, the government failed to grow more tea in Assam by using local labour.

### **(c) Labourers from Outside Assam**

As the company failed in its repeated attempts to 'grow more tea in Assam', it brought 50,000 labourers from Chotanagapur and Medinipur districts of Bihar and Bangodesh. Besides these two places, labourers were brought from Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and some other parts of southern India. In 1875, the hired labour number increased by 1,00,000. They were brought for a particular period of time. When these people became incapable of work, the tea-garden authority disallowed them to be in the gardens to work further. The labourers left the gardens who are now known as Ex-tea garden labours. The first group of labourers, then settled around the tea garden areas, remote lands or forest lands. In this way, the Adivasi people living in Assam were divided into two groups which government has recognized. They embraced Assam as their motherland and co-operated in the common eco-social life of Assam which have made them distinct from the socio-cultural life of the locality.

### **(d) Tea Labourers: A Mixed Community**

The labourers living in the tea-gardens were either tribals or non-tribals. The tribes, eco-socially backward were side hired from Bihar, Orissa and central India through were higher in caste but their social status was pitiable and they were exploited. Some professionals, too, jointed the tea garden service. Some of them were tribals in their behaviour and culture. These different sects are Santhals, Orao,

Munda, Ghasi, Kharia, Gadava, Tanti, Tasa, etc. Besides, them there Nayak, Gondtanti, Paan, Kumar, Kamar, Karmakar, Mali, Teli, Shawar, Kand, Kairi, Bauri, Kalahandi, Bishan, Panika, Bhuiyan, Koya, Parja, Bamura, Turi, Guwal, Kalani, Dom, Mirja, Saral, Rabidas, Bhumij, Chamar, Telenga Rajput, Kandpan, Baraik, Gadait, Manki, Haari, Maal, Barla, Gadai, Mahanti, Chahu, Indwar, Bismal, Puriya, Kalindi, Kulu, Murmoo, Runda, Charban, Tamaria, Rai, Chabachi, Purta, Guriya, Bhenra, Dhaan, Churin, Bhuimali, Baniya, Bheel, Binjiya, Bedeya, Birhor, Bhumij, Bagti, Baarui, Chhero, Dhanwar, Dhangar, Gond, Ghatowar, Ho, Keot, Lohar, Lodhi, Maal, Maalpahariya, Nagbhanshi, Nower, Napit, Parma, Pachhi, Patar, Patawa, Rajwar, Tekka, Tirki, Kerketa, Herenj, Soren, Baske, Kisko, Hembrom, Mardi, Hasda, Tudoo, Besra, Chore, Paoriya, Dhananga, Tiru, Minje. Horo, Topno. Porh, Kundulna, Jhariya, Dar, Sinha, etc. This extra-ordinary sub-divisions of multi-lingual people in India, in general and in Assam, have influenced not only in eco-social status, but in the formation of cultural life as well as composite unit of the national life.

### **(e) Mutual Influences**

As the Assamese culture and community was formed in the evolutionary process, the culture of Santhal people too, is formed in the same way. While looking back to their previous job of tea labourers of Assam, we find them of Austric and Dravid culture. They have been influenced by the Aryan culture. The Nishadas, mentioned in the Mahabharata, with their form and colour say definitely that they are from the family of Kol lingual of the Austrics. This Kol community includes Santhal or Santhal, Mundari, Bhumij, Koda or Koya, Ho, Karua, Kurkoo, Kharya, Khanagari, Juwang, Shawar ertc, as the main branches. People coming to Assam, as tea garden labourers, are mainly from the Kol, Mundas and now their culture is directed to village culture or peasant culture. The agricultural village culture in plains and hills of Assam have some common elements in them. Their main village

culture has broken down due to the administrative control of the industrial owners on the labourer living in the gardens. No doubt, some original elements of their culture is still alive. Some legends of the Tea labourers coming from Chhotanagpur make it clear that their forefathers—the Austrics sprouted the paddy seed inside the bamboo pipe than the are tradition is followed even today. The Aryans tamed animals and were nomadics, the Austrics settled in the riverines and lived an agricultural life. Later on, they came into close contact with the Dravids, exchanged their culture and got mixed. The tea labourers in the garden too, live a close life with Dravids, exchange their views to achieve solidarity. They follow and worship gods and goddesses in the festivals, traditions, folk beliefs and preserve them as their forefathers had gifted.

In fact, Santhals of Assam have unknown and internal similarities with the people of Khasi Hills. Their speaking words in the language, womens' dresses, ornaments etc., have similarities with the people of Meghalaya—the Khasi State. They too, mention that they are the people of Austric group.

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