

"The population of the plains tribals which is being gradually assimilated to the population of the plains, should for all practical purposes be treated as a minority. Measures of protection for their land are also in our view necessary.....The question of their representation and protection will, we hope, be considered by the Minorities Sub-Committee. We have kept in mind, however, the possibility of there being certain areas inhabited by tribals in the plains or at the foot of the hills whom it may be necessary to provide for in the same manner (as for the hill areas of Assam)"—So wrote the Bardoloi Sub-Committee of the Advisory Committee of the Constituent Assembly in 1947¹. The comment was only *in passim* in the Sub-Committee's elaborate recommendations regarding the constitutional structure of the hill areas of Assam known, in the British period, as Tribal and Excluded Areas. The Sixth Schedule to the Indian Constitution was product of that report.

The Sub-Committee, however, could not ignore the plains tribals because of their sheer number. "The total tribal population of Assam was shown in the census of 1941 as 2,484,996. The excluded and partially excluded areas contribute to this only 863,248. About 1.6 million tribals therefore live in the plains including those who work as tea-gardens labour². Little did the Constituent Assembly realize that, within 25 years, they would pose a political problem in Assam.

Rupnath Brahma, a plains tribal leader, listed the categories of plains tribals in a memorandum to the Minorities Rights Sub-Committee of the Advisory Committee as:—(1) The Kacharis, the Boros, the Meches, Dimasas, Sonawal Kacharis, the Thongal Kacharis, (2) the Rabhas, (3) the Lalungs, (4) the Miris, (5) the Mikirs living in the plains, (6) the Garos living in the plains, (7) Deoris, (8) the Khamptis, (9) the Singphos, (10) Akas, (11) Daflas, (12) Abors, (13) Mismis, (14) The Hajongs, (15) the Hojais, (16) the Motoks, (17) the Morans and such other tribes living in the plains of Assam. Brahma did not count the tea garden labourers of Assam as Assam tribal³ but the North-East Frontier Assam Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee of the Constituent Assembly, under the then Premier of Assam, Gopinath Bardoloi, recorded them as a category of Plains

Plains Tribals In Assam Politics

By Dr. S. K. Chaube

Tribals. This anomaly was probably due to the legacy of classification under the 1935 reforms. But the fact that they were not regarded as Assam tribals even after the enforcement of the Constitution of India probably points to the significance attached to the place of birth of a people in Assam politics. The tea garden tribes are among the Scheduled Tribes in the places of their origin. The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950, records the following as the Scheduled Tribes outside the 'autonomous districts' of Assam, who may be regarded as Plains Tribals of Assam:—

- (1) Barmans of Cachar,
- (2) Boro-Borokacharis,
- (3) Deori,
- (4) Hojai,
- (5) Ka hari including Sonwal,
- (6) Lalung,
- (7) Mech,
- (8) Miri,
- (9) Rabha.

Who are the Plains Tribals?

The origin of most of these groups (except, possibly, the Miri) has been ascribed to the great Bodo race spread over the long tract of territory from

the Purua district in Bihar to Central Assam. The name Bodo itself is derived from the Bara or Baraphisa which the Kachari use to denote themselves⁴. The Kacharis who once had a big kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley, with headquarters at Dimapur, claim descent from the marriage of the Mahabharata hero, Bhima, with Hirimba. Ethnographers do not subscribe to this belief. They trace certain folklores among the groups to suggest their migration from southern Tibet several centuries back and their eventual mixing with the indigenous people. Certain cultural elements support the theory. Even the Garo are supposed to be a part of this race.

Leaving the field of anthropological speculation, one enters the field of history. The Palas of North Bengal probably were Bodos. The Koch, another groups of Bodos, were ruling powers in North Bengal and, in the 16th century, the Koch rulers successfully invaded Assam. To the Kachari kingdom reference has already been made.

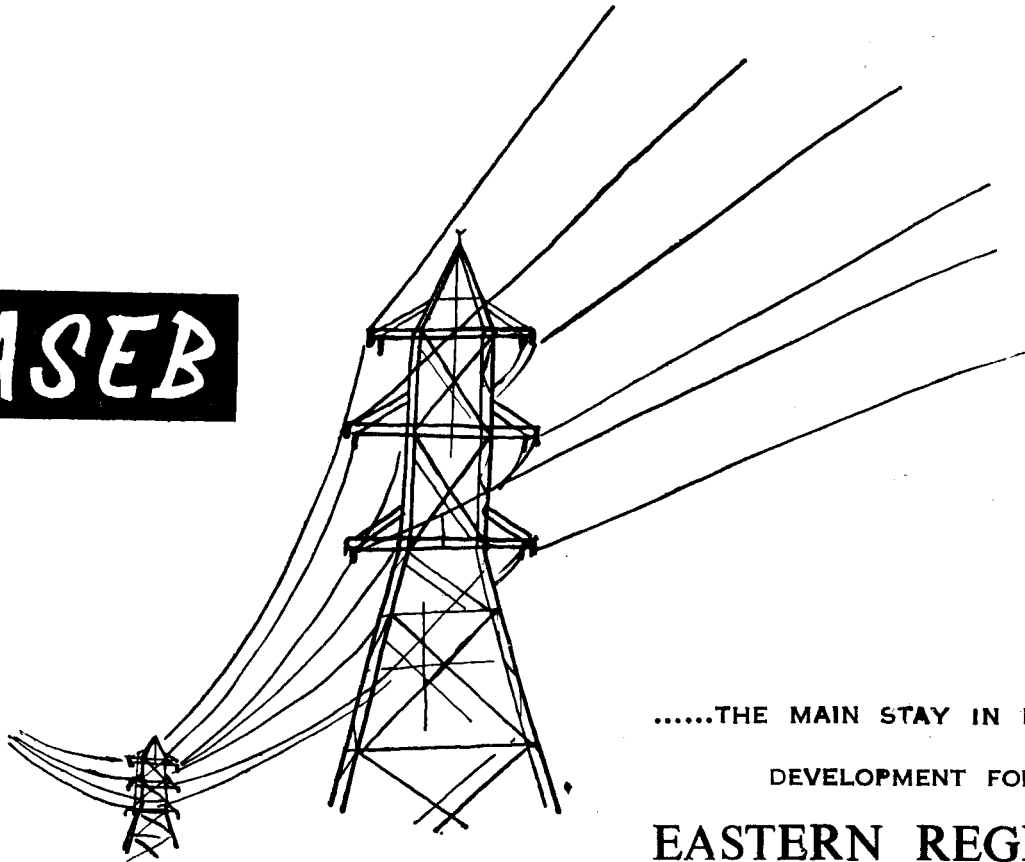
One interesting aspect of the Bodo's culture contact was their relation with Hinduism. The Koch were completely Hinduized when they entered Assam. The Koch rulers' connections with the Kamakhya temple has become one of the sacred tales of Assam. But all Bodo groups certainly did not become Hinduized. Some of them came close to Hinduism but refused to accept Brahminical order, as is demonstrated by the Deoris, the pre-Brahmin priests of the Bodos. But those Bodo groups which from time to time came to dominant positions in parts of North Bengal and Western Assam usually assumed a Kshatriya caste status and the title of Rajbanshi. The process of assimilation still continues, as illustrated by these observations in the 1881 census report of Assam:—

'.....the converted Bodo.....first become Saraniya, Madhahi, or, Totila, and then develop into Koch⁵.

and
'A large number of Koch in the Goalpara district call themselves Rajbanshi, or classmen of the Raja of Bijni, and thus claim alliance with the royal stock of Kuch Bihar⁶.

The Kachari-Koch-Rajbanshi complex in Assam and North Bengal is an

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illustration of the tribe-caste continuum involving the Hindu society. But it also demonstrates the plural character of the population of the region. The persistence of a large number of 'Tribal' population in the Brahmaputra Valley can be explained only by the failure of Hinduism to absorb them in its vortex. On the other hand, possibly because of Hindu influence, the plains tribals have not been attracted to Christianity in a notable way.

The 1961 census recorded the strength of the Scheduled Castes in Assam as 732,756. Of them the biggest group (221,714) was made of the Namasudras, 'mostly of Bengali origin'. The strength of the Scheduled tribes in Assam (excluding Nagaland and NEFA) amounted to 2,204,249, and, of the Plains Tribals among them, 953,310. A special compilation from the individual census slips showed that 115,121 hill tribals lived in the plains and 24,312 plains tribals lived in the hills⁸. The plains tribals living in the Assam plains thus numbered 862,501. Assuming a 30% decennial growth of those people, their number will probably reach above 1.12 million, i.e., about 8% of the plains population⁹. The strength of the Scheduled Tribes in the Assam plains, in 1971, stood at 901,911. Leaving the Cachar district where the strength of the Scheduled Castes is about 13 times that of the Scheduled Tribes, the proportion of the Scheduled Tribes to the Scheduled Castes in the Brahmaputra Valley will be bigger than that of the Scheduled Castes. As most of the 'other backward classes' of Assam, like the Ahom and the Koch, live on the borderline of Hinduism, their differences with the caste-Hindu Assamese remain significant in the social network of Assam.

Stratification of the non-Muslim Assamese society in terms of clear social categories, therefore, becomes difficult. Christians in the Valley do not pose much problem, first, because of their insignificant number, and, second, because of the fact that Scheduled Tribal remains a Scheduled Tribal even after conversion. The bulk of the Muslim population of Assam is made of immigrants. And both these religions officially do not recognize castes. Plains Tribals are, therefore, a political category which emerged at the time of Scheduling of the castes and tribes under the 1935 Reforms.

In the multi-polar power-relationship of Assam, however, they can play a significant role notwithstanding the fact that there is not a single police station in Assam where they are in absolute majority. Their greatest concentration is in the Kokrajhar sub-division of the Goalpara district from where their leadership generally emerges. But they are in considerable strength all along the north bank of the Brahmaputra.

Grievances of the plains tribals

Although the Bardoloi Sub-Committee had anticipated the creation of protective tribal belts for the plain-tribals of Assam, the Indian Constitution made no such provision¹⁰.

Besides the Scheduled Tribes of the autonomous districts of Assam, the tribals in all other parts of India were treated on the equal footing. The Constitution provided for some exceptions to the rights to equality and freedom in the interest of the Scheduled Tribes. Government may make special provisions for them. Parliament can make laws restricting the freedoms of movement, residence and acquisition and disposal of property in the interest of the Scheduled Tribes. The Constitution provides for preservation of seats for the Scheduled Tribes in the Central and State legislatures. The claims of the members of the Scheduled Tribes shall be taken into consideration while making government appointments. There shall be a special officer for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, appointed by the President, to investigate and report on their conditions. The President shall cause the report to be laid before Parliament. The President may also appoint a Commission to investigate and report on their condition from time to time. The President publishes the list of the Scheduled Tribes. Parliament may by law add other groups into the list.

These are the commitments of the Constitution. Besides them, there are some Directive Principles of State Policy. The State has been directed to 'promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes' and to 'protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation'¹¹.

Concrete steps towards the amelioration of the conditions of these weak sections of the community were, however, started to be taken only with the initiation of the Second Five Year Plan. Under that Plan the Community Development Scheme was initiated for the upliftment of the rural and weaker classes and Special Multi-purpose Tribal Blocks began to be founded. Tribal Land was sought to be given protection within such blocks through the application of the Assam Land Revenue Regulation, 1886, added by an amendment in 1893. According to a memorandum submitted by the Plains Tribal Council and the Congressite plains tribal members of the Assam Assembly, including a minister, in 1968, the tribal belts and the tribal blocks did not benefit them much¹².

In a recent memorandum¹³ of the PTC it has been alleged that the plains tribals 'have been systematically and in a planned way uprooted from their own soil' and the 'step-motherly treatment towards them by the administration, dominated by the Assamese-speaking people, has reduced them to the status of second-class citizens in the State'. An important aspect of their resentment is that the plains tribal people believe that, though they are the original inhabitants of the State, the Assamese aristocracy has dispossessed them of their original rights. The grievance smacks of that of the Jharkhand movement, although the perspectives of the two are different. First, the plains tribals are not as much concentrated as the tribal population of Jharkhand. Second, the role of Christianity among the plains tribals of Assam is almost nil.

Historically, the plains tribal movement emerged out of the movement for linguistic rights of the Bodo people. Language, it may be noted here, is the most favourite political issue in Assam. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha moved the State Government, in 1953, for the use of their language in the schools in the Bodo concentrated areas. The demand was recognized, for primary education, in 1963¹⁴. In 1968, Government agreed to introduce the Bodo language in higher secondary schools, in stages.

The Political phase

The political phase of the plains tribal movement began about the time of the 1967 elections with the forma-

tion of a Plains Tribal Council. On May 20, 1967, the Council submitted a memorandum to the President of India demanding (1) protection of their land, (2) check on the exploitation by non-tribals, (3) conservation of their language, culture and customs, (4) prevention of political domination by the non-tribals of Assam and (5) right to grow according to their own genius. In 1968, Shri B. P. Chaliha told this writer that the State Government was pinning its hope upon the *panchayati raj* to satisfy the political aspirations of the plains tribals. About the same time, however, a Tribal Block on the north bank of the Brahmaputra was abolished when the Gauhati town was expanded.

Between January 12 and January 14, 1969, the Plains Tribal Council had a conference at Tezpur (in Darrang district) where they resolved that 'To ensure peace and better and more efficient administration in the northern tracts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts along the foothills of Bhutan and NEFA, autonomy be granted to above tracts'. This completely alienated the PTC from the Assam Congress. The PTC won an Assembly seat in the 1972 elections defeating the plains tribal minister of the cabinet of Mr. Mahendra Mohan Choudhury ousted on the eve of the elections. This boosted the PTC's prestige, although the Congress defeat may well have been due to the internal feuds of the party.

One of the results of the political changes of 1972 was the precipitation of the language trouble in Assam, in June that year. In August, an Assam Linguistic Minorities Rights Committee was set up. The Secretary of the PTC, the sole MLA of the party, became its Vice-President. The PTC shared the Minority Rights Committee's stand in favour of the indefinite continuation of English as the University medium of instruction in Assam. As it came under bitter criticism of the supporters of the Assamese language, the PTC received better publicity outside the State and revived the demand for an autonomous region for the plains tribals, named by them as *Udayachal*.

The agitation for *Udayachal*, however, seems to be heading for a natural death. The PTC's greatest weakness was the sparse settlement of the plains

tribals from amongst whom Congress had more MLA's than the PTC. The extraordinary press coverage received by them in Calcutta and Delhi boomeranged subjecting them to the allegation of being agents of the Bengalees. But its participation in the Assam Linguistic Minorities Rights Committee certainly strengthened the ALMRC movement against the 'imposition' of the Assamese language on the reluctant minorities. By all indications, the enthusiasm about the introduction of the Assamese language as the sole medium of instruction in the State is now damped.

Notes and references—

1. Report of the Sub-Committee on the North-East India (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas, paragraph 25.

2. *ibid.*

3. Brahma's memorandum to the Minority Rights Sub-Committee of the Advisory Committee of the Constituent Assembly of India.

4. Census of Assam, 1881, paragraph 118, Rev. Mr. Endle's note on the Kacharis. See also paragraph 111 of the Report.

5. *ibid.*, paragraph 115.

6. *ibid.*, paragraph 123(1).

7. Census of India, 1961 vol. III, Assam, Part V-A, p. 3.

8. Census of India, III, V-A, p. 1.

9. Estimates based on Census of India, 1971, series 1, India, paper 1 of 1972, Final Population, Table 2.

10. The Fifth Schedule to the Constitution was meant for the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas of the British period outside Assam. There was no such area in the Assam Valley.

11. Article 46 of the Constitution of India.

12. Memorandum to the Study Team on Tribal Development Programme, Government of India at New Delhi, by the Plains Tribal Members of the Assam Legislative Assembly and the Members of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam, 1968.

13. Memorandum to Bharatratna Shrimati Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, New Delhi, by the Plains Tribal Council of Assam, dated 22nd October 1972.

14. On University Medium in Assam; A Memorandum to Bharatratna Shrimati Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, New Delhi, by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Kokrajhar, Assam, 8th November, 1972.

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