

Tribal Question in Assam

Author(s): Monirul Hussain

Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 27, No. 20/21 (May 16-23, 1992), pp. 1047-1050

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4397885>

Accessed: 19-02-2020 13:58 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Economic and Political Weekly is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Economic and Political Weekly*

Tribal Question in Assam

Monirul Hussain

The tribals of Assam, particularly of the Brahmaputra valley, have historically contributed towards the emergence and growth of the Asamiya nationality and its language, literature and composite culture. A large number of tribals have identified themselves fully with the Asamiyas and have even given up their mother-tongue/dialect. The tribals in no way pose a threat to the identity of the relatively advanced Asamiyas. In fact, if any group in Assam faces an identity crisis, it is the autochthon tribals.

THE nationality question or in a wider sense the ethnic question is very complex in north-east India in general and Assam in particular. Against the backdrop of the repeated reorganisation of Assam since early 1960s, transformation of four tribal-dominated districts into three small tribal states, i.e., Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram, the operation of the Sixth Schedule, reservation of seats and other constitutional as well as political measures, the nationality question has remained a perpetually burning problem in Assam. The Assam movement 1979-85 and the present tribal movements in the Bodo-dominated areas in the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra and in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hill districts fundamentally reflect the complex nationality question in Assam. An attempt is made here to understand the contemporary tribal question in Assam vis-à-vis the Asamiya nationality question.

At the outset it would be pertinent to state that there are broadly two groups of tribal populations in Assam, i.e., the autochthon tribals and the non-autochthon tribals. The first category can again be subdivided into two distinct groups, i.e., the tribals of the plains and the tribals of the hills. All of them are recognised as scheduled tribes. The non-autochthon tribals include various tribal groups which migrated mainly from the Jharkhand area during the colonial period in search of livelihood as plantation labour for Assam's growing tea estates. These non-autochthon tribals are not recognised as scheduled tribes in Assam though the same groups are recognised as scheduled tribes in the states of their origin [see Hussain, 1989 and 1992]. However, our discussion here is confined to the autochthon tribals of Assam only.

Historically speaking, the hill tribals of north-eastern India were neither a part of India nor of Assam prior to the British colonisation of the region. However, different tribes living in the north-eastern hill region had some trade relations with the neighbouring people of the Brahmaputra valley. They maintained their own distinct tribal culture, tradition, taboos and social systems which were quite different from

those of the people of the valley. The major hill tribals of undivided Assam were Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Garos, Karbis and Dimasas. They had their own small states which were perpetuated without significant interference from outside. This was due to their location in the areas geographically isolated and different from the Brahmaputra valley. Almost all the tribals are held to be the remnants of primitive or ancient Mongolian migrants to this region. They established themselves in their present homeland in the remotest past. Needless to say, the tribals are undoubtedly the original natives of Assam. Even in the non-tribal dominated Brahmaputra valley today, it was the Bodo-Kachari tribals who created the first culture and civilisation and in a real sense they are the first natives of the valley [Hussain, 1987: 1329].

Since independence, Assam has been experiencing several tribal movements—peaceful and violent and a combination of the two—signalling the very complex problem of the national minorities within the Indian social and political system. These movements are yet to be studied in depth. As a part of the resolution of issues raised by the tribal movements, Assam experienced several reorganisations leading to the drastic reduction of its size from 1,47,624 sq km to 78,525 sq km. In spite of reorganisation of the Naga Hills district as Nagaland in 1963, the Lushai Hills district as Mizoram in 1972, and the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills district and the Garo Hills district together as Meghalaya in 1969, Assam continued with a substantial tribal population both in the hills and the plains. Besides, some tribes which have attained their own states, like Nagas, Khasis and Garos, etc., are still found in good number in Assam. The tribals continue to form an important component of Assam's demography, society and polity. At present there are two hill districts in Assam—Karbi Anglong and North Cachar inhabited mainly by the Karbis and the Dimasas-Kacharis respectively. These two districts have their own district councils under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution which has provided the hill tribals with some autonomy

in managing their tribal society. However, this privilege was not extended to the plains tribals. This happened because the hill tribals "were acknowledged to be entirely separate from the non-tribal people in the plains, the plains tribes were seen as yet another sub-nationality of the Assamese" [EPW, 1988: 2243]. Therefore, the major tribes of the plains like the Bodos, the Ravas, the Mishings, the Sonowals, the Tiwas and the Deuris did not get the autonomy as provided to the hill tribals under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule.

Table 1 shows the scheduled tribes population of Assam in 1971. The census was not conducted in Assam in 1981 because of opposition from the leadership of the Assam movement and the detailed data of the 1991 census are yet to be made available. Therefore, we are compelled to depend on 1971 census data. According to this census report, Assam had a tribal population of 16,06,648 and their percentage to the total population of the state was 11. In spite of the exclusion of many tribals from present Assam, the tribal population in Assam is still very significant both numerically and percentage-wise. In the plains, Bodos, Mishings, Sonowals, Ravas and Tiwas have demographically occupied the first, second, third, fourth and fifth positions respectively. These tribals stand at uneven levels in relation to one another in terms of social, cultural, economic and political development. Besides, their levels of assimilation with and exclusion from the Asamiyas also vary drastically. For example, Sonowals and the Meches of Upper Assam have completely assimilated and identified with the Asamiyas. Bodos have developed their language in Devnagari script which is now the medium of instruction up to secondary school level in the Bodo-dominated areas. Mishings have recently adopted the Roman script for developing their language. From

TABLE 1: SCHEDULED TRIBES POPULATION IN ASSAM, 1971

Name of the Tribe	Population
Bodo/Bodo Kachari	6,10,459
Kachari, including Sonowal	1,93,619
Mishing/Miri	2,59,551
Rava	1,38,630
Tiwa/Lalung	95,609
Deuri	23,080
Mon (Tai-speaking)	964
Barman of Cachar	13,210
Chakma	395
Dimasa Kachari	39,342
Garo	9,139
Khasi, Jaintia/Synteng	6,487
Hajong	386
Hojai	5,380
Kuki	13,524
Mech	2,570
Karbi/Mikir	1,77,194
Naga	8,481
Others	1,329
Total	16,06,648

Source: Census of India, 1971, Assam.

1986, the Mishing language has been introduced at the primary level in the Mishing-dominated areas. Deuris, Tiwas and Ravas have adopted the Asamiya script for developing their respective languages. Though some of the plains tribals have become very conscious about their distinct identity and language, all of them have been contributing very significantly to enrich the composite Asamiya culture, language, literature, arts and nationality. The late Bishnu Prasad Rava, a tribal communist leader, became a towering figure in modern Asamiya performing arts like music, theatre and cinema. Even staunch anti-communists had to accept the communist Rava as the 'Kalaguru' of modern Asamiya culture. Medini Mohan Choudhuri, a Bodo tribal, contributed remarkably to the enriching of modern Asamiya literature. Such examples are numerous. However, the tribals have experienced a very distorted process of social transformation both in colonial and post-colonial Assam.

In order to comprehend the tribal question, it is necessary to go back to the colonial period. Though there are some limitations in the data provided by the first ever census conducted in 1872, we may with some reservation refer to the data provided by that census as a starting point in order to understand the overall tribal demographic situation and its transformation over the last one hundred years in Assam proper, that is the Brahmaputra valley. Table 2 shows that in 1872 the number of plains tribals was 4,43,117 out of the Brahmaputra valley's total population of 19,69,650. The percentage of tribals was very significant, 22.5. Except Sibsagar district, all other districts showed a percentage of above 23 in 1872. Over the last one hundred years the population of the plains tribals in the Brahmaputra valley increased from 4,43,117 in 1872 to 13,28,743 in 1971. However, their percentage in the total population decreased drastically from 22.5 in 1872 to 10.7 in 1971. All the districts of the Brahmaputra valley have registered very high rates of decline in the percentage of tribal population. How do we explain this? Was it due to the inclusion of non-autochthon tribals from the Jharkhand region that the percentage of tribals in the Brahmaputra valley was so high in 1872? The answer is no. When we look into the census data we find that only very few non-autochthon tribals were included and their number did not exceed 4,000 out of a total of 4,43,117 [Hunter, 1879: 30, 113, 181, 236, 307 in vol I and 33 in vol II]. During 1872-1971, the tribal population in the valley increased less than three-fold compared to a more than six-fold increase in the total population. This difference cannot be fully explained by the increasing rate of migration into Assam from outside. Many of the tribals identified fully with the Asamiyas and totally gave up their original tribal identity. Besides, the ongoing process of sanskritisation, particularly during the pre-colonial period, absorbed many tribals into the caste-fold both in the 'shakta' (sivaite)

and the 'vaisnava' forms of Hinduism in the Brahmaputra valley.

In the absence of a well-developed or a developing language of their own the tribals of the Brahmaputra valley had to accept Asamiya as the medium of instruction at the school level. This educational process energised the assimilation and formation of a composite Asamiya culture and nationality. From the late 19th century, Asamiya became the mothertongue of many tribals in the Brahmaputra valley and obviously those who continued with their tribal dialect/language as their mothertongue also knew the Asamiya language. Asamiya as a language of education, market and exchange and as a lingua franca of inter-tribal communication was well-entrenched in the Brahmaputra valley. Under such a situation, the tribals largely accepted the Asamiya language. Hence, the tribals of the Brahmaputra valley were regarded as inseparable sub-nationalities within the larger composite Asamiya nationality.

In Assam, the number of tribals has always been larger than the speakers of tribal languages. Figures in Table 3 and Table 1 are indicative of this trend. Even in 1971, out of 16,06,648 tribals only 10,99,008 spoke tribal languages. Roughly one out of three tribals do not speak tribal languages. It is obvious that all of them have accepted Asamiya as their language and thereby have increased the number of Asamiya speakers in the Brahmaputra valley substantially. It is not the Asamiyas but the tribals who are losing gradually their identity. The loss of tribal identity in the Brahmaputra valley has always been the gain of Asamiya nationality. A simple comparison between Table 1 and Table 3 would reveal that the total population of Bodos and Sonowals together stood at 8,04,078 (Table 1) and the number of speakers of their languages was however 5,33,713 (Table 3). Thus one-third of Bodos and Sonowals had apparently given up their tribal language by 1971. Similarly, out of 2,59,551 Mishings only 1,77,226 turned out to be the speakers of the Mishing language. Nearly 50 per cent of Deuris do not speak the Deuri language. Among Tiwas only one out of 10 speaks the Tiwa language. Those who have given up their tribal language have identified more strongly with the Asamiya nationality and its composite culture.

During the Assam movement, particularly

in its earlier phases, the leadership of the movement did not specify their role and position vis-a-vis the autochthon tribals. At one stage, the All-Assam Students' Union demanded the abolition of the constitutional safeguards provided to the tribals. On the other hand, innumerable journalists and even some social scientists, because of inadequate understanding of Assam's specific history and society, have directly or indirectly bracketed the tribals even of the Brahmaputra valley in the non-Asamiya category. Needless to say, the tribals are the first native or indigenous people of Assam. Those who supported and sympathised with the Assam movement and its goals very subjectively failed to understand the plight of Assam's first natives, the tribals. With the exception of a few political leaders and a very small elite section, the tribals have perpetually experienced not only an identity crisis in Assam but also economic exploitation and social, cultural and political oppression. The tribals too suffered heavily along with the others in the anti-election violence in 1983. Some of the plains tribals had to pay heavily for their participation in the 1983 elections to the state legislature.

Are the tribals of Assam Asamiyas or are they individually isolated tribals separated from the Asamiyas? This is a very complex question to answer at this juncture as most of the tribals of Assam are seeking very seriously to establish their distinct identity independent/autonomous from the Asamiyas. Besides being Indians, the tribals of the Brahmaputra valley had two inseparable

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF SPEAKERS OF TRIBAL LANGUAGES OF ASSAM 1971

Languages	No of Speakers
Bodo (including Sonowals)	5,33,713
Mishing	1,77,226
Rava	32,400
Tiwa/Lalung	9,954
Deuri	12,190
Karbi/Mikir	1,91,354
Dimasa	33,507
Garos	76,004
Hmar	10,483
Khasi	20,082
Kuki	5,098
Mizo	4,001
Naga	7,124
Total	10,99,008

Source: Census of India, 1971, Assam and Government of Assam [1986: 26-31].

TABLE 2: DISTRICT-WISE TRIBAL/SCHEDULED TRIBE POPULATION AND THEIR PERCENTAGE TO TOTAL POPULATION OF THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY, 1872-1971

District	Total Population		Tribal Population			
	1872	1971	1872	Percentage	1971	Percentage
Goalpara	4,07,714	22,25,103	97,732	24.00	3,08,287	13.90
Kamrup	5,61,681	28,54,183	1,29,781	23.10	2,98,090	10.45
Darrang	2,36,009	17,36,183	76,094	32.25	1,85,640	10.70
Nowgong	2,56,390	16,80,895	81,770	31.90	1,25,115	7.45
Sibsagar	2,96,589	18,37,389	29,352	9.90	1,25,311	6.85
Lakhimpur (including Dibrugarh)	1,21,267	21,22,719	28,388	23.40	2,86,300	13.50
Brahmaputra valley	19,69,650	1,24,56,477	4,43,117	22.50	13,28,743	10.70

Source: Computed from Hunter [1879] based on 1872 Census and Census of India, 1971, Assam.

identities simultaneously; one as tribal/ethnic groups like Ahoms, Chutiyas or Koch-Rajbanshis, and the other as an inseparable part of the larger Asamiya nationality. The plains tribals have been enriching Asamiya language, literature, customs, arts and dress patterns very significantly. They together with other groups of the Asamiya nationality participated in the national movement for freedom. Though the national movement was relatively weak in Assam's hill region, in the plains the tribals revolted against colonial rulers as early as in 1861 [Guha, 1977: 6-7, also see Kakoti, 1988]. It is impossible to isolate the colourful tribal elements from the composite Asamiya society, culture, language and nationality.

Any perceptive observer will find that the tribals of Assam are in no way creating any problems of identity for the Asamiya nationality. On the contrary, the tribals have been enriching the Asamiya nationality in various ways. It is the tribals who are experiencing an identity crisis in Assam which is very real. The tribals have remained as the most oppressed group in Assam, together with the non-autochthon tribals of Assam's tea-plantations and the Na-Asamiya Muslims. However, the political response to their oppression and backwardness has been qualitatively different from the response of the other oppressed communities of present Assam. The tribals have become very conscious of their position and are gradually building up their movement/struggle based on their ethnic/tribal identity. The tendency of general tribalism in the sense of repulsing social, political and economic modernisation is absent among the tribals of Assam. The increasing political mobilisation is mainly aimed at overcoming their socio-economic oppression and cultural backwardness and attaining more political power and autonomy within the present system.

The remaining hill tribals of Assam, the Karbis and Dimas-Kacharis, are building up a movement for the creation of an autonomous state within the state of Assam [Hussain, 1987: 1329-32]. The Bodos are demanding 'Udayachal' or Bodoland, a state or a union territory for the Bodos and political autonomy for all the tribals of Assam in their respective areas of habitation. Unlike the hills tribals, the plains' tribals—even the single largest group among them, the Bodos—did not get any protective facilities like autonomy or an autonomous district council to manage their affairs. The 'official' imposition of Asamiya language on the tribals had recoiled on itself. The tribals of the Brahmaputra valley had already accepted the Asamiya language at the school level voluntarily, but its official imposition made them suspicious about the motives of the high-caste-dominated Asamiya leadership. In the hill areas this became an important rationale for the separate hill state movement. From the late sixties onwards the plains tribals too became gradually conscious of their ethnic identity. They started articulating their identity to gain political power and to overcome their socio-economic backwardness and oppression. The Assam

movement and the aftermath of the Assam Accord of 1985 further sharpened the identity consciousness among the tribals, both in the remaining hill areas and the plains.

The emerging tribal movements virtually transformed the 1991 elections to the state legislature and to the Lok-Sabha into a referendum on their demands, i.e. creation of Udayachal/Bodoland and an autonomous tribal state in the remaining hills of Assam. The pro-Udayachal/Bodoland All-Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) and the Bodo Peoples' Action Committee (BPAC) candidates won all the eight seats in the state legislature and the lone seat in the Lok Sabha from the Bodo-dominated areas. Similarly, the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) emphatically won all four seats in the state legislature and the lone Lok Sabha seat from Karbi Anglong. The leadership of the tribal movements very remarkably demonstrated that their movements have solid mass base and the issues raised by them are not ignorable. These issues are yet to be resolved. However, the issues and the problems raised by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) are receiving more attention and urgency at present, it would be unwise to ignore the fundamental character of the tribal questions raised by the popular tribal movements.

The tribals have perpetually experienced the problems of land alienation, poverty indebtedness, severe unemployment, economic exploitation and cultural and political oppression. Limitations of space do not permit us to go into the details about these problems faced by the tribals, we will only highlight a few cases to illustrate the plight of the tribals in Assam. The government of Assam created 37 tribal belts and blocks, ostensibly to protect the plains tribals and their land from intrusions by non-tribals at the time of independence [Government of Assam, 1974: x]. However, in 1973-74, 2,000 hectares of periodic *patta* land changed ownership from tribals to ineligible non-tribals in the protected tribal-belts [Government of Assam 1980: ii]. About 1,000 hectares of government land was encroached upon during the same period in the tribal-belts by non-tribals [ibid: ii]. From his investigations, a senior administrator-cum-scholar found that in the two remaining hill districts while formal transfer of land to non-tribals is minimal, actual transfer is very large; temporary alienation of lands from tribals to non-tribals, in the shape of 'paiks', 'sukti', 'bandhak', 'khoi' and 'mena', etc, is increasing at an alarming rate [Singh 1987: 1002]. A report presented in the state legislature on April 5, 1979 specified some of the crafty machinisms evolved by vested interests to alienate the tribals from their land [Government of Assam, 1979]. There are also numerous cases of land alienation from tribals in which the state government itself was involved. In a memorandum submitted to the president of India, the Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) specified several cases in which state government agencies were involved in depriving tribals of their

land in the tribal belts to accommodate non-tribals [PTCA, 1967]. Even Assam's capital township, Dispur, was built on a cluster of tribal villages near Guwahati city. The increasing urbanisation in and around Guwahati has forced a good number of tribals, particularly Karbis and Bodos, to sell their land which came under or near the city boundaries. This has pushed them to the interior places. Land alienation has made a large number of tribals homeless in their own homeland. The number of landless peasants among the tribals is increasing alarmingly and perhaps is the highest among the various groups in Assam.

The problem of land alienation has pushed the tribals deeper into poverty, unemployment and the debt trap. The government admits that the planning and land reform policies adopted under the constitutional provisions to safeguard the tribals' socio-economic and cultural life have been either neglected or implemented indifferently due to resistance from vested interests [Government of Assam, 1974: 79]. The same has been the case of autonomy provided through the Sixth Schedule. It also "failed to provide the much needed protection to the tribals in the absence of political will on the part of caste Hindu Assamese" [Gohain, 1988: 32].

Industrial underdevelopment and the very slow pace of urbanisation have blocked the possibility of improving employment avenues in the non-agricultural sectors. It is mainly the state government and its various agencies which have remained the sole/major source for providing employment outside the agricultural sector. Even here, educated tribals are finding it difficult to get their due share. The unemployment situation has affected both educated and uneducated tribals. However, the Asamiya bourgeois press has been largely successful in grossly distorting the situation by creating an image of 'privileged tribals in state employment'. The real situation is however very different.

Table 4 presents some interesting data on the backlog of scheduled tribe and scheduled caste employment in state government services. The government kept nearly 10,000 jobs meant for scheduled tribes in abeyance. It is difficult to believe that the government did not find an adequate number of

TABLE 4: BACKLOG OF POSTS RESERVED FOR SCHEDULED TRIBES AND SCHEDULED CASTES IN ASSAM, 1988

Category/ Class	Scheduled Tribes Plains	Scheduled Tribes Hills	Scheduled Castes
I	409	316	285
II	287	404	139
III	3,546	2,496	1,032
IV	1,192	911	124
Total	5,534	4,129	1,580

Source: *The Assam Tribune*, 27.3.1988. As disclosed by Thanewar Boro, minister for welfare of plains tribes and backward classes, Government of Assam, in the Assam legislative assembly.

qualified tribals. The staggering backlog of jobs for tribals in the state services signifies the plight of Assam's tribals in the high-caste dominated government and bureaucracy. The tribals are not only facing unemployment under the present socio-economic system but are also experiencing unending discriminations in getting their limited but rightful place in society. Most of the educational institutions in Assam are dominated by the high caste Asamiyas. Even Gauhati University which served the tribals of the entire north-eastern India till the early seventies had to wait for a long time to find a scheduled tribe member of the faculty. According to a report, the Guhati University has only one scheduled tribe faculty member out of 267 faculty members at its post-graduate campus [Gauhati University, 1987: 12-21]. While analysing the root of the present phase of tribal separatism a perceptive scholar has observed that "the educated tribal youths felt that they had been left out in the cold as the Assamese cornered the lucrative jobs and monopolised administrative power" [Gohain, 1988: 32].

In spite of certain constitutional safeguards, the scheduled tribes of Assam have by and large remained educationally backward. The Asamiya high caste stereotypes of the tribals have been not a little responsible for the alienation of tribals. Because of the perpetuation of such stereotypes even in institutions of higher learning, tribal students in such multi-ethnic and Asamiya-dominated educational institutions silently suffer severe mental torture. This makes them resentful of both the educational system and the relatively advanced Asamiyas. It is worthwhile to recollect that the Bodos launched a massive movement for the recognition of the Bodo language and the adaptation of the Roman script for their language in 1974. The movement was brutally suppressed by the state government with the help of the police and the CRP. The All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the bourgeois Asamiya press tacitly supported the brutal repression of the Bodos. The Bodo language attained the status of medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools after a long struggle. Though the Bodos succeeded in securing officially the rightful place for their language, their success was severely qualified by the pathetic plight of Bodo medium schools. Schools which accepted Bodo as medium of instruction have been facing severe discrimination from high-caste educational planners and administrators. Most Bodo schools are understaffed and ill equipped to meet the challenge of tribal education. Schools which have adopted other tribal languages as medium of instruction face a similar situation. In the hill areas, the state government has largely left it to the Christian missionaries to educate the tribals, very much like its colonial predecessors.

The tribals of Assam, particularly of the Brahmaputra valley, have been historically contributing towards the emergence and growth of the Asamiya nationality and its language, literature and composite culture.

A large number of tribals have identified themselves fully with the Asamiyas and have even given up their own mothertongue/dialect. This is clear from the census data presented above. Even those who would like to maintain their tribal identity cannot be distinguished fully from the Asamiya nationality. In fact, the tribals of the Brahmaputra valley are in a real sense sub-nationalities within Asamiya nationality. Simply put, a plains tribal is not a tribal alone, he is an Asamiya and an Indian simultaneously. The Assam movement very successfully brought the problem of the Asamiya identity crisis into sharp focus pushing the very fundamental question of the tribal identity crisis into oblivion. Needless to say, the tribals are in no way threatening the identity of the relatively advanced Asamiyas in Assam. This is historically impossible. Rather, they have an impressive record of enriching Asamiya nationality and its culture. If any group in Assam has been facing the problem of an identity crisis, it is obviously the autochthon tribals. They have remained socially, culturally, economically and politically exploited and the most oppressed group, together with the non-autochthon tribals of Assam's tea-plantations and the Na-Asamiya Muslims—a predominantly peasant community. The official imposition of Asamiya language backed by powerful social movements led by the Asamiya bourgeoisie have made the tribals suspicious about the motives of the relatively advanced high castes. The tribals too have become conscious of their distinct identity, have started reviving their dormant language and advancing it as their ethnic symbol to assert their rights in their historical homeland through political mobilisation. Paradoxically, the Asamiyas have been their reference group. The social movements to assert group identity or language by the relatively powerful and advanced Asamiyas have given birth to new social movements among the weaker national minorities or small sub-nationalities like the tribals in Assam. However, the objective situation is such that even if the tribals succeed in asserting their distinct identity through language or political autonomy or even separation from Assam, the tribals of the Brahmaputra valley would still continue to remain an inseparable component of Asamiya nationality which they too have enriched so remarkably. These tribals just cannot give up the Asamiya language even if they turn against Asamiya high caste oppression. Asamiya as a language in Assam, more particularly in the Brahmaputra valley, is the most popular language, well accepted among various ethnic groups and its status as the lingua franca for inter-tribal communication is established. Once official and social compulsion is removed, the Asamiya language is likely to gain more acceptability and vigour. Besides, it can help head the injuries inflicted by Asamiya chauvinists from time to time on their own mothertongue. The autochthon tribals of Assam, who are the first natives in real sense, deserve to be

treated with respect and greater understanding. Their right to their traditional land, forest, language, script, culture, economic development and political autonomy deserves better understanding from the relatively more advanced Asamiyas. A democratic solution to the tribal problems vis-a-vis the Asamiya nationality would surely enriched both the tribals and the Asamiyas. However, at this juncture the main hurdle is the middle class leadership and the absence of a progressive ideology and strong mass organisations capable of leading the masses of the various nationalities towards a truly democratic solution.

[The author thanks K L Sharma of School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for his valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.]

References

- Assam Tribune, 1988: Report on 'Backlog of Posts for the ST and SCs in Assam', March 27.
- EPW, 1988: 'Change in Assam' (editorial), October 29.
- Gohain, Hiren 1988: 'North East: Roots of Separatism', *Mainstream*, January 9.
- Government of Assam, 1974: *Draft Outline: Fifth Five-Year Sub-Plan for Scheduled Tribes (Plain), Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes*, Department of Planning and Development, Guwahati.
- 1979: *Report of the Committee on Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Relating to Land and Revenue*.
- 1980: *Tribes of Assam Plains*, Guwahati.
- 1986: *Statistical Handbook: Assam 1984*, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Guwahati.
- Government of India, 1960: *Dhabor Commission Report*, Ministry of Home Affairs.
- 1971: *Census Report 1971*, Assam.
- Guha, Amalendu, 1977: *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*, Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi.
- Hunter, W W, 1879: *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vols I and II, Trubner and Co, London, reprint 1975, BR Publishing Corp, Delhi.
- Hussain, Monirul, 1977: 'Tribal Movement for Autonomous State in Assam', *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 8.
- 1989: *The Assam Movement: A Sociological Study*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
- 1990: 'The Nationality Question in North East', *Seminar*, February.
- 1992: *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity*, Manak Publications, Delhi (forthcoming).
- Kakoti, S C, 1988: 'The Role of Tribals in the Freedom Movement', *The Assam Tribune*, August 15.
- PTCA, 1967: *Memorandum to the President of India*, Plains Tribal Council of Assam.
- Singh, B P, 1987: 'North-East India: Demography and identity Crisis', *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, October-December.