

Understanding Political Mobilization of Tribal Identity in Colonial Assam and Its Contemporary Issues

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Abstract

The paper provides an analysis of the evolution of tribal identity and political mobilization in colonial Assam, with a particular focus on contemporary trends post-Assam movement era. It explores the responses of tribes in the Brahmaputra valley to governance structures that historically marginalized them, leading to the emergence of associative politics and the pivotal establishment of the Tribal League. Utilizing qualitative analysis of archival documents based on historical records and legislative debates, the study strives to understand the socio-political landscape of colonial Assam. Additionally, it examines challenges faced by tribal leaders regarding classification, cultural affinity and representation, emphasizing their persistent advocacy for separate recognition and acknowledgment of tribal identity. Furthermore, the paper analyzes contemporary trends post-Assam movement era, particularly amidst the mobilization of the greater Assamese identity, with a specific emphasis on the role of the Assamese language issue in accentuating the tribal mobilization. By elucidating the complexities surrounding tribal identity and political mobilization, this study offers valuable insights into the dynamics of associative policies and inclusive politics in colonial contexts and their implications for contemporary Assam.

Keywords: Assam; colonialism; governance; identity formation; inclusive politics; political mobilization; Tribal League; tribal identity; tribal leaders.

I. Introduction

The formation of a distinct tribal identity and its subsequent political mobilization in colonial Assam constitutes a significant aspect of the region's socio-political history, marked by complex power dynamics, cultural affiliations and socio-economic disparities. Amidst governance structures during the colonial era that often-marginalized indigenous communities, tribes in the Brahmaputra valley embarked on a collective endeavor towards political representation and self-assertion. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of this historical trajectory, spanning from the colonial period to contemporary trends unfolding in the aftermath of the Assam movement. At the core of this examination lie the emergence of associative politics and the fostering of collective mobilization among the tribes of the valley, both of which represent crucial junctures in the pursuit of socio-political empowerment among tribal groups. Drawing upon an array of primary sources such as archival materials, legislative deliberations, newspaper reports and commentaries, this study seeks to reconstruct the intricate socio-political milieu of colonial Assam. It endeavors to shed light on the myriad challenges encountered by

tribal leaders concerning issues of classification, cultural affinity and representation. Moreover, this paper undertakes an analysis of the evolving dynamics of tribal identity formation and political mobilization in the post-Assam movement era, with a specific emphasis on the impact of the Assamese language movement in shaping the socio-political landscape in Assam. By elucidating the complexities inherent in these processes, the study aims to offer valuable insights into the realm of inclusive and exclusive politics within colonial contexts, thereby delineating their ramifications for contemporary Assam.

II. Associative Politics and Tribal Identity Formation

Colonial Dynamics and Tribal Identity

The colonial epoch in India witnessed the introduction of governance structures that frequently marginalized specific communities, including indigenous tribes, while privileging others. In response to this marginalization, tribes residing in the Brahmaputra valley of northeast India embarked on a journey of political mobilization and self-representation. This section aims to explore the dynamics of associative politics prior to 1933, tracing the trajectory of a unified tribal identity and the establishment of the Tribal League as a pivotal moment in the quest for socio-political empowerment. Colonial Assam witnessed a complex interplay of power dynamics, cultural affinities and socio-economic disparities that shaped the formation of tribal identity and political mobilization. Tribes such as the Kacharis, Mikirs, Miris, Lalung and Rabhas found themselves grappling with the challenges posed by colonial rule, which sought to categorize and classify them within the hierarchical framework of the administration and social structure. Associative politics emerged as a response to the marginalization experienced by tribal communities, providing a platform for collective action and representation. Despite being labeled under the colonial construct of “Plains Tribes”, tribal leaders capitalized on this classification to foster unity and solidarity among tribes historically divided by geography, language and cultural practices. Various tribal associations, including the Kachari convention and Miri convention, laid the groundwork for collective political action, nurturing a nascent tribal consciousness and fostering a sense of shared identity.ⁱ

The early 20th century witnessed a burgeoning political consciousness among tribal communities, catalyzed by Congress mobilizations and the emergence of caste associations. Educated middle-class leaders such as Kalicharan Brahma and Sitanath Brahma Choudhary played pivotal roles in articulating the political aspirations of their respective tribes. Through memoranda, petitions and representations made to the Simon Commission in 1929, tribal leaders effectively articulated their grievances and aspirations, emphasizing the imperative for separate recognition and acknowledgment of tribal identity within the colonial administrative framework.ⁱⁱ Contesting the classification of tribes as low-caste Hindus, tribal leaders vehemently asserted their distinctiveness and autonomy from Hindu caste society. They advocated for the recognition of tribal culture and identity, rejecting attempts to assimilate them into mainstream Hindu society (Pathak, 2010). Additionally, efforts were made to forge a cultural affinity with the Assamese identity or ethnic Assamese, particularly in response to territorial transfers and language policies imposed by the colonial administration.

Emergence of the Tribal League and Land Alienation Issue

The emergence of the Tribal League in 1933 marked a significant turning point in the political landscape of colonial Assam, particularly for the Plains Tribes residing in the Brahmaputra valley. Spearheaded by small yet educated elite, the Tribal League aimed to consolidate the collective interests of tribal communities amidst competing political forces. Initially conceived as a colonial classification, the term

“Plains Tribes” was appropriated by tribal elites to articulate their political aspirations and secure separate representation within the colonial administrative apparatus.

Simultaneously, the problem of tribal 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 tribal in the absence of political will on the part of caste Hindu Assamese” (Gohain, 1988: 32). Concerns surrounding immigration and the encroachment of agricultural land by immigrants from East Bengal escalated during the 1930s, becoming a focal point of intense debates within the Legislative Assembly of Assam. While the colonial administration encouraged immigration to cultivate fallow lands and bolster revenue, it introduced the “Line system” in 1920 as a mechanism to safeguard tribal lands.ⁱⁱⁱ However, practical challenges in enforcement, compounded by lenient local governance, hindered its effectiveness. In 1937, the Muslim League proposed a resolution to annul the Line system, triggering resistance from Tribal League members such as Rabi Chandra Kachari and Rupnath Brahma. They argued for the indispensability of the Line system in safeguarding vulnerable tribal communities from dispossession of their ancestral lands.

The debates in the Assembly underscored escalating tensions over demographic transformations and land ownership, exacerbated by colonization schemes displacing indigenous populations. Colonization schemes, which opened reserved lands and forests for settlement, frequently led to the displacement of tribal communities. Despite assertions of indigenous people’s legal right to land occupation, Congress and Tribal League representatives contended that they lacked the capital to participate in colonization schemes. The dwindling availability of arable land, particularly emphasized by tribal representatives like Karka Dalay Miri, threatened the livelihoods of indigenous peoples (Pathak, 2010). As tensions mounted, colonial administrators downplayed genuine conflicts between indigenous and immigrant populations, attributing purported tensions to disparate land-use preferences. However, reports of land-grabbing and forced occupation of tribal lands intensified tensions, with tribal representatives and Congress leaders accusing the government of disregarding indigenous interests and colluding with immigrants.

III. Socio-political Dynamics in Colonial Assam

Escalating Tensions: Political Maneuvering and Communalization

The 1931 census further exacerbated tensions by highlighting demographic imbalances, depicting immigrants as both diligent cultivators and unruly neighbors who imperiled the cultural fabric of the Brahmaputra valley. Reports of forced occupation of tribal villages heightened fears of displacement among indigenous communities. The census report aggravated the tension on the question of demographic balance. The Superintendent of Census Operation, M Mullan termed the coming of the immigrants as an ‘invasion’. J H Hutton (1931), the Census Commissioner of India in his report wrote,

These immigrants, who are prolific breeders and industrious cultivators, are unruly and uncomfortable neighbours. These immigrants threaten to swamp entirely the indigenous inhabitants and during two or three decades to change the whole nature, language and religion of the Brahmaputra valley.

Henceforth, demands for protective measures against land alienation grew increasingly aggressive. Committees were formed to probe the efficacy of the Line system, proposing measures to expel illegal settlers and safeguard tribal lands. However, political instability and divergent interests within the

Legislative Assembly hampered the implementation of these proposals. The confluence of land alienation and political maneuvering saw the Congress leveraging tribal concerns against the Muslim League's agenda, despite internal divisions within the Congress regarding the economic indispensability of immigration. The ensuing debate highlighted the intricate interplay of demographics, land use and political exigencies shaping colonial Assam's socio-economic landscape. However, the Muslim League's policies had significant implications for tribal communities in Assam, particularly concerning immigration and land rights. The communalization of politics by the Muslim League in Assam led to demographic shifts and tensions, impacting tribal identity and empowerment. The Muslim League's policies, as indicated in scholarly sources, were perceived as a ploy to allow more Muslims to settle in Assam, resulting in a significant influx of illegal migrants and leading to Muslims becoming the majority in certain areas. This migration had implications for tribal communities in terms of representation and cultural dynamics in the valley. Apart from communalization of politics by the Muslim League linked immigration and land issues, impacting the socio-political landscape of Assam. Tribal communities, mostly the Plains Tribes, navigated their identity in opposition to the dominant Hindu society, emphasizing separateness and autonomy from mainstream Assamese identity.

Census Controversy: Contestation over Classification

The 1941 Census in Assam deviated from past practices by eschewing religious classification; instead opting to compile data based on "race, tribe and caste" as opposed to religion, as was the case in the 1931 Census. This decision elicited fervent criticism from various segments of Assamese society, sparking debates in newspapers and the Legislative Assembly. The Congress accused the government of manipulating census operations to conceal the actual figures of religious demographics, culminating in an Adjournment Motion in the Assembly to deliberate on the census methodology.^{iv} Under pressure from the Assam Provincial government, the Census Superintendent issued a special circular directing Census Officer to gather data based on community identity rather than religion. This directive aimed to streamline tabulation and create a distinct entity under the constitution for franchise purposes. Nonetheless, it encountered resistance from various quarters, including the Congress and Christian representatives, who contended that religion, should also inform classification. Meanwhile, the Tribal League endeavored to project a unified tribal identity predicated on distinctive rituals and customs, accentuating their separateness from caste Hindu Assamese society. They undertook propaganda campaigns to instruct tribal individuals on enumerating themselves in the Census, broadening the definition of tribal to encompass those categorized as Hinduized. This initiative sought to preserve tribal identity and counter attempts to classify them within the Hindu caste hierarchy. However, dissent arose from within tribal communities as well, with certain tribes refusing to be collectively classified under one rubric and asserting their distinct identities. The Census came under fire for lumping tribes together under a single community label, disregarding their diverse religious affiliations and cultural practices (Pathak, 2010).

The Saadulla government encountered mounting criticism from the Congress, accused of exploiting the Census to provoke divisive tendencies and alter the demographic structure to align with political exigencies. The Saadulla coalition ministry was throughout criticised for its anti-Assamese, anti-tribal and pro-immigrant stand, through its Minister Abdul Matin Choudhury declared officially that protection of the backward tribals was the "bedrock of their policy".^v Apprehensions were expressed regarding the decline in the Hindu populace and purported increments in Muslim numbers, fueling concerns of demographic imbalance. Editorials in newspapers echoed these concerns, positing that categorizing tribes solely because of community distorted reality and inflated tribal population figures.^{vi} The Census

methodology was perceived as an attempt to fragment the unified Hindu community by downplaying religious identity. In response to criticism, tribal representatives in the assembly defended community-based enumeration, emphasizing the resilience of tribal identity and rebutting perceptions of tribal decline. Despite protests, the Census Superintendent's classification predicated on community identity remained contentious, mirroring broader tensions over identity, politics and demographics in colonial Assam.

IV. Impact of Caste-Based Hindu Expansion on Tribal Dynamics

Temple Entry and Tribal Identity

The caste-based Hindu expansion policy exerted a profound influence on tribal identity dynamics in Assam, significantly shaping the social, political and cultural interactions within the region. This policy contributed to the historical consolidation and perpetuation of the Brahmanical Hindu social structure, thereby impacting the articulation of tribal identities in Assam. Against the backdrop of caste-based Hindu expansion, the introduction of the Assam Temple Entry Bill in 1940 exemplified the intricate challenges encountered by tribal communities in defining their identities. Advocates of the bill, such as Ghanashyam Das, underscored the exclusionary practices within temples, particularly concerning marginalized societal segments like the depressed and backward classes.^{vii} This exclusion underscored the complexities tribes faced in negotiating the hierarchical frameworks imposed by the caste-based Hindu expansion policy.

Tribal Resistance and Assertion of Autonomy

The endeavors of the Tribal League to assert a distinct 'tribal' identity, separate from the caste Hindu Assamese society, reflect the resistance against assimilation pressures emanating from the caste-based Hindu expansion policy. Tribal leaders emphasized the uniqueness and autonomy of tribal social structures, contrasting them with the hierarchical caste system prevalent in Hindu society. By rejecting the placement of tribes within the degrading caste hierarchy, the Tribal League sought to affirm the distinctiveness of tribal identities amidst the broader socio-cultural milieu influenced by caste-based Hindu expansion (Ghanashyam, 1940).

In short, the caste-based Hindu expansion policy in Assam played a pivotal role in shaping tribal identity dynamics, engendering tensions between tribal communities and the dominant Hindu social structures. The discourse surrounding temple entry, political representation and social inclusion underscored the intricate challenges and complexities faced by tribes in asserting their distinct identities within a socio-cultural landscape profoundly influenced by caste-based Hindu expansion.

V. Tribal Politics in Contemporary Assam: Navigating Identity and Communal Dynamics

Cultural Inferiority, Representation and Education

Education emerges as a modern vehicle for empowerment and social emancipation among tribal leaders. Recognizing education as indispensable for fostering and preserving identity, tribal elites, epitomized by the Tribal League, view modern education as a potent tool for empowerment. Consequently, they clamor for improved educational amenities and opportunities for tribes, particularly in tribal enclaves. However, despite demands for educational reform and augmented funding, tribal representatives express dissatisfaction with the government's response. They lambaste inadequate budgetary allocations and the dearth of specific provisions for tribal education in the budget. Tribal leaders bemoan the sluggish pace of ameliorating educational disparities and underscore the imperative for expeditious action to uplift tribal communities through education. The reliance on colonial policies and governmental succor for development gradually wanes as tribal representatives realize the limitations of colonial administration. They advocate for heightened attention to tribal education and empowerment, emphasizing the pivotal

role of education in effectuating transformative change within tribal societies and ensuring their seamless integration into the mainstream. Despite encountering impediments and setbacks, tribal leaders remain resolute in their advocacy for educational reform and empowerment measures for their communities.

In the Legislative Assembly, tribal representatives articulate a sense of self-deprecation influenced by colonial officials and ethnographic depictions of tribes. They portray tribes as backward communities, acknowledging internal and external factors contributing to their perceived inferiority. This sense of cultural inferiority engenders calls for protection and special provisions to redress their socio-economic circumstances. *The sense of cultural inferiority integral with the term 'tribal society' enunciated by the colonial ethnology was too embedded in the psychology of the educated tribals to inspire them... not surprisingly, the tribal leaders consciously presented themselves as 'backward' people before the statutory commission amounting to negation of their own culture* (Joseph, 1997).

The Assamese identity movement, rooted in historical tensions between Assamese and Bengali-speaking communities, finds expression through the Assamese language movement. Central to this movement is the fervent advocacy for the recognition of Assamese as the official language of Assam. Intellectuals, students and activists mobilized together to elevate the status of the Assamese language as a symbol of regional pride and unity.

Within the complicated spectrum of Assamese identity formation and the Assamese-Bengali language conflict, the Miah community, often labeled as immigrant Bengali-speaking Muslims, introduces a nuanced and complex dynamic. While the broader indigenous identity historically hasn't accommodated the Miah community, there are instances where members of this community identify themselves as Assamese speakers. This identification is sometimes strategic, aiming to garner support from majoritarian politics. However, this stance can potentially contradict the interests of tribal politics, particularly concerning the protection of tribal land and socio-cultural identity.

Moreover, 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 tribes of Assam, the Karbis and Dimasa-Kacharis, are building up a movement for the creation of an autonomous state within the state of Assam (Hussain, 1987).

However, the language movement isn't without its challenges. Communal tensions between Assamese and Bengali-speaking populations often escalate, leading to social unrest and discord. Bengali-speaking communities, perceiving the language movement as a threat to their linguistic and cultural identity, vehemently oppose the imposition of Assamese language policies, exacerbating inter-ethnic strife (Baruah, 2000). The emergence of the Assam movement in the 1970s further intensifies efforts for socio-political rights and regional autonomy. Rooted in grievances over immigration, land rights, and cultural preservation, the Assam movement galvanizes diverse segments of Assamese society in a collective

struggle for social justice and empowerment. The Assam movement spanning from 1979 to 1985, along with contemporary tribal movements in Bodo-dominated regions along the northern banks of the Brahmaputra River, as well as in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hill districts, inherently encapsulates the intricate nationality dynamics prevalent in Assam. This analysis endeavors to elucidate the contemporary tribal discourse in Assam within the broader context of the Assamese nationality question (Baruah, 2005). The interwoven narratives of tribal politics and the Assamese language movement serve to underscore the persistent struggle for empowerment and acknowledgment among marginalized communities in Assam. These movements, rooted in a collective commitment to linguistic and cultural identity, have assumed pivotal roles in addressing socio-economic and political adversities while concurrently safeguarding the distinct heritage of Assam's diverse populace. Through avenues such as education, advocacy, and concerted collective endeavors, these movements persist in molding the socio-political terrain of Assam, thereby reaffirming the paramount significance of linguistic and cultural identity in the pursuit of equitable social representation and regional autonomy.

The Assam movement, characterized by protests, strikes and civil disobedience, exerts significant pressure on the Indian government to address the socio-economic and political concerns of Assamese communities. At its core, the movement aims to safeguard the interests of indigenous Assamese communities against perceived threats posed by immigration and cultural assimilation. Throughout the Assam movement, language remains a central theme, reflecting the inseparable link between linguistic identity and regional autonomy. The movement underscores the importance of language as a marker of cultural identity and solidarity, reinforcing the Assamese community's commitment to preserving its linguistic heritage amidst socio-political upheaval.

The legacy of the Assamese identity movement continues to resonate in contemporary Assamese society, shaping its socio-political landscape. The signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 marks a significant milestone, outlining measures to address the grievances of Assamese communities (Das, 2015). These measures include the detection and deportation of illegal immigrants, the protection of indigenous rights and the preservation of Assamese culture and identity. However, challenges persist in effectively implementing the provisions of the Accord, highlighting ongoing tensions and complexities within the region.

Furthermore, the Assamese language movement has played a crucial role in promoting and preserving the Assamese language as a symbol of regional pride and unity. Despite opposition from Bengali-speaking communities and communal tensions, Assamese linguistic and cultural identity remain integral to the fabric of Assam's socio-political landscape. The impact of the language movement extends beyond linguistic boundaries to encompass broader cultural assimilation and national identity formation. In the absence of well-developed tribal languages, tribes in the Brahmaputra valley embrace the Assamese language as the medium of instruction in schools. This process of assimilation facilitates the formation of a composite Assamese culture and nationality, with many tribal individuals adopting Assamese as their mother tongue. As the language of education, commerce and inter-tribal communication, Assamese becomes deeply entrenched in the Brahmaputra valley, leading to the perception of tribal communities as integral sub-nationalities within the larger composite Assamese nationality.

VI. Contemporary Issues of Tribal Politics in Assam

One of the enduring challenges in Assam revolves around the demand from both tribal and non-tribal communities for a reevaluation of their status. Among the twenty-three tribal communities in the region,

fourteen are categorized as ‘Hill Tribe’ and the remaining nine as ‘Plains Tribe’. Initially, the Hill Tribes opposed extending tribal status to non-resident Plain Tribe communities in the Hill Districts. However, they have now come to terms with it, provided that the newcomers do not encroach upon the twelve percent reservation allotted to them in their districts. This issue highlights the perception that tribal status, whether Plains Tribe or Hill Tribe, is seen as privileged, leading to more complex demands and conflicts.

For instance, six non-tribal communities in the Brahmaputra Valley, namely the Tai Ahom, the Matak, the Moran, the Chutia, the Koch Rajbongshi and the Adivasi, have been advocating for classification as Scheduled Tribes (plain). Existing tribal communities oppose this extension, fearing it would enlarge the tribal pool and dilute the benefits they currently enjoy. Despite these tensions, certain tribal communities have gained some degree of autonomy within the state framework. The Bodos, classified as a Plain Tribe, have established the Bodoland Territorial Councils (BTC) under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Similarly, Autonomous Councils have been formed for the Rabhas, Tiwas, Mishings, Deoris, Sonowal Kacharis and Thengal Kacharis by the Government of Assam.

Taking cues from the Bodo movement, smaller tribes like the Tiwas, Mishings and Rabhas asserted their political aspirations for autonomy in the 1990s. In response to these demands, the Government of Assam established Autonomous Councils for various ethnic tribal communities through legislative acts. For instance, in 1995, three Autonomous Councils were constituted for the Tiwa, Rabha and Mishing Plain Tribal communities, followed by another three in 2005 for the Thengal Kacharis, Sonowal Kacharis and Deuris. These councils serve as institutions of self-rule, allowing these communities to preserve their ethnic identity and pursue development according to their own needs.

The increasing desire for self-expression and distinct identity among smaller ethnic groups in Assam can be attributed to state policies aimed at recognition and representation. By recognizing traditional institutions and identities and providing representation in decision-making bodies, the state inadvertently fosters stronger ethnic sentiments. Additionally, economic, educational and employment disparities, coupled with discriminatory central policies, further fuel the emergence of identity movements.

The state’s response to accommodate ethnic mobilization has led to various institutional arrangements, as evident from the tables below:

Table 1: Institutional Arrangement for Ethnic Minorities in Assam

Sl. No.	Institutional Arrangement	Status
1	KarbiAnglong Autonomous Council	Sixth Schedule
2	DimaHasao District Autonomous Council	Sixth Schedule
3	Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC)	Sixth Schedule

Source: Ministry of Development of Northeastern Region, Government of India

Table 2: Institutional Arrangement to Ethnic Movements in Assam

Sl. No.	Institutional Arrangement	Status
1	Tiwa Autonomous Council at Marigaon	Legislative Act
2	Rabha Autonomous Council at Goalpara	Legislative Act
3	Mishing Autonomous Council at Dhemaji	Legislative Act
4	Deori Autonomous Council at Lakhimpur	Legislative Act
5	Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council at Titabor	Legislative Act
6	Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council at Dibrugarh	Legislative Act

Source: Department of Welfare of Plain Tribe and Backward Classes, Government of Assam

Table 3: Institutions for Non-Tribal Ethnic Communities in Assam

Sl. No.	Institutional Arrangement	Status
1	Tai Ahoms Development Council	Legislative Act
2	Muttoks Development Council	Legislative Act
3	Morans Development Council	Legislative Act
4	Koch-Rajbangshis Development Council	Legislative Act
5	Chutiyas Development Council	Legislative Act
6	Gorkhas Development Council	Legislative Act
7	Adivasis Development Council	Legislative Act
8	Sema Development Council	Legislative Act
9	Tangsha Development Council	Legislative Act
10	Mon Tai Linguistic (Tai Fakey, Tai Khamiang, Tai Khamiang, Tai Turung, Tai Khamti, Tai Aiton)	Legislative Act
11	Bishnupriya Manipuri Development Council	Legislative Act
12	Manipuri Development Council	Legislative Act
13	Mech Kachari Development Council	Legislative Act
14	General Caste Development Council	Legislative Act
15	Maimal Development Council	Legislative Act
16	Saraniya Kachari Development Council	Legislative Act
17	Moriya Development Council	Legislative Act
18	Nath-Jogi Development Council	Legislative Act

Source: Department of Welfare of Plain Tribe and Backward Classes, Government of Assam

These tables highlight the diverse mechanisms through which the state addresses the demands for autonomy and representation from different ethnic groups. However, the territorialization of autonomous councils often triggers tensions among competing ethnic groups vying for control over the autonomous areas. Conversely, de-territorializing autonomous councils could pave the way for the establishment of development councils for additional ethnic communities in Assam. Moreover, the state’s recommendation to classify certain non-tribal communities as Scheduled Tribes (plain) has prompted other indigenous communities to advocate for inclusion in the scheduled tribe list.

Despite the state’s endeavors to accommodate the demands of various tribal communities through institutional arrangements, such measures have inadvertently eroded the collective cohesion once prevalent among these groups. The reclassifications and extensions of privileges, such as Scheduled Tribe status and autonomy, have fostered divisions and discord among different tribal factions, each belonging to distinct categories. While certain communities have obtained autonomy and representation, others perceive themselves as marginalized or neglected, thereby exacerbating internal tensions and inter-group conflicts. Moreover, notwithstanding these institutional reforms, the fundamental issues that previously galvanized tribal unity, such as land protection and defense against emigration, remain unresolved. Consequently, while the state’s interventions have granted a degree of recognition and representation, they have concurrently introduced new obstacles and schisms within the tribal fabric of Assam.

VII. Conclusion: Navigating Tribal Identity in Assam

The journey of tribal identity and political mobilization in colonial Assam illuminates a complex array of challenges, resilience and aspirations. From the margins of governance structures, tribes in the Brahmaputra valley embarked on a quest for recognition and empowerment, forging alliances and articulating their grievances through associative politics. As the colonial administration sought to classify and categorize them within hierarchical frameworks, tribal leaders contested these impositions, vehemently asserting their distinctiveness and autonomy. The emergence of the Tribal League marked a watershed moment, symbolizing the crystallization of tribal unity and collective agency. Through legislative debates and political maneuvering, tribal leaders navigated the intricate terrain of colonial politics, championing the cause of land rights and socio-political empowerment. However, communal dynamics and demographic transformations posed formidable challenges, exacerbating tensions and complicating the pursuit of tribal identity. Contemporary trends post-Assam movement era further underscore the enduring legacy of tribal politics in Assam, intertwined with broader socio-political movements such as the Assamese language movement. As tribes navigate the complexities of inclusive politics and communal dynamics, the preservation of linguistic and cultural heritage remains paramount, serving as a testament to their resilience and commitment to autonomy.

In essence, the trajectory of tribal identity formation and political mobilization in colonial Assam offers valuable insights into the dynamics of inclusive politics and socio-political empowerment. By elucidating the complexities inherent in these processes, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the socio-political landscape of Assam, underscoring the enduring struggle for recognition, representation and autonomy among marginalized communities. Through education, advocacy and collective action, tribes in Assam continue to navigate the intricacies of identity politics, reaffirming their commitment to cultural preservation and socio-political empowerment in the face of formidable challenges.

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ⁱ The British encountered two categories of tribes in north-east India: those who lived in hills and those in plains. The concept of plain tribe was coined to sharpen the differentiation. The earliest possible reference was by Ethnographer Endle (The Kacharis, London, 1911). The phrase continued to be used in the post-colonial period.

ⁱⁱMemorandum by the Bodo Community of Goalpara district (by Mr Ghyassudin Ahmad, B L Dhubri). Assam Kachari Jubok Sammilan (by Jadav Chandra Khakhlari, Secretary) on behalf of the entire Kachari community; Proceedings of the Confernece held by the representatives of the Kachari community from different parts of Assam held at Titabar, Jorhat, August 1928; Memorial of the Bodos, Garos and Rabhas of the Goalpara Sub-division, Boro Jubok Sammilan (by Shyama Charan Brahma, Secretary) cited from Pathak, S. (2010). Tribal Politics in Assam: 1933-1947. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(10), 61-69.

ⁱⁱⁱ The idea of Line system was mooted in 1916 and formally introduced in 1920 as a measure to segregates areas specified for indigenous people and immigrants. For further see Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, New Delhi, 1977 and Sajal Nag, Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationality Questions in Assam, New Delhi, 1990.

^{iv} See Assam Legislative Assembly Proceeding, 4th December, 1941: Adjournment motion in connection with the conducting of the last census operations in Assam brought by Siddhi Nath Sarma.

^v See Assam Legislative Assembly Proceeding, 6th March, 1944: Speech by Abdul Matin Choudhury.

^{vi} See Teendiniya Assamiya (Guwahati) and The Assam Tribune (Guwahati) undated from Pathak, S. (2010). Tribal Politics in Assam: 1933-1947. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(10), 61-69.

^{vii} See Assam Legislative Assembly Proceeding, 29th February, 1940: Speech by Ghanashyam.