CHAPTER 2
SOCIAL DEMOGRAPHY: CASTE, ETHNICITY AND RELIGION

Understanding social demography in general and social structure in particular, through census based analysis, as discussed in the previous chapter, clearly explains the interlink between demographic change and its impact on society. As such population which has often been regarded as the essence of social processes when statistically defined measured and distributed by factors such as sex, age, marital status, urban-rural residence, religion, caste, education, industry and occupation, migration status, linguistic and ethnic basis leads to diverse consequences in a social setup. The demographic changes set in motion leads directly or indirectly to social and economic changes. The demographic variables crucially impacts the existing social relations in the form of institutions based on prevailing economic, political and cultural power. Despite their limitations the demographic figures serve as important indices to determine a society’s stages of development and are also responsible for the growth of its distinctive structure. Therefore, demographic events and processes have now begun to be seriously considered as reliable evidence of historical phenomena that impacts social and economic change. In Foucault’s view, ‘the population is the object that government must take into account in all its observations and savoir, in order to be able to govern effectively in a rational and conscious manner.’ Indian economists such as Amartya Sen used the Bengal Famine of 1943, as a case study, to dispute the

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decline of food availability and to emphasis the socially uneven collapse of entitlements and state institutions as an outcome of the famine.²

Historians and social scientists have focused on population enumeration by acknowledging it as a crucial process in state-building and identity formation. **Implication of demographic change on the social composition of population forms the base of this chapter.** Instead of exploring demographic effects and evidence on fertility and mortality pattern, here the discussion draws on political construction of population in detail, in order to understand the profound connections between demographic processes and social change at large.

Assam has been an area of high migration since ancient ages ‘through it passed from India on the one hand, South-east Asia on the other, at different times diverse racial elements who not only left their cultural remnants but contributed to the ethnic composition of the people’.³ The landscape of the valley further moulded the distinct character of the inhabitants. The physical divisions led to the emergence in Assam of two distinct ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups, namely the dwellers of the hills and those of the plains.⁴ The plain population were composed of Aryans and Mongoloids. The population pattern of Assam in pre-colonial period displayed an excess of Mongolian stock with extraordinarily multi-lingual and multi-ethnic composition involving constant inter-ethnic mixtures.

Though the process of ‘Sanskritization’ was in progress, since the fifth century in

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⁴ loc. cit
the valley, it was not the case with all those ‘who have been for centuries living far away from the mainstream, in the relatively isolated and inaccessible and less fertile and less agriculturally productive regions of forests, hills and mountains.’ They continued to maintain their identity in speech, traditional customs, usages, institutions and religious beliefs.

Historical accounts of Assam show that in the pre-colonial era, societies had survived by recognizing various diversities along with the notions of multiplicity and co-existence. Identities had great fluidity and implied no necessary exclusivity or superiority, at least in matter of language or dialect. ‘Assamese’ was a wide encompassing concept connoting the myriad of distinct socio-cultural, even religious, identities. Later with the region’s colonial connection large changes were on display regarding population pattern and its related issues. The population of Assam, roughly estimated as 830,000 persons on change of power in the year 1826, has been analyzed here with reference to their changing social composition and position, religious as well as linguistic dispersals. Since the pre-colonial population pattern changed during colonial regime as a result of new economic forces which encouraged migration into the valley, the chapter shall also examine the trans-regional migration and their contribution towards reformulation of identities in the region. Population of this region differed so much in history, character, pattern and intensity that the processes to address them must respond to

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6 loc. cit
7 The ‘change’ referred here is the change from feudal and tribal form of government to foreign origin capitalistic government. Though a complete take over did not feature at this stage yet the ruling Ahom dynasty was reduced in political power and economic control.
each specific set of circumstances. Insight and skill of interdisciplinary studies has been drawn in an attempt to bridge the gaps that often divide historians from social scientists in the treatment of population.

Religious and caste differentials together with other markers of social difference like language and occupation played an important role in determining the social composition of population in the period. The composition of population during colonial rule in Assam has been defined, theorized, and studied through myriad perspectives. One such attempt and an important one, had been by those of colonial administrators. The venture was carried out through the tool of decennial Census and ethnographic studies. For a demography based study of society the Census Reports, therefore, constitute an important source. They are valuable not only for population history but also for discerning the social composition of population through various social and economic data. The Census Reports include details of religious communities, race, caste groups, tribes, customs, rituals, occupation, landholding size, literacy, education and technical qualifications.

In view of the interest taken by the British administrators in the subject of ethnicity and the institution of caste to classify the population composition, the first universal Census questionnaire adopted for the Census of the 1871-72 included separate items on ‘religion’ and ‘caste or class’, besides ‘race or nationality or country of birth’. In 1881, a separate item on ‘mother-tongue’ was added and the question on caste was modified to read ‘caste, if Hindu, sect, if of other religion’. A section entitled- ‘The Distribution of the Population by Race, Tribe, or Caste’- featured in the general Report of the Census of India in 1891. The question on caste, in fact, received more attention in 1891, as there were attempts to get more
details by providing for a separate item on the sub-division of caste or race in addition to the question on the main caste or race. Classification of caste in 1891 was on the basis of ‘traditional occupation’. In 1901 it was based on ‘social precedence’ and in 1911 ‘the arrangement was alphabetical’. A glossary with various notes on the distribution of caste was also included in the Census Report of 1911. The 1921 Census reflected a departure from the previous practice in enumeration of castes. Rather than ethnography, the Report detailed its demographic and social aspects.

Apart from the Censuses, colonial literature on racial and ethnic distributions and the tribes of Assam were left behind by Hutton (1931), Dalton (1872), Hunter (1879) Waddel (1900) etc. The data were not just on the number of human beings but also of classification and this classification gives us an idea about how the people are imagined to be divided. What is meant is the idea that Bodo in Assam plains and the hill Garos could be brought under the same column but not the Khasis was something that the Census tables presented for the first time. The name Bodo includes a large number of tribes and among these are included the Garos, who belong not to the Valley itself, but to the highlands. Geographically the Garos were proximate to the Khasis of the present state of Meghalaya but differed in ethnological origin as well as language. This attempt of the colonial Censuses to classify the people has been critically analyzed by anthropologists and postcolonial historians alike. Therefore, while examining the demographic change of population it becomes imperative to take into account the critiques of Census constructions of

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9 loc. cit
10 loc. cit
caste and tribes. The colonialist’s classification of its subjects has been the theme of discourse in many works.

The classic work in this regard is Bernard Cohn’s essay ‘The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia’ (1987), where he shows that the Indian Census, rather than being ‘passive instrument of data gathering’, created by its ‘practical logic and form a new sense of category identity in India’. Cohn argued, that European concept of ‘caste’ was imposed on, through capturing the localized and complex phenomenon of social division prevalent in the Indian social setup (with regional variations, of course), thereby using the divisions thus created to divide the vast Indian population into a fixed number of ranked castes.11 This, in turn, had a powerful impact on developing Indian society, both in offering categories on which government policies could act, and in providing people with identities of a sort they had not previously had.

Confronted with the task of classification everyone in these categories, and having to cope with the instructions for how to do so, the local enumerators came to view ‘India’ as composed of a population divided into just such categories. The classificatory element of Cohn’s work found ample space in the works of many scholars such as Nicholas Dirks (1987), Rashmi Pant (1987), Gyan Prakash (1990), Ronald Inden (1990), Benedict R. Anderson (1991), David Ludden (1993), Arjun Appadurai (1993) and several historians of the subaltern school, including Ranajit Guha (1983), David Arnold (1988), and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002). All these

Historians have showed in various ways that **colonial classifications had the effect of redirecting important indigenous practices in new direction.** In all these discourses one particular emphasis had been on the component of castes. Arjun Appadurai, suggested that the category of ‘caste’ in the Indian census provided an opportunity for indigenous self-identification that coexisted in tension with its ‘objectifying’ features.\(^\text{12}\) Historians of caste politics in India also attempted in correlating colonial fascination for caste classification with their policy of divide and rule ‘where the state attempted to mark out its allies from its enemies in order to preserve the natural divisions within the colonized society.’\(^\text{13}\)

Social composition of population in the region has been reflected through a lengthy list in the Censuses for the province of Assam. The first Census of 1872 being imperfect and incomplete in many respects the attempt to comprehend the ethnic and caste composition of the region’s population is on the Census data of 1881 and comparing with the subsequent Censuses. In 1881 the Brahmaputra valley had a population of 2,249,185 persons. Of this, an estimated three lakhs were of recent immigrant origin or new immigrants. The rest were indigenous. The non-indigenous population increased from less than one lakh in 1872 to anything between five and six lakhs in 1901. But on the other hand, the indigenous Assamese population which had been growing fast during the years 1872-81, remained almost stationary for the next twenty years. The decrease was at the rate of 6 percent between 1891 and 1901. Table 2.1 below shows the increase and/or


decrease in the total indigenous as well as migrant population between 1891 and 1901 in the Brahmaputra valley.

**Table 2.1: Variation in the Statistical Composition of Population**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1891</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>Total variation between 1891 and 1901</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>2023,708</td>
<td>2157,025</td>
<td>+133317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Indigenous Hindus)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caste and Tribes</td>
<td>1584,027</td>
<td>1504,847</td>
<td>-79180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>439,681</td>
<td>652,178</td>
<td>+212497</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The population in the Census Reports and other government records and accounts were classified as aboriginal tribes, semi-Hinduised aboriginals, Hindu superior castes, Hindu intermediate castes, persons of Hindu origin ‘who refuses recognition of caste’\(^{14}\), trading castes, agricultural castes, pastoral castes, artisan castes, weaver castes, boating and fishing castes, castes engaged in personal service and Muhammadans. This classificatory dimension points towards the fact that in the pages of the Census Reports and scores of classificatory tables, caste, tribe and race had, but a troubled presence. The term ‘caste’ in the list above was used to denote both religious factions and occupational groups. Thus J.H. Hutton wrote that ‘Caste in the Assam Valley was however not as elsewhere, chiefly a functional division, it was rather a racial division and functional castes were very

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\(^{14}\) See *A Statistical Account of Assam*; population included in this category are Vaishnav, Matak Gosain Buddhists Sanyasi, Nanakshahi, Native Christians, pp. 31, 115, 238.
few’.\textsuperscript{15} But this view, according to S. Chattopadhyaya ‘was only partial’\textsuperscript{16} and that it ‘will be too much to assume that there were in Assam no functional groups almost akin to castes’.\textsuperscript{17} Citing epigraphic records Chattopadhyaya showed that the classes like Kayasthas, Karanas, Lekhakas, Daivajnas or Ganakas, Vaidyvas (associated with medicinal practices; also acted as lekhakas), Kumbhakaras (potters), Kaibarttas and the Tantuvas (weavers) were functional castes indeed since ancient period.\textsuperscript{18} Caste, wrote J. A. Baines, the Census Commissioner of India in 1891, referred to ‘status or function’ that was perpetuated by ‘inheritance and endogamy’. Despite signalling function as the basis of caste, the author, when it came to elucidating the genesis of the institution, shifted to race. The origin of caste, he believed, was ‘distinctly racial’. It was the result of the struggle of ‘the Arya’ to keep out ‘the dark races’\textsuperscript{19}. Underlying all these definitions the following two assumptions can be ascertained: that caste existed in myriad of forms and that communities called ‘caste’ across India have something in common. The caste system in Assam was summarized by Chattopadhyaya as ‘a mess’ where ‘Brahmanas who clung to their original profession got great respect and the Vaisyas following the avocation of the Sudras gradually sank in that category’.\textsuperscript{20} It

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} J.H. Hutton, \textit{Caste in India}, p. 212.
\item \textsuperscript{16} S. Chattopadhyaya, ‘Social Life’ in H.K. Barpujari edited, \textit{The Comprehensive History of Assam}, vol. 1, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, 1990, p.207. The author equated the Kayasthas, Karanas and the Lekhakas with modern day judicial or magisterial office holders enjoying different grades of power.
\item \textsuperscript{17} loc. cit
\item \textsuperscript{18} op cit. pp. 207-218.
\item \textsuperscript{19} J.A. Baines Census of India 1891, General Reports, as cited in Padmanabh Samarendra, ‘Census in Colonial India and the Birth of Caste’, \textit{Economic & Political Weekly} August 13, 2011, vol. xlvI, no. 33, p. 55
\end{itemize}
is not true, however, to say that the caste statistics are not without importance, for caste was and still is regarded as one of the dominant factor in perhaps many problems in India. In the Census Reports, anthropological enquiries and demographic studies shared equal space. Therefore, without going into the details of the debate concerning the emergence of caste, the proposition in this chapter is to illustrate the indigenous social hierarchies and identities under the term ‘caste’.  

The subject is treated as an element of population in its social and demographical aspect, rather than from the point of ethnography or origin. Suffice to say that caste categories consolidated officially by the colonialist were not all constructed out of thin air. The British constructions as shown through various works were importantly influenced by the already existing constructions in Indian society. Bernard Cohn for example, defined the process of census taking as a two-step affair where the tasks of data collection, interpretation etc were done by a local

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21 Indigenous texts did not use the term caste. The word is of foreign-Portuguese origin ‘Casta’. The Sanskrit as well as vernacular terms was ‘varna’ and ‘jati’. Caste has been variously defined as an endogamous, ethnic, occupational, ritualistic or racial division. The understanding of caste in colonial literature in the early decades of the 19th century was primarily text-based. The text-based exposition of the Indian society as presented by the Orientalists William Jones, Henry Colebrooke and later Max Muller and John Muir Denzil Ibbetson, William Crooke and John Nesfield had offered a functional explanation. The colonial officials like William Jones and Henry Colebrook, writing from towards the close of the 18th century, considered Sanskrit texts as the authentic sources of knowledge about the Hindus. These officials, despite being aware of the presence of the jatis, treated the text-derived varna order to be representing the original and the authentic caste system. While enumerating caste in the Indian Census the officials, working with concepts of varna and jati, struggled unsuccessfully to define and classify these into castes on a single pan-India list, where each caste had to be discreet, homogeneous and enumerable. In 1891 the results of the survey of Bengal undertaken by Herbert Risley were published in four volumes entitled the Tribes and Castes of Bengal where he propounded a racial theory of caste.
enumerator and eventually by a supervisor of the census district.\textsuperscript{22} The enumerators were usually those people who had a ‘social position, some designation and were fairly literate’. Thus, the local enumerator’s perception and understanding must have had considerable influence in the shaping of the ‘categories’. Also, the native constructions underwent major changes after the colonial categories were consolidated through self-perception.

Before moving further, the term ‘tribe’ also necessitate an explanation. The term found a place under ‘Agricultural and Pastoral Castes’ as ‘Forest Tribes’ in the 1891 Census. In the Census Report of 1901, they were classified as ‘Animists’ and in 1911 as ‘Tribal Animists or People following Tribal Religion’. Reports of the following decades till 1941, the terms used were ‘Hill and Forest tribes’, ‘Primitive Tribes’ and ‘Tribe’ respectively. Pre-colonial usages include such regional vernacular terms as \textit{sampraday}, and \textit{jati} for denoting both the mentioned castes and tribes; thus \textit{Bodo sampraday} or \textit{Kalita jati}. In the words of the anthropologist Ravindra S. Khare, the concept of \textit{jati} refers to the experience of caste in the ‘concrete and factual’ domain of everyday social life and ‘a reference to \textit{jati} can identify people in a very minute and precise way’.\textsuperscript{23} The Census of 1931 forwards a discussion on the depressed\textsuperscript{24} and backward classes of Assam. These


\textsuperscript{24} The term ‘depressed classes’ was used for the first time, in 1921 Census of India for ‘low castes’ but no standard list of such classes was available for want of an adequate definition. The Census officer restrained in using the word “depressed” as he thought it unsuitable for describing the status of any caste in Assam. “Depressed” as used in India in connection with caste are associated with those who are untouchable, whose touch necessitates immediate purification and who are not allowed to use the public properties such as water bodies or to read in school along with others castes. No such degree of depression in Assam was however noticed according to the Reports.
communities were listed under three broad division- Hindu exterior castes\textsuperscript{25}, indigenous backward tribes\textsuperscript{26} and tea garden caste coolies.\textsuperscript{27} The tea garden coolies were seen as a separate homogeneous class of population no matter of what class or caste they belong to in their place of origin. The principal Hindu and Animist castes and races found on tea gardens of the Brahmaputra valley were tabulated separately in the Censuses. The list included \textit{Bauri, Bhuiya, Bhumij, Dom, Ghasi, Goala, Gond, Kamar, Kurmi, Munda, Oraon, Oriya, Pan, Santhal, Tanti Turi} etc. The population strength of important plain tribes, Hindu castes and other religious groups are shown in Table 2.2.

\textbf{Table 2.2: Ethnic Division of Population in Assam Valley in 1881}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>1881</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>1881</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lalung\textsuperscript{28}</td>
<td>46,077</td>
<td>Kalita</td>
<td>2,41,370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabha</td>
<td>56,285</td>
<td>Kaibartta</td>
<td>1,551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hajong</td>
<td>3,689</td>
<td>Kewat</td>
<td>103,766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mech</td>
<td>57,885</td>
<td>Dom</td>
<td>96,779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koch</td>
<td>228,039</td>
<td>Jugi</td>
<td>22,084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajbansi</td>
<td>106,363</td>
<td>Katani</td>
<td>59,847</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{25} In the Census Report of Assam, 1931 the expression was used to connote castes which were within the Hindu religion but remained outside the social pale of the Hindu Society, which prevented them from moving upward. The expression was further used for those who were deficient in education, wealth and influence or some who remained connected with their traditional occupation.

\textsuperscript{26} The definition of backward tribe was given as those communities which retained some form of tribal organization and are below the general provincial standard of education.

\textsuperscript{27} Report on the Census of Assam, 1931: p. 209

\textsuperscript{28} Though the tribe name at present is \textit{Tiwa}, but this study being carried out in historical perspective we have used the tribe name \textit{Lalung} as it was by this term that they were recorded in the colonial official literatures.
Madhahi 13,149  Chandal and Hira 32,222
Chutiya  59,163  Boria or Sut  20,436
Mikirs  67,516  Saloi  12,091
Ahoms  179,283  Hari  11,245
Brahman  68,784  Muhammadans  204,344
Ganak  17,390  Moria  2,001


Classifications apart, the **Censuses since the beginning of the nineteenth century also recorded caste mobility in order to uplift one’s social position.** Until the middle of the nineteenth century the Assamese social order was stable. There were higher castes and lower castes (socially speaking) and people with power and wealth and people without, but there were only few instance of mobility from one category to another. But like its counterpart, the restrictive preindustrial feudal societies, restrictions in regard to the movement of people existed in the valley too but without much rigidity in comparison to the Indian experience. As a result only few men in Assam sought to change their social status through new occupations. The possibility for mobility was restricted by the prevalence of hierarchical structures (though less rigidly) and individual attitudes together with limited opportunities to move up. Caste in India have complex perceptive as Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi noted that ‘almost every statement of general nature made by anyone about Indian caste may be contradicted’.  

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An understanding of the changing caste affinities during colonial dominion therefore requires a discussion on the endowment of what different caste identity actually entailed at these times. The term ‘caste’ was nowhere to be found in the religious texts and as well as secular literature across the country and its geographical divisions. The word used was *varna*. Four in number, the *varna* of Brahmans, commonly identified with those fulfilling the callings of priests and spiritual preceptors. They commanded superior position by dint of their spiritual association and as teacher of Sanskrit. The *varna* of Kshatriyas, usually associated with rulers and warriors, was extended to include landed groups. The *varna* of Vaishyas, were identified with commercial livelihoods, and also with other producers and wealth-creators as well. The *varna* of Shudras were servile toilers. The so-called untouchables and also the hill and forest populations who are now commonly called ‘tribal’ occupied an ambivalent place below, outside or sometimes parallel to this *varna* scheme.

The Census of 1921 while enumerating various castes in the valley wrote that some indigenous castes and tribes tended to change their names or took names previously used by other castes in order to advance their social position. Whether these caste movements are good or bad and whether the castes are entitled to the new names they have taken, do not form the matter of discussion here. The main interest in studying these movements is to note the various changes and their effects on the statistics. Allen in 1901 and McSwiney in 1911 estimated of what they referred to as ‘purely Assamese caste’ in the five upper districts of the

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30 See footnote number 21 in page number 40 in this chapter.

31 Literally meaning colour, the designations of *varna* evoke vast and sweeping generalities.
Brahmaputra valley. The variation between the two sets was an increase of 11.11 percent, which was over 5 percent less than the growth in natural population in the Brahmaputra valley (for natural growth of population, see Table 1 in Appendix I). The reason for the decline was suggested as due to prolific immigrant settlers or that the castes have not fully recovered from the effects of the calamities of the decade before.

**In 1901 these Assamese castes had shown a decline of 6.4 percent in spite of substantial increase in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.** When compared with the 1891 return the increase in 1911 was 4 percent. The Census of 1921 discusses caste movements among the Hindus and the Animists. Change in population composition is an important element to determine how societies change, but more elusive are the reasons for social change when the groups (age groups, race and ethnic groups, social classes) change their behaviour. The explanations for such patterns and changes are most likely to be found in changing contexts of economy, politics, society, technology, and environment etc. The Report included a list of castes and groups affected either by their own or others’ agitation or changes of name. Here the discussion has been limited to those belonging to the districts of the Brahmaputra valley only. The Brahmans showed an increase by about 27 percent. The reason for increase was ascribed partly to natural growth and chiefly to the inclusion of more Barna Brahmans and Agradanis into the caste. A large

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32 The history of Assamese identity is complex, interesting as it was a story of the continuous formation and transformation of the communities. The issue found ample space in the writings of A. Guha (1985); H. Gohain (1977); by S. Nag (1990); A.K. Baruah (1991); U Mishra (2001) and S. Baruah (2001). They attribute the beginning of community consciousness in Assam to colonial policies.

33 Report on the Census of Assam, 1921; p 144.
accrual to the number, it was mentioned, came from the Mahants or priests of the Yogi (Jogi) community. The Yogis are according to the Census of 1881 not even Hindus but residual of some non Aryan tribes. Again the Katanis living in the Brahmaputra valley were mentioned as a section of Yogi caste. They were supposedly the only people who could and would rear pat silkworm and therefore, entailed a low caste following a prejudice that the occupation was unclean. In contrast the silk weavers almost everywhere in India enjoyed the status of the urban middle-class. As they transacted exclusively with urban elites, whether merchants or consumers, they were often in positions of power, and, where power is derived from religion, claimed ‘Brahmanhood’ or the warrior (Kshatriya) status.

The 1921 Census statistics for Vaisyas, an indigenous cultivating caste of Kamrup, shows that the provincial number increased more than sixfold, mainly on account of the movement of the Sahas or Vaisyas Sahas in the Surma valley. Socially the Sahas were low in caste in the Surma valley where the number was more numerous. The increase in the district of Kamrup was 12,000 from a population of 3,000. This was interesting owing to the fact that the natural growth of population in the district was only 5.7 percent. Hunter tabulated an ethnic division of the people compiled from the District Census Compilation with minor differences in his monumental A Statistical Account of Assam. A noteworthy feature in this classification was the inclusion of the Kaibarttas in agricultural caste along with

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34 See, S. Chattopadhyaya, ‘Social Life’ in H.K. Barpujari edited, The Comprehensive History of Assam, vol. 1, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, 1990, where the author citing epigraphic record referred to the Kaibarttas as boatmen, workers in fisheries and collectors of tolls on the rivers. According to ethnologists the Kaivarttas were an aboriginal tribe gradually coming within the fold of Aryan culture. The smritis and the Puranas referred to them as offsprings of mixed castes.
the Kalitas. Fanciful etymologies exist regarding origin and social position of the Kalitas ranging from Kshatriya refugees to Kayasthas who lost their caste by taking to the plough. The Kalitas according to some accounts had been the priests of the Koch rulers of the country and therefore, had been a superior race. K.L. Barua maintains that the Kalitas were the earliest Aryan settlers in Assam.35

When the Koches adopted Hinduism and placed themselves under the guidance of the Brahmans, the Kalitas gradually sank to the position they now occupy. The Kalitas, more than half of whom were concentrated in the district of Kamrup, numbered 241,589 in 1881. They were regarded a high caste and ranked next to the Brahmans 68,784; Daivajnas 17,390; and Kayasthas. Whatever be their racial origin, they appeared to have always been associated with cultivation. The caste also had some functional subdivisions within itself. These subdivisions, Mali (gardener), Kamar (blacksmith), Tanti (weaver), Sonari (goldsmith), Kumar (potter), Napit (barber), and Nat (dancer) etc., were grouped together as Sarukalita and are said to have been debarred from intermixing with the Barkalitas (high Kalitas). In Sibsagar, a section of the Kalitas was known as Naotalia or boat-makers.36 The Kalitas on the other hand had begun identifying themselves with the Kayasthas. The Census of 1881 referred to them as the highest of the Sudra caste, native to the valley. Dalton stated that they are distinctly ‘Aryan and a good Sudra caste’.

Against this increase showed in the upper castes, a decrease from 31,000 to 25,000 was showed in the return of the Dom. There was a certain degree of ambiguity in

35 K. L. Barua, Early History of Kamarupa, Shillong, 1933, p.15.
36 Census of India, 1901, Assam Report, p. 133.
the description of the *Doms*. While the Census of 1931 described the caste as disgraced, the Census of 1881 wrote ‘the Dom of the Assam valley as person of exceptional purity’, and though their non-Aryan origin is recognised, yet was counted among the Hindus, and held in respect accordingly. The same tendency towards exaltation of caste takes a somewhat different shape in the circumstance that the sub-divisions of certain castes disappear in the upper portion of the valley of the Brahmaputra. *Kalita, Kewat, Koch* and *Dom* of the western districts have their classes of great or small, agricultural or fisherman, between whom commensality and intermarriage are forbidden, but as one move eastwards, these distinctions cease and all the members of the caste are of an equal status.37 The decrease in number of the caste was because fewer of the indigenous *Doms* preferred to return by their previous caste name. In the Census of 1911 over half the *Dom* population that was enumerated were returns from the districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. In 1921 most of them gave up *Dom* as caste name in favour of *Nadiyal* or *Kaibartta*. This decrease, if due to upward mobility, reflects that they were a disgraced caste indeed. Of the 25,000 *Doms* enumerated 20,000 were counted on tea gardens and, therefore, immigrants. The *Kaibarttas* showed an increase due to inclusion of the *Dom* and *Nadiyal* caste. A movement was in progress among the *Nadiyals* of the valley with the intention of improving their status. Considerable efforts were made to this effect by stopping the practice of selling fish in public market and prohibiting the women from going to bazaars (markets). The increase to some extent was also due to natural growth.

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37 Report on the Census of Assam, 1881, p. 66.
A noteworthy fact of the caste was that the caste name has been in use interchangeably with Kewat, in the district of Kamrup. The Kewats in the Census of 1921 discarded the caste name Kaibarta because of its assumption by the Nadiyals. Though the population following Islam (Muhammadans) were technically casteless an interesting subdivision of this group was recorded in the Assam valley. They were known as the Morias. The Census of 1872 returns their number as 2,001 population, and most numerous in the district of Sibsagar with a population of 1,169. Though meagre this number is significant as the division was functional. They were brazier by occupation; hence the name Moria which means to ‘beat something on’. Probably their population was more than the enumerated but many preferred to return as cultivators due to decline in their trade.

Another agricultural caste the Salai or Shaloi peculiar to the Assam valley were ranked below the Kewats. A noteworthy feature of Hinduism in the valley is the relatively high estimation of certain castes which elsewhere are held in contempt or even abhorrence. Ganaks, for example, are looked down upon in Bengal as a spurious kind of Brahmin, but here they are commonly regarded as on much the same level with Brahmins of the genuine sort. The Grahabipras or Ganaks decreased to two third of their previous number owing to their return as Brahmans.

By contrast, with the non-Aryan races prevailing in Upper Assam, the Hindu population by descent or religion stands out as a comparatively homogenous mass, free from those minute sub-divisions which splits up caste in purely Hindu districts. An example of yet another kind was that of the Haris. In point of caste status they were ranked below the Doms. The population of this caste were
traditionally sweepers but returned as goldsmith. As a result their population increased at the rate of 55 percent in ten years between 1872 and 1881.

Among the tribes, the Kachari population decreased in 1921 Census by 23,000. The tribe followed different movements for social uplift in different districts. Owing to this more than half the 28,000 Kachari population in Lakhimpur returned themselves by the sub-caste name of Sonowal. While the Census of 1911 did not record a single person from the tribe, in Goalpara district, there were nearly 11,000 of them in the decade later. The increase was in correspondence with a decrease in Mech tribe. The tribe showed a slight decrease in the districts of Nowgong and Darrang which was attributed to their return under new names such as Kshattriyas, Mahalia, and Solanemia. In Nowgong a section also returned themselves as Saktas in caste and religion. The decrease in Sibsagar was attributed due to transfer of territory to the Naga Hills. Attempt for social mobility among some Rabha clan, on the other hand was prominent through their discontinuing of the practice of bārāī, a system in which the male child takes the clan name of the mother on conversion to Hinduism. The Pati Rabhas on discarding the traditional system and the Rangdanni and Maitri Rabhas on retaining the system were ascribed a position of high and low respectively in their social order. The number of the Koch caste or tribe has fluctuated since 1891. This caste received converts from Animism in the Brahmaputra valley. Their number decreased to about 11,000

39 Sonowals were the professional gold-washers under the Ahom rulers and a sub caste of the Kachari tribe.
40 Report on the Census of Assam, 1921; p. 144.
41 loc. cit
43 The Koches found mention both as caste and a tribe in the Census Reports.
populations during the Census of 1921. This decrease in face of large natural increase all over the valley, points to the disuse of this practice in some of the districts. It was observed that some of the converts instead of becoming Saru Koch or Saranias continued their old tribal names and described themselves as Kshattriyas, which is not the name of any tribe but caste.

The decrease in the tribe along with the Rajbansis, was largest in the district of Goalpara. This district, however, returned a large increase in both Kachari tribe and Kshattriya caste. Until 1911 Census enumerations the Kshattriya caste was practically synonymous with Manipuri population and certain others in Cachar and Sylhet districts, the old Manipuri settlements, in the province. The increase in number in the caste in 1921 Census was so great that even after deducting a genuine increase of 26,000 for Manipur, there was of 70,000 more population. The greatest increase was in the districts of Goalpara (nearly 49,000) and Kamrup (6,000). The districts of Nowgong and Darrang showed an increase of 1,000 Kshattriyas each. Apparently the new increase formerly belonged to Koch, Rajbanshi, Kachari or other Bodo tribe. Historians have shown that ‘Kshatriyaization’ apart from allowing ‘social mobility to lower castes’ was taken as a tool to reclaim political ancestry by the erstwhile ruling groups or to secure a job in the army. Change among the Miri tribe was evident in the Barahgam Miris (a section of the tribe) preference for invoking Sankar and Paramesvar during public worship instead of the tribal deities ‘Nekiri Nekiran’ (or

45 At present they are known by the name Mishing but here the use has been as per the name prevalent in the colonial records
‘Mekiri Mekiran’). Moreover, the existence of the class of mati or ground Miris, proves their gradual sinking into the mass of the Hindu population, who gave up traditional custom of platform-houses and had taken to living on the ground.\footnote{Report on the Census of Assam, 1881, p. 88.} Rather than statistical the change among the Miris was a matter of attitude.

The Mech tribe, mainly confined to the district of Goalpara, returned a decrease. Some of the Hindu converts in the tribe identified themselves as Bara by caste and language and Brahma by religion.\footnote{The Brahma religion was a form of Vedic Hinduism which was received with favour by the Rajbansi zamindars of Goalpara and the Mech tribe.} In the district of Goalpara the Mech language was returned by about 20,000 more speakers but about 11,000 populations of these speakers described themselves as Kacharis. The Census Report of 1921 in this regard observed that, ‘in the last few years the claim to an ancestry with epic associations has been adopted or revived by leaders or outsiders for other tribes in the process of conversion to Hinduism or already converted.’ This type of caste mobility was observed by Ghurye thus:

Various ambitious castes quickly perceived the chances of raising their status. They convened conferences of their members and formed councils to take steps to see that their status was recorded in the way they though was honourable to them. Others could not but resent this ‘stealthy’ procedure to advance and equally eagerly began to controvert their claims. Thus, a campaign of mutual recrimination was set on foot. The leaders of all but the highest castes frankly looked upon the Census as an opportunity
for pressing, and perhaps obtaining some recognition of social gains which were otherwise denied by persons of castes higher than their own\(^48\)

While discussing change in social structure the Commissioner for Census of Assam, 1921 concluded that culture and wealth are the only ladders by which the castes on the ground floor may hope to climb to an upper storey; and when they have climbed they do not attain to religious equality or to commensality. The 1921 Census Report puts it thus;

Certainly is that no amount of Census figures, noting but the verdict of society itself, can raise any caste or any individual in social status. No names of persons are kept on record from the Census, and whatever social or religious differences existed before appear to exist in just the same measure after the adoption of a new caste name; if there is any change in status it is due to culture and wealth rather than to the alteration of the name.\(^49\)

An example of successful social uplift was recorded in the case of the Shahas of Surma Valley was cited in the Report of 1931. The Shaha caste, it was mentioned, though technically unclean \(\text{‘jal-achal’}\)\(^50\) commanded considerable respect in the Sylhet district due to their wealth and influence. They were even, by a peculiar social convention permitted to purchase their brides from the higher castes.\(^51\)

Situation similar like the Shahas was, however, not evident in the Brahmaputra


\(^{49}\) Census of India, Report for the Province of Assam, 1921, p. 151.

\(^{50}\) The term used to denote those castes from which the upper castes do not accept water.

valley districts. Notwithstanding the hard effort and having a considerable number of educated members, the Census of 1931 informs that the Brittial Banias failed to improve their social position. This is both puzzling and interesting at the same time because even the religious texts did not assign them the lowest position. The term if translated will mean professional traders. The attributes of trader place them in the Vaishya varna and therefore were divj or twice born people. Why were the Brittiyals relegated to lower caste? The answer can only be inferred that too tentatively, that the bent of Assamese mind had never been favourable towards trade. Census officers, therefore, denied the fact that by keeping the caste column in the Census ‘perpetuated the system and foments differences’. 52

Castes being mostly racial, no tendency in formation of new castes by separation of functional sub-caste was visible. But there was a general desire to appear as cultivators rather than as followers of any of the other traditional pursuits. This may be explained partly by the circumstances of a country where land is abundant, and nobody was restricted to any degrading occupation as the only available means of earning. The officer further added that these generalizations do not apply to the ‘unorthodox and the more unselfish of the educated classes’. There has often been much dispute about the precise order of merit among the various jati population of a given region. On pan – Indian basis, a definite and singular caste based hierarchy is perhaps the Brahmins at the top and the so-called ‘untouchables’ at the bottom, with specific set of practices relating to endogamy or commensality. The hierarchical pattern subsisted without rigidity in Assam. Except for the Brahmins the divergence in the nature of the castes in the region implied the difficulty of ascribing a singular scale to measure their social status or construct hierarchy.

52 Census of India, Report for the Province of Assam, 1921, p. 141.
Furthermore, people of different doctrinal traditions and social circumstances have attached differing degrees of importance to these schemes of caste. Simple tests such religious inclusion does not help to determine caste position in the society. If wealth, education and influence had constituted the basis for determining social position than a large population belonging to the traditionally superior castes would have remained out of their high position in the society. Keeping in view the empirical nature of the Censuses, these criteria were drawn not from texts but from the lived social experience. The method of local enquiry in each district on the general social position of the castes adopted by the Census officer to solve the problem was rather crude. In 1931 enumeration the caste Bania, formerly Brittial-Bania was referred to as an exterior caste. The Census officer noted that some of the leading men of this community informed him that their position in society was hopeless and asked to be classed as a depressed caste. Reports from every district were unanimous in the opinion that along with the Brittial Banias, the Kaibartta (which include Charals/Chandals or Hiras of Lower Assam districts, the Nadiyals and all the other names which have been applied to various branches of this family) were the most exterior caste in the whole of Assam valley.53

Though the Census of 1872 records the Hiras and the Chandals in the same column they never ate together nor intermarry. In the Census of 1931 the grand total of exterior castes in the valley was enumerated at 183,000 (the figures were rounded for the castes). Hira is the name given to the caste of potters who shaped vessels by hands and were mostly women the Census of 1881 refers to the caste as peculiar to the Assam valley. Another caste of potters existed by the caste name

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Kumhar who were thought superior than the Hirases. The difference between them was may be due to the technique used in their occupation but possibly also the factor of gender was associated. Many instances in the Census reflect that the notion that women working in the field and selling goods in hats\textsuperscript{54} as degrading, was in progress. The difference in position assigned to two sets of people in same occupation may be in conformity with the above notion.

The category of race as well as ethnicity appeared in colonial censuses because it was deemed a ‘self-evident component of human identity’. \textbf{On racial basis, the Census of 1881, broadly divided the population of the Brahmaputra valley} into – the Bodos with a population of 875,233. This figure represented more than one-third\textsuperscript{55} of the population in the valley. The Shans classified under the three heads of Ahom, Khampti and Shan with a population of 182,441; the Daphlas, Miris and Abor, with a population of 27,006; and the Hindus with a population of 857,450. Later the 1891 Census Report of Assam made far-reaching contribution in the field of ethnology including physical anthropology by providing data on physical and racial types based on anthropometric measurements. Except the Hindus, the populations belonging to the other three races were categorized as tribes\textsuperscript{56} because of their non-Aryan origin. \textbf{The tribes, constituted the major}

\textsuperscript{54} Local term used to refer petty market place(s).
\textsuperscript{55} Report on the Census of Assam, 1881, p. 63.
\textsuperscript{56} In the Censuses of British India (except in 1941), religion was one prominent criterion for classification of the country’s population, with tribes being categorized as those practicing hundreds of different ‘primitive’ religions. In fact, they used to be classified as ‘animists’ until the 1931 Census, in which they were enumerated under the heading ‘tribal religion’. It was only in 1941 that the tribes were defined, for the first time in the history of the Indian Census, not in terms of their religion or faith, but their ‘origin’. The use of religious category in the Census enumeration enabled the authorities to bypass many complex issues – anthropological, sociological and historical – involved in the notion and/or identity of diverse tribes across the country.
proportion of the total population of Assam according to the Census of 1881. These tribes were of different ethnic origin, linguistic affiliation and varied socio-cultural tradition. The Census Reports and statistical tables have presented demographic information separately for the tribal population – and often for many individual tribes since 1872. The proportion of indigenous Hindu castes and aboriginal tribes in the total population came down from almost a hundred percent in the pre colonial period to 78.3 percent in 1881, and then to 67.8 percent in 1901. The non-indigenous section constituted one-quarter to one-third of the population in 1901. The proportion of tribal population to general population in Assam since 1901-51 reveals that though a consistent proportion of the total population was constituted by the tribes their proportion to the general population was on decline since the early twentieth century which fell from 16.72 percent in 1901 to 10.04 percent in 1951.

In the colonial period the growth rate of the tribal population was always positive but the percentage variation was much lower than for the general population. The difference was due to large number of immigrant settlers and conversion of the tribe into the fold of Hinduism. Among the tribes the Chutiya, Koch and Ahoms yielded to the overpowering fold of the Hindu religion prior to colonial domination in the region. Both these factors of change are looked into to understand the changing population composition. The Census of 1931 differentiated between the Ahoms and the Kacharis who were politically dominant at different times in the valley. While the Ahoms were categorized as racial caste, the Kacharis were considered more a tribe. The tribes classed as ‘backward’ in the
1931 enumeration were the *Kacharis* (including the *Mechs*) *Miris, Lalungs Rabhas, Hajongs*, and the *Deoris* of Upper Assam.\(^57\)

The basis of such distinction was that the latter preserved their language but the former did not. This perspective demands a reading of the pre-colonial dominant constructions of the tribe. Historians who have worked on the topic blames those focused on studying ‘tribal’ communities without paying any attention to the pre-colonial experience. To put it in the words of Sumit Sarkar ‘in Census and law alike, ‘colonial knowledge’, was not just a Western superimposition: such an interpretation gravely underestimates the extent and significance of inputs from relatively privileged Indian groups with autonomous interests and inclinations.’\(^58\)

One such construct which continued from the pre-colonial era was the distinction made between the speakers of Sanskrit based language and the non-Sanskrit based language by the pre-colonial state and society. The Sanskrit based languages claimed superiority as the language used for religious practices and ritual.

**For a comprehensive study of historical social demography, language therefore constitutes a necessary variable.** An indirect evidence of migration flows can also be obtained by a detailed examination of the data on mother tongues collected in the Census. This exploratory study is based on an examination of language in all the six districts of the valley. The Census data on languages has been interpreted with caution in view of the complex character of linguistic returns and classification schemes. Assam inhabited as it is by a mixed population, speaks

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\(^{57}\) Report on the Census of Assam, 1931, p. 221 Appendix I.

a great variety of language as well as dialects. Altogether 36 different ‘languages’ were recorded in the province, of which 30 are found in the Brahmaputra valley and 23 in the Surma valley. Linguistic map of the region shows dominance of four great families of languages – Austric, Tibeto-Chinese, Dravidian and Indo-European. In 1901 Census no less than 167 different ‘languages’ were returned as spoken in the province of Assam.

The Eastern group, an outer sub-branch of the Indo Aryan branch belonging to the Indo-European family consisting the languages of Assamese, Bengali, Bihari Oriya and Nepali recorded the largest number of 6,164,000 persons or 66.7 percent of the total population of Assam as its speaker. Though Assamese is spoken almost entirely in the valley the percentage of speakers to the total population has remained very steady since 1901 Census. This diminishing percentage was identified in the Census as due to slow growth of natural born population and predominance of a large migrant population. In the Census year of 1901, 83 percent inhabitants in the district of Kamrup returned as speaker of Assamese, in Darrang the return was a little more than half the districts population but in the tea districts the percentage was significantly less, only 39 percent in the district of Lakhimpur. In 1911 Census the largest proportion of Assamese speakers was found in Kamrup and Nowgong, which are practically non-tea districts. Sibsagar by contrast showed an increase with an over half the population in spite of the large number of gardens. In the Brahmaputra valley, the Bengali language had 308,958 speakers during the enumeration of 1881. A large number, 209,212 of speakers of the language was enumerated in the district of Goalpara alone. In the

59 In the Census Reports the term was also used to mean dialect.

60 Census of India, Report on the Province of Assam, 1881, p.103.
other districts they were rare, spoken only by tea coolies recruited from Central Bengal and a certain number employed as writers in offices. The Goalpara district recorded the predominance of Bengali language with 69 percent speakers in 1901. Therefore, the district of Goalpara needs special mention when the Bengali language is under discussion.

According to the Linguistic Survey of India, the dialect of western and southern Goalpara is pure Rajbanshi, a Bengali dialect in use in the north-east of the Rajshahi Division, while in the eastern part of the district the dialect is western Assamese, i.e., Assamese influenced by the neighbouring Rajbanshi Bengali. The number of people returned as speaking the latter dialect shows a rapid decline up to 1901 and a sudden rise during 1911 enumeration. The other Assam valley districts with one-tenth preponderance of Bengali language were Darrang, Sibasagar, and Lakhimpur. These districts owe this proportion to the number of tea coolies who returned as speaking Bengali. In the three lower districts of the Brahmaputra valley – Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong, - the total number of Bengali speakers increased from 529,000 to 840,000. This large increase was due to influx of East Bengal peasants. Oriya and Hindi languages were confined to the tea coolies, immigrants and unindentured labourers respectively. Nepali, the language belonging to the Pahari Group of the Inner Sub Branch of the Indo-Aryan branch showed an increase in every Census. In 1931 enumerations the speakers in this language group numbered 140,000.

Assam’s population was a part of the Tibeto-Burman ethnic continuum. The total number of speakers of the Assam-Burmese branch of the Tibeto – Chinese group increased from 485,000 to 531,000 or by 9.5 percent according to the Census of
1921. The main language group in this branch was the Bodo language which comprises as its sub group the languages of Garo, Rabha, Chutiya, Koch, Bara or Bodo (Kachari), Dimasa (Hill Kachari) and Lalung. However, according to the Census of 1921 the languages most affected by contact with others in the Assam Plains were Chutiya, Lalung, Kachari and Rabha all belonging to the Bodo group. In 1931 Census all languages in the Bodo group, except Lalung and Koch, showed an increase – a peculiar contrast to 1921 when all dialects in this group except Garo, and Koch showed a decrease. The speakers of Lalung have decreased at each successive Census since 1891. In 1931 Census the Lalung speakers numbered only 9000 against 40,000 recorded in 1891 Census. The decrease according to the Census Reports was due to the epidemic kala-azar during 1891 – 1901 when their number was reduced to 35,500 persons. However, it is interesting to note that only 16,500 persons out of 35,000 returned themselves as speaker of the language. The Census Report of 1931 reflects the difference in attitude among the hill and the plain Lalungs, in respect of language preference. All the 3,500 Lalungs who lived in the neighbouring Khasi Hills returned as speakers of the Lalung dialect, whereas of the 38,000 Lalungs in Nowgong a less than 5,000 have claimed Lalung as a mother tongue. Of the 96,009 person enumerated as belonging to the Chutiya tribe only 4,113 were returned as speaking the language. The language of the Ahoms, a branch of the Tibeto – Chinese group, cultivated only by their priests, the Deodhaings as the ancient language of their religion was ‘nearly extinct’. These

61 The Ahoms ruled in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam before the coming of the British for 600 years.
figures reflect that something changed fundamentally about population pattern since British rule.

The change was not only statistical but also linguistic and religious, and at least for some, in their choice for religious identification. The Census statistics show that there has been a wholesale conversion of many of the tribal communities to Hinduism since 1921. A decade earlier the Census of 1911 records that two-thirds of the people were Hindus, but large number of them were comparatively new converts from non-Hindu tribes who were rapidly being absorbed by the all-embracing proselytization of the Vaishnava Gossains in the east of the valley; but still over one-sixth of the population cling to primitive nature of worship. This partly explains the decrease in the number of speakers in the tribal language groups. The Lalung language was dying out in the district of Nowgong – the home to the large bulk of the tribe - for most of these tribes returned themselves as Hindus (the conversion of the Lalung tribe to Hinduism increased from 1.8 percent in 1911 to 8.2 percent in 1921 Census) and their mother tongue as Assamese, for Assamese was considered a more respectable language and more in accordance with their pretentions to Hinduism than their own language.

The Rabha population owing to their conversion to Hinduism was steadily decreasing since 1911, as they refrained from returning their tribe or caste as Rabha during enumerations. The tribe was enumerated as 79,000, 70,000 and

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63 Even in all India contexts the tribal population during 1921-31, appears to have experienced a decline in aggregate population, while there had been an increase in the total population. This differential seems attributable to the heightened politics over religious divisions around the 1931 Census, with, for example, an active political pressure mounting on the authorities to return ‘everyone of doubtful status as Hindu’.
69,000 persons with the number of speakers as 28,000; 22,000 and 27,000 in 1911, 1921 and 1931 Censuses respectively. The Census of 1911 Reported that the Pati Rabhas had lost altogether their mother tongue and spoke Assamese and showed a lean towards Hinduism of the Sakta form.\textsuperscript{64} Probably a great number of these tribes were bilingual but a feeling of superiority conferred by Aryan speech must have influenced them concurrently with their moving toward Hinduism. The Plain Kacharis, who according to the 1881 Census, remained uninfluenced by Hinduism were reported to have shown eagerness to be enumerated as Hindus and a section of the tribe in the district of Nowgong went a step ahead and asked to be entered as Saktas in the caste column during the enumeration of 1921.\textsuperscript{65} Further, it was noted about the Kacharis who enlisted in the Assam Rifles or Armed Reserved Police that their conversion to or preference for Hinduism was because they ‘naturally find it improves their status with their fellow sepoys – largely Gurkhas’.\textsuperscript{66}

The large increase in the number of Hindus in the districts of Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong corresponded with a decrease among the Animists in the Census of 1921. The grand attraction of Hinduism for ‘barbarous’ tribes, observed Dalton, is that it professes to teach the secrets of ceremonial purity. Apart from the changing attitude of the indigenous population; migration too caused a linguistic dispersal of population. The province experienced two major streams of population in migration- the heterogeneous tea community and the homogenous East Bengal Muslim peasants. Linguistically the tea coolies in the Province were enumerated under two broad divisions – the Austric family and the Dravidian family. The

\textsuperscript{64} Report on the Census of Assam 1921, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, p. 50.
\textsuperscript{66} opcit., p. 151.
Munda dialect belonged to the Austro-Asiatic sub group of the Austric family. During 1931 enumerations this branch, which included dialects such as Mundari, Santali, Savara, Kurku, Kharia etc was represented by 321,000 speakers in the province. In the Dravidian language group, the principal languages found in Assam were Kurukh or Oraon, Gondi, Telegu, Kandhi or Kui and Tamil all of which were spoken by tea garden coolies and ex coolies. The total number of speakers of this family was enumerated at 141,000 during 1931 Census. Migrant workers in the valley became acquainted with the language of the dominant group as they became dependent on the nearby village hats for food grains and other necessities. As Census officials noted, ‘Assamese with variations’ became the lingua franca for communication. In the social dealings with the locals as well as with the planters and supervisors the plantation labourers and the ex coolies used this lingua franca. The coolies born in the gardens of Assam were thus brought up to speak a patois composed partly of their tribal tongue and partly of the language of the district in which the tea garden is situated. There the task of recording the mother tongue of the garden coolies and ex tea coolies was a difficult one. Commenting on the difficulty of the language returns in 1921 Census Report Lloyd remarked:

> Our returns are certainly visited by the real impossibility of diagnosing the language of the tea garden coolies. In Sibsagar Mr. Mullan, the Subdivisional Officer, gave much personal attention to the problem and proved again the difficulty was a very real one. After close questioning of many coolies, and with literate Assamese and Bengali helpers he was still

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67 The idea of dominancy in social group is both empirical and rational. Superiority has been claimed on such basis as statistical majority, political as well as cultural. Here the reference is to cultural (linguistic) dominancy.
unable properly to place the ordinary *coolie-bat* or mixture of Hindustani, Bengali and Assamese. He was however, able to eliminate the common error of entering Bengali in many cases.  

The *patois* were referred to as dialects in formation in the Census of 1911 for they vary frequently and is different in each garden. Further when the coolies settle down outside the garden their language gets modified again by the vocabulary of their neighbours. The Census of 1961 reported that only 204,000 persons in the province spoke a tribal language of Bihar and Orissa as their mother tongue, though clearly the number of persons who were tribal migrants was considerably large.

The discussion above brings out the fact that religion or religious affiliations determined the shift in population pattern in the valley. **Religion also had been a fundamental category to enumerate the growth and decline of population** ever since the first Census conducted in 1871-72. The Census of Assam between 1872 and 1941 enumerated eight main religious groups: *Hindus*, Muhammadans, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Animistic and ‘Others’. The Census information on religion included the general distribution and growth of each religion in comparison with the previous enumeration, distribution by districts, variation in number by district, religious distribution of urban and rural populations etc. According to the Census of 1872, total Hindu population in the valley was

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68 Census of India, Report on the Province of Assam, 1921, p. 115

69 The category ‘Others’ according to 1871 Census Report included population of aboriginal tribes who retained their primitive form of faith. In the Census Report of 1891 the head ‘others’ included Theists, Agnostics and Jews who were enumerated in the districts of Goalpara, Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.
1,692,054; Muhammadan numbered 176,109; the Christians recorded 1,379; the Buddhists totalled 6,563; and the Jains formed a meagre 158 in number. On the basis of the major religions followed in the valley, the percentage enumeration was 72 percent Hindus, 18 percent Animistic tribes, and 10 percent Muhammadans during 1901. The other religions included 1,600 Jains, 7,940 Buddhists, and 12,526, Christians of whom 11,151 were natives. The Muhammadans numbered a little more than one-tenth of the population. The small number in the return of Jain population was due to the religion’s non-indigenous origin. The Jains, all migrants from Rajputana (modern day Rajasthan) were associated economically with small business enterprises in the valley.

In 1921 the Hindus with a population of 69 percent in the Brahmaputra valley, were the most numerous in the districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. The Hindus of the province were composed of the indigenous Hindu population and old converts, with their descendants, new converts from Animism, and immigrants – chiefly tea garden coolies. The large number in the Hindu population was due to inclusion some of the Hill Tribes in the category. The history of the connection between the categories ‘tribe’ and the Hindu religious identity has its existence in colonial construction of both these identities. The term *Hindu* has been defined in particular ways in the British documents and the tribe has been defined in this category's shadow. Patterns of transformation took place with British coloniziation and

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70 Briefly the word was used as a general term to denote the religion of the primitive tribes. A detail account of the beliefs of the Animists of the province is given in a series of ethnological monograph on different tribes under the supervision of Lieutenant-Colonel Gurdon, Superintendent of Ethnography.

subsequent intrusion of new ethnic groups, which disrupted the existing pattern of population. The influx of East Bengal immigrants into the valley altered the scenario. Reconstitution of the province into an administrative unit under a Chief Commissioner drastically altered its demographic, ethnic and linguistic profile. Muslim settlement in the valley rose from 5.9 percent to 28.8 percent in the total population after 1874 constituting a population of 9.2 percent in the Brahmaputra valley. In 1881 Census the Muslims numbering 208,431 constituted 9.3 percent of the whole valley’s population, but as much as a quarter of these populations were in the Goalpara district. In 1921 the increase in the Brahmaputra valley Animists was mainly due to the increased immigration of aboriginal tribesmen from regions such as Chota Nagpur to the tea areas of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. Goalpara gained by influx of Santhal and Mech settlers into the Eastern Duars as well as natural growth among the inhabitant Animists. The other districts of the valley, Kamrup especially lost the Animist population from 140,000 to 102,000 as a result of conversion to Hinduism. The increase in the Brahmaputra valley was 82 percent. This was mostly due to tea garden coolies who were Christians even before they immigrated to Assam. The increase was observed in all the districts of the valley with Goalpara heading the list with 10,312 numbers.

These data on changing religious affiliations and language pattern in the valley brings us to the question of underlying issues which conditioned such changes. A basic argument is that the changes were an outcome of colonial classification of population. The studies on the genesis of modern community identity as we know it today show that these are product of colonial Censuses and other official enumerations of the late nineteenth century. Sudipta Kaviraj, for instance, argues
that people who lived in pre-modern social forms, while they had a strong sense of community, did not define themselves primarily in terms of their difference from other groups, and did not perceive themselves as belonging to only particular communities and not to others. It was the mechanisms of modern governance introduced through colonial rule that reconstituted the meaning of community along the lines primarily of religion, sharpening the hitherto ‘fuzzy’ boundaries of overlapping community identities. He writes that ‘colonial modernity did something quite fundamental to the logic of identities, to the ways in which people fashion self-descriptions.’

The practice of discontinuing the use of tribal language, a unifying element among all tribes, due reasons such as religious affiliation of a particular kind or in search of a position, thought superior as per colonial construct, was an interesting phenomenon. This trend of some of the tribes in showing reluctance in identifying themselves by their mother tongue during Census enumeration reflects that a change in attitude among the tribes was in progress. Dipesh Chakravarty argues that the regular and systematic process of Census-taking, which the colonial government introduced, led to the hardening of community boundaries and the fixing of religious and caste identities. Further according to Kaviraj, the late-nineteenth-century Censuses and other similar institutions, then, reconstituted the meaning of community or ethnicity and gave Indians three important political messages; the second of which is that the social and economic progress of a

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community can be measured, in the case of Indian Censuses, in terms of share in public life (education, professions, employment, etc.).

Such instance of measurement is seen among the Census enumerators while determining the social hierarchy of various castes and tribes in the valley. The enumerators resorted to such factors as permission for entrance into places of public worship and if allowed then was it in part or in entirety, general standard of education, retention of tribal organization, customs etc in some form if converted, location of dwelling place etc., to determine the social position of the population. On this issue of identity formation both the anthropologists and postcolonial historians, have critically analyzed the place of Census enumerations during colonial rule. The early twentieth century changes in the political system required a homogenization of communities whose dominant elements had previously sought to differentiate and structure them. And this logic of modern administrative politics was such that people came to fit the categories that colonial authorities fashioned for them.

Further, the gradual emergence of institutions of representative democracy, however limited, meant moves towards homogenization of communities in order to establish ‘majorities’. The relevant communities increasingly came to be religious in character. This majority concern has been imposing in identity formation in the valley. The notion came to effect due to two major developments- colonial understanding of racial superiority reflected through the Census classifications and

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74 See Report on the Census of Assam, 1931. It says that in the Assam Valley Namghars, communities such as Nadiyals and Banias were not allowed at all into those of the higher castes whereas Katanis and Suts were allowed in some districts to enter the part not regarded as particularly holy but not the Manikut (the central position set aside for the deity).
colonial economic policy in the valley. The British rule was extended into Brahmaputra valley after much deliberation on the issue of profit maximization. The land abundant sparsely populated region opened up treasures for profit. But the riches demanded human labour and the low population growth rate proved the negative factor. The demand was met with immigrants from other parts of British India. The economic effect of the immigrant population has been discussed in the following chapter. In this section the focus has been limited to the influence of the immigrants on the social composition of population.

The influx of immigrants during colonial period also had adverse effects on the delicate ethnic balance within the population and in its spatial distribution over the districts creating a deep sense of social and cultural insecurity among the tribal population. The difficulty of labour which the tea industries in Assam had to face was overcome with a supply of a heterogeneous mixture of races and creeds drawn from almost every part of the country. These migrant groups tried to recreate their culture of the place of origin at the place of destination which resulted in cultural pluralism. Therefore, in a particular society a given social group may not be aware of the extent to which it differs from others who live in the same geographical boundary until migrants enter their area. Ethnic self awareness is made possible when the individuals are able to contrast their cultural characteristics with those of others. The increasing consciousness and scarcity in land resources resulted in toughening of ethnic and communal identities in contemporary Assam valley.

Conversely, the trend immediately in Assam was towards assimilation with the dominant groups under colonial rule as a result of immigration. As the
immigration increased the Census returns fluctuated in favour of the new settlers-the ethnic ‘other’. For example the districts Goalpara and Nowgong recorded a higher proportion of tribal population to general population in the Census of 1891 but in the Census of 1921 the mentioned districts recorded the largest concentration of East Bengal immigrants due to the pull of abundant cultivable lands. The gradual settlement of the immigrants in the midst of the tribal habitat alienated the tribes, subsequently pushing them into remote areas. Such a situation must have raised a cause for alarm among the tribes. Fear of marginalisation led to assimilation and gradual merging of some of the tribes into the greater entity ‘Assamese’ in search of some space in the ‘civilized society’.

To sum up a few points may be reasserted: The population pattern of the region which developed as a result of historical forces was an extraordinary mixture of castes and tribes. They had equal existence in the social set up without much conflict and more importantly the numbers of different ethnic groups did not suffer much decline. The decrease due to natural causes was never selective. Thus, **there was no major evidence from any region in the valley to conclude that a particular group was decimated**, while others remained untouched when a calamity occurred. The change started with change in government and the ideologies that accompanied it. The complex system of colonial administration which changed over the period from 1826 had imposing impact on the demographic pattern in Assam. It tried to dominate the social system it found, adapting to it when required for administration and restructuring it for revenue
extraction. There was, to borrow Bagchi’s phrase ‘churning of class positions’, and invention of identity on the basis of numerical considerations.

**Colonial quantification, classification and biased administration largely reversed the social composition and relations, through various forms of ethnic and racial discrimination, recognising patriarchy in social as well as economic issues.** The change can be crudely but simply described as related to colonial ruling strategies, understanding of social superiority which was partly influenced by the indigenous upper caste employees, Census enumerators and process of immigration. The situation in Assam, like in almost all instances of inter-ethnic contact where the people of subordinate rank have sooner or later learned the ways of the dominant group, was similar. For example, the use of a common language ‘Assamese’ which was needed for trade as well as to deal with authorities. But this did not imply the discontinuance of the original or tribal language at least in pre-colonial Assam. The tribes were largely bilingual but when asked to specify one single language during colonial Census the choice went with the dominant language.

The identity categories of the Censuses show an ostensibly capricious series of changes in which categories are ‘continuously adjusted, de-adjusted and readjusted’ in the records. In a restrictive society the powerful identities were determined by religion based hierarchy, abstract notion of racial purity etc. Therefore, many of those generally regarded as lower castes have concentrated their efforts at improvement in social status on the caste column at the Census. In

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order to achieve this end they tended towards more orthodoxy in religious matters, considering that non-orthodoxy will be regarded as ‘uncivilised’ practices. Social and political movements made serious attempts to improve the status of castes regarded as untouchable at the cost of discarding the age old customs, language and even occupation. The social orientation thus developed also had its impact on the pattern of occupation in the valley.