

TRIBAL DEMOGRAPHY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

Northeast India, comprising the states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and the Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram together has an area of 255,037 sq. k.m. which is nearly 8 per cent of the total geographical area of the country.¹ It is inhabited by more than lakh people constituting 3.8 per cent of the total population of India in 1981.² The rate of population growth in northeast India since 1901 has always been higher than in national average. It was moderate till 1951, but a faster growth has been observed there after. The total population of north-east India increased from 102.61 lakh³ in 1951 to 259.86 lakh (excluding Arunachal Pradesh) in 1981 representing a rapid growth of 159.86 per cent over the thirty-year period as against an increase of 89.37 percent of India as a whole during the same period. Some scholars tried to explain this growth (with special reference to Assam) as being an account of higher birth rate and reduced death rate only. Migration, according to them, contributes only marginally to this rapid growth. However, the figures of birth rate, death rate and migration cast doubts on this conclusion.⁴ Migration did play an important role throughout the period in 1951-1981. Had north-east India's population in 1951 increased at the national rate, it would have stood at 194.31 lakh in 1981. Since the figure (excluding Arunachal Pradesh) was 259.86 lakh, the excess of 65.55 lakh persons constituting 25.23 per cent of its 1981 population may be attributed to migrants and their descendants during the post-independence period. Adding the excess population of Arunachal Pradesh would increase the figure still further. No other region in post independence

India underwent such profound demographic changes with concomitant socio-economic implications.⁵

According to the 1971 census the tribal populations was 22.19 per cent of the total population of the region the proportion varying from 94.26 per cent in Mizoram, to 10.99 per cent in Assam.⁶ The Scheduled Tribes in northeast India fall into two broad categories namely the hill tribes living in the hilly area of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland and the hill districts of Assam, Manipur and Tripura and the plain tribes living in the valley areas of Assam, mainly the tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley.⁷ The two categories indicate differences in cultural characteristics. Most of the hill tribes remained isolated till the time to the British occupation. The plains tribes however have been living with other non-tribal communities. Since time immemorial and there has been a great amount of cultural give and take between the tribes and other neighbouring communities.⁸ Demographically Scheduled tribes in the hills from a majority in Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, while in the valley region of Assam, Manipur and Tripura they are a minority. The size of the tribes varies considerably: there are very small tribes with only a few hundred individuals and very large ones comprising several lakh of individuals. More than 55 per cent of the tribal population of the region was in the states of Assam (36.33 percent) and Meghalaya (18.53 per cent in 1971).⁹

Location quotient gives the highest concentration of the tribal population of district level in relation to the total population of the country in Mizoram. Nagaland and Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh followed

by Meghalaya and districts of Siang, Tirap and Qameng of Arunachal Pradesh.¹⁰ These refugees are secluded from man's habitat and are characterised by unattractive features such as rugged terrain, forests and non-agriculture land.¹¹ The tribals were pushed into these inhospitable pockets by people who had newly come and occupied the better grounds. In districts where the process of urbanisation has already started. Such as Goalpara, Lakhimpur, Karbi Anglong, North Cachar and Lohit tribal concentration is low. The urban areas where tribal concentration is least are Kamrup, Darrang, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Cachar and Imphal. The concentration of the tribal people in the hills and backward areas is of great significance for their cultural orientation and for the formulation of strategies for their social and economic development.¹²

Trend and Pattern of Tribal Population:

Despite its immense economic, social and political significance tribal demography in northeast India has received inadequate attention from the scholars. The main purpose of this section is to highlight certain important aspects of the trend and pattern of tribal population growth in the northeast in post-independence India.¹³

During 1961-1971 the rate of growth of tribal population in northeast India was lower than that of the general population from the fact that Assam was an exception it can be safely concluded that the migration of non-tribal population has taken place during the decade the tribal dominated areas of the northeast. This is also reflected by the fact that the percentage of the tribal population to total population is on the decline in all the units of the northeast except Assam.¹⁴ Even the 1971 Census

report admits that there was an influx of outsiders to certain parts of Arunachal Pradesh in spite of inner line restrictions. The influx of migrants into tribal areas of northeast India may be attributed mainly to economic factors. In spite of having a distinct social identity these migrants have faced no resistance from the tribal people because of their superior skill in agriculture, dairy farming, trade and commerce. They also work as wage labourers for which tribal people are not easily available. Out of 65.65 lakh total migrants in northeast India during 1951-1981 as estimated by us, nearly 24.43 lakh migrants belong to the state of Assam in 1971.¹⁵ This indicates the dimension of the migration problems in the rest of the region where the tribal population numerically dominated the total population. It not checked, this process of migration would create complicated social-economic and ethnic problems in the region in the near future.¹⁶

The natural increase of the tribal population in the region is very low.¹² The annual natural growth rate estimated from birth and death data for the villages of the region was 1.66 in Kanther Terang (Karbi village), 1.40 in Benshidua (Garo village), 0.58 in Hmnpui (Mizo village) 0.62 in Khonsa (Nokete village) and 3.44 in Mawtrum (Khasi village).¹⁷ Such slow natural growth rate of the general population in tribal areas also clearly supports the hypothesis that there is an influx of population from outside. This has become a problem of great concern for the tribal leaders of the region. This was manifested, for instance, in the Subansiri project (Arunachal Pradesh) of the Brahmaputra Board where the Board had to face a number of obstacles including the reservations of tribal

leaders about the future demographic consequences for the union territory.¹⁸ It is feared that if the project is implemented and the tribal population will become a minority in their own homeland. The fear of losing their ethnic identity looms large on the tribal's horizon.¹⁹

In Assam the percentage increase of the tribal population has jumped from 7.42 in 1951 to 44.55 in 1961 and 37.95 in 1971,²⁰ such irregular fluctuations cannot be explained only in terms of higher birth rate and lower death rate. Rather they are reflective of the greater consciousness of the tribals about their ethnic identity leading to more accurate reporting of their numbers in the last two censuses. District level data on the tribal population of Assam reveal some interesting details, which are difficult to explain without further primary investigation. It is seen for example that there was a drastic fall in the rate of increase in the tribal population of Cachar district from No. 09 percent in 1951-1961 to 8.57 percent in 1961-1971.²¹ Similarly the population change of the major tribes in the plains indicates that there was an abnormal percentage. Increase of Boro, Boro-Kachari and Sonowal group of 60.11 during 1951-1961 while there was a drop in this groups percentage increase to 21.64 during the next decade.²²

The rate of increase of Lalung was 17.84 per cent in 1951-1961, which jumped to 55.05 per cent in 1961-1971. The Miris showed a higher percentage increase of 50.24 and 58.79 in 1951-1961 and 1961-1971 respectively. These are some of the vital findings of the census that require further primary investigations to present the tribal demographic profile of Assam more accurately.²³

The general awareness of the important role of population factors in the ultimate process of the social-economic development of the northeastern region calls for a change in opinion about the National Population policy and its basic philosophy with respect to the population question.²⁴ The population behaviour of the northeast cannot be compared with that of other parts of India. Hence a regional approach should be attempted to tackle the problem more effectively. Therefore, the concept of a Regional Population Policy for northeast India requires immediate attention from scholars and policy makers.²⁵ Effective measures are also essential to ensure the economic and political future particularly for the tribal inhabitants of the region to preserve their socio-cultural identity. While many of these problems call for an intensification of economic and social development programmes, it seems very clear that further development and refinement of our national population policy should become a feature of planning during the coming years. Once the appropriate policy formulated and approved, it will be the prime responsibility of the government to implement – it effectively. The future socio-economic and political development of entire northeast India will largely be determined by such policy measures and their effective implementation. ²⁶

Tribal societies faced with modern innovative are in a state of tension. The conflict is between forces that seek to promote change and those that strive to maintain the status quo. The former try to throw the traditional structure of society off balance, and the latter seek to prevent it.²⁷ The extent of acceptance or rejection of innovative measures is a reflection of the extent of the balance between the opposing forces. When the

frameworks of traditional forces are weakened, modern political and social frameworks and institutions and many important indices of modernisation gather strength.²⁸ Among such are urbanisation, diversification and modern forms of political organisation. But organisation does not necessarily create institutions that would facilitate the transition of traditional societies to modernity. This is specially so in tribal societies where large parts of the societies remind tradition bound although they are continually drawn into wider, more differentiated and specialised institutional frameworks.²⁹

Modernisation in tribal societies is usually a gradual and slow process. This may be because of the democratic and classless nature of tribal society where no group or clan was viable enough to corner the benefits to the changed circumstances initially.³⁰ In the long run, a new middle class is bound to emerge. The attitudes and aspirations of this class, usually comprising the educated and commercialised section of the society are a break away from those of the traditional society. They have dual loyalties and a double role in the process of development. The middle class is the agent of change and the cause of the tension with the traditional society. An understanding of the nature of these classes and the pace and rapidity with which it emerges can lead us to an understanding of the tension between the forces of modernity and tradition. This paper tries to highlight the nature of these opposing forces in Mizoram particularly in the wake of the grouping of villages.³¹

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