Chapter III

Colonial Ethnography and the Tribal Question
The period core to this study concerns with the early associative politics and conscious construction of identity, but this chapter attempts to locate the long-term trends in the colonial official and non-official thought on the question of representation and identity as a backdrop to such developments. The formation of the Tribal League can be considered a landmark event in the sphere of organized politics in the province but its inception also points to a longer history of organized and unorganized politics from the beginning of the 20th century onwards. Essential to tracing these trends are the dominant ideas on the notion of ‘tribes’ as constructed in colonial ethnography.

After the occupation of Assam in 1826 the British encountered a society which was still in flux. It was a region, which had witnessed migrations of different groups and races of people over time; from the mainland of the Indian subcontinent and also from the surrounding hills of Burma and China. Therefore, the Brahmaputra valley was heterogeneous in its demographic composition. The migrations in 18th century from the neighbouring areas, continued till very late in the valley and for the colonial ethnographer and the administrator faced with this fluidity the task of understanding and classifying the people was difficult.

This chapter will deal with the earliest descriptive ethnographic accounts of various communities in Assam. Knowledge about the various tribes varied, determined by actual contact with the tribes at one level and on the other on mediated information and popularly held beliefs. The underlying intention of this section is to look into the representation of the tribes in colonial writings. The question will be considered in the light of the wider debate on the nature of colonial ethnographic data collection and the
question of hegemony and power connected with it. Recently, Indian historians and anthropologists have argued that colonial ethnographic literature could not have been the product of neutral and scientific observation. Recent works, as mentioned by Susan Bayly, focus on the “complex interactions between the institution of a manipulative colonial state, and the responses of Indians to the process of data collection by tribe, caste and community.” In these writings we see an effort to locate the Kacharis (Bodos), Mikirs (Karbis), Mishings (Miris), Lalungs (Tiwas), Rabhas and other communities within the framework of colonial ethnography. In most cases, observations were merely of a speculative nature; most of the works, barring a few, were general accounts of the province, its people and resources, and the customs and cultural practices. Among the more detailed empirical accounts like that of Endle’s account of the Kacharis and Lyall’s on the Mikirs, a better understanding of the communities is found. Discussion on the tribes are not central to the content of most of these works.

Construction of ‘Tribalness’ in Colonial Ethnography

Writing about the Kacharis, Miris, Lalungs, Rabhas and Mikirs was fraught with problems for the colonial ethnographers and officials. These communities could not be easily typified and classified by virtue of their not conforming to certain notions held by

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1 Susan Bayly, “Caste and Race in Colonial Ethnography” in Peter Robb ed. The Concept of Race in South Asia. (New Delhi, 1995), p.166
3 Rev Sidney Endle, The Kacharis (Delhi, 1990); Sir Charles Lyall, The Mikirs (Gauhati, n.d).
the colonial authorities on caste, tribe and race. The ethnographers, official and non-
official writers did not produce a uniform colonial discourse on the subject. As
colonialism penetrated and spread, regional societies in various provinces were studied
and what came to the fore in many cases challenged conventionally held notions of these
communities i.e. tribes are essentially savage and caste degenerating. But even then it
cannot be denied that the overarching structure for understanding the society at large was
caste as a monolithic institution, and in relation to it were located tribes and groups in a
complex interplay. A certain fluidity was believed to have existed at least in peripheral
region, in that groups, ethnographically distinctive, were conceded to be outside of the
stereotypes of fixed pan-Indian caste hierarchies and of an all pervading Brahmanical
system.

In these above-mentioned works we find the reflection of various ideas about
caste, tribe and race. They are located within the purview of certain dominant themes and
concerns of 19th century ethnography like dividing population into ‘savage’ and ‘wild’
casteless mountaineers and highlanders and caste bound people living in the plains,
‘Aryan’ and ‘non-Aryan’ people. Besides, people were also classified on environmental
grounds where ‘civilized’ and ‘savage’ were distinguished on the basis of habitat. Of
course there was no single stereotype to be ascribed to, as a variety of views existed. But
as in many ethnographical works of the 19th century, the term caste, tribe, nation and race
are used interchangeably and imprecisely. But “it is from this official mind, and the minds
of missionaries, medics and other professional men, that we can derive a much fuller
picture of the so-called ‘colonial’ understanding of India”. ⁴

⁴ Susan Bayly, “Caste and ‘Race’ in Colonial Ethnography”, p.188.
Attempts to understand the 'tribes' of the Brahmaputra valley always located the communities, such as Kacharis, Mikirs, Miris, Lalungs, Rabhas, in relation to the tribes who were 'purely' tribes and the caste Hindus who were 'civilised'. Officers and ethnographers like Hutton writing about tribes of Assam primarily focused on the hill tribes, which conformed to the colonial imagination of a "tribe" being "wild" and "savage". One of the dominant trends in these accounts is the presence of a contrasting hierarchisation between (a) the more 'wild' and 'savage' hill tribes, (b) tribes of the plains, and (c) the caste-Hindu communities. This discourse persisted as administration and capitalism penetrated even remote areas, despite the avowed policy of non-interference in the hills, and the terms "hill tribes" and "valley people", which implicitly connoted certain essential contrasts lost much of its substance. But still the civilisation discourse treated people as different and largely the official and ethnographic perception was one of opposed pairs: one cultured, the other barbaric, savage; one refined and advanced, the other primitive and backward. But as observed by James Scott,

"These pairs, of course, are the pairs as valley elites see them. If we adopt a hill perspective we get different pairs: one is free and autonomous, the other is in bondage and subordinate; one is nominally an equal of others, the other is socially inferior, one is physically mobile, the other is hemmed in by officials and state institutions."\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Administratively, the hill areas were managed differently. The areas were Lushai Hills, North Eastern Frontier Province, Naga Hills; see Census of 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 for the categorisation.
\(^7\) James C. Scott, "Hills and Valley in Southeast Asia...or Why the State is the Enemy of People who Move Around...or...Why Civilisations Can't Climb Hills", Symposium: Development and the Nation State, Washington University, February, 2000 (Unpublished Paper), p.3
For the ethnographers, the tribes of the plains were distinct from the rest of the plains’ population in certain aspects. Racially they were distinctively Mongoloid or Austro-Mongoloid and easily distinguishable from the Aryan population. Linguistically also speech was not ‘Aryan’ but was classified as Tibeto-Burman and inferior to Assamese and Bengali, which were recognised as Aryan languages. But in the spheres of religion, culture and lifestyle distinctiveness was not easily observable and pinned down. These colonial perceptions reveal, though sometimes distorted, a great deal about the fluidity and complexity of the societies. And to a great extent they ineffectually tried to understand the confusing dynamics and the continual subtle changes in a heterogeneous society. A great deal of contradiction prevailed over the question as to what made a tribe. Also, ethnographers and data-collectors found it difficult to pin down ideas about the religion, and agricultural practices with precision. And though many of these ethnographers, and officials realised that the communities which they wanted to categorize as ‘tribes’ did not strictly conform to their notion of a ‘tribe’, they continued to focus on certain features like religion and economy imagined and created some others to maintain the usage of the category of the ‘tribe’. As mentioned earlier identifying the tribes within the dynamics of social change, in opposition to caste Hindus were not a simple process but a problematic issue. Obviously ‘tribes’ were not easily categorised if social realities and practices were considered.

Overt confrontation between the colonial state and the Kacharis in the 1861 riots led to a growing administrative concern within the official circle about the administration of the tribes. The murder of Lt. Singer in Phulagoree in 1861 by tribal peasants evoked serious responses, which also characterised the society and the rioters. In a letter to the
Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Major H. Hopkinson, Agent to the Governor General traces the origin “to apprehensions which had been excited in respect to the import to be levied on Pan cultivation, and to the duty on Arts, Trades and Dealings." To a great extent unrest among the tribal peasantry was aroused by the prohibition of opium cultivation in 1860. Government reports, on the riots, state the growing concern among the tribal peasants regarding taxation. They repeatedly petitioned and approached the Deputy Commissioner to state their grievances. These proceedings report the failure of the administration to redress these grievances, which created a situation of ferment. The peasantry organised mels, meetings where people gathered, often armed with lathis, to protest. Lt. Singer was killed by such a gathering when he tried to impose order and disarm them. For the first time, after the murder of Lt. Singer in Phulagoree in 1861, the Kacharis and their administration was seriously considered within the framework of direct and indirect administration. This riot and protest led to the characterisation of the Kacharis as being linguistically ‘semi-savage’ and ‘savage’ in the administrative discourse. The Kacharis were ‘semi-savage’ “speaking a language of their own and are quite distinct in race from the Bengallee and Assamese…” In the bureaucracy their turbulent nature led to various characterisation like that the “Cacharies were impatient of taxation, and a leaven of the blood-thirsty spout…. Thus, in suppressing the riot the colonial authorities came into direct contact with the Kacharis and the unfamiliarity and distinctiveness from the Assamese and Bengalis struck them.

Various concerns and notions shaped the discourse on the tribes, dominant themes

8 Home Public B, 13th June, 1862, Nos.83-87 (National Archives of India, Delhi).
10 Home Public B, 13th June, 1862, Nos.83-87 (NAI).
11 Ibid.
being that of social and cultural changes which accompanied the broader question of evolution from 'savagery' to civilisation and the various agencies of such changes. Undoubtedly the 1861 Phulguri riots formed an important landmark in the history of the growing interest on 'tribes'. In later works, especially after authority was strongly imposed and the people controlled the characterisation of the Kacharis also altered remarkably. J.D. Anderson, characterises the Kacharis settled in the Duars as "like most aboriginal races of Assam, cheery, good-natured, semi-savage folk; candid, simple, trustful, but incorrigibly disrespectful according to Indian notions of good manners."\textsuperscript{12}

**Savagery and Civilisation: Colonial Stereotypes**

The tribes of the Brahmaputra valley were generally perceived as a contrast with the communities in the hills surrounding the region, whom the colonial authorities encountered in confrontational situations. The history of the relationship between the British and various hill communities was one of tension and conflict and it was crucial to the ethnographic characterization of the tribal communities in the Plains. The valley and its people were situated in that contrast as observed in one of the earlier works:

"Such are the tribes surrounding the valley of Assam, and the exact position which each tribe bears to the Government of British India is not easily defined. Some are entirely subjects, and are good subject: some are entirely independent, and most uncomfortable neighbours, but they are included in our political system as against the outer world: some pay revenue, some receive blackmail, some are pagan savages, some civilised religionists of one of the known types."\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Endle, *The Kacharis*, Introduction by J.D. Anderson, p.XIII
\textsuperscript{13} R.N. Cust, "On the Non-Aryan Languages Of India", Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, January, 1877, p.15
One of the dominant characterizations of the ‘tribes’ of Brahmaputra Valley is that of a ‘semi-savage’ and ‘pagan’. In contrast the hill communities of the mountains and highlands eastwards were categorised as “a race of downright savages and Pagans, ‘of most vindictive disposition and blood-thirsty, treacherous’ and extremely ‘revengeful’. They were pacified through a system of blackmail by the Government of India to compensate for the lost privilege of making raids on the peaceful settlers in the valley. Infact, these raids conducted by some of the hill communities was a thorn in the flesh of the British administration and hence the classification of such groups as non-peaceful. According to J.D. Anderson, “the Kacharis are the most innocent and kindly of semi-savage people.” Likewise, in the introduction of The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley L.A. Waddell, while celebrating the wild region with a rich variety of ‘savage tribes’ also talks about the more ‘civilized tribes’ living along the river, Brahmaputra. Lyall also characterises the Mikirs in opposition to the hill tribes. According to him “the leading features of the race, in contrast with other hill tribes of Assam, is its essentially unwarlike and pacific character.” And therefore tribes like the Mikirs though not actually practising “head-hunting” as the “savage hill tribes” were in “the early stage of the wandering horde, without permanent village.” In sharp contrast were the tribes of the frontier, like the Nagas were qualified as “atrocious savages and Pagans” and beyond

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14 Ibid., pp.12-13  
15 Ibid., p.XVIII  
16 L.A. Waddell,(1854-1938) Medical officer in the Indian Government service also mentioned as traveller and orientalist.  
17 L.A. Waddell, “Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley, p.1  
18 Sir Charles Lyall. The Mikirs, p.151  
20 Ibid., p.30
that "numerous clans of turbulent highlanders".\textsuperscript{21} And among the Nagas "the most powerful and warlike, as it is also the most enterprising, intelligent, and civilised, so to say, is the turbulent Angami".\textsuperscript{22} Another tribe the Kookies or Lunctas further eastwards were again noted for their 'predatory excursions' were the 'least civilised' and were "all hunters and warriors".\textsuperscript{23} The early years of frontier expansion in the province were largely aimed for the creation a 'safe' border for the plains. As John Butler expresses his regret and official frustration about the pattern of political relations: "...one long, sickening story of open insults and defiance, bold outrages, and cold-blooded murders on the one side, and long-suffering forbearance, forgiveness, concession, and unlooked-for favours on the other..."\textsuperscript{24}

Further, W.W.Hunter, Waddell, and Endle characterized the tribes at another level as "semi-hinduised". Behind such characterization lies colonial notions about the society of Assam and how populations were to be classified and enumerated. The causes of 1861 riots by the Kacharis were traced by the colonial authorities to the nature of constitution of society in Assam which was 'heterogeneous', hence to accommodate their stereotype of 'wild' tribes, it became essential for the colonial ethnographer to perceive it as societies in transition. Major Henry Hopkinson locates the dynamism in the constant migration of hill tribes towards the plains

"the hill tribes who have never seen a white face...Hill tribes who have settled

\textsuperscript{21} R.N. Cust, "On the Non-Aryan Languages Of India", p.15
\textsuperscript{22} Captain John Butler, "Rough notes on the Angami Nagas and their Language", \textit{Journal of the Asiatic Society}, No. IV, 1875, p.308
\textsuperscript{23} John Macrae, "Account of the Kookies, or Lunctas", \textit{Asiatick Researches}, Vol.VII, 3\textsuperscript{rd} Edition, 1807, pp.184-85
\textsuperscript{24} Captain John Butler, op.cit, p.312
for some generation in the plains and who, as they spread, intermingle, at their point of contact, with the timid enervate, intriguing oppressive priest-ridden descendants of the Bengal and Shan colonists who are known as the Assamese.\textsuperscript{25}

Though it was meant to characterize only the Kacharis, such an image was provided, by and large, for all other plains-dwelling tribes. Waddell likewise in the introduction of his book appeals to ethnographers and scientists to record the practices of such ‘prehistoric’ societies still extant, but rapidly changing in face of “our advancing civilization.”\textsuperscript{26} He also quotes Col. Woodthorpe “…of late all the various wild tribes are fast losing their characteristic customs and adopting those of their Hinduised Assamese neighbours so quickly.”\textsuperscript{27}

Another important aspect of the discourse in Waddell, Dalton and others\textsuperscript{28} is the migration from the hills to the plains. The eastern frontier region where the Brahmaputra entered the valley was perceived to be ‘linguistically, politically, and ethnologically’ significant, because the ‘last and weakest’ ‘Aryan’ influence was met by a ‘Shan counter current’.\textsuperscript{29} The rationale behind these shifts in population of the ‘border tribes into the settled valleys’ was often an ‘unwilling’ move to escape wars and conflicts within groups.\textsuperscript{30} And also that:

“The rich fertile central valley and its chief tributaries seem always to have attracted the more powerful tribes from the mountains… luxurious living inevitably resulted in their degeneration and absorption by the old settlers of the

\textsuperscript{25} Home Public B, 13 June 1862, Nos. 83-87 (NAI), From Major Henry. Hopkinson, Agent, Governor General, Northeast Frontier to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal.

\textsuperscript{26} Waddell, The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley, p.2.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p.4

\textsuperscript{28} Census Reports of Assam for the years; 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941.

\textsuperscript{29} R.N. Cust, op.cit. p.14

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
plains, eventuating in their being conquered sooner or later by a more active
horde of mountaineers, who again in their turn succumbed in like manner to a
fresher batch of invading hillmen.”

Thus parallel with the history of the region as a “long tale of violent inter-tribal
conflict, invasion and cruel extermination”, was this notion of ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’,
‘Aryan’ and ‘Mongoloid’ races. The colonial ethnographers, writing on Assam, found the
category of ‘race’ more useful in classifying the varied population than ‘caste’. When
conducting the census of 1901, B.C. Allen remarked that contrary to the functional notion
of caste held by Ibbetson, Nesfield, Risley, “Caste is not necessarily connected with
occupation, because we find that in Assam proper, it is almost entirely matter a of race”. Such a view has been reiterated in the 1931 census of caste in Assam being a racial
division. We find from Dalton to Lyall, that ‘caste’ and ‘race’ were used imprecisely. The
discussion mostly focused on the division of the people as ‘Aryan’– ‘Hindus’ and
‘Mongoloid’– ‘Animists’. Crucial to identifying the ‘tribes’ as ‘Mongoloid’ was to locate
the history of the origin of the tribes. There was a unanimous agreement that the tribes
migrated from the hills, which was probably derived from the notion that ‘tribals’
‘aborigines’ ‘semi-savage’ people are necessarily confined to forest and hills, and that the
plains were not their natural habitat. Waddell discusses this phenomenon in the
introduction of his book. They also point to two seemingly contradictory processes in
the movement of the tribes. First, the regression of the tribes into the hills “in face of

32 Waddell, *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, pl.
33 Census of Assam. 1901, Vol.1 (Report)
34 Waddell, *Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, p.2.
advancing civilization. And secondly, a reverse trend of progression of ‘tribes’ to “the rich fertile central valley and its chief tributaries” which “seem always to have attracted the more powerful tribes from the mountains”. Hunter, Endle, Lyall, and others have stressed on the question of the movement of the ‘tribes’. If we consider the question historically the two above mentioned processes can be located in two different periods. Dalton to a certain extent discusses these migrations in the specific time context. He focused on the early migrations that took place in the history, the Kacharis, Chutiyas and Ahoms who settled down in the plains. But the process of migration and movement of population did continue to very recent times, as late as early twentieth century. The discussion largely focuses on the principal groups of people the Ahoms, the Chutiyas and the Kacharis, who dominated the medieval political history.

According to Dalton, Kamrup or Assam was among the earliest settlements of the eastward expanding Aryans, and simultaneously the Chutiyas “adopted Hindu customs, and placed themselves under the tutelage of Brahmanical priests...” and the Ahoms too who migrated to Assam in the thirteenth century, “became proselytes to Hinduism at an early period, and, adopting the language and customs of Hindus”. Supposed evidence that there was conversion as early as the ancient period often led the ethnographers to speculate on the nature of Hinduism and ‘tribal’ religion in the valley. Rev.S.Endle questions the nature of the spread of Hinduism within the process of ‘conversion to

36 Ibid. p.9.
37 E.T.Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, p.78.
38 Ibid. p.77.
39 Ibid. p.76.
Hinduism' which followed the establishment of a kingdom. He writes, “it would seem that the movement was a very limited and restrictive one, confined indeed very largely to the Raja and the member of the court.”\textsuperscript{40} Such an argument of course has to be dealt with cautiously, considering that it was made by a missionary, engaged in proselytizing of the Kacharis to his own faith. Ethnographic writings on the status of the ‘tribes’ in the Brahmaputra valley in late nineteenth century categorize their religion as “semi-Hinduised.” According to Dalton therefore, conjecturally speaking, it was probably the ruler who strictly adhered to the dicta of caste-divided Brahmanical order at his court. The mass of the ‘tribal’ people probably practised a religion which probably had elements of Hinduism, due to constant influence but retained elements of their old faith. The irrational part of their religion was ascribed generally to all pagan religions, ‘common to all savages, fear’.\textsuperscript{41} As Dalton points the ‘Hindu’ influence was so strong among the tribes like the Chutiyas and Ahoms that other than the physical distinctiveness of race nothing differentiated them from the caste Hindus.\textsuperscript{42} The influence of living with a caste Hindu population was obvious at various levels and to different degrees. Sometimes it was in the sphere of religion as Hunter recorded,

“The Miris in the plains have generally abandoned the vague religious notions of their ancestors and adopted ideas put into their heads by the Assamese Gosain or Brahmanical priest, that each of them choose to adopt as their Guru or spiritual instructor…”\textsuperscript{43}

Waddell writing much later on the Miris also comments on evolution from the

\textsuperscript{40} Endle, \textit{The Kacharis}, p.7
\textsuperscript{41} Captain John Butler, op. Cit., p.315
\textsuperscript{42} Dalton, \textit{Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal}, pp.76-77.
\textsuperscript{43} Hunter. \textit{A Statistical Account of Assam}, p.343.
‘maternal stage’ to a ‘paternal stage’. In fact for him the Miris manifest a tribe in ‘transition’ from matriarchy to patriarchy, from a ‘primitive stage of society...’ to one in which descent is traced through the father, as in civilised society. The levels of change and shift in beliefs and customs varied greatly from ‘tribe’ to ‘tribe’ and there were regional variations as well.

Different ethnographers observed wide ranging changes in the lifestyle of the ‘tribes’ – from dressing, to shelter and mode of cultivation. These changes were located within the purview of the ‘tribes’ settling in the plains and their interaction with the ‘caste Hindu’ neighbours or the impact of colonialism as well. Hunter, Waddell, Endle and others in their accounts mentioned that the Kacharis, Mikirs, Miris had moved away slowly from their traditional way of dressing and constructing houses. Hunter’s description of the Mikirs of Nowgong mentions that earlier the “practice was to go nearly naked, although a few are now well clad; the men in waist clothes wrapped around the loins and hanging down to the knee (dhuti), and the females in a species of petticoat (mekhalas), in imitation of the Assamese.” Waddell in his account mentioned that the Miris were “gradually merging into Hinduised habits so far as to live in mud huts built on the ground in the neighbourhood of the Assamese” and left living in houses built on piles. Again when recording the Mikirs he observed that in the vicinity of the Hinduised Assamese the Mikirs were rapidly giving up their ‘primitive habits’. At Kamrup near the Assamese settlements he found that Mikirs were not only “giving up their nomadic habits and forming fixed villages, but have abandoned their communal houses, and adopted

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45 Ibid. p.3.
46 Ibid. emphasis mine.
48 Waddell, Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley, p.59.
separate houses for each family...". Likewise, "they are adopting the style of Assamese dresses, and bazaars-made clothes..." Hence, we find in Waddell's account, the characterisation of the Mikirs as a "wandering horde, without permanent village", even as he mentions that they were giving up their nomadic habits and settling down permanently.

For the colonial ethnographer, comprehending the changes and shifts in the social and cultural sphere of the tribals was more difficult than understanding the changes in their material lifestyle. Here ideas, beliefs, customs did not conform to strict defining lines or boundaries, and the grey area of subtle changes and of overlapping belief-systems made it very difficult for the ethnographers to document concrete information. The 'tribes' of the Brahmaputra Valley mentioned in most of the accounts are called 'semi-hinduised' but some like the Kacharis are also referred to, in the words of Mrs.P.H.Moore, as "a tribe of demon worshippers." Endle despite his documenting the influence of Hinduism on the Kachari race categorises them as distinctly 'animistic'. But he also writes about the extensive pantheon of the Kacharis and speculates that "only a comparatively small number are strictly of tribal or national origin, many having obviously been borrowed from their neighbours." But the term 'animist' as defined in the census connotes a loose set of beliefs: "animism can, however, be more readily defined by the negative method, as the creed of those members of the aboriginal tribes who did not claim to be followers of the main recognised religions." Therefore religion

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49 Ibid. p.31
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., p.30.
52 P.H.Moore, Twenty Years in Assam, (Calcutta, 1901). p.81.
53 Endle, The Kacharis, p.33
54 Ibid. p.35.
55 Census of Assam, 1901, p.46.

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53 Endle, The Kacharis, p.33
54 Ibid. p.35.
55 Census of Assam. 1901, p.46.
of Boikuntho (Vaikunta, Vishnu's Paradise) and Norok (Naraka, hell); but these conceptions do not play much part in their views of a life to come. Better known, and more often mentioned, is Jom Recho (Jam, Yama Raja), the lord of spirits with whom the dead remain below ground.61

Assimilation and Its Contestation

In these accounts, the notion of a 'tribe' being 'semi-hinduised', or being under the influence of Hinduism was often qualified by statements that these influences do not transform the tribal into a 'Hindu' and that his beliefs and practices makes him distinguishable from others. In Endle's work on religion, culture and social practices are qualified with various illustrations on how parallel to the processes of Hinduisation was the contestation of such an influence and assertion of a 'Kachari' identity. The Kacharis "though largely hinduised, they still form a large, perhaps the main constituent element in the permanent population of the province. To this day one often comes across villages bearing the name of 'Kacharigaon', the inhabitants of which are completely Hinduised, though for some considerable time they would seem to have retained their Kachari customs and culture, unimpaired."62 Preservation of the culture and social identity, or at least the imagined satisfaction that it was preserved, was more evident in the outlying parts of the province. Lyall also discusses the persistence of certain 'tribal' customs within the Mikirs despite their tendency to 'assimilate', as mobile, nomadic people tend to do. According to him the Mikirs, being a small tribe are "extremely homogenous."63

Unlike, other tribes the Khasis, Kacharis, Kukis, Nagas, the Mikirs did not fight

61 Ibid.
63 Lyall, The Mikirs, p.152.
internecine wars and therefore did not suffer disintegrating influences.\textsuperscript{64} “Whether in north Cachar, the Jaintia Hills, Nowgong, or the Mikir Hills, their tribal institutions, their language, and their national character are identical and they pursue their peaceful husbandry in the same manner as their forefathers”.\textsuperscript{65} Despite their borrowings, especially linguistically, “they retain together with these borrowed features, a sufficiently definite stock of original characteristics.”\textsuperscript{66} Though generally as Endle notes “the Kacharis of Assam still cling to their national customs, speech, religion.”\textsuperscript{67} in certain areas they could not be distinguished from the rest of the population. For instance, in the sphere of ‘domestic’ life, “the Kacharis of Darrang do not differ very materially from their Hindu neighbours, to the subordinate castes of whom they are no doubt very closely allied.”\textsuperscript{68}

Colonial ethnographers and writers also evinced interest on the loss of customs and language due to hinduisation. According to Endle, Kacharis who had become “more or less hinduised”\textsuperscript{69} gave up using their mother tongue. He also locates the disappearance of certain customs like the provision of bachelor barracks as a movement away from their ‘tribal lifestyle’ to a more ‘civilised’ way. And as Waddell observed, the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy reflected among other developments, the gradual disappearance of practices like ‘couvade’.\textsuperscript{70} Though in some cases the would be bride-groom continued

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} S.Endle, \textit{The Kacharis}, p.8
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, p. I I
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, p 5.
\textsuperscript{70} Couvade is a ritual where the husband goes through the ceremony of mock childbirth, considered by colonial ethnographer as remnants of a matriarchal society.
to serve for his wife for a time in the house of the girl’s mother.\textsuperscript{71} As a result of the communication with the caste Hindu Assamese society, the internal structure of the organisation in the ‘tribe’ was altered to a certain extent, though not radically. Like Endle writing in the early part of twentieth century mentions “totem has become a thing of the past”,\textsuperscript{72} though not obsolete, some regard for it as still surviving. But it was clear from such information as was available to him, that the “internal and tribal organisation of the Kacharis (Bara) race rested in early days, very largely at least on a totemistic basis.”\textsuperscript{73} It is clearly evident from Endle and other accounts that the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley had experienced a flow of various ideas and cultural practices which were incorporated in one or the other form, and probably rejected at times according to the nuances of the local socio-economic conditions.

Marriage rituals were also observed to be fast losing the rigidity of a ‘tribal’ society. Restrictions of endogamous marriage were generally not observed.\textsuperscript{74} Lyall while discussing marriage rules and polygamy mentioned changes, which came about mainly because of extraneous factors. He tentatively concluded “monogamy is the general rule, and that cases of polygamy have occurred in consequence of the effect of the example of the Assamese, and the weakening of tribal sanctions.”\textsuperscript{75} The complexity of the situation is also reflected in Mrs.P.H.Moore’s account of missionary activity amongst the Mikirs.

\textsuperscript{71} Waddell, *Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, p.45 and 59. According to Endle among the Kacharis the institution of marriage was one of the first to be influenced by Hinduism. Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.29.
\textsuperscript{72} Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.29
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.p.24
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Lyall, *The Mikirs*, p.20
"The Mikirs have some curious customs. The Mikirs sacrifice chickens, goats and pigs to the demons to keep them from doing them harm."\textsuperscript{76} At the same time the Mikirs cremate the dead like the Hindus.\textsuperscript{77}

In fact in the public festivals there were some institutions which were shared by both the Caste-Hindu and the ‘tribals’. Bihu was celebrated by the caste Hindus and ‘tribals’, though the forms of celebration varied. Dalton calls the ‘Magh’ and ‘Baisakh’ Bihu the two national festivals of the Assamese. The observances connected with these festivals have nothing to do with the Hindu religion...\textsuperscript{78} Endle gives a vivid account of the ‘Baisakh’ ‘April’ Bihu, “the origin of which it is not easy to account for, seem to be a “saturnalia” of much more objectionable character. The people abandon themselves freely both to drunkenness and other forms of licentiousness and cases of known assault and riots have been known to accompany and follow these gatherings.\textsuperscript{79} But these are not “distinctively tribal festivals characteristic of the Kacharis”\textsuperscript{80} because both the caste Hindu and the Kacharis celebrate the festivity of Bihu.

The similarity and commonality was also evident in character and the mentality of the common people, “the rustic Hindus of the Brahmaputra valley are in temperament and habits very like the cheerful and smiling Bodo folk”.\textsuperscript{81} Ethnographers like Dalton have testified to the indistinguishability of the population. Yet, we find in the writings of others (Waddell, Endle, Hamilton, P. H. Moore), the existence of beliefs and practices that often

\textsuperscript{76} P.H.Moore, \textit{Twenty Years in Assam}, p.150
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., p.149
\textsuperscript{78} Dalton, \textit{Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal}, p.80.
\textsuperscript{79} Endle, \textit{The Kacharis}, p.50.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid. p.49.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.; Introduction by J.D.Anderson.p.XIII
differentiated the populace. That is why most of these accounts mention the prevalence of witch-doctors (Ojhas) even within hinduised tribes. Likewise, Waddell observed that

"... till now those tribes of the valley who pose as Hindus especially the Ahoms, Koch and Kacharis are scarcely to be distinguished by a casual observer from the Bengalis in dress, manners and language except for their lighter colour and Mongoloid eyes."^82

In the sphere of prescription or proscription norms of Hinduism, these communities did not always conform to the colonial ethnographers’ image of an ‘Aryan’ ‘Hindu’ and therefore were called ‘semi-hinduised’ or ‘semi-savage’ or ‘semi-aboriginal’.

One of the areas where these people functioned in different spaces and hence negated the rigidity was the notion about proscribed food, and ethnographers observed it with interest, because food clearly defined in the public and private spheres the ideas of ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’. Angus Hamilton writes about the presence of such practices among Miris who had settled in Assam proper and described themselves as Hindus “at the same time they have liberal notions with regard to diet, eating pork and drinking rice beer without hesitation. Where they are not Hindus, they are Animists, sacrificing to the sun, moon and earth.”^83 But as mentioned by Dalton, conversion to Hinduism and more specifically to Vaishnavism entailed abstinence from forbidden food, “the Soronias keep fowls, but not pigs and will not eat beef; they are cleanly in their habits.”^84 The proselytisation was carried out with one simple but powerful or earnest request of making them clean. But “they do not renounce the devil and all his works, but promise to abstain

^82 Waddell, Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley, p.11.
^83 Hunter, Statistical Account of Assam, p.183.
^84 Dalton, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, p.82, (emphasis added).
from pig and live cleanly."\textsuperscript{85} Satisfied, their Hindu gurus did not interfere in certain practices like dancing “nor do they attempt to alter their customs” such as late marriage.\textsuperscript{86}

Even the Mikirs inhabiting in the fringes of caste Hindu villages were going through changes in customs, though they did not employ Hindu priests, the changes were tangible. The “foremost of all caste distinctions in practice, namely, what a person may eat or drink is beginning to show itself.”\textsuperscript{87} But from the illustrations provided by Waddell, it is also evident that such notions were not yet strongly entrenched and there were regular subversions of such norms. Though still believing and practising rituals and customs integral to their social structure there were simultaneous trends, which increasingly appeared to the colonial ethnographer deviation from a particular way of life. This complex situation was explained as the ‘tribes’ “adopting many of the externals of Hinduism.”\textsuperscript{88} And the existence of tribal customs to contest the influence of Hinduism was regarded as a positive cultural symptom by Endle.

“... They help to keep the people to some extent beyond the influence of the destructive vortex of Hinduism, in which their simple primitive virtues might otherwise be so readily engulfed, and the adoption of which in whole or in part is invariably accompanied by a grave and deep seated deterioration in conduct and character.”\textsuperscript{89}

This leads us to another area of common ethnological convictions about the formation of a racial ‘composite’ through the merging of people from separate racial ‘stock’ and ‘very unequal degrees of civilisation, which was racial degeneration. Such an

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{87} Waddell, Tribes of Brahmaputra Valley, p.3.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., p.45
\textsuperscript{89} Endle, The Kacharis, p.53.
idea is evident in most of the writings and essentially derives from the idea that racial
intermixing, migration from the hills to the plains and influence in religious beliefs
adversely affects the composition of a ‘tribe’. As mentioned earlier, Major Henry
Hopkinson wrote about the tribes being “in contact with the timid enervate, intriguing,
oppressive, priest-ridden descendants of the Bengal and Shan colonists who are known as
the Assamese.” 90 Waddell discussing the migration of the tribes from the hills to the
plains mentions that the ‘tribes’ that settled down in the plains “inevitably” degenerated,
due to the “more luxurious living” and were absorbed by the old settlers of the plains. 91
Such migration has resulted in a considerable intermingling of races in the valley proper
and therefore none of the races preserve the ‘purity’, “whereas the mountain tribes appear
to have retained their purity of stock to a much greater degree.” 92 Migration to the plains
also located within the purview of changing habits or acquiring ‘evil’ ‘habits’, due to
which the tribe might lose its vitality and physical strength. According to Mrs. P. H
Moore, “one sad result of the Mikirs coming to the plains is that they are fast learning to
take opium” 93 which degenerates this weak minded people.

According to Susan Bayly “the environmental theme was then taken up by
Victorian ethnologists as a part of the language of racial classification in which so-called
‘civilized’ and ‘savage’ races were distinguished from one another on the basis of
habitat.” 94 Such an explanation was crucial for classifying the varied population of the

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90 Home Public (B) 13th June, 1862, Nos. 83-87.
91 Waddell, Tribes of Brahmaputra Valley, p.9.
92 Ibid.
93 P.H. Moore, Twenty Years in Assam, p.150.
area and also as a justification for colonial rule and direct intervention. The climatic influence being crucial on the temperament and disposition of the people which led to a differentiated population of caste Hindus, 'semi-hinduised' ‘semi-savage’ tribes of the plains and the ‘blood thirsty and warlike tribes’ in the surrounding mountains. Ethnographers drew various conclusions especially with regard to change of lifestyle among the tribes. Essentially, for all of them, migration to the plains corrupts the tribes, but it also undeniably and inevitably brings it closer to ‘civilisation’, as Waddell mentions in his introduction and it leads to various changes through the influence of Hinduism, the colonial state and the missionaries. Influence of Hinduism was essentially not perceived as a moral progress from the ‘primitive stage’ of the tribal societies but only as a step towards civilisation and hierarchised caste society of the Hindus.

'Tribals’ and the Colonial State

Colonial ethnographers by and large saw the colonial state as the only redeemer of the ‘tribals’, civilising to free them from the fetters of a caste based Hindu society. The paternalistic attitude reinforced with the ideas of civilising is evident in all writings. Hamilton writing on the Miri and the Mishmi mission observes that

"ever since the advent of the British in Assam, the Miris have shown themselves amenable to civilising influences, though this quality is not shown by the hill tribes who still preserve no little independence.”

The hill tribes because of the geographical distance and absence of direct administration were found less amenable to the civilising efforts. Captain John Butler

noted with regret that despite long, arduous colonial effort towards ‘improving, civilising, and weaning’ the Nagas from their ‘accursed thirst for blood’ very little changed.\textsuperscript{96} According to him so deep rooted was the Naga nature that civilising influence of education on them was only ‘skin deep, superficial’ and once back in their native villages would lapse into the behaviour of ‘rapine and cruelty’, rather than providing assistance to the colonial government as ‘agents of peace’. In fact this independence of the ‘war like’, ‘head hunting’ hill tribes and problems created by geographical isolation in administration made the colonial authorities look at the ‘plains tribes’ as ‘amenable’. But administration of the plains tribes also presented severe problems occasionally and the colonial government seriously considered separate administrative set-up for them. The colonial government had followed a policy of non-interference in the hills, which came to be seriously debated because of the ‘threat’ that the authorities felt in conducting commercial and survey operations. Officials active in the direct operations in the hills opined that non-interference had failed and each year the loss of human lives continued. It was felt that direct action was required so that the colonial project to “induce these savages to amend their ways, to convert their ‘spears into ploughshares’.\textsuperscript{97} After the 1861 revolt the idea of restoring the local administration to the traditional ‘tribal’ leaders was discussed. The system would have functioned as in the hills:

\footnotesize{“Now if there is one rule more certain than another in dealing with such tribes, it is that they must be managed through their own chiefs or head-men, that there shall be no native officers of any stranger race between them and their European rulers. Unless it be a few selected for their special tact and influence in dealing

\textsuperscript{96} Captain John Butler, Op.Cit., p. 320
\textsuperscript{97} Captain John Butler, Op.Cit., p. 312

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The administrative concern about 'tribes' arose from the paternalistic colonial attitude to safeguard the 'weak', 'vulnerable' plains tribe from the caste Hindus. The administration of the district was managed by the Assamese or Bengalis, "the omlah, the police, the local revenue officers are all one or the other, and in their eyes the Cacharies and their cognates are little better than outcaste..."99, and were exploited by them. The argument in favour of paternalism and relative isolation was more evident in the works of Endle and Mrs.P.H.Moore, the missionaries. According to Endle, the Kacharis by staying away from the corrupting influence of civilisation has preserved his innocent self, but:

"his innocence is the innocence of ignorance, not the innocence of experience and he is as a rule free from certain forms of evil because in his village life he has never come under any temptations to indulge in them."100

Contact with civilisation as manifested in a degraded form in the caste Hindu society or even "when brought into contact with ... civil and criminal courts,"101 there is degeneration in character and the much-celebrated innocence is lost. The strong comment about the role of colonial civil and criminal courts and deep faith in customary justice might be seen as an urge to preserve the 'tribal identity' in a traditional form. The colonial authorities assumed the role of moral guardians to the 'tribes', safeguarding them from Hinduism and the hegemonic influence of Assamese society. Colonial intervention was not only by means of administration but also through the opening up of communication between remote areas, extension of tea industry and other European interests in Assam. All these together, encouraged interaction, ended isolation and

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98 Home Public (B) 13th June, 1862, Nos. 83-87.
99 Ibid.
100 Endle, The Kacharis, p.3.
101 Ibid.

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brought them in contact with ‘civilisation’.

The modern missionary activity among the tribe was essentially a part of the civilising mission. Though missionary activity sometimes preceded and often went together with colonialism, the relationship was not always favoured equivocally. Though the missionary work especially the spread of education was supposed have civilised the tribes as appreciated by Anderson in the case of the Kacharis, and P.R.T. Gurdon for the Khasis, Hutton thought that in most cases it essentially drove a ‘sword of dissension’. Directly transforming customary practices the missionaries created a definite rift between the people who converted and those who did not, sometimes leading to conflict.

Mrs. P.H. Moore writing about the American Baptist missionaries work among the Mikirs discusses about the hindrances in proselytising one of which was “the drinking customs of the animistic tribe, such as Nagas, Garos, Rabhas, Mikirs, Miris” and opium addiction. But since the Mikirs were a ‘timid race’ it was easy to set them in “right direction” with missionary influence. Endle on the other hand celebrates the British colonial government and the missionaries too. He illustrates the “benevolent influence of Pax Britannica to be found in the wide realm of India” evident in the domestic functioning of “a Kachari woman working placidly and contentedly at the weaving loom” and freeing the people from exploitation, slavery and cruel raids. The role of the colonial state in its efforts to tax home-made liquor “phatika” (crude whisky) is also lauded by Endle which according to him, is harmful to the physical, mental and moral

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102 J. H. Hutton, op. cit., p.viii
103 P.H. Moore, Twenty Years in Assam, p.200.
104 Ibid., p.150.
106 Ibid.
well-being of the Kachari race. Significantly, he compares the rice beer (madh, zau) drinking habit of the Kacharis to the drinking habits of working man in more civilised lands, for example, England. For Waddell, the British occupation of Assam after the Burmese war of 1824, broke the relative isolation of these communities and gave a fillip to the process of hinduisation, and also 'civilised' these 'tribes'. Discussing the dressing style, he mentions that adoption of the Assamese dress and mill made cheap cotton goods from Manchester and Bombay, which were displacing the native cloth, was “more ample and decent.” That the advent of colonialism brought these ‘tribes’ closer to ‘civilisation’ is evident from such illustrations.

While the civilising effects of the colonial state was lauded especially in the context of uplifting the tribes, not all interference of the colonial state was appreciated in the official circle. A very serious concern among the later ethnographer-administrator was the ‘rapidity with which tribal societies were changing and to study them before they were ‘reformed and hopelessly sophisticated’. In the introduction of Hutton’s study of the Angami Nagas he noted that across the frontier, distanced from the plains were the ‘happy tribes’, untouched by civilisation like their ‘administered brothers’. They paid no taxes, did no ‘reluctant coolie work’, were not yet converted by the missionaries, suffered no civilised disease, and ‘no paternal government’ forbade them headhunting and no irreverence was shown against ‘their customs of primeval antiquity’. Ethnography also defined the tribes further away from the Hindu influence as more pure and their outlook more in consonance with the Europeans because they had not been

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107 Ibid., p.19.
108 Ibid., p.2.
109 Waddell, Tribes of Brahmaputra Valley, p.31.
111 Ibid., p.vii
112 Ibid., p.viii
“stunted by the cumbrous wrappings of caste and hinduism.”\textsuperscript{113} So the twin desire to study the ‘pristine, primitive’ society collided with the administrative desire to ‘civilise’. Due to colonial penetration or ‘altered conditions induced by \textit{pax britannica}’ and government control, along with the advent of missionaries and traders, hill societies faced ‘inevitable metamorphosis’. It saw “the arbitrary suppression of all traditional customs, ceremonies, and dances- including even those which in themselves are harmless enough- on the plea that they belong to the ‘bad old days of heathendom and head hunting’.\textsuperscript{114}

Though representing the tribes was fraught with problems, certain ideas emerged which came to dominate the characterisation in the colonial discourse. The discourse on the tribes focussed largely, on the question of change. Change itself was dealt within the purview of an evolutionary framework of progress of ‘primitive’ communities to ‘civilization’ and the extension of Hindu influence on the ‘tribes’. These two processes were of course not perceived as mutually exclusive. An apparent and superficial duality was the paternalistic duty to ‘civilise’ the ‘tribes’, while at the same time celebrating their exclusiveness and safeguarding them from the degeneration that progressively sets in due to cultural contact with civilisation. As Ajay Skaria writes, the duality shared a common motive and a great affinity. According to him, “There was, on the one hand, the civilizing mission, with its tasks of bringing the wild into the time of the civilized...” and “on the other hand there was primitivism, with its celebration of wildness. Thus, the Kiplingesque Anglo-Indian jungle, a space of the exotic, opposed to the baseness of Indian civilization...”\textsuperscript{115} Thus the noble savage. Colonial ethnographic discourse largely became

\textsuperscript{113} J.H.Hutton, \textit{op.cit}, p.38
\textsuperscript{114} J.P. Mills, \textit{The Ao Nagas, Bombay, 1973, 1\textsuperscript{st} pub. 1926, Prof. H. Balfour in the Foreword, p.xxii
a representation of differences, juxtaposing the ‘semi-savage tribes’ of the plains with other dominant section of the population, the ‘caste Hindus.’ In doing so they had to accept that the interaction with and influence of the caste-Hindu Assamese society did provide ‘civilizing’ impetus, though in a relative sense. But as B.B. Chaudhuri writes, the issue ignores the subjectivity of the tribals in emulating the Hindu cultural influences. Mere emulation by adivasis of some cultural traits – religious beliefs, rituals and practices was described as growing Hindu influence or ‘Hinduisation’, by colonial ethnographers who often failed to accommodate various complexities of the society where migration was still taking place, and various people intermingled in different degrees.

116 Ibid., p.193.
118 Ibid., p.51.