Chapter IV

Emergence of Tribal Politics
Parallel to the efforts of the colonial state and ethnographers to define and locate the ‘tribes’ of the Brahmaputra valley, and the Assamese middle class efforts to construct an identity, there was an effort by the various ‘tribal’ communities to locate themselves in the socio-political milieu of the colonial state. The early twentieth century saw the emergence of various associations within these communities. The mel/mel matured the nascent ‘tribal’ consciousness which resulted in the formation of the Tribal League, as a mode of organised tribal politics.

From 1920’s onwards the conditions of growing political consciousness under the Congress, and caste associations’ like the (Ahom Sabha, Kaivartta Sanmillan) gave impetus to the emergence of associations of ‘tribal’ communities like the Chutiya, Moran, and the Kacharis. The early twentieth century saw the emergence of political consciousness particularly among the Kacharis, the Mikirs, and the Miris, which arose out of an awareness of their own identity and of the political space of representational politics and the colonial discourse on the administration and representation of the tribes. Notions of ‘protection’, ‘isolation’, ‘backwardness’, and ‘difference’ were key to understanding the emergence of tribal politics and its relation to provincial politics. The gradually strengthening idea of cultural identity was co-extensive with emerging political aspirations. ‘Tribal’ identity politics cannot be solely located in terms of the role of a catalyst played by the colonial state, which provided the political space, and facilitated social mobility. But one needs to locate it vis-a-vis the caste Hindu Assamese society. Various attempts by this new leadership were made to understand the reasons for the backwardness of these tribal communities and to introduce reforms in social practices.

1 A mel is a public meeting (in Assamese).
Kalicharan Brahma, Sitanath Brahma Choudhury among the Kacharis (Bodos) and Samsongson Ingti among the Mikirs (Karbi) were the real pioneers. Their attempt to redefine tradition, adjusting to colonial modernity, were also the first steps towards the construction of tribal identity.

This chapter would also engage with a discussion of the initiatives taken by these early organisations (Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilan, Boro Jubok Sanmilan) towards comprehending representational politics with coming of the Simon Commission. The petitions and memorandum given to the Commission clearly show the presence of a definite idea about cultural and political identity. It would also discuss various efforts made by these early associations and leaders to emancipate and empower the members of their respective societies. That line of inquiry will also lead to a study of the profile of the middle class that was emerging within these communities.

The emergence of these groups needs to be located in the emerging politics of the Congress in the province. Since the 1920’s, the Congress mobilisation and the beginning of the Non-Cooperation movement in Assam, the nature of provincial politics changed radically from what it used to be during the time of the Assam Association. The Congress leaders attempted for the first time to address popular and topical issues and localize the message of the Mahatma. So they took up issues like prohibition of opium and drinking, and of course the slogan of economic boycott of British goods. So there was stress on weaving of own clothes which was the norm in Assam before the British began dumping machine made clothes.
Platforms/Associations like the *Assam Association*², the *Assam Students’ Conference*³, *Assam Sahitya Sabha*⁴ contributed in many ways to the growing national feeling within the Assamese middle class and a very concrete notion of identity within the province and outside it too. The emerging middle class through these platforms could articulate their aspirations. Around 1921 Ambikagiri Rai Choudhury began to publish the journal *Chetana* and also founded the *Assam Sangrakshini Sabha*. This association started to articulate a strong Assamese national feeling and took an aggressive position against any vindication of the rights of the Assamese people.⁵ There were other associations like the Kaivartta Sanmilan, Ahom Sabha, Sut Sabha. Caste organisations also started articulating their aspirations and concern about their specific castes. These concerns were often general, about the issue uplift of their respective communities and about defining their caste status vis-a-vis the upper caste Hindus.

So all these developments inevitably influenced the mobilization among the various tribal groups. Emergence of organisational politics was already an important trend in the province and various communities were already using it as a progressive platform in dealing with the colonial state.

However, even before the emergence of organisational politics, the changing milieu at the turn of the century saw various questions being raised about the living conditions of the people. Such a movement was started among the Bodos by Kalicharan

² The Assam Association was formed in 1903 by the educated section of upper caste Hindu Assamese who were educated and also from the planter community.
³ Formed in Guwahati in 1916 and the first session was presided over by Lakshminath Bezbarua, one of the prominent writers of that time.
⁴ The Assam Sahitya Sabha was founded in 1917 by Sarat Chandra Goswami and others also contributed to the growth of national consciousness amongst the Assamese people.
⁵ K.N. Dutt, *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam*, p.70.
Brahma. The propagation of the Brahma Faith and the overwhelming response that it could evoke marks a transition point in the Bodo society of the Goalpara and Dhubri area of west Assam. It carried a broader meaning than just the agenda of socio-economic reforms. Kalicharan initiated the dynamics of modernity and politics in the Bodo community. It was through his efforts that issues like education, prohibition of drinking, modes of practicing religion and the necessity of an organized platform was realized. From there the sections of Bodos that emerged proceeded in various other directions. The period prior to the ‘arrival’ of Kalicharan Brahma and also of associative politics is looked upon as a period of ‘darkness’ or ‘degeneration’. There was a realization that the Bodo people were no longer actors in the political scene of the province and that sense of relative obscurity and backwardness gave rise to serious thinking and action.

Kalicharan Brahma’s class profile is reflective of the emerging middle class. His father was an important ejradar (leaseholder) of the Parbatjoar estate, which was owned by Surendra Narayan Singh Choudhury of Bagribari. The zamindar lived in Calcutta. Kalicharan Brahma after completing his basic education, which was not much because of the absence of schools in that area, started looking after his father’s business. It was an accident that Kalicharan Brahma got acquainted with the basic tenets of the Brahma faith. As the story goes, narrated by Kalicahran 2nd, disciple of the Kalicharan Brahma, one Charan Mandal who used to work at Sillai-bikri-badha, where timber was processed for the market, went to Calcutta where he met Sibnarayan Paramhansa. The guru gave him a copy of his sermons, the Sarnitya Kriya. So it was in Dhubri that Kalicharan Mech first got introduced to the tenets of the faith.6 He was getting critical of the indigenous

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6 M.C. Saikia, “The Brahma Movement among the Bodo-Kacharis of the Goalpara district” in KS Singh (ed.), Tribal Movements in India, p.242. The story, repeated in other sources, is very similar with little variation of details. However, it is certain the source of inspiration for Kalicharan was external.
practices of his society and probably more than that of the upper-caste Hindu attitude towards the tribes. So reading the book evinced a response that eventually led to the reformist movement, the Brahma movement, which in many ways opened doors leading towards addressing other relevant social questions.

The origin of Sibnarayan Paramhansa is still obscure. All that was known at that point was that he was probably from the west (of Assam). He probably was close to the zamindari of Goalpara. His thoughts were enunciated in two books—*Sarnitya Kriya* and *Amrit Sagar*. After the initial influence nothing much happened till Kalicharan was asked to lead a delegation of leaseholders to Calcutta to plead for a reduction of royalty on timber extracted from the estate. After the Eastern Bengal State Railway opened a branch line from Calcutta to Dhubri in 1902, his travel to Calcutta became more frequent. And these visits acquainted him with Sibnarayan Parmahansa and his ideas and in 1907 the former formally initiated Kalicharan. He returned and left his business and estate and started preaching the basic tenets of the new faith. The basic of the Brahma philosophy/ideology emerged both as critique of the indigenous religious practices and of the caste Hindu propaganda for converting the tribes into Vaisnavism.

It is apparent that the core of the Brahmaism was monotheism as opposed to the many indigenous deities of the Bodos and the numerous god and goddess of the Hindu pantheon. Though it was a critique of the existing Bodo religious practices it was also an attempt to maintain or abide by an indigenous identity, which Kalicharan felt, was threatened at that specific juncture by the twin religious propagation of Vaishnavism and Christianity. His confrontation with the Vaishnav sattradhikar (religious head) began

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7 Ibid.
early on when he had a debate with Ananda Narayan Dev Goswami of the Boitamari Sattram. Kalicharan was appalled at the superior upper caste attitude of the Sattradhikars and the price that people had to pay for being initiated into the Vaishnav Hindu fold, i.e. become a saraniya, a status still way below being a proper Hindu. This strategy of upward social mobility was always available for the tribes in Assam and such conversions were still happening in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Bodos who got initiated into Vaishnavism as saraniyas assumed titles like Koch, Rajbansi, Chaudhuri, Das, Deka, Mondol etc, with the view to moving upwards in the social hierarchy. Moreover, becoming a saraniya, converting to socially accepted Hinduism was an expensive proposition, not easily available to all Bodos. Only those who could pay for the formal initiation could attain that position in the social hierarchy. Since Hinduism was not an easy option for social change, many of the Bodos got converted to Christianity at the turn of the century. In Goalpara the Santhal Mission of the Lutheran church and the American Baptist Mission were quite active and had converted a fair number of Bodos in Kamrup and Darrang district. There were even cases of conversion to Islam, though they were fewer, they happened around the area of Panbari. This also reflects on the socially accepted mode of conversion. Being classified as untouchable acted as a social pressure to be self-critical in a certain section. So other “religious groups, namely, the ek-saran, the Christian and the Islam started acting upon the weaknesses of the Bodos.”

8 Satras are Vaishnav religious institutions, which control several villages where the disciples and followers stayed.
10 Manik Kumar Brahma, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma: His Life and Deeds, p.8. Ek Saran is a form of Vaishnavism prevalent in Assam, since Sankardev, a Vaishnav saint of the 15th century propagated it.
This was the reason why Kalicharan Brahma felt that a new form of religious affiliation was needed which would draw people away from the other faiths and also from indigenous practices that had ‘degenerated’, and put the Bodos in a position of untouchables. The attitude of the caste Hindus, where the term Melch was used in a derogatory manner reinforced social divisions. He felt that the philosophy of Sibnarayan Paramhansa had the potential. He was of course not alone in the whole effort. There were already men who thought and felt similarly. Most of them were his co-workers at the estate and in the timber business, like Charan Mandal, Jaladhar Mech, Karan Mandal, Dafadar Chaburam Mandal, Moniram Mech, Dafadar Maniram and many other socially important men.\textsuperscript{11}

Brahma faith as propagated by Kalicharan Brahma was monotheistic and proceeded with the belief that god manifest himself only in the light of the sun, surjyanarayan. Therefore Hom-Yagya, ritual fire worship, known to the Bodos as Ahuti-Shaoni was symbolically representative of the worship of light. So in ritual, the Brahma religion derived a lot from the Vedic mode of worship. After his return from Calcutta he and his friends toured the area of Goalpara extensively, meeting people and having discussions with various religious heads and influential people. Then he invited a Brahma devotee, Phanindra Bhattacharjee to perform the function of conversion as a purahit (priest). So in Bonyaguri a yojnahuti was performed during which a substantial audience of curious Bodos got converted to the new faith.\textsuperscript{12} Satisfied with the response he got, he went about with his close followers to different villages and preached before the people,

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p.21.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p.21.
trying to convince them about changing their life style and also explaining how to appropriate a social status without converting to other religions. His attempt in propagating a new faith was also to carry to the people the message that unlike other religions the Brahma faith was not contradictory to the indigenous way of life.

Though there was an overwhelming response to his call at least by the educated section and elite of the Bodo society, a lot of Bodo people still stayed outside the influence of Brahma-ism. There were reactions from saraniyas, from the Missionaries and also from a section of the Bodos who propagated the view that the new faith would erode away the indigenous components of the Bodo-Kachari society. Since the Brahma faith meant giving up old rituals like Kherai pooja, drinking (ritual and non-ritual) and rearing of pigs and poultry it was difficult for the rural masses to drastically change their lifestyle. Sections of the Bodos were worried that such an attempt to curb daily practices would alienate the Bodos from their socio-cultural base, which would be self-destructive.13

The importance of his contribution can be judged from the fact that he has been compared to the 15th century Vaishnava reformer Sankardeva: As without Sankardeva the medieval Assamese society was steeped in superstition and caste practices and his reformation changed and challenged the existing brahmanical order of those times.

There is scope for debate as to the nature of the faith that Kalicharan propagated. Where on one hand it emerged as a strong critique of the existing caste structure, on the other it was also critical of the indigenous practices of the Bodos because it was looked

down upon by the caste Hindu Assamese and in the beginning of the 20th century, was perceived by the socially conscious and newly educated as the primary reason for backwardness. In the changing milieu of colonialism and the emergence of an Assamese middle class, who attempting to create an pan-Assamese identity, growth of a very small educated section within these communities, and the work of the missionaries had given rise to an external consciousness about self. There began a process of critical internal self-examination among the people. That criticality and effort is visible in the movement initiated by Kalicharan Brahma. The biographers of Kalicharan Brahma have given hagiographic status to him and much of it is highly exaggerated. But what is evident from the chronicles of those times that times were changing. There was much going on in the socio-cultural environment. The meeting of Paramhansa Sibnarayan and Kalicharan and the conversion or initiation was also because there was a network of ideas which became more easily accessible to common people because of improved communication and growing relations of the markets, as in this case the timber market. In 1902, the opening of the Eastern Bengal Railway branch line from Calcutta to Dhubri facilitated travel and consequently people could visit Calcutta, which was a hub of activity in the eastern region.\textsuperscript{14}

Propagation of a faith was not the only objective of Kalicharan because with him the meaning of conversion also meant that there was to be a definite change of lifestyle for the Bodos. There were strict instructions about giving up of old customs of their ancestors— sacrifices for instance— with which, the Bodos celebrated various ceremonies, which were accompanied by brewing and drinking of rice beer. There were also efforts to

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p.242
intricately related to the question of livelihood. Such an approach also evolved from the Congress, when Chandraprava Saikiani addressed the 1st session of the Bodo Mahila Sanmilon she repeatedly asked the Bodo people not to give up their means of livelihood—like rearing poultry and pigs because they were looked down by their caste Hindu neighbours.\(^\text{18}\)

Economic considerations played an important role in redefining religious notions. Of course, one of the basic rules of conduct was to abstain from consuming and brewing of rice beer, which was a source of wastage of grain for the Bodos. The economy was primarily rice based and therefore it was essential that whatever paddy was produced was left for consumption as food and not brewed as rice beer. But the same logic functioned against the new rituals and norms of the Brahma faith. Many Bodos still associated certain material things with certain values and customs. Many Bodos objected to the ritual of throwing rice into the \textit{yajna} fire which, they thought might anger the goddess of wealth Mainao and that their crops might fail.\(^\text{19}\) Also, the injunctions that poultry and pigs should not be reared and consumed caused a great deal of inconvenience to the economy where both constituted an important part of the diet and trade.

Thus for, a great number of people rooted in their traditional practices it was difficult to comprehend the necessity of giving up certain practices for the sake of attaining high ritual status vis-à-vis the caste Hindu society. Even the people who generally accepted the basic tenets of Brahma faith did not necessarily follow the

\(^{18}\) Chandraprava Saikiani’s presidential address to the Assam Kachari Mohila Sanmiloni, *Awahon*, 7th issue, 1st year, Bohag, 1852 (1931).

proscriptive and prescriptive norms especially the ones concerning food habits. Some people who professed to be Brahmas continued with their earlier food habits probably in moderation.

It might be asked if conversion was not massive and a large numbers of people continued to follow their old faith where the influence of the Brahma movement was tangibly felt? It has been recognized by the later Bodo movement that some questions arose in the people's mind and fundamental changes began after the movement. It gave rise to a certain consciousness, which cannot be immediately identified as a political consciousness, but was a predecessor to the emergence of a modern Bodo identity. The greatest contribution of Kalicharan Brahma was his efforts towards addressing certain social issues and helping establish the first platform for the Bodos, the Bodo Mahasanmilan, which came to articulate the growing aspirations and issues. It also created a section of socially aware people who attempted to bring in reforms for the Bodo society and spread education among the community. In fact, the notion of backwardness was intricately related with the lack of education and educational structure. The attempt to appropriate high status for themselves either through conversion to being a saraniya or by becoming a Brahma was only a step towards self-emancipation. But it was also recognised that eventually social change hinged on material sources of high status i.e., education, employment and political power. As Shekhar Bandopadhyay points out in his work on the Namasudras, that these aspirations were reflective of the economic
prosperity and social ambitions of some upwardly mobile sections but that fact itself does not entail non-recognition.20

The social reform that the Kalicharan’s Brahma movement generated brought about social and political change. One of the most important results was the degree of organisation under the leadership of the people who were a part of the larger Brahma movement. Though the fervour of the movement waned after some time it was the same people who were a part of that social reform movement who continued with the agenda of social reform.

There emerged a discourse on the backwardness of the tribes or specifically at that point of the Bodo jati. By the mid-1920s the Bodo elite or the nascent middle class became self critical and believed that social and economic upward mobility was possible only by educating their people. That came to be considered the main instrument of development and progress. They hoped that education would help to disperse superstition and social practices which, was becoming a social embarrassment to the upwardly mobile class now empowered with a new faith so akin to Hinduism without its obvious caste divisions. It was frustrating for the class, which was initiating reforms to come up against opposition against reforms.

As made evident by the writings in Bibar, the magazine published by the Bodo Chattra Sanmilan and the messages made public by various organisations hinted at the growing concern for spreading education among the Bodo people. Education would bring about an awareness, which would disseminate darkness and would take the Bodos in the

path of progress and would also wash away the stigma of being untouchables. Economic and social backwardness was constantly plaguing the minds of the neo-educated class. Quote from bibar.

Under the initiative of Kalicharan and his followers primary and middle primary schools were opened. The Middle English School at Tipkai was established because of the efforts by Kalicharan, who met the Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Laine and later also met the Chief Commissioner, Mr. Archdale Earle. Because of the administrative support his proposition for a school with vocational courses of weaving and carpentry got approved with a grant of Rs.30,000.21 After that more schools sprang up and scholarships and stipends were given to especially bright students, both girls and boys as an impetus to continue education. Students were encouraged to form associations and work for spreading education and social reform for the uplifting the society. With such ideals the Goalpara Zilla Boro Chatra Sanmilani and Parbatjowar Tribal Students Union was formed.22 It was with this base of students’ organisations that the Bodo Chattra Sanmilani was formed and the first session was held in 1919 and the chief speaker was Kalicharan Brahma. He attempted to encourage the students to work for the society and also spoke to the common people about the absolute necessity of educating oneself and others.23. It decided was in this convention that a magazine Bibar would be taken out quarterly and people were encouraged to write not only in Assamese, Bengali but also most importantly in the Bodo language. It took the important role of spreading the message of the various organisations and gave a scope for engendering a debate about religion and social reform

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21 Manik Kumar Brahma, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma, p.49
22 Ibid., p.51
23 Ibid., p.53
and generated a consciousness about their status and vis-à-vis caste and other social and material conditions. It attempted to initiate a discussion on the origin and history of the Bodo/Kachari people and tried to bring about a unity of purpose and goals among the territorially scattered people.

The publication of the Bibar stimulated the publication of other journals and magazines, primarily amongst them were the Olongbar, Hathorkhi-hala, Cifung, Jenthoka, Munshri Arw Sanshri, which continued for some time and generated a new consciousness vis-à-vis language and society of the Bodos.

As we see in the writings in Bibar, the emphasis was on eradicating ignorance and the issue was not just imparting the ability to read and write. As pointed out in an article in Bibar, the ability to read and speak English was not the only requirement, real education was necessary to enlighten people socially and morally too. The author writes, "...it is sad that our Bodo people (jati) have not yet recognised the way of development (i.e. education). The Bodos are ignorant and foolish because such widespread ignorance people have not been able to work constructively towards progress and are divided."24 Therefore the agenda of education and social/cultural reform were related. It was expected that people who were educated would initiate changes in the society, be critical of superstitious practices, live an altered lifestyle, modernise and leave practices, which were termed as socially detrimental. Rupnath Brahma, later an important leader of the Tribal League then active with the students association, the Bodo Chattra Sammiloni also repeatedly stressed on the role of the students to inculcate the value of education among

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24 Karindra Narayan Brahma, "A Few Words for the Bodo People (jati)", in Bibar magazine, 1st year, 2nd issue, 1924.
the people. Articles in *Bibar* evoked the glories of the old Bodo kingdoms and people and asked the people to realize that they were not civilisationally backward, than the other people of the province. The Bodos were not bereft of culture and civilisation and only lacked proper education.

"The Bodos are the numerically speaking the largest group and still they are backward and if the educated Assamese classes/sections ignore them and leave them alone in the darkness of ignorance and content themselves in reaping the benefit of modern education, the whole project of constructing a new Assamese identity would collapse," 25

So there was an awareness that education would bring about better social and political organisation as it was happening with other communities. Rupnath Brahma articulated such awareness, education became a medium/door to understand and reclaim the historical past and show others the glorious picture. 26

The Bodo Chattra Sanmilan was infused with this ideology. The necessity of making education more broad based on class lines. Since the very beginning, the impetus was towards making provisions so that education was not limited and the question of creating more scholarships and stipends was always a primary consideration in the agenda of the Sanmilan. As much as there were efforts to petition the government for establishing government schools and providing financial support to students there were serious efforts to raise funds and establish schools through their own initiative. One of the early editorials in *Bibar* magazine proclaimed the ideals behind the Sanmilan, which was

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26 Ibid.
to encourage education among the economically and socially backward sections of the Bodos, and bind the people in a common bond of sharing knowledge.\textsuperscript{27}

Few measures taken to encourage education among the economically backward classes/ sections of the society as announced in one of the meetings of the Sanmilan - a small amount was constituted probably with the help of Jai Chandra Brahma to help students to continue with education, one each for one deserving student from high school and junior school student. They were to receive Rs.3 and Rs. 2 monthly.\textsuperscript{28}

The achievements of students and the patrons who encouraged were duly mentioned in the proceedings of the Sanmilan. There was evidently a great sense of achievement and pride in making announcement like the one quoted below–

"3 silver medals to be awarded to Bodo students. Shri Sobha Ram Bodo awarded 2 medals. 2 boys got the prize. Another well wisher of the Bodos, Shri Shyam Charan Brahma Sarkar, gave away another silver medal to a girl student. It was awarded to the girl who passed lower primary. Another person Matilal Brahma Sarkar, son of late BirNarayan Brahma Sarkar (probably zamindars of the Goalpara area) had decided to award a prize of Rs. 10 monthly to any poor student of Dhubri High School."\textsuperscript{29}

So there was a class, though numerically small, whose influence and contribution to the society was important, especially financially, to a fund-less association. They were often landlords or men who had business connections in Bengal. So evidently there was a class who thought that education was important not only for boys but for girls as well. On the whole, the environment of social change was largely influenced by the reforms in

\textsuperscript{27} Editorial, Satis Chandra Basumatary, \textit{Bibar}, 1st year. 1 issue, 1924
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
Bengal and Assam as well. It was evident in the repeated message the magazine *Bibar* carried, which called out to the Bodo Kacharis to wake up from their social, political and cultural slumber and acknowledge the changes that have taken place in the turn of the new century. The national question, which became important not only in the Indian context but also in the global context at that point came to have an impact on the upwardly mobile section of the Bodo people.

In the background of Congress mobilization and assertion of various communities in colonial situation and also growing importance of the fast developing industrialized nations of the West acquired a lot of importance to these marginalised communities:

"Today all other jatis of Bharat because of their hard work have proceeded in the path of progress. Even hilly jatis (people) like the Naga, Kuki etc, whom we looked down upon, have due to their labour and unity come to know progress. The English, the Chinese and the Japanese jatis (people) have because of hard work and unity has been acknowledged as advanced people. They have therefore done a lot for their own people and country. They have proved themselves in some field or other. The Garos under the influence and advice of the missionaries have become socially active and conscious. The Rajbonshis have also mobilised themselves through sabhas, samitis and in an attempt for upward mobility have starting claiming kshatriya titles like Barma and Singha."^{30}

It was also realized that the mere passing of resolutions would amount to no radical change. Therefore, towards the end of the 1920s, efforts were centered around the necessity to involve more and more students in the activities, and at any rate by that time the association had spread to other districts of the Brahmaputra valley. It had begun functioning in the districts of Kamrup and Goalpara but by 1929 it had people coming to

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its conventions from far off districts like Lakhimpur. So with growing strength in participation it could think of pressurizing and petitioning the colonial Government for opportunities and reservations in sphere of education. So though there is a caveat in the proceedings of the Bodo Chattra Sanmilan, 1929, put by Rupnath Brahma on dependence on the Government for ameliorating backwardness there is an evident tilt towards ‘humbly petitioning’ the authorities. The resolutions of the 10th convention there are demands for –

"Reserved seats for the Bodo/Kachari students in all government, colleges, high schools and hostels; Request to official for Bodo/Kachari students who have performed well in Matriculation, ME, MD examinations, there should be at least two scholarship each reserved for them."31

There was also a growing awareness of reservation on communitarian basis. Demands made, articulated an understanding of the rights based on community, like the request made that the Jorhat Normal School award 2 scholarships of Rs.10 per month to the Bodo Kachari students as it does to the Mohammedan students.32 In 1924 Dhubri being a non-Mohammedan constituency Biraj Mohan Dutta was elected as councilor, the Bodo people of Goalpara once again petitioned the Governor to create a special councillor from among the Bodo people, which was not accepted.33

Another major thrust of the early associations was to engender an idea of a Bodo/Kachari unity. Though it began as a result of Kalicharan Brahma’s efforts to unite the Bodo people under the umbrella of a monotheistic reformed faith. the roots of further

31 Proceedings of the Assam Bodo Chattra Sanmilan, 10th convention, Roumari, 1929
32 Ibid.
33 Editorial, Satis Chandra Basumatary. Bibar, 1st year, 1st issue, 1924
political efforts lay there. Kalicharan Brahma by travelling to spread his faith generated a common consciousness to a great extent. One of the writers in the first issue of Bibar commented on the absence of unity among the Bodo/Kacharis, “If there is no feeling of unity among people then progress becomes difficult to achieve. Today nearly all the backward, uncivilized people are on the path of progress except the Bodo people, who are still slumbering.” 34 It was further elaborated by him that “…because of the ignorance the Bodo people have failed to understand the importance of unity and therefore have failed to progress as ‘a people’, because development can only be attained by being united.” 35 One of the professed aims of the Bodo Chattra Sanmilan was to establish unity among the Bodo/Kachari students and people by bringing them together under this platform and encourage interaction and exchange of ideas and views. 36

The notion of a ‘tribal’ unity, which was initially conceived during this period, was in a narrow scale, in imagining a unified, a ‘great Bodo/Kachari tribe’ whose past was traced through the invention of a common history. Writing for the Bodo students, Rupnath Brahma traces the ancient and glorious lineage of the Bodos and exhorts them to educate themselves about the past richness of their society and culture. He also felt that the Bodos did not have to resort to constructing a mythical past to establish their historical importance as was done by the Koch, Rajbansis and the Ahoms. 37 There was a realization that despite the fact that the Bodos were numerically speaking one of the largest communities in the province of Assam without an essence of unity that demographic strength carried no meaning, because ‘ignorance made the people like

34 Karindra Narayan Brahma, A Few Words for the Bodo People (jati), Bibar, 1st year, 1st issue, 1924
35 Ibid.
sheep. Therefore the 6th annual convention of the Bodo Chattra Sanmilan stressed on the necessity of involving more and more students and people in its efforts to spread the social and political agenda. The President of the convention Dwarika Nath Rabha reiterated that the convention not only aimed at uniting students from different districts but also among various groups and sub-groups of the Bodo tribe. According to him the Kacharis, Bodo (mech), Dimasa, Hojai, Hajong, Koch, Rabha, Lalung, Garo, Tripura, Chutiya etc. were a part of a greater tribe, which, with time bifurcated, into different groups. The source of such knowledge was colonial ethnography, which on the basis of philological and anthropological similarities, concluded that these communities probably had a common origin in the past. He also mentioned that in the past people perhaps inter-dined and intermarried – for instance marriage between Rabhas and Kacharis was not unknown. Geographical distance, resulted in social and cultural differentiation, which was “compounded by the ‘insidious influence of Hinduism’ which led to changes in customs and rituals, like Kacharis who came under the influence of Vaishnavism and more recently Brahma faith had to adhere to certain prescribed and proscribed rules.” But he hoped that through attempts like that of the Sanmilan such superficial differences would be overcome. Such an opinion reverberated in other platforms also, for example, it formed an important theme of Benudhar Rajkhowa’s presidential address to the 3rd conference of the Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilan. According to him, due to migration the ‘great Kachari tribe’ got divided into branches, which because of geographical distances became totally separated from each other. Distances coupled with the

38 Karindra Narayan Brahma, A Few Words for the Bodo People (jati), Bibar, 1st year, 2nd issue, 1924.
39 Proceedings of the 6th convention of the Bodo Chattra Sanmilan,
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid. Here he quotes Anderson who was the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang and studied the Bodo/Kacharis.
42 Ibid.
pernicious influence of Hinduism fragmented the identity of the Kacharis into ‘proper tribal’ and ‘low-caste Hindus’ like Koches and Soroniyas. He cautioned the Kacharis against the divisive tendencies and said that it was an effort to fragment the Bodo people, who being numerically large could afford to ignore the stereotypes imposed on them by the caste Hindu society.

Unity of political nature was still a very important consideration and that had begun leading to a closing of ranks among some sections. So much so that Sib Prasad Barua’s address to the Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilan reflected the genuine concern that had sprung to the minds of the nationalist-minded Assamese middle class. While acknowledging the Kacharis as the ‘foundation and backbone’ of the ethnically varied Assamese society, there was constant refrain against falling into the trap of narrow communitarian interest and politics. It was immediately after the Simon Commission and growing mass politics of the Congress that the need to attract these associations was seriously felt. Therefore, the role and necessity of community based associations was criticized if it eventually did not speak the language of the national movement. He warned/cautioned the Bodo people and leaders of associations that unity based on narrow communal interest and not broader national interest was disruptive and the interest and progress of the community lay in the good of the ‘Assamese’ and ‘Bharat’. So there was growing concern about the increasing importance of these associations and therefore the need to subsume them under the broader definition of the National Movement.

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43 3rd conference of the Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilani, Presidential address by Benudhar Rajkhowa, 1929
44 Ibid.
45 Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilani, Presidential Address by Rai Bahadur Sib Prasad Barua, 1931, published in Avahon 1st year, 10th issue.

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The arrival of the Simon Commission generated a lot of political activism in the province, the Congress led a mass movement boycotting the Commission and the associations of these communities petitioned to the commission. The scope to put forward their grievances and aspirations to a Commission, which was reviewing the administrative setup, gave further impetus to the activities of the associations. The memoranda and petitions to the commission show that the notion of a tribal identity had by that time become more concretised and tangible, which can be gauged by the strong political consciousness. It was no longer an abstract idea, with the Simon Commission it became an important part of the official and political discourse. Though there were a number of petitions by different associations the commission only considered the one submitted by Ghyasuddin Ahmed, on behalf of the Bodo community of Goalpara. The main demands of the petition that was accepted hinged on acquiring more political opportunities under the colonial state vis-à-vis other communities. There was an awareness of the complex relationship of numbers, political reforms and power, hence a demand for a separate electorate was put forward more strongly. The refrain was that because of mixed electorates there was misrepresentation and the Bodos could not “enjoy the advantages of reforms as other communities did. In spite of our being such a large number all advantages of the reform are being enjoyed either by a Brahmin or by a Kshatriya or by a Sudra.” On the basis of numerical strength of the community in the non-Mohammedan seat, the Bodo Jubok Sanmilan demanded special representation in the local council. Another resolution stated that considering the demographic strength

47 Memorandum by the Bodo Jubok Sanmilan, in P.T.B.S.C., p.16.
of the Kacharis in both the valleys, two members of this community from each valley should be in the legislative council of the Assam government to represent the community. The petitions also deplored the state of backwardness these people were living in and since education was already recognised as a means of development, the tribal leadership therefore put forward their prayers or demands for free primary education and special scholarships for pursuing higher education. The fact that the importance of reforms in both politics and education was realized, because though “numerically the Kacharis are a strong community, want of education the bone of human progress has relegated as untouchable. Check quote” As Sekhar Bandopadhyay found in the case of the Namasudras, in an atmosphere marked by the politics of numbers, it was their backwardness, which became the main capital for bargaining with the colonial state. The political space given by the colonial state was perceived as a means of emancipation. And as mentioned by Joseph Bara such a sense of backwardness and cultural inferiority was not only embedded in the minds of the tribal leadership because of colonial ethnography but also because they defined their politics in opposition to a caste Hindu attitude which was inherently iniquitous, as was the case in Assam. Nor was their effort to consciously present themselves as a ‘backward people’ before the Statutory Commission amount to a negation of their own culture, because in the same time they were constantly reiterating their difference to other communities. They were very aware

49 Memorandum by Jadav Chandra Khakhali, Secretary Kachari Jubok Sammiloni on behalf of the Kachari community, in P.T.B.S.C., p.9.
of the importance of the census categorization and the necessity of defining communities for the colonial state.

So one of the dominant ideas that was evident since the early 20s was the contestation of the census classification as ‘animist’ or ‘low-caste’ Hindus, which became more persistent during the time of the Simon Commission due the growing political importance. The Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilan, suggested that to regard the ‘tribals’ as ‘Hindus’ was misleading, for the latter “do not receive them into their society, do not dine with them and are mostly unsympathetic with their ideas and aspirations.”51 It was also empathetically asserted that the Kacharis were never a part of the caste divided Hindu society, and were ‘independent’ by virtue of not being bound to the “chariot wheels of the Hindu community.”52 So by the late 1920’s the notion of ‘difference’ of ‘tribal culture’ became a crucial part of the political and social definition of what was ‘tribal identity’. For various reasons – political, social and economic, such distinctiveness was espoused and articulated. Politically, for special representation such an identity defined in opposition to the caste Hindu social structure aided the formation and later crystallization of the idea of ‘tribal’ unity and identity.

Even before the time of the Commission Rupnath Brahma had brought the issue into public notice, writing in Bihar he pointed out that though the official record and the census refer to the Bodos as animists it was probably due to ‘inexperience’ of the government officials. According to him there was no evidence of Animism in the old and new Bodo tradition and requested that such an unjust categorization be rectified. Because

51 Memorandum by Jadav Chandra Khakhliari, Secretary Kachari Jubok Sammiloni on behalf of the Kachari community, in P.T.B.S.C., p.9.
52 Ibid., p.10.
the Bodos did not want to be categorised as 'animist' or as 'low caste Hindus' but simply as Bodos.⁵³

Thus influenced with the idea of 'tribal unity' various associations circulated the idea of forming an unified identity based on a distant co-extensive history, which was also the history of exploitation by the caste Hindus, who by providing limited social mobility successfully created fissures in the identity and fragmented it.

It also led to reification of the idea that the Kacharis were a single tribe and this idea was also defined in opposition to the caste Hindu Assamese construct of a monolithic Assamese nationality. Therefore the demand that communities like as the Rabha, Sonowal, Thengal, Dimasa, and Lalung be 'counted and recognised as the Kachari'.⁵⁴ Kacharis were divided into sub-groups, that did not mean that they are not of the same race and therefore enumerate themselves as 'one community' under one head, that is 'Kachari'.⁵⁵

There were efforts to trace a history of origin and migration of the tribe whose "descendants are now spread all over Assam and form an important community. The Kacharis are divided into sub-races."⁵⁶ They wanted the census report to enumerate these 'tribes' as one community, under one head, that is Kachari. The issue was further discussed in detail in the Presidential address by Benudhar Rajkhowa in the third conference of the Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilan. According to him, due to migration the 'great' Kachari tribe got divided into branches, which because of geographical distances became totally separated from each other. Distances coupled with the

⁵³ Rupnath Brahma, "A Small Request", Bibar, 1st year, 2nd issue, 1924.
⁵⁵ Memorandum of the Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilan, in P.T.B.S.C., p.9.
⁵⁶ Ibid., p.9, Memorandum of the Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilan.
'pernicious' influence of Hinduism fragmented the identity of the Kacharis into proper 'tribal' and 'low-caste Hindus' like Koches and Soroniyas.\textsuperscript{57} For him unity of the 'Kachari' was a political and social necessity to contest untouchability, ignorance and backwardness.\textsuperscript{58}

However, on the question of territorial transfer of Goalpara to Bengal, members of the various Kachari organisations claimed themselves to be Assamese on the basis of cultural affinity.\textsuperscript{59} As mentioned earlier, Kalicharan Brahma's efforts to introduce Assamese as a medium of instruction also points to wider political and cultural identification to an Assamese identity. Though contesting the parallel project of inventing a monolithic Assamese identity on wider issues the identification was with the Assamese. This may have been promoted by the fact that Assamese were not considered as 'outsiders'. Further, these apparently conflicting identities and the presence of contradictory claims to identity may actually be viewed as 'multiple identities'. Probably, as shown by T. Ranger in the case of Africa, there was never a single 'tribal' identity, people moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves differently at various junctions and situations.\textsuperscript{60} The overlapping networks of associations did not pose as a problem for the 'tribal' leadership as it did not when negotiating 'tribal' identity between traditional and modern. And in the process of giving a wider and alternative definition to the idea of an Assamese identity in which they could carve out space for the Kachari identity, as well.

\textsuperscript{57} 3\textsuperscript{rd} Conference of the Assam Kachari Jubok Sanmilani, Presidential address by Benudhar Rajkhowa, 1929, p.3.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. p.4
\textsuperscript{59} Binay K. Basumatari ed. P.T.B.S.C p.6.
\textsuperscript{60} Terence Ranger. "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa", p.248.