Chapter V

The Tribal Question in Provincial Politics:
The Tribal League and the Congress, 1933-47
The thrust of this chapter is on the political alignments and mobilisations during the period of Assembly politics in Assam, the decades which saw the formation and emergence of the Tribal League and the establishment of Congress as a crucial political organisation. Nationalism was the essence of the contemporary politics, which effectively attempted to restrict the diverging expressions and aspirations of other political associations and groups. However as noted by Sekhar Bandyopadhay “it is now common knowledge, confirmed by nearly all recent writing on the nationalist movement in India, that there were substantial sections within the indigenous society which had little concern for what has been described as the central contradiction of this period, i.e., between the colonised and the colonisers.”

The Congress under the leadership of Gandhi and the National movement dominated the political scenario for almost all over India in the decades of 1930’s and 40’s. The hegemony of the colonial discourse persisted with respect to the tribes continued because the nationalist adopted the colonial rationalist-integrationist approach and also because the relatively less importance of the tribal question on the nationalist agenda. In Assam too the situation was very similar, the Congress and the Muslim league emerging as main players in the arena of provincial politics. The ideological hegemony of nationalism commanded the politics leading to the silencing of other dissenting voices. The National Movement and Assamese nationalism were seen as the primary ideology.

As we have seen in the earlier chapter there was increasingly growing awareness about community identity from the beginning of the 20th century. Various associations were active among different communities, as mentioned earlier, especially caste associations and nascent organisations among the Bodos, which stressed the differences among the communities. This political attitude crystallised in the Tribal League, which was visible in the number and content of the League resolutions in the decade of 1930s and 40s.

In fact, in the 1930's, post Simon Commission, the political development of the minority and backward communities was steady process, though till the election of the Assembly in 1937 they were yet to play a significant or separate role in provincial politics.

The fragmented and factional composition of the electorates and the limited area under Congress mobilisation left enough political space for the mobilisation of other communities. The Gandhian intervention in the Congress politics in the province gave rise to wider mobilisations but failed in a radical transformation, and the nationalist movement continued as a high caste Hindu affair. So even during the period of provincial governments the dominant political story tended to revolve around the Congress, whose main constituency was the caste Hindus of the plains (and mainly of the Brahmaputra) and the Muslim groups (Assamese Muslims, Sylhet Muslims, Immigrants organised under various association, most prominently the Muslim League)

But among the various groups, which come to play crucial in the provincial political equations, was the electorate of the ‘Backward Tribes’ category. The 1935 Act
had made provisions for representatives of backward tribes in the provincial Legislative Assembly.

Most of the representatives Backward Tribes, plains were members of the Tribal league which was formed in 1933 to give an organised political platform to the diverse tribal communities of the plains, who were organised under various organisations.

A tiny minority which had emerged among the 'Plains Tribes' had already improved their economic position through land holding, contracts, business, education and profession. The efforts of these new group, articulate and educated, with leaders like Bhimbar Deuri, Rupnath Brahma in the forefront led to the convention of the backward tribal communities in Raha, Nowgong where the Assam Backward Plains Tribal League was formed in April 1933. It came to known as the Tribal league (Tribal Sangha) later. Its first president was the experienced Bodo leader Jadav Chandra Khakhliari, though Bhimbar Deuri continued to provide ideological and political support. The formation of the Tribal League was also due to the realisation that provisions of new governance should not be political squandered. During the 30s and 40s decades the attention of the tribal leadership gradually shifted to more material modern sources of social mobilility, i.e., education, employment and political power'. The stress was on protesting against the iniquitous distribution of power and economic opportunities. The first session itself was an effort to unify various backward tribal communities of the plains. The movement of the plains tribes united various communities in common action through some shared goals or experiences. It was realized as if separate considered in the electorate it would

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3 Indibar Devri, Jangostiya Samshya, p. 13 (quoting from Representation dated 29th August, 1933 to the chief secretary, Government of Assam, submitted by the President, Assam Backward Tribal League, Raha)
weaken the claims, but together it was demanded that they could claim at least 7 seats in
the Assembly on the basis of their unified numbers.

The special provisions made in the Government of India Act 1935, which
reserved 4 seats for the Plains Tribes since 1937 and 1 seat in the council since 1939 was
also mostly due to the regular petitioning and efforts of the Tribal League. Therefore the
League had become a platform for at least the educated, 'ambitious' and conscious
sections of the tribal communities. By the 1930's organisationally and politically there
emerged a section which could provide leadership to their respective communities and
think in terms of a separate political identity and equitable development and progress. As
Ogborn's study on the provincial politics of Assam in the 1930's has noted: "the
backward tribes representatives in contrast were greatly concerned with notion building
issues affecting their community and felt that achievements here would determine
whether or not they retained their seats."4

The concerns of the Tribal League even before it became part of the Assembly
and then coalition partners of various ministries in the period from 1937 to 1946, were
largely centered around the questions of delineating the notion of a more unified, broad
based tribal identity vis-a-vis other communities and political platforms, disseminating
political awareness and consolidating and creating a mass base in the rural areas
throughout the Brahmaputra valley. Tribal league's activities were therefore at two
levels, one at a popular level and another at the official Assembly level, though different
but not divorced from each other.

4 Keith Ogborn, Ogborn, Keith Peter. "The Development of Nationalist Politics in the Assam Valley, 1929-
1939", submitted to University of Western Australia, 1982, p. 326
At the organisational and popular level the Tribal League and its members held annual meetings and conventions and attempted to spearhead a movement towards bringing various local level organisations of different communities closer to the League by addressing the people and creating a space for dialogue for the local leadership. Spreading the message also led to the establishment of various district level Tribal League bodies which started functioning and organising public meetings in the tribal villages.

On the ideological level, growing awareness was visible in the writings and the political discourse of the Tribal League leaders like Bhimbar Deuri and Rupnath Brahma, both office holders of the League and who were able to articulate and translate the political message for the League to a wider public.

Infact, though Rupnath Brahma was not present in the formation meeting of the Tribal League it was he who suggested to that the official name of the organisation was to be 'Assam Backward Tribal League'. It was to be a platform, which would joint articulate the grievances of different tribal communities of the plains. Though it emerged essentially to meet the necessities created by the constitutional changes, it gave tribal politics and social movements a definite direction.

The Tribal League early works were in that direction, i.e. bringing different communities closer. Therefore, when the Franchise Committee was formed in 1932 smaller communities like Deuris were not included in the schedule for backward communities, which included comparatively larger communities like Kacharis, Mikir, 

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5 Bhimbar Deuri was a member of the Dibrugarh Local Board and from 1939 a member of the Legislative council. Rupnath Brahma stayed as a MLA of the League and was a minister in several Ministries.
Lalung for separate reservation, the League took action. The League perceived this segregation and separation as a hindrance for the progress of the tribal people in general. The Tribal League took the initiative to include the Deuris in the schedule for backward. In its first convention resolutions demanded that for official purposes all Backward tribes should be considered as one unit and should be jointly given 7 seats. Moreover it was also demanded that small backward communities like Deuri etc. should be given the ‘Backward Tribe’ status and be included in the list of the ‘Plains Tribes’. The Deuris were omitted in the 1929 Simon Commission memorandum too. Writing to the Government, the League, “under the arrangement suggested by the majority of the Franchise committee, small minorities like the Deoris, who are no doubt tribal communities, have been excluded altogether and the process of disintegration of these tribes has been already set in motion.” As late as in the 1931 census, C.S. Mullan gave acceptance to the 8000 strong Deuri tribe the status of a ‘tribe’ among the 16 other tribes. Rupnath Brahma, one of the important leaders of the Tribal League and also a lawyer, appeared as witness in front of the government, on this issue and as a result in the New Reforms Act, 1935 the Deuri community was given backward tribe status and separate election where they could send members to the Legislative Assembly and Deuris with limited property were enfranchised. Therefore in a memorial to the government in 1936 they wrote, “The name of the Deoris has however been omitted to be described as one of the Backward Tribes deserving separate treatment in the matter of government employment in the Government circular recently published. The effect of this omission

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6 Indibar Devri, p.88, Representation dated 29th August 1933 to the Chief Secretary, Government of Assam submitted by the President, Assam Backward Tribal league, Raha as quoted by Deuri.
7 Ibid., p.86
would be that in spite of their being truly a backward tribe, their boys will not have the privilege of separate treatment and consideration...."8

The resolutions of the first session of the Tribal League at Raha was put forward to the Franchise Committee and in 1933 the colonial authorities decided to grant 4 seats to the Plains Tribes in the 1935 Act. The ‘Plains Tribes’ category was therefore invented by the colonial authorities to ethnographically classify the ‘tribal’ section of the population in the plains which was, after the 1935 Act, given the status of a separate constituency. Thus, there emerged a single, unified notion of the ‘Plains Tribes’. Therefore, in 1937 elections Rupnath Brahma, Karka Doley Miri, Rabichandra Kachari and Dhirsing Deuri got elected in the reserved seats (Plains Tribes). They all owed their allegiance to the Tribal League and very soon Khorsing Terang from the Mikir Hills Reserved seat joined the League. The presence of these members in Assembly led to discussions of the socio-economic situation of the tribal communities. As a result problems of such communities got the required attention and starting receiving some aid and help from the colonial authorities.

The Tribal League and the Congress

By the 1930’s the Congress in Assam was already a very important political force in Assam. Though the Civil Disobedience movement failed to evoke a strong a response as the Non-Co-operation movement in Assam, its all India popularity and the incipient idea among the Assamese middle class that the Congress movement was getting strong gave them the confidence and belief to be involved in the movement.9

8 Indibar Deuri, p. 87-88, Memorial on Behalf of Deoris to the Deputy commissioner Lakhimpur at Dibrugarh, April. 1936 as quoted by Deuri.
But the earlier associative activities of the Kachari Sammilani, Assam Kachari Jubok Sammilan, Boro Jubok Sammilan, Miri Sammilan were contemporary to the early Congress. These associations as we had seen in the earlier chapter imparted a certain sense of identity which later on with the formation of the Tribal League became more broad-based as rural areas became aware of the ideology of the Tribal League.

As we had seen earlier also despite articulating for a separate identity of the 'Plains tribes' by asserting their difference and distance from the caste Hindu population, the Tribal League on various crucial questions reaffirmed their allegiance to the larger Assamese identity. The long-standing demand of the League and also of the tribal people for a 'separate electorate' was abandoned at the crisis point of partition and grouping. In 1946 when the Cabinet Mission had attempted to group Assam with the Muslim majority Group C the Tribal League aligned with the Congress and other parties to oppose it.10

The Congress and the Tribal League eventually came to share a complex relationship in the period of provincial ministries. The Congress was against the communal award and community based representation. The tension between the caste Hindu dominated socio-economic and political structure and the tribals manifested itself in the politics of the Congress and the League. The nationalist historians and the official historians of the political history of Assam perceive the emergence of tribal politics as a result of the 'divide and rule' politics of the colonial state and the League as sectarian and opportunistic which is mostly because of the visible bias in the public opinion. At various juncture during the very short period of provincial ministries the Congress attacked the Tribal League’s efforts to politically unify different communities and carve out more political space for itself.

10 Indibar Deuri, Jangosthiya Samashya, Guwahati, 2001. p. 10
The growing concern in the 1930’s and 1940’s for the Congress in Assam was the Muslim league and other associations and political parties of the immigrant Muslim east Bengal peasantry. The middle class caste Hindu Assamese expressed distress about the growing number of east Bengal immigrant peasantry and this tension was reflected in the Congress politics and the Assam Sangrakhini Sabha diatribes.

Therefore the Congress attitude and understanding of the tribes and tribal politics was determined by an overwhelming sense of ‘Assamese Hindu’ nationalism, which was perceived to be under threat from the Muslims. Congress’ framework for dealing with the ‘Plains tribes’ was that of assimilation and integration and as “all ideologies of assimilation, isolation and integration saw tribal welfare as the primary mechanism for changing these societies”. Such an assimilationist and integrationist framework was reinforced due to the fear of the communal split. The Congress relied greatly on the Vaishnava Sattradhikars to penetrate the Miris (Mishing) and the Bodos (Kacharis) and also by initiating social movements against untouchability, encouraging temperance and its efforts to eradicate the opium habit. In some cases the Congress mobilisation was successful like in the time of Non-cooperation when the movement had the support of the Kacharis of Darrang and Kamrup district. But at the same time there was an outbreak of illicit distillation by the Kacharis and Nepalis flouting the decree of the Congress.12

The Tribal League also carried very similar social messages but coming from their own leadership the thrust and content, especially in the context of the issue of separate identity the divergence of opinions was tangible. The Tribal League’s efforts to

distance itself from caste Hindu Assamese society in carving out a ‘tribal’ identity was also evident when the Assam Temple Entry Bill was introduced in the Assembly to be debated in 1940 and on the question of separate electorate.

The ministry that was formed in the legislative Assembly after the first election after the 1935 reforms was led by Muhammad Saadualla in 1937. Though the Congress did manage to win most of the Hindu seats it could not form a ministry because of the social diversity of the representation. There were 4 ‘Plains Tribes’ representative in the Assembly. So in Assam there was a certainty that there would be a non-Congress ministry, which led to the consolidation of several non-Congress MLAs into several fractions. Amongst them Saadulla, a non-Muslim League leader was asked to form the ministry, where one Plains Tribes member Khorsing Terang (Mikir Hills) who was a part of the Rohini Choudhury led United People’s Party.

But the first Sadualla ministry was very unstable and factional rivalries had made it very evident that it would not survive long. The Congress in the meantime was preparing to form a ministry because without the Congress no faction would have benefited from Sadualla’s predicament. It was this crisis in the ministry, which forced Saadulla and his supporters to join the Muslim League, to find allies in the immigrant Muslim community.

In 1938 Saadulla formed the second ministry and therefore Congress again failed to manage enough support from various factions to form a ministry. But his ministry came under an enormous pressure on the issue of land alienation to the immigrants. As observed by Ogborn, “The members form the “backward tribes” were showing greater independence from the ministry. They were not represented in the cabinet; much of the
Mymensinghia settlement was taking place on tribal land; and they felt that an undue share of patronage designated for tribal people was being taken by the hill tribes who were represented in the cabinet by Nichols – Ray.”¹³ As Karka Doloi Miri in his 1ˢᵗ speech in the Assembly floor mentioned the discrepancies in the government policies toward the ‘Plains tribes’. He mentioned that the plains tribes communities are the original inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley but they were being dispossessed of their lands, and under British rule despite various reforms it was the hill tribes and Muslims, which appeared to be favoured by the colonial government and the backwardness of the ‘plains tribal’ communities being overlooked.¹⁴ He also complained that Budget allocations were never specifically made for the ‘Backward Plains Tribes’ and neither was it adequate for any developmental measures, like education and employment.¹⁵ There were also opposition to various tax measures, which was seen to be as anti-backward tribal communities.¹⁶ They were becoming more articulate about their grievances and demands, related to progress, grants, public facilities, reservation of facilities etc.¹⁷ Along with doubts about settling lands with the immigrants and mounting tension around the issue of land alienation and the existence of the Line system, the ‘tribal representatives also took positions against the colonisation schemes of the government, which had the support of the Muslim League leaders.¹⁸

On such issues the positions of the Congress and the Tribal League verged on agreement. The four “Backward tribes” MLA’s role in the Assemble clearly

¹³ Keith Peter Ogborn, The Development of Nationalist Politics in the Assam Valley, p. 283
¹⁴ ALAP, Karka Dalay Miri’s speech in the Budget session, 7ᵗʰ August, 1937, p. 355.
¹⁵ Ibid. p. 356.
¹⁶ Ibid. p. 357.
¹⁷ Ibid and ALAP, 10ᵗʰ August, 1937, Dhirsing Devri. p. 534
¹⁸ ALAP, 24ᵗʰ February, 1938, p. 402-404
demonstrated that their allegiance to any group could not be considered pre-given and they functioned as crucial pivot points in debates. Similarly, there were efforts on the part of the Tribal League in mobilising their constituencies. The 1938 conference of the Tribal league was an evidence of the success of such steps. It was attended by 1500 people.\textsuperscript{19}

By the late 1930's the concerns of the Tribal League, especially in 1938 convention was dominated by discussion of the tribal land alienation and threat to indigenous culture by the immigrants.

As the pressure on the 'tribal' lands grew and the Saadulla ministry refused or showed inability to take any decisive steps, the 'plains tribes' representatives increasingly looked for alternative allies. The failure of the Saadulla ministry and the mounting tension around the question of the Line system led to an allegiance between the Congress, which was attempting to form a ministry and the Tribal League, which demanded a more equitable share power, resources and opportunities.

In early 1938, certain factions of the Saadulla ministry started questioning the functioning of the government. In Kokrajhar session of the All Assam Tribal League, Rabichandra Kachari mentioned that the League would withdraw its support from the Saadulla ministry if the Shillong – Pandu road lease was not given to an Assamese Company along with other grievances like granting of an agricultural loan.\textsuperscript{20}

The second session of the Tribal League, held very significantly in Kokrajhar (a center of Bodo activity) on the 16\textsuperscript{th} June, 1938 became a landmark occasion, because it brought together almost all the important leaders, like the premier Md. Saadulla and Congress leader Gopinath Bardoloi and Rev. Nichols Roy, the leader from the Hills. It

\textsuperscript{19} Assamiya, 28\textsuperscript{th} June, 1938, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{20} Dainik Assamiya. 11 September 1938. The Newspaper with its anti-Saadulla and pro Congress stance welcomed this decision of Rabi Chandra Kachari in the editorial.
also set the trend and framework for the demands of the Tribal League vis-à-vis other parties and factions. The event also demonstrated that in the politically crucial period the Tribal league’s representatives in the Assembly could be politically counted upon. One of the resolutions was a demand for reservation of seats for ‘Plains tribes’ in the local boards and the Congress. Congress acceptance of such demand indicated the necessity for allies to form a ministry.21

It led to signing of an electoral agreement between the Congress and the Tribal League on the 10th of September 1939 in Shillong. It was clearly stated that the Tribal League would maintain its independent identity, and its members would not be bound to sign or endorse anything “pertaining to the Congress creed.”22 It was also decided that despite Congress’ initial reluctance, to continue with the system of separate electorate, which would only be changed if the Congress agreed to reserving separate seats in the joint electorate for the tribal communities in proportion to their respective community strength. Another crucial step was about census enumeration, the Tribal League reiterated its position that irrespective of their religion, whether people from these tribal communities had embraced Hinduism or Christianity they would also be included in the schedule of the ‘tribal’ if they returned themselves as ‘tribal’.23 And all the major demands about employment and education were included. It was notified that the ‘plains tribals’ was to be regarded as a separate category in government employment. There was also a demand for fair division of funds for the spread of education and scholarship and stipends among tribal students. Over and above, it was decided that one member should

23 Ibid.
be included in the ministry as a minister. The agreement was signed by Gopinath Bordoloi, though certain terms and conditions went against the ideas of the Congress.

So when the Congress coalition formed the ministry in the Assembly in October, 1938 under the leadership of Gopinath Bordoloi, Rupnath Brahma, one of the leaders of the Tribal League became a minister (Forests). The League’s support to the Congress came at a crucial moment, when the latter was looking for support from the fragmented constituencies, especially the estranged Muslim, the Assamese, the Immigrants and the Surma Valley Hindus. During this period, the Tribal League received considerable Congress support for mobilising their constituencies in favour of the stance with the ministry. A meeting of tribal people, presided over by Robi Kachari, MLA, expressed support for the Congress coalition and pleasure that the tribal MLA’s had given their support to it and many such public gatherings were organised. On the other hand, Bordoloi announced that the funds of the Harijan Sevak Sangha would be augmented by Birla and made available to Kacharis.24

The Congress did attempt to address the issues raised by the Tribal League without antagonising the other members or without involving immediate or visible expenditure. For example: “Forced labour among forest tribes was reduced from 10 to 5 days. Miris were to be allowed to sell timber free of duty during floods and were granted free use of timber for home building. In Sibsagar and Lakhimpur the people were allowed to use forest produce freely for boat building.”25


25 Ibid., p. 325: ALAP, III, 1939, p.,63
The major focus of the budget, however, was in Bordoloi’s portfolio of education where expenditure was increased by Rs. 2 ½ lakhs. “Expenditure in this area was highly visible and appealed to the articulate and influential in all groups. Although it disproportionately benefited the traditionally literate castes (particularly as over half the increase was allocated to high schools and colleges) increased education spending was popular among the more backward groups too. Significant portions of the increased expenditure were specifically allocated to the hills, plains tribal people, scheduled castes and immigrants.”

Unlike the case of the Muslim representatives, the Congress did in fact allocate budget spending on “small, and previously politically inactive minorities, such as tribal people” and not with the Muslim, which a large and economically varied community / minority “raised questions of unacceptable separatism and Hindu resentment.” And likewise “The backward tribes representatives in contrast were greatly concerned with nation-building issues affecting their community and felt that achievements here would determine whether or not they retained their seats.”

But behind the success of the Congress coalition and the Tribal League’s role in it the relationship between both the parties were often under strain because of inherent differences in ideology. The Congress in Assam was not only nationalist but also caste Hindu organisation with very strong hegemonic tendencies.

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26 Keith Peter Ogborn, The Development of Nationalist Politics in the Assam Valley, p. 325: ALAP, 1939, p. 57
27 Ibid. p. 326
28 Ibid.
The politics of the Tribal League has been perceived as sectarian, communal and opportunistic by the Congress, caste Hindu middle class and their institutions, and contemporary history writing. But that allegation made on the basis of Tribal League’s coalition politics, which was only a facet of broader League concerns and was a political reflection of the narrow concerns of the Assamese caste Hindu middle-class.

But the formation of the Congress ministry saw a temporary change in attitude and the pro-Congress Assamese press were all praises for the Tribal League’s shift of allegiance from the Saadulla ministry.

It was very clearly stated in the Tribal League’s resolution since the formation of the Assam legislative Assembly that any ministry which would promise to secure and safeguard the rights of the tribal people would be supported by the League. And as reiterated in by Bhimbar Deuri, the policy of the League was more concretely devised in the Kokrajhar session of the League in 1938, ‘any government, which would work towards the progress of education and improvement of their economic conditions of the tribal people, without going against the interest of the tribal people’ would be supported by the Tribal League. The Tribal League, was never swept off or divested of its identity by Congress led national movement. It professed great faith in the positive and empowering elements in the reforms and thought that backward communities like the tribes should first be concerned about safeguarding their identity and development. Bhimbar Deuri commented on the nature of the politics of the League, which was definitely of opportunism but one of progress of the tribal people, “we do not want to

29 Teendiniya Assamiya, 21st June, 1938.
loose whatever progress we have achieved under the schemes and policies of the
government by joining a movement against the government, in doing so we will remain
backward forever.”31 This was the principle, which led to various coalitions and more or
less consistent presence of tribal ministers all through out the period from 1937 to 47.

The pro-congress press focussed on the new coalition and reported that it was
high time that the tribal people realized the Saadulla ministry was anti-tribal because his
policies of colonisation and wasteland settlement led to more immigration and his pro-
government position essentially alienated him from the people and their issues. The
Congress was projected by the press as more concerned with the rights and welfare of the
tribal people. Gopinath Bardoloi himself attempted to convince the tribal people when he
addressed the Kokrajhar session of the Tribal League, that the League could be a part of
the Congress ideologically and still maintain a separate political identity.32 And as he
wrote after the dissolution of the 1st Congress coalition ministry that the Congress did not
expect the Tribal League to actively participate in the struggle and be imprisoned, but the
Congress definitely wanted the moral support from the ‘plains tribes’ representatives and
the tribal people.33

Though the understanding with the Congress during the short duration of the
ministry was smooth than with the Saadulla ministry but the relationship between the
Tribal League and the Congress was one of conflict. Despite a good understanding
between Bhimbar Deuri and Gopinath Bardoloi, the Tribal League and its leadership
were often attacked by the press for the positions it took in provincial politics.

31 Ibid., p. 23.
32 Teendiniya Assamiya, 21st June, 1938.
33 Nayak, Bhimbar Deuri, Special edition, 1948, p. 11
There was clear recognition, awareness and acceptance of the Congress as very caste Hindu in its composition and in its policies too. Bhimbar Deuri commented that, “Even though the Congress was a mass organisation, in reality it was the organisation of the caste Hindus or more precisely upper caste Hindus.” 34 At one point disappointed by the level of politics he commented on the Congress that they fought like cats and dogs among themselves. He realized that progress of the plains tribes could not be left to other groups or political factions, because he could not conceive of a government of Assam run by caste Hindus and outsiders / foreigners, but neither could he bear to see Saadulla and his European allies forming the government and legitimizing alienation of lands to immigrants. To articulate and pursue the rights and claims of the ‘plains tribes’ there was the need for consistent presence without, which other issues would have overwhelmed the concerns of the government.

The Tribal League continued to maintain its separate identity in the provincial politics which was also engendered by the attitude of the Congress. Senior League leader, Jadav Chandra Khakhari wrote to Bhimbar Deuri, expressing his concern and doubts about the presence and existence of the League in the Congress coalition: “...such times the choice before the League is very complex,” but he stressed any action should be determined by greater welfare of the ‘plains tribal’. He feared that if the League continued to be a part of the Congress coalition then other organisation and community-based platform would become redundant and it was obvious not to support the demand for separate electorate. 35 In writing to Bhimbar Deuri he in many ways cautioned that the

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34 Nayak, Bhimbar Deuri, Special Issue, 1948, p. 20
35 Nayak, Bhimbar Devri Special Issue, 1948 P. 8.
policies and politics of the Congress was not necessarily in favour of the ‘tribal’ communities. He recounted the recent history of encounter between the Congress and other associations and that Tribal League should never forget the true character of the Congress. The fact that the League was a part of the Assembly was due to the provisions of the 1935 Act or reforms, a process, which was initiated by the visit of the Simon Commission to India. The Congress had boycotted the Commission and criticised those associations and individuals that had submitted memorandum to the commission.

The political activities of the League in the 1938 also attracted public attention. The pro-Congress Assamese press violently criticised the Tribal League’s joining the Saadulla ministry and offering allegiance to the coalition. Further, the press created issues out of the political meetings organised by the Tribal League and its corollary organisation. The inviting of Saadulla, the premier to 1938 meeting of the League, and a delayed invitation extended to Gopinath Bordoloi, leader of the Congress put the Tribal League at the receiving end of criticisms. The Assamiya commented that it was a pro-government convention, and its real purpose was not what it claimed. The chairperson of the meeting reiterated that the League’s efforts were towards attempting to bring unity among the backward communities of the province, so that they could progress in every direction – socio, economic and cultural. Referring to the Congress, he said that upper castes and forward sections should not be dissatisfied about such organisations and their perceived sectarian and communal politics. The editor of Assamiya wrote that they (community based organisations) should be aware that nothing less than an unified

36 Ibid.
37 Teendiniya Assamiya, 21st June, 1938
struggle against colonialism led by the Congress would lead to true emancipation and
social and economic equity. The paper also stated (or ridiculed) that rather than joining
the freedom struggle these organisations were contend enough to petition and 'beg' from
the colonial government.\textsuperscript{38}

There was an attempt to create a public opinion where any voice of dissent, or
organisation, which did not join the Congress and the movement was essentially anti-
national. In that manner the Congress attempted to impose a hegemonic caste Hindu view
on a society, which was only partially caste Hindu in its composition and very
heterogeneous. Assamiya's editorial mentioned that despite Congress being the only
organisation struggling against exploitation and oppression, it was sad to observe, despite
that people from backward communities had not joined Congress in expected numbers, or
provided any moral support.\textsuperscript{39}

It reflected a general opinion that Congress's welfare policies and ideas were
enough and the Saadulla ministry squandered its chances for development. And the
Tribal League, due to its 'narrow social and political vision' was a part of such a
government.

Infact, few chances were given up to attack and criticise the Tribal League. Since,
government initiative in encouraging progress of education was insignificant or rather
negligible, the Tribal League had at various stages decided to put an additional tax in
villages to fund the schools till the local boards regularised them. This step of the Tribal
League was termed by the Congress and Assamiya as anti-people, since the people were

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
already over burdened with taxes. The league’s position on such issues of development was one of initiative rather waiting for it to permeate down to the backward tribal people.

The Tribal League felt betrayed and offended by the frequent diatribe of the Congress and pro-Congress press. Since the proclaimed aim of the League was work towards the progress and development of the ‘plains tribes’ it attempted to maintain good political understanding with all groups, especially the Congress. In the pamphlet published by Bhimbar Deuri he clearly writes that the period of Congress coalition was one of progress because – of tax exemption, campaign against illiteracy and campaign for temperance and opium prohibition. He alleged that the Congress despite being aware of the Tribal League the former took steps to infringe upon the identity and ideology of the League. After the coalition ended the Congress slandered the League without any basis and the Congress committee ousted Narpati Basumatary, member of the League from the list of Congress members.

Another area of conflict was the census enumeration which time and again erupted between the League and the Congress and which always made the League wary of the Congress.

The World War II and Congress’s politics led to conflict again. The Congress ministry resigned in protest against the colonial government involving India in the war effort without the consent of the people and the parties. Leaders like Bhimbar Deuri of the Tribal League of were of the opinion that Congress opposition or support of the war efforts would not have any decisive effect on the colonial government. Therefore, the League proposed to advocate and assist the war efforts of the government and not to

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40 Teendiniya Assamiya, 21st June, 1938.
41 Bhimbar Deuri, The Assam Tribal League, Bulletin, No. 2, 1940, p. 23
42 Ibid.
forfeit any beneficial policies of the government and not to break the continuity of welfare measures pursued by the League members in the Assembly.⁴³

Md. Saadulla formed the ministry (and Rupnath Brahma became a minister,) and the Tribal League entered into an agreement with the political fraction, i.e. Assam United Party on the 16th March, 1940. In its basic content it was not very different from understanding with Congress, except on the issue of the Line system and the question of joint electorate. On the line system it was agreed that the resolutions and policies as decided on the ⁴⁴th November 1938 Congress Coalition ministry should be retained and improved upon. The premier would convene another Line System conference to discuss the issue for safeguarding the rights of the ‘tribes’.⁴⁴ And among other resolutions were – the reservation of government jobs for tribals, in percentage to their respective population and in case vacancies were not filled it would not be filled by candidates from other communities,⁴⁵ demand for separate election in the local board, special encouragement in government tenders and other public works, revenue reduction, prohibition of opium, granting of lands to landless tribals. The agreement also stated that the Tribal League would continue its existence as a separate political organisation and till the time the Assam United Party functioned as a ministry it would be a part of the Coalition, otherwise not.⁴⁶

**Tribal Politics and the Land Question**

One of the major issues of tribal political assertion through the legislative politics was the land question. Land alienation was intensely debated in the legislative assembly in relation to the issues of immigration and occupancy of agricultural land by the

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⁴⁴ Bhimbar Deuri, P. 17
⁴⁵ Ibid. P. 18.
⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 17
immigrants. In the crucial decade of 1940’s provincial politics was often determined by the nature of politics on the land question. Immigration from East Bengal had assumed enormous proportion in the 1930’s itself. Though the colonial government encouraged the immigration as a means of settling cultivable waste in the hope of raising more revenue, the government also introduced the Line system as a means of protecting the tribals. The principle of the Line system, envisaged the drawing of an imaginary line on the land, demarcating two distinct areas and no occupation of land by the immigrants was allowed beyond that line. With the Line system, the protection of tribal land and villages were to be ensured legally. The system was introduced for the first time in 1920 in Nowgong. By 1930 it was operating in most districts of upper Assam. Since the Tribal League favoured a policy of colonial intervention for the cause of the ‘tribals’ it appreciated the move on the part of the British.\textsuperscript{47} But the system as it existed on paper was different from its functioning in reality. It was never strictly implemented and neither was it very effective in the absence of a strong authority at the local level. Infact revenue-generating interest of the colonial state contradicted its projectionist policy towards the tribals. Even in areas where the system was enforced there was land alienation which led to the numerous sessions of questioning, adjournment motions and heated debates in the assembly.

In 1937, a resolution was moved by the Muslim League, for the abolition of the Line system. Members of the Tribal League, Rabi Chandra Kachari, and Rupnath Brahma opposed the resolution, and it was eventually withdrawn. The necessity of the system as a protective measure was reiterated by Rabi Chandra Kachari in the following

\textsuperscript{47} Speech by Bhimbar Deuri ALCP, 1940. Quoted in A. Guha, Planter Raj to Swarj. New Delhi, 1988, p. 262.
words, “There should be a Line system to protect the weak and backward people, without a Line of demarcation it is not possible to look into the interest of the poor people who require special protection.” 48 The tribal representatives in the assembly thus defended the continuation of the Line system and expressed their fear that if it was abolished “crores and crores of immigrants will come in and the original ruling people of Assam will have to leave the place to jungles and hills.” 49 This argument of endangering the tribals by letting them face the immigrants, their displacement from their areas and the crucial question of their existence in peril was repeated throughout the period of 1937-47 with growing intensity. Rupnath Brahma demanded enforcement of the Line system in Goalpara because “many tribal people in Goalpara have been compelled to leave their homes and settle elsewhere.” 50 Even some non-tribal members of the assembly like Naba Kumar Dutta and Mahi Chandra Bora, also condemned the efforts to abolish the Line system and criticized the government’s lack of concern for the ousted “indigenous people including the backward classes like the Kacharis and the Lalungs, who were driven out from their villages” and had “taken shelter in the forests.” 51 Rural masses though not involved in politics in the first two decades of the twentieth century but beneath it were a complex of antagonisms and resentments among the peasantry which produced a ‘highly volatile situation.” 52 One aspect of growing tension and which would assume great significance was the growing pressure on the lands occupied by Kacharis in Northern Kamrup. The population density in certain areas were increasing due to immigration of Bengali Muslim cultivators from Mymensing to grow jute, a crop normally not preferred by the indigenous population, and the Kacharis were rapidly losing ground in the

48 Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, ALAP, 5th August 1937
49 Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, ALAP, 5th August, 1937
50 Speech by Rupnath Brahma, ALAP, 5th August, 1937
51 Speech by Naba Kumar Dutta and Mahi Chandra Bora, ALAP, 5th August, 1937
52 Peter Keith Ogborn, The Development of Nationalist Politics, p.89
competition for land. The Mymensinghias were prepared to pay rents which were high by Assamese standards but low by that of Bengal and thus displace them. Immigrant peasant communities were not the only ones who were alienating lands from the tribals, increasingly passing into the hands Marwaris and local businessmen, mostly in the way settlement of debts. The Kacharis were displaced and either forced further north, to less desirable land or become land-less agricultural labourers.

Another aspect of the confrontation was the functioning and the motives of the colonisation scheme. The absence of any definite principles regarding immigration and accommodation of the immigrant population created further problems. The Congress perceived it as another subterfuge for opening land for the immigrants. Under the colonisation schemes the government opened up reserve lands, de-reserved forests and professional grazing reserves and in this process displaced and inconvenienced the indigenous people. The colonisation scheme also entailed paying a premium for occupying land, which the indigenous people, claimed the Congress and Tribal League representatives could not afford to pay. However, as Khan Sahib Maulvi Sayidur Rahman said in support of the colonisation scheme legally there was no bar regarding the indigenous people occupying land. Members like F. W. Hockenhull insisted that the indigenous people did not occupy land not because of want to of capital, but because availability of cultivable lands, which were available without paying any premium. But as claimed by others there was “practically no suitable arable land outside the colonisation areas and almost all cultivable lands have been occupied by the immigrants” and urged

53 Speech by Haldhar Bhuyan, ALAP, 24th February, 1938
54 Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, Purna Chandra Sarma, ALAP, 24th February, 1938
55 Speech by Sayidur Rahman, ALAP, 24th February, 1938
the government to stop the process of settlement of lands.\textsuperscript{56} Karka Dalay Miri, the representative of the Miri tribe in the assembly, opposed colonisation because of the growing scarcity of land which would restrict future expansion of the indigenous people.\textsuperscript{57} In view of the escalating pressure, the colonial administrators like Hockenhull asserted that there was “no real issue at all between the indigenous and immigrant population.”\textsuperscript{58} The logic was that the type of land which was favoured by the immigrants was never cultivated by the indigenous people,\textsuperscript{59} that is the river line areas. Even Purna Chandra Sarma, the Congressman, illustrated with few examples of Nowgong district the defective and biased functioning of the colonisation scheme. He complained that the ‘tribals’ of Nowgong were without land “and there has been no consideration to those people because they are not immigrants and cannot afford to pay the premium.”\textsuperscript{60} It was also pointed out that the lands originally belonging to the tribal communities of the Lalungs and Kacharis, were opened for colonisation in Nowgong.\textsuperscript{61} Protest against such violation of rules and regulation evoked, according to the leaders, only mild responses and often biased inquiries. For the officials, the system was working satisfactorily despite reports of violation of rules and regulations. Addressing the 1940 Budget session Beliram Das, representative of the backward castes, attacked the Saadulla ministry for its policy on the immigrants. The flow of immigrants was compared to an “invasion” into the ‘lines and reserves’ causing great panic.\textsuperscript{62} The situation was perceived to be one of total dispossession as “the immigrants forcibly entered into the lands owned by the Assamese

\textsuperscript{56} Speech by Mahi Chandra Bora, ALAP, 24\textsuperscript{th} February, 1938
\textsuperscript{57} Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, ALAP, 24\textsuperscript{th} February, 1938
\textsuperscript{58} Speech by Hockenhull, ALAP, 24\textsuperscript{th} February, 1938
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Speech by Purna Chandra Sarma, ALAP, 24\textsuperscript{th} February, 1938
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Speech by Beliram Das, ALAP, 24\textsuperscript{th} February, 1938
cultivators……agricultural produce taken away……fish being forcibly taken away” and the fishermen deprived.  

Haladhar Bhuyan also demanded that government should inquire into such incidents and take immediate action to stop them.

The question of land alienation and land availability however remained problematic. The deliberation of the Legislative Assembly and the subsequent land settlement policy and conflicts over land made it simply clear that available arable land was becoming scarce. It was further aggravated by occupation of vast wastelands by tea gardens and constitution of professional grazing reserves. The opening up of professional grazing reserves (P.G.Rs) for the colonisation scheme is significant in relation to the problem of land scarcity. Immigrants settled not only in the wastelands and reserves but as pressure on such land increased, a movement towards the tribal villages and lands, which were comparatively sparsely populated, began. The immigrant population had increased manifold leading to a serious crisis.

The displacement of the tribals can be traced to both economic and cultural factors. Economically they were on the weaker side. Various inquiries set up by the government to look into land alienation discovered that in many cases they had sold off their lands to the immigrants. It was evident when Rupnath Brahma questioned the application of Line system in Goalpara district, which had the largest population of the

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63 Ibid.
64 A. Guha, Planter-Raj to Swaraj, p. 281
66 B. N. Bordoloi, Transfer and Alienation of Tribal land fo Assam : With Special references to the Karbis of Karbi Anglong District (Guwahati, 1991), p. 73-77
67 Speech by ‘Rupnath Brahma, ALAP, 25th February, 1938; Speech by Khan Saheb Maulavi Muhammad Amirudin, ALAP, 6th March, 1944.
tribals. The Deputy Commissioner’s Report stated that, “... the Line system could be pushed” because “...owing to the local people’s thirst for gain by the sale of lands, within their blocks to the immigrants...” There were other instances when the tribals sold their lands to the immigrants and migrated to central and upper Assam in the hope of getting rehabilitated by the governments as per it’s the developmental schemes.

Moreover the fact that the immigrants often had money invested them with more economic power, especially where possession of land was concerned. On the contrary, in the absence of cash to pay taxes the tribal peasants were forced to sell their lands. The tribal representatives emphasized on the cultural differences between the Muslim immigrants and the tribals. They argued that it would be impossible for the ‘innocent’, ‘harmless’, peace-loving’ tribal peasant to live along with immigrants. Thus, creating settlement for the immigrants blocks near tribal villages were vehemently.

Karka Dalay Miri, representative of the Miri tribe, drew the Assembly’s attention to government’s action which displaced the Miri people of Gorumara in Sissi Mauza, Dibrugarh and also to the cancellation of pattas to Miris and Deuris, who had settled in Bahgara and Dhunagiri in Bihpuria Mauza, North Lakhimpur. The immigrant peasant with his ‘hunger’ for land seemed to be a threat existence to the indigenous peasantry. The attitude of the Assamese middle class and the Congress contributed to the spread of such a feeling, as is evident in Lakeshwar Barooah’s resolution: “The aggressive attitude of the

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68 Report referred in relation to the question of Rupnath Brahma regarding the enforcement of the Line system, ALAP, 25th February, 1938.
69 Speech by Lakeshwar Barooah, ALAP, 6th December, 1941.
70 Speech by Dhirsing Deuri, ALAP, 23rd March, 1943; 13th March, 1944, adjournment motion by Beliram Das, 13th March, 1944.
71 Speech by Beliram Das, ALAP, 13th March, 1944; Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, ALAP, 15th March, 1943.
72 Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, ALAP, 5th December, 1941.
indigenous population, offences against women, mischief upon the crops of the indigenous population and various other crimes disturbed the peaceful atmosphere of the local rural people.”73 The 1931 census and its conclusions aggravated the intensity of the whole population. The superintendent of Census Operation, Mr. Mullan termed the coming of the immigrants as an ‘invasion’. Mr. J. H. Hutton the Census Commissioner of India in his report wrote, “These immigrants who were prolific breeders and industrious cultivators are unruly and uncomfortable neighbors. These immigrants threaten to swamp entirely the indigenous inhabitants and in the course of two or three decades to change the whole nature, language and religion of the Brahmaputra valley”.74

Such sense of vulnerability increased because of reported cases of forcible occupation of tribal villages and lands.75 But often such cases were exaggerated. Often the Assembly session received telegrams informing them of forcible occupations. For example, “Hindu Mahasabha getting alarming reports of forcible occupation of lands in mass-scale by Muslims in Meteka Borbeal, and many other villages in Namati Mauza in Mikir Hills, Nowgong. Mikirs becoming panic-striken at this lawlessness.” Likewise another telegram mentioned that “innumerable Muslim immigrants, Surma Valley Muslims occupying lands in Meteka Borbeal, Hatipara, Jamunagaon, Maudongs, Howraghat, Dighae-pani, Dakmaka, Chulani, Parakhowa, Sorgathi villages within Mikir Hills area, Namati Mauza, Nowgong against all previous restrictive prohibitive orders. Great consternation amongst Mikirs prevails Pray Excellency’s immediate

73 Speech by Lakheshwar Barooah, ALAP, 6th December, 1941
75 Speech by Dhirsingh Deuri, ALAP, 14th March, 1941; Speech by Karka Dalay Miri: ALAP, 18th March, 1941; Rabi Chandra Kachari: ALAP, 6th March, 1944; Dhirsingh Deuri. ALAP, 26th February, 1940; Kameshwar Da. ALAP, 29th February, 1940

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intervention." Sometimes letter and petitions were addressed to the Assembly seeking intervention, and in other cases local representatives went to Shillong with the complaints demanding action. Yet, often such measures brought no solution in face of the overwhelming pressure on land. Inquiries were set up and officers often reported such complaints to be fraud and allegations against the immigrants distorted. The tribal representatives and the Congress leaders attributed this to the whole network of Muslims influence where officers were also Muslims who were supported by the Government. The members also highlighted the corrupt role played by the land revenue officials leading to the further alienation of tribal land to other peasant groups mainly immigrant peasants. In many places intervention of these officers worsened the situation. Because of the inability to comprehend complex rules about the occupation of land, they often lost out to the immigrants, who were economically more sound. Thus even genuine complaints and eviction orders were left without any action being taken.

Gradually from 1937 to 1947 such demands became more persistent against increasing violations of rules and regulations. Because of the failure of the Line system to control settlement of land and safeguard the indigenous population a committee was formed to review the functioning of the Line system. The report submitted by Mr. F. W. Hockenhall, of the ‘European party’, emphasized that “......indigenous people alone would be unable, without the aid of immigrant settlers, to develop....” But it was also in favour of the Line system and advised its tightening to protect tribal lands. The Bordoloi ministry after much deliberation agreed to evict all immigrant squatters from areas

76 Adjournment Motion, ALAP, 13th May, 1944.
77 Karka Dalay Miri, ALAP, 15th March, 1943.
declared "protected tribal blocks", in the submontane regions. Following the committee's report, the Congress coalition adopted a Land Settlement policy, which was published in a Gazette Extraordinary of 4th November, 1939. It emphasised on (a) the importance of maintaining grazing and forest reserves meant for public and ordered immediate eviction of encroachers – immigrants or non-immigrants. (b) the interests of the tribal and backward people were to be jealously guarded and with this view large blocks in sub-montane areas inhabited by tribals were ordered to be made prohibited areas. (c) due provision was made for the reservation of large areas for natural expansion of indigenous population, besides there was a proposal for planned settlement of the tribals. The resignation of the Bordoloi ministry left such decisions largely unimplemented. During the Saadulla ministry the Muslim League again demanded the abolition of the Line system. Regarding the issue of protection of the tribals and for that purpose allowing the system to continue, Maulavi Syed Abdur Rauf said that ".....the Line system question has been harped upon by the opposition to win over tribal friends....But if they require protection, they require it against all non-tribals." Most of the tribal representatives felt that the protective measures, which were adopted were inadequate so far as the interests of the tribal people were concerned. The Congress criticised the Saadulla ministry during whose tenure, rules and regulations of the Line system were further violated. The Congressmen such as Purna Chandra Sarma, Lakeshwar Barooah and Gopinath Bordoloi believed in giving protection to the tribals. They feared that these "indigenous people of the province – the tribals and the scheduled castes are soon to be driven away to the hills

79 Ibid
80 Speech by Maulavi Syed Abdur Rauf, ALAP, 26th February, 1940.
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79 Ibid
80 Speech by Maulavi Syed Abdur Rauf, ALAP, 26th February, 1940.
to make room for the invading hordes of immigrants". In such suggestions we find the reflection of the fear that the tribals would be pushed back to the hills which relates to the fear that whatever civilizational steps they had taken would be regressed so.

In 1940’s on the issue of amending the conditions of the Line system the tribal representatives demanded legislative changes and legally evict all illegal settlers, whether they had settled before or after April 1937. In June 1940 a government resolution put a ban on settlement of wastelands with any immigrants entering Assam after January 1, 1938. This measure was taken by Saadulla due to pressure of the Tribal representatives and the Congress. The Muslim League members criticised this position of Saadulla, and as mentioned earlier no eviction took place, for there was no way to distinguish a pre-1938 immigrant and a later ‘intruder’. The Saadulla coalition ministry was throughout criticised for its anti-Assamese, anti-tribal and pro-immigrant stand, though Minister Abdul Matin Chaudhary declared officially that protection of the backward tribals was the “bedrock of their policy.”

The issue of the Line system and protection of the backward classes came in handy for the Congress. It could use for its own political advantage the Muslim League’s political motive to change the demographic pattern of Assam and presumably make it a part of Pakistan. But regarding the actual problem, the Congress could not bring in much changes not even pressurise the government for the speedy creation of tribal blocks. Tribal land alienation was caused not only by the immigrant peasantry but also by the caste Hindu people especially in the slowly emerging urban areas like Guwahati. Though the provisions of the various developmental schemes were open to the tribals they faced

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81 Speech by Pruna Chandra Sarma. ALAP, 26th February. 1940
82 Speech by Abdul Matin Choudhury. ALAP, 6th March. 1944
handicaps in occupying those lands. Absence of funds implements and biased special officers were few of them. Blocks continued to be opened as also the professional grazing reserves. The Congress continued to stress on the necessity of maintaining the P.G.R’s and also demanded that wastelands should be measured and areas reserved for the indigenous population before settling the immigrants. However, the Congress national level leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru felt that immigration was an economic necessity and though not supporting its abolition wanted a relaxation of the Line system. The question acquired new dimensions when the tribal people began occupying areas where the immigrants were settled. According to Md. Amiruddin, “some 350 Mikirs, Lalungs and Kacharis headed by the gaonburas came...not only broke down the houses.....set fire to most of them and turned the colonists out of their homesteads and holdings as well.” He tried to convey that the allegations against the immigrants were baseless and condemned the tribals as ‘rioters’ and ‘trespassers’. To sum up, even though, incidents, which found mention in the Assembly were relatively few, the sources alluded to the growing friction and confrontations. The Congress successfully attempted to win over the tribal representatives, by focussing on Saadulla and his ‘pro-Muslim politics.’ Saadulla was caught between the two groups- the tribal representatives demanding protection and the Muslim League calling for the abolition of the Line system. But it was accepted at least by the Congress and the tribal representatives, that the tribal peasants were loosing lands, due to various reasons to the immigrants. Despite government measures like colonisation illegal squatters settled down in villages, in forests, grazing reserves, wherever land was available. From 1937 onwards itself the tribal representative

83 Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, ALAP, 14th March, 1944
84 ALAP, 6th December, 1941, resolution disapproving the Land Settlement Policy of the Saadulla Government.
85 A. Guha Planter Raj to Swaraj, p. 258
86 Speech by Md. Amiruddin, ALAP, 6th March, 1944
in the Assembly demanded more stringent legislation to stop land alienation and blocked efforts of the members of Muslim League to abolish the Line system.\textsuperscript{87}

During this period around the land question, the Line system and protection for the tribals a large number of political manipulations were played which led to changes in the provincial governments. Such developments made the tribal representatives defensive and the Muslim League offensive.\textsuperscript{88} The Tribal League\textsuperscript{89} representatives strongly opposed any sort of land development schemes related with the settlement of immigrants.\textsuperscript{90} The Congress supported such an effort and backed the tribal representatives’ attack on the Saadulla government. Faced with the constant and strong opposition of the Congress led by Bordoloi, Saadulla tried to woo the Muslim League to form the ministry. He could also include on the important Tribal League leader, Rupnath Brahma in his ministry. Rupnath Brahma professedly joined the ministry for the welfare of his community and the plains tribes. For most of the supporters of the Line system its necessity was due to the underlying assumption that the plains Tribes being ‘poor’, ‘backward’, ‘primitive’, ‘helpless’ etc. needed some protection against such encroachment of land and their displacement. Mainly due to the pressure of the Muslim League, the government continued to open more areas for settlement of immigrants through various measures (like colonisation scheme, grow more food campaign, de -

\textsuperscript{87} The Line system was introduced for the first time in 1920 in Nowgong. According to this device a line was drawn on the village map taking into consideration of the people inhabiting the villages and no occupation of land by the immigrants beyond that line was allowed.

\textsuperscript{88} A. Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, Chapters 6 and 7.

\textsuperscript{89} Tribal League was mostly represented by the limited tribal elites. Rupnath Brahma and Bhimbar Deuri were its early organisers.

\textsuperscript{90} There were series of ‘Land Development Schemes’ in Assam beginning from the late 19th century. These schemes broadly categorised as colonisation scheme has been discussed elsewhere. See Nandita Khaderia “Some Aspects of the Rural Economy of Assam: A Study of the Brahmaputra Valley Districts, 1874-1914” unpublished Ph. D. thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (1992).
reservation of grazing reserves). At the same time, it promised to safeguard the interests of the indigenous people – the scheduled castes and the tribals.

During 1937-47, in the arena of legislative politics the ‘tribal question’ was contested and articulated in the close context of the ‘land problem.’ The government was compelled to redefine their policy towards the tribals vis-a-vis the land question. The tribal peasants, who were largely outside the caste Hindu Assamese peasants organisation, the ryot sabhas, found their guardians in the Tribal League. However, the failure of the land policy and protective measures in restricting the tribal land alienation forced the tribal peasants to participate in the politics of agitation. The Congress in allying the tribal representatives to check the emergence of the Muslim League in the wake of partition.

The Temple Entry Issue

The Tribal League’s efforts to distance itself from caste Hindu Assamese society in carving out a ‘tribal’ identity was also evident when the Assam Temple Entry Bill was introduced in the Assembly to be debated in 1940. Ghanashyam Das, the mover, regretted the fact that most temples were not open for some sections of the society, the so-called depressed and backward classes. According to him, temple entry was not restricted in the past and came into existence only recently. He illustrated how the Vaishnava preacher Sankardeva believed in equality and that is why “even a javan like Jayahari Ata, a Miri like Bolai Ata, a Bhot like Damudar Ata and a Kachari like Ram Ata were given equal
status in his religious society....”91 His treatment of the tribes reflective of a dominant trend, place it in the hierarchy of the caste structure and the discourse of ‘upliftment’ defines them as low-caste Hindus. The preconceived assumption bracketed the tribals with the low-caste Hindus, who were denied entry into most temples. The dominant Assamese caste Hindu society did not perceive the plains tribes a s separate entity, especially where programme of upliftment was concerned. Such an attitude is evident in Ghanashyam Das’ speech: “.....in the Doul festival in Barpeta a man having sympathy for his fellow brothers cannot bear to see the sight when the tribals and fellow brothers cannot bear to see the sight when the tribals and depressed classes are refused, with harsh words, entry to the kirtonghar. You cannot look at their eyes when they return with tears running down their sad faces.”92

He compared the equality shared by tribal and non-tribal representatives in the Assembly house where he saw no apparent distinction between Rupnath Brahma, Rabi Chandra Kachari, Rohini Choudhuri and himself. The presence of discrimination in the social structure would not allow the above mentioned tribal representatives’ access into any temple. He pointed out that, “if my friend M. Rabi Chandra Kachari wants to enter the Barpeta temple, he will also get no access there. Is it not painful, sir, and is it not humiliating? Should this distinction remain?...No matter, sir, their sympathy with me for their depressed and tribal classes will suffice....I have a duty. I should perform that duty.”93

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91 Speech by Ghanashyam Das. ALAP. 29th February. 1940.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
Doubts were raised by the government to what extent would the Temple Entry Bill benefit the tribals. As Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri questioned whether the bill would help the Kacharis and other animist.\footnote{Speech by Rohini Chaudhuri, ALAP, 29th February. 1940.} He also stated the Bill’s definition of a Hindu which was defined as “one who is such by birth and religion and one who is a convert into it,”\footnote{Ibid.} excluded the tribes. By that logic “the animists will be clearly excluded by this definition of the term ‘Hindu’.” So this Bill will not at all give them any right."\footnote{Ibid.}

Rupnath Brahma, then a Minister in the provincial government, representative of the Tribal League classified his organisation’s positions regarding the question whether the tribes can be termed as Hindus and whether if the Bill would benefit the tribes:

“I have been asked by the honorable mover whether I myself and my people are Hindus or not. On this point I do not like to enter into any open discussion in this house, but his much I can tell the house that amongst the tribal people there are Christians and there are some who have adopted the Hindu religion and the rest of them have been treated as animists. I may say that they are quite independent of the Hindu society – they are certainly not so called low caste Hindus – they have got a distinct form of religion of their own, and they do not care if they are allowed to have entrance in the temples. I think, these people are not so much anxious to have access to public temples, or any temples.”\footnote{Speech by Rupnath Brahma on the Assam Temple Entry Bill, ALAP, 29th February, 1940 (emphasismine).}

Another member, Gauri Kanta Talukdar, rejected the necessity to classify the tribals separately as ‘animists’, such categories being largely colonial constructions:

“It is matter of great regret that following blindly the Christian Missionaries and their friends, the European writers and some of our own countrymen are calling the
tribal peoples 'animists'. Sir, I vehemently protest against the use of the expression 'animists in the case of our brethren of the tribal communities. It is a misnomer, it is an insult leveled against these people to call them animists....who has been using this expression? Have the missionaries with the object of exploiting these peoples not done it? Is this not a surreptitious attempt to alienate a portion of our brethren from the Hindu fold?' 98

He used a broad definition of Hinduism, as given by the Hindu Mahasabha, which was inclusive of all religions which had originated in India. According to him the 'simple' act of calling oneself 'Hindu', (irrespective of practices and rituals), made one 'Hindu' and such a notion of distinctive religious identity because of its all inclusive paternalistic nature. Rupnath Brahma's denial of the positive effects of the Temple Entry Bill for the tribal people came under attack from the populist notions of 'Hinduisation' obtained any claim of social upliftment of the Congress. According to Ghanashyam Das, Rupnath Brahma represented only the tribal elite and was 'modern' in his views and therefore did not attach important to entry into a temple. Brahma's opinion was called a personal viewpoint and not representative of the voice of the tribal people. The tribal society being a part of the wider Hindu Society there were, asserted Gauri kanta Talukdar, "people who are religious minded and who like to worship God inside a temple", and they should not be deprived of that right. 99

Issues of Backwardness, Education and Employment

In the Legislative Assembly, through the articulation of aspirations of the Tribal League members, the constructions of another image of the 'plains Tribes' took shape.

98 Speech by Gauri Kanta Talukdar. ALAP, 29th February, 1940. 99 Ibid.
The dominant image is of a 'backward' community. In the speeches of the tribal members we find a sense of self-depreciation, which drew heavily from the internalisation of colonial, official and ethnographic images of the tribes. "The sense of cultural inferiority integral with the term 'tribal society' enunciated by the colonial ethnoology was too embedded in the psychology of the educated tribals to inspire them.... Not surprisingly, the tribal leaders consciously presented themselves as 'backward' people before the statutory commission amounting to negation of their own culture."¹⁰⁰ By virtue of not being a part of the dominant mainstream culture the appellation of 'backwardness' in various aspects, subsequently, entitled 'protection' and special provisions so that such conditions disappear. It was stressed that the tribes not only inhabited 'backward tracts' but were backward in every aspect, be it in education or other social conditions. The reasons of 'backwardness' according to Rabi Chandra Kachari, could be partly attributed to internal inability or handicaps to progress and partly (probably most importantly) "due to indifference of our more fortunate brethren and to want if proper encouragement at the hands of the government."¹⁰¹ The necessity of "protection and special treatment – real and substantial"¹⁰² for large tribal population, which was 'poor, weak and ignorant' is the dominant mode of articulation.

Therefore, education and employment was perceived as modern means of empowerment and social emancipation by the tribal leaders. The emerging tribal elite, who constituted the Tribal League, perceived modern education as empowerment. There was the realisation that in order to create and, preserve an identity one needs the aid of

¹⁰¹ Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, ALAP, 7th August, 1937
¹⁰² Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, ALAP, 14th March, 1944
instruments like education. As one tribal member of the Assembly observed: "At present, education is the most vital problem for the tribal, backward and scheduled castes people. They now feel what is education and they are now realising that without education they are nobody and nowhere in the civilized world."\textsuperscript{103} So within the scope of provincial politics, another aspect of assertion by the representatives of the Tribal League was for securing the right to education. The level of education in colonial Assam was quite low,\textsuperscript{104} and the plains Tribes were lagging behind in this aspect more than other communities. So with the communal award of 1935, and with their own representatives in the Assembly, demands for better educational facilities and opportunities were put forward. These demands were mostly for setting up more schools in tribal areas, increase of funds, reservation, scholarship and free studentship for tribal students. Bhimbar Deuri, one of the founding member of the Tribal League and also member in the Legislative Council, while discussing the various problems of the tribals, also focussed on the question of education: "Amongst these problems – the amelioration of the condition of the masses, the eradication of the opium habit and the spread of education among all classes, particularly among the backward classes, are the most urgent needs...."\textsuperscript{105}. But cognition of the problem and acting upon it were two separate processes. The initial jubilation among the tribal elite for the communal representation in the Assembly and over provincial autonomy soon evaporated. It was evident that development under the colonial government would not be easy. Rupnath Brahma's speech during a budget session reflects this attitude, "Now-a-days we hear a great cry in the country for the upliftment of these backward people, we have been given to understand that the

\textsuperscript{103} Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, ALAP, 2\textsuperscript{nd} March, 1938.

\textsuperscript{104} A.Guha, Planter Raj to Swarja, P. 56-64. In these pages he discusses the growth of the middle class.

\textsuperscript{105} Speech by Bhimbar Deuri, ALCP, 11\textsuperscript{th} March, 1933.
government also have taken up special responsibility for safeguarding of the interests of the minority people....But it is surprising that nowhere in the budget we find any specific provision for the upliftment for the backward tribal of the plains.”

In fact inadequate budget allocation for education and grants to fund schools were perennial problems. Rupnath Brahma, another tribal representative in the Assembly, expressed his disappointment and dissatisfaction in such a situation: “We expected this time our popular and responsible government would come forward with definite scheme for education of the backward tribal people of the plains, but unfortunately to our utter disappointment no specific earmarked provision has been made for the plains tribals in the present year’s budget also....It is a known fact that the tribal people of the plains are the most backward people in the whole province and I think all nation-building projects will be left far behind in Assam.”

Not much was done to address those grievances and conditions did not improve radically as evident in Rabi Chandra Kachari, another representative’s speech: “....The tribal people of the plains are every backward in the point of education. But we find a small amount of Rs. 8000 has been earmarked for the expansion of primary education among the tribal people of the plains. This money is quite insufficient because on average only 4 schools from each of the 12 subdivisions will be benefited from this grant. But in each subdivision we have got more than 50 lower primary schools. We are also neglected by the local boards, as we cannot be properly represented in the boards. So I request government to earmark a sufficient amount for the expansion of education in the tribal areas of the plains, so that we may have a special impetus in education.”

The reliance on ‘liberal’ policies of the colonial state to

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106 Speech by Rupnath Brahma, ALAP, 9th August, 1937.
107 Speech by Rupnath Brahma, ALAP, 18th February, 1938.
108 Speech by Rabi Chandra Kachari, ALAP, 22nd March, 1941.
improve their conditions and civilise them soon disappeared and most of the tribal representatives lamented that after more than a century of British rule in Assam there was a lot to be done yet. Karka Dalay Miri, representative of the Miri tribe, complained that though hill tribes and Muslim students were conferred free studentship and scholarship, no such special provisions had been accorded to the Backward Tribals of the plains.109

Another member, Purna Chandra Sarma pointed to the lopsided flow of funds: “While money is being poured for wastage in sectarian education in Madrasas and Maktabs he dreams to possibly bring in a bill for taxing education of the Mikirs, Lalungs, Kacharis and Miris and the ex-garden labourers – for whom, he could not find even a score of thousand.”110

The backwardness was due to these circumstances of absence of supportive provisions. According to Karka Dalay Miri, groups like the Miri, Kachari, Deuri, Lalung, Khampti, Mikir etc. were backward in education due to the absence of adequate number of schools.111 Khorsing Terang, representative of the Mikir Hills, stressed that education was necessary to transform the ‘inhibited, animal like Mikir’, into a proper civilized human being.

The tribal representatives came up with various solutions to the problem of providing education. It was suggested that such problems could only be solved if the government established lower primary schools in every five to six villages. In many areas the local people (i.e. the tribals) took the initiative to open schools in the hope that such venture schools would be taken over by the local board. But not many schools were taken over by the local boards and very few scholarships were provided. Another demand was

109 Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, ALAP, 17th August, 1937.
110 Speech by Purna Chandra Sarma, ALAP, 26th February, 1941.
111 Speech by Karka Dalay Miri, ALAP, 17th August, 1937.
that a special officer for education of these people should be appointed, as it was done for the Muslims. Under such pressure the Congress Ministry, when in power, improved the funding of tribal education.\textsuperscript{112} It was also decided that eight tribal students receive free studentship eighteen would be for the Muslims and rest to others.\textsuperscript{113} Lack of adequate funding and disinterest on the part of the colonial authorities observed by the tribal representatives and the Congress members criticised the motives. "Instead of giving us better facilities for education they have given us facilities for opium pills and some doses of liquor only".\textsuperscript{114} Haldhar Bhuyan, Congressman, pointed to the self interest of the colonial government in their policy towards the tribes, for whom nothing was done till the declaration of provincial autonomy. The awareness of the tribals on the necessity of education was also attributed to the spread of Congress message since 1921.\textsuperscript{115}

Thus, by the 1940's the Tribal League had reified the idea of a distinctive tribal identity, mostly for political and social reasons. Therefore on various issues it came into conflict with the Congress and other groups. The tribal leadership constructed a discourse which hinged on difference as it is evident from the controversies, which point towards engendering identity in opposition to caste Hindu society and politics. As it is evident, as a construction was contested at various levels and probably aware of the social complexities the Tribal League identity was political in its expression. It revolved around the question of rights, not traditional and customary, but modern rights of education, employment and equality. It evolved through appropriation, negation and opposition the identity of the 'plains tribes'.

\textsuperscript{112} Out of Rs. 50,000, Rs. 29,000 was kept for the tribals.
\textsuperscript{113} ALAP, 26\textsuperscript{th} February, 1940.
\textsuperscript{114} ALAP, 2\textsuperscript{nd} March, 1938.
\textsuperscript{115} Speech by Haladhar Bhuyan, ALAP, 5\textsuperscript{th} December, 1935