Conclusion
In the preceding chapters the attempt was to map out the trajectories of identity formation among the ‘plains tribes’ in the Brahmaputra valley. The process of defining, constructing and asserting identity was not unilinear and monolithic, though there was an effort to politically unify the various tribes in the valley it did not deny the cultural and social difference of the people. The Tribal League was a political organisation in which the tribal elite gradually moved away from seeking higher ritual positions within the caste Hindu society, and the attention shifted to a more secular domain of material sources of social mobility, i.e., education, employment and political power. The element of protest in the Tribal League’s articulation continued to be within the framework of constitutional reform and few confrontations with the caste Hindu congress leaders. But the political impact of the movement continued to be tangibly felt and it provided and nurtured people for later struggles.

The Congress’s successful attempt in merging or rather absorbing the Tribal League leadership in some manner or other proved catastrophic for the Plains Tribes communities of the Brahmaputra valley. When the Constituent Assembly was formed in 1946 the Congress sent the Bodo congressman, Dharanidhar Basumatary rather than any accepted and representative of the Tribal League. Leaders of the League, who articulated the demands and political rights of the Plains Tribes communities, were left out of the process of constituent assembly debates which were crucial to the determination of the political identity in the region, in terms of governance and administration in the newly created nation state.
It is undeniably true that the Fifth and the Sixth Schedule of the constitution define tribal policy to day, wherein while containing the vision for the future the roots were still deeply embedded in colonial policies. As observed by Amit Prakash, “The intellectual baggage that was carried into the Constituent Assembly drew heavily on the colonial rationalist, integrationist model” and also relied on the dichotomy of the two broad approaches towards understanding and administering ‘tribal areas’.¹ The dominant conceptual framework was that of the ethnographer-administrator which treated the tribal communities as ‘savages’—‘noble’ or ‘warlike’, living in primitive conditions in a non-hierarchised social system, innocent of the changes, which was only associated with non-tribals, in our case more specifically the caste Hindus. The second viewpoint saw the tribes as people existing in the peripheries of the Hindu society and in the process of being absorbed into Hindu society through upward social mobility. Though apparently contradictory both, these approaches converge in certain degrees – stressing on the essential differences between the ‘tribes’ and the ‘other’ communities, – as a pristine state already degenerated due to Hindu civilisational influences or accelerating towards disintegration; or as waiting to be assimilated into the mainstream political and capitalistic system – either the market economy or the caste Hindu system. It was from this discourse the notion of protection and isolation originated.

Leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi and Rev. Nichols Roy, who were favourable towards creating autonomous district areas and keeping certain areas under Governor’s control for the excluded and partially excluded areas attempted to allay the fears about the implementation of the Sixth Schedule for the Hill people. But there was dissension

¹ Amit Prakash, Jharkhand: Politics of Identity and Development, New Delhi, 2001, p.62
among the regional leaders on the policy to be implemented. There was group which
favoured the view that ordinary administration and governance for those regions and
opposed the formation of regional and district councils of that purpose. It was proposed
by mainly Kuladhar Chaliha that such a system would encourage separatism and would
lead to the creation of a ‘Tribalistan’ similarly in the way Pakistan was created and
eventually a ‘Communistan’ would be created. As pointed out by Amit Prakash, “the
integrationist approach of the colonial discourse was reinforced in the minds of the
nationalist leaders by the experience of the partition and formed the basis of political
reorganisation of India.” It was observed by Rohini Kumar Choudhury and Kuladhar
Chaliha that the Sixth Schedule was “closely, absolutely closely, following, except in
some cases, the British method.” Their voice reflected a framework where
assimilationist tendencies were dominant. Whereas Gopinath Bordoloi was a proponent
of the Nehruvian principle to allow each group to grow according to their own genius and
culture.

The relative success or the failure of the provisions of the Sixth Schedule in
administering the region is not within the scope for this work but in the process the Plains
tribal communities were denied the right to articulate their demands. In this scheme of
things too, the dichotomy between the hills and the plains acted as a crucial determining
factor. As classified by Gopinath Bordoloi, that there were 3 categories of tribals in
Assam — the plains tribal and the 2 categories in the hills, one administered by Governor
General’s Agent and others to be administered as autonomous groups under the Sixth

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2 Savyasaachi, *Tribal Forest-Dwellers and Self-Rule: The Constituent Assembly Debates on the Fifth and
Sixth Schedules*, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, 1998, p.119
3 Amit Prakash, *Jharkhand*, p.62
4 Savyasaachi, *Tribal Forest-Dwellers and Self-Rule*, p.126
Schedule. According to him, the plains tribes though the original people of the valley, had lost their own culture and civilisation, because they were gradually absorbed into the folds of the 'Aryan culture'. Bordoloi very conveniently skirted the issue of the question of identity of these plains tribes communities though there had been a strong movement under the Tribal League. Thus, colonial ethnographic and administrative discourses influenced the policy making in the post-colonial period also.

The colonial dichotomies between the hills and the plains, reform and protection, interference and isolation continued and still exist in the political and developmental discourse which has led to iniquitous development. People in the administration and academics have been forced to acknowledge and address the issues and ignore them.

This work has been an effort to explore some aspects of the tribal politics in the Brahmaputra valley in the colonial period. The transformations in the rural society in the valley due to colonial revenue and forest policies led to radical changes in the lives of the tribal communities. Colonial policies consolidated differences between communities rather hardened them as rules, norms or customs followed by the communities. Colonial administrative practices often became extensions of its ethnographic discourses and both assisted each other. But more powerful than colonial ethnography in maintaining and constructing distinctive identities was the census. It gave the scope to the colonial subject to manipulate identity as much as it did to the colonial state. It became a powerful instrument in the hands of the tribal elite to validate and legitimise their claims in opposition to other communities, and later on claim political power through representational politics which was based on numerical strength. Therefore since the beginning of the twentieth century the associative politics of the plains tribal
Communities of the valley hinged on notion of difference with the majority, the caste Hindus. It attempted to unify political various tribal communities and give them a common platform which resulted in the establishment of the Tribal League in 1933. Though the Tribal League attempted to unify the communities in the Brahmaputra valley there were problems in constructing such an identity and sustaining it. Because, in reality, the differences between each community was enormous and also because the plains tribal identity at least at that historical juncture was defined at various levels – as Indians, as Assamese, as a part of their community and also region. In this realm of multiple identities a definite political notion of tribal identity was reified by the Tribal League, an identity which was itself derived from colonial constructs and which emerged due the political space offered by the colonial state.