Introduction
The question of the ‘Plains Tribes’ immediately brings to one’s mind the endemic struggle for autonomy, status and statehood among the various communities of the Brahmaputra valley. The violence of the process and the persistence of their struggle for rights and ethnic status have brought these communities (i.e. Bodos, Kacharis, Tiwas, Mishings, Deuris, Rabhas)\(^1\) who had been largely ignored by the grand national discourse and also by the sub-national one into the mainstream societal discourse.

The trend in history writing did not differ from the general perception of attempting to silence the voice of the marginalised peoples, or communities who have been relegated or decorated with an ethnographic status.

The earliest efforts to write a history of Assam, colonial ethnographies and Gunabhiram Barua’s *Assam Buranji*, the history of the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley have been relegated to passing mention of the tribal communities or the grand narrative of the Ahom- Kachari conflict.

Since Edward Gait’s (*A History of Assam*, 1905) to H. K. Barpajari (*A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. IV and V, 1992 and 1993) tribes were confined to a certain period in history, especially dealing with the emergence of and decline of the tribal kingdoms of the Kacharis, Moron, Chutiyas and Jayantias in the ancient and medieval period. The establishment of colonial power in the province and the disjuncture and transformation ensuing from it gradually marginalised these communities in the history of the region. The silence about the fate of these communities during the colonial

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\(^1\) They are also known as the Kacharis (Bodos), Mikirs (Karbis), Lalungs (Tiwas), and Miris (Mishings). The nomenclature of tribes had always been a contentious issue, one used by the Caste Hindus and Colonial documents and one they used to designate themselves.
period naturally leads to a questioning and analysing of the nature of history writing and
the agenda behind it.

Most traditional histories were of course political narratives of medieval Assam,
which drew extensively from various Buranjis. S. K. Bhuyan’s (ed) *Kacahri Buranji*
(Guwahati 1936) is a typical example, where Bhuyan introduces the subject of the long
drawn Ahom Kachari conflict relying on the old Assamese manuscripts. The primary
attempt was limited to locating the origin of the myths of the tribes and thereafter tracing
the political history. After annexation of the province by the British and the dissolution of
the small tribal principalities and kingdoms, these people appeared to be sinking into
oblivion and relative passivity in history. Histories of the colonial period focus on the
transformation of the administration under the colonial rule and later on the growth of
nationalism.

In other contemporary works like H. K. Barpujari’s *The Comprehensive History
of Assam*, the mention of the tribes was limited to the issue of annexation of the Cachar to
the British province. It also discussed the spread of education among the tribes and the
role of the missionaries and the colonial administrators played in disseminating
education.

The project of documenting the political history of Assam by the Assam
government saw the publication of three volumes on national movement. The third
volume, *Political History of Assam*, Vol. 3 (1980) which deals with the period of 1930s
and 40s is again a distorted narrative of the legislative politics. It locates the Tribal

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2 Chronicles of the Ahom period.
League's position in the provincial assembly politics in the narrow context of nationalism, which was projected as an overwhelmingly caste Hindu dominated phenomenon.

A radical shift from such a trend of political narrative came with Amalendu Guha's seminal works, *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (New Delhi 1977) and *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam* (Calcutta, 1991). His article, “From Tribalism to Feudalism” problematised the issue of state formation in the early colonial period. Guha located the 'Assamese' social formation, parallel with the strengthening of the Ahom monarchy, as a process of sanskritisation and detribalisation.

Another important work Nayanjot Lahiri's *Pre Ahom-Assam* contest Guha's ideas about the role of land grants in introduction of settled plough agriculture, Hinduisation and detribalisation. According to Lahiri the nature of land grants in Assam was different from the Gangetic valley and hence the social processes inherent therein were different too. Further discussions have been carried on by Sujit Choudhary and Vaskar Nandy and Vasanthi Raman.

For the colonial period of course historical literatures have not attempted to transcend the absence of a history of the tribes to the present period. A. Guha's work on provincial politics of Assam, though mentioning the role of the Tribal League, locates tribal politics in the broader political scene of the early decades of the twentieth century.

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3 A. Guha, "From Tribalism to Feudalism" in *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, (Calcutta, 1991).
where he primarily focuses on the Congress-Muslim League equations and struggles. But an attempt at class analysis marginalises ideologies such as the ‘tribal identity’ and the smaller organisations like the Tribal League. Ideologies like that of the Tribal League remained largely outside the ambit of the primary contradiction of the nationalist movement, i.e., between colonised and colonisers. Guha has defined the emergence of Tribal consciousness as a ‘bogey’, a dreadful spectre, a sectarian farce, and an instrument in the hands of the Congress, and a hindrance in the class unity of the peasantry. Perception of the tribals and their consciousness as causing a rupture and schism in the social structure is a continuation of the ‘tribals’ in the region weakened the strong trends of sanskritisation and the resultant detribalisation.

Recent Works like Sanjib Baruah’s on the development and facets of the Assamese ‘sub-nationalism’ inquire into the contestation of such a narrative by the contemporary Bodo and other community based identity movement. However in the last decades of the 20th century the question of ethnic movements vis-à-vis ‘Assamese’ identity have been discussed in the light of a progressive political agenda. Dhrubajyoti Borah’s political rhetoric in his Asamor Jan Jati Prsanga questions an array of pre conceived notions about identity politics in the Brahmaputra valley and opens up space for further research. Sibnath Barman’s Asamer Janajati Samasya develops Borah’s arguments with reference to sources, which were not used for the official Histories. Like Borah, he too locates the emergence of the tribal consciousness in the divisive politics of the colonial government. The underlying assumption of course

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6 Sanjib Baruah, India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality, New Delhi, 1999.
being that the colonial government raptures the social fabric and the process where tribes were being slowly assimilated and acculturated to a hinduised civilisational pattern.

But as the question of tribal identity is being further explored along the growing awareness, the history of these communities has added a new dimension to the understanding of the region.

Recent essays⁹ on the subject raised questions about the role of the colonial state and also about the social and economic differentiation in colonial and Assam.

Indivar Deuri has in the recent years traced the history of identity movement among the Bodos, of Deuris and Miris and also contributed greatly to our understanding of movement under tribal league and one of its early leaders, Bhimbar Deuri.

Despite these attempts to record marginalised histories and bridge the gap that existed, there continues to be an inadequacy that necessitates further research into the area. Most works have been silent about the emergence of tribal politics in the colonial period or about the importance of such consciousness within the nationality question. Works that have manifested interest essentially sought to unearth the roots of contemporary autonomy or ethnic movements.

Until very recently the causality and progress of the movements were traced and located in the postcolonial situation. But as the various movements struggling to establish their ethnic identity take recourse to history to reconstruct their pasts and gain legitimacy

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there is a growing expediency to retrace a historian's footsteps further than that of a political scientist or sociologists.

The primacy of studying formation and construction of identities in its every cannot be ignored in the current political situation, where it is being constantly debated, in the public political spheres, 'who is an Assamese?' or 'Why a Bodo or a Mishing be an Assamese?' My work locates these fixed identities as an essential creation of colonisation. Although recent works like Sumit Guha's, *Environment and Ethnicity in India*, reject the overwhelming stress on colonialism's instrumentality in imagination and construction of identity.¹⁰ There is no denying the fact that colonial practices like census enumeration, cadastral surveys, ethnographic writings, and administrative reports all contributed to the construction of identities which gradually became inflexible due to administration and politics. To understand the situation better Sudipta Kaviraj’s notion of 'fuzzy' communities could be a useful tool, since our pre-colonial past seemed to a great extent a more fluid than our present. Such a position is no denial of conflict and contradiction in inter and intra- community relations.

This study will attempt to show how in nearly a century certain community based identities emerged in the Brahmaputra valley, often as a result of colonial intervention. Since the latter part of the 19th century when the colonial rule stabilised, the serious work of a systematic tax regime began.

In 1860 new taxes were imposed and the peasants, especially tribal peasants, responded by killing Lt. Singer, who was sent to control the movement. It seemed to be

an apt departure point, since, Kacharis, one of the valley tribal communities' came to be under serious administrative scrutiny and ethnographic consideration. A non- 'wild', 'semi – savage' tribe rose in violent protest though the term ‘plains tribes’ was coined and put into administrative usage in the early decades of the 20th century. There was already a differentiation in the society and the colonial administrators discussed this as well as used it in creating the taxation regime.

This study is arranged in five chapters, which would deal with different aspects of the identity question among the ‘plains tribes’ in the Brahmaputra valley. In this scheme of chapterisation the first chapter would deal with the change in the rural economy of the region with colonial penetration. It attempts to establish a connection between geographical and spatial location of these communities and their treatment in the official discourse and the existent and created differentiation between various peasant communities in the region. The colonial revenue officials categorised different communities in a peasant hierarchy of backwardness where deciding factors were the respective location of land and the mode of cultivation. The remarkable protean situation of agricultural practices lead to initial confusion and then straight jacketing of certain peasant stereotypes that lead certain identities were redefined and superimposed on the people.

The second chapter discusses the role of colonial census in identity formation. The study of census as instrumental to identity politics and caste mobility as has been pointed out by B. S. Cohn in his seminal essay “The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia”. Census provided for the first time within the purview of colonial ethnography the scope where the subject could identify and define oneself in
opposition or in relation to others. Notions of identity emerged since the first census because of its classificatory and enumerative role. It was evident, in the increase and decrease in the numerical strength of ‘tribal’ communities, seen through the markers of religion and language. In the Brahmaputra valley the census enumeration assumed crucial political importance by 1930s mostly due to altered situation since the arrival of the Simon Commission and the possibility of communitarian and communal representation.

The third chapter would attempt to delineate the trends in colonial ethnographic practices in colonial Assam and how the separation of identity between the hills an the plains were shaped. Writing about the Kacharis, the Miris, the Lalungs, the Rabhas, and the Mikirs was fraught with problems for ethnographers and officials. These commentates could not be easily typified and classified by virtue of their not confirming to certain notions held by the colonial authorities on caste, tribe and race. But, in the peripheral regions, like in the frontier province, certain fluidity was believed to have existed. Here groups ethnographically distinctive were considered to be outside the stereotype of fixed pan-Indian caste hierarchies and of an all-pervading Brahmanical value system. In these works (es. Wade, Hutton, and Gait) we find the reflection of various ideas about caste, tribe and race. They were located within the purview of certain dominant themes and concerns of 19th century ethnography, like creating and maintaining social divisions like ‘savage’, primitive, wild’. ‘casteless’ hill dwelling communities and caste bound people living in the plains.

Colonial ethnography presented an unbridgeable cultural gap between hill and the valley, and stressed on sharp contrasts between

a. the more ‘wild’ and ‘savage’ hill tribes,
b. the caste-Hindu communities

c. communities whose practices were not so sharply distinguishable, the tribes of the plains.

Other concerns which shaped the discourse on tribes was the question of social and cultural transformation which was an integral part of broader interests on evolution or movement from 'savagery' to 'civilisation'. Early ethnographic writings also reflect colonial attitudes in administration of various communities. The paternalistic attitude reinforced with ideas of civilising is evident in all writings. The administrative concern about 'tribes' arose from the paternalistic colonial attitude to safeguard the 'weak', 'vulnerable' plains tribe from the caste Hindus. There was an apparent a superficial duality in the paternalistic duty to civilise the tribes, while at the same time celebrating their exclusiveness and safeguarding them form the degeneration that progressively sets in due to environmental factors and cultural contact with civilisation. It would also look at how colonial ethnographic knowledge impinges on policies.

The fourth chapter deals with the actual process of emergence of tribal politics in the Brahmaputra valley, beginning with early associative politics and social reform movements. There were efforts by various tribal communities to locate themselves in the socio-political milieu of the colonial state and define, redefine and construct an identity vis-a-vis the colonial state and the Assamese caste Hindu middle classes. In the early years of the 20th century there were conscious efforts for social and religious change among the tribal communities, especially the Bodos and also saw the emergence of political consciousness among the Kacharis, Mikirs, Miris, especially which arose out of
an awareness of their own identity and of the political space of the representational politics and the colonial discourse on the administration and representation of the tribes.

Education, which spread gradually, penetration of colonial administration, contact with areas and regions of social and cultural identities and from 1920s onwards conditions of growing political consciousness under the Congress, and the caste and existence associations (like the Ahom Sabha, Kaibarta Samilan) gave impetus to the emergence of associations of tribal communities like the Chutiya, Moran, and the Kacharis. This chapter would also locate whether the gradual strengthening of the idea of cultural identity was co-extensive with emerging political aspirations. It would question whether tribal identity politics can be solely located in the catalyst role played by the colonial state which provided a political space or whether one needs to locate its efforts to define itself in opposition to the castes Hindu Assamese society.

The fifth chapter would look at the emergence of the Tribal League as a representative platform of the tribal communities in the Brahmaputra valley. It would discuss the formation of the Tribal League and the efforts of the League to delineate the question of representation of the plains tribes'. The formation and emergence of the Tribal League ion 1933 as a common platform of all the plains tribes' also involved a parallel process in self recognition (in defining ‘tribalness’) by the right of representative of the tribal people. This was largely necessitated by the constitutional reforms, which gave communitarian representation in the provincial assembly. So, the major thrust of this chapter would be to look into issues around which Tribal League politics take shape. Another major thrust of the chapter would be to locate the contestation of identity in the provincial politics of the period 1933 - 1947. Assembly politics was also a space where
the complex, sometimes antagonistic and at times compliant relationship between the Congress and the Tribal League took shape. The middle class and the Congress by and large perceived the Tribal League’s efforts to forge a tribal identity as an attempt to undermine ‘Assamese nationality’. So this chapter would focus on the crucial role the Tribal League played in the brief period of provincial politics before independence.

This work would question the primary assumptions about identity politics in this region and the path that it has followed in the post-colonial period. The resolution of conflict and understanding of the nature of the society essentially leads back to history and the roots of certain issues which might lead us to a better understanding of our society.

This work is an inquiry into the direction of identity formation and the transformations that it brought about in the realm of social and political ideas. The period under study saw the construction and crystallisation of certain group identities. Gradually as various communities moved towards modern representational politics the idea of difference and separateness dominated. It is now very obvious that the colonial and postcolonial realities do not essentially define the total social reality. In a period when, even the smallest communities attain and maintain distinctiveness the overarching historical and geographical identity of the region is submerged or besieged by subversive tendencies. In the situation like that of the Brahmaputra valley what is evident was that “Given multiple identities in a society, several alternative group formations are indeed possible in nationalist or communitarian politics.”

Ray, Rajat Kanta. ‘The Felt Community: Commonality and Mentality Before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism’. New Delhi, 2003, p.32