Chapter II

Census as a Site of Contestation
Many historical studies of the census use the corpus of demographic knowledge as a part of ethnographic inquiry. But recent studies have brought into focus the politics of numbers, or the political arithmetic, because unlike in the nineteenth century, quantitative approaches are no longer enmeshed in a scientific attitude now regarded as naïve empiricism.\(^1\) The census was admittedly a document of great ethnographic value. But the question of numbers also became important from the censuses of the 20\(^{th}\) century. Early colonial censuses were of course primarily ‘ethnographic classificatory exercises’, originating “in the need for information about people to facilitate their governance and to expedite the exploitation of their skills and resources”\(^2\). But ethnographic concerns did not begin, as often presumed, with the census’. These issues and ideas were already a part of administrative thinking by the 1850s. The consolidation of colonial rule over an agrarian society of great diversity gave rise to systematic revenue collection and required comprehensive land registers, which ensured maximum collection of land revenue, at a very local level.\(^3\)

The ethnographic aspect of the census was always most dominant, and a number of studies do draw extensively upon the census data. Grierson, who compiled the Linguistic survey of India, 1903, claimed that it was essentially based on figures from the census of 1891.\(^4\) As Bernard Cohn remarks in his seminal essay, “It would not be an exaggeration to say that down until 1950 scholars’ and scientists’ views on the nature, structure and functioning of the Indian caste system were shaped mainly by data and

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\(^3\) Kreager, “Population and Identity”, p.165.

\(^4\) Ibid., p.166.
conceptions growing out of the census operations". The census has also been an important historical source as a part of ethnographic inquiry, but it has also become important and necessary to inquire into the relationship between quantitative and qualitative definitions of population.

Census classification and enumeration and its effect on the indigenous population, its "consciousness of caste and the use of census for validation of claims to new status within the caste system" has been studied in great details. As observed by Kenneth Jones, there was an increasing realisation that critical relation between the census and political identity cannot be denied. The census was used in various ways by the subjects of the colonial state who were in fact the subjects of the census itself. The census and the subject were involved in a complex relation and each defined the other and attempted to control it. But as mentioned by Arjun Appadurai and others, such an exercise was totally appropriated or conversely 'democratic' politics came to be "adversely affected by the idea of numerically dominated bloc voting...". So, although the census did lead to certain rigidity in defining collective identities to a considerable degree, it also set into motion controversial mobility of nationalist, ethnic, communal and other identities. But these trends concretised into a politics that depended on 'representation' and 'representativeness' and established the ground for present day communal and ethnic conflict in South Asia. The focus of Appadurai and others is caste, it being the crucial category to understand Indian reality. This chapter attempts to understand a similar situation — the contemporary ethnic situation in Northeast India, particularly tribal

5 Bernard S. Cohn. "The Census and Objectification in South Asia" in An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays, Delhi, 1990, p 242
6 Ibid., p241.
communities and the demands for autonomy and separate statehood, within this framework of the politics of numbers. Here too, along with other means of articulation, census enumeration gave rise to an identity where demographic numerical strength played a determining role in the emerging notion of politics and identity. As mentioned by Appadurai, identities constructed by such a process, necessitated by the colonial state, "transformed not just into imagined communities but into 'enumerated communities'".9

Though the ethnographic aspect of the census was given up in the 1941 census, where caste ceased to be a category of enumeration, the "idea of politics as the contest of essentialised and 'enumerated' communities had already taken firm hold of local and regional politics and thus no longer required the stimulation of the census to maintain its hold on Indian politics".10

Therefore, though the 1941 census was not an elaborate ethnographic exercise like the 1931 census, with data presented only for a limited number of communities at the district level such as the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other castes, it created political tension regarding numbers.11 Yet it generated controversy about categories and numbers, particularly because by then representation in the Legislative Councils and Assemblies was totally driven by the logic of politics of numbers and ethnographically defined communitarian politics.

Notions of identity emerged since the first census because of its classificatory and enumerative role. This is evident in the increase and decrease in the numerical strength of the 'tribal' communities, seen through markers of religion and language. Census officials

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9 Appadurai, "Number in the Colonial Imagination", p.332.
10 Ibid., p.331
11 Singh, "Census and Ethnography", p.143
took an interest in the changes that they observed or in the question how other communities related to the caste Hindu hierarchisation. As remarked by K.S. Singh, census officials were "prone to describe tribal religion as raw material for Hinduism".\textsuperscript{12} They focussed on the process of socio-cultural of assimilation tribal societies into Hinduism. Hinduism was a primary category for understanding 'tribal' societies and Risley and others saw such a process as a negative marker for authentication of such communities. Risley and Gait who had defined the basic principles of categorisation, thought that tribes all over India were gradually but surely losing their identity and becoming 'Hinduised' in a movement from 'tribe' to 'caste'. The officers of the colonial administration presumed that the phenomenon of Hinduisation was an inevitability in the tribal world, but as remarked by B.B. Chaudhuri, the process was far more complex, especially where it was immediately linked with the radical agrarian movement.\textsuperscript{13}

The situation was much more complex in the province of Assam, where the diversity of communities was much higher and there was a remarkable fluidity in demographic structure. The region had experienced migrations both from the east and west for centuries, and it was a trend predicted likely to continue. Infact, it was quite difficult to pin down communities; as admitted by B. C. Allen in the 1901 census. He says, "There is, infact, no absolute test by means of which we can divide the inhabitants of Assam into those who are Assamese and those who are not."\textsuperscript{14} Likewise, in the Brahmaputra valley, in order to differentiate between various communities— the caste

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p.142.
\textsuperscript{13} Binay Bhusan Chaudhuri, "Society and Culture of the Tribal World in Colonial Eastern India: Reconsidering the Notion of 'Hinduisatiion' of tribes" in Hetukar Jha ed. Perspectives on Indian History and Society: A Critique, New Delhi, 2002, p.34
\textsuperscript{14} Census of India, 1901, Vol. IV, Assam, Part I, Report by B. C. Allen, ICS, Superintendent of Census Operations, Shillong, 1902, p.17
Hindus and the ‘tribal’ communities— the colonial census authorities resorted to indices like religion and language, qualified by notions of purity, prescription and proscription. Therefore, the question of ‘Hinduisation’ and Hindu influences was critically intertwined with the increase and decrease in numbers of followers of animistic practices and these communities. This was especially the case in the Brahmaputra valley where the colonial officials felt the tribal communities were particularly susceptible or vulnerable to such influences. Simultaneously, they accepted that whether it was possible to classify the animistic tribes of the province adding that even to “the most casual observer the Assam range must be an object of interest” ethnographically. Animism itself was a negative category for classification, because, only “those who had no recognized religion were shown in the column of the schedule for religion under the name of their tribe.”

Since there was an ambiguity of definition and the census officials perceived ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Animism’ as two opposite ends of a spectrum of faiths connected by the path of conversion, the problem of classification was compounded. “A large numbers of such people have already been converted to Hinduism and many of them now are as near the border line that it is difficult to say what they are.” The problem was not as easily resolved as observed by the census enumerators, practices co-existed and these communities were reluctant to give up their old customs and food habits, and proscriptions were not usually successful. Therefore, certain differences in lifestyles and practices persisted, which demonstrated the nature of still extant community identities and challenged the construct of a homogenous ‘Assamese’ identity.

15 Ibid., p.120
17 Ibid
Gradually, we see a change in the numbers of communities with the growth of political consciousness among various communities. Also any seeming ethnographic clarity among the colonial officers of course was coupled with a certain political idea about interplay of communities in the fluid demographic situation as it was in the Brahmaputra valley.

The 1891 census was important because religion was classified separately from caste and tribe, to remove the confusion about 'Hinduised' tribals. In the 1881 census, the classification simplistically assumed that the "tribes on the frontier which were altogether beyond Hindu influence were shown to be Animistic, and those which were beginning to come under that influence as Hindu."\(^{18}\) So, classification was arbitrary, and also hinged on the biases of the local enumerators. It is not to say that, later census are objective in their classification but segregation led to contestation and claiming of certain categories. Animism was characterised as "a religion of a very low type", thought to be "professed by the most backward tribes of the province."\(^{19}\) Though the absence of comparative figures showing the spread of Hinduism since 1881 leaves a lot of ground for speculation, Gait claims the work of proselytisation was steadily going on.\(^ {20}\) And the twin process of spread of education and the influence Hinduism gradually affected the number of people clinging to "their (ancestral) superstitions of their forefathers."\(^ {21}\)

From the 1901 census to 1911 there was an increase in the numbers of Animists by 16 percent. The increase in the Brahmaputra valley was attributed to the greater

\(^{18}\) Census of India. 1891, Assam Vol. I, Report by E. A. Gait, Shillong, 1892, P. 82
\(^{19}\) Ibid., P. 94
\(^{20}\) Ibid., P. 83
\(^{21}\) Ibid., P. 94
accuracy in recording the religions; in Darrang, the increase registered was 38 percent; in Sibsagar nearly 42 percent, and in Lakhimpur nearly 32.7 percent. Nowgong, where immigration was not a factor it showed an increase over 35 percent. However, in Kamrup the growth was less then 12 percent, and conversions to Hinduism were presumed to be the cause. There was a sharp decrease in Goalpara, which was due to conversion to a new faith, the Brahma, which should not be confused with the Brahmo Samaj.\footnote{Census of India, 1911, p.37}

Conversely it was claimed that the percentage of growth for Hindus was not equally encouraging. In fact the relation that was established by the colonial officials between Hinduism and Animism was one of inversion. As was stated explicitly in the census, “we see that in every district of the Brahmaputra valley except Goalpara the proportion of Hindus has fallen owing to the increase of Animists and, to a small extent, of Muhammadans.”\footnote{Census, 1911, Assam, p.39} All this information was juxtaposed mainly against the Muhammadans and in a lesser degree against the Christians to locate the demographic transformations. However, the census also acknowledged that there was a certain ambiguity in defining Hindu and Hinduism. The 1911 census quoted Sir Alfred Lyall, lecturing in Cambridge in 1891:

“If I were asked for a definition of Hinduism, I could give no precise answer.... For the word Hindu is not exclusively a religions denomination, it denotes also a country, and to a certain degree a race ... Religion, parentage and country ....”\footnote{Ibid., p.40}

According to colonial officials, such ambiguity gave rise to complexities and fluidity. Though there was an accepted idea of mobility among the people in the plains it
was difficult to ascertain when new converts definitely became Hindus. Even the latter censuses abound in examples of the resultant confusion. As J. McSwiney comments in the 1911 census, “In the Brahmaputra valley it is hard to say when the new converts definitely becomes Hindu, especially as many of them cling to their old habits of eating and drinking.”

This kind of impression was drawn primarily from the ‘tribal’ communities, who progressively became ‘Hinduised’. For example, the Miris, whom he encountered in the east of Darrang, had continued eating fowls and drinking liquor, though they had come under the tutelage of a Gossain. Such proscription of food was strictly adhered to when the Gossain was present. The reasons stated for the conversion were mostly social and economic, ‘that they were strangers in a strange land, and unless they made some arrangements with the gods of the place or their representative, there was no knowing what evil might befall them”, meaning that they were attempting to adjust to the environment, to avoid alienation. So, they placed themselves under the religious patronage of Gossain and “paid him his annual fee in order to be on the safe side.”

He also remarked that, during that period the missionary efforts of the Vaishnava Gossains of the Brahmaputra valley had been very successful among the tribals.

By the 1921 census it was reported that “accretion to the ranks of the Hindus from the aboriginal tribes has continued steadily but by no means evenly in all districts.” Of course many of these claims and counter claims were individual and some of these were

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25 Ibid., p.41
27 Ibid.
also influenced by the local enumerators and politics. Though the Hindu Mahasabha was not active in Assam during the early 1920's and the Tribal League was not yet formed, the Sattradhikars were strong spokesmen of Hinduism and equally active were the nascent associations among the tribes, especially the Kacharis. But there were also instances when orthodox Hindu enumerators refused to enumerate some animists plains Kacharis of Brahmaputra valley as Hindus.\textsuperscript{29} Similarly, a section of the Kacharis in Nowgong aiming for caste mobility of being a 'regular Hindu' wanted to be classified as Saktas.\textsuperscript{30}

The fact that practices were so fluid and "primitive practices so often continued side by side with Hindu ceremonies that some want of uniformity by the enumerating staff was inevitable."\textsuperscript{31} So the census officers attempted to simplify the enumeration process by stating that if subjects claimed so, they must be entered as Hindus and in other cases people who held land under and paid rent to a \textit{Gossain} were to be entered as Hindus, according to customary definitions.\textsuperscript{32}

But political and social movements for the annihilation of caste and tribal barriers were, as observed by the census authorities, at most, superficial and were "still in the domain of talk and not of practice.... And it is noteworthy that Hindu and aboriginal recruits to recent advanced political views had generally to be obtained by promises of material benefit...."\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p.50
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p.51
The issue of conversion to Hinduism among tribes becomes more important in the context of relative increase and decrease in the Hindu and Muslim population. For in 1921 there was an increase in the numbers both of Hindus and Muslims. And again it was observed that in “Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong large increases of Hindu corresponds with decrease among the Animists; the new converts are chiefly plains Kacharis, Mikirs and Miris”.

Therefore, in the Brahmaputra valley, the increase had sharply dropped from the 1911 figures of animists.

Hence, establishing a relation of numbers and politics, which led to the growing fear of Assamese caste Hindu middle class of a ‘Muslim invasion’ and communalisation of the 1930 and 40’s. So the numbers of the plain tribes was essential to the Hindus to maintain a majoritarian position in the province, and it was also a political necessity for the Congress, who considered its mass base – the caste Hindu peasantry – essential to counter the Muslim League. The Muslim population had increased by 16.8 percent by 1921 in every almost district in the province.

The 1931 census laid the strange base for further communalisation of demographic politics. It traced the growth of the immigrant population in the province, especially the East Bengal peasants from Mymensing district. According to Mullan, the figures “illustrate the wonderful rapidity with which the lower district of the Assam Valley are becoming colonies of Mymensing.” The immigrants were compared with vultures attracted to a carcass, in their hunger for land. Their mobility compared with the “mass movement of a large body of ants”, because a population which was around over 34

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34 Ibid., p.52.
35 Census of India 1931, vol.iii, Assam, Part I, Report by C. S. Mullan, Shillong 1932, p.50
"a half a million transplanted itself from Bengal to Assam Valley during the last twenty
five years" without causing any "fuss, without tumult..." 36

There were various reports from district officers about "an enormous increase in
the number of settlers" and that "the chars and riverain tracts...(were) nearly filled up
and all available wastelands are gradually being occupied by them...The increase of 69
percent in the population of Barpeta is solely due to Eastern Bengal immigrants." 37 The
Deputy Commissioners of most other districts like Darrang, Goalpara, Nowgong
presented a similar picture of expanding occupation of available wastelands under 'the
hoe and plough of the colonist'. The picture of colonisation was so completely,
alarmingly imagined that it was felt that "sad but by no means improbable that in another
thirty years Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will
find himself at home." 38

Though there was a substantial migration of Nepali graziers and who then settled
as peasants, it was not compared to the east Bengal immigration, and their numbers did
not become crucial in a similar manner.

The 1931 census and the period prior to it saw the emergence of very strong
propaganda efforts by the Hindu Sabha of Assam, which strengthened the movement of
the Vaishnava Gosains and Satradhikars. The census authorities saw it as an extension
and reflection of a nationwide movement, like the missionary efforts of the Hindu
Mahasabha, or the Hindu Mission, whose activities were confined among the tribals of

36 Ibid., p.51.
37 Ibid., Deputy Commissioner, Kamrup, Census of India, p.52.
38 Ibid.
Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and Assam laying claims on the 'aboriginal'. Perceiving changes in the returns of the census, the census superintendents felt that "the propaganda work of the Hindu Mission was certainly a great success in Assam from their point of view and had an enormous influence on the tribal people hovering in the borderland between Hinduism and Animism. It was felt that such a claim was a recent development in the practice of Hinduism, and was an effect of the census. Unlike the earlier efforts, there was no attempt to formally convert or admit people to the Hindu fold and caste hierarchy. The Assam Provincial Hindu Sabha presumed that the tribes of Assam, like the Garos, Khasis, Mundas, Santals, Mikirs, Miris, Mishmis, Lushais, Lalungs, Rabhas, Kacharis, Meches were 'really Hindus'. 39

It protested that the 1921 census classified such communities as well as castes like Kaibarttas, Chutiyas, Koches, etc. as Animists. The notice was issued in the interests of those who loved the Hindu religion. It was Hindu Mahasabha’s response to the threat that was felt by the "tide of conversion to Christianity." 40 By being ‘saviors’ to these communities, “the simple men and women,” who were being converted to Christianity by various missionary societies, the mission claimed to have brought back the aboriginal with the fold of Hinduism. Their arguments too largely drew from the notion of unilinear influence of hinduisation, which considered these communities to be “naturalised Hindus by long and close contact with their Hindu neighbours.” 41 It was claimed that the misleading propaganda by Christians and colonial notions about caste and tribe gave rise to misconceptions. This propaganda encouraged the ‘Animists’ to return as ‘Kshatriyas’.

39 Census of India, 1931, Vol. II p.188
40 As stated in the pamphlet quoted in the Census of India, 1931, p.189
41 Ibid., p.189
and claimed that the absorption was more than shown in the census report of 1931. “The newly initiated Animists wanted to be returned as Kshatriyas but as mentioned earlier, enumerators, who were mostly upper caste Hindus were not convinced of such claims and returned them as animist.”

So there were instances of claims and counter claims on the issue of enumerating and classifying such communities and fluidity of practices led to complexities and sometimes oversimplification of the situation. The census Superintendent and District Commissioners always presumed the naivete of these ‘tribal’ communities and suspected that enumerators, nearly all of them being Hindus were naturally biased. As the Deputy Commissioner, Darrang, commented, “the Hindus enumerator (and they are nearly all Hindus) tends to record all animistic and aboriginal tribes, such as Kacharis, Mikirs, Miris, Mundas and Santhals, as Hindus. Even if the enumerator fails, the supervisor or checking officer tends to keep him up to the scratch. An instance was brought to my notice at Halem where the enumerator had written Miri, but the checking officer changed it to ‘Hindu Miri’.”

That is not to say that there was an absence of agency and consciousness among these people, ‘animists’ and ‘aboriginal’, an imposed official identity being the norm of the day. Mullan himself claimed to have “received several petitions from Kacharis in Kamrup stating that hey had returned as Hindus in the census schedules and that they objected to the action of the enumerators recording their religion as Hindu.”

The propaganda campaign by Hindu Sabha produced many fold effects – some Kacharis willingly returned as Hindus, others were convinced by the enumerators to accept that

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43 Ibid., p.190
44 Ibid.
category, and in some cases the enumerators took advantage of confusion or ignorance to record them as Hindus. Because in some cases where there were no definite name for indigenous faith there were genuine confusion. Some Lalungs came to see Mullan in Nowgong in January 1930 and asked his advice as to ‘how they should return their religion’. He was convinced after questioning them, and ascertained that it was a ‘purely tribal religion’ and advised the Lalungs to tell the truth. Thereafter the Lalungs resolved in a meeting that the Lalung community should return their religion as Lalung. But during enumeration, “inspite... of this resolution the vast majority of Lalungs returned themselves as Hindus, in many cases, voluntarily.” Mullan suspected in many cases enumerators influenced by the Hindu propaganda entered as ‘Hindu’ names ‘tribal’ people “who found it difficult to state precisely what their religion was and often in such cases Hinduism got the benefit of doubt.” The relative success of Hindu propaganda was evident in the increase in the number of Hindus, which was conflated “owing to the inclusion of animists such as Kacharis, Miris and aboriginal tea garden coolies.”

The extent of the propaganda and the behaviour during the census convinced the colonial authorities that figures for Hindus and Animists were bound to be inaccurate. However, such inaccuracy was inherent to the nature of classification and fluidity of the society. So the Hindus formed 56.3 percent of the population, the increase being mostly recorded in the Brahmaputra valley, because the number of Animists in that area had fallen by 292, 204 from the 1921 census figures. But in the eventual analysis it came to

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Census of India. 1931, Assam, p.191
be noted that conversion was the major reason, first being that “very large numbers of tribal people living in the Brahmaputra valley have returned themselves or *have been returned as Hindus*” and secondly, “in the hill districts a considerable number of animists have been converted to Christianity.⁵⁰ But there were no doubts expressed over the conversion to Christianity and any relation to numbers of other communities. It was noted that Hindu propaganda and influence reduced their numbers in the plains and in the hill districts the success of the Christian Mission" demonstrated the ‘defeat’ of the ‘primitive tribal faith,’ which are “ultimately doomed to extinction."⁵¹

Goalpara, among all the districts in the Brahmaputra valley showed remarkable increase (38%) in the numbers of ‘Animists’. A large number of people in the Kokrajhar thana of that district returned “both their religion and their caste as Boro” and the growing numbers of the Santhali settlers.⁵² It could be attributed to growing political consciousness. It is interesting to note that it was in the same area in the earlier decades there was an attempt of religious reformation among the Bodos and it a primary centre for the various Associations of the Bodos.

But a reaction to it saw the emergence of revivalism strongly articulating the imagings and constructs of a notion of a ‘tribal’ identity. The census of 1931 quotes Rupnath Brahma, who was by then an accepted spokesperson to the Bodo community and the authenticity of their claims is reiterated by the qualification, “who himself belongs to the Boro community.”⁵³ He made a definite political statement by saying that the Bodos should speak for themselves. He claimed that Boros or Bodos had “a distinct state

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⁵⁰ Ibid., p.193
⁵¹ Census of India, 1931, Assam, p.194
⁵² Ibid., p.193
⁵³ Census of India, 1931, Assam, p.194
of civilization of their own... also a distinct form of religion which they have been retaining"... and were definitely not ‘idol worshippers’.\textsuperscript{54} He asserted that despite Hindu influences, “The Bodos had a separate society of their own and never allowed their tribal peculiarities to be merged into the Hindu society’ and that they did not recognise the Brahmanical supremacy of caste hierarchy.\textsuperscript{55}

The people who followed the Vedic religion of ‘Brahma’ cannot be treated as Animist. But Rupnath Brahma also stated that proximity of religions practices were overridden by other considerations, because “according to their views, they would be losers thereby in the social and political spheres.”\textsuperscript{56} Therefore, political consciousness was decisive in the decision to enumerate as Bodos. So by the 1930s the administration was also clearly accepted the discourse of the tribal politics: “They are in favour of having a separate representation of their own in councils and other government departments and they are not in favour of allowing their tribal interests to be merged with those of the Hindus. With these objects in view many of the Bodos, especially those of the Kokrajhar thana, were returned themselves as Boro by religion and Boro by caste. They say that considering the strength of their population in the whole province they have a rightful claim to have a separate category as Boro or Bodo in the census reports.”\textsuperscript{57}

The question of numerical strength of communities had become important by then and the Bodos had been officially striving towards ‘separate representation’ since the arrival of the Simon Commission. So the 1931 census had the instrumental role in the

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
further franchise reforms that was to be constituted. Just as in the case of growing communal tension, between the Hindus and the Muslims, in the Brahmaputra Valley, the ‘true cause’ as cited by the Simon Commission being “the struggle for power and for the opportunities which political power confers.”

The assertion of the plains’ tribes was also very evidently attributed to processes initiated by representative communitarian politics. The intensity was perhaps not equal to the Hindu-Muslim tension because of these communities ‘authochones’ status and also because of the fluidity of identities that existed. But there was a mounting pressure on the question of identities and politics, which led to colonial policies regarding various communities in the sphere of representational politics and that affected Congress’s balance of politics in the province.

Maintaining a ‘tribal’ identity had become important for that purpose mainly. By the 1931 census the connection between political power, representation and community identity was very obvious. Census superintendents were also asked to compile lists of the Depressed and Backward classes and for Assam Mullan compiled a list of communities based on social divisions –

a) Hindu exterior castes

b) Indigenous backward tribes.

c) Tea garden cooly castes.

58 Ibid. p.197
Indigenous backward tribes of Assam were the aboriginal communities - "either living in the hills like the Naga tribes - quite untouched by Hinduism" or "living in the plains - like the Lalungs or Miris - and influenced to a greater or less degree by Hinduism." The criteria or qualification for this category, especially in the case of aboriginal tribes living in the Brahmaputra plains, was that "such tribes should still be aloof from the main body of Hindus and should still be generally regarded as a separate community rather than as a Hindu caste. In deciding this the fact that they still speak a Tibeto-Burmese tribal language may be of importance." 59

Therefore, the colonial state did widen certain fissures in the Brahmaputra Valley, especially on the question of representation in the various bodies and institutions and generally on the question of social and political power.

Infact, the task of classifying was not easy if the marker of being a backward and depressed 'tribe' was indigenous religion, as accepted by various officials. The Lalungs, Rabhas, Kacharis, Mechis, Miris were under various degrees of Hindu influence and it was generally agreed upon that, "Inspite of partial conversion to Hinduism they still remain tribal people". 61 Even the caste Hindu Assamese middle class though eager to include them in the fold of Hinduism, still found it difficult to accept them as proper Hindus because they kept 'pigs and fowls'. 62 Therefore, the question of tribal identity hinged not only on the definition of religion and the movement of tribe to caste by conversion, but segregation from the caste Hindu hierarchy and language were

59 Ibid. p.204
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid. p. 21
62 Ibid.
considered important too. Therefore, the Kacharis were a backward tribe but the Ahoms were not, because the latter, "though in many ways a separate community - (had) been for so long completely Hinduised" that they (were considered) a racial caste. The Kacharis though 'nominally Hinduised' were considered 'more a tribe' than 'caste'. Preservation of one's own language and also the social and cultural distance maintained from the "general development of Assamese culture" distinguished the 'tribe' from the 'caste' and therefore 'backward' from the privileged. Therefore, the backward tribes of Assam were divided into two sections, "the real hillmen and those living principally in the plains who have been Hinduised to a greater or less extent," like the Kacharis, Miris, Lalungs, Rabhas Hojongs, Tiparas of Sylhet and Deoris of upper Assam, those who had preserved their tribal languages.

**Speaking Assamese and Being Tribal**

Another interesting aspect of identity was language- dying tribal dialects, growing bilingualism and the convergence of the use of 'Assamese' language with emerging notions of a monolithic 'Assamese' identity. Almost all the tribal languages and communities in the Brahmaputra valley were acknowledged as belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family. This was before Grierson's famous 'Linguistic Survey of India', where he refutes certain claims of the 1891 census.

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.

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As observed above, adopting the Assamese language was often not perceived as a mere linguistic shift, it often signified conversion to ‘Hinduism’, ushering in a transformation in culture and mother tongue. The 1891 census thought that the Kachari language was dying out because the Kacharis were “gradually being converted to Hinduism, and when this process is completed, many adopt Assamese as their parent tongue, at least as soon as they drop their distinctive racial name.”

By 1891, the Assamese language was established as the official language, after a long struggle by a certain section of the Assamese elite and the American Baptist Missionaries. Immediately after the British occupation of Assam, in 1836, Bengali was introduced in local schools and law courts. As Sudhir Chandra mentions, “This was done, as the Assamese saw it, under the influence of the Bengali petty officials of the East India Company who argued that Assamese was not an independent language but only a patois of Bengali.” The emergence of Assamese as a prominent language in the province led to a largely language based Assamese caste Hindu consciousness, which gave rise to a spate of creativity and largely popularized the standardized language.

The Bodo group was the largest language group after Assamese. Smaller groups like Lalungs (of Nowgong) were also recorded to be fast disappearing. Among the Lalungs, those residing in the part of the Nowgong district north of the Kallang were said to have entirely forgotten their old tribal language, by the end of the 19th century. The predictions about the fate of the language of the Rabhas were similar. They argued that it

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67 Census of India, 1891, Assam, Vol. I, Report by E. A. Gait, Shillong 1892, p.159
69 Census of India, 1891, Assam, Report, p.162.
was 'rapidly disappearing' and census officials thought that 1891 census was probably the last census in which it would be recorded as a spoken language.70

So there was a general concern about the disappearance of various languages of the Bodo group or about the decrease from the 1881 figures. The comparison shows a sharp decrease especially in the case of Lalungs and more so for the Rabhas. The loss was in favour of Assamese, because these tribes, which for centuries had retained their languages, had been rapidly taking to speaking in Assamese. The colonial authorities expressed surprise and thought that changes like “better communications... and the greater amount of trade and travel” put people to greater exposure. As observed by E. A. Gait “Thousands of Kacharis, & c., leave their home they must perforce speak Assamese...The process will doubtless continue at an annually increasing rate, and entire extinction of all these languages ... is probably only a matter of very few years.”71

Conversion to Hinduism, or coming closer to the Assamese cultural lifestyle had led to a decrease of numbers of people who claimed either their original language or religion as their own identity. Though it was justified that, “the rate at which the process of conversion has been going on during the past ten years may be gathered from the fact that only 243,378 persons have now been returned as Kacharies, against 281,611 in 1881 ... there is no reason to suppose that the race is dying,” because as a people they continue with the caste name of Koch.72 But Rabhas had “as a rule abandoned their tribal dialect in

70 Ibid.
71 Ibid. p.163
72 Ibid., p.225
preference of Assamese and considered themselves superior to the Kacharis, thought they continued consumption of proscribed food, like pork and liquor." 73

By the 1911 census further changes had taken place, the Mikirs were no longer considered a part of the Naga-Bodo sub-group. Though there was clarity about certain aspects of classification like groups and sub-groups, J.W. McSwiney observed that "the return of language in Assam will always be marred by a certain amount of inaccuracy." 74

The chief reason was that, "the large foreign population is often returned as Bengali, and most of the aboriginal tribes in the plains are bilingual and are just as likely to return Assamese for their mother tongue as their own language." 75 Still, attempts were made towards greater accuracy of language enumeration, in which various dialects were carefully noted and colonial census enumerators felt that 'Assamese suffered'. The relative decrease evident was not only because of "the more accurate census of coolie languages, but also by the increase in the number of immigrants" and also due more accurate return of non-Aryan languages. 76

So, it was assumed that the fluctuations in the returns of Assamese and 'tribal languages were connected, the rise and fall in each affected each other, and 'more accurate census' could stem ambiguities' and propaganda. Though fears were expressed about rapidly changing returns and also about 'imminent' disappearance of tribal and languages, especially smaller sub-groups of the Bodo group. But by 1911 it was evident

73 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., p.99 and 101
that “on the whole the indigenous tribal languages of Assam are still vigorous condition.”

This was of course more true of the hill areas, but even plains, it was observed, Kachari was being able to “withstand the influence of Assamese is a wonderful proof of the clannishness of its speakers.” According to census authorities, preservation of identity despite most of them being bilingual, was because the relative isolation of tribal communities from the caste Hindu Assamese villages. Almost all Kacharis, especially the men were bilingual. Bilingualism, being a compulsion for these communities to carry on with their routine economic activities. It is interesting to note that certain communities like the Bodo-Kachari were more conscious of this identity.

In the next decade too, the trend of decrease continued, but the indigenous tribal languages continued to survive and did not disappear as predicted 30 years back. The decrease continued because of “contact with others, i.e. practically, contact with the Aryan languages of the plains.” Aryan languages did not mean Assamese alone, in many cases Kacharis who returned as Kshattriya, also returned language as Bengali, as it happened in the North Cachar hills and Goalpara. But the languages most affected by external influences in the plains were the Chutiya, Lalung, Kachari and Rabha. The period till the 1920’s experienced the gradual but penetrative influence of Hinduism. But as acknowledged by J. W. McSwiney the ‘superior Aryan civilisation’ continued to exert influence and pressure and according to the 1921 census many may not have lost their

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
mother tongue, and a great number of them being bilingual, therefore 'the usual feeling of superior civilisation conferred by Aryan speech must have influenced them concurrently with the move towards Hinduism.'

By 1931, officially there was a more organised effort to enumerate languages and dialects more accurately and scientifically by collapsing the social, ethnic map with the linguistic map. And so by the 1931 political awareness among certain tribal communities led to a conscious distinctive enumeration. Therefore 1931 census showed a 9.5 percent increase in the speakers of the Assam-Burmese branch, i.e. the Bodo group which comprised of the Garo, Rabha, Chutiya Koch, Boro or Bodo (Kachari), Dimasa (Hill Kachari) and Lalung. Mullan remarks,

"In 1911 the number of Rabha speakers numbered 28,000 so that the 1921 census figures for this language were apparently too low, (Rabha speakers now number 27,000 against 22,000 in 1921) Chutiya speakers who now number 4,315 show a slight increase over the 1921 figure... Bara, Bodo, Mech or plains Kachari which showed a slight decrease in 1921 shows a considerable increase at this census in the number of its speakers - from 260,000 to 283,000."

The earlier two census, i.e. 1911 and 1921 the question was whether the tribal languages were disappearing as a result of contact with others and this had caused some alarm. But it was evident that those languages were not dying, and as mentioned earlier

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81 Ibid., p.123
83 Ibid., p.172
there has been an increase in their numbers. Therefore, the notion that Assamese was successful in hegemonising over other dialects was erroneous. These communities were undoubtedly the only real bi-lingual people but they were conscious of ‘holding their own in a wonderful manner’.\(^{84}\)

**The Census as a Site of Contestation: Controversy of 1941**

As the educated tribal elite became increasingly aware of the census, they sought affirmation from it for an official view of their own world, a view which supported many of their hopes and fears.\(^{85}\) Moreover, the census increasingly became the “arena for conflict and manipulation.”\(^{86}\)

The 1941 census evoked strong responses from various sections of the Assamese society and led to a debate in the Assembly and in the newspapers. The Congress criticised the government for manipulating the census operation so as to conceal the correct figures of the followers of different religions. The Congress moved an adjournment motion to discuss the census operations.\(^{87}\)

The cause of discontent and tension was the changed basis of classification, a shift from religion as a matrix of classification to one based on community. Compilation for communities was done with reference to ‘race, tribe and caste’ and not religion as it was

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\(^{84}\) Ibid., p.181


\(^{86}\) Ibid., p.88.

\(^{87}\) *ALAP*, 4\(^{th}\) December 1941: Adjournment motion in connection with the conducting of the last census operations in Assam brought by Siddhi Nath Sarma.
in the case of the 1931 census. The Congress and few others accused the United Party government of tampering with data compilation and deviating from the rules followed by the census authority of India. It was under the Assam provincial government’s instance that Mr. Marar, the Census Superintendent issued a special circular to the Deputy Commissioners and Census Officers in Assam to compile data on the basis of “community”. He wrote:

“The basis for community is answer to questions 3, but generally the communities are unavoidably mixed up and where community cannot be ascertained in answer to question 3, answer to question 4 will be the basis; e.g. If a Kachari has not in answer to question 3 mentioned hat he is a Kachari, and is returned under question 4 as Hindu, Muslim or Christian, he will be shown as Hindu, Muslim or Christian as the case may be, but if he is returned as a Kachari against question 3 he will be entered such irrespective of his religion.”

The government stated that the purpose of clubbing communities professing different religions was to create a “separate entity under the constitution for the purpose of franchise.” Siddhi Nath Sarma, for instance, clarified that as the tabulation would be done on the basis of ‘community’, and not on religious lines, it would simplify the problem of treatment or classification of the primitive tribes. He added that in this way their total number regardless of their religion could be recorded. These efforts on the part of the colonial government to seek out community identity corresponded to the

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88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., Classification of communities according to Appendix II, prepared by the Assam Government, was as follows: (1) Assam Valley Hindus; (2) Assam Valley Muslims; (3) Surma Valley Hindus; (4) Surma Valley Muslims; (5) Scheduled castes; (6) Tribal people. Hills; (7) Tribal people, Plains; (8) European and Anglo-Indian.
90 Ibid., Speech by Siddhinath Sarma.
Tribal League's own efforts to project community identity as one tribal people. And for this purpose the Tribal League carried out propaganda. As Bernard S. Cohn has observed such active interference in the process of census enumeration, because of growing "consciousness of the significance of the census operation had reached a point where Indians were not merely content to petition and to write books: some groups set out to influence the answers which people would give in the census". ⁹¹ A bulletin of the Tribal League was taken out in 1940 with the main objective of instructing the 'tribal' people – Bodo, Kachari, Mech, Rabha, Lalung, Miri, Mikir, Deuri etc. – about the politics of census enumeration. ⁹² The importance of the census for preservation of tribal 'identity' and interests was reiterated. The political aspirations of the Tribal League were moulded by government policies, which were correspondingly influenced by these political aspirations.

There was a growing reliance on the census for supporting data for articulating political aspirations, which resulted in the convergence between the census and the world it sought to describe. By 1941 the census became very closely interlinked with political issues like proving the existence of a community to validate the creation of a separate constituency. "Enumeration on the basis of community would show as a distinctive community which would enable us to demand special provisions in education in the and socio-economic spheres." ⁹³ It was also emphasised by the Tribal League that if special measures were not taken to ameliorate their conditions they would remain backward forever. The Tribal League’s definition of ‘Tribals’ was broad based and included those

⁹³ The Assam Tribal League (Bulletin No.2) by Bhimbar Deuri, p.4.
who were otherwise classified as ‘Hinduised’. Religion was a secondary aspect of the identity. The essence of ‘tribalness’ was the existence of distinctive rituals and customs, rules and regulations, which were retained, therefore aiding the preservation of a distinctive lifestyle often in totality and some cases partially.\footnote{Ibid.}

Further, the Tribal League also emphasised the separateness and difference of the social structure of the ‘tribals’ and the caste Hindu Assamese. The focus was on the ‘difference’ and the commonality and shared cultural practices were overlooked. They imagined two polarised societies where no intermingling ever existed. The ‘independence’ of the tribals from the Hindu society was claimed. The dominant idea was to engender a worldview, which provided political space to the educated tribal elite to emerge from an oppressive social framework. By rejecting placement in the caste hierarchy, which was perceived as degrading in the Tribal League’s discourse, it sought to acquire equality on their own plane, within the restricting political space provided by the colonial state. By not subscribing to the worldview of the caste Hindus the tribes had already taken a step towards redefining their identity.

The discourse contested the efforts of certain groups to classify the ‘tribals’ as ‘Harijan Hindus’, which was perceived as a ploy to club them together with the low caste.\footnote{Ibid.} The Tribal League persistently opposed various moves by more conservative circles and the Congress, to categorise them as a part of the Hindu society. Such a projection was a simplistic depiction of a complex social reality. It is difficult to say whether the ‘tribal’ leaders comprehended the complexity and how far politically
motivated was the invention of the notion of two polarised societies. But in giving it a concrete shape at least in politics the census aided the crystallisation of identity.

Discussing the provision of enumeration in 1941 in the Assembly the Assam government pointed out the problem of enumerating people like the ‘tribals’ where identities of religion and community did not converge. Commenting on the absence of clear defining categories which would establish the religious identity of the community and the related problem faced by the government in establishing the real strength of the community, Saddualla explained,

“Sir, everyone knows that the great Hindu and Muslim communities are generally known by their religion, either they belong to the Hindu community or the Muslim community. But the community of tribes who had been enfranchised under the present Constitution Act has different religions; some have stuck to their original religion, some have been converted to Christianity. But anyone who has been converted to Islam, he prefers to call himself a Muslim and forget the community.”

For reasons relating to transparency, to derive the full benefit of franchise the tabulation figures by communities was brought in and “those tribes who really belong to the tribe or community of tribal people were lumped together into the tabulation for ‘tribals’.” The government’s interests in providing representation complemented the tribal League’s quest for a political and cultural identity and in the process community identity was defined minus the religious aspect. Community identity was perceived as a ‘sense of belonging’ to a community whose cultural practices and rites and customs transcended the boundaries of faith. Defining ‘tribal’ religion or religious practices also

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96 *ALAP*, 4th December 1941, Speech by Maulavi Saiyid Sir Muhammad Saadualla.
97 Ibid.
posed a problem. The community identity was recognised and overrode the religious identity.

The Congress and few others insisted that the compilations were to the instructions of the Government of India. According to them the enumeration should have taken into consideration the important factor of religion while classifying the communities. But the colonial state’s interests were otherwise for the 1941 census. It aimed at simplifying complex categorisation in tabulation and wanted to “avoid in their contentious terms such as ‘Hinduised’.”98 Though complexities could be discussed by the superintendents, for purely anthropological purposes it was noted that some discussion on the religious affiliations of the tribals and the degree of their ‘Hinduisation’ would be both of interest and value99. Hinduisation alone was not the sole concern but conversion to Christianity also drew official attention, and it was suggested that “it is important to know to what degree they have entered the Christian or other fold.”100

The Congress and other association and individuals strongly criticised the basis of enumeration and the method applied to do so, in the Assembly and publicly through newspapers. The Congress suspected manipulation by the Assam government and thought the tabulation to be contrary to the instruction of the government of India. It was pointed out that religion being such an important component of life no attempt to classify would be nearer to the truth and reality than one, which hinged on religion. Religion was the defining feature of a community. Through the 1941 the newspapers carried the debate on the census and in the process tried to reinforce certain dominant ideas about caste,

98 Ibid., Speech by Siddhinath Sarma quoting Mr. Marar’s instructions to Census officers.
99 Ibid.
100 Speech by Rev. J. J. M. Nichols Roy, ALAP, 4th December, 1941

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tribe and religion. *Teendiniya Assamiya* published articles, which supported the views of the Congress and the Caste Hindu Assamese Middle Class

The Guwahati Rajhowa (Public) Census Committee along with others published a public notice stressing that, despite the instructions of census officers and the Tribal League, the tribal population need not necessarily state their religion, as instructed, according to their *jati* i.e. Kachari religion or Lalung religion. They could enumerate ‘as they were’ i.e. accordingly stating their religion – Hindu, Muslim, Christian and animist. Such an appeal was made to save the interests of the ‘Assamese’.  

It was also emphasised that the definition of a ‘Hindu’ was not narrowly confined to the people in the caste hierarchy but was wide enough to incorporate people who could be termed as Hinduised. “A lot of tribals who have been converted to Vaishnavism, Saraniyas, still stick to certain food habits like eating pork and fowls, but on that basis they should not be classed as otherwise i.e. according to their tribal name, but be classified as Hindus.”

Ambikagiri Rai Chaudhuri of Assam Siksha Prachar Samiti, appealed to the tribals to think twice before enumerating themselves. He stressed on their being a part of a greater Assamese society calling them the backbone of the Assamese society and asked them to desist from supporting the community based enumeration to preserve that identity. He referred to be colonial situation and suggested that such divisive tendencies would prolong colonial domination.

More or less similar sentiments were echoed through the articles and editorials of the newspapers. The Saadualla government came under increasing attacks from the

101 *Teendiniya Assamiya*, 21st January, 1941, (Guwahati).
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid., 10th January, 1941
Congress. The Congress accused the then provincial government, of using the census as an instrument to encourage fissiparous tendencies. The Tribal League was also criticised for being a pawn in the hands of the colonial government. The Saadualla government and the Muslim League were accused of attempting to alter the demographic structure of the society, in a bid to join Pakistan. The overarching concern was the decrease in the population of the Hindus. The concern towards the question of existence of the tribals can be linked with the fear of growing immigration from East Bengal and the census showing 'alarming' increase in the population of the Muslims. The only way visible to the middle class leadership to maintain a demographic balance was to conflate the figures of Hindus with the figures of the plains tribes' population. And that section of the population was by 1940's largely conscious of census enumeration and its politics, and unwilling to be herded into categories, which denied their 'difference'.

By 1940's due to various factors like Congress mass mobilisation and the party's growing importance in provincial politics, the strengthening of the notion of an 'Assamese nationality' was visible. Therefore the middle class and the Congress by and large perceived the 1941 census as an attempt to undermine 'Assamese nationality' by the Muslim dominated ministry and the colonial government. The census became an important site for friction and contest of identities for various groups and there was propaganda to spread their own views and to contest other parallel propaganda i.e. by the Tribal League and the government. In the public debate the question of representational communal politics was not taken into consideration. Efforts were made to invent and

104 Ibid., 19th September, 1941
105 Ibid., 21st November, 1941
106 Ibid., 19th September 1941
107 Ibid., 29th September, 1941
imagine a monolithic Assamese identity, which was dominantly 'Hindu' and speaking the Assamese language.

In *Teendiniya Assamiya* itself, the Garamur Sattradhikar representing a liberal trend, condemned the conservative sections of *Gossains*, for still maintaining forms of restrictions and untouchability. “Even converts were not allowed within the precincts of *Namghars* and *Kirtanghars* (temples), inter dining was strictly forbidden, thus alienating the community of tribe who did not strictly conform to the rules and regulations laid down. Within the private sphere many upper castes did not quite strictly follow proscribed and prescribed norms like prohibited consumption of intoxicants, fowl and pork.” 108 Thus, the hereditary and hierarchical notion of purity was denied. More conservative propagandists like the Hindu Seva Sangha wanted that people irrespective of communities should return themselves as Hindus. 109 The 1941 census was perceived as an attempt of the government to fragment the unified Hindu community by stressing more on community identity than on religion. This propaganda urged the Lalungs, Rabhas, Kacharis, Mikirs and other communities to demand to be classified as ‘Hindus’ as opposed to ‘tribals’. Editorials in the newspapers also addressed the same issue. It was conceded that there was nothing novel or wrong in calculating the tribal population but doing so solely on the basis of community and not qualified by religion gave a distorted impression of the reality, like showing a huge increase in the tribal population. 110 The increase and decrease in the 1941 census was viewed by the Assamese middle class as a deliberate miscalculation and misconstruing of instruction.

108 Ibid. 29th September, 1941.
109 Ibid. 17th January, 1941.
110 Ibid. 31st October, 1941, Editorial.
Protest against such calculation also came from the tribals, as well. Many tribal communities protested against being classified as ‘animists’ or according to their tribes. The Sonowal Kacharis for example were stated to be Hinduised for a long time and followers of rules and regulations of Hinduism, and used priests for officiating in the rituals. Various associations of the tribal communities like the Assam Bodo Sammilan, Assam Kachari Sammilan, Assam Miri Sammilan were not consulted by the Tribal League to discuss the issue of enumeration and therefore the latter could not be said to represent all the tribes. Some sections of the Kacharis refused to be classified as ‘tribals’ along with Miris, Deuri and Mikirs. The tribal representatives were criticised for attempting to distort reality by categorising all ‘tribals’ en masse together under one head. The Rabhas asserted that they be recognised as a separate community and not be treated as a branch of the Kachari tribe. It was argued that religion-wise they have to be classified either as Hindus, Christians or Animists.

Other than Congress, the Christian representatives in the Assembly opposed such a classification. They claimed that the data of the 1941 census were defective and incomplete, being flawed at the basis itself and Christians were shown with a low strength. They also argued that “The word ‘community’ itself cannot be explained, it is a misnomer. When we mean a community, whether religion is to be taken into account or the race, that is a question which very few people will be able to explain.” In the face of such evident protest from various sections Rupnath Brahma, member of the Tribal League and then a minister in the United Party Government, claimed that to present

111 Ibid., 21\textsuperscript{st} January, 1941
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid., 10\textsuperscript{th} January, 1941 and 17\textsuperscript{th} January, 1941
114 Ibid., Speech by Mr. C. Goldsmith, \textsc{ALAP}
before the house “the exact feelings of the tribal people on the matter.”115 The Tribal League’s position was reiterated in the Assembly:

“As regard the tribal people of the plains they have their own Tribal League and there is a feeling, and indeed there had been a solemn resolution of that League to the effect these tribal people should be shown together irrespective of any religion and they feel that unless and until that is done their future is doomed and they will stand nowhere.”116

He also denied the reports that tribal people in some places had protested against classification on community basis and emphasised the fact that “the existing Tribal League is the only provincial organisation under which all the plains tribal people of the province function.”117 According to Rev. L. Gatphoh classification on the basis of community brought out the strength of the tribal people and contradicted the impression given by censuses till 1941 “that tribal people in Assam were a dying race or races.”118

Protest, against the manner in which the census was conducted, was registered by people like A. V. Thakkar, a Gandhian. He who called the enumeration on the basis of community a ‘strange phenomenon’ and thus enumeration by religion was “vitiated by this queer and unauthorised instruction passed on by the Assam Census Superintendent.”119 He also questioned the basis of classification, which clubbed various tribes under one head, the plains tribes. He stressed the separateness of every community: “But under the new classification, now adopted in 1941, they are all classed as aborigines or one community of tribals, (unless they declined to fill in column 3 for race or tribe)

115 Ibid., Speech by Rupnath Brahma, ALAP
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid., Speech by Rev. L. Gatphoh, ALAP
119 A. V. Thakkar, “Census of Assam Tribals” in Man in India, Vol.21, 1941, p.243
though there is nothing like one community but a number of (more than 20) communities, each tribe being a community by itself.”

He also criticised the colonial state’s communal award, facilitated by the 1935 Act, which granted separate representation to the tribals for the first time. “They have since 1935 got certain political rights and importance, a tribal gentleman and a tribal lady M.L.A’s are included in the Cabinet, (by the Congress Coalition government only the former and by the present non-Congress government both) and a wave of awakening has come over them.”

The great increase in the number of population returned as tribals is explained not in the positive aspect of identity consciousness but as politically motivated. “Thus religious faith and cultural affinity have proved to be nothing before political power, supported by an ukase (sic) of the Assam Census Superintendent.” Thus because of the colonial state’s policies and the tribal elite’s manipulation, the tribes who sought to assimilate and were “slowly absorbed amongst Hindus on one side and among the Christians for the last fifty years on the other, must have en masse swung to the ‘Tribal Community’.”

As a rejoinder to the comment, the editor published a note, which defined ‘tribal’ in context of community, and noted that

“As the word ‘tribal’ in the present Census is not used to indicate religion but

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120 Ibid., p.244
121 Ibid., p.246
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid., The communities he specifically mentioned are the Brahmans of Goalpara, Saranuyas of Kamrup and Darrang, Lalungs of Nowgong and the Miris of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.
only community or tribe, I think, the Assam Census Superintendent would appear to have been quite correct in classifying as aborigines such aboriginals .... In fact it is advantageous to the aborigines to be classified as such and injurious to them to get themselves returned as Hindus. For by becoming Hindus they sink into the degraded class of ‘Harijan’ or ‘Depressed classes’. Moreover, by recording themselves as ‘aboriginals’ or ‘tribals’ they stand a chance of political advancement. For in the next India Government Act, an increase in the recorded number of aboriginals is expected to ensure them a larger number of seats in the Legislatures. We think that lovers of aborigines should rejoice rather than grieve over the recorded increase of ‘Tribals’ or ‘aborigines’ in any Province.”

The census enumeration made the identity of the plains tribes a political reality. It became a site for contestation and redefining of identity because of the official legitimacy it conferred on communities. The apparent connection once established between the census and political rights contributed to the communitarian politics of the 1930s and 1940s. However it also demonstrated that identities are never fixed and often situationally motivated and there are several layers to one visible and tangible identity.

124 Editorial note as a rejoinder to A. V. Thakkar’s comment on the Assam Census in *Man in India*, Vol.21, 1941. p.247