Introduction

The Tribes of Assam

Assam is described by the anthropologists as the 'museum of nationalities.' Elements of all major races, e.g., the Caucasoids, Mongoloids, Australoids and some traces of the Negroids (in cases of the Nagas) are found in the population of Assam. The physical and geographical features helped this tract to become the dwelling place of various races and ethnic groups. Assam is located in 'one of the great migration routes of mankind.' Assam, since very ancient times, has been providing the routes through which people of different racial elements either from the Gangetic valley or from the South-East Asian countries had migrated either to different parts of India or to the various countries of South East Asia. Thus, while passing through Assam, they had occasions to leave their racial elements and cultural legacy which contributed to the evolution and development of various ethnic groups, who used to speak different languages, used to have different social structures, cultural patterns and religious beliefs. Thus Assam has become the meeting place of diverse racial elements. But, although, the elements of all the major races are present, all the tribes of this region are of Mongoloid origin. According to S.K. Chatterji, "Assam is the tract where the Indo-Mongoloid elements are present in their largest number in India. In Assam they dominated the scene, politically mostly, and to some extent
culturally also (although in matters of culture, including religion, the composite Hindu culture of the Ganges valley always had the outward victory). Excepting the members of a few of the higher castes from the west (and these are as much mixed Austric-Dravidian-Aryan as any) the masses of the people are Indo-Mongoloid with some Austric and Dravidian substratum. The Indo-Mongoloid inheritance, therefore, belongs in a special manner to the people of Assam..."

These Mongoloid people found mentioned in Ancient Sanskrit literature as the Kiratas, Chinas, Mlechchas, Asuras, etc. In modern anthropological term they are called 'Indo-Mongoloids'. The British called them by various names, e.g., the primitive tribes, the criminal tribes, the backward tribes, etc. At present they are classified as 'scheduled tribes'.

The term 'tribe' or 'tribal is the innovation of the British. The tribes were living in India even before the coming of the Aryans. After the coming of the British they used to call these people as 'tribes'. They used the term 'tribe' to denote the indigenous people as well as to differentiate them, i.e., the non-Aryans from the 'jati' or caste based Aryans (Hindu population) of India. It appears that there had been no equivalent word to the English term 'tribe' in ancient Indian literature. The non-Aryan people were very often referred to in Sanskrit literature by the term 'jana'. meaning a community of people. The 'jana' or the community of people generally had non-monarchical institution with a definite territory, common kinship structure, common ancestry and common cultural pattern. The term 'janapada' (territory inhabited by the community of people) originated from the word 'jana'. The 'janas' or communities of people.
continued to maintain their own socio-religious and cultural identities, although, a large number of them had lost their name and identities and assimilated with the 'jati' or the caste system, the socio-religious and economic organization of Brahmanical Hinduism. Prior to the British annexation, most of them were not conscious of their ethno-tribal identities and called themselves in their own speech as 'people' (i.e., jana).

In the past, due to the geographical and physical features of this tract of land, the Indo-Mongoloid people, or presently known as scheduled tribes, had been living in small groups independently, each under their own chief or headman like the city-states in ancient Greece. There was no strong national spirit or other cohesive elements among them. Any kind of hegemony from outside was considered to be intolerable and they opposed political unification which might have jeopardized their independence. So, they had been living in isolation and had a stagnant life style.

Different types of chieftainships prevailed in all these societies, but the institution of chiefs was not the same as the feudal institution of monarchy. Being under the economy primarily determined by jhum cultivation, the tribal society acquired an egalitarian character. This situation helped in the growth of autonomous or self-governing communities in Assam. In the memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission by the State Government of Assam in 1928, it was stated, "The institution of this kind in the plains are as good as dead, but in the tribal areas they are untouched and working... Elders or chiefs with their advisers settled the vast majority of disputes, villages have their own funds, and village roads and bridges are kept up by communal unpaid labour."
Linguistically the Indo-Mongoloid tribes of Assam belonged to Sino-Tibetan family except the Khasis and the Jaintias, who speak Mon-Khmer. The Sino-Tibetan language group has been divided into various branches and sub-branches. The speakers of various branches and sub-branches of the Sino-Tibetan language formed several ethnic groups and came to be known by the names of their languages. The Indo-Mongoloid people of Assam linguistically can be divided as follows; (next page)
The British, for the first time, had brought these diverse ethnic groups of the North-East under one political umbrella. The British made them politically united, and they followed the 'policy of divide and rule' and from the very
beginning of their rule, they kept the tribal peoples in segregation from the general masses. For that purpose, they developed a highly personalised administrative system 'of a kind peculiar to their customs and prejudices' under Regulation X of 1822 to administer the indigenous people. This system of administration, outside the purview of the Bengal Regulations came to be known as non-Regulation system and the areas covered by this system were known as non Regulated areas. The non-Regulated areas were later brought under the Scheduled District Act of 1874, which authorised the local government to administer these areas by issuing regulations instead of the laws that were in force in other parts of the country. People living in the non-Regulated areas and then in the Scheduled Districts were called by the colonial rulers as 'tribes'. In the Census Report of 1891, they are mentioned as 'forest tribes', and in 1931 renamed as 'primitive tribes'. The Government of India Act, 1935 again renamed them as 'backward tribes.' After independence, under Article 342 of the Indian Constitution, these people were enlisted as 'Scheduled Tribes' with some new entries in the earlier list. As such, the Scheduled Tribes' of Assam are basically a politico-administrative category, created for the purpose of special protection and devoid of the classical consideration of anthropology, sociology and economics. At present, the ethnic groups which are recognised as scheduled tribes in Assam are not isolated from other societies. Their internal economy has been stratified with antagonistic class interests. Though there are some legacy of animism among the tribes, a large number of them are brought under the influence of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.

At present, there are 23 constitutionally recognised scheduled 'tribes' in Assam and it consists of 12.82 percent of the total population of the province.
The total number of tribes and the percentage of the tribal population were much more numerous before the spate of reorganisation followed with respect to the province of Assam after independence. Apart from this, some ethnic groups belonging to the Mongoloid race are not classified as scheduled tribes.

According to the geographical features of their habitation, the tribes of Assam have been divided into two broad categories: the plains tribes (dwellers of the plains) and the hill tribes (dwellers of the hills). The recognised scheduled tribes in the plains of Assam are; 1. The Bodos, 2. The Rabhas, 3. The Mishings, 4. The Deuris, 5. The Sonowals, 6. The Tiwas, 7. The Barmans, 8. The Hojais, and 9. The Meches. On the other hand, the scheduled tribes of the hills are; 1. The Dimasas, 2. The Karbis, 3. The Garos, 4. The Hajongs, 5. The Mans, 6. The Mizos, 7. The Pawis, 8. The Chakmas, 9. The Hmars, 10. The Lakhers, 11. The Syntengs, 12. The Nagas, 13. The Kukis, and 14. The Khasis. One notable exception in scheduling the tribes is that all the tribes living in the plains and hills are not given the same status. A tribe recognised as scheduled tribe in the plains is not treated as such in the hills and vice-versa. As for example, the Bodos in the plains are enlisted as scheduled tribe, while their counterparts are not enlisted as such in the hills. Similarly, the Karbis of Karbi Anglong living in the hills are placed in the scheduled tribe list, while those living in the plains are not given the same status. This type of uneven treatment to the same tribe, living in the plains and hills, creates a sense of discontentment amongst the tribes.

Assam has been passing through a series of movements of the tribes (both in the hills and plains) since independence. The constitutional provisions for special protection of tribes could not fulfil all their needs and aspirations. They felt neglected and oppressed in the socio-political set up of Assam. In a bid to
get rid of such a situation, they resorted to a series of movements demanding autonomy within the state. This resulted in the reorganisation of the British Assam for several times and in the emergence of several full-fledged states.

The hill tribes first took the initiative in the direction of attaining autonomy for their habitat within Assam and this has almost immediate impact on the leaders of the plains tribes. The plains tribes also organised and led movements for the autonomy of their respective tribes at various times. The Bodos, the Mishings, the Tiwas and the Rabhas were all demanding autonomous status for their respective tribes, independent of each other. Of all the autonomy movements of the plains tribes, the movement of the Bodos has been the most prominent and powerful. Because of these movements almost all the tribes have been granted autonomous councils of their own. But the tribes did not regard these councils as being able to safeguard and further their interests, and hence they started to demand separate state for their respective tribes. Thus the autonomy movements of the tribes in Assam subsequently have assumed the character of the movements for separate statehood posing a serious threat to the unity and integrity of Assam.

Though the autonomy movements of the plains tribes of Assam appear to be of recent origin, but their causes are deeply rooted in the past. With a view to have a clear picture on the origin and growth of these autonomy movements of the tribes, therefore, it is proposed to have a discussion on the pre-British ethnic situation vis-a-vis the process of Assamese nationality formation.
The Process of Assamese Nationality Formation and Existence of Tribal Pockets

The process of Assamese nationality formation and detribalisation of the Mongoloid population of Assam had begun with the arrival of the Aryans. The exact date of the arrival of the Aryans in the Brahmaputra valley is not known, but there are many evidences to show that their arrival had occurred at a fairly early date. And this happened either as the result of Aryan invasion or because of their peaceful penetration to the region. References found in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the legends of Naraka, Bhagadatta's participation in the kurukshetra War, the marriage of Bana's daughter Usha with Anirudha, etc. indicate the Aryan settlement in this region during the pre-historic period. King Bhutibarman's (6 Century A.D.) land grants to 200 Brahmanas for promotion of Vedic religion and culture as recorded in the Nidhanpur copper plate inscription also indicate to the Aryan settlement. References to the principalities in ancient Kamarupa like Suvarnakudya, Japa, Jangaka, Turupa, Asokagrama, Grameruka, Pumakadvipa and particularly to 'Paralauhitya' in Kautilya's Arthasastra also confirm to early Aryan settlement in this region since the 4 Century B.C. Traces of early settlement of the kalitas belonging to the Aryan race have been found in as far as Sadiya in eastern Assam. It may be mentioned here that the Aryans never dominated the political scene in Assam. But with the help of their highly developed language, agricultural technology and socio-religious system of Brahmanical Hinduism, they brought the earlier inhabitants, the Mongoloid races, to their fold by giving them Aryan religion, rites and language.
Moreover, with the Aryan settlement, fusion of Aryan and non-Aryan blood took place paving the way for caste formation among the indigenous groups of people. The tribes were broken into several 'varnas', or 'jatis' (castes) through a process of acculturation. Thus the Koc which was originally used to designate a tribe has become in later years the name of a recognised Aryan caste into which are absorbed converts from the Kachari, the Lalung, the Mikir and other original tribes.

The Brahman missionaries played a pioneering role in this direction. The Brahmans first gave initiation to the ruling tribal families and then gave them the status of Kshatriyas by finding a fictitious descent for them from some heroes of Hindu legends or connecting their origin to some great divinity of Brahmanism. It was a general tendency among the common people to follow the religion of their rulers and thus through this process a large number of tribal people was hinduised and brought under the caste system, the socio-religious and economic organisation of the Brahmanical Hindus.

The hinduised kings, on the other hand, gave land grants to the Brahmans for their spiritual as well as political and administrative services to the kings. Besides, the kings gave land grants to the temples and other religious institutions. Having possessed the vast areas of land, the Brahmans played a two-fold role. First, they introduced plough cultivation and brought the indigenous people surrounding their land to work in their fields. Secondly, they 'sanskritised' the indigenous people by converting them to Hinduism, who occupied the lowest rank in the caste divided Hindu society. Thus, introduction of plough cultivation and initiation to Brahmanical Hinduism went on side by side which not only supplied agricultural hands to the Brahmans but also created a lower strata.
recognised as essential for the retention of the Brahmanical social structure intact. This process is called by D.D. Kosambi as "feudalism from below". Thus, Indian mode of feudalism was introduced in the Brahmaputra valley as early as the 6 century A.D.\(^{20}\)

Under the feudal structure the process of detribalisation and Aryan and non-Aryan socio-cultural fusion began in Assam backed by sanskrit language and plough economy. It led to the growth and development of the composite Assamese society and culture and modern Assamese as a Aryan speech developed out of Sanskrit as early as in the 10 century A.D.\(^{21}\) S.K. Chatterji argues that the Aryanisation of the ruling classes in the western part of Assam was completed by 400 A.D. and the whole of the Brahmaputra valley became a part of Aryan speaking India by 1200 A.D.\(^{22}\) But this argument of Chaterji has some limitation in view of the fact that long after 1200 A.D., many of the tribes of the valley survived and continued to maintain their own speeches, culture and religious beliefs. The Census data of 1872 and that of 1881 reveal that the hill population in toto and some one-half or so of the valley people of this region remained as non-Hindu and pre-literate despite their Hinduised ruling families.\(^{23}\) Sir Edward Gait remarks, "It must not be imagined ... that Hinduism had become the universal religion in the Brahmaputra Valley. This was by no means the case. The great mass of the Kachari, Rabha, Lalung and other aboriginal tribes still held to their old tribal beliefs, just as do some of them even to the present day. No pressure was put upon them to change their creed; and it is recorded that Narnarayan issued an edict setting aside the tract north of the Gosain Kamala Ali for the practice of aboriginal forms of worship. Before starting on his expedition
against the Ahoms he made a special arrangement for the performance by his Kachari soldiers of their tribal rites on the banks of the Sonkosh river.

The stunted growth of feudalism was the main cause for the survival of these tribal societies in Assam. Feudalism had never fully developed covering the whole areas of this region. The hill and the forest areas continued to remain outside the Brahmanical influence and plough based cultivating system. There has been no epigraphic evidence indicating land grants to the Brahmanas. Therefore, the process of conversion and detribalisation did not occur in these areas at all. Even in the heartland of Assam tribal pockets survived outside the Brahmanical fold. Thus feudalism in Assam developed as a superstructure leaving outside its orbit a large number of indigenous people. In this sense, the formation of Assamese nationality, which grew up through the development of feudalism, suffered from a basic set-back since its inception. But in Bengal the case was quite different. Feudalism in Bengal, which had developed in the Pala period, greatly helped in the fruition of the on-going process of assimilation there. So, Bengali nationality took a definite shape during the Pala period and it did not have tribal pockets in its heartland. The tribal remnants could be seen only in the periphery of Bengal.

Besides, there are some other causes for the survival of the tribal societies in Assam. Firstly, the number of Hindu settlers was small and they could not exert effective influence over the large section of the tribal people of the province. Secondly, the missionary zeal of the Brahmans was neither encouraging nor did it continue for a longer period to sustain the conversion process. The Brahmans were generally more interested in initiating the kings and his chief nobles from whom they were highly benefited in terms of land
grants and other facilities. Thirdly, they did not want to interfere with the tribal religious rites and practices and beliefs for fear of being the targets of tribal priestly class. Fourthly, the reigning periods of the Hinduised tribal royal families were short-lived and they were overthrown before their subjects were being Hinduised. Fifthly, the fresh migration of the tribes from the hills to the plains continued to keep up the number of tribal population in an increasing state in the plains. Lastly, the fear of being placed in a lower status also kept the tribal people away from being converted to Hinduism. Thus the process of detribalisation and Assamese nationality formation, which had its beginning during the pre-Ahom Hinduised royal families, did not continue properly and effectively and therefore numerous tribal pockets survived even today not only in the periphery but also in the heartland of Assam.

However, the process of detribalisation and the formation of Assamese nationality again began during the Ahom rule (1228-1826) and it continued till the advent of the British rule. The moulding of the Assamese society during the Ahom rule was the result of two different processes. (i) the works of political unification by the Ahom kings from above, and (ii) the socio-religious reform movements of the vaisnava saints like Sankaradeva and his disciples from below. Both the processes were feudal in their essence.

The Brahmaputra valley became disunited and disintegrated after the fall of the Kingdom of Kamarupa. Numerous tribal states and principalities emerged in the valley under various hereditary chief or king. The Ahoms on the strength of their tribal solidarity laid the foundation of their kingdom in Upper Assam in the early years of the 13th century. Gradually they expanded it in the Brahmaputra valley by appropriating the territories of other tribal chiefs and kings, such as, the
Chutiyas, the Dimasas, the Kacharis, the Morans, the Barahis. They also conquered the Bara-Bhuyans and annexed their territories later on. They even fought against the powerful Bodo tribe, the koches of western Assam, and occupied a part of their territory. They also successfully resisted the Muhammadan invasions and saved the country from being included in their dominion. The scattered political units in the Brahmaputra valley were thus united under the authority of the Ahom monarchy and the country came to be known after the name of the ruling dynasty. An administrative machinery based on feudal structure also evolved which was run by an aristocratic class or nobility. The nobility consisted of three great Gohains, Barbarua, Barphukan and other head officials of the Khel.

The outlying provinces were administered by the local governors, called 'Datiyal Gohains', such as the Kajalimukhia Gohain, Sadiyakhoa Gohains. Besides this, there were vassal kings like the Rajas of Darrang, Rani, Beltola, Dimarua, Barduar, Naduar, etc. After they had made their submission to the Ahoms, they were latter transformed into governors of their respective territories. All the Ahom officials got 'khats' (tax free arable land) which they cultivated with the help of their own slaves and the 'paiks' assigned to them in lieu of salary for state service. Thus under the tutelage of the Ahoms, Assam had been unified. They introduced a feudal administrative system, where all the tribes and races including the Ahom dynasty itself began to assimilate with the emerging Assamese nationality.

But the Ahoms, even after long six hundred years of their continued existence could not shed off their semi-tribal trait in the sphere of administration social organization as well as in economy. The Ahom system of feudalism, is.
therefore, called by Dr. Guha as 'tribal feudal'. On the other hand, Dr. Gohain called it as 'bureaucratic feudal'.

From these divergent views, it becomes clear that feudalism did not fully develop in Assam under the Ahoms. The main pivot of the Ahom administration was the 'khel' system. Under this system land revenue was exacted through a process of servile labour from the tenants (called paiks) and thus production was delinked from the revenue. The land was the common property of the khel. Each paik was entitled to have two puras (2.66 acres) of land in lieu of state services. Each paik had to render service to the state in rotation for three/four months in a year. The khel officers got khats. But the paiks or the khat officers did not have hereditary rights over their lands, excepting the home-steads. So long as the paiks or the khel officials continued to render service to the state, they held the land allotted to them. The moment they ceased to render service to the state, the lands allotted to them passed to the clan or khel and these were again redistributed among the paiks. Thus the tribal custom of community ownership on land as well as joint cultivation had been retained under the Ahoms under the well-defined khel system.

Secondly, apart from the Ahoms, the khel system comprised various other ethnic groups of people. Being under the same khel, gradually a feeling of comradeship grew up among them. The tribals, being in the majority, could easily influence the other members of the khel in terms of decision-making and execution. Moreover, being situated in distant places from the capital, the kheldars exercised almost semi-independent power. The members of the khels showed their loyalty to their immediate overlords, i.e., the kheldars, than to their
ultimate sovereign residing in the capital.\textsuperscript{33} Under such a situation, the khels could maintain the tribal nature of functioning uninterrupted.

Similarly, the provincial Governors, the frontier wardens and the tributary tribal chiefs and princes had enjoyed semi-independent status and power in their respective territorial jurisdiction. The princes of Darrang, Dimarua, Rani, Beltola, Barduar, Naduar, etc., were given the status of hereditary governors in their respective territories. The only duty they had to perform was the requirement to attend the King in person with their prescribed contingent of men in times of emergency and to pay the annual tribute.\textsuperscript{34} The princes were left free in their internal affairs, such as in the administration of justice and collection of revenue, etc. The tribal societies, under their immediate princes, could thus enjoy much of their rights maintaining their customs and manners without interference from the caste Hindu Assamese society.

On the other hand, simultaneously with the growth of Ahom feudalism from above, there started a movement for the growth of feudalism from below under the aegis of the neo-vaishnavite preachers like Sankaradeva and his disciples. Sankaradeva’s neo-vaishnavite movement had a clear-cut programme for absorption of the tribals within the Hindu fold. The tribals and other non-Hindu groups of people after having been initiated into Hinduism became known as ‘sarania’. The ‘saranias’ were initially placed in the lowest rank of the caste Hindu society, and having been allowed to upgrade themselves they could move from sarania to Koch and from Koch to kalita through a process of reforms. This proselytizing procedure not only helped the tribal people to upgrade themselves to higher social status but also made it possible for bringing about a change in their socio-cultural and economic life and activities. Thus “The tribal
people moved from animism to Vaisnavism; from tribes to peasant caste; from pile houses to mud-plinth houses; from burial practice to cremation of dead; from liberal food habits to abstinence from liquor, beef and pork; and so on.”

Sankardeva’s neo-Vaishnavism became popular among the tribals and non-Hindu castes because of its liberalism and humane nature. The Satras (monasteries), each headed by a guru (pontiff) designated as the Mahanta, Goswami or Satradhikar, became the proselytizing centres. The infrastructure of the Satras and the relationship between the Guru and the proselytes was based on feudal principles. During the time of the ‘saran’ ceremony (the formal spiritual initiation by the Guru), the devotees (bhakats) had to offer total submission to the Guru by prostrating before the latter. Thus a personal bond like the one existing between the master and his serf grew up between the Guru and his disciples. The devotees had to give tithe (Guru Kar) regularly to his spiritual lord. When the monasteries became rich and powerful they gradually evolved their own hierarchy of functionaries to collect the tithes from the devotees and manage the properties. Thus a feudal system through the neo-Vaishnavite movement grew up from below which was effective both for the process of detribalisation and formation of the Assamese nationality.

But the Ahom Kings, barring a very few, did not patronize the neo-Vaishnavite movement. The Ahom Kings, after the expansion of their kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley, had been in search of a universal religion to teach the people to be obedient, patient and submissive and thereby tried to consolidate their monarchical form of government. Although, neo-Vaishnavism had the potentialities to serve their purpose, the Ahom Kings, at the initial stage,
discarded it outright, and without relinquishing their Tai-Ahom faith, began to patronise the Brahmanical Hinduism.

The Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-41) revived the old practice of making Brahmattor, Debottar and Dharmottar land grants to the Brahmans and temples and for charitable purposes. Moreover, the Mahapurushia sect of neo-Vaishnavism was subjected to much persecution during his reign. Sankardeva was expelled from the Ahom territory, his chief disciple Madhavdeva, along with others, was imprisoned. Sankardeva's son-in-law Mukunda Gosain was executed by the Ahoms. Thus, neo-Vaishnavism of Sankardeva could not deeply take root in the Brahmaputra valley during the Ahom rule and it survived only in those areas where the Ahom rule was nominal. The Satras continued their task of proselytising of the tribals in a limited scale and succeeded in bringing them into the fold of feudal mode of production.

It is to be mentioned here that King Narnarayan of Koch Behar appreciated the quality of Sankardeva and received him in his court with due honour and courtesy. It was due to the fact that King Narnarayan knew very well the religious and economic contents of feudalism then prevailing in Northern India as he had been in Benaras for several years in his early life. He found Sankardeva's new Vaishnavism well fitted to the socio-political scheme he had in his mind for his country and patronized him. But due to the disintegration of the Koch Kingdom after his death and the inability of the followers of Sankardeva together caused a serious set back to the process of assimilation initiated by him under the patronage of King Narnarayan being continued much further.

Despite this limitation of his immediate followers, under the well calculated move of some of the disciples of Sankardeva soon grew up a network
of decentralized monasteries in the Brahmaputra valley for proselytizing the Brahmanical Hindus as well as the tribals to the neo-Vaishnavite fold. Even the Ahom ruling house, who had been initially hostile and indifferent to the new faith and movement, gradually felt the need of winning over them to their side. They could realize that the movement was, in essence, an ideology helping the process of detribalization required for social transition. By the mid-seventeenth century Joyadhaj Singha (1648-63) formally embraced the faith. Since then till the time of Rudra Singha (1696-1714), barring the second half of Gadadhar Singha's reign, the Ahom Kings generally showed due respect and courtesy to the neo-Vaishnavite faith. They continued to show reverence its Gosains and made land grants and endowments to the Satras for their maintenance. But neo-Vaishnavism, which had lost much of its earlier charm after the death of Sankardeva suffered a split and a number of distinct sects emerged. Thus by the end of the 17th century ideological differences caused the division of the monasteries into four competing orders or samhatis: 1. Brahma Samhati, 2. Purusha Samhati, 3. Nika Samhati, and 4. Kala Samhati. These four orders or Samhatis could, again be placed under two broad categories; the right wing and the left wing satras. The right wing satras which included the Brahma Samhati upheld the supremacy of the Brahmans within the Vaishnava fraternity and conformed to the Vedic rites and idol worship. The left wing satras, on the other hand, were the followers of the teaching of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva. Most of the left wing satras had sudra Gosains and they believed that there was nothing wrong in a Brahma being spiritually initiated by a sudra. The left wing satras gained a strong foothold amongst the socially despised castes and the tribal neophytes.
The split of neo-Vaishnavism and the division of the satras together caused a set back to the continued process of sanskritization and detribalization. The later Ahom Kings did not utilize the potentialities of the satras in the direction of state formation either. Not only that, they even tried to crush the satras. Two factors were responsible for their taking an anti-satra stand. First, the satras had grown rich and powerful enough which the Ahom Kings considered as a threat to the royal authority. Secondly, the growing number of religious preceptors and their respective followers created a serious inconvenience for the state. The process caused a serious depletion of the number of people meant for paik services to the state, as religious recluses were being exempted from rendering manual service to it.  

Gadadhar Singha initiated a savage persecution policy towards the satra institution. His policy was, of course, selective and discriminating. The disciples belonging to the four higher castes, viz., Brahman, Daivajna, Kayastha and Kalita, were left unmolested while those of the lower castes were brought under rigorous punishment. The celibate 'bhakats' were released, and the married 'bhakats' being removed from the satras were made to work. Many sudra Gosains were tortured and even killed.

Rudra Singha, the son and successor of Gadadhar Singha, reversed the policy of his father and reinstated the satras and Gosains. But he too followed a policy of 'divide and rule' and discouraged the system of leading and guiding the satras with sudra gosain as head. He convened a religious conference of the Vaishnava gosains in 1702 for a debate on the controversial religious issues. In the conference he issued a royal decree forbidding the sudra gosains from giving initiation to the Brahmanas. At the same time he extended official patronage to
all Brahmanical satras. Besides, he compelled the sudra gosains to wear a small earthen jar as their distinctive badge, hanging from a string around their neck. This discriminating treatment to the sudra priests made them disaffected against the royal authority. Despite this sort of humiliation, the satras led by the sudra priests remained popular among the masses of the people. The situation continued till the reign of Rudra Singha when he decided in 1714 to introduce Sakti cult with the help of a Brahmanical priest from Bengal. The new religion appeared to be unacceptable to the prevailing socio-political situation of Assam. As a result, civil war began between the Ahom monarchy (feudalism from above) and the Moamoria sect of neo-Vaishnavism (feudalism from below), which ruined the Ahom monarchy.

Thus feudalism, both from above and from below, did not have the chance to fully develop in medieval Assam. So the process of Sanskritisation and detribalisation did not proceed further and the process of Assamese nationality formation remained incomplete. As a consequence, a large number of tribal people remained outside the fold of the feudal mode of production in Assam. Socially they remained isolated from the mainstream Hindu Assamese society and thus retained their distinctive linguistic and cultural traits. They continued their old practices of 'jhum' cultivation and thus helped in the survival of subsistence economy for a much longer time. However, as the tribal people continued to live side by side with the non-tribal Assamese neighbour, both the societies were influenced by each other's socio-religious and cultural behaviour. In the long run, this helped in the emergence of a plural society in Assam based on mutual co-operation, interaction and a little bit of assimilation between the tribal and the non-tribal people.
The British Rule and the Tribal Situation in Assam

The tribal situation in Assam underwent a change in the wake of the occupation of Assam by the British in 1826. The British, in stages, brought the different political units in the North-East under their hegemony and attached these units with Assam. During 1826-74, Assam had been administered as a Commissioner's Division under the Bengal government. But in view of the geopolitical importance as well as the unexplored nature of the region, the British government felt it necessary to administer it directly under the authority of the Governor-General in Council. Therefore, Assam was made a Chief Commissioner's province in 1874 and then a Governor's Province in 1921 under the provision of the Government of India Act, 1919. In this way a 'Greater Assam' was created by the British comprising all the areas of the North East inhabiting by the various ethnic groups of people with diverse language, culture and economy. The motive of the British behind the creation of Greater 'Assam' was to serve their imperial interest best, it was not at all in the interests of the tribes/ethnic groups or people of the region. They did not take any interest in the socio-economic advancement of the various communities neither they took initiative for strengthening the unity and integrity among them. On the contrary, the British followed a policy of keeping the hill people separate from the plains people and discouraged sanskritisation (Hinduization) of the tribals.

F.S. Dowson, a missionary with vast experience on the North-East, writes, "British administrative policies discouraged further sanskritization and for the most part encouraged the maintenance of distinct tribal entities". The British even took various measures, administrative and legislative, to seclude the hill areas on the plea of their separate identities. Gait writes, "The inhabitants of the
hill tracts, however, were not yet suited for the elaborate legal rules laid down in
the procedure codes and in several other enactments of the same class, and
they had to be governed in a simpler and more personal manner than those of
the more civilised and larger settled districts. 48

For that purpose even before the occupation of Assam, the British
Government passed the Regulation X of 1822, which is mentioned earlier. Later
the British Government passed a series of Acts and Regulations in the name of
maintaining peace and good government in the tribal areas. In 1873 the British
Government passed the 'Inner Line Regulation' prohibiting the entry of non-tribal
British subjects into the areas within the line without proper authorisation from a
competent authority. In February, 1874, Assam was separated from Bengal
Presidency and was brought under the administration of a Chief Commissioner.
But the Government did not change the administrative policy towards the hill
areas. In the same year, the 'Scheduled District Act' was passed. This Act
authorised the local government to administer the areas within the Inner Line by
issuing regulations instead of extending laws operating in the plains. 49 Under the
authority of the Scheduled District Act, 1874, the 'Assam Frontier Tracts
Regulations', 1880 was passed empowering the Chief Commissioner to remove
certain frontier tracts of Assam from the purview of the operation of the laws in
force and to frame rules for the administration of such frontier tracts. 50 Under the
provisions of the Government of India Act, 1919, the areas administered by the
Scheduled Districts Act, 1874, were declared 'Backward Tracts' and the local
government was directed not to apply any act of the Indian legislatures to the
said areas. The administration of these areas were vested in the hands of the
Governor of Assam, who was to act, with respect to these areas, as the deputy
of the Governor General of India. The Backward Tracts were again classified as 'Excluded' and 'Partially Excluded Areas' by the Government of India Act, 1935. The Governor of Assam was empowered to administer the Excluded Areas in his own discretion and those of the Partially Excluded Areas were to be administered by the Government of Assam in their own responsibility.

Thus the hill areas were separated from the plains portion of the province and these areas were kept in seclusion till the end of the British rule. And the political unification, which the British had created was artificial, inhibiting the process of assimilation among the tribes/ethnic groups on the one hand and the non-tribals on the other. The British, in the name of maintaining 'peace and good government' for the tribes and 'to reclaim them to the habits of civilised life', did nothing at all for their social, cultural and economic development. The Simon Commission Report has stated that 'the principal duty of the administration is to educate these people to stand on their own feet and this is a process which has hardly begun.' There is no denying the fact that under the protective umbrella of the British rule, the tribes of Assam, to a great extent, could maintain traditions and beliefs, but at the same time being isolated from the larger Indian society, they had lost the competence to face the challenges of the civilised world. The tribal situation under British rule in Assam has been more clearly stated by S.C. Dubey, "The policy of exclusion and partial exclusion of the tribal areas reduced competition between the tribals and non-tribals, and minimised the principal causes of conflict between them. Indirectly, it also helped the tribes to pursue their distinctive life ways....But this policy could not eliminate all competition, nor could it preclude all ideas and innovations foreign to the tribal style of life....Unsupported by dynamic and purposeful social action, this policy..."
resulted in the perpetuation of primitiveness. Their insulation from the main currents of Indian life helped the tribes in preserving their tradition, but at the same time, it also hindered the growth of competence in them to face the growing competition in wider society and to meet some of the challenges of the contemporary world.  

But despite this harmful protective or paternalistic policy of the British, there began a stir slowly and steadily in the tribal societies of Assam. Several factors were responsible for such stirrings, which differed from region to region in their intensity.

First, the system of transport and communication, roads and railways, had exposed the tribal societies to the outer world and thus brought about a change in their attitude to life and society. Secondly, the material progress achieved by the caste Hindu men in service, business, trade and commerce, under the new dispensation of the British had opened their eyes to new avenues of social mobility. They could compare their poor socio-economic plight with those of the caste Hindu men and take a realistic view on the emerging differences between the two. This activated their senses for change and mobility.

Thirdly, the Christian Missionaries who had arrived in the North-East as the agent of the British imperialism played an important role in modernising certain sections of the tribal people in the region. They penetrated deep into many of these communities, particularly of the hills, and converted many of them to Christianity and gave them education and health. Due to the exertions of the Christian Missionaries the rate of literacy increased rapidly among the tribals. In some cases, as in Mizoram, the rate of literacy far surpassed the all-India average. The tribal dialects were developed into written languages in Roman
script, thus making them a unifying and modernising force for the tribal people of the region. As a consequence, an elite class started gradually to emerge among the tribes capable of articulating the grievances of their community in absolute political terms.

Fourthly, some British administrators like Dalton, Risley, Crooke, Russell etc., have conducted a series of anthropological studies making it possible for the tribes to have a better understanding of their own station in society. These studies made them conscious about their present status and future prospect.

Despite these developments there had been no political consciousness among the tribes of the North-East till the beginning of the 20th century. As a matter of fact, political consciousness emerged among the tribal peoples of the region during the first three decades of the last century. The emerging middle class among the various tribes first sowed the seeds of ethnic consciousness and in the formation of political outfits.

Autonomy Movement of the Hill Tribes

There had been certain factors for the rise and growth of autonomy movement among the hill tribes of Assam. The spread of modern education as well as Christianity while creating a middle class among the hill tribes also unfolded their aspirations for government jobs, interests in business and trade and commerce and exercised their minds for political power and authority. During the course of the freedom movement, some leaders attempted to bring the tribal peoples of the hills as well as of the plains to the mainstream of political activity. But as the hill areas remained as the 'excluded' and 'partially excluded areas' their attempts did not fully materialize. So the political activity of the leaders of the hill tribes particularly remained confined to Shillong and to their
own political formation. Secondly, after independence of the country, the 
tribal economy of the hills was disrupted in the sense that some parts of Garo, 
Mizo, Khasi and Jaintia hills were economically integrated with Eastern Bengal 
than with the plains of Assam. The Partition of the country created economic 
hardship for the people of these areas. The economic hardship in its turn 
contributed to the growth of identity consciousness as well as for autonomy of 
the hills.

Thirdly, the Marxist ideology and influence of the Soviet Constitution 
together played an important role in rousing the ethnic consciousness among the hill peoples. The hill students studying in the colleges of Assam as well as in Kolkata came into contact with progress students having leanings to Marxism and Marxist student organisations, among others, and started to think in terms of solving the national question in the prevailing political situation of the country. The Soviet concept of multi-national state and autonomous regions with a right to secede was the liking of the students of the hills as they were very much afraid of domination by the people of the plains. Another factor responsible for igniting the urge for autonomy among the hill people in general was the idea of a 'Crown Colony' floated by the British official, Sir Reginald Coupland on the eve of independence of the country. The plan failed because of stiff opposition from the national political parties as well as lack of support of the hill leaders themselves. But it was 'successful to the extent of kindling an urge for autonomy and political participation and, above all, nurturing the seeds of suspicion in tribal minds against their more developed neighbours in the plains.'

With the turn of the century, several district level political organisations 
emerged in the hills. The earliest of these organisations were the Jaintia Durbar.
(1900), the Naga Club (1918), the Khasi National Durbar (1923) the Khasi State Federation (1924), etc. Subsequently other district level organisations also emerged in and around 1945, such as the Naga Hills District Tribal Council (1945), the Garo National Council (1946), the Mizoram Union (1946), the Khasi-Jaintia Political Association (1946), the Karbi Durbar (1947), etc. The article of faith of these organisations was the national self-determination and worked for attaining political-administrative autonomy within Assam.

The nationalist leaders, while framing the constitution could not totally disregard the demands of the hill people. The Constituent Assembly formed an Advisory Committee under the chairmanship of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel to go into the problems of the tribal people of Assam and other areas. Under this Advisory Committee functioned a Sub-Committee for the North East under the chairman-ship of Gopinath Bardoloi. The findings of this Committee under Bardoloi were submitted with its recommendations to the Constituent Assembly, and these recommendations were incorporated in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution under Article No. 244. In 'Part-A' of the Sixth Schedule provisions were made for the district level autonomy for the Garo Hills, United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Lushai Hills, Naga Hills, North-Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills under a 'District Council'. In 'Part-B' provision was made for the formation of Regional Councils for Balipara Frontier Tracts, Sadiya frontier Tract, Tirap Frontier Tract, Abor Area and Naga Tribal Area of the North-East. This constitutional provision gave greater autonomy to the tribal districts and tracts. The Sixth Schedule also provided that 'no Act of the State Legislature in respect of tribal affairs shall apply to any autonomous districts unless the 'District Councils' so direct ''. On the other hand, these areas were given full share in participation in the state
legislature and state cabinet. Thus the Sixth Schedule gave a unique status to the tribal areas of Assam.

But the freedom loving people of the hill areas were not satisfied with the incorporation of the hill areas within the administrative jurisdiction of the Government of Assam and they opposed it vehemently. They were sceptical about the sincerity of the Assam Government in protecting their rights and interests. They also apprehended the intrusion of the plainsmen into the hills. So, they raised the voice of protest against the Sixth Schedule and declared them to be ineffective for giving protection.

(a) Autonomy Movement of the Nagas

The first resistance against the measure came from the Nagas. The Naga political outfits, such as the Naga Club (1918) and the Naga Hills District Tribal Council (1945) soon transformed into Naga National Council (a federation of several tribal council under the leadership of T.Aliba Imti Ao). In June 1946 it submitted a memorandum to the Government of India opposing the plan of 'Crown Colony' and the grouping of Assam with Bengal. At the same time they demanded autonomy for the Nagas within Assam. In February 1947 the Naga National Council drafted a resolution demanding an interim government for the Nagas for a period of ten years at the end of which they would decide their political future.

In the meanwhile the leadership of the Naga National Council passed into the hands of Angami Zapu Phizo. This happened just before independence of the country. Under his leadership, the demand for autonomy for the Nagas was transformed to demand for national self-determination. In June 1947 Sir Akbar Haidari, the Governor of Assam, during his visit to Kohima, made an agreement
with the Naga National Council, by which provisions were made for protecting the interests of the Nagas, their culture and the ways of living, the imposition and collection of land revenues and a house tax and other taxes by the Council. The agreement was made for a term of ten years and it was specifically mentioned under clause no. 9 of the said agreement. The Naga National Council interpreted this clause as being the time frame after which they would opt out of India and become a sovereign independent state, which the Government of India denied.

By the time A.Z. Phizo became the President of the Naga National Council in 1949, the movement for independence of the Nagas got momentum. On February 20, 1950 the Naga National Council organised a plebiscite on the question of independence which the Government of India did not recognise. In retaliation, the Nagas did not participate in the countrywide general election held in 1952. The movement of the Nagas became violent and it took a different turn. This is the beginning of the insurgency movement in the North-East. In the face of all this the Government of India decided to give statehood to Naga people under the constitution of India. Accordingly, the Parliament passed the Thirteenth Amendment Act, 1962 providing the formation of Nagaland as the sixteenth state within the Republic of India.

(b) Birth of Meghalaya

The creation of Nagaland as a separate state gave new impetus to the identity movements of other tribes in the North-East. The wheel was further propelled when the Assam Government adopted the Assam Official Language Act in 1960. In the meantime, a conference of the people of the autonomous hill districts of Assam was held at Tura on 6 October 1954 under the chairmanship of Captain Williamson Sangma. This conference made a proposal for the
creation of a 'Eastern Hill State' and in accordance of this proposal a memorandum was submitted to the State Reorganisation Commission which the latter did not concede. But in the wake of the passing of the Assam Official Language Act, the hill leaders revived the demand for separate hill state and organised a new political outfit called the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) in 1960. The Conference made it clear that the Official Language Act was a "clear proof of unfair attitude and prior determination of the Assamese Community to avail themselves of undue advantage and thereby enhance their domination of the hill's people and the rest of the people of the state of Assam." So they demanded 'the immediate creation of a separate hill state.'

The Government of India failing to contain this movement of the hill peoples ultimately conceded the demand and by the Twenty Second Amendment Act, 1969, created the Autonomous State of Meghalaya comprising the districts of Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Garo hills. The autonomous statehood did not satisfy the people of Meghalaya and the Government of India ultimately had to concede the demand for full statehood to her by the North Eastern Areas (Re-organisation) Act, 1971, along with Manipur and Tripura.

© The Movement of the Mizos

The autonomy movement of the Mizos was marked by violence from the beginning. The Mizo Union, formed in April 1946, followed the path of Naga National Council and it stood for the abolition of the chieftainship, representation of the Mizos in state and central legislatures and improvement of the social and economic conditions of the Mizos. The Mizo Union prepared a memorandum on 22 April 1947 for submission to the Constituent Assembly urging for the consolidation of all Mizo areas into a single administrative unit and its self-
determination within Assam. Though the Union has majority support of the people yet it soon suffered a split with one section merging with the Indian National Congress, while the other group took the path of secession.

In July 1947, another political party was formed under the name of United Mizo Freedom Organisation (UMFO). It professed for secession of all contiguous Mizo inhabited areas from India and union with Burma. But it did not gain ground in the district. The Mizo National Front, formed in October 1961 under the chairmanship of Laldenga, played a crucial role in the Mizo autonomy movement. The MNF, under Laldenga, professed independence for Mizoram and started an armed revolt against the Indian Government. In the memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister on 30 October 1965, the MNF said, "The only aspiration and political cry is the creation of Mizoram, a free and sovereign state to govern herself, to work out her own destiny and to formulate her own foreign policy."

The MNF started a well-planned revolt and it captured the Mizo Hills district completely. The army was called upon to intervene to suppress the rebellion and the MNF was declared an unlawful organisation in March 1966. The district was recaptured within a month and after a series of discussion a Memorandum of Settlement was finally signed on 30 June 1968. Thereafter in January 1972 Mizoram was declared a Union Territory under the provisions of the North-Eastern Areas (Re-organisation) Act, 1971. Thus with the creation of Mizoram, insurgency was brought to a close and in 1986 Mizoram was elevated into a full-fledged state.
The northern mountainous tracts presently called the Arunachal Pradesh had been occupied administered by the British as a distinct administrative unit as per Regulation 3 of 1873 since 1874. Thereafter the administration of this area was vested in the hands of the Chief Commissioner of Assam under the provisions of the Assam Frontier Tracts Regulation, 1880. After independence this area was renamed as North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) under the provisions of the North-East frontier Areas (Administration) Regulation 1954 under the Assam administration. NEFA was elevated to a Union Territory in 1971 under the provisions of the North Eastern Area (Re-organisation) Act, 1971. Thus Assam has been reorganised several times to accommodate tribal/ethnic aspirations for autonomy and self-government under the constitution of India. This has been with respect to the tribes/ethnic groups of the Hills.

(B) The Autonomy Movements of the Plains Tribes of Assam

The tribal situation in the plains of Assam was somewhat different from that of the hills. The plains tribes were not isolated from other existing societies and Christianity did not take deep roots among them as did in the hills. They were not concentrated in a particular area as the tribes in the hills had been. They were scattered all over the Brahmaputra valley and they lived in smaller groups in the neighbourhood of the caste Hindu Assamese or other people professing Hinduism. Despite this fact the tribes maintain their own language, culture and religious beliefs sufficient for upholding their ethnic identity. Gradually ethnic consciousness grew up among the tribes and they started to raise demand for autonomy as a stepping stone for statehood.
The causes for the growth of ethnic consciousness and ethnic movements of the plains tribes were different from those of the hills. First, when the British occupied the Brahmaputra valley, the tribals and non-tribals formed the population of the valley. The tribals being in the grip of tribal and semi-feudal mode of production remained economically backward and underdeveloped.

Secondly, the new land rights introduced by the British had the effect of creating landlessness among the tribes in the sense that they, to avoid being brought under taxation, began to leave their original habitat and move further deep into the forest. Because of this new situation they had to remain migratory in habit. Apart from this the tribal people regarded land as communal property.

Thirdly, the opening out of the tea gardens also created problems for the tribes. Lands mostly owned as communal property by the tribal people were allotted for tea cultivation.

Fourthly, the immigration of people from outside the province in the wake of the British occupation and the beginning of the tea cultivation also led to alienation of land primarily belonging to the tribal people. The tribal people were thus deprived of their natural rights for free use of land. Land became scarce for the tribals when the immigrants, particularly from East Bengal (Now Bangladesh), began to settle indiscriminately in Assam. Whatever lands were available for occupation by the tribal people were being alienated under various tricks played by the village mahajans, traders and businessmen and government officials. The creation of Tribal Belts and Blocks could not change the situation in favour of the tribes at all. As a result the self-sufficient village economy of the tribes, among others, collapsed. Alienation of land and consequent poverty was
an important cause for the rise and growth of ethnic movements in the plains of Assam.

Fifthly, social oppression and humiliation meted out to the tribal people by the caste Hindu neighbours was another cause of the ethnic movements. Because of this humiliation and social oppression they became ethnically conscious to maintain and preserve their own social customs and status.

Sixthly, the impact of modern education among the tribes and their entry into government jobs under the colonial state also helped in the growth and development of an educated middle class capable enough to articulate the grievances of the tribal people. This was another cause for the growth of ethnic movements in the plains of Assam.

**Demand for Purbachal**

The demand for autonomy in the plains of Assam was first raised in 1948 in the name and style of Purbachal. Immediately after independence, the Cachar Congress Committee devised a plan to create a separate state under the name of Purbachal. This plan of the Cachar Congress Committee was then supported by the Manipur and Tripura Congress Committees as well as by the representatives of the Lushai Hills. They also decided to include in this state the districts of Goalpara, Garo Hills and Naga Hills and the Mikir Hill portion of Nowgong and Sibsagar, the Sadiya-Balipara Frontier Tracts, the Tirap Frontier Tract and the state of Koch Behar and the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills. This plan was submitted to the Government of India in 1948 for consideration. And when the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) visited Assam in 1954 the Cachar Congress Committee submitted a memorandum under the title of 'Purbachal Reconsidered' reiterating its demand of 1948. But the demand for
Purbachal soon came to an end as it was neither accepted by the SRC nor pursued by the Cachar Congress Committee any further after 1954. The Cachar District Congress Committee again raised the issue in the wake of the passing of the Assam Official Language Bill in 1960. They demanded that Cachar be separated from Assam and made a state. Then after the creation of several hills states were curved out of Assam during 1962-71, the demand for Union Territory status for Cachar was raised under the aegis of the Cachar Gana Parishad Demand Committee. But this demand also remained unfulfilled.

The Ahom Aspiration for Autonomy

The Ahoms, a branch of the great Tai race of Mongoloid origin, had ruled over Assam for nearly six hundred years, also started to raise demands for autonomy within twenty years of independence. In the wake of the announcement of the central Government for the creation of hill state as demanded by the All Party Hill Leaders Conference in January 1967, the idea of a Ahom state within Assam captivated the imagination of the Ahom community. Different factions of the Ahom community got united and formed an organisation under the title of 'Ahom-Tai-Mongoliya Rajya Parishad' in 1967 at Sibsagar. This was later renamed as 'Ujani Asom Rajya Parishad' in April 1971. They demanded a separate Ahom state comprising the districts of Sibsagar and Lakshimpur.

Demands of the Koch Rajbonshis

The Koch-Rajbonshis were of the same Mongoloid racial stock as did the Ahoms. The Koch-Rajbonshis formed an organisation during 1959-60 to fight for their cause. They demanded, attended with some sort of ambiguity for some time, the 'scheduled caste' status under the Constitution of India.
The Autonomy Movement of the Bodos

Of all the movements of the tribes for autonomy in Assam, the most important movement was that of the Bodos. Their aspiration for autonomy had begun during the colonial rule. It took a violent turn in the post independent period particularly in the 80's of the twentieth century. The Bodos raised the demand for the creation of a separate territorial and administrative unit for the Bodos within Assam. The details of the autonomy movement of the Bodos are being discussed in the following chapters.

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