Chapter II

Socio-Economic Situation of the Plains Tribes of Assam

The Tribal people of Assam have been living in close proximity with the non-tribal Assamese people since long time past. Though the natural barriers have separated the hill tribes from those of the plains, there had been frequent intercourse between the people of the hills and the plains through the passes and river routes for reasons economic and others. The plains tribes, on the other hand, were scattered all over the Brahmaputra valley and they have been living in small groups amidst the Assamese society. It has been stated earlier that a section of them became Hinduised and assimilated with the Assamese society. The rest of the plains tribes, even though not assimilated, had been maintaining friendly relations with their Assamese neighbours over the periods of history. So, a process of assimilation—racially, linguistically and culturally—were running through the ages between the tribals and the non-tribals of Assam. Prof S.K. Bhuyan writes, “The vocabulary of the Assamese language has been greatly strengthened by words used by the tribals. Assamese proverbs are brimful of references to the customs of our tribal neighbours. The popular music and dance of Assam have been largely reinforced by borrowings from the tribals. Weaving which is universal amongst women in Assam is also to be found amongst a large section of the tribal population... The liberal spirit of the Assamese Vaisnava monks has led to the conversion of a large number of tribals with the Hindu fold and they are as ardent devotees of Hinduism as their older co
religionists. But despite the changes that took place in the tribal societies through co-operation, interaction and assimilation with the non-tribal Assamese society, the plains tribals of Assam have maintained some of their tribal traits, such as, language, culture, religion, etc. These are sufficient for the maintenance of their ethnic identity. Economically, the plains tribes maintained self-subsistence economy based on agriculture done with traditional method. In consequence, the tribals remained poor and backward.

During British rule the plains tribals of Assam had to face tremendous population pressure due to immigration from outside the province. Apart from this, the self-subsistence tribal economy soon collapsed with the introduction of the money economy in marketless Assam. Even after independence their socio-economic condition did not improve. In the following pages an attempt has been made to study the socio-economic situation of the plains tribes which are the main driving forces for the growth of the autonomy movement in Assam.

Social Situation

Normally the plains tribes live in communal villages, though they are also found in mixed villages. 'Village Council' or village panchayat has been their socio-political institution. The elderly men of the village constitute the village council which is supreme in all matters within the village. The head of the village council is called Gaon Bura or 'Gam' (the village elder) He is selected from a particular family for a few generations, but the office is not hereditary. He is the nucleus around whom all the village elders gathered for the smooth running of the affairs of the village. The village council has the power to give judgement in all kinds of disputes that are brought before the panchayat. The village panchayat
they are not in print). The pandulipis are prepared by the zonal council composed of adjacent villages on the basis of customs, usage, traditions and religious beliefs. The pandulipis are not homogenous sets of laws, they may differ in content and application from locality to locality. But the basic issues pertaining to inheritance of property, succession to the office of socio-religious and socio-political nature and liability of atonement on committing unnatural and anti-social offences are more or identical. There are seven such pandulipis that are in use in governing the Bodo-Kachari tribe living in different places of Assam.

In Rabha society, there are two sets of such pandulipis in the southern bank of the Brahmaputra covered by the districts of Goalpara and Kamrup, one is called 'Mechpara Purbanchal Rabha Samaj Bidhi' and the other 'Dudhnoi Purbanchal Rabha Samaj Bidhi'.

Though most of their socio-cultural practices have been passing through a phase of transition the tribes in the valley could maintain some of their traits intact. On the other hand, various tribes are still in the transitional stage. Their close relationship and frequent contact with the non-tribal Hindu Assamese society, conversion of a large number of tribals to Hinduism and Christianity, the improved means of communication, impact of modern education as well as of political movement, among others, are responsible for bringing about a change in the socio-cultural and socio-political life of the tribal people in the plains of Assam. The plains tribes are not isolated from other civilised societies either. As they happen to live side by side with the Hindu Assamese society they are influenced by Hindu social, economic and religious practices. For example, the plains tribes were originally 'jhum' (shifting) cultivators and most probably, they
did not use the plough till the coming of the Ahoms, though some of them, particularly the Bodo-Kachari tribe, knew the art of a peculiar form of irrigation. Shifting hoe cultivation, which the tribes usually done on communal basis, was in existence in some parts of Assam till the mid nineteenth century. But the tribes gradually learnt the use of plough and adopted settled cultivation from the neighbouring caste Hindu cultivators. For instance, the Bodo-Kachari tribe of Assam-Bengal border had gone through a process of transition so far as their method of cultivation was concerned. The Bodo-Kachari tribe in the said locality started to resort to plough cultivation since 1875 through their contacts with more advanced neighbours, the Rajbonshis, who had earlier converted to Hinduism. Similarly, some tribes like the Rabhas, the Koches of Meghalaya border, the Lalungs (the Tiwas) etc. were originally matrilineal societies, but in course of time they became patriarchal societies. The change over to patriarchal family life from that of the matriarchal family life took place due to their attempt at elevating themselves to the Hindu social fold as well as to move from the stage of 'jhum' economy to the stage of permanent or settled cultivation. So far religion is concerned, the plains tribes, who had followed their age-old practices, gradually began to associate themselves with Hinduism. Apart from this with a view to identifying themselves with the Hindus they also drew a parallel of their deities with Hindu Gods and Goddesses and thus identified themselves as Hindus. For example, they preferred to identify Bathow (Sibray) and Mainao Buri, their principal deities, with Siva and Lakshmi of the Hindu God and Goddess respectively. Moreover, the neo-Vashnaivite movement of Sankardeva (1449-1559) and his disciples played an important role in bringing about a change not only in the field of religion but also in the social and cultural
life of the tribal people of the valley. The old Brahmanical system of Hinduisation or sanskritisation was revived through 'saran' ceremony by the neo-Vaishnavite preachers and as a result a large number of tribal people was converted and absorbed within the Hindu social fold.

The tribal neophytes had to undergo several stages of sanskritisation. First, they had to give up non-Hindu habits like taking beef, pork and fowl, and then they had to abandon all major elements of tribal social customs such as matrilineal inheritance, clan oriented kinship relations and adopt Hindu rites. The process of sanskritisation was considered to be complete when the individual or tribal group abandoned their speech and accepted the Aryan language, i.e., the Assamese. Thus the sanskritisation brought into being a definite change in the society and culture of the tribals. As a matter of fact, "Individual and groups moved not only from animism to vaishnavism, but also from tribes to peasant castes, from pile houses to mud-plinth houses, from burial practice to cremation of the dead, from liberal food habits to abstinence from liquor, beef and pork, from shifting to permanent cultivation, and so on." Thus the Pati Rabhas (a section of the Rabha tribe), the Sarania Kacharis (converts to Hinduism from Bodo-Kachari tribe), the Lalungs (Tiwas) etc. of the plains have become Hinduised and the impact of acculturation is more prominent among them. They have lost much of their traditional traits and accepted Assamese culture and language.

Though a section of the tribals is in the fear of losing their ethnic identity and is not happy at the low status assigned to them in the Hindu Assamese society, the others remained satisfied with the 'Hindu method of tribal absorption' as they were allowed to follow their own way of life with sufficient economic.
social and cultural security and freedom. So there was no large scale resentment among the tribal people against the Hindu system.

But the situation changed after 1826. The British introduced a centralised administration in the valley. They introduced a new revenue system supplanting the earlier one prevailing under the Ahoms and a new legal system. The old judicial system was replaced by the British law courts. To fit in with the new system a special set of rules known as the ‘Assam Code’ was introduced in 1837 for regulating the civil and criminal procedure in the valley. Thereafter in 1860 the general code of civil and criminal procedure of Bengal and in 1862 the Indian Panel Code were introduced in the Brahmaputra valley replacing the special Assam Code.

A network of police organisation with one Daroga, a zamadar and a few constables were maintained in the headquarters for maintenance of law and order. These changes created adverse effects on the tribal societies. The illiterate and economically backward tribals failed to take advantage of the new avenues created by the British administration. The khel system which had been at the core of the societies before the coming of the British collapsed. The village council not only lost its political power but also the civil matters went out of its hands. The civil matters like the question of succession, land rights and disputes became subject matters of the British law courts. As a result the village council lost its power and authority they had been enjoying since long.

Moreover, the opening out of new transport and communication network by the British government had the effect of encouraging immigration of people from other parts of British India to the Brahmaputra valley. The discovery of mineral products like coal, iron and oil as well as the tea and its plantation
increased the tempo of immigration. Thousands of land hungry peasants, among others, migrated to Assam\(^1\) leading to an imbalance in the demographic landscape of the province. Under the impact of immigration the tribal people suffered extensively. The tribal people not only lost the fallow lands in the neighbourhood of their habitat, but also their ancestral lands. In the face of repeated hordes of immigrants the tribal people gradually deserted their lands and habitats and moved deep into the jungle.

The Christian missionaries also played a positive role in changing the pattern of living and life-style of the tribes, both in the hills and plains. They came to Assam as part of British imperialism. Evangelisation was the primary objective of the missionaries and they sowed the seeds of the Gospel first in Assam. The missionaries were not successful among the Caste Hindu Assamese, but they could preach their Gospel among the tribal people of the region. In 1886, the number of Christians in the Brahmaputra valley was 845 of whom 496 were Garo, 43 Mikir and only 92 Assamese. In 1936, the number of Christian in Assam increased to 3,516 of whom only 464 were Assamese. The missionaries reclaimed the converted tribals to the habit of civilised life and in the process created a religious and cultural wall between the Christian and non-Christian among the tribals themselves. They invented scripts for tribal dialects, established schools, published books in tribal languages and gave medical aids to these people. The schools treated as the Mission's main evangelistic agencies redeemed the tribals from their backwardness. Literacy and formal education had been spread among the tribes. As a result, some of the tribal people could join the government jobs as clerks, teacher and soldiers in the military department.
This process helped in the emergence of a tribal elite class with modern outlook. The interest shown by the Missionaries in ethnological studies also helped in the creation of ethnic consciousness among the tribes. They published series of articles in the 'Orunodai', and some interesting accounts of the Garos, the Miris, and the Nagas, with whom they lived and worked. The Christian Missionaries thus spread western education and thought which roused the tribesmen from their torpor to assert their rights: political, economic and cultural.

The changing trends of the tribes, however, gained momentum during the post independent period. The state government from time to time took some plans and programmes such as Tribal Sub-plan, Tribal Development Authority, Tribal Development Corporation, Integrated Tribal Development Project, Welfare of Scheduled Tribes and Backward Class, Tribal Research Institute etc. for the development and welfare of the tribals. These programmes of the government helped in changing the socio-economic situation of the plains tribals to a great extent. The level of literacy among the tribals has gone up. Primary schools have been established almost in all tribal villages and tribal languages like Bodo, Mishing, Tiwa, Rabha, etc. have been introduced as the medium of instruction in these schools. The Bodo language has been introduced as MIL (Major Indian Language) in University level education in Assam.

A large number of educated persons from amongst the tribals get employment in military and civil departments, in Assam Civil Service, Indian Administrative Service. At present, doctors, engineers, university and college and school teachers and office assistants are not at all negligible. Expansion of education has changed the livelihood pattern and way of life of the tribals. The
agricultural practice has also been undergoing rapid diversification. The tribals now are more prone to use chemical fertiliser, pesticides, and scientific knowledge in the field of agriculture.21

On the other hand, the traditional village council lost its effectiveness. The independent government of the country abrogated its right to pass judgement on criminal and civil cases.22 The tribal villages are brought under the rule of law like other general villages. In the post-independent period, the tribals began to involve more and more in state and national politics. The reservation of seats for the tribals in the state and central legislatures, the participation of the tribals in general elections and the democratic processes also indirectly strengthened their position in the decision making processes of the country.

But despite these changes, the social position and status of the tribals have not improved. They are still occupying a lower rank in the Hindu society, though the differences are gradually decreasing. The Indian constitution has placed them in the new social category called 'Scheduled tribe' which is a humiliating term for the aboriginal.23 However, the newly emerged tribal elite class soon became conscious of their low status in the society. Since the beginning of the twentieth century they started to mobilise the tribal people and as a result several local organisations grew up to fight against the social injustice. In the conference of the Kachari community, held at Titabor on 12th August 1928, they first took up the issue of this social injustice in the following manner, “Resolved that this meeting is of opinion that the Kachari community of Assam do not recognise themselves as a lower class (sic) of Hindu untouchable and do hereby declare that they are quite independent from the Hindu community in all respects such as political, social and religious, etc.”
In conformity with this line of thinking they submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1928 imploring the Government to redress their grievances. The memorandum says, “Numerically the Kacharis are a strong community, but want of education the bone of human progress has relegated them to a minor position. Socially they are regarded as untouchable. To call them Hindu will be a misname in as much the Hindus do not receive them into their society, do not dine with them and are mostly unsympathetic with their ideals and aspirations. They are thus an isolated backward community and therefore look up to the Statutory Commission to lend them a helping hand by recognising their position, and granting them their legitimate rights and privileges and giving them facilities in education and in the matter of administration of the country.”

The sullen apathy and discrimination of the Assamese people towards the tribals gradually alienated them from the former. The attitude of the Assamese people hurt the sentiment of the rising tribal elite class. It seems to be one of the reasons that the tribals have been organising movements demanding autonomy to safeguard their social and ethnic rights. In the pamphlet captioned ‘Why Separate State?’ the ABSU (All Bodo Student Union) have argued, “One of the most important responsible (sic) factors as to why the tribals have become alienated from the mainstream of Assam is the attitude of the Assamese people. The Assamese people have never accepted the tribals as the part and parcel of Assamese community and society in real sense, though they give a motivated slogan of Greater Assamese Nationality. As for instance, a Goswami Brahman family will never allow or agree to give its daughter for a social marriage with a tribal youth. They hate the Rodos telling as Kacharis, Mishing, a tribal and the
like. So, a Greater Assamese Nationality never existed and does not exist even today." 26 Thus an anti-Assamese sentiment grew up in the minds of the tribes and it led to the demand of a separate autonomous state.

The Economic Situation:

The plains tribes of Assam have maintained a self-sufficient village economy. Agriculture has been the mainstay of their economy. The primitive form of agriculture known as the 'Shifting' or 'Jhum' cultivation had long since replaced the hunting and food gathering habits of the plains tribes.27 The tribes generally used to live on the river banks so as to get easy irrigation to their fields for raising sufficient supply of food grains.28 Some of the tribes, mostly the Bodo-Kachari, had developed their peculiar form of irrigation for undertaking agricultural activities in the sub-montane regions. The practice of constructing 'dong' (the traditional irrigation channels) are still prevalent among the Kachari tribe living in the sub-montane regions. It was 'the irrigated rice cultivation of the Kachari tribes which laid the basis of their early state formation.'29

The natural wealth and forest products also have been the basis of the tribal economy in Assam. The Indo-Mongoloid tribes of Assam mainly were dependent much on forest products for their housing materials. They had also been dependent much on forest for their food-stuff in the remote past. S.K.Chatterji writes on their livelihood thus, "The ways of the Kirata were simple. They lived mostly on fruits and tubers, dressed themselves in skins, wore their hair in a pointed top-knot, and were pleasant looking people..." 30 Besides, they had developed a certain knowledge regarding art and craft. The ancient records speak volumes on the weavers, goldsmith, potters and workers in ivory, bamboo, wood, hide and cane. They are highly acclaimed for introducing the silk industry
in Assam. They produced three varieties of silk, generally known as Pat, Muga and Endi. 31 Tribal people of Assam produced a considerable amount of cotton clothes in addition to silk.32

As is known from records, they conducted trade relations with the foreign countries like Tibet, China and Burma in the past.33 There are passes or 'duars' known as 'Kachari duars' through which the tribes conducted their trade with the foreign countries.34 The famous trade route was the Lhasa-Twang-Udalguu route. The trade was generally conducted through the barter as there was no currency in circulation.

But despite the extra-ordinary fertility of the soil, coupled with irrigated cultivation, and natural resources, a little bit of foreign trade, the general economy of the tribes was not more than above the subsistence level. Under the impact of the British Colonial rule (1824-1947) the entire peasant economy of Assam including those of the tribes broke down beyond redemption. The impact of British Colonial rule on the tribal people, in particular, may be discussed briefly under the following heads,

A. Monetisation of Economy:

The introduction of money economy by the Colonial rulers had greatly affected the rural economy of Assam. They exacted land revenue and all other taxes in cash instead of in kind and/or in terms of physical or manual service to the state as under the Ahoms. The monetisation of the economy led to a lot of hardships to the people in general and the tribes in particular. This was due to the lack of market facilities and the scarcity of hard cash with the peasantry/people. The people had to take their produce to trading centres far away from their homes. The brokers and traders took recourse to fraudulent
practices in their dealings with the producers and they did not get their due.

Situated as they were in such a situation, many of the tribal people took service
in the military department and joined the tea gardens as labourers. The fear of
paying more revenues against landholding in the new economic set up
discouraged the tribals to possess more lands. And in consequence, they
suffered from the shortage of land commensurate with their requirement. The
tribal people along with other sections of the Assamese society had participated
in the peasant movements of the nineteenth century against the British Colonial
rule.36

B. Land Tenure System of the British:

The alien rulers introduced a new land tenure system in Assam. Till the end of the Ahom rule there had been no hereditary ownership on land excepting the donated ones. Land was treated as the common property of the villagers or the 'Khel'. The village community had the common rights over forest and also on minerals.37 But the Colonial government took over the rights over land to their hands and introduced the system of individual ownership to the ryots through 'Ryotwari' or Zamindary' settlement.38 In the Settlement Rules of 1870 the Colonial government declared the 'ryot' to have heritable, permanent and transferable rights over land. These rules were later embodied in the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886. Under this Regulation, lands were periodically allotted to the ryots in the permanently settled areas with the right to transfer, to take Wasteland for reclamation. The ryots were entitled to have compensation from the government for any land taken up for public purposes. In the fluctuating cultivated areas, where the tribal people mostly inhabited, land was settled annually.
This system of land tenure introduced by the Colonial government had the effect of depriving the tribals of their lands in so far as they were deprived of the common ownership of land, forests and minerals. The situation became more dangerous when it initiated the system of granting lands to the tea planting class under the 'Wasteland Grants Rules', 1838. This was followed by subsequent rules known as the 'Old Assam Rules', 1854, 'Fee Simple Grant Rules', 1862, 'Revised Fee Simple Rules', 1874, 'New Lease Rules', 1876, and 'The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation', 1886. Under these Rules large areas of land were granted to the tea planting class at favourable terms and at nominal prices. In 1872, the tea planters in Assam took a total of 3,71,990 acres under 315 estates. In 1878, the number of estates increased to 850 covering an area of 5,87,409 acres and then to 980 estates in 1928 covering an area of 16,29,524 acres.39

The land problem became more dangerous for the peasantry of Assam in general and the tribals in particular when the government engineered immigration took place to the valley, mainly from the present day districts of Bangladesh.

C. Immigration Problem:

The immigration of people, particularly the land hungry Muslim peasants of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to the Assam valley, created acute demographic imbalance leading to the fear of maintaining the ethnic identity of the tribes inhabiting the province. The Census of India, 1931, shows that of the total population of 92,47,857 of the province, the number of immigrants was 14,08,763.40 The problem can be realised from the following table.

Table 1
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1931</th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1911</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Born in Assam</td>
<td>848</td>
<td>839</td>
<td>875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Born outside Assam</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Born outside India</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In the initial stage, the immigrants kept their settlements confined to the char areas of the Brahmaputra only, but subsequently, they spread almost all over Assam. The emerging situation has been described in the Census Report of 1921 thus, 'Almost every train and steamer brings parties of these settlers, and it seems likely that their march will extend further up the Brahmaputra Valley and away from the river before long.' In 1921 the Bengali Muslims were nearly 20% in Goalpara, about 14% in Nowgong of the total population of the said districts. In Kamrup specially in Barpeta sub-division wastelands were taken rapidly by the colonialists while in Darrang district their number remained almost the same as in the past. The number of Muslim population in the Brahmaputra valley increased from 3,65,540 in 1911 to 5,94,981 in 1921 and 9,53,299 in 1931. This alarming situation has been noted with caution in the Census Report of India, 1931, thus, "...probably the most important event in the province during the last twenty five years-an event, moreover, which seems likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than did the Burmese invaders of 1820 the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilisation-has been the invasion of a vast horde of land hungry Bengali
immigrants, mostly Muslims, from the districts of Eastern Bengal and particularly from Mymensingh. The table below shows the number of persons born in Bengal in each district of Assam in the year 1911, 1921 and 1931.

Table 2
(The figures within brackets show the immigrants from Mymensingh)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>1911</th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1931</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Goalpara</td>
<td>77(34)</td>
<td>151(78)</td>
<td>170(80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Kamrup</td>
<td>4(1)</td>
<td>44(30)</td>
<td>134(91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Darrang</td>
<td>7(1)</td>
<td>20(12)</td>
<td>41(30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Nowgong</td>
<td>4(1)</td>
<td>58(52)</td>
<td>120(108)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sibsagar</td>
<td>14(-)</td>
<td>14(-)</td>
<td>12(-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Lakhimpur</td>
<td>14(-)</td>
<td>14(-)</td>
<td>19(2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The mass squatting and indiscriminate settlement of the immigrants in the valley became a threat to the existence of the indigenous people, particularly the tribes.

D. Line System:

The Colonial Government encouraged immigration for their economic interests. The settlement of immigrants in the valley created a law and order problem for the administration at a later stage. The immigrants were often at friction with the indigenous people for land. In view of the growing number of immigrants there grew up tension in the minds of the indigenous people against them. The government, therefore, introduced a new administrative measure known as the Line System in 1920. This was with a view to restricting the
indiscriminate settlement of the immigrants. It was first introduced in the district of Nowgong and subsequently extended to the Barpeta sub-division of the Kamrup district. Later on it was extended to almost all the districts of lower Assam. It was an imaginary line drawn for separating the areas for settlement of the immigrants and the indigenous people.

This system divided the villages into three classes:

(1) "Open Villages' where immigrants were allowed to settle freely.

(2) "Closed Villages' where they were not allowed to settle, and,

(3) The "Mixed Villages' where a line was drawn and the immigrants were allowed to settle only on one side of it.45

It may be observed that while introducing the 'line system' the government did not give much importance in protecting the rights and interests of the indigenous people of Assam. Apart from this, the 'dubious and leniency' of the state officials were also responsible for the failure of this system.46 Thus the system has been violated by either side more often than not. Once the immigrants occupied a plot of land it become very difficult to evict them from their possession. For example, in Barpeta sub-division alone, fifty 'closed villages' were seized by the immigrants.47

The government constituted a Line System Committee in 1937 under the chairmanship of F.W.Hockenhull to review the working of the system. During the course of its tour of the different areas of the province, it found that the people of the tribal villages were the worst victims of the unregulated encroachment of the immigrants from the Mymensingh district. They found many tribal villages in the state of disappearing, and the inhabitants moving into the sub-montane areas.48
Despite these facts the Committee recommended for
(1) The continuation of the colonisation schemes, and
(2) The introduction of restriction protecting the large unit such as the Mouza or a block of Mouzas from the encroachers in place of the line.

The Committee felt that the indigenous people alone would not be in a position to develop the enormous wasteland resources of Assam within a reasonable period of time and therefore, it recommended for the continuation of the colonisation schemes providing wasteland grants to the immigrants.

E. Tribal Belts and Blocks:

As the Line System did not provide security to the rights and interests of the indigenous people over their land, the Congress Coalition Government of Gopinath Bardoloi took a different measure in 1939. This ministry, for the first time, in November, 1939, conceived the idea of constituting "prohibited areas" in the localities inhabited by the plains tribes and other backward classes so as to restrict the settlement of land with the immigrants.

But the succeeding ministry under Sir Muhammad Saadullah, instead took a different scheme, the 'development scheme', for giving settlement of all wasteland available, dividing into blocks, to different communities including the immigrants. The 'development scheme' had the effect of opening out more wasteland for colonisation by the immigrants. Apart from this Sir Saadullah also introduced the scheme of 'grow more food' which turned out to be a plan of "grow more Muslims" in Assam during the Second World War-time period.

In the post-independent period, the Bardoloi Ministry passed the Assam Act XV of 1947 which formed part of the (Chapter X) Assam Land and Revenue...
Regulation, 1886. Under this act, a total of 33 Tribal Belts and Blocks were created covering an area of 5,740 square miles and comprising 2,795 villages.50

In the government Notification that followed six classes of people were declared eligible to live in the Tribal Belts and Blocks,

1. The Plains Tribals,
2. The Hills tribals,
3. The Tea tribes,
4. The Santhals,
5. The Scheduled Castes, and,
6. The Nepali cultivator-graziers.51

The non-tribals who had been living within the Belts and Blocks since before the enactment of the said act, would be allowed to stay there provided there was surplus land and the government permitted them to domicile there. But the provisions of the Belts and Blocks have been violated in various ways,

1. The occupation of land by the non-tribals and immigrants in the Belts and Blocks,
2. The establishment of big industries,
3. The extension of areas of existing towns and cities,
4. The creation of Reserve Forests comprising the Belts and Blocks, and,
5. The rehabilitation of East Bengal refugees in the Belts and Blocks.

The Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in its memorandum submitted to the President of India stated, “The provisions of the Tribal Belts and Blocks could not serve the purpose for which they have been created not only because (1) there are the lacunae in the provisions, (2) the provisions were not well publicised among the people for whose benefit they have been formulated and
they have remained ignorant about it, but because the guardians of the land, in whose hands the responsibility of implementation of these provisions were lying were not willing to implement them sincerely.\textsuperscript{53}

F. Poverty and Indebtedness:

Most of the tribal peoples are poor and they can hardly afford to meet essential expenditure from agricultural products. The causes of the poverty of the tribal people are the low per capita landholding, lack of modern scientific method of agriculture, lack of infra-structural facilities, the prevailing practice of brewing rice beer in large quantities during festivals, etc.\textsuperscript{54} Besides, the performance of some social obligations as in connection with marriage ceremonies and the exploitation of the mahajans, mainly non-tribals, through money-lending and grain dealings, also appeared to be other causes of the poverty of the tribal people.\textsuperscript{55}

Government efforts to give relief to the rural poor by enacting legislation such as the Assam Debt Conciliation Act, 1936, the Assam Moneylenders Act 1943, the Assam Rural Indebtedness Relief Act, 1975, etc. are only on papers. A recent study conducted by a government agency revealed that 43.75\% of the tribal families within the Tribal Belts and Blocks and 37.79\% families outside the said areas are indebted. The average amount of debt per family within the Belts and Blocks is Rs.2, 239.63 in cash and 86 kg. paddy in kind. On the other hand, the average amount of debt per tribal family living outside the Belts and Blocks is Rs.5, 396.49.\textsuperscript{56} Having no other alternative to repayment of their debt, the tribal people in most cases, transferred their hereditary lands in satisfaction of their loans to the moneylenders or grain dealers and in consequence they became the land-less agricultural labourers.
(II) The Role of Village Mahajans and Businessmen:

The village mahajans and the businessmen appeared to have played a very harmful role in the rural economy of the country, both during the Colonial rule and after independence. In their dealings with the peasantry, they very often resorted to fraudulent practices and in the process ruined them. The interest on loans charged by the money-lenders and the grain dealers was generally much higher and beyond the capacity of the debtors. There were several system of contracting loans with the money-lenders or grain-dealers, such as, cash interest system, land mortgage system, the adhiair system, and the 'dhana' system (contract of paying loans along with interests in terms of paddy at harvest time). In most cases the money-lenders and grain-dealers realised their interests and the principal in terms of agricultural productions, mainly paddy. The price of the paddy was fixed at the time of the disbursement of the loan and much before harvesting.57

(III) The Displacement of Tribal People:

With the growth of townships and industrial centres in and around the tribal habitat, the latter moved silently away from the site and went deep into the forest areas and took up their habitat. For instance, the Paltan Bazar area under Dibrugarh town, the Court premises of Lakhimpur town were once inhabited by the Mishing people. With the extension of these towns, they left their original habitat and took settlement elsewhere. The establishment of the Nowgong Paper Mill at Jagiroad, the Bokajan Cement Factory in Karbi-Anglong district, the Hindustan Fertiliser Corporation at Namrup in Dibrugarh district, the Bongaigaon Refinery and Petro-Chemicals in Bongaigaon district, the Dhansiri Irrigation Project in Darrang district, effected in flushing out large number of tribal people.
to remote places. The Dhansiri Irrigation Project alone uprooted 1001 tribal families from 1184 bighas of land, both homestead and agricultural. The Nowgong Paper Mills at Jagiroad displaced a total of 52 tribal families. The major part of Guwahati city was once inhabited by the tribal people. With the establishment of the state capital at Dispur, the 'Guwahati Tribal Belt' was abolished.

(IV) The Alienation Tribal Lands:

The study conducted by the Tribal Research Institute revealed that a total of 16.44% of the tribal families have transferred their lands to others within the tribal Belts and Blocks. The break-up of 16.44% is as follows,

(I) From tribals to non-tribals 10.38%
(II) From tribals to tribals 2.22%
(III) From tribals to government 3.83%

The Law Research Institute, Assam, has conducted a study in 1981 in the Tamulpur and Kokrajhar tribal Belts which revealed that a large number of non-tribal people were occupying lands in these belts. The findings of the study are shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Transfer</th>
<th>Tamulpur</th>
<th>Kokrajhar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. From Tribal to tribal</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. From Tribal to non-tribal</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. From non-tribal to tribal</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. From non-tribal to non-tribal</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(V) Other Causes:

Apart from these causes, the tribal peoples are trailing behind in the field of modern education and consequently in getting jobs. The Government reserved 10% of the jobs for the plains tribals. Accordingly out of 100,660 government jobs 10,066 posts were allotted for the plains tribals up to 1976, but only 5,488 posts were filled up with tribal candidates.61

(VI) Forest Villages:

The Tribal peoples living in the Forest Villages, for some time past, have been in the grip of a serious crisis. The number of Forest Villages at present is 524 inhabited by 20,694 families comprising a total population of 150,233. The total number the Forest Villages inhabited by the tribals or having 50% or more tribals are 234.62 Initially each working member of the family in the Forest Village was entitled to 10 bighas of land subject to a ceiling of 35 bighas. They are simply, under the rules of the Forest Department, allowed to enjoy occupancy right. Apart from this, they are allowed to have free grazing facilities, the right to collect firewood, and house-building materials free of cost in lieu of 5 days of labour service to the Forest Department.

But with the pressure of land being increased in the Forest Villages due to penetration of increasing number of people and population growth there emerged a crisis in the sphere of public health and sanitation, educational facilities, irrigation, roads and communication, etc. This crisis has become almost a part of the overall development of the tribal peoples of the state.
A Seminar, organised by the Tribal Research Institute, Assam, on the "Constraints of Tribal Development in North-East India" in May 1988, identified ten major areas requiring urgent attention of the concerned authorities for the welfare and development of the plains tribal peoples of Assam. This indirectly shows the plight of the tribal peoples of the province.

Thus it is seen that the lopsided development of the country in the post-independent period created a feeling of alienation in the minds of the areas living in the under-developed areas. And this process of under-development also created, in turn, a sense of frustration and alienation in the minds of tribal peoples living side by side with the other communities. There certainly are differences in the level of development of the tribals and non-tribals. This difference in the field of economic development naturally gives birth to a sense of ethnic consciousness and identity crisis leading to the present state of autonomy movement(s) among the plains tribes of Assam, including those of the Bodos.

Notes and References

5. Guha, Amalendu, 1991, pp.68-69
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
15. Bulletin of the tribal Research Institute, Assam, Guwahati. 1987
   vol.I, No.v, p. 6
17. Barpujari, H.K., 1986, P.XXV
18. Ibid
19. Ibid., p. XIIX
20. Ibid., p.lv
23. Ibid., pp. 20-21
25. Ibid., p. 9
27. Sing, G.P., 1990, p. 227
28. Vasu, N.N., 1990, p. 70
30. Chaterji, S.K., 1951, p. 21

32. Ibid., p.1969, pp.104-05


34. Anderson, J.D., in Endle, S., 1990, p.XII

35. Guha, Amalendu, 1988, p.8

36. Ibid., pp.50-54; Kalita, R.C., 1993

37. Bardoloi, B.N., 1986, pp.43

38. The British introduced the zamindari system in the district of Goalpara and Cachar, while they introduced the ryotwari system in the Brahmaputra valley districts.


41. Ibid


45. Ibid., pp.309-10

46. Ibid., p.310

47. Ibid

48. Bardoloi, B.N., 1986, p.31

49. Ibid., p.34
50. The Assam Act XV of 1947 was subsequently amended in 1964, 1971 and in 1981. As a result the number of Tribal Belts and Blocks increased from 33 to 45.

51. Nepali cultivator-graziers were omitted from the list vide Notification No.RSD 26-64/Pt/15 dtd.26/6/1969. Bardoloi, B.N., 1986,p.38

52. Datta, P.S.,1993, pp.157-59

53. Ibid.,p.129


55. Ibid.,pp.189-95

56. Ibid.,pp.62-63

57. Ibid.,1986, pp.24-25,102


59. Ibid.,pp.63-64

60. Ibid.,p.62

61. Statistical Hand Book of Assam, 1978,


63. Ibid.,pp. XI-XVI