Article: Census as a Site of Contestation: Identity Politics among the Plains Tribes in Colonial Assam

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Source: Explorations, ISS e-journal, Vol. 5 (2), October 2021, pp. 105-124

Published by: Indian Sociological Society
Census as a Site of Contestation: Identity Politics among the Plains Tribes in Colonial Assam

--- Suryasikha Pathak

Abstract

Many historical studies of the census use the corpus of demographic knowledge as a part of ethnographic inquiry. But recent studies have brought into focus the politics of numbers, or the political arithmetic, because unlike in the 19th century, quantitative approaches are no longer enmeshed in a scientific attitude which is now regarded as naïve empiricism. The census admittedly was a document of great ethnographic value. But the question of numbers also becomes important from the 20th century onwards. Early colonial censuses were ethnographic classificatory exercises, but such concerns did not begin with the census. These issues and ideas were already a part of the administrative thinking by the 1850s. The census has also been an important historical source as a part of ethnographic inquiry, but it has also become important to inquire into the relationship between quantitative and qualitative definitions of populations. Though census enumeration and its awareness led to certain rigidity in defining collective identities to a considerable degree, it also set into motion controversial mobility of nationalist, ethnic, communal and other identities. This paper attempts to relook at the early censuses and the debates it generated within the purview of identity articulation. The situation in terms of enumeration and classification was complex in Assam, where the diversity of communities combined with remarkable fluidity in demographic structure made it challenging to pin down communities. Within such complexities reified identities took shape and articulated their politics.

Key words: Colonial census, Enumeration, Languages, Religion, Tribes/Castes

Introduction

Census as an exercise, especially colonial census was a ‘unique project’, because numbers, classification, explanation, all became a document which could be used in manifold ways (Padmanabh, 2011). Social sciences have gleaned much data from census as the corpus of the demographic data was one of kind, before other
surveys of more specific nature evolved. But recent studies and politics makes census as much qualitative as it is quantitative, the politics of numbers, or ‘the political arithmetic, because unlike in the nineteenth century, quantitative approaches are no longer enmeshed in a scientific attitude now regarded as naive empiricism’ (Kreager, 1997, p. 154). The census was admittedly a document of great ethnographic value and the ‘1881 census was the mother of colonial ethnography’ (Singh, 2011, p. 57). But the question of numbers also became important from the censuses of the 20th century. Early colonial censuses were of course primarily ‘ethnographic classificatory exercises’, originating ‘in the need for information about people to facilitate their governance and to expedite the exploitation of their skills and resources’ (Singh, 1996, p. 138). But ethnographic concerns did not begin, as often presumed, with the census. These issues and ideas were already a part of administrative thinking by the 1850s. The consolidation of colonial rule over an agrarian society of great diversity gave rise to systematic revenue collection and required comprehensive land register, which ensured maximum collection of land revenue, at a very local level (Kreager, 1997, p. 165). Colonial knowledge production geared towards governance of a large territory with diversity was the reason that ‘census was symptomatic of the Victorian urge to “know”, “classify” and “count”’ (Meeto, 2007, p. 43).

The ethnographic aspect of the census was always most dominant, and a number of studies do draw extensively upon the census data. Grierson, who compiled the Linguistic Survey of India, 1903, claimed that it was essentially based on figures from the census of 1891 (Meeto, 2007, p. 166). As Bernard Cohn remarks in his seminal essay, ‘(I)t would not be an exaggeration to say that down until 1950 scholars’ and scientists’ views on the nature, structure and functioning of the Indian caste system were shaped mainly by data and conceptions growing out of the census operations’ (Cohn, 1990, p. 242). The census has also been an important historical source as a part of ethnographic inquiry, but it has also become important and necessary to inquire into the relationship between quantitative and qualitative definitions of population.

Census classification and enumeration and its effect on the indigenous population, its ‘consciousness of caste and the use of census for validation of claims to new status within the caste system’ have been studied in great detail (Cohn, 1990, p. 242). As observed by Kenneth Jones, there was an increasing realisation that the critical relation between the census and political identity cannot be denied. The census was used in various ways by the subjects of the colonial state who were in
fact the subjects of the census itself. The census and the subject were involved in a complex relation and each defined the other and attempted to control it. But as mentioned by Arjun Appadurai and others, such an exercise was totally appropriated or conversely, ‘democratic’ politics came to be ‘adversely affected by the idea of numerically dominated bloc voting …’ (Appadurai, Breckenridge & Veer, 1993, p. 331). So, although ‘the census did lead to certain rigidity in defining collective identities to a considerable degree, it also set into motion controversial mobility of nationalist, ethnic, communal and other identities’ (Kreager, 1997, p. 166).

But these trends concretised into a politics that depended on ‘representation’ and ‘representativeness’, and established the ground for present day communal and ethnic conflict in South Asia. On the question of identity politics, caste-based or communalised or tribes, ‘the most significant moment in the formation of fixed identities in the subcontinent was the introduction of the colonial census’ (Meeto, 2007, p. 128). The focus of Appadurai and others is caste, it being the crucial category to understand Indian reality (Appadurai et al., 1993, p. 331). This paper attempts to understand a similar situation – the contemporary ethnic situation in Northeast India. Particularly, in tribal communities, the demands for autonomy and separate statehood became very decisive within this framework of the politics of numbers. Here too, along with other means of articulation, census enumeration gave rise to an identity where demographic numerical strength played a determining role in the emerging notion of politics and identity. As mentioned by Appadurai, identities constructed by such a process, necessitated by the colonial state, ‘transformed not just into imagined communities but into “enumerated communities”’ (Appadurai, 1993, p. 331).

Notions of identity emerged since the first census because of its classificatory and enumerative role. This is evident in the increase and decrease in the numerical strength of the ‘tribal’ communities, seen through markers of religion and language. Census officials took an interest in the changes that they observed or in the question of how other communities related to the caste Hindu hierarchisation. As remarked by K.S. Singh, census officials were ‘prone to describe tribal religion as raw material for Hinduism’ (Appadurai, 1993, p. 142). They focused on the process of socio-cultural assimilation of tribal societies into Hinduism. Hinduism was a primary category for understanding ‘tribal’ societies, and Risley and others saw such a process as a negative marker for authentication of such communities (Census of India, 1891, Assam, Vol-I). Risley and Gait, who had
defined the basic principles of categorisation, thought that tribes all over India were gradually losing their identity and becoming ‘Hinduised’ in a movement from ‘tribe’ to ‘caste’ (ibid). The officers of the colonial administration presumed that the phenomenon of Hinduisation was an inevitability in the tribal world, but as remarked by B.B. Chaudhuri, the process was far more complex, especially where it was immediately linked with the radical agrarian movement (Chaudhuri, 2002, p. 34).

**Constructing ‘Tribe’ and ‘Caste’ in Colonial Census**

The situation was much more complex in the province of Assam, where the diversity of communities was much higher and there was a remarkable fluidity in the demographic structure. The region had experienced migrations from both east and west for centuries, and it was a trend predicted likely to continue. In fact, it was quite difficult to pin down communities; as admitted by B.C. Allen in the 1901 census. He says, ‘There is, in fact, no absolute test by means of which we can divide the inhabitants of Assam into those who are Assamese and those who are not’ (CoI, 1901, p. 17). The ambiguous or the fluid identity of the Assamese indicated that there was a thin line of differentiation between the Hindus and the non-Hindus or between tribe and caste. Hence in the Brahmaputra Valley, in order to differentiate between various communities – the caste Hindus and the ‘tribal’ communities – the colonial census authorities resorted to indices like religion and language, qualified by notions of purity, prescription and proscription. Therefore, the question of ‘Hinduisation’ and Hindu influences was critically intertwined with the increase and decrease in numbers of followers of animistic practices and these communities. This was especially the case in the Brahmaputra Valley where the colonial officials felt that the tribal communities were particularly susceptible or vulnerable to such influences. Simultaneously, they accepted that whether it was even possible to classify the animistic tribes of the province adding that even to ‘the most casual observer, the Assam range must be an object of interest’ ethnographically (ibid, p. 120). Animism itself was a negative category for classification, because, only ‘those who had no recognised religion were shown in the column of the schedule for religion under the name of their tribe’ (CoI, 1911, p. 36).

Since there was an ambiguity of definition, and the census officials perceived ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Animism’ as two opposite ends of a spectrum of faiths connected by the path of conversion, the problem of classification was
compounded. ‘A large numbers of such people have already been converted to Hinduism and many of them now are as near the border line that it is difficult to say what they are’ (CoI, 1911, p. 36). The problem was not as easily resolved as observed by the census enumerators; practices co-existed and these communities were reluctant to give up their old customs and food habits, and proscriptions were not usually successful. Therefore, certain differences in lifestyles and practices persisted, which demonstrated the nature of still extant community identities and challenged the construct of a homogenous ‘Assamese’ identity.

Gradually, the numerical strength of communities changed with the growth of political consciousness among various communities. Also, any seeming ethnographic clarity among the colonial officers of course was coupled with a certain political idea about the interplay of communities in the fluid demographic situation, as it was in the Brahmaputra valley during the early decades of the 20th century.

The first regular census of Assam was attempted in 1872, and at that time, the several districts forming the Chief Commissionership of Assam were under the Bengal government. Till 1878, the question of taking a new census was mooted by the government. The 1881 census marks the debates regarding understanding tribes and caste in colonial Assam, under the guidance of the Superintendent of Census, Denzil Ibbetson. There is no clear distinction established between tribe and caste before the 1901 census and that led to confusions regarding categories and their enumeration. The category ‘Hill Tribes’ was used ‘arbitrarily to designate certain of the non-Aryan tribes, which are more decidedly hostile to Hinduism than others. Tribes like Abors, Daflas, Garos, Khasis, Syntengs, Kukis, Mikirs, Miris, Mishmis, and Nagas are included under this head; while many other tribes which are classed as aboriginal, such as Kacharis, Hajongs, Lalungs, and others, were entered in the Religion tables as Hindus’ (CoI, 1881, p. 34). The Hindus in the hills, like the ‘Kacharis’ or Dimasas of North Cachar, the 1881 census observed that they were ‘hardly more right to be classed among Hindus than Kukis or Mikirs have’ (ibid, p. 35). It marked the increase in the numbers of ‘hill tribes’ as communities were no longer classified as Hindus but as ‘aboriginal races’.

Categorising Religion: Hinduism and Animism, Caste and Tribe Connection

The 1891 census acquired importance since religion was classified separately
from caste and tribe to remove the confusion regarding ‘Hinduised’ tribals. In the 1881 census, the classification simplistically assumed that the ‘tribes on the frontier which were altogether beyond Hindu influence were shown to be Animistic, and those which were beginning to come under that influence as Hindu’ (CoI, 1891, p. 82). So, classification was hinged on hills-plains divide, further influenced by the biases of the local enumerators. The later censuses too are not objective in their classification but segregation led to contestation and claiming of certain categories. Animism was characterised as ‘a religion of a very low type’, thought to be ‘professed by the most backward tribes of the province’ (ibid, p. 94). Though the absence of comparative figures showing the spread of Hinduism since 1881 leaves a lot of ground for speculation, Gait claimed that work of proselytisation was steadily going on (ibid, p. 83). And the twin process of spread of education and the influence Hinduism gradually affected the number of people clinging to ‘their (ancestral) superstition of their forefathers’ (ibid, p. 94).

From the 1901 census to 1911, there was an increase in the numbers of Animists by 16 per cent. The increase in the Brahmaputra Valley was attributed to the greater accuracy in recording the religions; in Darrang, the increase registered was 38 per cent, in Sibsagar nearly 42 per cent, and in Lakhimpur nearly 32.7 per cent. Nowgong, where immigration was not a factor, showed an increase of over 35 per cent. However, in Kamrup the growth was less than 12 per cent and conversions to Hinduism were presumed to be the cause. There was a sharp decrease in Goalpara, which was due to conversion to a new faith, the Brahma, which should not be confused with the Brahmo Samaj (CoI, 1911, p. 37).

Conversely it was claimed that the percentage of growth for Hindus was not equally encouraging. Colonial officials established an inverse relationship between Hinduism and Animism. As was stated explicitly in the census, ‘we see that in every district of the Brahmaputra Valley except Goalpara the proportion of Hindus has fallen owing to the increase of Animists and, to a small extent, of Muhammadans’ (CoI, 1911, p. 39). All this information was juxtaposed mainly against the Muhammadans and in a lesser degree against the Christians to locate the demographic transformations. However, the census also acknowledged that there was a certain ambiguity in defining Hindu and Hinduism. The 1911 census quoted Sir Alfred Lyall, lecturing in Cambridge in 1891:

*If I were asked for a definition of Hinduism, I could give no precise*
answer... *For the word Hindu is not exclusively a religious denomination, it denotes also a country, and to a certain degree a race... Religion, parentage and country...* (CoI, 1911, p. 39)

According to colonial officials, such ambiguity gave rise to complexities and fluidity. Though there was an accepted idea of mobility among the people in the plains, it was difficult to ascertain when new converts ‘definitely became Hindus’. Even the latter censuses abound in examples of the ensuing confusion. As J. Mc. Swiney comments in the 1911 census, ‘In the Brahmaputra Valley it is hard to say when the new converts definitely becomes Hindu, especially as many of them cling to their old habits of eating and drinking’ (CoI, 1911, p. 41). This kind of impression was drawn primarily from the ‘tribal’ communities, who progressively became ‘Hinduised’. For example, the Mishings, who he encountered in the east of Darrang, had continued eating fowl and drinking liquor, though they had come under the tutelage of a Gossain. Such proscription of food was strictly adhered to when the Gossain was present. The reasons stated for the conversion were mostly social and economic, ‘that they were strangers in a strange land, and unless they made some arrangements with the gods of the place or their representative, there was no knowing what evil might befall them’, meaning that they were attempting to adjust to the environment, to avoid alienation (ibid). So, they placed themselves under the religious patronage of Gossain and ‘paid him his annual fee in order to be on the safe side’ (ibid). He also remarked that, during that period the missionary efforts of the Vaishnava Gossains of the Brahmaputra valley had been very successful among the tribals.

By the 1921 census, it was reported that ‘accretion to the ranks of the Hindus from the aboriginal tribes has continued steadily but by no means evenly in all district’ (CoI, 1921, p. 50). Of course many of these claims and counter claims were individual and some of these were also influenced by the local enumerators and politics. Though the Hindu Mahasabha was not active in Assam during the early 1920s and the Tribal League was not formed, the Sattradhikars were strong spokesmen of Hinduism and equally active were the nascent associations among the tribes, especially the Kacharis. But there were also instances when orthodox Hindu enumerators refused to enumerate some animists’ plains Kacharis of Brahmaputra Valley as Hindus (ibid). Similarly, a section of the Kacharis in Nowgong aiming for caste mobility of being a ‘regular Hindu’ wanted to be classified as Saktas (ibid).
The local belief systems were fluid and ‘primitive practices so often continued side by side with Hindu ceremonies’ that uniformity could not be maintained by the enumerating staff (CoI, 1921, p. 50). So the census officers attempted to simplify the enumeration process by stating that if subjects claimed so, they must be entered as Hindus, and in other cases, people who held under and paid rent to a Gossain were to be entered as Hindus, according to customary definitions (ibid).

But political and social movements for the annihilation of caste and tribal barriers were, as observed by the census authorities, at most, superficial and were ‘still in domain of talk and not of practice… And it is noteworthy that Hindu and aboriginal recruits to recent advanced political views had generally to be obtained by promises of materials benefit…’ (CoI, 1921, p. 51).

Politics of Numbers: The 1930s and 40s

The issue of conversion to Hinduism among tribes becomes more important in the context of relative increase and decrease in the Hindu and Muslim population. For in 1921, there was an increase in the numbers of both Hindus and Muslims. And again it was observed that in ‘Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong large increases of Hindu corresponds with decrease among the Animists; the new converts are chiefly plains Kacharis, Karbis and Mishings’ (CoI, 1921, p. 52). Therefore, in the Brahmaputra Valley, the increase had sharply dropped from the 1911 figures of animists.

This relation between numbers and politics led to the growing concern among the Assamese caste-Hindu middle class of a ‘Muslim invasion’ and change in the political pattern. So the numbers of the plain tribes was essential to the Hindus to maintain a majoritarian position in the province, and it was also a political necessity for the Congress, who considered its mass base – the caste Hindu peasantry – essential to counter the Muslim League. The Muslim population had increased by 16.8 per cent by 1921 in the province.

The 1931 census laid the strange base for further communalisation of demographic politics. It traced the growth of the immigrant population in the province, especially the East Bengal peasants from Mymensing district. According to Mullan (the census superintendent), the figures ‘illustrate the wonderful rapidity with which the lower district of the Assam Valley are becoming colonies of Mymensing’ (CoI, 1931, p. 50). The immigrants were
compared with vultures attracted to a carcass, in their hunger for land.

The 1931 census and the period prior to it saw the emergence of very strong propaganda efforts by the Hindu Sabha of Assam, which strengthened the movement of the Vaishnava Gossains and Satradhikars. The census authorities saw it as an extension and reflection of a nation-wide movement, like the missionary efforts of the Hindu Mahasabha, or the Hindu Mission, whose activities were confined among the tribals of Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and Assam laying claims on the ‘aboriginal’. Perceiving changes in the returns of the census, the census superintendents felt that ‘the propaganda work of the Hindu Mission’ was certainly a great success in Assam from their point of view and had an enormous influence on the tribal people in the grey area between Hinduism and Animism. It was felt that such a claim was a recent development in the practice of Hinduism, and was an effect of the census. Unlike the earlier efforts, there was no attempt to formally convert or admit people to the Hindu fold and caste hierarchy. The Assam Provincial Hindu Sabha presumed that the tribes of Assam, like the Garos, Khasis, Mundas, Santals, Karbis, Mishings, Mishmis, Lushais, Tiwas, Rabhas, Kacharis, Mechies were ‘really Hindus’ (CoI, 1931, p. 188).

It was protested that the 1921 census classified such communities as well as castes like Kaibarttas, Chutiyas, Koches, etc. as Animists. The notice was issued in the interests of those who loved the Hindu religion. It was Hindu Mahasabha’s response to the threat that was felt by the ‘tide of conversion to Christianity’ii. By being ‘saviors’ to these communities, ‘the simple men and women’, who were being converted to Christianity by various missionary societies, the mission claimed to have brought back the aboriginal within the fold of Hinduism. Their arguments too largely drew from the notion of unilinear influence of Hinduisation, which considered these communities to be ‘naturalised Hindus by long and close contact with their Hindu neighbours’ (CoI, 1931, p. 189). It was claimed that the misleading propaganda by Christians and colonial notions about caste and tribe gave rise to misconceptions. This propaganda encouraged the ‘Animists’ to return as ‘Kshatriyas’, and claimed that the absorption was more than shown in the census report of 1931. ‘The newly initiated Animists wanted to be returned as Kshatriyas’ but as mentioned earlier, enumerators, who were mostly upper caste Hindus were not convinced of such claims and returned them as animist (ibid). So there were instances of claims and counter claims on the issue of enumerating and classifying by such communities and fluidity of practices led to complexities and sometimes over simplification of the situation.
The census Superintendent and District Commissioners always presumed the naiveté of these ‘tribal’ communities and suspected that enumerators, nearly all of them being Hindus were naturally biased. As the Deputy Commissioner, Darrang, commented, ‘the Hindus enumerator (and they are nearly all Hindus) tends to record all animistic and aboriginal tribes, such as Kacharis, Karbis, Mishings, Mundas and Santhals, as Hindus. Even if the enumerator fails, the supervisor or checking officer tends to keep him up to the scratch. An instance was brought to my notice at Halem where the enumerator had written Mishing, but the checking officer changed it to “Hindu Mishing”’ (ibid, p. 190).

The official categories and classifications were often questioned and checked by the agency and consciousness among these people, ‘animists’ and ‘aboriginal’. Mullan himself claimed to have ‘received several petitions from Kacharis in Kamrup stating that they had returned as Hindus in the census schedules and that they objected to the action of the enumerators recording their religion as Hindu’ (CoI, 1931, p. 190). The propaganda campaign by Hindu Sabha produced many fold effects – some Kacharis willingly returned as Hindus, others were convinced by the enumerators to accept that category, and in some cases the enumerators’ took advantage of confusion or ignorance to record them as Hindus. Because in some cases, where there were no definite name for indigenous faith, there was genuine confusion. Some Tiwas came to see Mullan in Nowgong in January 1930 and asked his advice as to ‘how they should return their religion’. He was convinced after questioning them, and ascertained that it was a ‘purely tribal religion’ and advised the Tiwas to tell the truth (ibid). Thereafter, the Tiwas resolved in a meeting that the community should return their religion as Tiwa. But during enumeration, ‘inspite… of this resolution the vast majority of Tiwas returned themselves as Hindus, in many cases, voluntarily’ (ibid). Mullan suspected that in many cases enumerators influenced by the Hindu propaganda entered ‘Hindu’ names of ‘tribal’ people ‘who found it difficult to state precisely what their religion was and often in such cases Hinduism got the benefit of doubt’ (ibid). The relative success of Hindu propaganda was evident in the increase in the number of Hindus, which was conflated ‘owing to the inclusion of animists such as Kacharis, Mishings and aboriginal tea garden coolies’ (ibid).

Goalpara, among all the districts in the Brahmaputra Valley, showed remarkable increase (38 per cent) in the numbers of ‘Animists’. A large number of people in the Kokrajhar thana of that district returned ‘both their religion and their caste as Boro’ and the growing numbers of the Santhali settlers added to it (CoI, 1931, p.
193). It could be attributed to growing political consciousness. It is interesting to note that it was in the same area in the earlier decades that there was an attempt of religious reformation among the Bodos and it was a primary location for the various Associations of the Bodos.

**Tribal Identity and the Census**

The reaction to census politics saw the emergence of revivalism, strongly articulating the imagination and construction of a notion of ‘tribal identity’. The census of 1931 quotes Rupnath Brahma, an accepted spokesperson to the Bodo community, and the authenticity of their claims is reiterated by the qualification of ‘who himself belongs to the Boro community’ (CoI, 1931, p. 194). He made a definite political statement by saying that the Bodos should speak for themselves. He claimed that Boros or Bodoshad ‘a distinct state of civilisation of their own… also a distinct form of religion which they have been retaining’ and were definitely not ‘idol worshippers’ (ibid). He asserted that despite Hindu influences, ‘The Bodos had a separate society of their own and never allowed their tribal peculiarities to be merged into the Hindu society’ and that they did not recognise the Brahmanical supremacy of caste hierarchy (ibid).

The people who followed the Vedic religion of ‘Brahma’ cannot be treated as Animist. But Rupnath Brahma also stated that proximity of religious practices was overridden by other considerations, because ‘according to their views, they would be losers thereby in the social and political spheres’ (CoI, 1931, p. 194). Therefore, political consciousness was decisive in the decision to enumerate as Bodos. By the 1930s, the administration too had clearly accepted the discourse of the tribal politics: ‘They are in favour of having a separate representation of their own in councils and other government departments and they are not in favour of allowing their tribal interests to be merged with those of the Hindus. With these objective in view many of the Bodos, especially those of the Kokrajharthana, returned themselves as Boro by religion and Boro by caste. They say that considering the strength of their population in the whole province they have a rightful claim to have a separate category as Boro or Bodo in the census report’ (ibid).

The question of numerical strength of communities had become important by then and the Bodos had been officially striving towards ‘separate representation’ since the arrival of the Simon Commission. So the 1931 census had the instrumental
role in the further franchise reforms that was to be constituted. The assertion of the plains tribes was also very evidently attributed to processes initiated by representative communitarian politics. The intensity was perhaps not equal to the Hindu-Muslim tension because of these communities ‘autochthonous’ status and also because of the fluidity of identities that existed. But there was a mounting pressure on the question of identities and politics, which led to colonial policies regarding various communities in the sphere of representational politics and that affected Congress balance of politics in the province.

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

(a) Hindu exterior castes.  
(b) Indigenous backward tribes.  
(c) Tea garden cooly castes.

Indigenous backward tribes of Assam were the aboriginal communities – ‘either living in the hills like the Naga tribes – quite untouched by Hinduism’ or ‘living in the plains – like the Tiwas or Mishings – and influenced to a greater or less degree by Hinduism’ (CoI, 1931, p. 204). The criteria or qualification for this category, especially in the case of aboriginal tribes living in the Brahmaputra plains, was that ‘such tribes should still be aloof from the main body of Hindus and should still be generally regarded as a separate community rather than as a Hindu caste. In deciding this, the fact that they still speak a Tibeto-Burmese tribal language may be of importance’ (ibid).

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

**Language and Tribe: Speaking Assamese and Being Tribal**

Another interesting aspect of identity was language – dying tribal dialects, growing bilingualism and the convergence of the use of Assamese language with emerging notions of a monolithic ‘Assamese’ identity. Infact, the task of classifying was not easy if the marker of being a backward and depressed ‘tribe’
was indigenous religion, as accepted by various officials. The Tiwas, Rabhas, Kacharis, Meches, Mishings were under various degrees of Hindu influence and it was generally agreed upon that, ‘In spite of partial conversion to Hinduism they still remain tribal people’ (CoI, 1931, p. 21). Even the caste Hindu Assamese middle class, though eager to include them in the fold of Hinduism, still found it difficult to accept them as proper Hindus because they kept ‘pigs and fowls’ (ibid). Therefore, the question of tribal identity hinged not only on the definition of religion and the movement of tribal to caste by conversion, but segregation from the caste Hindu hierarchy and language were considered important too. Therefore, the Kacharis were a backward tribe but the Ahoms were not, because the latter, ‘though in many ways a separate community – (had) been for so long completely Hinduised’ that they (were considered) a racial caste (ibid). The Kacharis though ‘nominally Hinduised’ were considered ‘more a tribe’ than ‘caste’ (ibid). Preservation of one’s own language and also the social and cultural distance maintained from the ‘general development of Assamese culture’ distinguished the ‘tribe’ from the ‘caste’ and therefore ‘backward’ from the privileged (ibid). Therefore, the backward tribes of Assam were divided into two sections, ‘the real hillmen and those living principally in the plains who have been Hinduised to a greater or less extent’, like the Kacharis, Mishings, Tiwas, Rabhas, Hojongs, Tiparas of Sylhet and Deoris of upper Assam, those who had preserved their tribal languages (ibid).

As observed above, adopting the Assamese language was often not perceived as a mere linguistic shift, it often signified conversion to ‘Hinduism’, ushering in a transformation in culture and mother tongue. The 1891 census thought that the Bodo (Kachari) language was dying out because the Bodo (Kacharis) were ‘gradually being converted to Hinduism, and when this process is completed, many adopt Assamese as their parent tongue, at least as soon as they drop their distinctive racial name’ (CoI, 1891, p. 159).

There was a general concern about the disappearance of various languages of the Bodo group or about the decrease from the 1881 figures. The comparison shows a sharp decrease especially in the case of Tiwas and more so for the Rabhas. The loss was in favour of Assamese, because these tribes which for centuries had retained their languages, had been rapidly taking to speaking in Assamese. The colonial authorities expressed surprise and thought that changes like ‘better communications… and the greater amount of trade and travel’ put people to greater exposure. As observed by E.A. Gait, ‘Thousands of Kacharis leave their
home they must perforce speak Assamese… The process will doubtless continue at an annually increasing rate, and entire extinction of all these languages… is probably only a matter of very few years’ (CoI, 1891, p. 163).

From 1910 to 1921 the trend of decrease continued, but the indigenous tribal languages continued to survive and did not disappear as predicted 30 years back. The decrease continued because of ‘contact with others, i.e. practically, contact with the Aryan languages of the plains’ (CoI, 1921, pp. 122-123). Aryan languages did not mean Assamese alone; in many cases, Bodos and Dimasas who returned their caste as Kshatriya, also returned languages as Bengali, as it happened in the North Cachar Hills and Goalpara (ibid). But the languages most affected by external influences in the plains were the Chutiya, Tiwa, Kachari and Rabha. The period till the 1920s experienced the gradual but penetrative influence of Hinduism. But as acknowledged by J.W. Mc. Swiney, the ‘superior Aryan civilisation’ continued to exert influence and pressure, and according to the 1921 census, many may not have lost their mother tongue, and a great number of them being bilingual, therefore ‘the usual feeling of superior civilisation conferred by Aryan speech must have influenced them concurrently with the move towards Hinduism’ (ibid, p. 123).

By 1931, officially there was a more organised effort to enumerate languages and dialects more accurately and scientifically by collapsing the social, ethnic map with the linguistic map. And so by 1931, political awareness among certain tribal communities led to a consciousness distinctive enumeration. Therefore, 1931 census showed a 9.5 per cent increase in the speakers of the Assam-Burmese branch, i.e. the Bodo group which comprised of the Garo, Rabha, Chutiya, Boro or Bodo (Kachari), Dimasa (Hill Kachari) and Tiwa (CoI, 1931, p. 172). Mullan remarks:

In 1911 the number of Rabha speakers numbered 28,000 so that the 1921 census figures for this language were apparently too low, (Rabha speakers now number 27,000 against 22,000 in 1921) Chutiya speakers who now number 4,315 show a slight increase over the 1921 figure... Bara, Bodo, Mech or plains Kachari which increase over the 1921 figure.... Bara, Bodo, Mech or plains Kachari which showed a slight decrease in 1921 shows a considerable increase at this census in the number of its speakers-from 260,000 to 283,000. (CoI, 1931, p. 172)
In the earlier two censuses, i.e. 1911 and 1921, the question was whether the tribal languages were disappearing as a result of contact with others, and this had caused some alarm. But it was evident that those languages were not dying, and as mentioned earlier, there has been an increase in their numbers. Therefore, the notion that Assamese was successful in hegemonising over other dialects was erroneous. These communities were undoubtedly the only real bilingual people but they were conscious of ‘holding their own in a wonderful manner’ (CoI, 1931, p. 181).

The Tribal League and 1941 Census

Though the ethnographic aspect of the census was given up in the 1941 census, where caste ceased to be a category of enumeration, the “idea of politics as the contest of essentialised and “enumerated” communities had already taken firm hold of local and regional politics and thus no longer required the stimulation of the census to maintain its hold on Indian politics’ (CoI, 1931, p. 331).

Therefore, though the 1941 census was not an elaborate ethnographic exercise like the 1931 census, with data presented of only a limited number of communities at the district level such as the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other castes, it created political tension regarding number (Singh, 1996, p. 143). It generated controversy about categories and numbers, particularly because by then representation in the Legislative Councils and Assemblies was totally driven by the logic of politics of numbers and ethnographically defined communitarian politics. 1941 census evoked strong responses from various sections of the Assamese society and led to a debate in the Assembly and in the newspapers. The Congress criticised the government for manipulating the census operation so as to conceal the correct figures of the followers of different religions. The Congress moved an adjournment motion to discuss the census operation.

The cause of discontent and tension was the changed basis of classification, a shift from religion as a matrix of classification to one based on community. Compilation for communities was done with reference to ‘race, tribe and caste’ and not religion as it was in the case of the 1931 census. The Congress and few others accused the United Party government of tampering with date compilation and deviating from the rules followed by the census authority of India. It was under the Assam provincial government’s instance that Mr. Marar, the Census
Superintendent, issued a special circular to the Deputy Commissioners and Census Officers in Assam to compile data on the basis of ‘community’. He wrote:

_The basis for community is answer to questions 3, but generally the communities are unavoidably mixed up and where community cannot be ascertained in answer to question 3, answer to question 4 will be the basis; e.g. If a Kachari has not in answer to question 3 mentioned that he is a Kachari, and is returned under question 4 as Hindu, Muslim or Christian, he will be shown as Hindu, Muslim or Christian as the case may be, but if he is returned as a Kachari against question 3 he will be entered such irrespective of his religion._ (ALAP, 1941)

The government stated that the purpose of clubbing communities professing different religions was to create a ‘separate entity under the constitution for the purpose of franchise’⁵. Siddhi Nath Sarma, for instance, clarified that as the tabulation would be done on the basis of ‘community’, and not on religious lines, it would simplify the problem of treatment or classification of the primitive tribes. He added that in this way their total number regardless of their religion could be recorded (ibid). These efforts on the part of the colonial government to seek out community identity corresponded to the Tribal League’s own efforts to project community identity as one tribal people. And for this purpose the Tribal League carried out propaganda. As Bernard S. Cohn has observed, such active interference in the process of census enumeration, because of growing ‘consciousness of the significance of the census operation had reached a point where Indians were not merely content to petition and to write book: some group set out to influence the answers which people would give in the census’ (Cohn, 1990, p. 249). A bulletin of the Tribal League was taken out in 1940 with the main objective of instructing the ‘tribal’ people – Bodo, Kachari, Mech, Rabha, Tiwa, Mishing, Karbi, Deuri, etc. – about the politics of census enumeration⁶. The importance of the census for preservation of ‘tribal identity’ and interests was reiterated. The political aspirations of the Tribal League were molded by government policies, which were correspondingly influenced by these political aspirations.

There was a growing reliance on the census for supporting data for articulating political aspirations, which resulted in the convergence between the census and the world it sought to describe. By 1941, the census became very closely
interlinked with political issues like proving the existence of a community to validate the creation of a separate constituency. ‘Enumeration on the basis of community would show as a distinctive community which would enable us to demand special provisions in education and in the socio-economic spheres’\textsuperscript{vii}. It was also emphasised by the Tribal League that if special measures were not taken to ameliorate their conditions, they would remain backward forever. The Tribal League’s definition of ‘tribals’ was broad based and included those who were otherwise classified as ‘Hinduis’d. Religion was a secondary aspect of the identity. The essence of ‘tribalness’ was the existence of distinctive rituals and customs, rules and regulations, which were retained, therefore aiding the preservation of a distinctive lifestyle often in totality and some cases partially (Deuri, 1940, p. 4).

Further, the Tribal League also emphasised the separateness and difference of the social structure of the ‘tribals’ and the caste Hindu Assamese. The Tribal League persistently opposed various moves by more conservative circles and the Congress to categorise them as a part of the Hindu society. Such a projection was a simplistic depiction of a complex social reality. It is difficult to say whether the ‘tribal’ leaders comprehended the complexity and how far politically motivated was the invention of the notion of two polarised societies. But in giving it a concrete shape, at least in politics, the census aided the crystallisation of identity.

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

Notes:

\textsuperscript{i} The nomenclature Kachari was loosely used for various communities like the Bodos, Dimasas, Sonowals and such groups.

\textsuperscript{ii} As stated in the pamphlet quoted in the Census of India, 1931, p. 189.

\textsuperscript{iii} The nomenclature Kachari was used for the Bodo tribe and Dimasa tribe alternatively.
10 ALAP, December 4, 1941: Adjournment motion in connection with the conducting of the last census operations in Assam brought by Siddhi Nath Sarma.

7 Classification of communities according to Appendix II, prepared by the Assam Government, was as follows: (1) Assam Valley Hindus; (2) Assam Valley Muslims; (3) Surma Valley Hindus; (4) Surma Valley Muslims; (5) Scheduled castes; (6) Tribals people, Hills; (7) Tribals people, Plains; (8) European and Anglo-India.


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