

TRIBAL STUDIES OF INDIA SERIES T 170

TRIBAL SITUATION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA



Edited by

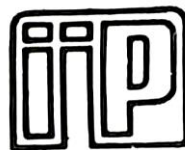
GARTHAK SENGUPTA

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SARTHAK SENGUPTA



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FOREWORD

NORTH-EAST India is inhabited by a large number of mongoloid tribes, which came to this part of the country mostly from north and east at different times and settled all over the hilly regions and also some parts of the plains assuming different names. On the basis of one or the other factor like socio-cultural similarity, linguistic affinity, ethnic affiliation and common territory these tribes may conveniently be put under certain groups like the Boro, the Khasi, the Naga, the Lushai-Kuki, the Arunachali and the other. Though most of the tribes are referred to as hill tribes and a few plains tribes, in some cases a section of the same tribe is confined to the hills, while the other section prefers to live in the plains. Accordingly they have adjusted themselves to two different environments and thereby show variation in respect of socio-cultural elements as well as biological traits.

Most of the tribes have their traditional tribal religions. But some members of them have accepted Christianity, while others are Hindu or Hinduised. In the process of detribalization many tribal people occupy a place in the caste-fold of the Hindu society, indicating tribe-caste continuum. However, at the present time the reverse process, that is, retribalization appears to be very strong among many of them.

The tribes of North-East India speak different languages of the Sino-Tibetan language group, which has two major branches, one being the Tibeto-Burman and the other the Siamese-Chinese. The languages of most of the tribes belong to the Tibeto-Burman branch. The language of the Khasi and the Pnar is entirely different from that of the other tribes. They speak the Mon-Khmer language, a member of the Austro-Asiatic language family.

The North-East Indian tribes are patriarchal people except the Khasi group and the Garo tribe which follow matriarchal

system. The Rabha tribe appears to be in a transition from matriarchy to patriarchy. The Karbi tribe also to some extent has been influenced by the matriarchal Khasi.

The subsistence economy of all the tribes is agriculture, though the methods of cultivation and agricultural products vary from tribe to tribe and region to region. Home brewed rice-beer is the common and the most favourite drink of them.

The tribes of North-East India have their own traditional systems of government. Among some, chieftainship is prevalent, while others prefer to be ruled by a village council.

Each society has its own cultural tradition, its own social system, its own sets of values and the like. This is true for the various tribes of North-East India as well. Socio-cultural elements of any tribe are not static, but changeable because of various reasons. With the passage of time they are exposed to new environment of varied natures. Accordingly, they take measures to adapt themselves to the new changed situation. These processes are ongoing among the tribes of North-East India.

Under these circumstances, it will be interesting to be acquainted with the current situation among the tribes of North-East India. Dr. Sarthak Sengupta deserves congratulations for his attempt to enlighten the readers in this regard by bringing the present publication.

Guwahati, Assam

B.M. DAS

PREFACE

THE North-East region of India, which covers an area of about 2,55,082 sq. km. lying between the latitude of 20° and 29° North and the longitude of 89°46' and 97°5' East, constituted by the seven sister States, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura and is bounded by China and Bhutan in the north, Myanmar in the south-east, and Bangladesh in the south-west. The region is connected with the rest of India by a narrow corridor between Nepal and Bangladesh. The mighty river Brahmaputra flows from north-east of this region to the west. The two sides of the Brahmaputra valley are covered by hills of varying altitudes except the Barak valley in the south-western part and the Imphal valley. Because of its geographical features and ethnic composition, North-East region of India is regarded as a distinct geo-ethnic unit. In that sense Sikkim and the northern extreme of West Bengal are also included in this region.

The area is the homeland of a large number of tribes who belong to different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. They differ greatly in their tradition, economy, and complexity of social organization, and there are wide variations in their customs and institutions. The total population of the region is approximately 31.4 millions of which about 8.14 millions are tribals. Ethnically the tribes of North-East India belong to the Indo-Mongoloid racial stock. They speak languages of different divisions and sub-divisions of the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family. However, only the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya speaks Mon-Khmer language which belongs to Austro-Asiatic language family. Most of them have their own traditional religion. But some tribal people of the plains region of Assam and Manipur and also of Arunachal Pradesh have accepted Hinduism (both Brahmanical and Vaishnavism). Many others are Hinduised. Again some tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and

certain tribal population of Assam and Tripura practise Buddhism. Christianity is mostly confined to the hill tribes of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland.

TABLE 0.1 : Tribal Population in North-East India

States	Scheduled Tribe Population
1. Arunachal Pradesh	5,50,351
2. Assam	28,74,441
3. Manipur	6,32,173
4. Meghalaya	15,17,927
5. Mizoram	6,53,365
6. Nagaland	10,60,822
7. Tripura	8,53,345
	81,42,424

Source : Census of India, 1991.

Even today, after more than four decades of Independence and incorporation of relevant safeguards in the Constitution of India, the position of tribes of North-East India is far from better and they continue to be subject to various social and other disabilities. The region is also subjected to varieties of intense intrinsic and extrinsic influence, since over the centuries. Many of the tribes in this region had undergone or are undergoing rapid transformation under the impact of ongoing modernization process, economic development as well as contact with the out-side world. Their experiences with regard to various forms of economic exploitation, social discrimination and political isolation also show wide variation. This creates a situation in which one finds tribes living in different conditions. One can also find numerous situations where many tribal populations are found in all the transitional stages providing excellent opportunities to study the life styles, transition and associated factors.

The present volume is a compilation of work to combine the studies and analysis of celebrated anthropologists, sociologists, economists, political scientists, folklorists, administrators, missionaries on the tribes of North-East India. The scholars who have contributed these articles have longstanding experience with the tribal situation of North-East India. It is appropriate that recognising the great need in the precise documentation of the vast body of data on the tribal situation in North-East India

obtained through serious studies by many social scientists and the important role these informations can play in furtherance of the subject both in national and international scenario, I began preparing this compilation work in 1993. The United Nations has also designated 1993 as 'Year of Indigenous People'. It is with this idea that an attempt has been made in this edited volume through the writings of several reputed social scientists to provide at least a sketchy idea of the tribal situation in North-East India to everyone's attention. While editing, in many places I purposely restrained myself from using editor's pen, as I believe, nothing substantial can be achieved by forcibly filtering down the thoughts of individual contributors.

The articles which follow do refer to the theme of the volume in one way or another, and range from the topic of social formation (A.C. Sinha and L.T. Aeir, A.C. Bhagabati), through those of problem of tribal identity dynamics (A.K. Danda, R.K. Das), concept of trusteeship (B.K. Roy Burman), agrarian situation and emerging stratification (S.B. Chakrabarti, S.K. Choudhuri), customary land laws (J.N. Das), issues related to shifting cultivation and agricultural development (R.K. Samanta, R.K. Kar), Christianity and its impact (Fr. S. Karotemprel, J.J. Roy Burman), dimensions of changes in tribal folklore (B.N. Datta), status of women in society (S. Sen), eco-cultural adaptation (D.G. Danda), form of political system (R.P. Athparia and N.K. Das), system of alliance-ethnic status, identity and system of hierarchy (B.K. Das Gupta), to the very interesting area of ongoing tribe-caste transformation (S. Sengupta) among the tribes of North-East India. The volume, however, in no way can claim to have projected a complete picture of the tribal situation of the region within this limited space by dealing all aspects which vary from region to region.

The efforts expended in compiling this small treatise will be well rewarded if these articles can provide a glimpse of the vast expanse of the tribal situation in North-East India and prove to be informative and useful, and arouse interest in scholars and researchers as well as administrators and policy-makers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I STAND deeply indebted to my reverend teacher Professor B.M. Das of Gauhati University for kindly writing a Foreword, which has enhanced the value of the book; to all scholarly contributors for their academic co-operation, patience and forbearance; to those publishers who have given me permission to use copyright materials; to Professor R.K. Kar for many helpful academic conversations; to Mrs. Neelanjana Barua for her long hours spent in typing the manuscripts; to my wife Kaveeta for her alround help in my academic persuit; and to Mr. M.C. Mittal of Inter-India Publications, New Delhi for ensuring a prompt and flawless production of this volume.

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A NOTE ON SOCIAL FORMATIONS IN NORTH-EASTERN FRONTIER REGION

A.C. Sinha and L.T. Aeir

THE North- Eastern Frontier Region of India is said to be unique in many ways. Scholars have endeavoured to show its links to south-east Asian lands on the one hand, while on another, strenuous efforts have been made to prove that this region had been the part of India since mythical period. We propose to accept the region with its present specificity and structural generality within the process of the political economy of the present Indian political system in which professed State ideology of socialism and planned economy permit almost unrestrained expansion of capitalism. In this *note* we take the British period of over a century as a backdrop and try to identify the dominant trends of social formation evident in the lives of the communities in the region during the last four decades of the Indian Independence. We frankly acknowledge our lack of originality at the outset. The issues discussed elsewhere and on other forums are being examined with a view to a meaningful academic dialogue. They are taken as indicative and not exhaustive. Though we may refer Assam time and again, our intention is to examine the social formations in the hill areas. We feel it will be advisable on our part to limit ourselves with the dominant trends rather than cases even from the hills. In the final analysis, we the academically alert and concerned citizens, may take stand on

some of the disturbing trends threatening the professed pattern in our national life.

A serious analyst of the contemporary Indian social scene such as Srinivas stops his examination of Indian social transformation on the eastern border of West Bengal (Srinivas, 1977). Perhaps historians, Raychaudhury and Habib, tried to rectify the wrong done in this North-Eastern region by putting the medieval history of Assam in the appendix of their celebrated anthology (Raychaudhury and Habib, 1982). In fact, the geographers have been much fairer to this region. Spate identified it as one of the 34 regions of India with three-four Sub-regions (Spate *et al.*, 1967). In this recognition itself lies its diversities. One must hasten to add that besides the geomorphological consideration for regionalization, Spate and his colleagues also recognized the human factors, by that they meant technological base of human endeavour leading to various social formations.

In the aftermath of the sepoy mutiny of 1857, the British consciously felt the need to examine the nature of the Indian society. Alfred Lyall, an important colonial functionary, prevailed upon others to depict the Indian scenario as a confused conglomeration of caste and tribes, religions and sects, language and dialects, races and regions held together by the British imperial presence (Owen, 1973). And that is how Dalton's *Ethnology of Bengal* and various volumes on caste and tribes were compiled. In their mercantile and strategic policy for the defence of the empire, it were the British strategists, who referred to the Indian mainstream (or *core*) against the distant frontier regions to be defended. On this distinctly colonial approach a series of books were written and published in course of time. In many ways, this trend still continues, which baffles an alert mind from the frontier region.

The historians inform us that there were various principalities before the Ahom could establish themselves in the Brahmaputra Valley. The way they organized their water-managed economy through an intricate system of *pyke* on the basis of *khel* and *mel*, was reminiscent of Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism* (Wittfogel, 1962). Though the plains were ruled with a heavy hand, frontiers were secured through the payment of *posa* and institution of *Kakoti*. Many of these distant

communities were loosely linked with the Ahom State and at times their services were requisitioned. There was a limited social intercourse, at times Ahom princes used to marry beyond their limits for political alliance. Though there was an economic hierarchy, Ahom Hinduism was largely free from social disabilities experienced in other Hindu kingdoms. At the cultural level, early Assamese was emerging as a lingua-franca for the entire region.

At the formal political level, there were three dominant models available in the region: (i) Hindu and Hinduized kingdoms such as Manipur, Ahoms, Jaintias etc, (ii) Buddhists like Chakma, Khamtis, Bhutanese etc. and (iii) tribal polities such as Khasi Syiemships (Sinha, 1987). Then there were a number of insipient state formations such as Mizos (Lushais), Angamis, Konyak and others. The basically subsistence hill economy generated an extremely limited surplus, which was too insufficient for the maintenance of a state structure. On the other hand, the region was on a difficult and agriculturally unsuitable locale, where possession of a plot of land was not preferred to an extensive topographical niche for hunting, grazing or transhumance. The basic character of a hill man is that of defiance and struggle against the natural obstacles and human intrigues (Lattimore, 1962). Thus, if a surplus was not generated locally, it was considered imperative to acquire such articles of necessity and luxury by force leading to raid, feud, invasion and even war.

After 1824—1826 Anglo-Burmese war, Lakhimpur district which touched all the sub-regional variations to a great extent, was considered an ideal location for colonization of the white settlers. As luck would have smiled on them, a stray and insignificant vegetation of the region—tea, caught the imagination of the then technologically advanced British entrepreneurs. This resulted in an organized expansion of the plantation economy on an entirely technologically primitive base. The natural resources—land, forest, minerals, and wild life were considered inexhaustible. The key word was expansion—through adventure, intrigue, trade, treaty and treachery. Among the *posa* articles, bottles of rum, opium, tobacco, were the items gifted to the hillmen (Sinha, 1986). Still the hillmen were referred as barbarians, savage, uncivilized,

wildmen, headhunters and what not. In this way, while the valley land in the region was being transformed into one of the most progressive plantation economy in the world, the newly emerged formation was causing havoc to already stagnant indigenous economy.

In case one makes very broad generalization on the pre-British hill formations, the scenario presents relatively simpler contour. The hill communities possessed too extremely crude technology with their sparse population and abundance of natural vegetation, were engaged in hunting of the wild animals and collecting of the forest products for their subsistence. A secondary formation was taking shape in the form of family community based subsistence farming through slash and burn and less type of rotational cultivation (*jhuming*) often described as the 'Asiatic mode of production'. Ethnographers have described the economy in which there were no roles for the specialists. A few of them were engaged in barter trade in wild products for exchanging them with salt, threads, iron and other necessities. As their legends of migration indicate, hills witness incessant human movements leading to feuds, raids, reprisals and even wars. It appears by the middle of nineteenth century the entire hill tract was closely identified with various ethnic groups. Thus, there was hardly a patch of land in the region, which was 'no man's land'. However, the hills with their almost impregnable forests were no 'isolates'; in fact, there were trails across all the significant ranges.

It is a fact that the British did not directly administer the hill districts as they did in the case of the Brahmaputra valley. But an overall British control on the regional economy and inter-tribal relations led to the freezing of the tribal situation as if their natural process of growth was clipped off. A far reaching process was introduced in terms of capital and house taxes. Slowly and slowly, the entire hill region barring the upper ridges of Arunachal Pradesh was brought within the British capitalist economy. This was secured through introduction of cash economy, petty blue coat jobs, elementary education through the Christian churches and creation of administrative, market and urban centres (Aeir, 1986). What resulted in the process was the scenario in which subsistence

farming tribes were exploitatively linked to the world metropolitan market in which they were reduced to suppliers of the raw materials and consumers of the industrial goods. To the extent that even the *Jhumias* were induced to cultivate some minor crops for cash transaction which were channelled through markets to the urban industrial centres. However, with the carving out of the scheduled districts in the hills the British appeared to be reluctant rulers to some of the naive tribesmen. Though even their paternalistic caring for the tribesmen did not stop inroads of the private commercial establishments, such as Rajasthani wholesalers, timber merchants etc., to the tribal areas.

With the Indian Independence, the tribesmen were induced to participative politics. The electoral politics created a situation in which tribals had to identify their representatives at various levels from the villages to the parliament. This resulted in an emergence of a new category of tribal elite, distinct from the traditional leadership, articulate enough to interact with the larger Indian community. Because of the constitutional safeguards to the tribal property and provision of investment for the planned development of the backward tribal areas, the newly emerged tribal elite in many areas began to appropriate the given resources as their private property. Provisions of bank loan to farmers for improved agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, cottage industries etc., have largely gone in the hands of these newly emerged power brokers. Studies have shown extensively how private ownership was introduced on the communal landholdings in various districts of the region resulting in absentee landlordism, sharecropping, landless agricultural labour. In this context, it may be pertinent for the concerned tribesmen to ask themselves whether the constitutionally guaranteed rights are adequate enough to stop these disturbing developments.

The traditional dominant mode of farming i.e. *Jhuming* is slowly giving way to settled agriculture in which various symptoms of agrarian relations found elsewhere are emerging. Collection of forest products and hunting the wild animals as a way of meeting the economic needs are no more viable, because of increased population and dwindling forests. Still forests are cut in such a way as if they are inexhaustive and

timber is supplied to the saw mills. Invariably the timber depots and saw mills are owned by the non-tribal outsiders. The concerned tribals should ask themselves whether depletion of forest in connivance with the non-tribal timber merchants is not a denial of the traditional rights and privileges of the common tribal folk. Possibly there is a need for a grassroot movement for environmental awareness and preservation.

The tribal's genuine apprehensions against the non-tribals, lack of infrastructure and skilled manpower are some of the main reasons for the lack of industrial enterprise in the hill regions. However, industrial establishments are required for a healthy economic development of the region. With the reduced role of the primary sector of production and absence of the secondary sector, are the hill States willingly and knowingly not encouraging the service sector, which is non-productive and parasitic? What type of manpower planning do they visualize in the years to come for their future? Are they not deliberately short-sighted and over dependent on the federal exchequer for managing their administrative structure? Perhaps it is time for them to re-examine their priorities in the light of four decades of planned development and work out a future-oriented industrial policy for their people.

To sum up, the 150 years of tribal exposure to the capitalist *laissez-faire* economy presents a scenario in which a number of formations co-exist in the North-Eastern region. We have a well organized capitalist plantation economy on the one hand and extremely primitive subsistence hunting and collecting one on the other. In between there are various phases of agricultural practices, mercantile and industrial enterprises and a state controlled service sector. In case one looks at the region from the classical evolutionary vantage point, it provides various aspects of formations indicative of various stages of development. However, path of regional development provides enough evidence to the dominant role of the State—the British or the Indian Union in the lives of the people. It is a tribute to the State that the tribal structure continues to be viable and resilient enough inspite of all the demands on it. It appears that the basically community-oriented tribal leadership has no alternative, but to decide

whether to strengthen the institutions and structures of age-old communal existence or go to an easy option of capitalist path of development.

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