Ethnic Reconstruction and Demand for Scheduled Tribe Status: A study of Ahoms in Assam

A Dissertation Submitted

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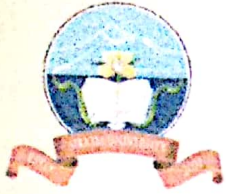

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the

Degree of Master of Philosophy

By

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February, 2019

Date: 07/02/2019

DECLARATION

I, **Hare Krishna Doley**, hereby declare that the research work embodied in the dissertation titled "**Ethnic Reconstruction and Demand for Scheduled Tribe Status: A study of Ahoms in Assam**" submitted to the Sikkim University in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is my original work. Any content or any part of this dissertation has not been submitted for any degree of this university or any other university.
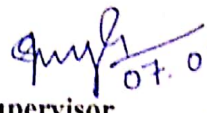
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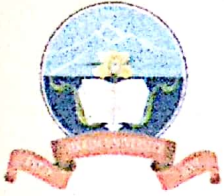
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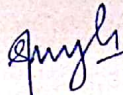
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "**Ethnic Reconstruction and Demand for Scheduled Tribe Status: A study of Ahoms in Assam**" submitted to the **Sikkim University** in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** in the **Department of Sociology**, embodies the result of *bona fide* research work carried out by **Hare Krishna Doley** under my guidance and supervision. No part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree, diploma, associate-ship or fellowship.

All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledged by him.

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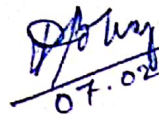
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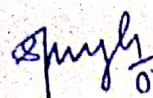
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Dedicated to

My Father

Late Akan Ch. Doley

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him and highly indebted to him. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank Bhaskar I am beholden to him for the motivation he provided throughout my humble endeavour.

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Hare Krishna Doley

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAAA	-	All Assam Ahom Association
AATSA	-	All Assam Tai Students Association
AATAC	-	All Assam Tai Ahom Society
AGP	-	Asom Gana Parishad
AJYCP	-	Asam Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chattra Parishad
ASI	-	Anthropological Survey of India
ATASU	-	All Tai Students Union
BOMPT	-	Ban Ok Pup Lik Mioung Tai
BJP	-	Bharatiya Janata Party
CAB	-	Citizenship Amendment Bill
CCTOA	-	Coordination Committee of the Tribal Organizations of Assam
ST	-	Scheduled Tribes
GoI	-	Government of India
GoS	-	Government of Sikkim
ILO	-	International Labour Organization
ILP	-	Inner Line Permit
JOM	-	Janagusthiyo Oikya Mancha
MoTA	-	Ministry of Tribal Affairs
NEFA	-	Northeast Frontier Agency
NRC	-	National Register of Citizens
OBC	-	Other Backward Classes
RGI	-	Registrar General of India
SC	-	Scheduled Castes
SCBC	-	Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes
UNDRIP	-	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People
UNO	-	United Nations Organization
WGIP	-	Working Group on Indigenous Population

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

Located in peripheral North-Eastern region of India, Assam has always been a vibrant plural society since time immemorial. It is one of the multi-ethnic hotspot as well as a region of cohabitation of diverse groups. It is also a site for several ethnic assertion and contestation by various groups and communities. In the contemporary time the issue of resource distribution and demand for autonomy have been the most debated and visible subject in the state. These issues exhibit both conflict and solidarity in the society over time and space. The State as part of its administrative mechanism undertakes various measures to resolve such issues. One of the important measure on the part of the State have been the categorization and classification of groups of people on the basis of various line, e.g. caste, tribe, language, religion, class, gender, ethnicity, etc. Historically, this practice has remained one of the important measures of the state and it has become imperative with the arrival of the modern state to administer its population. In the context of post-independent India it has become essential for the State due to the existence of diversities which is the product of complex historical trajectory. The Indian State with its democratic form of governance plays as an agent to negotiate these differences by allocating resources on the basis of various categories. The construction of these categories have always been contested on various grounds and lacks consensus leading to reconstruction of the existing categories. It is partly because of the historical roots of the process and also due to the socio-political situation of the present. A constant practice of reconstruction of ethnic identity for maximizing political power and resources on grounds of

ethnicity is a common feature of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period of India.

Inhabited by different groups of people belonging to diverse races since time immemorial, instances of increased interests in patterns of social and political milieu is apparent in everyday life of Indian State in a broader sense and Assam in a specific context. Existence of inequalities among groups on the grounds of race, religion and essentially on ethnic background has brought about varying degree of consciousness towards preservation of respective cultures and traditions which often becomes obscure in a plural society like India under the praxis of national integration.

Plurality as a liability has been experienced in contemporary period as communities along with the existence of strong primordial values, has been experiencing ethnic assertion and strife for quite some time (Goswami, 2001, p. 123). Occasionally various groups and communities use ethnicity as a major resource while engaging with the State to fulfill their various demands. Chhetri (2016) explains that the engagement with the State has undergone considerable transformation from its colonial origin to its post-colonial development which in turn has shaped and reshaped the political processes.

Such processes can be witnessed in Assam with the demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by various groups in the contemporary time. The present study is an attempt to understand and examine the demand for ST status by various groups and Ahoms in particular and the responses of the State needs to be examined. Along with Ahoms there are five more groups namely the *Koch-Rajbongshis,* the *Morans,* the *Mataks,* the *Chutias* and the *Tea-tribes* in Assam are demanding for ST status.

As observed by Chhetri (2017) ethnicity has been periodically reconstituted by retracing their genealogy with the reaffirmation of their belongingness to the nation-state. The whole process of such demands is not without contestation, as many of the communities who already belong to the category vehemently oppose the demand of the six communities. They argue that the said communities do not fulfill any criteria for inclusion in the list; triggering contesting polarized atmosphere in the region in recent times. Additionally, plurality of the society of Assam shoots up a wide range of ethnic identity movements attracting attention of academicians and policy makers as well as (Fernandez, 1999). In such a context the category of tribe needs a proper conceptualization. Various pre-colonial and post colonial discourses have engaged with the concept of tribe and attempt has been made to define it in various contexts. The epistemological understanding of tribe was basically an approach of the colonial anthropologists who began to write on Indian society and its people for the ease administering the conquered population. Scholars argue that the category of tribe in India is a colonial construction (Beteille, 1995; Xaxa, 2008; Singh, 1978). They used the term 'tribe' in general parlance in more than one sense; in reference to a group of people claiming descent from a common ancestor, and in reference to a group living in a primitive or barbarous conditions (Xaxa, 1999). Most importantly the colonial impression of the tribe was derogatory and barbarous which are commonly understood as negative attitudes of any group of people. Hence today, a tribe is commonly perceived as primitive, savage or wild in a routine manner. It has become an idiom of defining backwardness against advanced or forward (Bara, 2009, p. 90).

Persistence of the colonial anthropological approaches has significantly contributed to the ethnic problems to an already stratified society along ethnographic lines (Bordoloi, 2014). Additionally, the category of tribe has always been in

transition, at least since the beginning of recorded history (Beteille, 1986). Categorization done on the basis of certain features such as religion, caste, physical traits, etc., added more to the differences. Appadurai (1993) stated that such differences were reinforced by the British through the decennial enumeration and classification of the populations and created social boundary, which might have been, otherwise flexible. The persistence of differences not only posed difficulty in subjective understanding of the terminology vis-a-vis stratified society besides it has also transformed the self-categorization of individual in the post-colonial nation-state.

With an effort to build an inclusive democracy in a highly stratified society like India in the post-colonial period it has established the principle of universal adult suffrage with the introduction of affirmative action (Hasan, 2009). Incorporation of the affirmative action into the constitution by the Government of India (GoI) in the post independent period for the historically oppressed and disadvantaged groups has been to achieve a just and egalitarian society through redistributive justice. Such principle of redistributive justice was applied to certain categories what came to be known as Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) (Kapila, 2008; Hasan, 2009). Thus the categorization of population evolved, based on certain characteristics laid by the government to administer its subjects with the approach of positive discrimination. In pursuit of this goal, the GoI formed the First Backward Classes Commission in the year 1953 under the chairmanship of Kaka Kalelkar. The commission formulated five criteria for a tribe to be scheduled (a) primitive traits, (b) distinct culture, (c) geographical isolation, (d) shyness of contact with the community at large (e) general backwardness (Backward Classes Commission, 1955). These criteria are still in vogue and used as the mechanism to determine the category of ST. Notwithstanding the ambiguities with these official criteria, the category also carries a

wide range of unofficial connotations, which continue to inform "tribal" identification and recognition inside and outside the government (Middleton, 2013, p. 13). Importantly, the process of designating or 'scheduling' tribes began in the 1931 census by the British rule systematically (Beteille, 1986, p. 317). Therefore, we can see immense implications of the census in the contemporary practice in determining the category of tribe. Indeed census was the most essential tool and effort of the British colonial government to collect systematic information about many aspects of Indian society and economy (Cohn, 1987, p. 231).

However, this formulation for welfare mechanism intensified discontents among many other groups who do not fall under the list of ST having preferential treatment in matters of jobs, education and in the share of politics. The Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) under the 'People of India Project' determined 461 tribal communities in India (Xaxa, 1999, p. 3589). With more than one thousand communities vying for recognition, the category of the "tribe" has assumed a place at the fore of affirmative action debates across scholarly community and civil society (Middleton, 2013, p. 13). Similarly, the case of Assam can also be contextualized in a similar fashion reflecting projection of ethnicity to articulate political rights with interest's group politics (Brass, 1985; Smith, 2009).

Ethnicity is one of the fastest growing contemporary phenomena all over the world ethnic movements have been gaining force since 1950s (Ghosh, 2015, p. 51). Essentially, ethnicity has not met its death the way liberals has so vigorously and idealistically predicted; on the contrary it flourishes in our modern world and it is exactly the modern conditions that encourage an ethnic revival (Smith, 1984). In fact, sociologists like Durkheim, Simmel, Tonnies, Weber and many others endorsed the view that social life would be guided solely by modern rationalism and scientific

spirit with the impact of western enlightenment and scientific rationalism where the spaces for traditional norms and human relations based on kinship, clan and caste would lose significance (Roy & Mukhopadhyay., 2015, p.15). Yinger (1985) also noted that the strength of ethnic factor continues to be a significant element in most societies despite the widespread belief and prediction of a sharp decline of ethnic attachment by developmental theory and Marxist theory. Revival of shrinking and abandoned customs and practices, re-imagination and reconstruction of past is integral to the assertion of ethnic identity (Erickson, 1968; Hobsbawm, 1983; Brass, 1991). The recognition as ST is justified by searching for the primitive practices of the groups concerned and complemented by large-scale collection of narratives outlining their historical and cultural genealogies. This process can be linked with what Nagel calls 'ethnic -renewal' and 'ethnic-switching' (Nagel, 1994). In this similar fashion, the Ahoms now organize themselves to revisit their past, their abandoned customs and traditions to rationalize the coveted status of ST stating themselves as the victims of relative deprivation. The frequent overlap between social and economic deprivation is a defining feature of India's social structure (Hasan, 2009, p. 3), giving birth to ethnic tensions over the periods. Thus the issues of ethnicity are closely connected to the attempt to regain lost resources and political autonomy (Xaxa, 2003) of the Ahoms.

As the issue of tribe is closely linked with administrative and political considerations, there has been increasing demand by various groups and communities for their inclusion in the list of ST of the Indian constitution (Xaxa, 1999, p. 1520). The underlying approach of such demand or mobilization has the perception that STs, as a people, a denomination, and even as a nomenclature have become privileged. With such a perception by the non-STs underlies the continuous process of self-

invention and reinvention by various communities in Assam, tribal and non-tribal, by seeking a change of official status-the STs seeking territorial councils and the non-STs seeking reclassification as STs as part of a strategy of political survival and advancement (Prabhakara, 2010, p. 264). In doing so the past is continually constructed and reconstructed by the Ahoms for tribal traits and each time it is contextualized within the contemporary socio-political setup. They see themselves as the victims of socio-economic injustices and evoke certain historicity to materialize their long standing demand of ST status. Contradictorily, the *Ahoms* are also found to glorify their past as rulers to which there is no doubt proved by the abundant available historical accounts mainly in the form of *Buranjis*.

Underneath the ever-increasing ethnic upsurge is the state sponsored welfare mechanisms and distribution of rewards along ethnic lines which has generated much ethnic assertion in the contemporary period like that of the Ahoms in Assam. Besides, the Ahoms demand for ST can also be linked with the process of change from tribe to caste with the process of Sanskritization[1] during their rule and again from caste to tribe in the post colonial period.

The present study focuses upon the assertion related to *Tai*-Ahoms or in short, Ahoms who are demanding inclusion of ST status in Assam.[2] The Ahoms demand involves the processes of invention; reinvention and historical reinterpretation of their status as category of tribe. Numerically a significant group, the study on the Ahoms

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[1] Sanskritization is a concept developed by M.N. Srinivas in his analysis of the social and religious life of the Coorgs of South India. It is a process whereby the so called lower castes adopt the Brahminic way of life to rise to a higher position in the social hierarchy in the caste system. M.N. Srinivas, M.N. (1956). "*A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization", 15*, 481-496.

[2] Ahoms are the sub group of the greater Tai. Here we have used Ahoms and Tai-Ahoms interchangeably.

also analyzes the perceived repercussion of the entire socio-political scenario of Assam. The study also tries to analyze the politics of inclusion and the process of engagement of Ahoms in Assam with the larger state and society in their demand. It further analyzes the production of ethnographic knowledge by the Ahoms and the methods and techniques used in the assertion of ethnicity in the larger social-structure framed by the institutions of the state.

1.2. Literature review

To carry forward any academic activity and delving further into the problem or issue undertaken it becomes imperative to take into considerations the already existing literatures and its standpoints on the concepts related to it. Therefore, we have engaged with the previous works being done by various scholars across the disciplines of social sciences. This exercise has helped us to understand the various dimension related to the issues of ethnic reconstruction and the process of categorization and also the complexities associated to it. The review of literatures has also helped us in understanding the theoretical framework and concepts for the present study.

1.2.1. Tribe

Defining the term 'tribe' and its application to people, their culture and societies has remained controversial and arbitrary basically in Africa as well as in other parts of the world. It has been conceptualized in many forms in the language of the anthropologists as well as in that of other social sciences and in lay man's jargon only to misuse and abuse to cover a wide range of groups of people (Biebuyck, 1966). The term tribe has its origin in the Latin word '*tribus*' meaning, a group of persons forming a community and claiming descent from a common ancestor (Gregory, 2017, as cited in Fried, 1975, p. 7). A wide range of anthropological studies covering

regions like Africa, Australia, Asia and other parts of the world demonstrate the study on tribal. Among the studies mentioned may be made of L.H. Morgan, Mayer Fortes, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Bronislaw Malinowski, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and others who conducted intensive study on primitive tribes. With their ethnographic account, they tried to understand family, kinship, marriage, religion, magic, economy, political institution, law and social relation of primitive tribes. In India the term tribe was used by the British anthropologists and the colonial administrators to categorize a large number of groups who do not fit into the categories of 'caste' or 'Hindu' (Munshi, 2012). The words like *'adivasi'* (first settlers), *'vanvasi'*(inhabitants of forests), *'vanyajati'* (forests communities), *'pahari'* (hill-dwellers), *'adimjati'* (original communities/primitive people), *'janjati'* (folk people), '*anusuchit jan jati*' (ST), are also used in India to refer to tribes (ibid). Among all these terms *Adivasis* is known most extensively, *'anuscuhit jan jati'* is the constitutional name covering all of them (Vidyarthi and Ray, 1976). The colonial term has stayed unquestioned. This is because scholars rigidly stick to the belief that tribe is a stage of human progress and not an autonomous unit of human progress. The *Oxford English Dictionary, Compact Edition* (1971) explains the original meaning of 'tribe' as 'a group of persons forming a community and claiming descent from a common ancestor' (as cited in Bara, 2009).

Verrier Elwin (1943) describes tribals as the original settlers of India and he proposed that tribals should be kept in isolation in response to G.S. Ghurye's (1943) idea of assimilation of tribal with the Hindus (as cited in Guha, 1999). N.K. Bose (1941) tried to define tribe as original settlers and argued that they are increasingly coming into the fold of Hindu through the process which he called as "Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption", in his study of the *Juang* community of the *Pal Lahara* region, now in Odisha.

In understanding tribes, Bailey (1958) relates tribe with caste and distinguished them in relation to economic and political entity. Similarly, in India the continuities between tribes and castes are so much that it often becomes difficult to distinguish one from the other. Because there are numerous instances of communities as tribes in one state and as castes in other; many communities were arbitrarily listed as tribes or castes by the perception of the individual enumerator of the census (Srivastava, 2008, p. 29). He argued that a caste society is hierarchical while a tribal society is segmentary and egalitarian. On the other hand Vidyarthi and Ray (1976) view tribes as isolated and hill dwellers those who retain their customs and traditions. Therefore they form distinct communities in contrast to their neighbors and these communities have been listed in the scheduled category for special treatment.

Beteille (1986) has tried to define tribe by adopting evolutionary and historical approach. According to him in the Indian context, the term 'aboriginals', 'hill and forest tribes' were widely used to refer to 'tribe'. He also argued that the process of designating or 'scheduling' tribes in India began during British rule and acquired a systematic character from the time of the 1931 census. The question of tribes in India is closely linked with administrative and political considerations (Beteille, 1986; Xaxa, 1999). In anthropological literature the term 'tribe' is generally equated with the term 'primitive' (Burman, 1983). Xaxa (2008) discusses the term tribe and its undergone transformation in Indian society in the past. He brings into light the inadequacies of different definitions of the term tribe. Xaxa (1999) defines tribes as indigenous people and a type of society.

The difficulties and ambiguities inherent with the epistemology of the term 'tribe' posed enormous challenges in the past as well as in the contemporary period. However for administrative purposes the British administrators brought those groups

and communities who were historically deprived and marginalized into an umbrella term called Scheduled Tribe (ST). Independent India continued to use the same as an administrative category with the approval of the constitution (Beteille, 1998). The constitution of Indian union (Article, 366) has defined,

"Scheduled Tribes as such tribes or tribal communities or part or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under article 342 to be scheduled tribes for the purpose of this constitution."

So following the same measures adopted in the colonial era, the government of India has adopted some criterias laid down by the Lokur Committee to identify tribe to be enlisted in the Scheduled Tribes list. The criteria are (a) primitive, (b) distinct culture, (c) geographical isolation, (d) shyness of contact with the community at large, and (e) backwardness. But it is also not without ambiguity and remained contentious in terms of operationalization. In fact the criteria laid down by the committee are hardly relevant today to describe any tribe (Srivastava, 2008, p. 30).

1.2.2. Ethnicity

Ethnicity has been a key concept in the discourse of anthropology and sociology for many years, yet it has remained as a perplexing idea among people to its meaning, its relevance and its relationship to other concepts such as 'race' and nationalism (Banks, 1996). Though the term 'ethnicity' is of recent origin, the sense of kinship, group solidarity, and common culture to which it refers is as old as the historical record (John Hutchinson & Anthony D. Smith, 2009). Stating ethnicity as a new term Glazer and Moynihan, (1975) point to the fact that the world's earliest dictionary appearance is in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1972 (cited in Hutchinson and Smith, 1996). Its first usage is attributed to the American sociologist David Reisman in 1953 (Glazer & Moynihan, 1981). The word 'ethnic' is derived from the Greek word *ethnos* (which in turn is derived from the word (*ethnikos*), which

originally meant heathen or pagan (Eriksen, 1993). Ethnicity is the relationship between persons or groups who think or consider themselves distinct from the members of other groups and try to maintain their distinctiveness. It is a dynamic and shifting aspect of social relationships (ibid). Although the term 'ethnicity' has its roots in the Greek term *ethnos/ethnikos*, its academic and popular use is fairly modern that gained wider use only during the 1960s and 1970s (Glazer and Moynihan, 1975, as cited in Malesevic, 2004). Smith (2009) basically focuses on the measures of ethnic community's subjectivity. According to Max Weber (1965) ethnic groups are those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration and this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation (as cited in Hutchinson and Smith, 1996). Ethnicity refers to a group identity displaying certain common characteristics and on the basis of which one may arrive at some kind of common substantive core which may function as an ethnic group (Das, 2015, p. 37).

Ethnicity has both objective as well as subjective connotations. Objectively, it is seen as "primordial affinities and attachments" (Isaacs, 1975; Greeley, 1974, and subjectively, as an "activated primordial consciousness" Geertz, 1975, as cited in Subba, 1996, p. 39). Defining ethnic group as a subjective construction, Das argues that it contains a certain degree of arbitrariness which is unavoidable (Das, 2015, p. 37). Brass (1991), defines ethnicity as cultural practices and outlook of a given community of people that set them apart from others. He suggests that there are three ways of defining ethnic groups in terms of objective attributes having different cultural features such as language, color, dress etc; with reference to subjective feelings. It uses cultural symbols that make subjectively self conscious community

that establishes criteria for inclusion and exclusion from the group and with relation to behavior according to cultural differences. According to Brass, the most appropriate definition is the objective cultural markers and also recognizes that they are susceptible to change and variation. He also argues that ethnicity and nationalism are not 'given' but are social and political constructions. However, most of the scholars have emphasized on the subjective aspect of it; for instance Barth (1969) as the process of ascription and identification of status by the actors themselves, Wallman (1979), as interest groups and Bell (1975), as a perception of group difference, Glazer and Moynihan (1975), as interests plus effective tie (as cited in Subba, 1996, p. 39). Ignoring the basis of it Hobsbawm & et al., (1992) argues that ethnicity is a way of expressing a real sense of group identity differentiating 'we' from 'other'. The group may not be clear about the commonality of not being them, especially today. But it has become one way of filling the empty containers of nationalism. According to Nagel (1994), ethnicity is dynamic, constantly evolving property of both individual identity and group organization; the construction of which involves both structure and agency. He has shown how identity and culture serves as the two basic building blocks of ethnicity and how it creates boundaries among different ethnic groups. Ethnicity can also be defined as the consciousness and feelings of individuals that they are members of 'we-group' and the reflections of behaviors which can be found in the light of these feelings (Antweiler, 2015, p. 27). Explaining it in a sociological manner Malesevic states that ethnicity is not a thing or a collective asset of a particular group; it is rather a notion of social relation in which participating social actors perceive themselves and are perceived by others as being culturally distinct collectivities (Malesevic, 2004, p. 4). According to Spencer (2014) ethnicity is a concept which is more inclusive and less objectifying indicating the constantly

negotiated nature of boundaries between ethnic groups and rather than the essentialism implicit in divisions of 'race'. It can be considered as a transient concept necessarily not useful to try to pin down a final meaning.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

In the context of the present study various approaches of ethnicity are being examined. The major approaches are primordial, instrumental and constructionist theories. These theoretical approaches have helped us in looking at the issues from various perspectives.

1.3.1. Primordial

According to the primordial theory, ethnicity is an ascribed status and is static in nature. The ideology of primordialism naturalizes ethnic groups and justifies ethnic sentiments (Ghosh, 2015, p. 54). It stresses the role of primordial factors such as lineage and cultural ties. Geertz (1973) suggested that ethnic identity developed from certain givens of social existence which includes blood and kin connections, religion, language, region and custom (as cited in Spencer, 2014). Within this framework there are two differing views. First one is the socio-biological perspective given by Pierre ven den, which emphasizes that kinship is determined by ethnicity (as cited in Yang, 2000). He argued that ethnicity is an extension of kinship from a family to an extended family and finally to an ethnic group. The other one is the cultural perspective which emphasizes the importance of a common culture like, a common language and religion which determines the genesis and tenacity of ethnic identity even in the absence of common ancestors. Barth (1969) had identified four theoretical features of the model of ethnicity:

     (i)   Ethnic groups are biologically self-perpetuating;

(ii)   Members of this group share basic cultural values manifests in overt cultural forms;

(iii)   The group is a bounded social field of communication and interaction; and its members identifies themselves and are identified by others as belonging to that membership (Ghosh, 2015, p. 54)

1.3.2. Instrumentalists

Instrumentalists approach emerged as a challenge to the classical primordial approach. Barth (1998) argues that primordialist's view of ethnic groups embedded with innate cultural characteristics. He emphasizes on subjectivists standpoint and suggests that individuals selectively emphasize those forms of cultural differentiation that are important to them. Group boundaries among ethnic groups are maintained through the interaction process which delineates 'us' from 'them'. He further argues that cultural features are not fixed and depend upon the situation in which the interaction occurs. Barth, thus, emphasizes the relational, interactional and situational nature of ethnicity.

Another group that challenged the primordial approach is the members of the 'Manchester School'. Among the group the most important study was carried out by Cohen (1969), in his studies on the instrumentality of ethnic affiliation. Here he investigated the Hausa and Yoruba tribes of Nigeria and suggested informal political organization as the principal function of ethnicity. 'Primordial' symbols, Cohen argued, are sometimes created by the political elites but also sometimes use and exploit them to gain the allegiance of political powers (Cohen, 1969). The scholarly works of Barth and Manchester School brought about a fundamental shift in the theoretical foundation of anthropology because of the analysis of tribe as a unit of social structure to ethnicity as a process of social organization (Jenkins: 2008).

1.3.3. Constructionists

The idea of 'ethnicity as a social construction' is an extension and revision of the arguments of the instrumental perspective on ethnicity (Ghosh, 2015, p. 60). The constructionist theory of ethnicity views ethnic identity as the constructed entity. It is the product of human choices and actions. It is the creation of elites who draw upon, distort, and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well being or existence or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as for themselves (Brass, 1999). The constructionist school also embodies numerous different views which emphasized different components. William Yancey & et al. (1976) proposed 'emergent ethnicity' and they downplayed the importance of cultural aspect and viewed ethnicity as an "emergent phenomenon" created by structural conditions. On the other hand Sarna (1978) differs from such views and maintained that ethnicity is created by two conditions, i.e., ascription and adversity. Ascription refers to the assignment of individuals to particular ethnic groups by outsiders such as governments, churches, schools, media, natives and other immigrants. Adversity includes prejudice, discrimination, hostility and hardship. It is held that adversity forces members of a same group to maintain solidarity and also helps in forming unity (Sarna, 1978). Her theory undermines the active role of ethnic groups in shaping their identities, thereby inflating the effects of outside forces. Yet the merit of it lies in its call to locate the creation of ethnic identity in relation to the larger society. There are also some scholars who focused on the resurgence of old ethnic identities and boundaries. According to such approach ethnic identities are constructed on the basis of formerly established historical boundaries or identity in which they used raw materials of

history and cultural practices. Outlining the basic social constructionist model of ethnicity Jenkins (1997) identified four elements:

(i) Ethnicity is a matter of cultural differentiation;

(ii) Ethnicity is centrally a matter of shared meanings- what we conventionally call 'culture'.

(iii) Ethnicity is not fixed, while it is dynamic and can be manipulated;

(iv) Ethnicity is an identity which can be internalized and externalized during the course of social interaction.

The social constructionist views ethnicity and race as social construction and in terms of dynamic processes of ethnic and racial formation. Werner Sollar (1989) rejected Primordialist assumption and argued that ethnic identity is rooted in tradition, which is relived and sustained by people through recreation (as cited in Philip Q. Yang 2000). Nagel (1996), in a same vein contended that it is reconstructed by internal forces of actions through reconstructions and negotiations and external forces like economic, social, political processes and outsiders. Thus he asserts it as dynamic in nature upheld by the ethnic group. On the other hand according to Castells (1996), 'network society' is more important in which we actively take part in interacting with others in the construction of our ethnic identity (Ghosh, 2015).

Looking at the complex nature of the issues of ethnicity and tribe and the anticipated challenges emerging in the field; grounded theory is also used in exploring the integral social relationships among various groups and communities in this context. As a qualitative theoretical approach grounded theory provides us the base for observation, interactions and settings about the studied population. It provides additional advantage of containing explicit guidelines that show us how we may

proceed (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3). This is essential because the study had undergone critical engagement in the field to have proper understanding of every aspects underlying in the demand for ST.

1.4.   Rationale of the Study

Researches on 'ethnicity' and upsurge of ethnic mobilization in contemporary social sciences have emerged as important analytical categories. The nature of ethnicity is fluid and dynamic, and has far reaching implications in the social relationships. Therefore the various dimension of ethnicity have been continuously drawing the attention in the academic field. In fact the escalation of ethnic consciousness among different communities has become a major issue of concern in the socio-cultural and political milieu. The present study on ethnic reconstruction and claim for ST status is being articulated in the field of socio- cultural level which also includes the revival of their past, histories, food habits, dress patterns to name a few. Moreover the study of the Ahoms and their claim for indigeneity as well as ST demand has been neglected on various occasions in the academic discourses. Hence the present research is an attempt to look into the ongoing process of ethnic assertion by the Ahoms. The study will also enrich our understanding on such an important issue in Assam.

1.5. Research Objectives

(i) To study the historical context that gave birth to ethnic reconstruction and assertion in Assam especially with reference to Ahoms.

(ii) To explore and examine the various ways and methods adopted by the studied community in the process of demand for ST status.

(iii) To present a detailed ethnographic account of the Ahoms in the process of their demand and engagement with the State.

1.6. Research Questions

(i) What is the context that led to the demand of Scheduled Tribe status by the communities in Assam at present?

(ii) What are the various modes of engagements by the studied community at the intra-community and inter-community level and their process of negotiation and the responses of the State in the demand for ST status?

(iv) How does the Ahom community engage and negotiate with the State in the process of demand for ST status in Assam and what are the responses of the State?

(v) How the nature of struggle by the Ahoms has evolved and transformed over the years.

1.7. Methodology

Being exploratory in nature the present study is primarily based on qualitative research supported by both primary and secondary sources of data.

The study is about understanding the process of demand for ST status by the Ahoms. Therefore, the research is largely based on both theoretical and empirical understanding of the concepts related to comprehend the process. The theoretical framework related to the study is primarily supported by the understandings on the

concept of ethnicity and tribe. Empirical understanding of the subject matter is based on field study.

The study emphasized the participation of the researcher to explore the underlying causes in gathering in-depth knowledge. Research tools such as observations, interviews and narratives were employed to collect the primary sources of data. Primary sources also included official documents, and gazetteers. Employing this method helped in gathering various perspectives and understanding on the concerned topic. Secondary sources included newspapers, magazines, journals, internet, and other existing literatures.

Ethnographic fieldwork was also carried out during the study which is one of the essential methods of primary data collection. It involved building rapport with the respondents by the researcher. Interviews and discussions were initiated with the leaders and office bearers, stakeholders of various associations and organizations of the Ahom community as well as the civil society members, experts and Ahom priests. Apart from that content analysis of pamphlets, posters, and memorandum used in the process of their demand was also undertaken for in-depth information. This has tended to offer the dynamics of the current socio-political issue of the studied community.

Technological equipments such as cameras, audio and video recording was also employed to keep the data visually and technically concrete to create ease in data inputs. Along with this a field diary was maintained for recording daily observations during the course of field work.

1.8. Sample selection

Selection of sample is one of the essential methods of data collection. Snowball and purposive sampling were employed in the study. The respondents were purposively selected as the study was designed to explore the activities to initiate their project. Purposive sampling helped to identify the relevant respondents who could provide in-depth information towards learning a great deal about the research questions and the issues considered by the researchers to be of central importance (Emmel, 2013).Primarily our respondents were office bearers and members of ATASU as we have focused extensively on the work and activities of the said organization. We have also interviewed experts from the sister organizations of the ATASU and other community organizations. Since the study was grounded with ethnographic account; the role of associations and the community leaders is important to keep in track the process of their demand. The snowball sampling was used to find out the potential respondents and learn about the various networks of the Ahom associations which provided detailed understanding of their processes of asserting ethnicity in their demand for ST status. During the process of data collection objectivity was maintained with an effort to choose respondents without any biases.

1.9. Study Area

The area of the present study was undertaken in the district of Dhemaji in the state of Assam. The study was primarily concerned with the Ahom and their demand for ST status. Dhemaji is one of the districts situated in the remote corner of North East India, on the north bank of river Brahmaputra. The boundaries of the district are the hilly ranges of Arunachal Pradesh to the North and the East, Lakhimpur district in the West and the river Brahmaputra in the South. The district has two subdivisions, namely *Dhemaji* and *Jonai*, comprising of 5 blocks *(Dhemaji, Sissiborgaon,*

Murkongselek, Bordoloni and Machkhowa) with 1150 revenue villages. The district headquarter is at Dhemaji. It occupies an area of 3237 km² and has a population of 686,133 (census 2011). The study was conducted specifically in the Dhemaji town area which has a population of 12,816, consisting of 6510 male and 6302 female respectively. Looking at the ongoing social and political participation of the studied population, the selected area proved to be a very prolific location in carrying out the study.

1.10. Limitations of the Study

The study mainly focused on the process used by the ethnic groups and their engagement with the State and the larger society. Within a stipulated time it was difficult for the researcher to conduct interviews with all the respondents to know the larger scenario of their process. Information could be collected only from a few members of the associations due to the prevailing unstable political scenario. Resource constraint was also one of the limitations faced during the study.

CHAPTER TWO

Locating Ahoms in the History and Culture of Assam

2.1. Introduction

The state of present order of human relationship of various groups or broadly speaking the society in which we live is the historical conditions of the past. We become clueless in knowing the present social structure or human relationship without the knowledge of history. Evidently human group has come across a certain degree of historical experiences in the past. The present social, economic and political dynamics and the relationship among different groups and their assertion for shift in social status on many occasions can be historically contextualized. For a better and vivid understanding of the present demand of the Ahoms and its related issues can be partially analyzed, though not completely, by trying to understand their well documented history in the form of *Buranji*[3] of their existence and the contemporary momentous social forces centered on ethnicity. Their movement for ethnic assertion in many ways is rooted in their history of origin and belongingness within the state of Assam. Nandi (2015) argues that the ethnic movements display a timeless quest of people and their aspirations. This is reflected in their deep sense of history, where their present and future lie in the past. The past is continually constructed and re-constructed and each time it is contextualized within the contemporary socio-political setup. History of the Ahoms displays a composite culture of Assam and has contributed extensively towards the formation of the entire Assamese culture until the annexation of foreign power. Frequently, assertion of ethnicity can be seen as the

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[3] *Buranji* is a word purely of *Tai-Ahom* language. It is historical recorded information of the Ahoms. It happens to be the most precious gift, a sacred wealth and a legacy left by their forefathers. As the Vedas are to the Hindus, so are the *Buranjis* to the *Tai*-Ahoms. Gohain. R. (Ed.), (1994). *The Lost Trails, 1*. pp. 1-2, Ban-Ok Pup-lik Mioung-Tai, Dhemaji, Assam.

desire to regain lost positions in the social hierarchy for which are now determined to allocate resources like land, political share and other benefits attached to it. The case of Ahoms and their demand can be seen in this context locating in the colossal and diverse culture of Assam due to the historical conjectures of the Ahoms.

Therefore the preceding chapter is an attempt to comprehend the historical context of Assam encompassing the issues of ethnic resurgence by emphasizing the Ahoms.

2.2. Geographical Location

Geographically, Assam is in the extreme North-East frontier of India. It is situated between 22°19′ and 28°16′ North latitudes and 89°42′ and 97°12′ east longitudes covering an area of 78,432 sq. km. Located between the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas and the Patkai and Naga range, Assam shares borders with the hill States of Bhutan, Arunachal, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya in the vicinity of China and Tibet on the north, Burma on the east and the south and of Bangladesh on the west (Baruah, 1986, p. 4). Assam is connected to the rest of India via a 22-km land strip in West Bengal, popularly known as 'Chicken's Neck', near Siliguri corridor (Goswami, 2012). Therefore the strategic importance of Assam is highly emphasized due to its geographical location. Along with the modern Assam, earlier it had incorporated together with the districts of Jalpaiguri, Koch-Behar, Rangpur, Bogra, Mymensing, Decca, Tripura, and portions of Pabna and probably portion of Nepal (Barua, 1933). Moreover, it also covered large and varied regions comprising the entire valley of the Brahmaputra, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills, Mizo Hills and Sylhet (Baruah 1998). Additionally, the Naga Hills and the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), now Arunachal, were also parts of greater Assam. The

geographical extent of ancient Assam never remained static and it has undergone changes due to various political outcomes (Barpujari, 2014, p. 12).

Assam which is bounded on all sides by mountain ranges is habitat of different hill tribes, mostly of Mongoloid race such as the *Bhutias*, *Akas*, *Duflas* (*Nishis*), *Abors* (*Adis*), *Miris* (*Mishings*), and *Mishmis* who belonged to Tibeto-Burman linguistic group (Barpujari, 2014, p.2). These Mongoloid groups were often referred to as the *Kiratas* in the Vedas.

However, in the modern context the territory of Assam can be divided broadly into two valleys- the Brahmaputra valley or Assam Valley and the Surma Valley or Barak Valley (Baruah, 1986). These two valleys are plain in nature while there are also two hill divisions consist of two Autonomous Hill Districts viz: Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (Dutta, 1995, p. 1)

2.3. Different stages of the history of Assam

The formation and development of Assam is basically considered to be passed through three time periods, viz., the ancient, the medieval and the modern. The ancient period covers from the earliest time to the 12th century A.D., whereas the medieval period begins with the advent of the Ahoms, i.e., from 13th century to the annexation of the British till the 19th century (Rajguru, 1988, p.2). The modern period refers to the British rule and the succeeding phase of socio-cultural turbulence that can be witnessed in the present century.

2.3.1. Ancient Assam

According to the Provincial Gazetteer of Assam (1906), the early history of the province is exceptionally obscure. The population contains a certain mixture of Dravidian blood, but, the majority of its inhabitants were from the great hive of

Mongolian race in western China. In very ancient times it threw off a series of swarms that afterwards found their way into the frontier lands of India. The first mention of the country which we now call Assam is found in the epics and religious legends of Gangetic India like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, *Tantras* and religious scriptures like *Puranas* as 'Pragjyotishpur' (Provincial Gazetteer of Assam, 1906). In the later period it came to be known as Kamarupa (Barua Bahadur, 1993). Kamarupa witnessed a long and continuous rule of at least three royal dynasties in the historic period. The three indigenous royal dynasties were chronologically the Varman dynasty of Pusyavarman, the Mlechchha dynasty of Salastambha and the Pala dynasty of Brahmapala. These three dynasties ruled from 4th century A.D. to 12th century A.D. After the fall of the Palas, in the early part of the 12th century A.D., the history of Pragjyotisha - Kamarupa again appears to be disconnected. The fragmentary accounts of kings and events continued till the coming of the Ahoms in the medieval period (Baruah, 2015, p. 29)

2.3.2. Medieval Assam

After the fall of the Palas two major events occurred in the early part of the 13th century. One was the beginning of a series of invasions from the west led by the Turko-Afgan rulers of Bengal and the other was the foundation of a kingdom by the *Tai- Shans* in the south-eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley (Barauh, 1986). The two major events that took place in the history of Assam in this century was the beginning of invasions by the Turko-Afgan rulers and the establishment of a kingdom by the *Tai-Shans* called Ahoms (ibid). Before the Ahoms came there were also many independent tribal kingdoms like *Chutias*, the *Morans*, the *Barahis* and the *Kacharis* ruling in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley. Each of these kingdoms was independent of their own. The Chutia kings ruled the country to the east of the

Subansiri and the Disang; while to the south and the south east, small Bodo tribes enjoyed a precarious independence. To the west there was the Kachari kingdom on the south bank of the Brahmaputra extended half-way across the Nowgong District. Besides there were a number of petty chiefs called *Bhuyans* (Gait, 1906).

On the other hand, was the western part of Assam, which retained the old name of the kingdom of Kamarupa later, came to be known as Kamata. In this part a line of Hindu kings were ruling with their capital at Kamatapur called the Koch kingdom in the sixteenth century. The kingdom included the Goalpara and the Kamrup districts of the modern Assam Valley besides a portion of northern Bengal and Mymensing to the east of the Brahmaputra (Barua, 1933). In due course of time, none of these kingdoms lasted for long. Subsequently, they were overtaken by the Ahoms who later became the lord of the land by way of consolidation. Therefore, they could fight against invaders from the west, whom they repulsed in a series of battles (Baruah, 1986). But in the later stage, there were incidences of various internal disorders and turmoil during their rule. This paved the way for the Burmese invasions followed by the annexation of Assam by the British East-India Company under the treaty of Yandaboo in the year 1826 (Goswami, 2012).

2.3.3. Modern period

The modern period starts with the advent of the British colonialism in Assam. In this period many changes occurred after the colonization of the region. Changes could be observed in the social, political and economic spheres and importantly in the educational field with the introduction of new form of governance and administrative measures. One of the significant changes occurred in the Ahom kingdom of Assam after the invasion of British was the land ownership system. The British replaced the *Paik* system with Ryotwari tenure which introduced land ownership (Ghosh, 2018).

But within a few years of their occupation of Assam, the British had laid the foundations of a modern state by surveying the land, settling revenue collection, creating a bureaucratic of systems, codifying the law and instituting law courts, introducing western education, establishing industries and a communication network and finally exposing the state to the outside world (Goswami, 2012, p. 197). Consequently, the exposure to outside world has changed the traditional system of administration and the outlook of the people. Finally socio-political awareness came into being which found expression in the formation and growth of various organizations by the elite sections belonging to different ethnic groups. The modern period also reflects the awareness and increase consciousness of one's ethnic identity developed from the state's mechanism to categorize population on the basis of religion, creation of the binaries of insider and outsider to maintain the status quo. Therefore, ethnicity has become more pronounced to protect one's own culture, traditions and political security amidst social instability growing out of various political gimmicks by the state.

2.4. The Ahoms and origin of the Terminology of Assam

The origin of the word Assam is of recent times and also quite contentious. It can be traced back to the Ahoms, a *Shan* tribe who entered Assam in the thirteenth century. Opinions differ among scholars regarding the origin of the name Assam. It is known by different names in the Epics, *Puranic* and early historical literatures (Barpujari, 2014, p.1). Ancient Assam was known as 'Pragjyotisha' in the *Mahabharat* and as 'Kamarupa' in *Purans* and *Tantras*. The term '*Prag*' means former or eastern and '*jyotisha*' refers to a star, astrology, shining. Thus 'Pragjyotisha' may be taken to mean the City of Eastern Astrology.[4] The name

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[4] For details see, Sir Edward Gait *"A History of Assam"*, 1906. Calcutta Thacker and Co.

Kamarupa is considered quite younger than the former, mention of which can be found in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudra Gupta in the 4th century A.D. and in the early *Puranas.* The term *Asam* is attributed to the Ahoms, and some believe that its 'uneven' (*asam*) topography, comprising hills and plains, gave it the name Assam. There is no any satisfactory explanation by historians as to how the term *Asam* with variants came to be applied to the tribe (Kakati, 1941, p. 2).

Sir E.A. Gait, however, opines that the Ahom called them *Tai*, and it is not clear how they came to be known by their present name. He also suggests that the term *Asam* in the sense of "unequalled" or "peerless" was applied to the *Shans* by the local tribes in token of their admiration of the way in which the *Shans* first conquered and then conciliated them (Kakati, 1941, p.2). With a slight modification of Gait's conclusion, Kakati added that *Asama*, peerless may be a later day Sankritization of earlier form like *Acham*. In *Tai*, *cham* means 'to be defeated' Phukan, (2006) is also of the same opinion and thus he writes,

> *"Even the name of the land known earlier as Kamarupa got its name ASAM after the Ahom who were called ASAM by almost all the tribes inhabiting the vast region that extends from Southern China to India's North East. This name in its Anglicized form ASSAM still continues and is well-known today. As this name Assam is derived from ASAM (the Ahom), some Brahminical pundits who find it hard to accept have been trying to trace its root to Sanskrit Asom (meaning uneven or unequal) so as to impose their wily intelligence over the majority of population of the state." (J.N. Phukan, 2006, p.1).*

Baden Powell (1896) was of the opinion that the name *Asam* was probably derived from the Bodo word *'Ha-com'* which means 'low or level' country. It appears that the *Vamshabali* of the Koch kings, the *Yogini Tantra* and the *Vaishnava* literature applied the term *Asam* to the Shan conquerors rather than to the country which they occupied. So it is evident that the word is derived from the designation applied to the Ahoms (Baruah, 1986). Though there are different theories and interpretation regarding the origin, it is noteworthy to mention that the present name was not in use prior to the arrival of the Shan tribe of Ahoms.[5] Gait (1906) has mentioned that the British used *Asam* before finally settling on Assam; though Grierson claims that the form Assam is in English (as cited in Bhuyan, 1934). The present day term Assam which is in use is thus a hybrid form. Therefore, Bhuyan states that no place name has been subject to such variations in meaning and etymology as the term by which we designate now (Bhuyan, 1934, p. 1).

2.5. The Ahoms and their Origin

The history of the origin of the Ahoms is somewhat blurred, similar to that of the other remote tribes inhabiting in various parts of India. As Yasmin Saikia (2006), has asserted, *Tai* Ahom is neither a defined community, nor its history of origin is clearly delineated (Saikia, 2006, p. 34). From the writings of the majority of the scholars and their opinions suggest that they are the descendants of the *Shans* or *Tais* of South-East Asia (Acharyya, 2003, p. 40). Edward Gait has also pointed out that they are the offshoots of the great *Tai* or *Shan* race of Mongolian origin who now inhabits the vast regions of Southeast Asia. They belonged to the northern and eastern hill tracts of Upper Burma and Western Yunnan, where they formed a group of states

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[5] For details see The Name 'Assam – Ahom', Selected Papers, Bangla-Nibandha-Chayana, Suniti Kumar Chetterji, vol. 11, Peoples Publishing House, New Delhi, May, 1979.

(Gait, 1906, p. 87). They were scattered in different areas having national appellation of 'Shan' in Myanmar/Burma, 'Thai' in Thailand, 'Lao' in Laos, 'Dai' and 'Zhuang' in China, 'Tay-Thai' in Vietnam. However the Ahom chronicles have no specific mention about the particular branch of the *Tai* ((Barpujari, 2007, p. 49)). Padmeswar Gogoi (1968) asserts that the '*Tai*' is a generic name denoting a great branch of the Mongoloid population of Asia. According to him the *Tais* were the descendants of the *Huang-Ti* Dynasty and their original homeland probably was in Huang-Ho valley (Gogoi, 1968, p. 32). They are now mainly found in the Indo-Chinese peninsula. Thus Padmeswar Gogoi writes that,

> *"It has been brought to our notice by recent researches that the 'Tais' were ruling in Central Eastern China with a comparatively advanced culture long before the formation of the so called 'Chinese race'. The Chinese race is the product of a gradual process of amalgamation of many separate peoples belonging to different races including Tai"* (Gogoi, 1968, p. 3).

Presently the habitat of the *Tai* people extends from Assam in the west to Kwangsi and Hainan in the east and from interior of Yunnan in the north to the southernmost extremity of Thailand (Siam) in the South. The *Tai* are a very ancient race and like other such races their origin is shrouded in mystery. Accounts of their origin and development in the early period by modern writers are largely based on legendary accounts contained in ancient books (ibid). It is stated that they came from *Kieng Sen Mao-Long*, the capital of the state of *Mong Mao* or *Mong Mao-Lung*, assumed to be a part of Upper Burma and known as 'Shan' irrespective of their divisions and sub-divisions. The term '*Shan*' applied to the Ahoms of Assam does not give any idea to which they belonged nor the exact geographical location from where

they came. This is because the European literature used the term in a broader parameter and related it to the *Tai* of south-western Yunnan by calling them 'Chinese Shan' and differentiated them from the 'Burmese *Shan'* or the *Shan* of Myanmar (Barpujari, 2007, p. 49). They entered the plains of Assam in the early thirteenth century through the *Patkai* range under the leadership of *Sukapha*, the first king of the Ahoms in Assam (Provincial Gazetteer of Assam, 1906). They first settled in a place called *Mungdun-chun-kham* which is now known as Assam, perhaps derived from the *Tai* word *Ha-sham* - the land of the Shams. Initially they occupied whole of the Brahmaputra valley situated in the eastern most part of Assam and in course of time Ahoms established their kingdom extended towards west by the 16th century. Eventually by the end of 17th century, the Ahom rulers conquered a large area extending from *Sadiya* in the east to *Goalpara* in the west. It is a fact that the genesis of the Ahom kingdom was formed by different pre-Ahom chieftains, big and small aboriginal kingdoms like the *Borahis*, the *Morans*, the *Chutias*, the *Kacharis*, etc. Sukapha brought these groups together and unified them during his regime by policy of peace and conciliation. They ruled whole of Assam valley continuously for a long period of six hundred years. During their rule, they had confronted several ups and downs and it became worst towards the end of their regime despite having a high degree of administrative quality. It was until 1826, the Ahom reign ended when they were annexed by the British East India Company under the Treaty of Yandaboo (Barpujari, 2007, p. 363). The period from which the Ahoms ruled Assam is called as the medieval period, i.e., from 13th century to the beginning of 19th century.[6]

Number of theories popular in the form of legends and folk tales exists regarding the origin of Ahom and is still shrouded in mystery. The origin and early

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[6] For details see, Tripathi. C. D. Aspects of the Medieval History of Assam, 2002. p. 6-7.

history of the *Tais* still remain largely speculative, the larger group to which the Ahom belong (Barpujari, 2007, p. 50). According to Gait (1906), there are two version of the origin of the Ahom kings, one that is told by the *Deodhais*, which resembles very closely with that of the still preserved tale amongst the Shans of Upper Burma. The other is a modification of it, invented by the Brahmins with a view to encourage their conversion to Hinduism. But there is no consensus among scholars about their origin. According to the *Deodhai*[7] (the Ahom priest), *Lengdon* or *Indra*, from heavenly body, directed his sons, *Khunglung* and *Khunlai*, to descent to earth and established a kingdom. Both of them were presented with an idol called *Somdeo*, a magic sword, two drums for invoking divine aid, and four cocks for telling omen. *Khunglung*, being the elder, was given the responsibility of the position of king, and *Khunlai*, the younger, became his councilor. They built a town in *Mungrimungram* (an uninhabited and desolate country), where the *Tais*, or *Shans*, inhabited without a king. The Ahoms claim *Mungrimungram* as their original habitat and posit that *Khunlai*, their younger progenitor ruled over this kingdom (Baruah, 1986). The last died childless, and Sukapha, who was born at *Maulung*, one of the descendents of the line of *Khunglung*, was sent to fill the vacant throne. Sukapha quarreled with one of his brothers, and after stealing the *Somdeo* left the country in about 1215 A.D and fled to Assam. On the other hand according to some chronicles *Somdeo* was given to Sukapha by his grand-mother at the time of his departure from Mong-Mao in Yunnan where he had been brought up (Gogoi, 1976, p. 10). He reached the upper region of the Brahmaputra in around 1228 A.D. and laid the foundation of the Ahom kingdom in Assam (Sadir, 1914, p. 338-339). The Ahom kingdom was bounded by the Buri-

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[7] The term *Deodhai* refers to the priests of the old Ahom religion. They hold a high position in the Ahom social-structure who presides over every socio-religious activities.

Dihing, the Brahmaputra, the Dikhow and the Naga hills, at present parts of the districts of Dibrugarh and Sivsagar. They established the capital of their kingdom in the year 1253 at *Charaideo* and declared it as a separate district in the recent time which is a part of Sivsagar district at present. Thereafter, the Brahmaputra valley came under the rule of the Ahom kingdom. The end of Ahom rule came with the passing away of Rudra Singh in 1714 although their rule continued till 1830 (Tripathi, 2002). The Brahminical account of their origin also attributes divine ancestry to the Ahom kings as evident in the Assamese chronicles (Phukan, 1998).

2.6.   Religion of the Ahoms

Religion has been defined with a wide range of understanding and theorized by different scholars in different ways. However, there has been no universally accepted definition of religion. One of the classical understanding of religion is the definition put forwarded by Emile Durkheim in his work "*Elementary Forms of Religious Life*" (1912), where he defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, i.e., things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them".[8] Religion has always been an inevitable element of human society since the existence of mankind. Human life is governed by religious practices in many ways. A person's birth till his death is full of religious activities for which they believe that their life is governed by external forces. Likewise the Ahoms also believe that they are born out of some heavenly body. Before the Ahom rulers were converted into Hinduism, they had their own religious practices and customs, which

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[8] Durkheim, E. (1964). *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, p.34.* London.

are practiced by few even today in their daily life. "*Lit Lai Peyn Ka Ka*"[9] one of the most important religious scripture speaks of an all pervading, omnipresent Supreme God which is without any shape (Phukan, 2011, p. 1). There are different interpretation and explanation about their religion by different scholars; however their religion is based on certain fundamental beliefs in supernatural powers. They believed in an omnipotent God (*pha-tu-ching*) and *(pha-la-bet),* or simply *'Phra'* which created the whole world (Barua, 1985; Phukan, 2011, p. 1). It is one of the most important religious practices of the Ahoms, regarded as the ultimate creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world and also believed in the presence of a hierarchy of gods which have their origin from the Great God (Phukan, 2011, p. 2). According to Gogoi, prior to their migration to Assam, they were followers of the *Tao* religion. '*Tao'* or '*Teh'* means unlimited, unending or the entire cosmos. This '*Tao'* in *Taosim* was the "*Fra-tra"* or *''Fura-tera''* the supreme supernatural power of the Ahoms (Gogoi, 2006, p. 10). They worshipped their ancestors with great devotion besides worshipping the various gods with elaborate ceremony. The worship and propitiation of gods and spirits was basically for their protection, general welfare, and cure from illness and evils (Gohain, 2011). *Um-pha* is another very important religious practice of the Ahoms, which believes in the worship of heavenly Gods and Goddesses (Phukan, 2011, p. 2). The religious rituals were observed mainly by three members of priestly clans, namely- the *Changbun (Deodhai),* the *Mo'hung (Mohan)* and the *Mo'plong (Bailung)* during the reign of the Ahom kings. Even today the priestly clans perform the *Tai* Ahom religious ceremonies. Among the religious ceremonies the

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[9] "*Lit Lai Peyn Ka Ka*"is the most important religious scripture of the Ahoms and is read in almost all the rituals. The manuscript is available with Chao Tileswar Mohan of Patsaku Parijat village.

Phralung or *Phuralung* worship, *Saipha Puja*, and *Rik-Khan*[10] were prominent in the early days of their rule. They believed that in this world all visible objects have invisible spirits or gods presiding over them. Hence the forests, the rivers, the hills, the paddy fields, and even the households had their presiding deities (Gogoi, 1976, p. 12). Gogoi also notes that the Ahom people were generally not image worshippers in their own religion unlike the Hindus. According to the *Buranjis,* the original Ahom settlers practiced a magico-religious cult of ancestor worship and animism (Guha, 1983, p. 30).

The Ahoms consider *Lengdon* as the lord of heaven and ascribe themselves to be heaven by born and the kings are the direct descendants of *Lengdon* (Barua, 1930, pp. 3-4). After the conquest of the Brahmaputra valley they introduced their various gods and goddesses and ancestral spirits to be revered and worshipped. According to Barua (1905), traces of Buddhist influence could also be found in the religious practices of the Ahoms. On the other hand, Gurdon (1908) said that Ahoms were not Buddhists. They were believed to be the followers of *Taoism* (Buragohain, 1956; Gogoi, 1984).

Though they used to practice their own religion in the beginning but after their migration they came into contacts with the local tribes who were already under the influence of Aryan Hindu religion. The religious outlook of the Ahoms was quite different from other religions because they were found to be holding flexibility in the adoption of other religious cults. Migrating into the valley of diverse beliefs and cults, the Ahoms had to maintain an eclectic view of religion and showed due importance to every religion that comes to their way. To put it in a precise manner, the Ahoms had

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[10] For details see, Gogoi, P. (1976). *Tai Ahom Religion and Customs,* p. 15. Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.

non-sectarian attitude and freedom of religious belief. Therefore it can be argued that the traditional religion of the Ahoms did not come into conflict with any other local cult in Assam or even with Islam at a later stage (Gait, 1887. p. 142). With the process of assimilation and acculturation with the various social groups, they have adopted their religious practices as well as they retained their own religious rituals. The religion for the Ahoms became a tool to unite groups of people having different belief systems.

It is premised that there is a 'total loss' of identity and structural change among the Ahoms (Gogoi, 2006). According to him, the *Tai* Ahom or in other words the Ahom kings continued their ritualistic practices and traditional religious worships until the end of their reign in the Brahmaputra valley but it diminished to a great extent in its gravity. This was the result of the acceptance of Hinduism by the Ahom monarchs in the seventeenth century. The liberal attitudes of the Ahom kings have paved the way for the Hindus to patronize their religious rites in a large scale. Subjected to change like every element of human culture, religion has also under gone changes among the Ahom in due course of time. The large number of Ahoms has become followers of Sankaradeva in the 15th and 16th century, the Neo-*Vaishnavite* saint of Assam who became one of the pillars of *Asomiya* culture (Baruah, 2017). At present, most of the Ahom population practices Hindu religion, being adherents of a variety of mutually exclusive religious sects. So there are *Saktas*, *Saivites*, *Vaisnavites*, *Mahapurusias* (followers of Sankaradeva), Damodarias (followers of Damodardeva) and Moamarias (followers of Aniruddhadeva), each with their own prayer houses (Terwiel, 1996, p. 280). But of course, some people have not abandoned their traditional religion, albeit syncretized with Hinduism. Moreover many among them practice Buddhism as well. Since the 19th century serious attempts

are being made by the Ahoms to reintroduce their aged old religion in the public sphere to delink them from the greater Hindu religion. This project is being carried by the Ban Ok, founded in Dhemaji (North Lakhimpur District) in the year 1981, a formal organization which created a new religion *Phra Lung*. *Phra* means a Buddha like figure and *Lung* means a *Sangha* (community). *Phra Lung* means the community of worshippers of *Phra*. *Phra Lung* combines elements of *tantric* Hinduism with Thai Buddhism and local ancestor worship. The production of *Phra Lung* thus gives the form and discourse of the *Tai* Ahom politics and its movement for revival of its ethnicity (Saikia, 2006, p. 35). The available data, however, do not lead to any definite conclusion with regard to the religion of the Ahom (Buragohain, 1994, p. 58).Such reinvention of traditional exercise flares up the ground for their various demands in the contemporary period.

2.7. The Hindu Influence on Ahoms

During the long rule of six hundred years, the Ahoms underwent a continuous process of cross-cultural adjustments and modifications. In the process many of their traditional practices are preserved while some of them were influenced by the Hinduization process. The layers of the changes were visible in the socio-cultural levels such as language, religion, customs, art, architecture and literature. Initially the Ahom rulers followed a policy of non-intervention with the religious beliefs of the local people and maintained in parallel, for all practical purposes, their own beliefs and customs (Sharma, 2011, p. 244). There was no appreciable departure in the religion of the Ahoms for the first two hundred years. They were free from religious inhibition and caste prejudices (Phukan, 2006, p. 45). They continued their traditional religion which involved blood sacrifices in their ritual religious celebrations, observations and performances (Buragohain, 1996).The process of Hinduization

among the Ahoms was gradual and complex in nature. The process has changed the whole scenario of the traditional Ahoms' social set up and structure bringing change into their administration and socio-political aspects. However the land and the people conquered by the Ahoms were predominantly Hindu by religion since the process of Hinduization was already there in North East India (ibid). In their long history of rule they have come into contact with Hinduism at several times and were undoubtedly influenced to a large extent. The system of inter-marriages of the Ahom society with the local people can be considered as one of the significant factors influencing their religion (Gohain, 2011, p. 75). They were first influenced by the Brahmins under the rule of *Sudangpha* who became king in 1397. *Sudangpha* was brought up in a Brahmin family and thus under his influence, many Hindu rites and ceremonies began to be observed and the seeds of Hinduism were sown in the Ahom kingdom (Gait, 1887; Buragohain, 1996). In this manner the Brahmanas came into the Ahom court. This has brought the first official entrance of Hinduism to the Ahom court with the worship of *Lakshmi-Narayana-Salagram*, or of God Vishnu. It received equal status with the *chomdeo* the guardian deity of the Ahom king. This has made easy access for the Brahminical tradition to be accepted and also to find a sacred place in the Ahom court (Phukan, 2006, p. 47). Subsequently there was a far reaching influence in the political and cultural history of the Ahoms. However, after adopting Hinduism they did not abandon their original belief or traditional tribal habits altogether and immediately (Baruah, 1986). But before this the Ahoms assimilated the Naga, *Moran*, and *Borahi* neighbors and later, large sections of the *Chutia* and *Kachari* tribes through a process called *Ahomisation* (Guha, 1983, p. 12). He also noted that the non-Ahom tribes who were described by the Ahoms as *Kha* people (meaning 'slave' or 'culturally inferior foreigner') ceremonially adopted various Ahom clans which are

evident from the Ahom chronicles. The *Ahomisation* process was later followed by the Hinduization, which involved changes in the language, mode of dwelling, food habits, traditions, and customs and also in various aspects of life. Following the Hindu tradition, the Ahom kings started to assume their name in Hindu and as such *Suhungmung* or *Dihingia* Raj (1497) became the first king to assume the Hindu title *Swarga-Narayan*, a sanskrit equivalent of *Tai*-Ahom *Chao-Pha*. According to Gait (1887), after the reign of *Suhungmung* the Ahom king prefer to use their Hindu names in the official records. The kings who were traditionally known with the title of *Chao-Pha* were replaced by the Aryan title *Swargadeo*. It was Jayadhvaj Singha, the first Ahom king who formally accepted Hinduism. Hindu influence on the Ahom reached its turning point during the rule of the king *Hso-Khrung-Hha* or Rudra Singha who brought Krishnaram Bhattacharya, a Brahmin *Sakta* form Bengal (Phukan, 2006, p. 48). Becoming of Hinduism as the national religion of the Ahoms happened during Sib Singh (1714-44) and those who adhered to the old tribal beliefs and ceremonies was regarded as a separate and inferior class (Eliot, 1910, p. 1163). It has to be noted that, after Hinduization the Brahmins had religious hegemony over the Ahom kings, and treated the converted Hinduised Ahoms according to their convenience. Most importantly, despite becoming Hindu no Ahom could be or was admitted to the top rank in the hierarchical ladder and was positioned in a low rank (Buragohain, 1996). The vigorous proselytisation of the Ahoms by the Brahmins and clever political strategies had significant influence in the Ahom court for the spread of their faith. Hinduization of the Ahoms was the logical process towards sophistication of the rudimentary formation of the Ahom state (Buragohain, 1996). Importantly, the priestly classes of the Ahom like the *Mohan*, *Deodhai* and *Bailung,* mostly remained outside the purview of Hinduism and continued to express their unwillingness to

come into the fold of the Brahmin Hindus (Phukan, 2010, p. 14). The Ahoms who were considered as the unifying force to create a spirit of oneness among the people of Assam gradually lost their religion, language and culture under the influence of Hinduism, a religion of the Aryan origin (Gait, 1887; Gogoi, 1968). However their tradition, culture and religion can be found to be preserved by some priestly classes in rituals, marriages and festivals which reflect the Ahom style of living.

2.8.   State Formation during the Ahom Rule

The period from the 13th to the 16th century saw the emergence and development of a large number of tribal political formations in North-East India. The *Chutiya*, the *Tai*-Ahom, the *Koch*, the *Dimasa (Kachari)*, the *Tripuri,* the *Meithei (Manipuri),* the *Khasi (Khyriem)* and the *Pamar (Jaintia)* -all these tribes crystallized into rudimentary state formations by the 15th century (Guha, 1983, p. 5). Among the ethnic communities, the Ahoms stood as the most distinctive community who formed state in the Brahmaputra valley and in the neighborhood in the early and middle ages (Nath, 2005, p. 83). The case of *Tai*-Ahom and its state needs a careful investigation due to its long rule of six hundred years who has made remarkable influence in the history of medieval Assam. A centralized administrative and political system had been the most important feature of the Ahom kingdom for such an exceptionally long period of rule. However, administration in ancient Assam was largely dominated by the powerful monarchies provided by the Hindu polity of the mainstream of Indian culture. But the improved economic system of the monarchy was unable to reach the rock bottom of all the tribal societies in the east. Therefore, the Ahoms took the initiative to build up administrative machinery, elaborate and efficient enough to accommodate itself to the tribal and semi-tribal societies of the valley (Baruah, 1986, p. 386). The Ahom government was mixed with both monarchic and aristocratic,

exhibiting a system highly artificial, regular and novel, however defective in other aspects (Guha, 1983). The right of hereditary was generally from the male line in the Ahom kingdom.

The Ahom kingdom was ruled by a king called *Swargadeo*. The king was the source of all power, but he had to abide by the recommendations of the Council of Ministers. In the hierarchy of the Ahom kingdom the Council of Ministers enjoyed the status next to the king. These ministers were called as *Patra Mantris*. They consisted of the *Buragohain, Bargohain, Barpatra Gohain, Barbarua and the Barphukan* (Baruah, 1986, p. 389). It should be mentioned that the backbone of the Ahom kingdom rests on the *Paik* or *Khel* system. In this system, every adult male between the ages 16 to 50 was registered as a *paik* for State service. The *paiks* used to render all kinds of services to the state ranging from agriculture to industrial work and even military services (ibid). Basically there was no system of collecting land tax in the Ahom administration. The kingdom was largely dependent on rice cultivation; in fact the Ahoms are the first to introduce wet rice cultivation in Assam.

The formation of state by the Ahom king Sukapha and his subjects was the presence of considerably high degree of civilization with ideas and institutions of their own in the fields of polity, language, religion and society (Nath, 2005, p. 84). Therefore, they could subjugate the regional states of the *Chutias*, *Kacharis* and *Koches* and expanded its territory in all directions of the Brahmaputra valley (Gait, 1906). Uniformity in social, cultural and economy can be attained by the model of a state with a defined geographical and political territory. The Ahoms in Assam created such platform that supplied the structure by way of subjugation of the various local tribes and acquisition and annexation of their territories into the Ahom state (Nath,

2005, p. 87). The form of state prevailed in Ahom kingdom was traditional in its nature and functions. The Ahom state met its downfall due to various internal social and religious conflicts and also due to the invasions from the mighty Mughal emperors. However, they left a permanent legacy to shape a greater Assamese society of the modern period.

2.9. Contribution of the Ahoms to the Assamese Society and Culture

Kings or royal dynasties are remembered by posteriority not for their achievements in territorial aggrandizement but for their welfare measures and the contributions they make to the progress of society and culture (Baruah, 2005, p. 75). One such kingdom or dynasty that can be referred to is the *Tai* Ahom whose contribution towards building Assamese culture is noteworthy. Before the annexation of the British, the *Tai* Ahom created Assam as a separate entity as an independent kingdom (Nath, 2010, p. 11). The process of acculturation was a very important factor in making a composite Assamese society by the Ahoms (Gogoi, 1964; Phukan, 2010). The acculturation has been so strong that it is difficult to identify the Ahom and non-Ahom cultural practices in Assam now-a-days. In fact, they were the first to give Assam a political unity and a culture equally acceptable to all sections of the Assamese people (Nath, 2010, p. 11). Sukapha, the Ahom king after settling permanently in the Brahmaputra valley adopted a two-fold policy of force and friendship with his far sighted quality of leadership (Baruah, 2005). Battles and peace were used according to the situations where it was necessary. The liberal attitude of the *Tai* Ahoms accepted other religions and adopted Assamese as a language through which they could give shape to a larger Assamese identity encompassing all ethnic groups. The important factors that helped the *Tai* Ahoms in accelerating the process of social formation and integration were the possession of improved skill as

cultivators, their knowledge of astrological calculations and density of water as well as their possession of war horses (ibid). Thus the *Tai*-Ahom emerged as a very stable and settled ruling class and contributed to the consolidation of the concept of Assam encompassing all the aspects of a society such as literary, cultural, linguistic, social, political, economic etc (Nath, 2010). Dance, music and *Bhaonas*[11] are some of the art forms that were practiced in the *Satras*[12] and also in the *Namghars*[13] as well as the Bihu dance provided impetus to give distinctiveness to Assamese culture. Hence under the patronage of the Ahom rulers a united Assamese society was created with the unification of various groups belonging to different religion and cultural identity.

2.10. Conclusion

Placing Ahoms in the history of Assam it is observed that their history of origin is not confined to a specific geographical location. Legendary mythologies and historical records are available yet no one is certain as to the precise state from which their king Sukapha came to Assam. Despite having contrasting views of historians regarding the origin of the Ahoms, it has been perceived that the historians arrived to a conclusion stating their existence confined mainly to the southwestern Yunnan. Broadly speaking, a commonly held believe among scholars is that they have migrated from South-East Asia. The Ahoms claim *Mungrimungram* as their original homeland (Baruah, 1986, p. 220). Crossing through the Patkai range the Ahoms entered the upper Brahmaputra valley and made a permanent settlement. Expedition towards Assam was not an easy task as the Ahoms had to confront various tribes. After subjugating the existing groups of people the process of assimilation took place among the Ahoms resulting into exchanges of cultures. The liberal outlook of the

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[11] Bhaona refers to dramatical performances.
[12] Satras are the religious institutions introduced by Sankaradeva in the 16th century.
[13] Namghars are the prayer halls of Assam.

Ahoms in many ways helped them to establish their kingdom through which they could rule for long six hundred years.

If we look into the history of the Ahoms they have come across many conflicts with the existing tribes and with the outsiders. They had to confront repeated Mughal invasion but they could finally push them back and prevented them from further invasion. Another very significant conflict in the history of the Ahom rule was the Maomaria revolt against the Ahom kings and its administration which devastated the kingdom to a great extent. Taking advantage of this the British which already had some control over the region gradually took control over the whole Assam valley.

Greatly influenced by the Aryans, Ahoms had lost many of their earlier traditions mainly due to the process of assimilation and acculturation. The Aryan elements largely moulded by the influence of Hinduism, the Ahoms gradually accepted the Hindu religion; except few priestly class maintaining the practices of their age old religious traditions. Another important change that took place among the Ahoms was upon the language giving way to the Aryan Assamese language, developed out of Sanskrit as the base. Thus, the process of Aryanization influenced the Ahoms in a number of aspects, such as language, social, religion and even political.

CHAPTER THREE

Assertion of Indigeneity and Ethnic Reconstruction by the Ahoms

3.1. Introduction

Ethnic assertion among different ethnic groups and communities in every nation-state is a widespread character growing out of consciousness both at the individual and group level. The growth of struggle against the state for legitimate share of socio-political rights over resources on ethnic lines has become a widespread phenomenon in the contemporary world. The assertions based on respective social, cultural, linguistic and political reasoning have become very expressive in the 1980s (Shimray, 2001, p. 3676). Such circumstances is not only confined to the underdeveloped or developing countries, but can also be attributed to the developed countries every now and then. Factors responsible for ethnic assertions and contestations in the society are social, cultural, economic and political problems. Ethnicity has been a source to a series of major issues of social disharmony in India besides being the reality of everyday life. In case of North-East India in general and Assam in particular it is not mere academic discourse of civil society but literally a life and death question. In fact, this part of the country over the years has been dominated by ethnicity and the discourse surrounded with it (Gohain, 2001, p. 1).

The act of asserting one's ethnicity is motivated by many factors perceived in a plural society like Assam. The state being a land of diverse cultural groups since time immemorial has witnessed troubles coming from several ethnic groups and communities in the pre-colonial and post-colonial period. Intensification of the ethnic issues is more due to failure of the state machinery which has failed to address the aspirations of various indigenous groups and communities after independence. The existence of diversity has made the political scenario more complex which cannot be

dealt easily; this has created enough space for all the groups for their ethnic expression. The increase in the assertion of ethnicity often finds expression in political domination, economic exploitation and ideological domination (Goswami, 2001, p. 123). Mobilization of group members becomes very essential in the assertion of ethnicity. Therefore, to bring awareness of their ethnicity among masses an elite section emerged. They become the architect in designing and construction of a particular notion of ethnicity through their engagement with the larger social structure. Besides the construction of ethnicity, political power, economic benefits, and social status between competing elites become the major determinants in the emergence of elites (Brass, 2009, p. 89, as cited in Hutchinson and Smith). Elite groups and classes often play a very crucial role in mobilizing the ethnic groups (Brass, 1991).

Imagined communities[14] based on citizenship of nation-states have become obsolete under the pressure from globalization storms. New forms of imagined community based on primordial loyalties, ethnicity, local community, language and other culturally concrete forms are increasingly emphasized for any ethnic assertion (Santasombat, 2001, p. 152). It is observed that new imagined communities are largely constructed and designed by the elite which is further strengthen by the participation and contribution of the members of respective groups.

The category of tribe for the assertion of ethnicity in the past decades has begun to be an important means for acquisition of resources and share of power. In fact, justice today requires both redistribution of resources and cultural recognition and neither alone is sufficient (Fraser, 1998). Example of such an instance can be

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[14] Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* New York: Verso,

found among many groups who wish to be determined as ST for various constitutional safeguards with the acquisition of resources and claims for the recognition of cultural differences. The Ahoms of Assam are one of those groups in the process of reconstruction of their identity as tribe. Their demand for the status of ST has been continuing since colonial period. They claim that they belonged to the 'indigenous tribes' of Assam. To support their claim they have been engaged in multiple socio-cultural activities to legitimize their demand. They have been mobilizing the population with a constant reinterpretation of history and reinvention abandoned social practices.

The beginning of British rule has not only triggered sweeping changes in its polity and economy but has also transformed the socio-cultural relations that existed prior to Ahom rule in Assam. The transformation has added much to its inequalities in the social system of the state. Eventually groups of people belonging to different social status failed to find any opportunity to adapt in the modern system brought by the colonial rulers. Escalations of ethnic divisions under the new administrative system led to more and more struggle for resources on the basis of defined category of population in the later period. The following section is devoted to emphasize the historical circumstances that led to the breeding ground for such a demand of the Ahoms in the contemporary period.

3.2. Genesis of the demand for ST status

In recent times what is observed that the demand for the ST status has gained much concerned in the media, civil society discourse and debates in the academic circle. The impact of it is visible both in the social and political spheres since the past few decades due to protests movements of various kinds related to the demands. Over the periods, the politics of tribal recognition are escalating in volumes and has become

volatile across India. Suitable example can be drawn from the violent outbreaks in Rajasthan and Assam in 2007 in exhibiting the rising demands for ST status (Middleton, 2013, p. 13). On the other hand, neither the issue has been solved nor any significant step is seen to be taken by any successive governments to resolve it. It has been observed that more attention is put forward for the identification of tribe than with their definition in India (Xaxa, 1999, p. 3589). With this backdrop it becomes imperative to know how this kind of demands has come into existence in the past and continuing in its process in the contemporary period. The demand for ST status is deep rooted in the State formation during the British rule in India. A history of oppression and discrimination, a sense of socio-cultural and economic deprivation lasting for centuries, feelings of mistreatment and neglect of their constitutional rights under the democratic rule have contributed to the quest for ST status among many ethnic groups in the multilingual and multicultural state of Assam. It is obvious that those who suffer from deprivation make efforts to obviate factors responsible for their plight (Shah, 1991, p. 601). Sabar, (2012) noted that the reasons behind the demand for tribal status by certain communities vary and range from political gain to reservation in Parliament and educational institutes, although not in all cases. In this context the acceptance of recommendations of the Mandal Commission and to extend reservation to economically backward classes by the V.P Singh led government has also escalated the politics of recognition in the early 1990s in India. Consequently a new category has emerged known as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) unfolding and transforming the nature of ethnic demands (Kapila, 2008, p. 124). Thus the ground on which their demand has evolved is manifold. Ethnically designated resources and rights for a particular group is one of a significant factor that gave birth to the reconstruction of ethnicity of the Ahoms. It has been realized by many indigenous

groups that policies and designations have enormous power to shape patterns of ethnic identification when politically controlled resources are distributed along ethnic lines (Nagel, 1994, p. 158). As our study focused particularly among the Ahoms, it is essential to bring into light the condition under which they have started their demand for such status. During their long rule of six hundred years in the Assam valley the Ahoms are credited for their contribution that helped in building the composite Assamese society. They had identified themselves with the Assamese by consolidating all the groups that had existed before (Phukan, 2010). But they have undergone major transformation during their rule. Both the processes of assimilation and acculturation are responsible for the growth of the present society of Assam. The process of acculturation is one of the key-factor in the overall cultural change among the Ahoms as they had come into contact with numerous social groups while they were coming down to the plains and even thereafter. Their contacts with other groups have made significant impact in their way of life. In the process they have accepted some of the new elements and at the same time resisted some to keep alive their own traditions (Gogoi, 2007). In this manner they could rule Assam for nearly six hundred years.

But the downfall of the Ahom dynastic rule came to an end slowly with the beginning of a civil war known as the Maomaria revolt[15] (1769 -1805) that has taken

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[15] The Maomaria revolt was a joined revolt against the *Ahom* dynasty. It started in 1769 A.D which continued till 1794 A.D. It was basically a revolt launched by the *Morans* under the leadership of *Ragha Neog* and *Naharkhora Saikia*. Various groups of caste tribe and even the ordinary paiks of the Ahom administration joined in the revolt. Historians have different opinions regarding the cause of the revolt. However besides the socio-economic and socio-religious reasons there were also other factors that ignited the commoners against the *Ahom* kingdom (Gogoi, B. (2015). The Matak, Mayamara sect and Moamaria revolt: A brief

place in the 18th century during the reign of *Lakshmi Singha* (Baruah, 1986). The cause of Maomaria revolt was due to the inappropriate handling of the socio-religious aspects and the failure to visualize the upcoming events by the Ahom kings which took deteriorating turn (Barman, 2016). The popular rebellion of the Maomariyas was more than enough to create crisis for the Ahom monarchy compelling them to seek the aid of the British East India Company against its own people. Directly or indirectly this has provided an access for the British colonial rule over the valley of Assam (Baruah, 1993). The immediate outcome of the British rule was felt by the Ahoms more with the lost of their administration along with their identity and culture after the colonial ruler. Identity and culture are identified as the basic building blocks of ethnicity (Nagel, 1994, p. 152). Nagel further argues that culture and history are the substance of ethnicity as well as the material used to construct ethnic meaning. The construction of history and culture is a major task facing all ethnic groups, particularly those that are newly forming or resurgent. In constructing culture, the past is used as resource by groups in the quest for meaning and community (Cohen, 1985 as cited in Nagel, 1994, p. 163). The assertion of Ahoms' ethnicity can be convincingly link with the theoretical understanding of ethnicity what Nagel had asserted, by looking at the nature of their demand.

After the advent of the British the emerging educated elite of the Ahom started asserting their distinct identity within the larger Assamese society. The growth of ethnic ideologies among elite class can be attributed to their exposure to the western education system in India (Vail, 1989). It is argued that during the British rule, the Ahoms were strategically compelled to remain backward in education, economic,

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revisit. *Integrated Journal of Social Sciences*, *2,* (1). pp.23-27., Karnataka: National Translation Mission, CIIL, Mysore.

social and even political spheres. Needless to say after the independence, the emerging socio-economic and political processes contributed towards sharpening of primordial loyalties and identity consciousness among the various oppressed communities including the tribals of Assam (Hussain, 1987, p. 1330). Consequently from a position of dominance, they sank to a rank of a Backward Class among the other high caste Hindu society that has emerged as a middle class category in Assam (Lahon, 2001; Phukan 2016). Thus Mahanta (2014) opines that the hegemonic ideology of the *Aryanised* Assamese society is also a leading factor for the emergence of ethnic assertion of the tribes in Assam. The present disadvantages perceived by the Ahoms is mainly due to the discrimination and oppression suffered in the past in the colonial regime to which Chakrabarty (2011), expressed as 'historical wounds'. The wide ranging issues and the atrocities of the British towards the Ahoms rendered them to organize themselves to restore the old Ahom monarchy and made repeated attempt to overthrow the British (Baruah, 1986). Various organizations and associations were formed in the pre-colonial and post-colonial period by the Ahoms to revive their lost culture and to safeguard their distinct socio-cultural identity through constitutional protective measures. Therefore, Ahom Sabha was formed in the year 1983, the first of a number of associations to protect the interests of the Ahoms (Terwiel, 1996, p. 278). The initiative to constitute this organization was taken by Padmanath Gohainbaruah along with some other educated persons who belonged to Ahom community (Phukan, 2010). Later this organization came to be known as All Assam Ahom Association (AAAA). This organization placed a number of demands before the British government keeping in view of the economic, political, social and cultural grievances. Initially the objectives and programs by the associations were confined to protect cultural activities which can be described as 'cultural revivalist movement'.

Subsequently, it has acquired the political characteristics for the solution of their grievances. Therefore, in the very beginning they placed their demand to the British government to be recognized as 'minority status' (ibid). While some of their demands were fulfilled but many remained unfulfilled. Again during the visit of the Simon Commission, when the government of Assam at the instance of the AAAA submitted a memorandum to the Commission with the demand for a certain quota of legislative seats for the Ahoms, the Commission rejected the case of the AAAA considering them as the high caste Hindus (Lahon, 2001). To regain their lost status the Ahoms considered history as the most important tool to actualize their claims for separation from caste Hindus (Saikia, 2006). It has led to the process of revisiting of history of the Ahoms by the various organizations which was undertaken by establishing various institutions. History writing project of the Ahoms involves the characteristic feature seeking to relate their past and history of their origin with Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand. (ibid). The AAAA was very instrumental in obtaining the recognition of a distinct political status from the British, as well as separate representation in the Assamese Legislative Council (Phukan, 2010). Along with the AAAA, many more socio-cultural organizations emerged in the later period.

It should be mentioned here that the present demand for ST status by Ahoms was a gradual process. Mentioned may be made here that prior to 1931 census, the Ahoms were classified in the Indian census as a special sub-caste but at present its no longer used as a category. From such an observation it is clearly visible that they were considered as lowland Hindu Assamese (Terwiel, 1996). In the pre-independence period their demand was to provide them with adequate constitutional protection to safeguard their distinct socio-cultural identity. In this context the census played a very important role in determining the social categories. Several scholars

have also argued that modern politicized communities in India found their definite geographical and social boundaries through census enumeration initiated during the British rule (Jones, 1981; Cohn, 1987). Hence the British after failing to find a distinct community of Ahom in Assam dismissed them as "dead" in 1931 census. They replaced the lebel "Ahom" with the newly constructed term and group called "Assamese" (Saikia, 2006). Census plays a very crucial role in the formation of ethnic identities because it has not only counted people and communities; but it has also been involved in creating communities altering the traits of existing communities providing impetus to many social groups for political share (Cohen, 1987 cited in Bhagat, 2006). Categorization of the Ahoms by the British in the census to be Assamese has made them feel that their ethnic identity is under threat. Therefore, it was not merely a movement against the British but was also emancipation from the advanced caste Hindu (Phukan, 2010). Gradually various organizations united under one banner of "Ahom Tai Mongolia Parishad" to demand a separate Mongolian state in the year 1967 to be formed in Upper Assam. It also included the *Tai* Ahoms along with various tribes to ensure social recognition and political rights (Ahom Tai Rajya Parishad, *Assam Tribune*, June 3, 1967, as cited in Saikia, 2006). Such an effort was to separate themselves from the larger Assamese group which remained inconsequential and the Ahoms were considered as the backward Hindu community. All Assam Tai Students' Union (AATSU) formed in the year 1964 later renamed as All Tai Ahom Students' Union (ATASU) in 1988 had successfully mobilized the Ahom students in favour of various demands of the community particularly, during the period of late sixties and seventies (Phukan, 2010). It is observed that since 1990s the movement for the demand of ST status among the Ahom has gained considerable momentum. Prior to this in the year 1981, a memorandum was submitted to the Prime

Minister of India regarding the recognition of ST to the *Tai* Ahom and other *Tai* groups of the state by the All Assam *Tai* Ahom Society (AATAS) (Das, 2015). Again in the year 1992 Assam *Phralung* Council also submitted a memorandum arguing that if the six *Tai* clans namely *Tai Khamti, Tai Aiton, Tai Phake,Tai Khamyang and Tai Turung* have been included in the ST list, so the *Tai* Ahoms are also supposed to be enlisted under the modified Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes order Bill, 1978 (Memorandum of Assam Phralung Council, 1992, Phukan, 2010). It is also true that their demand for parity of status with the existing ST arose in large part because of the significant benefits and opportunities that result from being ST. Ethnic aspirations leading to demand for ST status in state like Assam has its root in the British policy of administrative divisions and introduction of territorial politics (Shimray, 2001). The Ahoms demand for inclusion in the ST list on ethnic line could also be cultural or social discrimination, where the governing ethnic group outlaws the language and cultural practices. Presently, the demand for ST status of the Ahoms has gained momentum which is being spearheaded by the ATASU along with various other associations and organizations belonging to the Ahom community.

3.3.   Rules and Regulations of Scheduling Process

The entire process of scheduling tribes has its roots in the machinery of recognition emerged out of a well-documented entanglement between anthropology and colonial administration (Townsend Middleton, Sara Shneiderman, 2008). As Nicholas Dirks has argued, in the 19th century, "Anthropology replaced history as the principle colonial modality of knowledge and rule" (Dirks, 2001). Yet the operations of the postcolonial ethnographic state remain underexplored, especially with regard to affirmative action (Middleton, 2013, p. 14). Reasons behind such difficulty are due to the problematic meaning of 'tribe'. The modern state has failed to formulate

procedures to follow in the recognition of a community as a tribe. Therefore, state recognition of a community as a tribe has always remained an issue of a much contested and debated issue in the post colonial state response (Sabar, 2012). Unlike the Scheduled Castes (SCs) there is no officially determined criterion in the case of a tribal community included in the Schedule (Kulkarni, 1994). However, attempts have been made by various scholars of sociology, anthropology, administrators and policy makers to identify the groups of which can be included in the scheduled list. But no analogous understanding of tribe has been ascertained so far among them and hence no any definition for ST is given in the constitution of India. ST, however, was defined primarily in respect of their tribal origin, distinctive and primitive way of life, remote location, and 'general backwardness in all respects' (Chitnis, 1997, p. 104; Kapila, 2008). Yet, the line of demarcation between tribals and non-tribals has never been clear (Chitnis, 1997, p. 104). Thus, the definition of ST contained an inherent contradiction and one which arose from the problem of culture (Kapila, 2008). But the scheduling of tribes was much less complicated in the post-colonial period comparatively with the colonial days though the complications has grossed over in the contemporary period (Chitnis, 1997, p. 104). After the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950 it has re-classified as ST to the groups and communities identified and enumerated as tribes during the British rule.[16] The constitution has mentioned the provisions for constitutional safeguard for the development of those tribes. The introduction and use of the term "Scheduled Tribe" in India should be understood as a result of historical and political processes embedded in the constitutional framework of India. Xaxa (1999) noted that the question of tribes in

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[16]Report of the high level committee on socio-economic, health and educational status of tribal communities of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs Government of India May, 2014

India is closely linked with the administrative and political considerations and also argued that no real debate then or now ever took place over the criteria for defining a ST. It can thus be clearly stated that the power to determine some section of the Indian population as ST is vested with the state (Kulkarni, 1994).

Certain rules and procedures have been adopted from time to time to determine some groups or communities or tribe to be categorized as ST after the constitution came into being in India. Article 366 (25) of the Constitution of India refers to Scheduled Tribes as those communities, which are deemed under article 342 of the Constitution to be Scheduled Tribes.[17] In accordance to this the Constitution laid down that "'the President may with respect to any state by public notification specify the tribe or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purpose of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to the State" (Art 342(1) (Kulakarni, (1994). Clause (2) of the Article 342 empowers the Parliament to pass a law to include in or exclude from the list of ST, any tribe or tribal community or parts of these groups or communities. Thus, the first specification of a community as ST in relation to a particular State/ Union Territory is by a notified order of the President, after consultation with the State Governments / UTs concerned.[18] The first presidential order notifying the list of ST was declared on 6th September, 1950, after consultation with Governors and *Rajpramukhs* of' the states concerned which is a modification of the Government of India Act of 1935(Kulkarni, 1994, p. 3073). According to the annual report of 2017-18 published by the Ministry of tribal Affairs the criteria followed for specification of a community as a ST are indicative of primitive traits,

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[17]National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, Government of India, Second Report for the year 2006-2007

[18] Annual Report 2017-2018, Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs

distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness. Though these criteria are not mentioned in the Constitution but they are well established and accepted in the present context for determination of ST. The established criteria takes into account of the definitions of the 1931 Census, the reports of the first Backward Classes Commission (Kalelkar, 1955), the Advisory Committee on Revision of SC/ ST lists (Lokur Committee, 1965), and the Joint Committee of Parliament on the SCs and STs Orders (Amendment) Bill, 1967[19]. Besides the difficulties with these official criteria, the category also carries a range of unofficial connotations which continue to inform "tribal" identification and recognition inside and outside the government (Middleton, 2013).

In order to ensure whether a community seeking ST status really deserve or not, the National Commission for Scheduled Tribe notes that it may evaluate them against the following criteria:

(A). Way of living

(i). Habitations in geographically isolated areas, hilly terrains, islands, deserts, etc.

(ii). Prevalence of primitive traits in the matters of clothing, cleanliness, etc.

(iii). Engagement in occupations like hunting, trapping of bird and animals, stone carving, making of articles from forest wood and bamboo, hide and skin work, etc.

(iv). Mostly non-vegetarians with distinctive food habits like consuming roots and tubers, meat of animals, homemade alcoholic drinks etc.

(B). Social customs and religious practices

(i). Distinctive and specific sphere/ circle for marriages. Most of the tribal groups are endogamous and the system of consanguineous marriages is prevalent in most of the tribal areas.

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[19] Ibid.

(ii). Peculiar rituals and ceremonies for marriages.

(iii). Specific 'Deities' and peculiar ways of worshipping.

(iv). Peculiarity in dress, e.g., wearing of headgears including turbans, ornaments, body marking, tattooing, etc.

(v). Unflinching faith in the dictates of Clan Heads.

(C). Dialect

(i). Peculiarity of language/dialect generally distinct from the general population in the area.

(D). Educational and economic status

(i). Very low rate of literacy as compared to the general literacy rate in the area.

(ii). Living in very poor conditions much below the poverty line. No sense of savings and dependence on money lenders (NCST, 2006).

3.4.   Assertion of Indigeneity

As a concept, indigeneity has been defined in "criterial" and "relational" ways (Merlan 2009, as cited in Jimenez, 2013, p. 4). It is a highly contested concept in the political and academic spheres particularly in Africa and Asia and manifests itself in many ways. Indigeneity has increasingly become a resource in identity politics; woven together with an intricate web of concepts such as ethnicity, identity, hybridity, authenticity, autochthony, diasporas, nation, and homeland, and the ways in which these ideas are formed, developed, and "owned" (Uddin *et al.,*no year). The most commonly recognized conceptualization of indigeneity in Asia is indigenous peoples are 'first peoples' or 'original peoples' associated with particular places. In contrast to this Andrew Gray argued that most persecuted ethnic minorities in Asia are not actually the 'first people' to the places where they presently live. Many were, however, forced to migrate to these new places. Therefore, he proposed that the

indigenous peoples in Asia be considered to be as 'colonized peoples', or peoples who have been oppressed by other ethnic groups over historically, rather than simply using 'first peoples' that to the indigenous peoples (Baird, 2016). Indigeneity being riddled with many meanings, which apply to 'indigenous peoples' in a loose sense and which does not find uniform representation among all of them. But importantly, it is the legitimacy of claims made by 'indigenous peoples' themselves keeping the anthropological concept of indigenous people more problematic (Das, 2017, p. 1). While indigeneity remains a highly contested concept in many countries with respect to the ideas of modern nation-states, a global discourse with more or less transnationally standardized meanings and connotations has emerged, especially following the support of international organizations with measures such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, the definition by the World Bank, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (Uddin *et al.*,no year). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Working Group on Indigenous Population (WGIP) set up by the Human Rights Commission of the UNO indigenous people are those tribal and semi tribal population that are regarded as having their descents from the populations which inhabited the country or the geographical region to which the country belongs at the time of the conquest or colonization of the Europe (Xaxa, 1999, p. 3590; Srikanth, 2014, p. 41).   The WGIP's working paper on the concept of 'indigenous people' lists the following factors that have been considered relevant to the understanding of the concept of indigenous by international organizations and legal experts:

  i.   Priority in time, with respect to the occupation and use of a specific territory;

ii.   The voluntary perpetuation of cultural distinctiveness, which may include the aspects of language, social organization, religion and spiritual values, modes of production, laws and institutions;

iii.   Self-identification, as well as recognition by other groups, or by State authorities, as a distinct collectivity; and

iv.   An experience of subjugation, marginalization, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination, whether or not these condition persist.[20]

The term indigenous person, though of recent origin at the international level, has been in use in India for a long time (ibid). In his report to the UN Sub-commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities Jose Martiez Cobo (1986), has defined the concept of "Indigenous Peoples" as "those peoples and nations which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system"[21]

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[20] Working paper on the concept of "*indigenous people*" of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.4/1996/2), cited in C.R. Bijoy *et, al* in *"India and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Constitutional, Legislative and Administrative Provisions Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in India and their Relation to International Law on Indigenous Peoples".* Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact, p. 59. Editor Ms. Luchie Maranan

[21] Working paper on the concept of "*indigenous people*" of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.4/1996/2).

'Indigenous' is a term applied to the people and given by the people to themselves – who are engaged in an often desperate struggle for political rights, for land, for a place and space within a modern nation's economy and society (Guenther, 2006, p. 17). According to Karlsson (2003), being indigenous is a new way of placing oneself in the world and of pursuing a new type of politics. The term indigenous was popularized after the declaration of 1993 as the year of the indigenous people by the UN. In the international platform the term 'indigenous' is associated with the tribal people drawing political correctness as it encapsulates the conquest, subjugation, and decimation of native people such as in Australia and Americas (Arora, 2007, p. 2010). In the context of India the articulation of indigeneity is reflected in many ways with the introduction of neoliberal policy of the modern nation-state in the post independent period (Beteille, 1998). André Béteille is prominent amongst those who argue against the deployment of the term for social formations in India and he shares with B.K. Roy Burman the opinion that the term is a malapropism (Béteille 1998; Roy Burman 1992, as cited in Kapila, 2008, p. 119). On the other hand (Xaxa, 1999), states that the term indigenous should be used to describe certain groups of people in India with a view that they have actively described themselves as 'indigenous' on international platforms. Bijoy & et al,(2010) has thus noted that,

"The GoI of India officially does not consider any specific section of its people as 'indigenous' as generally understood and implied in its usage in the UN. Rather it claims all its peoples as indigenous. However, operationally, in many of its dealings, those sections of people declared as falling within the administrative category of STs are considered as indigenous peoples. Though STs are not coterminous with either the socially and historically accepted term 'Adivasi' (meaning indigenous or original people) or 'tribal', by and large it is accepted that the STs include mostly 'indigenous

people' in the Indian context. This 'indigenousness' is also recognized as distinct and different from 'regionalism' and finds clear and distinct expression in the constitution and laws." (Bijoy, Shankar & Shomona, 2010).

From a political angle the banner of indigeneity has enabled a great number of social groups around the world to lobby for their collective betterment addressing themselves as the victims of violence, exploitation, cultural suppression, and other forms of discrimination (Wolf & Heidemann, 2014). The instances showing the augmentation of indigenous slot[22] by people around the world is the fact that indigeneity resonates well with the experiences and aspirations of marginalized peoples in the present day nation-state (Karlsson, 2003, p. 404). There are numerous cases of claim for indigeneity in the world, especially in Africa on the basis of their political marginalization and cultural distinctiveness in their country or region of residence (Pelican, 2015, p. 136). Besides attracting much debate and contestation, indigeneity has become a political strategy in the counter-hegemonic indigenous social movements against exploitative, oppressive and repressive regimes throughout the world (Gomes, 2013). It is always a claim to justice which is based on historical relation and of course the power relation (Nandi, 2015). In Africa and Asia, colonialism has restructured indigenous communities to such an extent that many individuals only became aware of their indigeneity later of their lives. Overtime many have sought to re-establish these social and cultural connections with the past. Identifying oneself as indigenous, however is not a straight-forward process and it requires navigation of particular narratives of belongingness and discourses about what constitutes an 'authentic' or 'traditional' indigenous identity (Baird, 2016).

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[22] A term used by Tania Murray Li taken from Michel-Rolph Trouillt's (1991) the 'Savage slot'.

Indigenous movement among the tribes in North-Eastern India was however planted in colonial era, through the introduction of various repulsive laws, division of hills and plains by installing an Inner-Line, and promoting and 'importing' a huge non-indigenous workforce, to protect economic interests of the colonizers (Das, 2015, p. 217). It is important to note that the tribes in India are not the only group to claim indigenous status. Even many of the Dalit intellectuals have made similar assertions (Burman, 2009). Indigenous identity that was forced upon groups or particular section of population from outside was precisely to mark out differences from the dominant community. For the past few decades it has been internalized by the people themselves as an important marker of social differentiation and identity assertion and also as a significant tool of articulation for empowerment (Xaxa, 1999, p. 3589). The process involves recovering history, circulating historic myths, and sanctifying historic sites as repositories of collective memories that sustain indigenous identity (Arora, 2007, p. 211). Myths of ethnic descent are essential components of ethnogenesis, the processes through which *ethnies* (ethnic communities) are formed and persist. Widely believed and deeply embedded, they are instrumental in defining the ethnicity of the communities (Smith, 1984).

Categorically to be indigenous in India and Assam in particular is the basic requirement to press demand for ST status and self determination albeit the contentious definition of the concept. Indeed the tribal identity provides a sense of belongingness to the people of North-East (Datta, 2004). On the other hand such a conventional idea of tribes in this region is quite problematic. Because the distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous people do not necessarily correspond to the distinction between tribals and non-tribals due to the assertion of the non-tribal Assamese of the Brahmaputra valley to be indigenous (Baruah, 1989, p. 2087). But

the government of India refuses to grant indigenous status to the tribes. The government fears that recognizing the right to self-determination of indigenous peoples will strengthen ethnic separatist tendencies and jeopardize the state's territorial integrity (Burman, 2009).

Historically Assam has been a homeland of migration of different races of human beings in the pre-colonial and post-colonial period. Movement of population belonging to different race, ethnicity and linguistic groups including those described as tribals form one place to another is something that has been in process within India over the centuries to which Assam is of no exception. Different communities came to develop distinct and definite association with certain territories in the course of the history of their movement (Xaxa, 1999, p. 3593). Among the communities the tribes are considered to be the oldest inhabitants of India (Tapper, 1966; Ray, 1973).[23] Therefore, tension between indigenous groups and outsiders has become an important theme of political discourse in the area (Baruah, 1989, p. 2087). Enduring complexities of the operational definition of the term makes it more difficult to identify indigenous people of the region. However, if we look at the relational theories of indigeneity it is established that the groups who were the settlers before the Europian colonialism. They are considered as the indigenous groups having distinct identity markers such language, religion and other cultural elements. Pragmatically unfolding of indigenous assertion in Assam is the established rules of inclusion and exclusion[24] introduced by the colonial empire into a particular category negotiated with the state for allocation of resources. In the context of the present demand of ST

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[23] Thappar, R. 1966. A History of India, Volume 1. Penguin, Middlesex, UK. Ray, N. 1973. Nationalism in India. Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.

[24] Baruah, S. 2008. Territoriality, Indigeneity and Rights in the North-East India.

status territorial affiliation and linguistic and cultural distinction have legitimized tribal claims operational in both national and international level (Arora, 2007, p. 210).

As shown by Mathias Guenthar, (2006) in his case study of the San and Bushmen in Africa, the issues of indigeneity have become much stirred up politically, they have organized themselves, and are active on many fronts has made up cultural identity as an extremely important matter (Guenthar, 2006, p. 17). Likewise the assertion of indigeneity by the ethnic groups of Assam and particularly by the Ahoms demanding for ST status has also become active culturally on many occasions to which they find deemed for representation as indigenous. Their cultural elements are being demonstrated through various institutionalized forms. As for example the *Ban Ok Pup Lik Mioung Tai (*BOMPT*)* or Eastern Tai Literary Organization established in 1981, in *Dhemaji* at present has proved to be a highly successful organization. It should be mentioned that one of the main objective of BOMPT was to preserve the racial existence of the *Tai* Ahom through developing their culture. Because of this kind of development it has stimulated a large literary output in the form of language textbooks, popular history books and publications in the unique Ahom script for use in religious services (Terweil, 1996, 279). The BOMPT faced numerous obstacles due to geographical locations and overwhelmed by the powerful influence of the Aryan culture and consequent Hinduization. But it had existed and continued to be as instrumental in the resurgent activities of the Ahoms (Buragohain, 1994). Racially, the Ahoms represent themselves as one of the tribes of Mongolian origin and in doing so they have been retaining their original religious faiths, beliefs and customs, such as the brewing of rice beer, the wearing of distinctive clothing and the observance of a

particular Ahom form of marriage called *Chak-long*[25] (ibid) and they have been successfully maintaining a separate identity as Ahoms (Memorandum, 1997). They have been constantly arguing that Ahoms have remained backward in every aspect due to their valiant resistance against the British Empire since the end of the Ahom rule overtaken by the British in the year 1826 A.D. As far as the discourse on Ahoms in the academic field is concerned the narrative of indigenized ethnicity of the community has its roots in the 18th century when they started their movement to be recognized as a minority status. In the 1950s, in Assam mainly on account of several prejudiced policies such as the official language policy in educational institutions, through imposition of Assamese language and script, the discourse of indigeneity self-esteem and minority symptoms has rapidly surfaced in the region. Such a policy has resulted into a feeling of elimination and social-exclusion on part of tribes like the Ahoms by the dominant Assamese community, triggering agitations (Das, 2015, p. 220). In an ethnically pluralist society like Assam distinct culture differentiating a particular type of community from the larger complex society is inevitable as in the case of the Ahoms. As embodiment of distinctive culture is one of the criteria to be recognized as ST and hence emphasized by groups of people in their demand for such a status.

The case of Ahoms assertion for indigeneity can be suitably related to the analysis of Omaira Bolanos in his study of the Arapium and Jaraqui ethnicity, of the lower Amazon, Brazil. In the study he has found six major themes that constitute the

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[25] *Chak-long* is a traditional Ahom marriage system. The term *Chak-long* does not appear in any Ahom dictionary and as such the meaning remains largely speculative. According to B.J. Terweil Chaklong derives from two Ahom words, namely *chak,* the Tai form of the Indian word *chakra,* 'wheel', and *long,* Tai Ahom for 'big' or 'great' *(luang* in central Thai) (Terweil, 1996).

conceptual sources through which the material and symbolic meanings of the two communities are explained. The themes are – sense of rootedness, historical memory, historical transformation, consciousness, and identity politics (Omaira Bolanos, 2010, p. 72). To legitimize their claim for ST status the Ahoms also undergo the same process as shown by Bolanos in the construction of indigenous identity. Indigeneity as cultural practices manifests in itself the anticipation of many social groups to be categorized as tribe as it embodies allocation of substantial resources for the welfare and development of tribal categories. The term indigenous of late has assumed a political dimension which had earlier remained an accepted term of description and designation of certain category of people (Xaxa, 1999, p. 3590). Such assumption by groups in the contemporary period like the Ahoms and their assertion for indigeneity is an example of the conceptualization of indigenous category with the associated dynamics of the discourse on indigeneity

3.5.   Politics of Inclusion and Contestation

Despite having a rich natural and human resources, Assam is mired by inter – ethnic feuds and rendered more viciously by the ongoing multiplication of ethnicities in an already heterogeneous region. Assertions over resources and articulation of grievances have given rise to contestations over the same space shared by multiple ethnic groups (Singha & Singh, 2016). Apprehensions loomed large due to demands made by the communities which include the Ahoms in Assam for inclusion in the ST list. These communities are currently categorized as Other Backward Classes. The OBCs' share in Assam's quota is 27%, while the STs (plains), SCs and STs (hills) have 10%, 7% and 5% share respectively. The share of political power and other administrative resources are distributed according to the constitutional framework. The issue of indigeneity also influences the ethnic identity movement for

constitutional safeguards. Perhaps ethnic mobilization is a flourishing growth industry in the state and the region with wide range of demands (Prabhakara, 2010). Ethnic issues and cultural elements are often used to meet political and economic ends. With this backdrop the demand for ST status in Assam has created a new dimension to the socio-political sphere along with the counter -narrative from the existing STs in the state. The demand of the six communities has the backing not only of the ruling government in the centre and its ally in the state but also of the opposition parties. All three parties have expressed their support during the last three Assembly and Lok Sabha elections (Kashyap, 2016, The Indian Express). The communities that currently enjoy ST status in Assam include Bodo, Rabha, Tiwa, Karbi, Dimasa, Mising, Sonowal, Hajong, Garo and Deuri. These communities under the umbrella organization called Coordination Committee of the Tribal Organizations of Assam (CCTOA) opposed the demand. They argue that the groups demanding ST status are educationally and economically advanced and more in number. Therefore their anticipation is that they cannot compete with this advanced group. Enlisting them into the Scheduled list would wipe out the existing communities from the elected bodies as well as from educational and job opportunities. Moreover it would also usurp the land rights of the existing ST communities (ibid). To support their argument CCTOA cites precedent to the case of 1996, the year in which the Centre had granted ST status to the Koch-Rajbangshi community for six months which took away the majority share of the ST quota in college admissions within that short span of time. Kalita (2016) has stated three reasons in relation to the opposition of the CCTOA,

i. Firstly granting ST status to new groups would increase the ST population. As a result the existing ST will be deprived from educational, economy and political benefits.

ii. Secondly, the objective with which the affirmative action was undertaken in the constitution to provide safeguard and to uplift the marginalized communities would be out of spirit or will be lost if ST status is granted to the comparatively advanced groups of people. Of late, the demand for ST status by the Meitei community of Manipur has raised such questions in this context. The Meitei community who inhabits in the upper most part of the valley is much advanced in every aspect of jobs, education, politics and economy in comparison to the existing ST. Therefore the lion's share of all the benefits and resources will be grabbed by the Meitei community who once avoided the identity of being tribal and adopted Hindu cultural practices through the process of Sanskritization. Thus the existing ST population has been complaining for the inclusion of some more communities to the category on such grounds against the Meitei.

iii. Thirdly, in the meantime the demand made by twice-born (*Dwija*)[26] recognized by the Vedic Hindu tradition can be considered as a conspiracy to weaken the whole system of reservation on ethnic lines. If the path for such twice-born groups gets open to be included in the ST list then will get all the benefits and the overall philosophy of the positive discrimination will be indirectly affected. In this context such a tendency has been observed to be increased after the coming of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) as a ruling government in India dominated by the Hindu varna system.

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[26] The term '*Dwija*' is a sanskrit word which means second or spiritual birth. According to Vedic literature a person is first born physically and at a later stage is born for a second time spitually. The term also refers to members of the three varnas in the traditional Hindu social system, or social classes — the Brahmins (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (warriors), and Vaishyas (merchants) — whose *Sanskara* of *Upanayana* initiation was regarded as a second or spiritual birth (Bose, 1998). pp. 55-56.

Politically it is observed that the issue of ST status demand is endowed with logic of electoral politics behind the scene. Currently, 16 constituencies are reserved for STs out of a total of 126 seats in the assembly. It is estimated that more than 80 seats would come under the reserved category for Scheduled Tribes after these six groups are included in the category. After the official procedure is completed, there will be delimitation of Assembly and Parliamentary constituencies in Assam, and seats reserved for the indigenous communities. Immigrants and people of doubtful origin would be barred from contesting elections (Bhattacharya, 2016). The demand of Ahoms along with five other communities for ST status has another dimension, i.e., the demand as one step towards separation of the state as a sovereign nation.[27] Anticipation for turning Assam into predominantly a tribal sate will have broader geo-political ramifications.

From such an environment it becomes essential on the part of the indigenous groups to fight together to achieve their common goal of interest. Therefore they work under an umbrella organization called Janagusthiyo Oikya Mancha to bring into reality of their demand for ST status.

3.6. Reinvention of Traditions

One of the fundamental exercises of documenting one's cultural identity is the project of rediscovering the lost trails (Buragohain, 1994). In doing so elements like language, religious rituals, festivals, traditional symbols, dress patterns, food habits, belief systems, etc., play a major role. With the intervention of the British during the rule of the Ahom and overwhelming influence of Hinduism brought drastic changes

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[27] Conversation with an Ahom Assistant Professor of Dhemaji College, Assam, October, 2018.

ushering in disunity and divisions among the populace of Ahoms creating into various sects such as neo-*vaishnavism*, *saktism*, etc (Buragohain, 2006). The long standing social cohesion among the Ahoms was almost diminished with the coming of new administrative policies of the colonial system and religious ethos of Hinduism. However we cannot solely allege the influences of the external forces. Gogoi (2003), has observed that the process of acculturation has been a key player in the overall cultural change among the Ahoms. Because, they had come into contact with numerous cultures after they migrated to Assam. Thus the principle of inclusive governance by the Ahom kings has also brought about immense changes in their social composition. With regard to religion in this context we can apply the structural functionalist approach to religion which has its roots in Emile Durkheim's work on religion. Durkheim (1912) proposed that religion has three major functions in society: it provides social cohesion to help maintain social solidarity through shared rituals and beliefs, social control to enforce religious-based morals and norms to help maintain conformity and control in society, and it offers meaning and purpose to answer any existential questions**.**

3.7.   Solidarity and Ethnic Boundaries

Ethnic boundaries are best understood as cognitive or mental boundaries situated in the minds of people and are the result of collective efforts of construction and maintenance (Barth, 1982,). These are the patterns of social interaction that give rise to and subsequently reinforce in-group members' self-identification and outsiders' confirmations of group distinctions (Nagel, 1994; Sanders, 2002). The location and meaning of particular ethnic boundaries are continuously negotiated, revised and revitalized by both ethnic group members themselves as well as outside

observers (Nagel, 1994, p. 153). In the words of Sanders (2002), ethnic boundaries are patterns of social interaction that give rise to and subsequently reinforce in-group members' self- identification and outsiders' confirmation of group distinctions. By their very nature the ethnic boundaries are reciprocally respected by interacting groups. Analysis of relationship between groups reveals ethnic boundaries. The growth and increasing centralization of state also demarcate and activate ethnic boundaries (Enloe, 1981, as cited in Olzak, 1983, p. 365). Ethnic boundaries dichotomize insiders from outsiders as 'us' from 'them.' The ways in which insiders and outsiders go about characterizing a group, and thereby positioning it and its members in the larger society, are responsive to the social and historical context within which intergroup interaction take place (Nagel, 1994; Waters, 1990 as cited in Sanders, 2002, p. 328) . A common myth of descent becomes essential element in the departure from a larger society to form a collective demand (Smith, 1984). Boundaries of an ethnic category are also supposed to be created with the official determination of groups on the basis of discrimination and repression producing particular ethnicities (Nagel, 1994). Therefore, we can safely assume that boundary of an ethnic group is subject to change with respect to the socio-cultural and political circumstances. Separation and blending of ethnic groups or segments of an ethnic group may take place depending upon the circumstance and specific goal at a certain point of time (Pakem, 1990). In the short term ethnic boundaries are strongly correlated with the realms of social, economic, and political status, and such inequalities are often reinforced by categorical discrimination and public policies (Williams, Jr, 1994, p. 57). Assam is a homeland for numerous ethnic groups displaying distinct characteristics of their own. They seem to showcase their distinctive attributes in the socio-cultural level every now and then. In a multi-ethnic

society like Assam the endeavor to maintenance of solidarity and ethnic boundaries is central to their assertion of distinct cultural and political identity of their own (ibid). In a similar fashion, Smith (1984) suggests that ethnic groups should be viewed as flexible bases for making economic and political claims, and concentrate on the strategies of manipulation and mobilization employed by elites for political ends.

To distinguish the people of Assam on the basis of ethnic attributes is quite difficult due to the prevalence of diversified social category. Additionally, the unstable nature of the boundaries between and among the ethnic groups creates more difficulties. Baruah (1986), states that ethnic categories in Assam is difficult to analyze in terms of primordial approach, which often take political forms in an attempt to organize ethnic solidarity. Therefore, ethnic boundaries are fluid in nature. But ethnic solidarity has become very expressive in the current political scenario with the demand for ST status by various groups. Post-colonial policies and administrative instruments perpetuated the sense of differences among various groups and ethnic boundaries between communities (Goswami, 2016). Barth and his associates (1969) also link ethnic boundaries to resource niches. Phukan (2016), noted that the unwillingness of the caste Hindu governing elites has greatly intrigued different ethnic groups vying for political boundaries with the demand like ST status (Phukan, 2016). As Nagel (1994), has stated that the contemporary demographic, political, social and economic processes has greatly contributed in increasing the cleavages of ethnic boundaries. Thus, the Solidarity among ethnic groups is maintained through various social processes such as marriage, festivals, religious and political organizations.

Contemporary scenario in Assam is the question of who is a tribe and who is not? Many groups undergoing this multifaceted situation have been struggling for

their identity as a tribe which is a situational context. Having a distinct cultural and historical context, maintaining ethnic boundary is of central concern within the reams of political and cultural identity of every ethnic group. The development of ethnic boundary depends on multiple variables such as competition, differential power, and also resource distribution. One way to enforce ethnic boundary maintenance is through the use of clear symbols that can demarcate difference, such as dress and language (McGuire, 1982). Language and culture often referred to as ethnicity has now become most pronounced marker of distinctiveness (Xaxa. 2005, p. 1364). One needs to demonstrate the specific symbols in a multicultural society as a marker for distinguishing from others. Cultural differences do persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence in a society albeit the presence of interaction among different cultures that fails to the liquidation of ethnic distinctions (Barth, 1982).

The use of traditional dress by the Ahoms in particular occasions identifies members from close groups as an insider and also generates 'we feeling' among the group members. The annual celebration of *Me-DA-Me-Phi*,[28] the socio-religious festival of the *Tai* Ahom invoke the life force in human life to secure social control for solidarity , vitality in national life at the time of peril as well as in times of peace and prosperity, successes and failures (Buragohain, 2006, p. 67). At present the celebration of the *Me-DA-Me-Phi* festival has become the symbol of Ahom ethnic identity in Assam within the Assamese society. Mention may be made that in the year 1991 the celebration of *Me-Da-Me-Phi* was established as a public worship ceremony, since then it is being celebrated on 31st January every year in most part of upper Assam dominated by Ahom population and now it has also gained a wider popularity

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[28] *Me-Da-Me-Phi* ordinarily means offering oblations and taking care of the dead (ancestors). According to the historical records this ceremony was first performed by *Siu-Ka-Pha* while he reached at *Nam-Ruk*.

in other parts of Assam (Saikia, 2006). On this occasion a very significant event is the hoisting of the *Tai*-Ahom flag with the symbol of *Ngi-Ngao-Kham*[29] embossed on it. In the ceremony the priests recite incantations in *Tai* language, the most solemn part of the festivals (ibid). Saikia (2006), states that in the various ceremonies Ahom people are encouraged to adopt every characteristic of *Tai* such as in dress, speech, religion and food habits. Nonetheless, this has become a major identification marker for the people. In relation to this Pakem (1990) observed that solidarity is felt or realized mainly by shared cultural traits like language, myth of origin, oral traditions, social systems, beliefs and practices, and also political organization. Language is a very important medium in fostering ethnic identity. The Ahoms have been persistently working for the revival of *Tai* language. Revival of the language means revival of all the symbols, ideas and ideologies of a human group and their civilization. The Ahoms find history as the most important tool to actualize Ahom claims for separation from caste Hindus.

Likewise many past and forgotten elements of them are now being used as a resource in one or other way. Evidently, the Ahom priests performed all *Ahom* religious rites and ceremonies in Ahom language, and they do so even today to view that the Ahom language is totally dead is erroneous (Information submitted for justification of Ahom as ST in the Indian Constitution, 2007). The emphasis on language is more vibrant as they realized that the absence of language would disintegrate their identity as a distinct community. For many people in many parts of

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[29] It is a dragon like figure of winged lion used by the Ahoms as their royal insignia. It was their religious symbol as well as the state symbol too. Contemporarily it is a very significant used with enthusiasm and reverence for the socio-cultural identity of the *Tai-Ahom*. For details see on *Ngi-Ngao-Kham, The Lost Trails*, (Ed.), Romesh Buragohain, Vol-I, Ban-Ok-Pub-Lik Mioung-Tai, Dhemaji, Assam, 1994, pp. 71-78.

the world the past is a strong presence. Thus, the language the group has "always" spoken, the religion it has always followed or that it converted to at some ancient time, the customs, the clothes, the stories and music, the values and morals—these things are effective identifiers and legitimizers of the group. Justification of a claim or to find a social voice requires usage of culture and history, by invoking group or national uniqueness along with ideals like "social justice" or "self-determination." (David, 1997, p. 22).

Regarding the religion of Ahoms there are several views which are often conflicting and confusing. While some view that they have the traces of Buddhism, others view that they belong to *Taoism*. Having such complexities in determining their religion it is observed that the knowledge of the *Tai*-Ahom language becomes imperative, or else all such generalizations would remain as historical conjectures (Buragohain, 1994). However, in the contemporary period the Ahoms view that their religion does have the animistic character though they came under the influence of other religions. To support such views they have provided several studies by scholars on Ahoms and their religion. According to historians and scholars the food habits of the Ahoms differs greatly from the Hindu religion and they used to eat pork and fowls, and drink rice beer. They still make no distinction in partaking food from anybody as observed by *Shihab-ud-dinTalish* during (1662-63). All this forms of observation and studies are embraced by the Ahoms to mark themselves distinct as tribes and justification to be included in the ST list by the highest authority. Such an attempt discloses the political salience of boundaries between groups in the modern multinational economic redistribution of resources on ethnic lines. When boundaries are blurred political alliances of co-ethnics are likely to be formed and work under a common platform. Realizing the fact that a single ethnic group cannot put any

pressure in the centre the groups facilitates inter-ethnic co-operation (Diamond, 1987). Ahoms along with five other ethnic groups is a model showing such alliances in the present demand for ST status. This kind of phenomenon has been explained by the situational approach by anthropologists applicable in complex, "plural" society (Okamura 1981, as cited in Wimmer, 2008, p. 977). Creation of ethnic boundaries have become one of the major tool in the post-colonial Indian state to have better access to resources and political power with the growing sub-nationalists idea. The elite or the middle class section of the groups mobilize common people by projection of material and non-material culture in the public platform and the emotions attached to it for preferred ethnic classification from the larger national ethnic boundary. They provide a definite direction by articulating their aspirations in tune with the changed rational-legal framework. As a matter of fact, the middle class are always equipped with considerable access to modern education and a sense of history and are able to occupy the position of leadership and mobilization of masses for bargaining of political share in the trajectory of a definite ethnic boundary. Aspiration for the maintenance of boundary between groups on the basis of ethnic identity among the Ahoms and other groups is not a new trend of the Assamese society. The Ahoms have their own language, culture and tradition which they feel was distorted by the greater Assamese middle class during and after the colonial period (Phukan, 2010). Over the periods of time, Ahoms have become increasingly conscious about their position and are gradually building up their movement based on their distinct ethnic or tribal identity. They have also tried to maintain their ethnic relation within a larger boundary together with the other communities having similar political interests by shifting their ethnic boundary as Ahoms. At the same time the current political atmosphere of Assam in the quest for larger Assamese identity sometimes makes

obscure the ethnic boundaries for greater interest of sub-nationalism. Within the ideology of sub-nationalism reflection of ethnicity is evident for self determination of numerous communities. Hence, the quest for economic and political advantage is the root cause of such a shift in the modern states requiring distinct markers of ethnicity among many groups like the Ahoms.

3.8. Conclusion

From our above discussion it has been observed that the Ahoms assertion for ethnicity is by and large inspired by their long traditions of history invoking their resentments against the British government in an organized way in the colonial period and the middle class Assamese elite. Additionally, the Ahom ethnicity in Assam is the outcome of a long course of their marginalization in their own homeland giving birth to their articulation in the movement for a separate administrative category as ST. Contemporary demand for distinct ethnic category of the Ahoms is rooted in the colonial period resulting into deprivation of their social, political and economic rights. It has been stated that after the British annexed Assam the then ruling Ahom kingdom lost all its earlier positions of higher category and pushed them to a backward position. It is stated that various socio-economic policies introduced by the colonial empire were primarily responsible for the backwardness of the Ahoms (Lahon, 2001, p. 99). Losing land rights and access to other resources developed a feeling of relative deprivation among the Ahom community. In a diverse state like Assam every ethnic groups in the contemporary period has realized the importance of its distinct attributes positioning themselves into marginalized communities. Therefore, to sustain their unique cultural markers assertions are made and construct themselves as the 'other' to materialize their demands and grievances. Currently, the ethnic movement of the

Ahoms can be positioned in a similar fashion in their projection of marginalization with the demand for ST status. Birth of their ethnic assertion is the changes in culture and custom, loss of their original language and its popularity, loss of religion and most importantly political aspects. Resurgence movement of the *Tai* Ahom has been continuing since past till present backed by various socio-political methods. Scholars, religious leaders, community leaders, etc., belonging to Ahom community are all involved in the process of the *Tai* Ahom revival movement.

First and foremost association of the Ahoms to articulate their demand was the Ahom Sabha formed in the year 1893. Subsequently, various other organizations came up to struggle for their development. Felt with the importance of political share the initial demand of the Ahoms was to recognize them as 'Minority Community' to safeguard their socio-economic status (Phukan, 2010, p. 11). When they failed to attain this status they planned to demand for distinct Ahom identity only to become unfruitful in their attempt. Most importantly the Ahoms have also demanded for a sovereign state comprising the districts of upper Assam. But this has not gained much popularity among the masses due to various political upheavals. From the movement for preservation of culture to secure constitutional safeguard they constantly reaffirm their indigeneity as a tribe. Dynamics of their demand demonstrates that they are conscious of their distinctive culture despite having assimilated with the greater Assamese society composed of multicultural groups. Administrative reform has thus become inevitable for them to protect themselves from further marginalization as they perceived. .

CHAPTER FOUR

Role of Associations and Ethnic Renewal in the process of Demand for ST Status by Ahoms

4.1. Introduction

One of the most observable facts in today's society is the reconstruction of ethnic identity by reclaiming a discarded distinctiveness through replacement or amendment in an existing ethnic identity repertoire. The increase in ethnic renewal process is caused by the changes in political culture by the ethnic politics that increase ethnic consciousness, ethnic pride and ethnic mobilization among all ethnic groups (Nagel, 1995, p. 948). Ethnic renewal refers to both individual and collective processes. When an individual acquires or asserts a new ethnic identity for filling personal ethnic void by renewal of abandoned ethnic identity is called as an individual ethnic renewal. On the other hand, collective ethnic renewal involves the reconstruction of an ethnic community by current or new community members who build or rebuild institutions, culture, history, and traditions (ibid). Past experiences and understanding of ethnic renewal process make us contend that the character of ethnicity as socially constructed phenomena still holds validity. We can therefore, situate the present day ethnic issues under this same framework. As Barth (1969), pointed out that ethnicity is situational and variable, which means it depends on time and space where it occurs. In explaining the process of ethnic renewal it becomes imperative for us to trace the genesis and under what circumstances such processes come into play in socio-political level. In Indian context the upsurge of ethnicity can well be connected to the post colonial administrative reformation to uplift the marginalized sections and those who remained in the periphery of developmental project. Since then the ethnic template designed by the colonial state gained more

expression in the public domain which was the basis for administrative organization (Young, 2002, p. 1). Political power structure at the national and local level in Assam often manifests the ethnic consciousness due to the presence of diverse social setting. This kind of consciousness is often influenced by political structures in reciprocal fashion (Khan, 2009, p. 151). Evidently, politics of ethnic renewal is living phenomena in every society of both developed and developing nation. In his preface of '*Ethnicisation of Politics in Northeast India*' Phukan, (2003) argues that due to the awakening of ethno-cultural consciousness the politics of the North-East India has been highly ethnicized. Consequently, ethnic groups have been pressing for separate state and while some have been demanding for constitutional safeguards on the basis of ethnic identity.

The present chapter focuses on how the idea of affirmative action has transformed itself from its social understanding to politicization of ethnic category for power over resources. It also highlights the ways and measures undertaken by the ethnic associations to fulfill their demand for granting ST status and our specific focus will be on the Ahoms. It will also bring into light the interactions with other associations for protecting their interests. Attention has also been given to the issues of convergence and divergence among the groups in protecting their interests.

Since the state has the power to determine and categorized people on ethnic lines; therefore this chapter also seeks to examine how the state responds towards the demand for ST status? Assam being the hotspot of ethnic turmoil, it also becomes necessary to look into the dynamics of ethnic assertion and the politics involved in it. Therefore, an attempt has also been made in this chapter to understand how ethnic groups are engaged in maintaining their abandoned cultural symbols to enhance their autochthonous tribal traits in everyday life. State plays an important role in

developing, escalating and diffusing ethnic renewal process and its assertion in a plural society. Therefore, this chapter tries to examine how the ethnic group used ethnicity as a political strategy for pursuing pragmatic interests within the instrumentalist framework of ethnicity.

4.2. Ahom Ethnic Associations and the Demand for ST status

Ethnic communities living in Assam are seemingly homogeneous to laymen from outside but in reality it is characterized by heterogeneity with respect to language, culture and religion (Singha & Singh, 2016). The perpetual perception of the Indian administration as a homogeneous Assam has encountered challenges with growing ethnic aspiration and autonomy demand within the constitutional framework in and outside the nation state. This has the persistence of internal diversity and complexity since past as the state has perpetuated the process of ethnic renewal (Bhattacharya, 2016).

Looking through the lens of instrumentalist approach, ethnic consciousness among groups and communities in recent decades has indeed been the result of post-colonial power struggles 'over new strategic positions of power, places of employment, funds for development, education, political positions and so on (Goswami, 2016). In doing so, ethnic associations has become one of the major entity of ethnic renewal process or mobilization by which group organize around some feature of ethnic symbols such as language, customs and rituals and other forms of community practices related to primitive traditions.

Much of the ethnic mobilization in the world is an outcome of conflict among ethnic contenders to control territories, populations and their resource distribution patterns on ethnic lines. In the history of Assam, the surge of ethnic associations has always been the outcome of state sponsored projects like affirmative action based on

certain attributes of the populations belonging to different historical and geographical locations. The institutionalization of affirmative action in the post independent period forms an integral part of understanding the rights and benefits attached to an ethnic category, with the ST status being valued over all the statuses (Chettri, 2014, p. 216). Needless to mention here that the ethnic associations have made foray into policies of Assam right after it was considered as a separate state within the union of the Indian State. Over the past few decades Assam has witnessed unprecedented growth in the number of ethnic associations representing distinct group of varying sizes. Hence politics of distinct identity has become living phenomena of Assam as well as of the Ahoms (Phukan, 2011, p. 171). Outcome of such associations is also the creation of a socio-political framework by the State which motivates consciousness and thereby proliferate ethnicity and its tangible cultural symbols. These associations have come to take control over the cultural aspects of ethnicity and have been able to provide their respective communities a definite direction in the changed democratic political process (ibid). Stakeholders such as ethnic associations, political parties and interest groups mould their agendas and activities around the state based on national guidelines to partake in the redistributive systems (Chettri, 2014). The historicized consciousness among ethnic groups has thus structured in opposition to the forging of larger Assamese identity in its failure to represent numerous distinct cultures.

From a general perspective we know that any kind of ethnic identity movement is always led by the educated elites of a particular community. The democratic structure of the State has provided the avenues for the emergence of new strata of elites as well as new platform. Likewise the Ahoms ethnic renewal process is also exhorted by the elite section through various strategies and means in mobilizing group members. As it has been observed that the Ahom intellectuals are

trying to revive their culture and assert its distinct identity from the larger *Asomiya* identity (Baruah, 2017). Therefore, the associations are engaged in promoting their own approved form of ethnic identity. Ethnicity being the central component of individual and group identity provides an important thread of continuity with the past and is often kept alive through the practice of cultural tradition (Giddens, 2006 as cited in Singha, *et al*., 2016) Accordingly revivalism of ethnic language, religion and other tangible markers constitute the main activities so that it can be utilized to negotiate with the state to bestow their ethnic groups with benefits commensurate with a particular socio-economic category (Chettri, 2014).

Revivalism means a concerted effort by a particular group of people to restore, to use or to reawaken interest in set of old customs in order to counteract the influences of a dominant alien culture. Such an attempt is observed among the Ahoms from the early seventeenth to eighteenth century till present. We can equate this form of performances what Cohen (1985) calls the symbolic construction of the community, where genealogy of cultural traits are carefully and judiciously selected and reinterpreted to suit the requirements of the present (ibid). Among the people who conduct this kind of activity are the *Deodhai* and *Bailung* priests (Terweil, 1996). In an attempt to bring back *Tai* Ahom to its own religious cult a section of the Ahoms constituted a religious forum named *Buddhist Society of Phralung Culture* (BSPC) in 1963. This was later converted into another religious organization called *All Assam Phralung Sangha* (AAPS) in 1975 with similar objectives. Such organization provided the platform to feel the necessity of popularizing the religious traits by performing their traditional rites like *Om-pha, Sai-pha* and *Me-Dum-Me Phi* (Phukan, 2010).

The census enumeration has contributed to a great extent in the upsurge of the Ahoms when the Indian census discarded them from the 1931 census as a special sub-caste (ibid). The first stirrings of community and ethnic assertions in the region began in Assam when a section of the elites of the Ahoms formed the All Assam Ahom Association (AAAA) to fight against the injustices done to the community by the British ((Lahon, 1990; Phukan, 2010). But in the contemporary period All Tai Ahom Students' Union (ATASU), basically, a student organization has been taking the lead role in their demand for ST status.

4.3. All Tai Ahom Students' Union (ATASU)

ATASU came into being on 14th July, 1988 with the leadership of Promod Boruah and Arun Gogoi as President and General Secretary respectively (Phukan, 2005, p. 16). They play a significant role in protecting the interests of the Ahoms through their various activities ranging from cultural to socio-political dimensions. However, their focus is also on educational, lingo-cultural, socio-economic and even political aspects. We have tried to understand their roles and contribution for the upliftment and development of Ahoms in general and specifically focusing on their activities in the demand for ST status.

4.3.1. Organizational Structure of the ATASU

ATASU is a student organization spearheading the demand for ST status besides undertaking other issues related to the development of Ahom community. With this backdrop it becomes imperative for us to discuss about the organization to keep track of the nature of their demand in the contemporary times. They are visibly participating for the all round development of the community, besides the existence of other organizations of Ahom community. They act as the platform for other organizations of the Ahoms. The birth of ATASU came into being when a galaxy of

Tai Ahom students more than (800) of the state assembled at *Dolbagan* Higher Secondary School premises near *Charaideo* sub-division in the Sivsagar district on July 14-15, 1988 (Phukan, 2005, p.29). It is a non registered organization. In the course our field study we have extensively focused on the works and activities of the ATASU. At present there are twelve districts under ATASU, namely; *Tinsukia*, *Dibrugrh*, *Jorht*, *Golaghat*, *Nagaon*, *Marigon*, *Dhemaji*, *Lakhimpur*, *Sivsagar*, *Karbi Anglong*, *Charaideo* and *Sivsagar*. Out of these twelve districts nine districts are actively participating in the organizational activities.

According to the constitution of the ATASU, its organizational structure can be divided into five hierarchical units. They are:

    i.   Local or Primary Units

    ii.   Regional *Tai* Ahom Students' Union

    iii. Sub divisional Tai Ahom Students' Union.

    iv. District *Tai* Ahom Students' Union

    v.   All *Tai* Ahom Students' Union (Phukan, 2005, p. 35).

One can become a member of an executive body both through selection and election method, whichever is deemed to be feasible. The apex body is the Central Executive Committee which is consisted of one President, two Vice Presidents, one General Secretary, three Assistant General Secretaries, five Organizing Secretaries, one Cultural Secretary, one Office Secretary and eleven members (ibid).

4.3.2. Objectives of the ATASU

The ATASU has chalked out certain objectives to fulfill their desired goals after they drafted the constitution. In accordance with the constitution of the ATASU the primary objectives of the organization are as follows:

i.   To encourage the students belonging to the *Tai* Ahom Community to respect the traditions of *Tai* Ahoms.

ii.   To take necessary steps for the upliftment of socio-economic, educational and cultural plight of the *Tai* Ahoms.

iii.   To bring together the Tai Ahom students of North-Eastern Region with the Tai Mongoloid people on the basis of homogeneous culture.

iv.   To sow the seeds of unity, integrity and harmony among the different communities of Assam.

v.   To inculcate a sense of consciousness of exploitation of people belonging to Other Backward Classes and weaker section of society by the advanced section of society and thereby to liberate the same by a united democratic struggle.

vi.   To create a conducive atmosphere for the study and research of *Tai* language and culture.

vii.   To preserve all the historical monuments, sculptures and traditions of the *Tai Ahoms* (Phukan, 2005, p. 32).

4.4.   Modes of Demand for ST status

There are number of associations and organizations of the Ahom community. They are largely involved in bringing awareness and consciousness about the community after they lost their kingdom. Among these, in the present days ATASU is one of the most pioneering student union who has been relentlessly demanding for the cause of overall betterment of the Ahoms in particular and Assam as a whole (refer to annexure). It is a non-registered and a non-political organization which is locally termed as *"Sodou Tai Ahom Chatra Santha"*. Despite being a non-political organization they have been very much active in raising issues related to politics for

the overall development of the State. Therefore, their demand includes both political and non-political issues and its solution. As stated by the leaders of the association one of the major demands of this union in the contemporary time is the demand for ST status. They firmly believed that the ST status alone can safeguard their overall interests and enable them to struggle for their backwardness with reservation in the political sphere (Phukan, 2005, p. 62). It must be stated that the communities demanding ST status have been carrying out intense protests in various forms for many years. Keeping their movement for demand democratic in nature meetings are often held with the top bureaucratic and political leaders, both at the central and state level. It has been observed that to press their demand they have submitted several memorandums, carried out strikes such as bandhs, burning effigies, half naked strike, holding of press meet, etc. They are also involved in organizing ethnic food festivals, workshops in the national and international level to bring awareness and to draw attention of the common masses of their demand. They also organize workshops, seminars and summer educational programmes for the students and youth. During our field work we also came across one such free coaching programme being organized by them for the school students in Dhemaji. They also provided free lodging facilities to the poor students during this period.

Their activities are mostly democratic in nature. As regard to their demand both print media and electronic media are widely used which plays a vital role in displaying of their culture and ethnic identity as autochthonous tribe. The Ahoms also argue that even after their adoption of Hindu tradition in the past they still practice their own tribal culture having animistic traits. Animism and primitivism being the primary requirement of becoming a tribe as stated by the administrative modality, effort has always been to select such qualities of animism and primitivism in their

everyday life as observed in the field of study. One of our respondents went on saying in his words that *"amar khaidyo, pindhar sar solon, amar dhorma hindu holor logot olopu nimile. Amai hindu nohoie. Tao Amar dhormo."* (Our food, dress pattern, our religion do not match with Hindus. We are not Hindu. Tao is our religion). This kind of sentiment was being expressed by almost all the respondents.

Self assertive evaluation of being tribe can also be seen among the group members. But so far the parliamentary approval is concerned the Ahoms demand for ST status still remains pending despite their continuous effort.

4.5. Ethnographic Venture of the Ahoms

Primarily the procedures involved in the recognition of any group into a particular category as per the Indian constitution take into account of the cultural dimensions. Likewise the recognition of certain ethnic groups as 'tribe' also employs the cultural criteria which are officially determined. Therefore, these groups are consciously projecting themselves through their practices and behaviors in public spheres in accordance with official modality. Therefore, ethnographic knowledge plays the fundamental role for the groups that wish to be recognized as ST. Cultural attributes and traditional practices of particular social groups are documented in ethnographic studies what they really are. If we observe the struggle for categorization as ST, we witness social actors engaged in the extensive use of ethnographic knowledge across the nation. Middleton called it as a space between the anthropologists and cultural groups where the cultural material is made to conform to state criteria of tribal recognition (Middleton, 2016, as cited in Vandelhelsken, 2018, p. 94). Government employs anthropologists to evaluate conformity of the 'cultural characteristics' of ethnic groups to the official criteria determining tribal traits (ibid, p. 89). Introduced way back in the colonial period and studied by their anthropologists

about the people of Indian society, the way category of 'tribe' was defined still holds dominant paradigm (Devalle, 1990, p. 73). The most serious consequence of following this kind of anthropological perception of different groups of people is the construction of a still persisting anticipation and opposition for inclusion in the ST list.

Endeavor of the Ahoms for inclusion in the ST list is supported by numerous ethnographic studies during the British regime as information having tribal characteristics in the form of memorandums used by the ethnic groups to communicate with the state.[30] The memorandum contains lengthy lists of all the attributes ranging from socio-cultural to socio-economic aspects amenable to tribal traits of the Ahoms. The list containing the description of various aspects is:

a. *Ahom* Tribal Religious Culture is Distinct from those of non-Ahoms of Assam

    (i)   Multiplicity of formless Gods and Spirits.

    (ii)   Animistic character of Ahom religion

    (iii)   Ahom system of Divination

    (iv)   Communal worship of Ahom Gods

b. Distinctive Mortuary Culture

    (i)   Belief in *Khwan*

    (ii)   Ahom Buried their Dead

    (iii)   Graves are Sacred

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[30] Additional Information and Further Justification for enlisting the *Ahom* community as Scheduled Tribe (Plains) under the Constitution prepared by Tai-Ahom National Council, Assam, July 15, 2007, p. 294. Documents on Ahom Movement in Assam by Girin Phukan. Institute of Tai Studies and Research.

    c. The Casteless Ahom Society

    d. Traditional Festivals

        (i)   Me-Dam Me-Phi

        (ii)   Ompha

    e. The Ahom Socio-Cultural Institutions

        (i)   Clan system

        (ii)   Exogamy in Marriage (Chak-Long).

However, in the contemporary period, these socio-religious activities are virtually absent among all the Ahoms. One of the most significant reasons behind the irrelevance of Ahom socio-cultural practices was due to the gradual absorption of Ahoms into the Assamese society dominated by the Hindu way of life. Therefore, efforts of the ethnic leaders in collecting the ethnographic literatures have become one of the fundamental assets to legitimize their claim as authentic tribe.

Hence the ethnic groups become mediators between the state and the groups they represent (Chettri, 2015, p. 570). The Ahoms demand for ST status relying heavily on colonial discourse on 'tribalness' now confronts historical juncture due to the absence of distinctive way of life than before. This is because the categories of *jana*(tribe) and *jati*(caste) have become porous if not mutually defining (Kapila, 2008, p. 129).

4.6.   Response of the State on ST demand

The demands of the Ahoms have always been brought into the notice of the governments both at the state and central level in a democratic manner. After a prolonged agitation the Ahoms along with other communities demanding ST status were earlier provided with Development Councils under which an amount of Rs. 12 crores were provided to each community for the social, economic, educational and

cultural development of the said communities. The creation of each of the Development Council were made by separate Gazetted Notification during the month of May and June 2010 and January, 2011, and also during the year 2015-2016 for socio-economic, educational, cultural and ethnic advancement of the people of the community within the State of Assam.[31] But the hopes and aspirations of the Ahom population were not fulfilled with mere Development Councils (Baruah, 2018, p. 48). Consequently, they began to demand ST status along with the demand for Autonomous Councils. Currently, their demand for ST status is more significant in response to the ongoing socio-political scenario. In response to this the Assam government as well as the Centre has time and again assured that they are very much concerned about their demands and are doing their best to soon grant them the ST status. Drawing from the data based on fieldwork the Assam government has repeatedly forwarded the case of the six communities to the Centre, but the Registrar General of India (RGI) has repeatedly turned the proposals down. The BJP, Congress and Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) a regional political party are in support of granting them ST status. All three parties had mentioned this in their 2014 Lok Sabha election campaign and 2016 Assembly election manifestos. The central government set up the Singla Committee to consult with the state government and the agitating groups to suggest modalities for granting them ST status. Union Minister of State for Home Kiren Rijiju has also shown his concern and said the government would change the modalities, if necessary, to include them in the ST list (Indian Express, 2016). However there has not been any outcome in favor of the demand despite such approaches from any agency till recently. The negative outcome from the State has led to a series of protests by the Ahoms in the form of press releases and threatening

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[31] Department of Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes, Govt of Assam.

more intensive movements in the days to come. But in a very recent development on the issue of ST status a Bill has been recommended by the BJP led government and passed in the Lok Sabha but is pending in the Rasjya Sabha. The announcement to grant ST status to the six communities of Assam was made by the Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh in the Lok Sabha on 9th January, 2019. The union Tribal Affairs Minister Jual Oram also moved the Bill to further amend the constitution Scheduled Tribes) order, 1950 to include certain communities in the list of the ST in relation to Assam (Assam Tribune, 10th January, 2019). Despite such announcement by the central government the groups in question have remained skeptical about the declaration. The obvious reason for their dissatisfaction is that such announcement has taken place amid great political strife in Assam over the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016, which was tabled in parliament on 7th of January 2019, which seeks to amend the Citizenship Act of 1955, and proposes to grant Citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Christians and Parsis from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively. Bewilderment has taken place in the process of NRC (National Register of Citizens) as the Bill seeks to provide opportunity to apply for Indian citizenship to those unauthorized Hindu immigrants who came before December 31, 2014 (Baruah, 2019, 15th January, Indian Express).

In the context of granting ST status to various communities of Assam, it is also observed that the government has made no any rigorous ethnographic field studies of the six communities to examine whether they practically deserved to be included in the ST list or not. However, recommendations were put forwarded along with the resolution passed unanimously by the Assam Legislative Assembly on 5th

August, 2004 to grant ST status to the Ahoms.[32] Prior to grant ST status to any community; factors of historical, sociological and anthropological elements are supposed to be undertaken for the justification of such demands. On the other hand, in the State of Sikkim situated in the same region of Northeast India, where the demand for ST is occasionally examined by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA), Government of India. A submit called Sikkim Submit for Tribal Status was also organized in the year 2018, in collaboration with Sikkim Commission for Backward Classes, Government of Sikkim, (GoS), Social Justice Empowerment and Welfare Department, (GoS), to discuss the issue at length with the eleven communities demanding for ST status. Moreover, a consultation meet was also held at Chintan Bhawan on 8th January, 2019, which was attended by the Chairman of Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes (SCBC), T.N. Sharma, Meera Rnajan Tshering, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, etc and representatives of all eleven left out communities of Sikkim and its members. The eleven left out communities from the ST list of Sikkim are namely; *Bhujel, Gurung, Manger, Jogi/Sanyasi, Chettri, Bahun, Newar, Rai, Sunuwar/Mukhia, Thami and Yakha (dewan)* (Sikkim Chronicle, Jan 8, 2019). Unlike in Assam, the team of (MoTA), have decided to consider the ethnographic report of the communities and asserted that the state government of Sikkim has ample reason with valid justification to recommend the demand of the eleven communities to recognize them as tribal. Media reports also assert that they have also visited some of the places to gather first hand information about the communities to substantiate their reports. Drawing from this exercise by the MoTA, it

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[32] Additional Information and Further Justification for enlisting the Ahom community as Scheduled Tribe (Plains) under the Constitution prepared by Tai-Ahom National Council, Assam, July 15, 2007, p. 268. Documents on Ahom Movement in Assam by Girin Phukan. Institute of Tai Studies and Research.

is clear that the issue of granting ST status to various groups by the stakeholders give rise to enormous difficulties in determining tribe within the nation-state. Because, though the problem is same irrespective of different states but there is unequal treatment and is not judiciously handled all over the country giving rise to the same age old difficulty in determining tribe of different geographical location.

In case of Assam, one can easily understand the ''vested interests'' of the political parties on such an issue which have the potential of determining the whole socio-political scenario of the state. Media reports suggests that their demand has become louder after the Union Cabinet has granted ST status to the Bodos living in the hills and Karbis in the plains of Assam (The Telegraph, 2016). The Bodos who are categorized under the ST (P) have also a significant population living in the hills of Karbi -Anglong who were not considered ST until 2016. Similarly, the Karbis a group categorized under the list of ST (H) also have a population living in the plains of Assam and not scheduled under the ST list. In due course of time both the groups were entitled to be scheduled in their respective geographical location. Such a move by the government itself shows the ambiguities surrounding enumeration practices of the postcolonial Indian state and its scheduling process in the country. Further, there are many groups who are recognized as ST in some region of habitation while they are not recognized as ST in a certain location. As for example, the Tea- Tribes of Assam who are classified as OBCs are designated as STs in their place of origin (Hussain, 1992, as cited in Sharma, 2018, p. 75). The demand also gained momentum after Prime Minister Narendra Modi acknowledged it during a rally held in Bongaigaon, during 2014 general elections campaign. Additionally, an informal meeting was also held with the representative of six communities vying for ST status (Scroll, 2017).

During the field work we came to know that now the Ahoms oppose their status being in the OBC lists asserting themselves as the 'son of the soil' and asserts that they have all the right to be included in the ST category. In his own words the President of the ATASU said *"aami OBC status loi hukhi nohoi, jihetu hihot bhumiputra gotike hihotok janajatir morjyada dibo lage".* (We are not happy with the OBC status; we are the son of the soil, so they should grant us ST status).

Considering their backwardness, the Kaka Saheb Kalelkar Commission earlier recommended them as (Other Backward Classes (OBC).[33] Along with it they feel that OBC status does not allow them to participate in the political decision making fully letting them to a second class citizen and has not improved their condition. Therefore in the present context of their socio-political position the Ahom demand for the inclusion in the list of ST (Plains) in consideration to their historical perspective, and its century-old struggle for recognition and assertion for existence. From such a view point of the Ahoms, the ethnic groups with the demand for ST status has come to develop a perception of relative deprivation and also perceive that their wretched condition can be solved only by granting them ST status. One of the essential part of this view is the creation of opinion by the elite section and the dynamics of intense elite interaction leading to the politicization of ethnicity (Phadnis & Ganguly, 2001, p. 48).

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[33] Additional Information and Further Justification for enlisting the *Ahom* community as Scheduled Tribe (Plains) under the Constitution prepared by Tai-Ahom National Council, Assam, July 15, 2007, p. 294. Documents on Ahom Movement in Assam by Girin Phukan. Institute of Tai Studies and Research.

4.7.   Negotiation at the Intra and Inter-Community Level

The complex processes involved in the demand for ST status by the Ahoms needs to be analyzed as they are considered as the contributor of the greater Assamese society and in the homogenization of its culture. Narratives from the association leaders credited their past king Sukapha who built Assamese society taking into all the groups of people belonging to different cultures. The strong foothold of the discourse of tribalism in the state has altered the outlook of the Ahoms in the contemporary period projecting itself as a distinct cultural entity deviating itself from the non-tribal characteristics. Keeping this in view it has become imperative for the Ahoms to negotiate at both intra and inter-community level as one of the key strategy.

As mentioned in the preceding chapter the six communities have come under an umbrella organization called (JOM). It is a forum comprising organizations of the six communities of Assam demanding ST status. The Ahoms believed that it would not be possible to fulfill their demand unless they make united efforts in collaboration with other sister organizations of *Tai* Ahom community. Along with this they also tries to associate with the non-*Tai* Ahom organizations of indigenous communities who are also fighting for the causes of ST status. Therefore to bring their demand into reality the Ahoms began to communicate with the other organizations too and launch a united movement in the year 2000 (Phukan, 2005, p. 62). To materialize their new strategy the ATASU organized a delegates' meeting at Dibrugarh on 30th April in the same year where certain regulations were passed, such as:

i. To communicate and launch a united movement on the demand of the inclusion of *Tai* Ahom*, Moran, Matak, Konch Rajbongshi* and *Tea-Tribes* in the list of ST.

ii. To submit memoranda together to the Chief Minister of Assam and the Prime Minister of India through Deputy Commissioners of each district demanding the inclusion of the *Tai* Ahoms, *Moran, Matak, Konch Rajbongshi* and *Tea-Tribes* in the list of ST.[34]

During the course of my field work the leaders of the Ahom association stated that despite having come under a common platform they have failed in their effort to secure the status due to the negligence of the government. Additionally, due to the presence of differing political ideologies of the leaders among the groups affiliated to different political parties. Thus there is a splintering of group leaders on many occasions that prioritize individual interests and aspirations for larger political positions for their personal benefits.

Interestingly, as regard to the demand there has never been any formal meeting between the existing ST groups and the demanding communities. With the absence of common understanding of the issue more and more difficulties has cropped up over time leading to inter ethnic conflict. The existing STs are unwilling to allow the dilution of their quota by the inclusion of large community like Ahoms and other numerically larger groups. They argue that unless the existing quota of the present reservation is increased the existing ST would become more backward with the addition of new groups of population into the ST list. Consequently, previously integrated ethnic groups have now become disintegrated to a large extent due to the wants of constitutional safeguards over resource distribution along ethnic lines.

Looking at the present internal chaotic political condition the socio-political atmosphere provides spaces for both convergences and divergences among competing

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[34] Resolutions passed in a meeting of the delegates of organizations of different communities called by *All Ahom Students' Union* at Dibrugarh on April 30, 2000, as cited in Phukan, 2005, p. 63

ethnic groups. There are several socio-political problems confronted by the Assamese society like the immigrant problems a much echoed term since the beginning of the Assam movement, Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2016, (CAB), flood problems and other social problems of the state providing grounds for convergences among different ethnic groups to raise against the issue for its immediate solution for the protection of their indigenous rights. On the one hand, while both the tribes and non-tribes along with other groups of people build collective effort to stand against the much debated (CAB) 2016, on the other hand, both the groups come into clash with regard to the granting of ST status exclusively. For instance, a 12 hour Assam bandh was called by the CCTOA opposing the government decision to include the six communities in the ST list (Asomiya Pratidin, 11th January, 2019, p. 1). In this manner disarray rises among group and faction developed for the protection of their interests and socio-political rights. The development of faction could be observed when it comes to glorify their historical figures realizing its importance at present socio-political context. For instance, the episode of conflict in naming the Bogibeel bridge over the Brahmaputra river informs us the kind of intra and inter-community relations exist among different ethnic groups.[35] It may be mentioned that when the issue of naming the bridge emerged, all the groups put forwarded their proposal to name the bridge after the respective iconic figures of their community. For these communities these kinds of incidents are part of history making project which glorify their ancient past and represent their community in the larger public sphere.

Along with the demand for ST status the Ahoms' demand also include implementation of Inner Line Permit (ILP) in Assam. They believe that the threat to

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[35] Bogibeel is the longest rail cum Road Bridge which was inaugurated by Prime Minister of India, Mr Narendra Modi on 25th of December, 2018. The construction of the bridge was completed after a long wait of 22 years, which bears significant for the people of Assam as well as the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh.

indigenous people would be solved by the grant of ST status to all the six communities which would further help in the introduction of ILP in the state. There have been campaigns demanding the Inner Line among ethnic activists in Assam (Baruah, 2014). The two most prominent voices that have been pushing for the introduction of the ILP in the state are former Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and *Asam Jatiyatabaadi Yuva Chattra Parishad* (AJYCP). The device of ILP and its repercussions is the policy of gradual segregation of tribes and non-tribes, the hills and plains; segregation of the tribal population, creation of 'non-regulated', 'backward' and 'excluded' area/tracts that has broken the centuries of continuum and connectedness (Bhattacharya, 2016, p. 23). However, the current socio-political situation in the north-eastern region calls for it applicability in state like Assam to resist the phenomenon of illegal immigration and the dangers apprehended can thus be prevented to protect the interests of permanent settlers since past.

Inner Line Permit is an official travel document issued by the Government of India that permits inward entry of an Indian citizen to a protected area for a limited time period. Basically it is a legacy left by the British who first introduced it as a travel permit under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations Act of 1873 (Nair, 2016). At present the states in which the arrangement of ILP is in force are Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram in the Northeast. They consider that ILP would check further illegal immigration from the neighboring international boundaries which is a decade long problem of the state since Independence. Therefore, numbers of other organizations from the North-Eastern states have started reiterating the enforcement of the Inner Line regulation with the pretext that it will become instrumental in constitutionally safeguarding the land, people and their political, economic and socio-cultural rights (Medak, 2018). However, if we draw reference

from the existing states with ILP regulation we can perceive overall failure since its inception. For instance, in a state like Arunachal Pradesh, where ILP was introduced way back in 1870s during the colonial era, thousands of Chakma and Hajong refugees from Bangladesh (Chittagong Hill Tracts of erstwhile East Pakistan) were accommodated in the then Tirap, Lohit and Subansiri districts in 1960. According to the 2011 census, 47,471 Chakmas live in Arunachal Pradesh alone. After reorganizations of many districts in Arunachal Pradesh, majority of the Chakmas are living in the present districts of Changlang, Namsai and Papumpapre (ibid). Hence, it can be assumed as a futile effort from such perspectives to introduce the ILP to control the foreign immigration envisaged by the ethnic people of Assam.

4.8. Conclusion

From our above discussion, we observe that ethnic associations play the crucial role in determining the social fabric of the society. While the process of ethnic renewal among the common masses is not so visible, the initiative taken by the ethnic associations are always observable. In engaging with the State and the larger social structure, routine politicization of ethnicity takes place between competing groups. The present demand for ST status by different ethnic groups faces number of challenges. The immediate and obvious hurdle is the disagreement from the existing STs. Another problem that comes their way is the larger political commitment to grant them ST status along with the present ruling government's willingness to amend Citizenship Bill, 2016. Thus, the whole issue creates antagonism among the state and all the groups.

In order to make the demands more authentic, anthropological accounts become handy to make a stronger appeal for the ethnic groups. Changes in life style including dress pattern, food habits and even language takes place at the community

level. Initiatives are taken to relocate the forgotten and abandoned practices both at the material as well as at symbolic level. This practice becomes routinized and reproduced gradually by the people in their everyday life.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Loaded with colossal fluidity and vagueness by its nature, the term 'ethnicity' has always been under relentless treatment for its proper appliance in studying ethnic groups and their resurgence. In their analysis by scholars basically belonging to anthropology and other social sciences in general, attempts are being made constantly to formulate proper theoretical paradigms to understand the dynamics of ethnicity across nations and formation of ethnic groups. Most often the formation and assertion for ethnicity is multifaceted and contradictory in its appearance. Various forms of ethnic revival in the trajectory of socio-political sphere have come to exist in the modern period on the basis of distinct ethnic categories. Manipulation of ethnic symbols both at material and non-material level and anticipation for categorical readjustment of resources for exclusive categories echoes among all distinct ethnic groups.

The development in political, economic and socio-cultural domain of every ethnic category in the contemporary period exclusively depends on the redistributive justice ever since its inception in the constitution of India. At the same time census has become one of the significant tool in the enumeration of the subject population of the nation-state base on certain characteristics. Categories of caste and tribe have thus acquired important places in the census. Certain social, political and economic privileges such as reservations in jobs, education and political representations were accorded to those sections of people who were considered to be historically marginalized and underprivileged. With regard to such preferential treatment on ethnic lines; ethnic assertion for tribal identity in India is a living phenomena, which was otherwise once considered derogatory in the colonial regime. The persistence of

bafflement over the issue of tribal and non-tribal has much to do with the administrative division of the people of India germinated during the British rule. Therefore, transformation of the image of tribe in the current socio-political scenario can be contextualized more with the sharing of power politics rather than mere subject of social inequality.

The study entitled "Ethnic Reconstruction and Demand for Scheduled Tribe Status: A Study of Ahoms in Assam" was undertaken with the basic objectives of understanding historical context that led to the demand of ST status by the Ahoms examined through the theoretical lens of ethnicity such as Primordialist, instrumentalism, and social constructionist.

Historically, Ahoms being a ruling class presents a typical case, being reduced to a minority and marginalized community by the colonial empire to which they now consider as the ground for their demand. Officially, determined as OBCs, the Ahoms demand for ST status shows how the politics of identity in the modern nation-state has acquired importance for rights and entitlements on the grounds of indigeneity in Assam. The State plays a vital role in engineering such claims by different ethnic groups, encouraged with the allocation of substantial resources for the upliftment of the tribal communities. Moreover, directly or indirectly the State has always supported such ethnic resurgence, but without resolving the essentialist (colonial) invention of the category of tribe. On the other hand, the enterprise of anthropology is quite critical regarding the granting of such demands. Therefore, one can easily understand the 'vested interests' of the political parties and their political gimmick in handling such issues. Additionally, the obscure definition of tribe also facilitates such demands in the contemporary competitive social structure. Largely, bestowed with the State in determining the categories of population, ethnic associations constantly work

in accordance with the officially determined attributes designed by the State as authentic tribe. The ethnic leaders occasionally interacted with the politicians, bureaucrats at the local and national level. Alongside this, protests movement of different kinds has also taken place to pressurize the government. At this stage, the process of negotiation takes place at the intra and inter-community level which is peaceful at times and also takes violent turns in the form of counter arguments and protests among the existing STs and the aspiring ethnic associations and organizations.

The study of the present demand for ST status by the Ahoms and other ethnic groups has not only put us in bewilderment over the issue of recognizing who is a genuine tribe and autochthonous inhabitants of the state. It has also revealed how history is projected differently for mere political benefits undermining the social status. Assam, with the history of different races of migration in the ancient time and claims for indigenous slot by different groups has thus changed the social fabric of the present scenario of Assamese identity. Discursively, a politics of inclusion and exclusion has assumed greater importance in the demand for ST status in Assam. To emphasize the demand, binary of native and the outsider is created accompanied by other distinctive attributes to demarcate boundaries between the self and the other. Assertion for tribal status thus seems to be a political construction of 'othering' both at the internal as well as at the external level. Thus the '*Axomiya*' identity as a whole is slowly losing its convergent character with the increase in demand for tribal category in search of its own distinct language, history and cultural roots as with the case of Ahoms.

A very significant aspect can be seen in Assam is the persistence of the process of detection of illegal immigrants and the recent debate centered around the

Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2016. Despite having claims for exclusive and distinct ethnicity, the simmering protests against the citizenship bill and the pressure put forward in detection of illegal immigrants reflects the solidarity of all the ethnic groups when it comes to nationality question. The State's role in this respect can be seen as diluting the genuine cause of tribal identity by making it a mere political instrument. Such political situation reflects the increase in cleavages of the ethnic boundaries which are otherwise reciprocal at the societal level.

In the process the Ahoms faces challenges from various corners in their struggle for ST demand. Immediate hurdle that comes their way is the opposition from the existing tribe and the other from the state's failure to provide a permanent solution to the problem. Their demand for tribal status as fixed category has been in used to ensure power in the electoral politics and at the same time considered to preserve their distinct culture and traditions growing out of complex nexus of society, economy and polity of the modern state system. Being part of globalized age, ethnicity is also used by ethnic groups to derive material benefits with aspirations for modification of the blurred identities. At the same time it can also be argued that the historical juncture of the Ahoms has also forged the manifestation of such diverse nature of ethnic demand composed of multilayered issues in the contemporary period.

From the study it is revealed that the category of tribe and its sociological understanding is at the crossroads multiplying ethnic cleavage with the increase in its demand all over the nation. Therefore, the issue of ethnicity faces more challenges. Populated with diverse ethnic society and situated in the South Asian region, Assam is more likely to illuminate the challenges of ethnicity. Further, it has threatened the existing social fabric of synchronization between different communities' accompanied by socio-political unrest and turmoil in the recent time.

Through the study of the ethnic reconstruction of the Ahoms and their parallel demand for ST status, we can argue that it exhibits how the deep sense of history opens up spaces and can be contextualized according to the contemporary demand for its existence. Reimagination and re-interpretation of the past has served as one of the major strategies in the articulation and the making of a discrete category.

More research can be done to explore the present issue of ST demand in relation to the larger question of nationality, citizenship and ethnicity of which Assam in particular and India in general is confronting at present. It will also be interesting to look at the intra and inter-community relationship in this kind of scenario in which the struggle for resources is escalating and cleavages are being created among various groups and communities. At the same time there is a space for understanding the regional specificity and differences to this question and the responses of the State in a democratic setup. It would be interesting to understand the role of the State in mediating and negotiating the differences among the various groups in the present era of democratic setup with the emergence of civil society in the neoliberal globalized economy. Lastly, the process of categorization of population, the question of tribe and how the State deals with the various complexities can be further investigated.

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প্ৰসঙ্গ নং. ATASU/C C/0212/16   দিনাংক. 28/6/16

২। আহোম যুগৰ ঐতিহাসিক কৃর্তি চিহ্ন সমূহ বৈজ্ঞানিক পদ্ধতিৰে সংৰক্ষণ আৰু সৌন্দৰ্য্য বৰ্দ্ধনৰ ব্যৱস্থা কৰক।

৩। হিন্দু বাংলাদেশীক অসমত নাগৰীকৰ্ত্ব প্ৰদানৰ সিদ্ধান্ত প্ৰত্যাহাৰ কৰক।

৪। অত্যাৱসকীয় সামগ্ৰীসমূহৰ মূল্য বৃদ্ধি ৰোধ কৰক।

৫। অসমৰ জলন্ত সমস্যা বান আৰু গৰাখহনীয়াৰ স্থায়ী সমাধানৰ ব্যৱস্থা কৰাৰ লগতে ৰাষ্ট্ৰীয় সমস্যা হিচাপে ঘোষণা কৰক আৰু বানপানী সৃষ্টি কৰা অসমৰ নৈ-উপনৈসমূহৰ খননৰ ব্যৱস্থা কৰক।

৬। অসমৰ তৈল ক্ষেত্ৰ সমূহৰ নিলামৰ সিদ্ধান্ত প্ৰত্যাহাৰ কৰক।
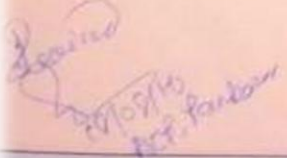
ধন্যবাদ সহকাৰে—

(চাৰ্ অংকুৰন ফুকন)
মুখ্য সেনাধ্যক্ষ

আহোম সেনা, অসম

(চাও মনোজ গগৈ)
সভাপতি

(চাও দেৱকান্ত গগৈ)
সাধাৰণ সম্পাদক

সদৌ তাই আহোম ছাত্ৰ সন্থা (আটাছু)
কেন্দ্ৰীয় সমিতি

সদৌ তাই আহোম ছাত্ৰ সন্থা (আটাছু)
কেন্দ্ৰীয় সমিতি

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প্ৰসঙ্গ নং. A.T.A.S.U/C C /২৮২/16   O/c   দিনাংক. ২৬/৫/১৬

প্ৰতি,

মাননীয় ৰাজ্যপাল মহোদয়

ৰাজভৱন,

গুৱাহাটী, অসম।

বিষয়ঃ- স্মাৰক পত্ৰ।

মহোদয়,

খুপতাং। বৈপ্লৱীক অভিনন্দন গ্ৰহণ কৰিব। আপোনাক জনাওঁ যে, সদৌ তাই আহোম ছাত্ৰ সন্থা (আটাছু) আৰু আহোম সেনা, অসম যে যৌথ ভাৱে জন্ম লগ্নৰে পৰা অসমৰ তাই আহোম জনগোষ্ঠীৰ আৰু অসমৰ বিভিন্ন সমস্যা সমাধানৰ দাবীত গণতান্ত্ৰিক আন্দোলনৰ কাৰ্য্যসূচীলৈ আহিছো। তাৰে ভিতৰত তাই আহোম জনগোষ্ঠীৰ জনজাতিকৰণ হ'ল মূল দাবী। কিন্তু বিগত চৰকাৰৰ দৰে বৰ্তমানৰ চৰকাৰেও আমাৰ সমস্যা আৰু দাবীৰ প্ৰতি ইতিবাচক ব্যৱস্থাৰ পৰিবৰ্তে ৰাজনীতি কৰাহে পৰিলক্ষিত হৈছে। সেয়েহে মাননীয় মহোদয়ক আমি দাবী জনাওঁ যে আমাৰ সমস্যা তথা দাবীবোৰৰ ইতিবাচক সমাধানৰ বাবে ব্যৱস্থা গ্ৰহণ কৰিবৰ বাবে আমাৰ দাবী।

<u>আমাৰ দাবীসমূহ ঃ—</u>

১। ২০১৬ চনৰ ভিতৰত তাই আহোম জনগোষ্ঠীক জনজাতিকৰণৰ ব্যৱস্থা কৰক।

Office : Sixmile, Jayanagar, Guwahati - 22, Assam, E-mail : atasu1988@gmail.com

মুক বাঙ ঙুক তাই আহোম জাং ম্যু

সদৌ তাই আহোম ছাত্ৰ সন্থা (আটাছু)
কেন্দ্ৰীয় সমিতি

L TAI AHOM STUDENTS' UNION (ATASU)

w Pranjal Rajkonwar
President

CENTRAL COMMITTEE

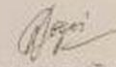Chow Devakanta Gogoi
General Secretary

Date ....

(৩) অসমৰ বিদ্যালয় সমূহত বুৰঞ্জী আৰু ভূগোল বিষয়টি বাধ্যতামূলক বিষয় হিচাপে অন্তৰ্ভুক্তিৰ ব্যৱস্থা কৰক।

(৪) ২০১৪ চনৰ ডিচেম্বৰ মাহৰ ১১ তাৰিখে হোৱা আলোচনাৰ সিদ্ধান্ত মৰ্মে বিশেষজ্ঞ সমিতিৰ প্ৰতিবেদন গ্ৰহণ নোহোৱাপৰ্য্যন্ত বৃহৎ নদীবান্ধৰ নিৰ্মাণৰ কাম বন্ধ ৰখা।

(৫) ৰাজনীতিকৰণৰ জৰিয়তে ৰাজ্যপাল ডাঙৰীয়াই প্ৰস্তুত কৰা ডিব্ৰুগড় বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ৰ ক'টৰ সদস্য তালিকা বাতিল কৰি অসমৰ অভিজ্ঞ ব্যক্তিৰ দ্বাৰা তালিকা পুনৰ প্ৰস্তুত কৰা।

(৬) অসমৰ জলন্ত সমস্যা বান আৰু গৰাখহনীয়াৰ স্থায়ী সমাধানৰ ব্যৱস্থা কৰাৰ লগতে ৰাষ্ট্ৰীয় সমস্যা হিচাপে ঘোষণা কৰক।

ধন্যবাদ সহকাৰে -

বিনীত -

(প্ৰাঞ্জল ৰাজকোঁৱৰ)
সভাপতি

(দেৱকান্ত গগৈ)
সাধাৰণ সম্পাদক

সদৌ তাই আহোম ছাত্ৰ সন্থা

প্ৰতিলিপি প্ৰেৰণ ঃ

১। প্ৰতি, মাননীয় মহামান্য ভাৰত ৰাষ্ট্ৰৰ ৰাষ্ট্ৰপতি ডাঙৰীয়ালৈ।
   নতুন দিল্লী।

২। প্ৰতি মাননীয় প্ৰধান মন্ত্ৰী ডাঙৰীয়ালৈ।
   নতুন দিল্লী

প্ৰতি

মাননীয় মুখ্যমন্ত্ৰী মহোদয়
অসম চৰকাৰ
দিছপুৰ, গুৱাহাটী-৭৮১০০৬

বিষয় ঃ স্মাৰক পত্ৰ ।

মহোদয়,

নমস্কাৰ গ্ৰহণ কৰিব । আপোনাক জনাওঁ যে, সদৌ তাই আহোম ছাত্ৰ সন্থা (আটাছু) য়ে জন্ম
লগ্নৰে পৰা অসমৰ তাই আহোম জনগোষ্ঠীৰ আৰু অসমৰ বিভিন্ন সমস্যা সমাধানৰ দাবীত গণতান্ত্ৰিক
আন্দোলনৰ কাৰ্য্যসূচীলৈ আহিছো । তাৰে ভিতৰত তাই আহোম জনগোষ্ঠীৰ জনজাতিকৰণ হ'ল মূল
দাবী । কিন্তু বিগত চৰকাৰৰ দৰে বৰ্তমানৰ চৰকাৰেও আমাৰ সমস্যা আৰু দাবীৰ প্ৰতি ইতিবাচক
ব্যৱস্থাৰ পৰিবৰ্তে ৰাজনীতি কৰাহে পৰিলক্ষিত হৈছে । সেয়েহে মাননীয় মহোদয়ক আমি দাবী জনাওঁ
যে আমাৰ সমস্যা তথা দাবীবোৰৰ ইতিবাচক সমাধানৰ বাবে ব্যৱস্থা গ্ৰহণ কৰিবৰ বাবে আমাৰ দাবী ।

আমাৰ দাবী ঃ
(১) ২০১৫ চনৰ ভিতৰত তাই আহোম জনগোষ্ঠীক জনজাতিকৰণৰ ব্যৱস্থা কৰক ।
(২) আমোহ যুগৰ ঐতিহাসিক কৃষ্টি চিহ্ন সমূহ বৈজ্ঞানিক পদ্ধতিৰে সংৰক্ষণ আৰু সৌন্দৰ্য
বৰ্ধনৰ ব্যৱস্থা কৰক ।

মূক নাও লুক তহি আহোম তাং মুং

সদৌ তাই আহোম ছাত্ৰ সন্থা (আটাছু)
কেন্দ্ৰীয় সমিতি

Chao Manuj Gogoi
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Ph. 9954384991, 9435110717
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ALL TAI AHOM STUDENTS' UNION (ATASU)
Central Committee

Chao Devakanta Gogoi
Secretary
Ph. 9954415168
E-mail : devakantagogoi@gmail.com

Ref. No. ....

প্ৰেছ বিবৃতি

Date : ২৭/০৮/২০১৭

আজি ইং ২৯/০৮/২০১৭ তাৰিখে গুৱাহাটী হোটেল চান চিটি প্ৰেক্ষাগৃহত অনুষ্ঠিত হোৱা সদৌ তাই আহোম ছাত্ৰ সন্থা, (আটাছু) কেন্দ্ৰীয় সমিতিৰ এখন কাৰ্যনিৰ্বাহক সভাত অসমৰ বানপানী সমস্যাক ৰাষ্ট্ৰীয় সমস্যা হিচাপে স্বীকৃতি প্ৰদান কৰাৰ লগতে বানপানীত ক্ষতি হোৱা লোকসকলক পুনৰ সংস্থাপন আৰু ক্ষতিপূৰণৰ ব্যৱস্থা কৰা। নগাঁও কাছুত খিলঞ্জীয়া ওপৰত কৰা আক্ৰমনক তীব্ৰ ভাষাৰে গৰিহনা দিয়া লগতে চৰকাৰী পৃষ্ঠপোষকতাত বলিয়ান হোৱা দুষ্কৃতীকাৰী সকলক অনাগত দিনত এনে ধৰণৰ দুষ্কাৰ্যৰ পৰা বিৰত থাকিবলৈ সকিয়াই দিছো। লগতে নতুনকৈ স্থাপন হ'ব লগা ২২ খন মহাবিদ্যালয় অসমৰ বায়ু, পানী, মাটিৰ লগত সম্পৰ্ক নথকা দীনদয়াল উপাধ্যায় নামত নামাকৰণৰ সিদ্ধান্তক তীব্ৰ বিৰোধীতা কৰাৰ লগতে জাতীয় নায়ক অসমৰ মুখ্যমন্ত্ৰী ডাঙৰীয়াক ল'বা বজাৰ ভাও নধৰি জাতি ধ্বংসী সিদ্ধান্ত প্ৰত্যাহাৰ কৰিবলৈ দাবী জনালো। আনহাতেদি মেডিকেলৰ নামভৰ্তিৰ সৰ্বভাৰতীয় পৰ্যায়ত যি সংৰক্ষণৰ ব্যৱস্থা আছে সেই একে সংৰক্ষণ অসমৰ ক্ষেত্ৰতো বাহাল ৰাখিবলৈ দাবী জনাই মেডিকেলৰ ছাত্ৰ- ছাত্ৰীক ভৱিষ্যত অন্ধকাৰলৈ ঠেলি নিদিবলৈ অসম চৰকাৰৰ শিক্ষা আৰু স্বাস্থ্য বিভাগক এই বিবৃতিৰ জৰিয়তে সকিয়াই দিলো।

উল্লেখযোগ্য যে শাসনলৈ অহাৰ পূৰ্বতে বিজেপি দলে তাই আহোমকে ধৰি অসমৰ ছয় জনগোষ্ঠীক জনজাতি প্ৰদান কৰিম বুলি প্ৰতিশ্ৰুতি দিয়াৰ পাছতো ক্ষমতাৰ থকত মতলীয়া হৈ কেন্দ্ৰীয় আৰু অসম চৰকাৰে অসমৰ ছয় জনগোষ্ঠীক চূড়ান্ত প্ৰতাৰণা কৰিছে। সেয়েহে তাই আহোম জনগোষ্ঠীক অতি শীঘ্ৰে জনজাতি কৰণৰ দাবীত, শক্তিমন্ত্ৰী আদ্ধাৰৰ ৰজা পদ্মবলোচন দাসক মন্ত্ৰীত্ব পদৰ পৰা অপসাৰণ কৰাৰ দাবীত, নতুনকৈ স্থাপন হ'ব লগা মহাবিদ্যালয় সমূহ দীনদয়াল উপাধ্যায়ৰ নামত নামাকৰণ বিৰোধীতাত, বানাক্ৰান্ত ৰাইজক উচিত ক্ষতিপূৰণ আৰু পুনৰ সংস্থাপনৰ দাবীত অহা ইং ১২ চেপ্তেম্বৰ ২০১৭ তাৰিখে দিঘলীপুখুৰী পাৰত অৰ্ধ উলংগ প্ৰতিবাদ আৰু ১৯ চেপ্তেম্বৰ ২০১৭ তাৰিখে আটাছু মৰিগাঁও জিলা সমিতিৰ সহযোগত ৩৭ নং ৰাষ্ট্ৰীয় ঘাই পথ অৱৰোধ কাৰ্যসূচী গ্ৰহণ কৰা হৈছে।

ইতি

চাও মনোজ গগৈ
সভাপতি

চাও মাধৱ গগৈ
চাও অনিল গায়ন
প্ৰচাৰ সম্পাদক

চাও দেৱকান্ত গগৈ
সাধাৰণ সম্পাদক

Office : Sixmile, Jayanagar, Guwahati - 22 Assam

যুক যাও লুক তাই আহোম তাং যুং

৩ সর্দী তাই আহোম ছাত্র সন্থা (আটাছু)
কেন্দ্রীয় সমিতি

ALL TAI AHOM STUDENTS' UNION (ATASU)
CENTRAL COMMITTEE
Head Office : Jaya Nagar Six Mile, GHY

Date:...................

প্ৰেছ বিজ্ঞপ্তি

আহোম জনগোষ্ঠীটোৰ একমাত্ৰ সংগ্ৰামী সন্থা সৰ্দী তাই আহোম ছাত্ৰ-সন্থাই নিগত দীৰ্ঘদিন ধৰি নিৰ্বচিত্ৰ ভাৱে অসমৰ প্ৰতিটো জাতীয় তথা জনগোষ্ঠীয় সমস্যাৰ আৰু সমাধানৰ বাবে সাজোৱে মাত-নাতি আহিছে। আহি থকা দিন বিলাকতো আটাছুৱে এই সমস্যা সমূহৰ সমাধানৰ বাবেসৰ্বৰ প্ৰতিবাদ কৰি যাব।

আজি ইং ০৬-১১-২০১৪ তাৰিখে আটাছুৰ নৱম কেন্দ্ৰীয় কাৰ্যনিৰ্বাহক সমিতিৰ ঐতিহাসিক শিৱসাগৰ জিলাৰ শিৱদ'ল প্ৰাঙ্গণত অনুষ্ঠিত হোৱা শপত ও কাৰ্যভাৱ গ্ৰহণ অনুষ্ঠানত নিম্নলিখিত প্ৰস্তাৱ কেইটা গ্ৰহণ কৰা হয় -

প্ৰস্তাৱ নং ১- তাই আহোমকে ধৰি অসমৰ ছয় জনগোষ্ঠীৰ জনজাতিকৰণৰ দাবীটোক অসম তথা কেন্দ্ৰীয় চৰকাৰে ধৰি অধ্য চূড়ান্ত প্ৰত্যাৱ্হাক আজিৰ সভাই তীব্ৰ ভাষাৰে গৰিহণা দিয়াৰ লগতে আগন্তুক ২০১৬ চনত অসমত হ'ব লগা সাধাৰণ নিৰ্বাচনৰ পূৰ্বে যদি এই সমস্যাটোৰ সমাধানৰ বাবে অসম তথা কেন্দ্ৰীয় চৰকাৰে বাস্তৱ পদক্ষেপ হাতত নলয় তেন্তে আটাছুৱে কঠোৰৰ পৰা কঠোৰতম চৰকাৰ বিৰোধী স্থিতি গ্ৰহণ কৰিবলৈ বাধ্য হব।

প্ৰস্তাৱ নং ২- আজিৰ সভাই তাই আহোমৰ জনজাতিকৰণৰ দাবীটোক অধিক শক্তিশালী ৰূপত আগবঢ়াই লৈ যোৱাৰ লক্ষ্যৰে ডিচেম্বৰ মাহৰ ভিতৰত প্ৰতিখন জিলাতে একোখনকৈ বিশাল গণ-সমাবেশ আয়োজন কৰিব।

প্ৰস্তাৱ নং ৩- আজিৰ সভাই অসমত উপ্তান হোৱা সকলো ধৰণৰ মৌলবাদী শক্তিকে চৰকাৰে কঠোৰ হাতেৰে দমন কৰাৰ দাবী জনায়।

প্ৰস্তাৱ নং ৪- অসমৰ প্ৰাচীন কীৰ্তিচিহ্ন সমূহৰ উপযুক্ত সংৰক্ষণ আৰু সৌন্দৰ্যবৰ্দ্ধনৰ বাবে অসম তথা কেন্দ্ৰীয় চৰকাৰে উপযুক্ত কাৰ্যব্যৱস্থা হাতত লবলৈ দাবী জনায়।

প্ৰস্তাৱ নং ৫- আজিৰ সভাই শিৱসাগৰ জিলাৰ বৰুৱাবাৰীত অা.এন.জি.চি. ৰ পুঁজিৰে নিৰ্মাণ হ'ব লগা উন্নতমানৰ চিকিৎসালয়খনৰ স্থায়ী নিৰ্মাণ কাৰ্য তৎকালে আৰম্ভ কৰাৰ দাবী জনায়।

প্ৰস্তাৱ নং ৬- আজিৰ সভাই সকলো জাতি-জনগোষ্ঠীৰ দুখীয়া ছাত্ৰ-ছাত্ৰী সকলৰ বাবে এক কোটি টকাৰ পুঁজিৰে এটা শৈক্ষিক ন্যাস খোলাৰ প্ৰস্তাৱ গ্ৰহণ কৰে। আৰ্থিক ভাৱে পিছপৰা দুৰাৰোগা ৰোগী সকলৰ সাহায্যাৰ্থে জিলা পঞ্চায়ত একোটাকৈ স্বাস্থ্যকোষ খোলাৰ প্ৰস্তাৱ গ্ৰহণ কৰে।

প্ৰস্তাৱ নং ৭- আজিৰ সভাই আহোম যুগৰ আপুৰুগীয়া স্থাপত্য শিল্পৰ ওপৰত এখন পুথি প্ৰণয়ন কৰাৰ প্ৰস্তাৱ গ্ৰহণ কৰে।

চাও প্ৰাঞ্জল বৰগোহাঞি
সভাপতি

চাও লিট্টল ব্যাগোহাঞি
সম্পাদক

মুক বাও লুক তাই আহোম আং ম্বাং

সদৌ তাই আহোম ছাত্ৰ সন্থা (আটাছু)
কেন্দ্ৰীয় সমিতি

ALL TAI AHOM STUDENTS' UNION (ATASU)
Central Committee

Monuj Gogoi.
Chow Pranjal Rajkonwar
President I/c

Chow Deva Kanta Gogoi
General Secretary

Ref:

Date:

প্ৰতি,

মাননীয়

সভাপতি/ সাধাৰণ সম্পাদক/ যুটীয়া সম্পাদক

সদৌ তাই আহোম ছাত্ৰ সন্থা

.... জিলা সমিতি।

বিষয় ঃ আটাছু আগন্তুক কাৰ্যসূচীৰ সন্দৰ্ভত।

প্ৰিয় সতীৰ্থ,

শ্ৰদ্ধাপতাং। আপোনাক / আপোনালোকক জনাবলগীয়া হ'ল যে, সদৌ তাই আহোম ছাত্ৰ সন্থা (আটাছু)ৰ
যোৱা ০৮-০২-২০১৬ তাৰিখ সোমবাৰে দিনৰ ১২ বজাত প্ৰতিমা পাণ্ডে বৰুৱা ভৱন, চুপাৰ মাৰ্কেট, দিশপুৰ,
গুৱাহাটীত অনুষ্ঠিত হোৱা কেন্দ্ৰীয় কাৰ্যনিৰ্বাহত তাই আহোম জনগোষ্ঠীক জনজাতি কৰণ নকৰাৰ প্ৰতিবাদত
কেইটামান প্ৰস্তাৱ লোৱা হয়। উক্ত প্ৰস্তাৱ কেইটা কাৰ্যকৰণাৰ্থে প্ৰেৰণ কৰা হ'ল।

আশা কৰো, আটাছু আৰু জনগোষ্ঠীটোৰ স্বাৰ্থত আপোনাসবে এই পত্ৰৰ যথোচিত ব্যৱস্থা গ্ৰহণ কৰিব।
কাৰ্যনিৰ্বাহক সভাৰ প্ৰস্তাৱ আৰু নিৰ্দেশনাৱলী লগত গাঁঠি দিয়া হ'ল।

ধন্যবাদ সহকাৰে –

বিনীত

(দেৱ কান্ত গগৈ)
সাধাৰণ সম্পাদক
সদৌ তাই আহোম ছাত্ৰ সন্থা

Appendix-I

জনজাতিকৰণৰ দাবী

ধেমাজিত আটাছুৰ অৱস্থান

প্রতিদিন বিশেষ সংবাদ, ধেমাজি, ১১ ডিচেম্বৰ ঃ তিৱা, ৰাভা আৰু মিচিং পৰিষদক ষষ্ঠ অনুসূচী প্রদান কৰিবলৈ চৰকাৰে লোৱা কেবিনেট উপ-সমিতি গঠনৰ সিদ্ধান্ত প্রত্যাহাৰ কৰা, টাই আহোম জনগোষ্ঠীক শীঘ্রে জনজাতিৰ মর্যাদা প্রদান কৰা আৰু নাগৰিকত্ব সংশোধনী বিধেয়ক ২০১৬ প্রত্যাহাৰ কৰাৰ দাবীত আজি ধেমাজি জিলা টাই আহোম ছাত্র সন্থাই অৱস্থান ধর্মঘট কার্যসূচী ৰূপায়ণ কৰে। ধেমাজি চাৰিআলিত ৰূপায়ণ কৰা দুঘণ্টীয়া ধর্মঘট কার্যসূচীত সংগঠনটোৰ নেতা-কর্মীয়ে অসম চৰকাৰ হায় হায়, কেন্দ্রীয় চৰকাৰ হায় হায়, বিজেপি চৰকাৰৰ কাম নাই আদি শ্লগান দি পৰিবেশ উত্তাল ■ ১৪ পৃষ্ঠাত

Source: *Asomiya Pratidin*, (2017, December, 11).

তাই আহোম জনগোষ্ঠীক অতি শীঘ্রে জনজাতি মর্যাদা প্রদান কৰা, খিলঞ্জীয়া ভূমিপুত্র সকলৰ ভূমি, সম্পদ আৰু ৰাজনৈতিক অধিকাৰ সুনিশ্চিত কৰা, অসমৰ বানপানী সমস্যাক ৰাষ্ট্রীয় সমস্যা ৰূপে ঘোষণা কৰাৰ দাবীত

অর্ধ উলঙ্গ প্রতিবাদ

স্থান ঃ দীঘলীপুখুৰীপাৰ, গুৱাহাটী

তাৰিখ ঃ ১২ চেপ্তেম্বৰ, ২০১৭

সদৌ তাই আহোম ছাত্র সন্থা, কেন্দ্রীয় সমিতি

Source: Field Study, 2018: April to June.

Appendix-II

Field Work, 2018: April to June.

Source: *Asomiya Pratidin,* (2017, July, 8)

Appendix-III

Source: *Asomiya Pratidin,* (2017, July, 8)

Source: Festivalsoflife.blogspot.com. Ahom priests performing rituals on the occasion of Me-Dam-Me-Phi