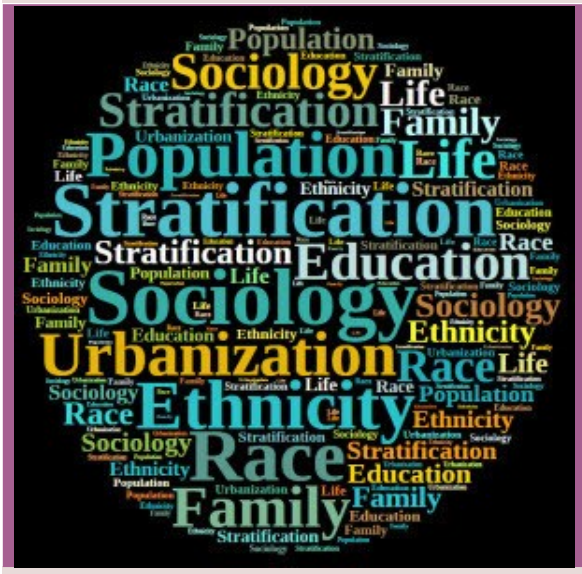

MASTER OF ARTS
SOCIOLOGY

CENTRE FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

(CODL)

MSO 404: SOCIOLOGY OF NORTHEAST INDIA

BLOCK II

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MSO-404: SOCIOLOGY OF NORTHEAST INDIA

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BLOCK II

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

This Block comprises of Modules **III** and **IV** of MSO 404: Sociology of Northeast India. **Module III** focuses on land relations in Northeast India. **Unit 8** deals with the pattern of land ownership and social stratification in the region during the pre-colonial period while **Unit 9** discusses the colonial period, focusing on the emergence of modern land system in the region. The post-colonial developments in the context of land relations are covered in **Unit 10**. **Unit 11** will help the learners to have a clear grasp of state and society in Northeast India.

Module IV explores the issues of identity in Northeast India. **Unit 12** discusses identity assertion in Northeast India. The unit will help the learners to understand the fluid character of society in Northeast India and how identities get moulded and enacted in a shared situation. **Unit 13** deals tribal autonomy and homeland politics. On the other hand, **Unit 14** deals with the important topic of immigration in Northeast India. The unit will help the learners to explore the debatable question of indigenous-immigrant in the region.

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MODULE III: LAND RELATIONS IN NORTHEAST INDIA

UNIT 8: PRE-COLONIAL ASSAM: PATTERN OF LAND OWNERSHIP AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we are going to discuss land ownership and social stratification in Northeast India during the pre-colonial period. The inferences about ancient Assam can be obtained from the Hindu epics and the puranic and tantric literature besides the various inscriptions available from that time. Ancient Assam included roughly the present-day Brahmaputra valley, Bhutan, Rangpur, Cooch Bihar, the northeast of Mymensingh and possibly the Garo hills (Gopalkrishnan, 2000). Although during the six hundred year of the Ahom rule, the extent of Assam varied in different periods, most of the time the Ahom kingdom covered the major portion of the Brahmaputra

valley, the most populous part of the northeastern region. Therefore, we are going to focus primarily on the Ahom state. Therefore, more precisely in this unit, we will focus on the land relations of Assam/Ahom state during ancient and medieval period. Land ownership, land use pattern and land tenure systems have gone through different changes in Assam. From ancient to medieval and medieval to the modern era, land relations have rapidly been changing (Gopalkrishnan, 2000). In this unit, an attempt has been made to trace a few aspects of land ownership pattern and social stratification in the northeastern part of India during Pre-Ahom and Ahom period.

8.2 OBJECTIVES

By the end of the unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the Land ownership pattern of Assam during the pre-Ahom period and during the rule of the Ahoms;
- Discuss the social stratification system of pre-Ahom Period and during the Ahom rule.

8.3 PATTERN OF LAND OWNERSHIP AND

8.3.1 Land Settlement Pattern during Pre-Ahom Period

Nayanjot Lahiri argues that to know about the land relation of ancient Assam from the period of 5^{th}-13^{th} century, we should rely on 32 inscriptions, twenty of which have recorded the royal grants to the Brahmins. Lahiri shows the riverside character of the settlements. Most of the inhabited and cultivated areas of Kamarupa between 5^{th} and 13^{th} century were concentrated on the banks or near about the Brahmaputra river with most significant aggregations near Tezpur and Gauhati. The riverside character of Assamese settlements also found in the descriptions of the donated lands. Tezpur and Gauhati, the political epicentres of different dynasties had grown around the Brahmaputra. Because of the

influence of the agrarian way of life, lands were regarded as the symbols of prestige. Most of the inscriptions are land grants and the only beneficiary of those donations, the Brahmins were on the top of social hierarchy. However, around this period sacred texts began to include agricultural work within the traditionally sanctioned duties of the Brahmins (Lahiri, 1991).

According to Lahiri, a huge amount of lands were granted to the Brahmin priests during the reign of Bhaskar Varman and Bhuti Varman. Fiscal and administrative benefits were given to the donees. In case of fiscal benefits or privileges, the donees were exempted from paying tax in case of the donated land. Different administrative powers were given to the donees. In case of the donated land; the cultivators of these lands need to pay tax to the donees. The donee should maintain the affairs of the donated land. Further, the insecurity of land tenure and issues of landlessness was not a part of the land relation of ancient Assam (ibid.). While talking about the system of landholding she mentions that from the 5th-century inscriptions to 12th-century inscriptions, the dominant trend was large scale land donation by the rulers to the Brahmins. The inscriptions suggest occupational mobility. These also suggest that certain classes held considerably more land than others (ibid.).

In this context, Barpujari (2007) argues that in ancient Assam, the land was classified as *kshetra*, *khila* and *vastu* land. *Khestra* refered to arable land, *khila* referred to wasteland, and land for building houses was known as *vastu* land. Two types of land tenure were mentioned as *Bhumichidra* and *karada*. Though it's debatable, *Bhumichidra* were non-cultivable land where no tax has been levied. A special type of tenure *brahmodiya* was operated to govern the land given to the Brahmins (Barpujari, 2007).

From the inscriptions, it is clear that formally at the top of the hierarchy was the king who controlled a considerable amount of land and donated huge amounts of land. These lands were often rendered free from the visits

of policemen and free from the obligation to pay the taxes. Land was privately held even in the centres of political power. The land which the king owned was more in the nature of his private estate. While talking about the nature of the land tenure, Lahiri highlighted that as donated lands were in settled village areas where agriculture had been practised, the peasant cultivators were supposed to give that part of their produce to the Brahmins what they were originally supposed to give to the king (Lahiri, 1991).

When people settled in the Brahmaputra valley by cutting trees and raising crops, the role of controlling authority was nil. The colonizers were allowed to raise crops for one or two years without rent. Later on, when rent was levied the original cultivators enjoyed permanency of tenure and landlessness could hardly be a feature of pre-Ahom Assam. She mentions that from the fifth till the ninth century AD the density of settlements was quite low because a number of settlements or villages mentioned in this period was limited. However, from the beginning of the 11^{th} century, the amount of agricultural and settled land increased significantly. Compared to early thirteen village settlements after the tenth century, approximately 47 settlements are mentioned. According to Lahiri, the extension of wet rice cultivation can be the main factor behind the favourable demographic growth (ibid.).

The hills which run along the Brahmaputra valley were not inhabited at least by the people of the inscriptions. If at all there is some mention of hills, it is only in a religious context. Cultivation and habitation were basically limited to the flat plains of the Brahmaputra valley. Pre-Ahom Kamarupa was basically a riverside agrarian society. The predominant kind of urban settlements in pre-Ahom Assam were all centres of power. Pragjyotishpur, Durjyoya and Haruppesvara. Mahasamata (feudatory king) and Mahaamatya (chief councillor), etc. were the administrative officials during that time. In conclusion, Lahiri argued that the Brahmaputra has through the centuries been the cultural and economic lifeline of the region.

History reflects the manner in which the Brahmaputra provided a strategic line of communication (ibid.).

8.3.2 Social Stratification during Pre-Ahom Period

According to Lahiri, the ranks of the peasantry in the Brahmaputra valley were low compared to Brahmins and tribals. The Kaivartas, traditionally associated with boating and fishing, appear to be an important part of such a group. It was likely that boatman, weavers and potters were peasant cultivators since the demands for their professional services were not adequate enough to support full-time production (ibid.).

From the inscriptions, Lahiri came to know that the Varna-jati divisions were not very distinct. Lack of strict specialization and hierarchical division can be witnessed in that period. In case of Kamarupa, society may have been far less differentiated, as a result, certain occupations which theoretically have been socially taboo may have been practised by a high caste. The hereditary occupational division was not very rigid in the Pre-Ahom Assam and even the Brahmins not following such a hereditary association can be witnessed (ibid.).

There was a direct correlation between the peasant economy and the principles involved in the caste structure in Assam. There is no group of tribesmen in this region which has not involved itself in the caste structure in some form or the other after the adoption of wet rice cultivation. A large amount of detribalization also took place and the Brahmins played an important role in the process. Among other things, detribalization also involved a renunciation of tribal forms of worship and the acceptance of traditional Hindu god and goddesses (ibid.).

The caste system was loosely organized in this period and the Kaivartas, who in other regions of India were considered impure, are included in the ranks of the peasantry. Again hereditary occupational associations within the framework of the caste system seem to have been insignificant in this period (Baruah, 2013). The predominance of the Brahmins was partly

because they were the predominant landholding class, the only class which benefitted from the large land donation. Landholding was fairly egalitarian. The actual functioning of the supposed hierarchy of the caste system in Kamarupa was far less rigid and differentiated (Barpujari, 2007)

It has been witnessed that the settlement patterns continued to be same from the pre-Ahom time with some changes in the administrative divisions (Guha, 1983).

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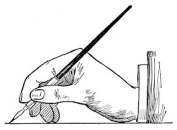

1. What was the main character of the settlement pattern in the Pre-Ahom Assam?

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2. How was the Varna-Jati division in the Pre-Ahom Assam?

8.4 PATTERN OF LAND OWNERSHIP AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION UNDER AHOM PERIOD

8.4.1 Land Ownership Pattern under Ahom Rule

Amalendu Guha argues that historically Assam has been regarded a rural agrarian society. Mode of production of pre-colonial Assam has been semi-tribal and semi-feudal in nature (cited in Das & Saikia, 2011). The semi-

tribal and semi-feudal nature of the pre-colonial medieval Assam has clearly been visualized in the writings of Jahnabi Gogoi (2002). According to Gogoi (2002), the Ahoms classified lands according to their use. They classified land into three categories: 1) cultivated, 2) cultivable, and 3) un-cultivated land. The cultivated land has two categories:

1) *Rupit* land, where permanent cultivation is done.

2) *Pharingati* land, the land suitable for cultivation but remains un-cultivated.

Un-cultivated lands were classified as 1) *dalanimati* and 2) *jangalamati* (Gogoi, 2000).

According to Acharyya (1966) land was considered as absolute property of the state in the Ahom period. *Paiks* were allotted about 3 acres (2 *puras*) of land for cultivation which was free of rent. Such rent free land was popularly known as *gaa-mati*. A piece of homestead land was allotted to each *paik.* This homestead land was known as "*bari* or *basti mati*". If any *paik* wanted to cultivate more than 2 *puras* of land, one rupee per pura should be given as tax. Free land granted to the religious institutions was known as *Lakheraj* land (Acharyya, 1966).

The system of revenue administration under Ahom rule was the *Paik* system. The system of rendering personal service to the state in lieu of a regular land tax- the *Paik* or *Khel* system came to prevail all over the upper valley i.e. from Kaliabar upwards. According to this system every able-bodied male adult of the country was liable to render personal service to the state. He was known as *paik*. As remuneration for his service each *paik* was allowed two puras (nearly three acres of rupit or rice land free of rent. That land was designated as Gomati or body land. He was also given land for house and garden, called *bari* and *basti* land. For the occupation of this land he had to pay a poll tax of rupee one. The paik enjoyed heritable property rights on their homeland, but paddy land was subject to

redistribution at periodic intervals. The *pam* cultivators paid plough tax. The hill tribes who cultivated hill land for growing cotton paid *hoe* tax. The Ahom king patronized nobles, temples and religious institutions by granting land to be held revenue free or Lakhiraj for religious and charitable purposes (Baruah, 2013).

As there was no restriction to occupying waste lands, the nobles as well as the heads of the temples and the *satras* who used to employ *paiks* in their establishment for reclaiming waste lands, started their *khats* or *pams* and grew rich. This led to the accumulation of vast landed property in the hands of the privileged few. In the inundated parts of the country, lands were cultivated chiefly by *rayats* emigrating there in search of fertile lands, which were called *pamuas*. They paid a plough tax. The hill tribes cultivating dry or high lands for cotton etc., who didn't use the plough, paid a hoe tax of rupee one per annum (Cited in Baruah, 2013). The situation was different in the lower valley. There in Kamrup, the *pargana* system largely prevailed whereas in the tributary states of Rani, Luki, Beltola and others, lands were held according to the old tribal system on community basis (Baruah, 2013).

The State has owned all land in Assam from early history. The Ahom king owned all of the land within his territory and made extensive land grants to temples, priests, and charitable institutions. In particular, religious institutions received massive landed property from the state in the Ahom period. These were revenue-free and were known as *Lakhiraj* grants. But the bulk of land was allotted to *paiks* in lieu of their services to the state (Barpujari, 2007).

The Ahoms appear to have carried on their rice cultivation from the very outset apparently on an individual household basis, with a large measure of mutual cooperation. Historical data suggest that, during the Ahom rule, collectively reclaimed wet rice lands used to be divided into family- sized

plots and distributed for usufruct among individual households. This distribution was made according to the number of adult males in each such household and was subject to redistribution after their deaths or superannuation. Any other category of land, when reclaimed by private sorts for permanent cultivation, and homestead land in general remained obligation-free private property, subject to a degree of clan control. The early Ahom society was thus a stratified one not only in terms of lineage status, but also to some extent in terms of access to resources (Guha, 1983).

8.4.2 Social Stratification during Ahom Rule

Under Ahom rule, at the top of the social hierarchy was the privileged aristocracy consisting of the king at the centre, the tributary Rajas, the Patra Mantris, the frontier or local governors and the priestly class which included mainly the pontiffs at the leading *Satras*. Next to the king was the council of the five known as the Patra Mantris, consisting of the Burhagohain, Borgohain, Borpatra Gohain, Borbarua and the Borphukan. The three Gohains, who were hereditary counsellors to the state, occupied an exalted position in the Ahom polity next to the king (Baruah, 2013).

The gentry consisted of the Chamua class, who depending on their skill as well as caste and tribal identities, enjoyed offices of Phukans, Rajkhowas, Baruas, Hazarikas, Saikias etc. The caste Hindus were generally given offices of civil Phukans, Kakatis, Bairagis, Baruahs, etc. The vast majority of the population consisted of the *paiks* who were, in reality, the labouring class. They formed the peasantry and also the militia of the kingdom (Guha, 1983).

The *paiks* were organized into *gots* or *squad* of three or four *paiks*. The *paiks* were further arranged into *khels* . Each *khel* consisted of one thousand to five thousand able-bodied men. There was a regular gradation of officers over the *paiks*. Over twenty *paiks* there was a Bora, over one hundred, a Saikia, over one thousand, a Hazarika, over three thousand, a

Rajkhowa, over six thousand, a Phukan, and all of them were under a rigid discipline under a regular army. There was also a wide prevalence of slavery in the entire region and slaves could be bought and sold in the open market. Their market price was determined by their caste. The difference between the *paiks* and the slaves was only one of degree and not of kind and unlike the latter, the former could not be sold and bought (Baruah, 2013).

There was a rigid social distinction among the people belonging to different classes, which was not there in the initial stage of the Ahom rule. A significant social distinction was the number of *paiks* and *likchows* (personal attendants) placed under the control or allotted to each of them, and the extent of territory placed under respective jurisdiction. In the royal court, the distinction was maintained by allotting them different seats in different positions in order of hierarchy. In a similar way, the distinction between the king, the nobility and the small section of the gentry holding high offices, on the one hand, and the masses on the other, was strictly maintained (ibid.). There was a distinction in the use of houses, dress code, ornaments, utensils, etc. Cutting across the classes, there were caste distinctions among the Hindu population of the entire valley, even though the caste system as such was not enforced in Assam with all its rigidity. Brahmins of lower Assam considered themselves purer and did not intermarry with their counterparts in upper Assam. There was no intermarriage between Brahmins and the Sudras. Among the Sudras also, there was a hierarchy of castes with the Kayasthas at the top and the Kaivartas, Haris etc. at the bottom (Barpujari, 2007). During Ahom rule, the family was patriarchal and daughters had no right to their father's properties. Though the position of women as subordinate to man, she enjoyed great freedom in society, where the tribal outlook prevailed. Women played an important role in all family affairs (Baruah, 2013).

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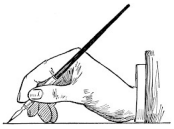

1. What was the mode of production during pre-colonial Assam?

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2. What is *Paik* system?

8.5 SUMMING UP

- Land ownership, land use pattern and land tenure systems have gone through different changes in Assam. From ancient period to medieval and medieval to modern era, land relations have rapidly been changing.
- The riverside character of Assamese settlements can be found in the descriptions of the donated lands.
- From the fifth till the ninth century AD the density of settlements was quite low because the number of settlements or villages mentioned in this period were limited. However, from the beginning of the 11^{th} century, the amount of agricultural and settled land increased significantly.
- The Varna-Jati divisions were not very distinct. Lack of strict specialization and hierarchical division can be witnessed in the Pre-Ahom period.
- Mode of production of pre-colonial Assam has been semi-tribal and semi-feudal in nature.
- The system of revenue administration under Ahom rule was the *paik* system. According to this system, every able-bodied male adult

of the country was liable to render personal service to the state. He was known as a *paik*.

- Under Ahom Rule at the top of the social hierarchy was the privileged aristocracy consisting of the king at the centre, Next to the king was the council of the five known as the patra mantris, consisting of the Burhagohain, Borgohain, Borpatra Gohain, Borbarua and the Borphukan.

8.6 QUESTIONS

Short Questions:

1. Who were granted huge amounts of land during the Pre-Ahom period?
2. Name two urban settlements of the Pre-Ahom Assam.
3. How much of land was allotted to *Paiks* free of rent?
4. Who were the hereditary counsellors to the state during the Ahom rule?

Essay Type Questions:

1. Discuss the land ownership pattern of the Pre-Ahom Period.
2. Examine the Varna-Jati division that existed during the Pre-Ahom Assam.
3. Describe how the land was important in the power structure of the Ahom rule.
4. Discuss the social hierarchy that existed during the Ahom period.

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UNIT 9: COLONIAL ASSAM: EMERGENCE OF MODERN LAND SYSTEM-COMMODIZATION, PRIVATIZATION

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Though Assam proper came under British rule in 1826, it took some time for the colonial rulers to control the other parts of present-day Northeast India. In comparison to the other parts of the Northeast or mainly the hills, the plains of Assam were under the Ahom rule where it developed a distinct system of land management. With the introduction of the wet rice cultivation during the Ahom rule, the surplus production increased and a well-structured Ahom dynasty could survive for almost 600 years. On the contrary, the hill dwellers followed the shifting cultivation and dry rice cultivation that resulted in a self-sufficient economy. British occupied Assam in 1826 and then started annexing the other areas of the region –the Cachar plains in 1830, Khasi Hills (1833),

Jaintia Hills (1835), Karbi Anglong or Mikir Hills (1838), North Cachar Hills (1854), Naga Hills (1866-1904), Garo Hills (1872-73) and Mizo Hills (1890). Subsequently, they also introduced a new system of landholding, taxation, and a new regime of land relation started into the region. Moreover, as the economy of the 19th-century colonial northeast ranged from tribal to semi tribal-semi feudal, it was hard for the peasantry to cope up with the cash economy introduced by the colonial rulers. With the discovery of tea and oil as well as the development of the communication (like railways, streamer), a new regime of capital started into the region. With the annexation and capital investment, the Colonial Government came up with new land laws and revenue system for colonial exploitation. We will discuss these in detail in this Unit.

9.2 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will learn about the emergence of the modern land system in Northeast India. As we all know, northeast India is dominated by the tribal population and most of the communities are engaged in *jhum* (shifting) cultivation, especially the hill dwellers hence the landholding system was different in those societies. On the contrary, with the emergence of the stable state structure in the plains in the medieval period, the system of taxation on land differed from region to region. As such the hills and the plains carried different landholding and taxation system. However, with the coming of the Britishers, the areas came under a similar administrative structure. We will discuss those in this Unit. After going through this Unit you will able to:

- Explain the nature of landholding system in colonial times;
- Discuss the taxation on land in the hills and the plains;
- Describe land allotment and various rules enacted during the colonial period;
- Discuss the emergence of the tea industry and land allotment

9.3 INTRODUCTION OF NEW LAND POLICY AND REVENUE

We have already understood that before the coming of the Britishers, the landholding policy in the Ahom state was different. In the tribal societies of the hills where they practised *jhum* cultivation, most of the land belonged to the community. In Assam, the ruling Ahom state followed the *paik* and *khel* system which we have already discussed. In the colonial period, the Britishers introduced a new system of land revenue by suspending the older one. It stopped the personal service of the *paiks* and introduced poll tax for the *paiks*. It appointed the chiefs of *khels* to collect the revenue. Later Mauzadars, Choudhuris were appointed to collect the revenue on behalf of the Government.

Such mechanism took away the traditional right over land and with the introduction of the new policy, land was considered a private property. The British introduced the *Ryotwari* System in upper Assam. Under this system, the landholder was considered as the proprietor of the registered land. He used to pay revenue directly to the Government for his land. He could sell, transfer or gift his land. But to some extent, the colonial rule continued the *zamindari* system in Goalpara district. In Assam, the land administrative structure was divided into three categories, viz. *basti* (homestead), *rupit* (paddy land) and *foringati* (high land growing inferior crop). For these different types of land, different revenue was set which was revised from time to time. Mauzadars were appointed to collect the revenue on behalf of the Government. Thus, a systematic process of landholding and land management process was evolved during the colonial time. Though initially, revenue realization was different in different districts for various types of land, from 1860 onwards, uniform revenue was realized in five districts (Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur) of Assam and revenue was also increased. At the same time, the colonial Government brought various laws and Acts for successful management of land as well as to

encourage commercial agriculture in the vast uncultivated land. Apart from these, there were different types of land available in the Assam plains such as *devottar* land (granted to temples) which was made revenue-free (*lakhiraj*), *dharmottar* land (land granted to Brahmins) was confirmed half revenue-free (*nisf-khiraj*). The *khiraj* lands were owned by the peasants with full revenue.

9.4 TEA INDUSTRY AND COMMODIZATION OF LAND

As we have mentioned earlier, the land tenure system in the hills and in the plains are different. The plain areas of northeast India had settled agriculture and the hills areas were under shifting cultivation which resulted in shifting of the hill dwellers from place to place after a regular interval and this led to a problem in carrying out a cadastral survey in the hills. Under the Ahom rule, in the present-day upper Assam, the Ahom state realized periodic service from the subjects called *paiks* as tax for the land they used. The economy in the entire northeast was to some extent self-sufficient and barter system dominated the region. Land in such rhetoric was not considered as a commodity. However, with the advent of the colonial power, the commercial activities started. The colonial Government wanted to transform the existing land and other resources as productive resources for colonial exploitation. The process got accelerated with the discovery of tea in the early years of colonialism in Assam (it is to be kept in mind that several states of the present-day Northeast were districts of the Assam province and those were occupied in different times by the British). It attracted the British planters for opening up of tea gardens in large scale. As a result, the colonial Government introduced various rules, acts and regulations to encourage the planters. Let us discuss various rules and land acts of the colonial Government and how those tried to transform the self-sufficient economy to a commercialized one as well as how the process of commoditization and privatisation started. Land became a capitalist commodity in the colonial period with the encouragement of

establishing tea gardens and other cash crops, taxation on land and natural resources and so on.

9.5 WASTE LAND GRANT RULES, OLD ASSAM RULE AND FEE SIMPLE RULES

The Company experimentally started cultivating tea in 1835 in Lakhimpur. Gradually, tea cultivation increased in different districts including in the Barak valley. To encourage the planters, it came up with a rule called Waste Land Grant Rules in 1838, as vast areas of land were unused. However, in many cases, the wastelands were basically covered with forests. David Scott in 1827 also proposed granting of wasteland to the *ryots* (cultivators) for production of various cash crops like cotton, indigo, sugarcane, etc. in favourable terms for a period of nine years. This would increase the land revenue as well as economy and cultivation could be capitalized. The condition was set forth that the cultivator (grantee) must tillage his greater portion of land within a stipulated time. Scott's premature death brought a halt to such an idea for some time. In the subsequent period, favourable terms were laid down but failed to attract the local cultivators. With the discovery of tea and its experimental production, the Company tried to attract foreign capital for tea production with the introduction of the Waste Land Grant Rules in 1838. The rules were further modified and revised in 1854 and 1861. As per this 1838 rule, land was given in lease for a period of 45 years.

"The rules divided wastelands into three categories with corresponding rent-free terms ranging from five to twenty years after which only three-fourths of the grant was to be assessed at low but graduated rates for the remaining period, the rest being granted rent-free perpetuity " (Prajapati, 1984: 582).

Acreage of 100 acres was granted under this rule. However, such rules were more favourable for the European planters than the local

cultivators. But, the new rules also failed to attract more Europeans for clearance conditions and for not granting land less than 100 acres (ibid).

Stop and Read

Wasteland Grant Rules:

i) One-fourth of the granted land was to be brought under cultivation in the 5th year

ii) One-fourth of the grant was perpetually revenue-free

iii) Of the remaining three fourths, no revenue was payable for first 5 years if it was under grass, no revenue was payable if the land was under reeds and high grass, and revenue-free for 20 years if the land is under forest;

iv) On the expiry of this period, revenue was to be paid at the rate of 9 annas per acre for 3 years after which the rate was to be Rs.1-2 annas per acre for the next 22 years

(https://landrevenue.assam.gov.in/information-services/tea-land-administration-in-assam)

In 1854, the rules were modified which came to be known as the Old Assam rule. As per this rule, lease grant was increased for 99 years. "One fourth of the grant was declared rent free in perpetuity as before. The remaining portion, after a revenue free term of 15 years, was to be assessed at annas three per acre for ten years and annas six remaining 74 years" (ibid). In the new rule, the minimum quantity of land to be applied for was raised to 500 acres holding the condition of clearance. The waste land grant created a favourable condition for booming up the tea industry in Assam.

Instead of encouraging local planters, the wasteland grant was suitable for the Europeans. By 1858-59, 54860 acres of land were brought under tea plantation which increased in 1861-62.

Stop and Read

Old Assam Rules

i) One-fourth of the grant was held revenue-free in perpetuity; The remaining three-fourths of the grant was to be revenue free for 15 years

ii) Thereafter these lands were assessed at 3 annas per acre for 10 years, and at 6 annas per acre for the next 74 years

iii) After expiry of the 99 years lease, the grant was to be subject to reassessment at such moderate rates as seen proper by the Government.

(https://landrevenue.assam.gov.in/information-services/tea-land-administration-in-assam)

Fee Simple Rules 1861-62

The Fee Simple Rules were enacted in 1861 and was revised in 1862. Here, the allotment was given to a limit of 3000 acres.

Stop and Read

Fee Simple Rules

i) Grants of the compact area were put up to auction sale subject to an upset price of Rs.2 per acre

ii) The purchase money was to be paid either instantly or by instalments within 10 years

iii) On payment of the full price, the land became free forever from payment of land revenue. The grant-holder enjoyed absolute proprietory and hereditary rights

iv) The Fee Simple Rules also allowed 99 years grants to be redeemed to Fee Simple status by payment of 20 years' revenue at a time;

v) Immediately before the constitution of the province of Assam in 1874, the Fee Simple Rules were revised in February of that year **https://landrevenue.assam.gov.in/information-services/tea-land-administration-in-assam**

Land was one of the most important sources of revenue in colonial Northeast, as a result, vast tracts of land were leased out to the tea-planters as well as new land law was also introduced to extract the revenue, especially in the plains of the region. On the contrary, in the hills instead of land revenue, house tax was imposed. As we have discussed above, the planters were awarded revenue-free land but the colonial Government increased the land revenue for the local peasantry (there were local planters too but too small in numbers). Saikia and Das write, "Planters were awarded revenue-free land or were charged a rate which was a small fraction of what local peasants paid. Land revenue rates were raised by 100% in 1867-68, to be further enhanced by another 53% in 1892-93" (ibid: 75). Similarly, tea plantation also grew. In 50 years span (1839-1897/98), it rose from zero to 27.2% of the cultivable land (ibid).

9.6 SETTLEMENT RULE 1870

The Colonial Government brought a systematic land settlement rule in 1870. The rule gave the right to hold land to the individual (cultivator). As per this rule, the settlement was made with the cultivator permanently known as 'settled assessment'. Non-permanent category of land was settled on a yearly basis and the settlement terminating at the end of the financial year. The permanently held settlement was ordinarily for ten years on lease and lease so given guaranteed him against enhancement of assessment for the term of the lease. Such settlements were declared to be heritable and transferable under the condition of being registered. The revenue was to be collected by the Mauzadars. Thus, the 1870 land settlement policy recognized a permanent, heritable and transferable right of the cultivator.

The Decennial Settlement Rules, 1883

In 1883, the decennial settlement was introduced and was terminated in the year 1893. Under these rules, long term settlement of the *khiraj* lands into Assam proper was introduced decennially (continuing for ten years) and such land was held permanently.

The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886

The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1886 was enacted by the Governor in 1886. The legal sanction or statutory rights to the ryots were given by this regulation. Various provisions were made under this rule. It also provided transferable and heritable right over land.

However, with the process of immigration that started in the late 19th and in the 20th century from erstwhile East Bengal, conflict over land also started. The emerging Assamese middle class also showed their concern against such large-scale immigration of the Muslim peasantry. The Land Policy Resolution, 1939, Land Policy Resolution, 1940, 1942,

Land Policy Settlement 1943, 1945, etc. were enacted. Moreover, commercially jute cultivation was also done especially in the lower Assam by the newly settled Muslim peasants. Hence, a new regime of plantation economy started in Assam during the colonial period and vast tracts of lands were converted to tea gardens. The coming and settlement of various groups as labourers in the tea garden as well as the immigration of the Muslim peasants and their settlement in the *char* areas started diminishing the land resources in the plains of Assam. With the enactment of laws like Inner Line Permit (ILP) in the hills areas barred the planters from a further extension of tea gardens to the hills as well as restricted the settlement of other population.

9.7 SUMMING UP

We have discussed various land laws regulations enacted by the colonial Government in Assam and present-day Northeast India in the 19th and 20th centuries. Abolishing the previous system of land management (*paik*), the Britishers introduced a monetary tax on land that initiated modern land management system by the state The rules of land allotment were changed from time to time. With the discovery of tea, European tea planters got attracted for tea plantation, and various attractive offers were made on the part of the colonial Government and thereby land as a resource of the peasantry converted to a commercial entity. Various forestlands were converted into tea-estates in due course. However, though initially rights over land of the peasantry were denied, with various rules, the rights were secured including making it hereditary and transferable.

Glossary:

Paik: The Ahom Administration divided its population into some 'got' (groups). Initially, four persons consisted of a *got* and they were known as *paik*. They were supposed to render services to the

dynasty in rotation basis for a period of three months and enjoyed some land without paying revenue to the state.

Ryotwari system: In this system, land ownership right was given to the individuals and the state directly collected revenue from them.

ILP: A law enacted in 1873 by the colonial Government for the hills of colonial Assam. As per the law, no outsider was allowed to enter or settle beyond the line without prior permission. It also barred the European planters from further extending the tea gardens and rubber cultivation beyond the line.

9.8 QUESTIONS

1. Briefly write about colonial land policy in northeast India.
2. Write a note on tea plantation and commercialization of land in Assam.
3. Write a note on various laws and Acts implemented by colonial Government in Assam for land management.
4. How did wasteland regulation rule and subsequent modifications help the growing tea industry in Assam?
5. Write short notes:
   a) Ryotwari System
   b) Waste Land Regulation
   c) Old Assam rule
   d) Fee Simple Rules

9.9 RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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Useful Website:

https://dlrar.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/land-policies-during-british-rule

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UNIT 10: POST-COLONIAL PERIOD: EMERGENCE OF NEW SOCIAL FORCES

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we will discuss changing land relations and the subsequent emergence of new social forces in Northeast India during the post-colonial period. However, we are going to focus mainly on Assam. The unit discusses the rapid demographic transformation in the last century and its implications on the prevailing land relations of Assam. The issue of peasant mobilization after independence, which led to the enactment of several legislatures, has been discussed in detail. The unit also takes an account of the context of the emergence of a nationalist vocabulary in the political landscape of Assam. Land alienation among the tribal peasantry in the post-colonial period and how it had led to the emergence of a new ethnic mobilization across the state has also been discussed.

10.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Discuss the context of the demographic change in the post-colonial period and its consequences in the larger context of the agrarian relations;
- Explain the emergence of ethnic mobilization through the question of the land of the tribal peasantry;
- Analyse the backdrop in which Assamese landed class allied with the Assamese nationalists to articulate their grievances in a broader framework of Assamese nationalism.

10.3 DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSFORMATION IN THE POST-COLONIAL PERIOD

Assam has been a hub of various migrant groups since ancient times. The colonial period witnessed massive migration from its neighbouring areas such as peasants from East Bengal/ East Pakistan, Nepali grazers from Nepal and Santhals from East-Central India under the patronage of the colonial revenue economy. However, this unrestricted immigration had rapidly transformed the demographic landscape of the region. Consequently, Assam's population growth in the period during 1901-51 recorded the second highest (137.80%) in the world, exceeded only by Brazil (204.00%) (Hussain, 1993: 59-60).

The phenomenal growth of population in the region continued in the post-colonial period too. This massive transformation in the demographic structure of the region has its implications on the prevailing land relations of the region. Over the years, Assam has transformed from 'a land abundant and thinly populated state to a land scarce and thickly populated state' (ibid.: 60). The rate of population growth in the state is much higher than the national average since the colonial period. It would be worthwhile to mention that in 1901, the population of Assam shared only 1.38% of the total population of the country, which later doubled (2.67%) in 1971. During the post-colonial period, all districts and major regions- the

Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley and the hill areas witnessed the highest decadal population growth. Among all the districts in the Brahmaputra Valley except Sibsagar, the decadal population growth rate was ranging between 35% to 45%. The Darrang district had shown the highest decadal population growth which was 40% during the decade 1951-61 (ibid.: 60).

The rapid transformation of the demography of Assam had increased the pressure on land. According to Census, 1971, the average size of land holding is 1.47 hectare, per capita cultivable land is 0.19 hectare and the net sown area per cultivator is only 0.9 hectare against the national average of 2.30, 0.32 and 1.8 hectares respectively. Therefore, all of these statistics have demonstrated that the rapid demographic change in Assam had 'severe pressure on land and an obvious negative land-man ratio in a predominantly agrarian society' (ibid.: 64-65).

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Fill up the gap: Assam's population growth in the period during 1901-51 recorded the _____ highest in the world.

10.4 PEASANTRY MOBILISATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF ASSAMESE NATIONALISM IN THE POST-COLONIAL PERIOD

In the 1940s, the land scarcity issue became a central point in the political landscape of Assam. It was accentuated by the concentration of large landholdings in the hands of a few landlords and tea planters. Tribal land alienation also came to the forefront in the public domain. Since 1948, the Assamese and tribal peasants mobilized under the banner of communist

peasant organizations. The slogan 'land to the landless peasants' echoed across the valley and even exhorted to occupy government-owned land. Their demand was to distribute the land from grazing reserves, tea industry, forested land and unploughed land of rich landlords among the landless peasants (Saikia, 2014: 228-230).

During 1948-52, the rural Assam witnessed massive sharecroppers' protest against the landlord class. After independence, due to the pressure from peasant mobilization against the oppression of the rural landed gentry, the government of Assam enacted the Assam Adhiar Rights and Protection Act of 1948, which sought to regulate the amount of rent demanded by the landlords (ibid.: 207). Unlike the passage of the Regulation of 1886 and the Assam Tenancy Act of 1935, the Adhiar Act of 1948 spawned aspirations and enthusiasm among the Assamese peasantry. The Act was a part of the everyday rural vocabulary in that period and perceived to be an instrument for social justice (ibid.: 227).

However, despite such reform measures, the government could hardly contain rural discontent. The promise of distribution of surplus land to the landless peasants could not be implemented in an effective manner. Amidst the growing peasant discontent, in 1948, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) led the sharecroppers' movement in the Brahmaputra Valley. This movement of sharecroppers transformed the power dynamics of the rural world in the Brahmaputra valley for a couple of years. The movement, to a large extent, displaced the landlord's control over land (ibid: 210-219).

The rich landlords rejected the Assam Adhiar Rights and Protection Act, 1948 as they were in a hegemonic position in the agrarian society and had the privilege of access to the administrative machinery. They did not accept the new rent arrangement stipulated in the Act. The landlord lobby with the help of the government functionaries exercised its influence to nullify the positive aspects of the Act (ibid.: 227). In many cases, the landlords took the help of police to collect rent from the peasants. Moreover, they refused

to renew land contact with sharecroppers and evicted them in case of non-payment of rent (ibid.). The Assamese and tribal sharecroppers built resistance against such repression of the landlords. Gradually, it took an organized form under the leadership of the Communist and local peasant organizations. In Kamrup district of Brahmaputra valley, the sharecroppers confronted with the landlords' attempt to evict them or transfer land to other sharecroppers. Similarly, in Golaghat district, the Assamese sharecroppers stopped paying rent to their landlord. In many instances, they successfully took away the land from the landlords (ibid.: 215).

However, the landlord as a class tried to overcome the crisis with state support. A large number of sharecroppers failed to withstand police atrocities. Moreover, the traditional patron-client relation between the landlords and sharecroppers had not completely dried out and was rather restored in the aftermath of 1950's big earthquake and subsequent food crisis (ibid.: 222).

The social relationship of the Assamese landlords with the Assamese and tribal sharecroppers was primarily based on the formers ability to extract rent, other customary services and its social hegemony in the rural landscape. However, as the Assamese and tribal peasants started to revolt and exercised to control over land and its produce, this relationship between the landlords and sharecroppers began to weaken. On the other hand, the immigrant Muslim peasants remained out of this sharecroppers' movement. They continued to pay rent and even sometimes helped the landlords to collect rent from the Assamese sharecroppers.

There were mainly two factors that conditioned the alliance between Assamese caste Hindu landlords and immigrant Muslims- firstly, the Assamese caste Hindu landlord started to replace their traditional sharecropper with immigrant Muslims. The immigrant Muslim peasants started multi-crop and cash crop production in their land, which yielded high profit. The partition further accelerated the flow of immigration of Hindu and Muslim peasants into this region (ibid.: 223). This increasing

number of landless peasants from East Pakistan paved the way for Assamese caste Hindu landlords to engage more immigrant landless peasants as sharecroppers in their land, evicting their pre-existing Assamese and tribal sharecroppers. Secondly, due to lack of integration into Assamese society and increasing scarcity of material resources necessary for cash crop production, these immigrant Muslim peasants had to stay outside of the fold of the sharecroppers' movement. The immigrant Muslim peasants largely depended on the landlord-moneylender-traders nexus to cultivate cash crops. Also, after partition, these immigrant Muslim peasants did not have a political representation to articulate their discontent.

Initially, the Assam Adhiar Act, 1948 was implemented only in southern Kamrup and Golaghat districts. The other districts had to wait for long for the implementation of the Act. The resistance came from the powerful landlord lobby in the implementation of the Act. However, due to the mounting pressure from the sharecroppers, the Act was implemented in a phased manner in the period between 1949-54 (ibid.: 224).

On the other hand, two pieces of legislature, namely the Assam State Acquisition of the Zamindari Act of 1951 (Zamindari Abolition Act) and the Assam Fixation of Ceiling on Land Holding Act of 1956 (Ceiling Act) had an enormous impact on the rural landscape of the post-colonial Assam. Both these legislatures had a direct bearing on the landed interest of the Assamese nationalist. The Act, which was introduced in the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1949, sought to abolish the Zamindari estates and gave tenurial rights to the tenants along with occupancy and hereditary rights. The Zamindars of Goalpara legally and politically challenged the Act. Despite strong protest from the Zamindars, the bill passed in 1951. The Zamindars waged a 'protracted' legal battle against the Act in Supreme Court of India. The Zamindars argued in the court that the bill was not enacted according to law and there was a gross infringement of their fundamental rights under the Indian Constitution. However, the Supreme

Court was not convinced by Zamindars' argument and uphold the Act in 1956. Later, the Zamindars got compensation from the government. They also often indulged in the fraudulent transfer of land to someone else's name (ibid.: 291). The social impact of the Ceiling Act, 1956 was minimal as compared to the Zamindari Abolition Act as the Act was rarely put into action. These legal and administrative measures failed to alleviate the problem of landlessness in the state.

Reflecting the rural politics of that period, a historian (Saikia, 2014: 291) opines, "(T)he Act failed to ameliorate the problem of landlessness. These administrative measures or new legal instruments nonetheless began to shape the rural mobilization in Assam. It did not take long to make room for nationalist politics within the broader framework of tenancy politics". By 1960, though the Act was extended to most areas of the valley, the act hardly gave relief to the sharecroppers as the landlords used their influence on the bureaucracy and government functionaries. Till the mid of 1964, the land acquired under the Ceiling Act was a mere 18,000 acres affecting only 262 landlord families (ibid.: 303).

The political mobilization in the 1960s took a new turn as issues such as the question of language, immigration from East Pakistan and a severe food crisis unfolded in the socio-political landscape of the region. The language movement which erupted during 1960-61 polarized the Assamese the Bengali communities in the region. At the same time, recurring devastating flood and erosion during 1956-67 resulted in the loss of vast tract of agricultural land which further increased the number of landless peasants. In such a backdrop, with growing discontent among the Assamese peasantry, they became a part of various Assamese-led political and cultural movements (ibid.: 303-34).

The issue of unabated immigration of peasants from East Pakistan to Assam was gradually started to be discussed in the public domain. It identified large scale migration of peasants from the neighbouring areas as a major factor for increasing landlessness among the Assamese peasants.

The scarcity of land became a political slogan in that period. The growing discontent among the peasants also came to be reported in the Assamese press in the 1960s. The various peasants' agitations were organized in different parts of the state demanding tenurial rights of the sharecroppers or land for the landless peasants. The widespread protest of the peasants forced the government to reformulate its land distribution policy in 1968. Already a large number of peasants had reclaimed the government-owned forest land and grazing reserves. The government agreed to legalize up to a maximum of eight bighas of such land of those who had reclaimed land till 1967. Such reclamation of land by the Assamese landless peasants had a serious impact on the dairy economy of the state. However, the Nepali grazers did not get any support from the Assamese landlords and subsequently, could not withstand the pressure from the Assamese landless peasantry.

Two decades after the enactment of Adhiar Act, there was still widespread practice of sharecropping and tenancy in Assam. The Census of 1961 estimated that about 37 per cent cultivators of the state were sharecroppers. Official statistics taken during 1970-71 revealed that one-tenth of the total peasant families were still dependent on tenancy in Assam (ibid.: 313). This official statistics during that period testifies the fact that despite years of continuous struggle by the sharecroppers, their condition and relation with the landlords hardly improved.

With spiralling growth of discontent among the Assamese peasantry and mounting pressure from the radical faction of the Congress Party, the Assam government enacted Assam Tenancy Act of 1971, which gives entitle to occupancy rights to those peasants who had been cultivating for three consecutive years. This was a turning point for the sharecroppers' movement in the state. Earlier the Assam Tenancy Act, 1935 provided occupancy rights to those who were cultivating a plot of land for 12 years. The provision for long years of occupancy made its execution unfeasible. The Assam Tenancy Act, 1971 came into effect after 1973. There were

widespread protests of landlords against this Act. A large number of tenants were evicted by the landlords across the valley.

After the enactment of the Assam Tenancy Act of 1971, the tenancy rights were granted across all sections of tenants. One of the major beneficiaries of the Act was immigrant Muslim sharecroppers, who used to rent in the land of absentee Assamese landlords. This made the new Assamese middle class feel deprived. Gradually dissatisfaction grew among these absentee landlords. The Assamese landlords were a traditional ally of Congress Party. After the enactment of the Tenancy Act, 1971, they felt threatened and vociferously opposed Congress Party in 1978's Legislative Assembly election. Facing severe opposition from the Assamese landlords, the Congress Party sought the support of immigrant Muslim peasants in the 1978's election. This growing discontent of the Assamese landlords became an 'ideological apparatus' for the anti-foreigner Assam movement which began in 1979. The discontent of the Assamese landlords later transformed into anti-migration rhetoric in the state (ibid.: 318).

We have already mentioned that due to sharecroppers' movement, the Assamese landlords preferred immigrant Muslim peasants over Assamese or tribal peasants on their land. The immigrant Muslim peasants had expertise in jute cultivation and multiple crop cultivation and therefore could bring more profits to the Assamese landlords. Also, these immigrant Muslim peasants were not part of the sharecroppers' movement which was a big relief to the Assamese landlords. As the immigrant Muslim sharecroppers got the occupancy rights over landlords land, the Assamese landlords suddenly threaten to lose its economic and social privileges. Meanwhile, they sought their socio-economic support from other alternative resources and started to compete with non-Assamese traders. Competition over limited resources within the state by a new Assamese middle class turned out to be the backdrop of well-known Assam Movement that began in 1979, which later metamorphosed into anti-immigrant mobilization (ibid.: 320-21).

After getting land in the1970s, the immigrant Muslim peasants radically transformed the agrarian setting of the state. Two parallel processes – raising the share of landholdings and practice of multiple cropping by the immigrant Muslim peasants, dramatically changed the rural dynamics of the region. The immigrant Muslim peasants began to accumulate and consolidate their existing small plots of land. Reclamation of newly formed *char* areas and forest areas near riverine areas by Muslim small peasants expanded the agrarian frontier. By diversifying agriculture, the Muslim peasants started jute, paddy, fish farming and other cash crop production, which earned them high profit. It would be worth to mention that the number of landless peasants among the immigrant Muslim peasants was small as they overcame the problem of landlessness through a complex process of land reclamation and accumulation (ibid.: 321-22).

The most visible outcome of this new agrarian practice is that the surplus obtained from agriculture led to capital formation in the rural areas. This new phase of rural capital was diverted to mercantile capital, which led to the diversification of agricultural practices. Another outcome of this new agrarian economy is stratification among the Muslim peasants. Though a new Muslim middle class emerged in this period, the socio-economic condition of small peasants did not improve significantly.

The Assamese landed gentry who faced opposition from the government and landless peasants wanted to regain their lost privileges and hegemony. The general worry of this landed class gradually translated into a popular mass mobilization in 1979. The agitators demanded to declare these Muslim peasants as foreigners and deport them from here. The six-year long mass mobilization culminated with Assam Accord, 1985 which was signed between agitators and the government of India. The Accord framed the legalities of immigrants and citizenship in the region (ibid.: 324-25).

The Assamese nationalist entered the electoral politics and the newly formed Asom Gana Parisad (AGP) came to power in 1986. The new political outfit received support from the landed gentry. Defending the

Assamese absentee landlords' interest, the new government tried to repeal Assam Tenancy Act, 1971. The political representatives of the Assamese landed gentry in the government publicly criticized the Act for its very 'confiscatory' nature. The Assam Pattadar Sangh, an umbrella organization of the Assamese landlords demanded the repeal of the Assam Tenancy Act and urged the government to re-install Assam Adhiar Act, 1948 as an instrument to regulate the relations between landlords and sharecroppers. However, the AGP government failed to repeal the Act in the Assembly (ibid.: 325).

Since the mid-2000s, a radical peasant organization Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) started mobilizing landless peasants in demand of land reform, the abolition of money lending and land distribution among the landless peasants. Most of their leaders come from poor economic background. Though they have not rejected the nationalist aspirations of the masses, at the same time they strongly oppose the authority of the nationalist gentry. The KMSS also defend the interest of those landless peasants who had reclaimed the government-owned forest land (ibid.: 331-32). In Assam due to its unique history of recurring flood and soil erosion, the tribal and non-tribal dwellers' have traditionally inhabited in the fringe of forest land. But the present Forest Rights Act of 2006 provides land rights only to the traditional tribal forest dwellers. The KMSS has demanded that the land rights should be given to the non-tribal dwellers as well considering its distinct geographical location. The structure of forest villages in Assam is different from the forest villages of Central India. Here the forest dwellers usually inhabit in the fringe of forest area and they are sedentary peasants (Sharma and Sarma, 2017: 87-99).

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. When was the Assam Adhiar Rights and Protection Act passed?

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2. How did the immigrant Muslim peasants transform the agrarian setting of Assam in the 1970s?

10.5 TRIBAL LAND ALIENATION IN THE POST-COLONIAL PERIOD

A large section of the tribal peasantry of Assam in the colonial period was practising shifting cultivation. Due to abundant land resources, these tribal groups used to shift their habitat from one place to another. Moreover, many tribal peasants shift their habitat to avoid paying revenue to the government. This practice of shifting, however, deprived the tribal population of permanent land ownership document (*Patta*) for themselves.

The condition of the tribal peasantry worsened with the growing immigration of peasants from the neighbouring undivided Bengal and Nepal in the second decade of the 20th century. The large-scale settlement of Muslim peasants and Nepali grazers resulted in the displacement and alienation of tribal populace from their land and livelihood. More importantly, a large number of tribal people moved to the remote and forest areas due to the tendency 'to abandon their land and shift to a different place at the drop of a hat also contributed to their displacement'. In this context, it may be mentioned that a large tract of land in present-day

Guwahati city belonged to Bodo-Kachari and Karbi tribe of Assam. Similarly, a considerable land of the present-day township of Chilapathar was originally owned by Mising tribal community. These tribal inhabitants sold off their land at a nominal price to others and moved away to remote areas, which is free from the social complexities of the modern urbanized life (Sharma, 2001; Sharma & Borgohain, 2019).

The demand for secured and protected land for tribal communities gained momentum before independence. The Tribal League, led by Bhimbar Deuri continued to bargain with the Congress leadership for a secured and exclusive habitat for tribal communities of the state. To protect the interest of the tribal peasantry, the government of Assam agreed to reserve land for tribal communities in the form of tribal belts and blocks which were formed in 1946 (Sharma, 2001; Saikia, 2014: 204-05). The villages which consist of 50 per cent or more tribal population and backward communities were brought under the ambit of tribal belts and blocks. Even the neighbouring villages with less than 50 per cent population were clubbed with reserved areas. In such areas, the transfer of land from tribal to non-tribal was prohibited. These provisions were included in the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation (Amendment) Act, 1947. Approximately one-fourth of the total land in the Brahmaputra valley was brought under the tribal belts and blocks (Saikia, 2014: 206).

However, the tribal belts and blocks eventually failed in safeguarding the interest of the tribal peasantry. The appropriation of tribal land by non-tribal continued, by exploiting the loopholes in the existing law. Though the transfer of land from tribal to non-tribal is illegal in tribal reserved areas, the burden of indebtedness among the tribal people, often forced them to dispose of their land to non-tribal counterpart. In this context, Sharma (2001) contends, “Even the very custodians of tribal interest, viz; the government officials, ministers and political leaders have been recognized as principal perpetrators of the problem of tribal landlessness. All these categories of people are engaged in the usurpation of tribal land

by various dubious means" (Saikia, 2014: 292). It is also argued that this legal protection aimed to keep the interest of the tribal peasants overlook two other fundamental causes of tribal land alienation- firstly, it failed to recognize the predominance of traders and secondly, the lack of tenurial security of tribal sharecroppers (ibid.).

The emerging tribal landlords also engaged in the usurpation of tribal land from the poor tribal peasants if they were unable to pay back a debt. In the post-independence period, the successive government has been acquiring tribal land for various developmental activities such as construction of roads and railway connectivity, setting up of industrial hub, irrigation complexes, commissioning of dams, etc. which has resulted in the displacement of thousands of tribal people from their land and livelihood (Sharma, 2001).

On the other hand, the Ceiling Act, 1956 also caused land alienation among the tribal peasantry. The landlords who owned excess land under this Act often dispose of their land to someone else to escape from the clutches of the act. As a result of this, a large number of peasants have been evicted from this surplus land belonging to landlord or institution. Most of these evicted peasants belong to tribal community. Secondly, 'the Ceiling Act resulted in many tribal peasants getting much less land than what they hereditarily deserved' (Sharma, 2001). Thirdly, due to the ignorance of the tribal peasants, their ancestral land is not legally transferred to them and they often enjoy the land right in the name of their ancestors without any legal document. Therefore, the Ceiling Act of 1956 further perpetuated the alienation of land among the tribal peasantry (Ibid).

This pervasive marginalization and alienation of tribal peasantry in the region caused the emergence of a renewed phase of ethnic movement in the post-independence period. The tribal population is now more politically conscious than it was earlier. Their struggle for economic prosperity and inclusion has been articulating in the form of powerful ethnic identity mobilization.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How did the Ceiling Act, 1956 cause land alienation among the tribal peasantry?

10.6 SUMMING UP

In the above sections, we have outlined the changing land relations and how those shaped the vernacular politics of the region in the post-colonial period in Assam. We have discussed in detail the peasants' struggle for occupancy rights or tenurial rights over land which in the subsequent period, unfolded as an identity crisis. On the other hand, massive immigration of labourers and peasants transformed the demographic balance of Assam and it had a serious bearing on the prevailing agrarian relations. In the post-independence period, the issue of tribal land alienation also came to the forefront in the public domain. The caste Hindu Assamese leadership did not recognize the complex transition of the tribal peasantry from shifting cultivators to sedentary peasants and later in the decade of 1960s, the tribal peasantry's marginalization emerged as an ethnic identity struggle. We also discussed the recent peasant mobilization under the banner of KMSS for the land rights of the peasants and forest dwellers. The KMSS has again brought the peasantry issue at the centre-stage of the political map of the region.

10.7 QUESTIONS

1. Give an account of the demographic transformation in Assam in the 20th century and its implications on the rural landscape of Assam?

2. Write a note on the issue of tribal land alienation in Assam?

3. Discuss the factors that contributed to the emergence of Assamese nationalism as a distinct political discourse in the post-colonial period in Assam?

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UNIT 11: STATE AND SOCIETY IN NORTHEAST INDIA

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 INTRODUCTION

By now, you are already familiar with the geographical and cultural aspects of Northeast India. In our previous units, we have also covered the formation of different states of Northeast India as well as the cultural specificities of the region. In this unit, we are going to further explore state and society in Northeast India, focusing on a few conspicuous features of the region.

11.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain how territory and spatial relations in Northeast India worked;
- Analyse how social life in Northeast India is categorized;
- Explain the state's role in political governance in the Northeast;
- Evaluate the response of the tribal communities to the changing dynamics of the region.

11.3 NORTHEAST INDIA AS A SPACE

To imagine the space called Northeast India, we need to pay our attention to accounts written with the colonial-anthropological frame of reference. Robert Reid's *A History of Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam* provides a critical illustration of this frame. Reid's account provides an insight into the thoughts of the colonial mind vis-à-vis the Northeastern frontier. It points to the fact that for colonial administrators the frontier was a zone where complex socio-spatial relations thrived as much as it was a zone of administration and control. Central to such a conception was the practice of cartography and its instrumentality in colonial governance of the region.

11.3.1 From a Colonial Past to a Postcolonial Present

Colonial mapping formed the crux of the idea of the frontier. The project of British imperialism charged forward riding on the back of its cartographers. But there existed another form of pre-colonial mapping practice in the realm of communities. The *Buranjis* give a glimpse of how pre-modern spatial and territorial arrangements that broadly swept the entire expanse of the Brahmaputra Valley up to the Shan Highlands had close ties with kinship, chieftainship and place (Reid, 2013: xv). The contiguous arrangement of these three features explains the dynamic character of social organisation in the Northeast. This was quite a delicate dialectic, in that the shared and the distinct, between the communities, oftentimes overlapped. It

is to be kept in mind that life in the Northeast operated along the geography of the continental crossroad. Purnakanta Buragohain, an Assamese entrepreneur who set out on a voyage to Burma and Yunnan Province in the early part of the 20th century, was pleasantly surprised to find shared cultural connections between the people of Northeast India, Southeast and East Asia (Saikia & Baishya, 2017: 2). This was the very spatial arrangement that the British Empire set out to dismantle by invoking the territorial project of boundary-making. However, Reid's account also shows how the colonial regime while attempting to transform the crossroad into a frontier took cognisance of the problems of putting hard cartographic categories.

What entailed territory in pre-colonial times was often those spatial domains that circumscribed the lifeworld of communities. These domains were conceptually removed from the notion of mapped boundaries that soon displaced them with the coming of the British. Reid mentions the trans-frontier tribes—those inhabiting sparsely populated stretches of land ranging from plains through sub-montane regions to hills and having no explicitly marked spatial domains. They were called trans-frontier because they were spread across different topographical domains in British India and British Burma and followed different settlement practices. Some were more mobile than others. For e.g., the Kukis and the Konyaks were more mobile than the other Naga communities vis-à-vis their settlement patterns. As such, the colonial boundary project faced stiff hurdles. In the two expeditions against the Abors (Adi tribe) for the purpose of laying seize over the foothills to designate them as 'reserve forests' and forestall any Chinese advance, war broke out between the imperial political agents and the Adis resulting in casualties on both sides. The foothills were a geographical part of the larger spatial domain of the Adis, for whom their practice of space was at odds with the arbitrary installation of boundaries. Hence no clear identification of boundaries was possible. The boundaries were arbitrarily implemented (inner/outer line, frontier/trans-frontier) as the

nature and practice of space by the communities were unfavourable to colonial classificatory frameworks of boundaries and international borders.

The transfer of power from the colonial regime to the postcolonial state altered the policy position of the government towards an increasing tendency to nationalise the frontier and transform it into a borderland. If the colonial administration focused on mapping the territories of the Northeast, the Indian state drew that focus away into something that bore much more strategic import—mapping the citizens of the borderland and removing the unpredictability of transnational allegiance. The story of Arunachal Pradesh serves as a significant departure from the previous model of colonial governance. Arunachal Pradesh has witnessed massive changes in its political organisation after the 1962 Indo-China War. The Indian state urgently felt the need to enrol the frontier population of Arunachal Pradesh into a network of institutional infrastructures to thwart another Chinese incursion. The rationale behind such thinking was that the government machinery has to make its presence felt in the everyday lives of the population. To put it another way, the construct of the national imagination has to be regularly fed to them. In the state's attempt to reinvent its association with Arunachal Pradesh, which was earlier designated as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), it was given a more Sanskrit-sounding name to bestow a feeling of unity with the 'national grammar' of India. Furthermore, the profile of Arunachal Pradesh was given a rapid makeover by establishing state departments such as the Public Works, Rural Development, Border Roads Organization and most recently, even Panchayati Raj (Baruah, 2007: 48). Developmentalism was thus traded in return for an alliance.

11.3.2 Framing Social Life in Northeast India

The colonial imagination had difficulties in framing social life in Northeast India. Even in drawing boundaries, temporal functionality was considered above crude delineation. This can be seen in the system of 'approximate boundaries' (inner/outer line) which was an acceptance of the fact that

territorializing lifeworlds according to a strictly defined principle would mean jeopardizing the functional imperative of the British frontier. Some recent accounts of Northeast India display a propensity to ascribe to ethnic conflicts the 'difference' factor, envisaging for the postcolonial nation-state the role of a peacekeeper in removing these differences. However, this blurs the nature of the spatial domain as constituted by the communities in question. We need to take care in examining the nature of the spatial domains that overlapped one another. It was in the intervening space of these domains where conflicts broke out that challenges the argument of pure difference.

With the drawing of 'national' boundaries post-independence, the historical antecedents of spatial arrangements were further overlooked. The national boundary now had to be implemented with the full force and might of the nation-state. Thus, the politics of border-making took on substantial momentum to disrupt the functioning of the spatial domains. A reluctance to give the dialectic of space and territory its due has resulted in strained framings of Northeast India—as a region of exceptionality fraught with security concerns and questionable loyalty. A direct result of such a framing is the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act that extends the colonial method of subjugation onto the postcolonial geography of the Northeast. There are other cultural modes of framing also—racial, exotic, touristic etc. But here we are focusing only on the statist perspective.

Stop and Read

What was the link between the inner line and the outer line and the frontier and the trans-frontier? Inner line demarcated the territory of actual administration by the British while the outer line demarcated the territory that lay outside British administration. In between was the zone of influence. The areas that fell within the inner line and the

zone of influence were designated as the frontier whereas those areas that lay beyond the outer line were marked as the trans-frontier.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1.How has Northeast India been imagined? Reflect.

11.4 THE STATE AND ITS DESIGNS

The state is not a mute observer of social relations but an active shaper of what happens within those social relations. We see this in the various territorial divisions and geographical rearrangements of the colonial state guided by its capitalist mindset of resource extraction (which included importing labour from the Chhotanagpur region) and ecclesiastical mindset of bringing civilization closer to the tribes. Similarly, the postcolonial state embarked on a mission to usurp the loyalty of the communities by using the same colonial configurations albeit in a highly differentiated system of bureaucracy. The legitimate use of force by a political organization to enforce its order upon the population—a formulation of the state by the German thinker Max Weber, aptly calls our attention to why the Northeast had to be integrated to the idea of India, both politically and geo-strategically. India could be realized only by legitimizing its order, which faced enormous challenges from the Northeast frontier. The bounded nature of the Northeast in terms of its geographical location along a

crisscrossing landmass complicated the situation. Hence, the idea of a national geography had to be imposed in a more stringent manner, more so as a new international world order was in the making after the end of the Second World War.

11.4.1 Postcolonial Governance in Northeast India

Postcolonial Governance in Northeast India can be divided into three distinct paradigms, each of which depicts the policy positions of the central government towards its periphery (Ramesh, 2005). The first of these is the Culture Paradigm of the 1950s and 1960s that exoticized the local cultural landscape as a sort of diversity that needs saving. Difference between the communities was smoothened out to pave the way for 'tribal' diversity that redefined the space into a homogenous rubric of coexistence. It is without a doubt that this paradigm had in its application a certain racial flavour. The Culture Paradigm was swiftly followed by the Security Paradigm beginning in the mid-60s when the memory of Chinese incursion was still fresh in the discourses of the Indian state. The frontier transitioned into its new identity of borderland, but with affinities dispersed across borders that were required to be checked, maintained, and possibly re-engineered.

Then came the Politics Paradigm in the 1970s, when mainstreaming of the periphery was sought for. This was the beginning of Northeast's first significant steps at political integration with the rest of the country. In order to achieve this aim, the state began supplanting the tribal ways of negotiation with a democratic representative mechanism. New states were carved out as a measure to alleviate the problems of the region by sowing the seeds of democratic governance. Finally, it was the Development Paradigm that has still managed to sustain, but of course through numerous iterations (Look East Policy changing to Act East Policy, etc.).

The trope of development was seen to be a parapet guarding against feelings of distrust and antipathy. On the same note, however, it was also

seen to be a facilitator for reimagining the idea of nationhood through the lens of the present, by discreetly removing those vestiges of a past memory that might hamper submission to that idea. To add to the list of political redesigns done on Northeast India, the very appellation of 'Northeast' used in governance and policy formulations complicates the problem of association. Is it to be thought of as a directional category (Northeast India) having administrative relevance or as a proprietary category (India's Northeast) signifying ownership and control by the state?

11.5 SIXTH SCHEDULE

As you will get to read in the later units, the relative isolation of the hill people from the rest of the mainstream cultures in India also found continuity in the policies of the British administration. The Line System was adopted as part of the isolationist policy of the government. Thus, internal affairs of the tribes were left to them. The administration also sought to protect the tribes from exploitation by the plains people. The tribal chiefs were bestowed with vassal powers in exchange of non-interference and a promise of internal autonomy. This led to the creation of "Backward Tracts" comprising the hill districts (Government of India Act of 1919) which later was rechristened as "Excluded Areas" and "Partially Excluded Areas" (Government of India Act of 1935). On the cusp of India's independence, tribal leaders saw a looming threat over their heads. They feared the dilution of their autonomy and their tribal modes of living. Their future seemed dreary. The British administration was wary of this and hence its Cabinet Mission advised the setting up of an Advisory Committee to look into the nature of rights of tribal minorities. The Committee was set up with Sardar Vallabhai Patel as the Chairman on 24th January, 1947 by the Constituent Assembly of India. The committee was tasked with bringing about a constitutional arrangement for the tribal people in order to safeguard their ethnic identity and assuage their fears of

cultural and social disruption. On 2nd February, 1947, three sub-committees were formed. These were:

1. North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Area Committee.
2. North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan Tribal and Excluded Area Committee.
3. Excluded and Partially Excluded Area in provinces other than Assam.

The draft schedule was submitted to the President of the Constituent Assembly on 21st February, 1948. After a series of vigourous debates, the Sixth Schedule finally came to life. It was incorporated in Articles 244 (2) and 275 (1) of the Indian Constitution. Passed by the Constituent Assembly in 1949, the Sixth Schedule seeks to safeguard the rights of tribal population through the formation of Autonomous District Councils (ADC). ADCs are bodies representing a district to which the Constitution has given varying degrees of autonomy within the state legislature. It marked a key distinction— tribal areas under the Fifth Schedule were designated as "Scheduled Area" and those within the ambit of the Sixth Schedule were designated as "Tribal Area". However, there was a catch. Even if an area was exclusively tribal inhabited, it would not be called so if the provisions of the Sixth Schedule do not apply to that area. This led to discontent among the hills tribes. This feature was considered an anomaly by many tribal leaders. The limited nature of autonomy granted to the tribal people by the provisions of the Sixth Schedule led to the breakup of two Autonomous District Councils into the states of Mizoram and Meghalaya. The creation of hills states also served as a motivation for plains tribes to demand for autonomy. The Bodo Movement in Assam is an example. In case of the Bodo Movement, as the demand of autonomy scaled down due to socio-political factors the Sixth Schedule too was amended in 2003 to form the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD). On the other hand, the North East Frontier Tract and the Naga Tribal Areas did not have district councils. The Nagas had objected to the district council status

which led to its boycott by the Naga National Council (NNC). Later on these two areas merged and formed the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). But with the 13th Constitutional Amendment Act, the state of Nagaland was created on 1st December, 1963. Subsequently, NEFA too became Arunachal Pradesh in 1972. As a result, both of these areas were dropped from the Sixth Schedule. It was in fact the creation of Nagaland that also paved the path for the creation of Mizoram and Meghalaya from two previous ADCs.

- **Features of the Sixth Schedule:**
- The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution deals with the administration of the tribal areas in the four north eastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram as per Article 244.
- The Governor is empowered to increase or decrease the areas or change the names of the autonomous districts. While executive powers of the Union extend in Scheduled areas with respect to their administration in Vth schedule, the Sixth Schedule areas remain within executive authority of the state.
- The acts of Parliament or the state legislature do not apply to autonomous districts and autonomous regions or apply with specified modifications and exceptions.
- The Councils have also been endowed with wide civil and criminal judicial powers, for example establishing village courts etc. However, the jurisdiction of these councils is subject to the jurisdiction of the concerned High Court.

- The sixth Schedule to the Constitution includes 10 autonomous district councils in 4 states. These are:
- Assam: Bodoland Territorial Council, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and Dima Hasao Autonomous District Council.
- Meghalaya: Garo Hills Autonomous District Council, Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council and Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council.
- Tripura: Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council.
- Mizoram: Chakma Autonomous District Council, Lai Autonomous District Council, Mara Autonomous District Council.

11.6 CUSTOMARY LAWS

The government's policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of the tribes highlighted the crucial distinction of historical and cultural difference of the tribespeople from the rest of the mainstream of India. The government was intent on preserving the customs, traditions, and systems of tribal governance so as to earn the allegiance of the tribespeople. Doing so would effectively also create scope for future integration between these tribes with the rest of the mainstream. There was also the question of national security because of the strategic location of the Northeast. From time to time, the government has doled out political packages and other constitutional safeguards to comfort the tribespeople who are fearful of change. The Fifth and Sixth Schedules are part of these constitutional safeguards that allow customary laws to supersede the legal and juridical authority of India's general laws.

Today there is a fervent demand for codification of customary laws by its stakeholders. Notwithstanding the debate on its applicability in contemporary times, its votaries are increasingly pitching for customary laws to be turned into neat legal codes. The rationale behind it is such that

these will then serve as points of reference on matters involving adjudication of land rights, inheritance, social customs and so on. However, such a fundamentalist interpretation of what is 'customary' omits the fluid nature of oral traditions and conceives of these traditions as frozen in time rather than as flexible instruments that order tribal life. The orality embedded in customary laws allow them to be strategically reinterpreted and politically adjusted according to the appropriate conditions prevalent in a certain given context. Customary laws have to be seen in light of the role that they play as a transactional medium between the traditional and the modern. As such, the spirit of the custom holds greater value than the law of the custom. Any attempt to codify them into a rigid framework leaves very little for the evolving social dynamics of tribal society. Customary laws are centred around communities—their rights and interests—that often undercut the state's hegemony. Hence, codifying them into written laws that are fixed and unchanging would in fact allow the state to circumvent and mould them to its own will and wrest control over the communities. On the state's part, this might be part of its governance mechanism to lay control over natural resources that are community-owned or other such similar motivations.

11.7 SUMMING UP

This unit draws a basic sketch of the modalities of tribal society in Northeast India. It also highlights the government's policy approaches towards the Northeastern as a region beset with diverse realities that we will discuss at length in the next units. It underlines the importance of the state-society interface that feeds into the larger discourse of Northeast India on which rests its regional aspirations and political possibilities.

11.8 QUESTIONS

1. Trace the evolution of governance in Northeast India from its past to its present.
2. What are some of the unique features of social life in Northeast India? Discuss.
3. What are the provisions of the Sixth Schedule?
4. How does codification harm the spirit of customary laws?

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MODULE IV: ISSUES OF IDENTITY IN NORTHEAST INDIA

UNIT 12: IDENTITY ASSERTION IN NORTHEAST INDIA

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.1 INTRODUCTION

This and the two units that follow it deals with the issue of identity in Northeast India on three different pivots, namely— assertion, claim, and contestation. In doing so, we will see how the spatial arrangement of the Northeast has fostered some unique political possibilities while also stoking certain political anxieties at the same time. The entangled histories and shared geographies of the space called Northeast India have shaped its unique socio-political landscape, by both transforming it and in turn, getting transformed by it. In this Unit, we will learn about the effecting of social identities in Northeast India as a response to the Indian nation-building exercise within the context of the state-province dichotomy.

Northeast India has survived on a multiplicity of narratives. It is a region that has constantly remained in flux. It is a site of many happenings and many doings, many coming together-s and many breaking apart-s. The clichéd adage 'change is the only constant' perfectly fits the bill with regards to imagining the Northeast. It is another matter that this image of the Northeast hardly finds a place in mainstream Indian imaginings of the region which is coloured more or less by a dominant idea of homogeneity. Hence, the first job for us to do is to distance the image from the concept to gain some semblance of clarity. This is an essential condition that sets the ground for further analysis of this complex topic.

12.2 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Unit, you will be able to:

- Analyse the contexts and the consequences of boundary-making in Northeast India;
- Explain how identities get moulded and enacted in a shared situation;
- Explain the fluid character of society in Northeast India.

12.3 IDENTITY MOVEMENTS

With the nation-building project underway in full swing after independence, the thrust was placed on writing new national narratives. There was an increasing propensity to affect policies of cultural standardization so as to prevent the population from visiting their own personal accounts of historical imagination to which they were consciously affiliated. But the success of the nation-state in realising its existence lies on how its peoples imagine themselves within the configuration imposed by it. Thus, the imagination had to be 'won over' to feed life into the idea of the nation. This is an area where the Indian state has faltered time and

again, for Indian federalism, which was intentionally kept weak in favour of centralised governance, has continuously been questioned by subnational narratives emerging from within the Northeast.

In its quest to monopolise political identities into a singular national community, the Indian state has conveniently restricted political aspirations of an internal territory, the Northeast, into provincial oneness. This explains why ethnic fissures far from being removed have only resurfaced in the form of constitutive social hierarchies within the sub-nationalist discourse of the region. Such formulations further increase the gulf between the many inter-existing social memories or the memory of the population. A case in point is the separation of the Bodos from the composite fabric of Assamese nationality. If we go back a little further, we will notice that the Line System brought in by the colonial administration hardened the boundaries between the communities that in the pre-colonial formations were intertwined and complementary. Evidence of the latter can be found in the folktales and oral traditions of the communities, such as Naga folktales depicting the Assamese and the Nagas as siblings, as allies in wars, as economic partners (Baruah, 2001, p.30).

The Line System erected internal boundaries between the communities by way of confining them within designated territories. The rationale behind such actions was to secure for the colonial regime defensible property rights against its setting up of plantations and opening up of wastelands for commercial cultivation by landless peasants. The hill-valley divide brought about wide-ranging economic and cultural changes that changed the order of relationships that were historically maintained.

Add to that the demographic shifts that took place as a direct result of colonial land use policy whereby immigrants from the erstwhile East Bengal (from Mymensingh district) were encouraged to migrate to the vast swathes of unused land in Assam. Tribals in Assam were practitioners of shifting cultivation, which required mobility across a large tract (Sharma, 2012). The settling of the East Bengal stock of Muslim peasants in these

spaces posed a threat to traditional agricultural practices of the tribals and they were forced to migrate to more isolated areas. The disruption of the tribals' relationship to their land by migrants developed in their minds a feeling of deep resentment towards them and the state (for directly patronising the settlement of migrants). Same goes for the Nepali cattle breeders who occupied tribal land in the foothills; their presence changed the dynamics of traditional livelihood in these regions. Bodo-Adivasi conflicts, Karbi-Bihari conflicts and so on all centre around the question of land.

The postcolonial decades saw the first spontaneous reactions to the Indian state when native identities became the mainstay of Northeastern politics. It was a widely held belief that when it comes to regional self-determination, Northeast had to dance according to the tunes of Delhi (symbolically the Indian state). To counter the onslaught of a pan-Indian cultural vision, Assam wanted to build its own cultural face. The lurking challenge of a Hindu Bengali pushback against the Assamese language was another reason why the Assamese elites were keen on developing an 'Assamese Assam' (Baruah, 2001, p. 91).

The Bengali language was seen as a symbolic connection to the mainland, just as the Chicken's Neck is seen as 'the' physical connection to the mainland. It goes without saying that the Assamese language was not given its due place by the British, who incorrectly labelled it as a mere dialect of Bengali. Hence it was believed that only by the championing of a powerful regional identity can external aggressions be restrained. But the multi-ethnic reality of Assam did exactly the reverse. It facilitated the breakup of Assam by sharpening the fault lines, or if these were not present earlier, then by creating them between the different communities.

The Indian state took advantage of this situation and thus divided Assam into five more states. It became apparent to the States Reorganization Commission that the model of a linguistic nation-province was antithetical to the ethos of the Northeast, where language hegemony could engender

detrimental side effects given the Northeast's linguistic plurality. But what ran through their policy formulations was a false notion that creating new states in the Northeast would help to keep the state's agenda of cosmetic federalism alive. Cosmetic federalism is the central government's way of granting a fair degree of autonomy to its territories while keeping important areas of administrative control for itself. Beginning in 1963, the process of separation was set in motion. Nagaland separated first, which was followed by Meghalaya, then Mizoram, and finally the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA, present-day Arunachal Pradesh).

There were two major types of identity assertions in the Northeast—one that had to do with public identity, and the other that was more along ethnic lines. However, this distinction often got blurred and in many instances, each assumed the shape of the other. The language riots in Assam in 1960 and 1961 and the political rebellion by Assam's tribal communities, most notably the Bodos, bear testimony to this tension. Ethnic homeland demands by fixating on the *sons of the soil* (indigeneity) logic are just a corollary of the identity crises that run deep into the ethnopolitics of Northeast India. If the Marxist historian Amalendu Guha was concerned with the dual national consciousness existing between the pan-Indian nationalism and the many sub-nationalisms within the country, the existence of a doubly dual national consciousness was uniquely manifested in Northeast India. After all, the nation is an act of the imagination (to borrow Benedict Anderson's words) and the Northeast came to be beset with many such smaller imaginations in the postcolonial era.

Thus, ethnic identity assertions, be that of the Tiwas, the Karbis, the Bodos, the Mishings, the Zos, the Koch Rajbongshis, the Khasis, the Naga groups etc. all hark back to the desire for—a lost home, a lost imagination, a search for continuity with the past. The state's continual practice of carving boundaries and redrawing alliances caught smaller tribal groups in a frenzy. They saw themselves subsuming under a larger socio-political formation, such as the Assamese nationality, to lend themselves a voice and to fight

against an encroaching state. But things did not stop there. In trying to assimilate themselves into a unifying identity, they were beginning to feel the threat of erasure of key cultural traits. At some point, the hegemonic tendencies of the Assamese sub-nationality laid itself bare, following which the workings of the tribe-caste equation was inverted. There was an increased call for forsaking the tribe-turned-caste identities in a bid to reinstate nativist affiliations. Here it must be mentioned that the process of proselytization of tribal neophytes into the caste fold began even before the arrival of the British. It was a deliberate attempt by the caste Hindu Assamese to gain for themselves a larger politico-cultural influence (Sharma, 2011: 355).

However, the converts could never move beyond a certain position in the hierarchy of the caste structure. In other words, those on the receiving end of the caste structure could never fully immerse themselves into the space enjoyed by their caste Hindu Assamese brethren. Also, with the spread of colonial education and governmental apparatus in the tribal areas, a new class of tribal elites emerged who took on the duty of reinvigorating their sense of community consciousness upon themselves. The revivalist strategy took concrete shape in the postcolonial state with the demand for ethnic homelands (for e.g., Bodoland and Kamatapur) and ST (Scheduled Tribe) status, both of which were micromanaged by the state in order to suspend or tame rebellious passions directed towards itself. Language too played its part—Bodos summarily rejected the usage of Assamese for official purposes and demanded that their language be given a separate script. Under the leadership of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the demand for recognition of their language intensified and finally they bore the fruits of their struggle when they were awarded the Devanagiri script.

Stop and Read

By dual national consciousness what Amalendu Guha meant was that India was characterised by two levels of consciousness—one that was pan-Indian, and another that was more rooted in a linguistic identity, such as Odia, Tamil, Bengali, Assamese, etc. (Guha, 1982). For a nation to hold together, there must be a delicate balance between these two. Any increase in one over the other would prove to be disastrous for the country.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How role does culture play in shaping identity?

12.4 BUILDING A NARRATIVE OF RESISTANCE

Assam and Tripura present us with some interesting instances of how resistance (identity assertion) takes unique forms in Northeast India. The Assamese sub-national identity found its best vehicle of expression in Bhupen Hazarika's music, although the legacy of passionate protest music has been running in the veins of the Assamese public for much longer than Hazarika's arrival into the musical scene—since the days of Jyoti Prasad

Agarwalla and Bishnu Prasad Rabha. The frequent invocation in Hazarika's lyrics of the season of *Bohag* (Assamese spring), and its accompanying festival *Bihu*, as an event of national revitalization deserves our attention. Just like spring renews the dull of the winter, *Bihu* is supposed to kick us out of our stupor and dullness so that we may inject life back into the Assamese nationality. Hazarika's famous song *Bohag Mathu Eti Ritu Nohoi* (*Bohag* is not just a season) portrays the direction the Assamese national mood had to take to build a bond of solidarity:

Bohag is not just a season or a month; for the Assamese, it is a crucial moment in the nation's life-line— it is when the collective life gathers its strength and courage….it is Bohag that destroys difference (Baruah, 2001: 89).

In Tripura's case, it is worth noting how the Tripuri ethno-nationalist struggle led to the invention of a new Tripuri New Year. It draws on the narration of ethnic Tripuris as victims of immigration in their 'own' homeland. This new Tripuri New Year, called Tring, is a celebratory as well as a sorrowful return to a history that according to the Tripuri nationalists was systematically erased by Bengali Hindus (Debbarma, 2017: 216). Renaming of places in Tripura by the government was not taken lightly by the nationalists. They saw it as an act of subversion by the state—of bending history to their own favour and silencing the ethnic past of the Tripuris. Notwithstanding the bone of contention that exists in the imagination of Tripura's shared history, it leaves little room for doubt that the legitimization of Hindu Bengali dominance by sanitized official narratives was seen by ethnic Tripuris as an act of subversion of their collective memory.

12.5 A REGION IN CONFLICT: VIOLENCE AND MILITARISATION

Northeast India was, until a few years ago, inundated with conflicts and secessionist demands. The secessionist forces in the region trace their origin to the nature of relations that has prevailed since colonial times. The frontier was abundant in natural resources and the colonial regime effectively tapped into the commercial potential offered by it. We have already read how the Line System created territories and boundaries between the spatial domains of communities to transform the foothills into plantations. A similar tack was also followed by the Indian state when it targeted states like Arunachal Pradesh with the 'path to development' discourse. This was nothing but a tacit strategy of the state to make inroads into a trans-national territory and stamp itself onto the frontier region.

In Arunachal, the state could thus oversee the coming to fruition of the Nehruvian dream of channelling hydropower in service of the 'nation'—dams as the temples of modern India. Years of continuing such policies made the communities in Northeast think that they are being deprived of their ecological resources and political voice by movers in Delhi. The heavy-handedness of the state was crumbling the ethnic landscape of the Northeast. The crisis of displacement faced by the ethnic communities, the loss of homelands to national migrants and cross-border immigrants, the loss of economic power to corporations and outside merchants all coalesced into the sense of repression that gave rise to ethnic militias. Their agenda was set at liberating their territories from the clutches of outside forces and establishing a new sovereign status for their respective homelands.

The founding of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) or the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) all pertain to the realization of this ideal. To meet their aim, these outfits took to violence ranging from moderate to severe, such as abductions and bombing. However, commitment to their goal of sovereignty has been repeatedly hindered by

the counter-insurgency measures adopted by the state. In a different scenario, it must also be recognized that militias, those still active and those that have surrendered, are symbiotically tied with the state's art of governing in the Northeast.

12.6 BELONGING AND RECOGNITION

The atomization of the Assamese composite nationality into individuated groups holds significance in the understanding of how the aspiration for ST (Scheduled Tribe) status rests on amplification of inter-ethnic competition and distinction. The demand for rediscovering and reverting to 'tribal' origins opens up new political possibilities of emancipation. This demand is for recognition, for visibility. If we move a little beyond the argument that the 'politics of recognition' and the 'politics of misrecognition' are two sides of the same coin, one is made to question if misrecognition may also engender misidentification.

This philosophical viewpoint gives us a critical insight as to why statist or hegemonic renderings of culture bring in inconsistencies in ethnic associations, which leads to various identity assertion movements. As regards belonging, it denotes the affirmation of the social self through an inter-subjective consciousness of one's milieu. When identity assertion is motivated by a sense of belonging, what it actually does is it changes the rules of correspondence with those relations of the present (with the state) that prevents communities from situating themselves in a diachronic imagination of the past, in a true realization of their self-identity.

12.7 SUMMING UP

Northeast India is a medley of many ethnic life-worlds coming together, as Biswas and Suklabaidya argue in *Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India: An Analysis*. The authors talk of the notion of a 'possible world' that they

deem important "in order to describe the making of an identity, in terms of certain determinate designations of characteristics" (Biswas & Suklabaiya, 2008: 21). This possible world came into being through the complex network of interactions and interconnections between the state and the frontier. Identities are culturally and contextually contingent upon specific social and historical forces. Identities are part of specific social constructs. Ergo, there prevails a possibility of simultaneously being something and not being something, without being contradictory to either. Hence, we see that identity assertion in Northeast India puts the inter-subjective recognition of social relations at the forefront. Although the state often makes the reading of identity in Northeast India veer towards one that rests on a unificatory logic, it is prudent to consider identity politics in Northeast India as one outlined by a state of constant flux.

12.8 QUESTIONS

1. Explain how social life in Northeast India is framed.
2. How did the Line System affect social relations in Northeast India?
3. State some of the revival strategies that ethnic groups undertake to redefine their identities.
4. What is the connection between identity assertion and insurgency?
5. What is cosmetic federalism? Why did the Indian state resort to this policy?

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UNIT 13: TRIBAL AUTONOMY AND HOMELAND POLITICS

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we will read about how various ethnic groups in Northeast India lay claim to their identity, and by extension their territorial 'homelands'— real or imagined. Previously, we read about the strategic

manoeuvres on the part of the state that led to the adoption of a conscious policy of nationalising the frontier. A direct result of such a policy was the creation of a political atmosphere that centred on the notion of space. In this unit, we will look at how the process of national territorialisation of the frontier space ran into a conflict with a concurrent surge in ethnic politics, or, ethnicisation of space(s).

13.2 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss ethnic boundaries and their maintenance by communities;
- Analyse the demand for separate homelands within the state;
- Explain the working of identity politics in Northeast India;
- Explain the link between autonomy and militarisation in Northeast India.

13.3 DEFINING ETHNICITY IN NORTHEAST INDIA

Northeast India shares enormous ethnolinguistic connections with South East Asia and East Asia. Sanjib Baruah in his book *Durable Disorder* shares an interesting tale of a man called Dindu Miri, an Idu tribesman who worked as a political interpreter for both China and India. Dindu was originally from present-day Arunachal Pradesh but had gone to Beijing as a young boy to study. The first time when he took the role of the interpreter, he helped the Chinese advance to the Indian side during the war of 1962. Many years later, in 2000, he reversed his role by facilitating Indian communication with the Chinese government. This time he had returned to his original home that was now within the boundary of the Indian nation-state. Dindu Miri's tale is a fascinating story of how nation-states disrupted the lives (and relationships) of the people living along the crossroads. With his trans-border movement restricted, Miri had to take help of secret

messengers to keep in touch with the Chinese side of his family. Such movements are barely imaginable in the nationalised space of the borderland, with security apparatuses in place to check any trans-border allegiance. The colonial experiment of boundary-making had to be tightly protected by the postcolonial state. Memories of cross-cultural relationships had to be guarded against transgression. Thus, colonial policies had put an end to linkages and connections of the ethnic groups of Northeast India with their counterparts across the border. Diverse ecologies of the ethnic groups residing within the Indian nation-state too suffered a jolt with the creation of the Line System and other tools of colonial governance. Their spaces of co-residence were arbitrarily marked off as distinct and exclusionary. Once the markers of ethnic difference were institutionalised, the stage was set for the development of a unique politics in the region—one marked by frequent conflicts and native demands.

13.3.1 Ethnic Boundaries and Territorial Communities

Jimy M. Sanders defines ethnic boundaries as "patterns of social interaction that give rise to, and subsequently reinforce, in-group members' self-identification and outsiders' confirmation of group distinctions" (Sanders, 2002: 1). Hence, ethnic boundaries are social mediums of association rather than territorial demarcations as we see in pre-colonial formations. As rightly pointed out by Fredrik Barth, the ethnic boundary channelizes social life (Barth, 1969). In other words, ethnic boundaries give a direction to the organization of social life with its numerous behaviours and social relations. Social action drives the formation of ethnic groups that are aimed to "organize interaction" for a social purpose (Blanton, 2015). The social and historical context within which intergroup interactions take place, have to be accounted for to understand how ethnic groups maintain the distinction between insiders and outsiders, or, members and non-members. As a result, ethnic identities are fluid across time and social contexts because patterns of interaction ultimately link groups to one another. Barth contends that the locations of inter-group interactions are usually better

understood in terms of social space than as physical places. These social spaces act as social boundaries between groups. Thus, it is "the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (Barth, 1969: 15).

The colonial policy of demarcating the north-eastern hills from valleys through the Line System led to a spurt in in-group identity consciousness. Early ethnic mobilizations undertaken around generic identities such as Naga, Mizo, and Kuki and militant regionalization of ethnic demands for self-governance were a direct fallout of this plan of social exclusion. The ethnic communities regretted the presence of colonial governance in their lives. Having been newly subjected to a system of organizing their lives according to the principles of bureaucratic rationalisation, these communities sought to fight back. The many instances of early protests in the 1930s and 1940s defined the earliest narrative of ethnicity in terms of the indigenous anxiety to government. The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, established an Inner-Line (between hills and plains) and thereby enacted a prohibition. Within the Inner Line, the tribes were left to manage their own affairs through their own headmen and chiefs. These policies had led to permanent segregation between hills and plains. The motive to 'protect' the tribes against 'outsiders' resulted in such isolationist policies. There were other mercantile aspects too, such as appropriating the forests for commercial cultivation. The Christian missionaries were inducted for proselytization in hills areas, thanks to the Inner Line.

It is worth taking note that the Line System was the first official arrangement that resulted in an identity consciousness in the tribal communities that was separate from those areas of the country which were more formally ruled. Anger and resentment brewed among the indigenous communities. The government formed the Simon Commission (Indian Statutory Commission, 1930) to review administrative decisions pertinent to managing its affairs in the Northeast. Under the provisions of the Government of India Act, 1935, administration and governance in the

Northeast saw some massive changes. The backward tracts were regrouped as ‘Excluded’ and ‘Partially Excluded Areas’. The hill areas/ hills districts were categorised within Assam as 'Non-Regulated Areas', 'Backward Tracts' and as 'Partially Excluded Areas' and 'Excluded Areas'. Fear of becoming a minority had hastened the feeling of disengagement among the tribes. Various indigenous tribes such as the Khasi, Naga, Mizo, etc. expressed their resentment. They were increasingly alarmed by the thought of infiltration of their social spaces and withering of their identities through the active design of an alien civil order. On the eve of India’s independence, the people of the hills of northeast became worried as the new Indian nation-state was to exercise its control over the hills areas. On the southern side of the border, the creation of ‘East Pakistan’ furthered their anxieties. They became fearful of their socio-political destinies, as they thought that they were legally handicapped to offer resistance. Subsequently, as the newly formed Indian State recklessly adopted the policies of its predecessor, the multi-ethnic reality of Northeast India essentially paved the path for ethnic conflicts to emerge. The politics of bordering set into motion the process of hardening of ethnic boundaries between ethnic groups even as new margins of administration were enacted (Goswami, 2014).

13.3.2 Navigating Through Conflict

The various ethnic groups inhabiting the Northeast increasingly felt marginalised in postcolonial India. The provincial anxieties of these groups were greatly exacerbated with the widely-held assumption that the state would never respect their agency. Public opinion was more or less aligned with the view that the instruments of control that were employed during the British era would not disappear with a new dispensation. The seed of mutual distrust led to some groups demanding special concessions from the centre and others raising the call for secession. A case in point would be the Naga national movement. Donald Horowitz (1985) argues that once the colonial states gained independence, the societal contexts and political

conditions changed. Since self-determination was implemented only to the level of pre-existing colonial boundaries, the new question posed was about ownership of the territory. Ethnic fissures in the region did not develop in a vacuum. These were the result of a feeling of marginalization both within the political realm of the nation-state as well as within these ethnic groups. Ethnic conflicts did not occur suddenly. Let us take the example of the Assamese interethnic identity. Assamese nationalism was an offshoot of the greater Pan-Indian nationalism that had its own contextual beginnings. The first Assamese intellectuals educated in Calcutta effectively shaped much of what we now know as the Assamese national identity. Taking inspiration from their Bengali counterparts, this class of people modelled a collective identity for the land of Assam. It was not just a passive imitation of an already tested model, but also a rejection of regional hegemony of the Bengalis. The Assamese middle class was deeply distressed to play second fiddle to the Bengalis in matters of bureaucracy and administration. At this point, we should note that the Bengali language was made the official language of Assam in 1836. The Bengalis naturally were given an upper hand when it came to their role in the colonial administration. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, an Assamese who worked for the British administration, challenged this order and gave a spirited defence of the Assamese language to reinstate it as the lingua franca. Much later when there arose the problem of influx of Bengali migrants (both Hindu and Muslim) due to the carving of new administrative boundaries, there was a twin threat to both the Assamese middle-class (from the Hindu Bengali) and the masses (from the land-hungry peasants). Bengali majority areas of Sylhet became part of Assam and changed its language demographics. Interestingly enough, the Assamese middle class sought to widen the base of Assamese nationality for fear of being overrun by the 'culturally-other' migrants. The Muslim migrants of East Bengal origin on seeing their economic interests in Assam participated in that call. They started returning their mother tongue as Assamese in the censuses. The situation was different in the case of the Hindu Bengali migrant. They quickly ascended the ladder of important

bureaucratic positions which alarmed the Assamese. They began denouncing the baggage of Bengali influence that the Hindu migrants brought and sought to impose on their Muslim brethren. This is not to suggest that there was no cultural, or even religious contact between the Assamese and the Hindu Bengalis. But the hegemony of Bengali nationalism in the region warranted that a strong Assamese national identity had to be forged. However, just like Bengali nationalism, Assamese nationalism too aligned itself with the ethos of Indian nationalism. We must note here that Assamese nationalism was driven by the efforts of the middle class inhabiting the urban centres. Political mobilisation was in their hands. Once the Indian National Congress (INC) made inroads into Assam through the establishment of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) in 1920, bewildered masses in Assam were proselytised into a vision of Indian nationhood. Hence, the Assamese identity came to constructed as a constituent of Indian nationalism. At its helm were the Assamese middle-class Hindus. Over the course of time, the majoritarian caste Hindu Assamese began to write the codes of inclusion into the Assamese fold, thus ignoring the interethnic diversity characteristic to the region. The Aryan (caste Hindu) and non-Aryan (tribal communities) strands of ethnic inter-adaptation were given a cold shoulder and only a certain exclusive sense of belongingness was prioritised. Such a break from interethnic identity saw tribal religions and languages receding into oblivion. The tribesmen could not bear this insult to their social consciousness and started to protest for their 'rights'. Those hills tribes that bore allegiance to the Assamese middle-class was favoured over those who stood in opposition, such as the Bodos. This, in turn, resulted in further fragmentation along ethnic lines that completely changed the politics of Assam for years to come.

13.3.3 Tribe as a Category

As ethnic fragmentations started to increase, so did competition for political benefits among the tribal and other ethnic communities. A system

of protective discrimination was put in place to negotiate the political balance of communities affected by changes in their patterns of life. Soon after, tribal communities in the region gained traction in politics. The ST (Scheduled Tribes) benefitted from reservations in jobs, social welfare schemes, land ownership rights. Furthermore, the creation of Sixth Schedule areas and the requirement of permits to move about in those areas facilitated the protection of the tribal population from the migrants and non-tribal population. Verrier Elwin, whose ideas found its biggest taker in the form of Jawaharlal Nehru, was the man behind the doling out of special provisions for the tribes (ST status, tax exemptions etc.). This was done to integrate them with the Indian nation. The idea was that doing so would effectively bring about development while honouring the distinctiveness of tribal life. However, politics in Northeast India became fixated with this rhetoric. Various ethnic communities use the rhetoric of protective discrimination to demand the right to self-determination and territorial autonomy, citing ethnic characteristics peculiar to them. A most glaring example would be the demand for a separate state of Bodoland by votaries of the Bodo Movement. Tribal credentials even if not known to exist earlier were sometimes invented to proclaim themselves as befitting of the ST status. Thus, a politics of claims and contestations began spreading its wings across Northeast India.

Stop and Read:

The Sixth Schedule provides for elected councils which enjoy powers to levy taxes, constitute courts for the administration of justice involving tribes and law-making powers on subjects including land allotment, occupation or use of land, regulation of jhum or other forms of shifting cultivation, establishment and administration of village and town committees, appointment or

succession of chiefs, inheritance of property, marriage and social customs (Das, 2011). It was enacted in 1950.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who is the author of *Durable Disorder*?

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2. When was the Sixth Schedule enacted?

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3. Fill up the gap: The _____ was the first official arrangement that resulted in an identity consciousness in the tribal communities of Northeast India.

13.4 FINDING A HOMELAND IN THE INDIAN NATION

According to the geographer Theano Terekenli, the concept of home is carved out from three constitutive factors: (i) home as a contextually growing interface between the self and the world that is endowed with different, yet, recurring meanings, (ii) home as an unfolding of historical time, of a diachronic imagination, and (iii) home as a network of social relations that validate the existence of the individual (Saikia & Baishya, 2017: 2). With respect to the politics of Northeast India, the decades after independence witnessed a severe backlash against the encroachment of the state. The idea of a home was put to test on every front through the political machination of bordering. Various categories of ethnic movements began to simmer as crude manifestations of the sub-nationalist sentiments of the

region. These movements were diverse in their forms and organisation but some of them had majorly one exclusive demand—territorial autonomy in the form of a homeland. These were the autonomous, secessionist and irredentist movements. Also, the legacy of colonial administrative provisions was carried forward even with the transfer of power. It is without a doubt that such provisions fed into the feeling of territorial exclusivity through virulent nativistic demands for 'homeland territories'. Settler-indigenous conflicts, inter-ethnic violence and insurgency are all linked to the process of reversal and rejection of the idea of the Indian nation-state.

The Khasi-Jaintia Hills witnessed first the growth of identity consciousness and the demand for a separate 'Homeland' or a 'Hill State'. The movement spearheaded by the Khasi National Durbar (KND) was at its forefront. The KND submitted a memorandum to the government on October 19, 1952, highlighting a number of insufficiencies in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Subsequently, the leaders of Garo Hills Autonomous District Council resolved to form the Assam Hills Tribal Union (AHTU), which was later renamed as the Eastern India Tribal Union (EITU) with the objective to form a hill state which would include all the hill areas of Assam, the whole of Manipur, Nagaland and the tribal belts of Tripura (Das, 2011). Rev. JJM Nichols Roy vehemently opposed the creation of a separate hill state by arguing that the District Council would disappear if it comes to pass. He feared that the original inhabitants will then lose their ancestral land and property to the non-tribes. On July 6, 1960, a conference of leaders of all political parties of the hill areas was called in Shillong. The conference resolved to constitute itself into a political entity, to be known as the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC). A delegation of the APHLC met the Prime Minister and proposed that no legislation passed by the Assam Legislative Assembly could be enforced in the hill areas without the consent of the representatives in the hill areas. The State of Meghalaya came into existence on April 2, 1970, consisting of the Garo Hills district and the United Khasi and Jaintia district. However, the Mikir Hills and the

North Cachar Hills did not join the new state. Over the course of time statehood was conferred upon the regions that wanted to dissociate from the State of Assam. Nagaland was the first to make the move. The British administration had put in place a policy of non-interference to avoid conflicts with the Nagas (Inoue, 2005). This fostered an isolationist tendency among the Nagas. Moreover, in 1918, the Naga Club was established to discuss the scenario post a British withdrawal. Christianity played an important role in giving agency to the Naga identity. The Naga Club later became the Naga National Council (NNC) that pressed the British government in 1945 for autonomous status area for the Naga hills region. In 1946, they upscaled their earlier demand to home rule, and in February 1947 they actively sought for self-determination. There were other demands pertaining to preservation of ethnic identity, social system, customary law and so on. An accord was signed between the Governor of Assam and the NNC in June 1947. A Nine-Points agreement was reached between both the parties with a ten-year guarantee that the present administrative set-up will continue for ten years following which it was the Nagas call to make (Inoue, 2005). The NNC saw Article Nine that was the key instrument in the agreement as paving the way for future self-determination. The nationalist leader A.N. Phizo took over the reign of the NNC in October 1949. It was decided that the NNC will hold a referendum to decide whether to leave or remain in India. The referendum was conducted in May 1951. The Nagas largely supported independence. However, the Government of India and the Government of Assam rejected the result and soon talks between the parties broke down. The Naga hills was designated as a "disturbed area" and the Government of India fortified it by putting it under the Indian Army. Meanwhile, the course of disobedience that the NNC took earlier took up a separatist tone. The Federal Government of Nagaland was established in 1956 by NNC hardliners. The Indian Government responded by taking on a conciliatory approach by cosying up to the Naga moderates' demand for statehood. The Naga hills district was separated from Assam in 1957 to become a Central

Government Administrative Area. The Tuengsang area which was part of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) joined the Naga hills district and a new entity was formed—the Naga Hills Tuengsang Area (NHTA). This area was renamed into Nagaland by the Nagaland (Transitional Provisions) Regulation of 1961. The State of Nagaland Act of 1962 replaced this regulation thereby making Nagaland a full-fledged state. Nagaland was officially inaugurated in December 1963. In a similar vein, the state of Mizoram too was established. First the Government of India attempted to suppress the Mizo movement led by the Mizo National Front (MNF) (Inoue, 2005). Laldenga, its leader, was himself inspired by the movement in Nagaland. On failing to gain traction in Mizoram, the government reached an accord with the moderates in 1972. Mizoram was established initially as a union territory and subsequently in 1987 attained statehood. These measures also brought with it a climate of political anxiety which we will discuss later.

13.4.1 The Politics of Difference

The colonial policies led to the segregation of tribal populations. Besides the Inner Line Regulation (which continues to exist in Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland), the proselytization of large sections of the tribespeople to Christianity also created rifts in the social plane. The villagers were thus divided into adherents of two beliefs, both celebrating their festivals and rituals separately, 'excluding' the others to a great extent (Das, 2011). Although the introduction of Christianity was initially protested by organised groupings mainly in parts of Manipur, Assam and Meghalaya, later on, Christianity helped in widening the intra-tribal ethnicity and growth of self-identity. Christianity brought with it education that helped tribal people get employment in government offices and also in self-actualization. Following the relatively 'silent phase of identity consciousness' in the 1930s and 1940s, the tribal communities demanded minimal participative representation in the Principal Legislative Assembly. The Khasi, Ahom, Naga, Mizo, Bodo-Kachari, Miri and Deuri were the

first to demand such 'ethnic representation' (Ibid.). The Lalungs followed with a Durbar in 1967. The Koch Rajbanshis too grew wary of their minority status. Subsequently, the All Assam Garo Union was established in 1983. The Hajongs in Assam urged the Government to recognize them as a Scheduled Tribe. Later the Bodos, Nagas and Mizos launched strong autonomy/homeland movements within the union. Certain factions within those movements also devolved the movement into secessionism. Ethnic groups were alarmed at the threat to their language, culture and religious traditions because of their incorporation into the Indian union and the growth of the majority-minority syndrome. The underlying fear was that they will be turned into minorities in their own lands by outsiders, bringing about a grave threat to indigenous culture.

Ethnic difference was also proliferated by specific language policies aimed at homogenization and administrative convenience. When in 1960 the Assam Official Language Bill was moved, the hill people felt alienated and estranged in suppression, sparking off huge protests. The Bodos started a peaceful agitation in their territory since 1986, but the agitations occasionally turned violent. In 1972 the Bodo-led Plains Tribes Council of Assam (PTCA) complained that the plains tribes have been 'uprooted in a systematic and planned manner from their own soil' and that the 'step-motherly' treatment of the administration, dominated by the Assamese-speaking people, has reduced them to 'second class citizens' in the state (Ibid.). The rejection of Assamese script by the Miris, Bodos and other tribes rang the alarm bells in the minds of the caste Hindu Assamese, who feared that without their tribal counterparts they would become overwhelmed by the Bengali-speaking population. Similarly, in Manipur, Meitei revivalist leaders had demanded that Manipuri language should be named 'Meeteilon' and Bengali script be discontinued. In Mizoram, tension erupted between the Mizos and the Buddhist Chakmas. The Mizo leader Laldenga for some time insisted to the government at the centre that the Chakma Autonomous District Council, which gives the Chakmas a certain amount of autonomy, be abolished. Meanwhile, other communities such as

the Pawi and Hmar too felt the brunt of cultural and political subjugation. A Pawi leader pointed out in 1972, "When the Mizos had a District Council, we (the Pawis, Lakers and Chakmas) also should have a District Council" (Das, 2011, p. 45). The Hmars of Mizoram too, in their own right, resisted the cultural hegemony of the Mizos and asserted their linguistic and cultural distinctiveness from them. There are many numerous examples of similarly motivated ethnic clashes from Northeast India revolving around the factor of difference. But we are more concerned with the causal analysis of such politics at work.

13.4.2 Migration and Displacement

With the growing influx of peasants migrating into Assam in the early decades of the 20th century, the tribal peasants were at unease. The British administration encouraged this wave of immigration using the pretext of the 'grow more food' campaign. The aim was to tap the potential of the uncultivated land of the Brahmaputra valley and thereby garner more land revenue. Goalpara, Barpeta, Nagaon, Mangaldoi, and foothills of the Karbi hills saw a significant spike (in some areas close to 200% increase) in migrant population over the years.

Later waves of immigration included those of the Nepali citizens who settled mainly in the remote forest areas of Assam, the plantation workers from Chhotanagpur, the Marwari trade merchants, and Biharis (referred to as deshuwalis). The large-scale settlement of the immigrants resulted in the displacement of the tribal peasantry from their land (Sharma, 2012). The migrants usurped agricultural land of the tribals, thus running into trouble with them. The tribal peasantry of Assam were practitioners of shifting cultivation. Their movement encompassed a very large tract of cultivable area. When migrants settled in these areas the traditional agricultural practice of the tribal citizenry received a serious setback. This caused the displacement of the tribals from their homes resulting in land alienation. Many tribal communities moved to submontane areas or forests to save them from the awkwardness of living with an alien people. The tribal

people sold off their land at throwaway prices to others and moved away. This propensity of tribal people to live closer to nature points to the dependence of the tribals on the forest resources for the sustenance of their socio-economic life (Ibid.). The then colonial administration sought to wrest this process of displacement and land alienation among the tribal communities and brought in the Line System and other safeguard mechanisms which later on the postcolonial state borrowed without question. Marwaris had to face the antagonism of both the tribal communities as well as the caste Hindu Assamese as they controlled most of the trade and commerce in Assam. Anti-Nepali sentiments among some tribal groups in Assam was against the deliberate encroachment of common property resources in the forest and foothill areas which have been the traditional livelihood sources of the tribal population. Similarly, in Tripura, a regular inflow of immigrants since pre-independence days led to land alienation of the Tripuris. The tribal people thus became a minority in their own homeland. Armed insurgency in many parts of the Northeast was essentially a response to these changes, which to many tribal people felt like a necessary evil to check marginalisation of the natives. Militant outfits in the Northeast like the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), NSCN (IM), NSCN (K), Bodo Security Force (BSF), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), National Liberation Front of Tripura' (NLFT), ATTF (All Tripura Tiger Force) etc. all intended to retain the original tribal characteristics of the state by expelling the immigrants who supposedly usurped the lands and livelihoods of indigenous tribes and native populations over the decades (Das, 2011).

13.5 THE ANXIETY OF IDENTITY POLITICS

Memories of historical connections and several other factors pertaining to exclusion and ethnicity prompted the sustenance of a distinct in-group sentiment in Northeastern communities vis-à-vis the Indian nation-state/ 'Indians'. Ethnic unrest in the northeast had originally grown essentially

through primordial affiliations based on the binary sentiments of in-group/out-group, perceived marginalisation, and 'minority-consciousness' (Das, 2011). The politics centred on identity in Northeast India precisely stems from such historical and social contexts.

13.5.1 Creation of Tribal Belts

Assam provides us with a suitable example of how the creation of tribal belts and blocks greatly leveraged the politics of the homeland(s). The dominant population consisting of the caste Hindu Assamese have kept pressing on with their demands for an Inner Line System in the plains which still continues today. On the other hand, their tribal counterparts were provided with special provisions such as the tribal belts and blocks where they were given complete jurisdiction. Almost two dozen tribal belts and blocks were created as part of a constitutional safeguard mechanism for the 'protected classes' (as designated in the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1947). However, as with other political machinations, the system of tribal belts and blocks too faced issues in observance. Land continued to be traded with non-tribal people outside of the ambit of the protected classes. Although it was initially thought that tribal belts will be an extra layer of protection against land alienation, what transpired in the ground gave a completely different scenario. Moreover, areas that fell within these tribal belts and blocks were periodically de-notified in order to facilitate government construction projects. Inclusion of ethnically non-tribal communities such as the Nepalis in the protected classes list also was not taken lightly. Failure to strictly observe the boundaries of the tribal belts and blocks on the part of the administration created ripples in the hearts and minds of the tribal communities. They started feeling that since their interests as a people with shared affinities have not been protected by subsequent governments, they bear the right to demand a separate state. The different homeland movements such as the Bodoland movement and the Kamatapur movements are all active manifestations of such feelings of unrest over territory and livelihood.

13.5.2 The Demand for Autonomy

The Bodo leadership of the Bodo movement envisaged a shift in the way it wanted to carry its homeland politics. Realising that their calls for a separate state would not be heeded to by the government at the centre, the focal point of the movement changed to the demand for autonomy. Inspiration was sought for in the Sixth Schedule that helped create autonomous territories in the hills. One must take note that the Sixth Schedule only provided for limited autonomy which is why there were many resolutions that wanted to amend it. In the Constituent Assembly debates over this matter, some Assamese leaders were reluctant about granting autonomy to the tribal people, lest all paths to their assimilation get blocked. What concerned them was the tribal citizenry's allegiance to the Assamese nationality. Nonetheless, Gopinath Bordoloi did create Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) for the hill areas while leaving behind the concerns of the plain tribes. He was under the presumption that since plains tribes have fairly assimilated with the rest of the non-tribal population in the plains, they need no such protection. The limited scope of the Sixth Schedule did little to allay the fears of the tribes and soon enough they started demanding for separate states. When states were granted to the hills tribes (Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh), the plains tribes in Assam, namely, the Bodos and the Koch Rajbongshis were motivated to launch a similar demand. However, it was realised after few decades of dilly-dallying around this demand that not much would be gained in the long run if the movements stick to a single direction. A Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was agreed upon in 2003 by the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and the State. It gave significant legislative, financial and executive powers to the Bodo leadership (Goswami, 2014). The Sixth Schedule was also amended to give the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District powers equivalent to that of the state of Assam by conferring it with constitutional status. But the dream of a separate state still lingered somewhere in the minds of the Bodo leadership. In a convention held in 2010, it was decided that Bodos still

need to raise the demand for a separate state since the amended Sixth Schedule to failed in its purpose of safeguarding Bodo interests and identity. The Koch Rajbongshi people too wanted a share of autonomy seeing the Bodos as beneficiaries in a game of homeland politics. But instead, once they jumped the bandwagon things turned turbulent for them. The political map of Kamatapur that was presented by the Koch-Rajbongshi leadership intersected areas that were part of the map of Bodoland. Naturally so, there has been an ongoing conflict between the Bodos and the Koches. It did not stop at that. Since the map of Kamatapur also constituted areas (such as Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Morigaon etc.) that were largely inhabited by other tribes, they have run into trouble with other communities as well. Thus, we see that the demand for autonomy is intertwined with various strands of homeland politics—competing and contesting together.

13.6 CONFRONTING THE STATE

The NDFB (National Democratic Front of Bodoland) and the KLO (Kamatapur Liberation Organisation) in Assam were both born out of a sense of neglect that the two ethnic communities of the Bodo and Koch people experienced (Goswami, 2014). Same goes for the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam), the PLA (People's Liberation Army), the UNLF (United National Liberation Front), the two factions of the NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagalim) and many other such insurgent groups. The NDFB manifesto clearly outlines the necessary steps to unburden the Bodo people from their forced acquiescence to the State. In a nutshell, the overarching objective was to protect and promote the integrity and sovereignty of Bodoland while resisting non-Bodo expansionism. The Naga insurgency, on the other hand, stemmed from secessionist ideals that were deeply rooted in the collective ethos of the Naga people. However, as time passed, some of these insurgencies have changed tack from earlier separatist rhetoric to one of autonomy and internal sovereignty. Piecemeal

efforts at sharing common ground against a belligerent State resulted in factionalism within the insurgent groups. The State's heavy-handed approach in regards to employing counter-insurgency measures also weakened the prospect of secessionist demands to a great deal.

13.7 SUMMING UP

In the end, we ought to look at how vociferous homeland politics in Northeast India has given rise to a carrot and stick policy by the State. Tribal councils and autonomous districts have resulted in the development of a differential system of land ownership and economic rights. Divisions have been created not just in the political sphere but also in the social sphere by separating people as insiders and outsiders on the basis of tribal citizenship. The Indian State's habitual reliance on counter-insurgency efforts to quell the anger of the ethnic communities instead of engaging in meaningful dialogue with them has further alienated the populace. If today a community feels exclusive in its claim to rights, it is because an order of difference was seen as the norm instead of the pre-colonial order of mutual coexistence.

13.8 QUESTIONS

1. How did the Line System affect the relationships of ethnic communities living in contiguous spaces?
2. What importance do ethnic boundaries hold for communities?
3. Is Assamese nationalism an offshoot of Bengali nationalism? Explain.
4. How did the creation of tribal belts engender a politics of difference in Northeast India?

5. Why was the demand for sovereign states diluted to that of autonomous territories? How would autonomy serve the purpose of the tribal people?
6. Discuss the effects of homeland politics in Northeast India.

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UNIT 14: INDIGENOUS-IMMIGRANT QUESTION IN NORTHEAST FRONTIER

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will deal with the issue of immigration in Northeast India and the unique challenges it poses in society and politics. We will mainly focus on the historical antecedents that encouraged immigration into the territory of Assam. It bears mention that colonial Assam formed a large part of what we today refer to as the Northeast, before it was further subdivided. As a result, much of the immigration crises that we see unfolding across the northeast has deep ties to the socio-political dynamics extant in present-day Assam. However, in the case of the two princely states of Tripura and Manipur which were not part of colonial Assam, immigration has played

out along two axes—in the former it is foregrounded by the majority-minority divide and in the latter the insider-outsider binary rules the roost. We will look at how this binary plays out in the present context. An important development worth considering is the increasing demand to bring back the inner line system in states like Meghalaya and Manipur to reduce the burden of immigration. We will study how demographic changes coupled with an existential fear among indigenous communities create the popular discontent that feeds into such demands. The wider relationship between the national borders and boundary-making processes in identity politics and social relations will be examined.

14.2 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Unit, you will be able to:

- Contextualise the presence of immigrants in Northeast India;
- Explain their impact in the politics and policies of the region;
- Explain the native resistance to immigration;
- Analyse the factors behind the continuity of the immigration debate.

14.3 LAND, LABOUR AND THE MARKET

The history of the flow of immigrants to the Northeast Frontier is fairly old. The region has always received immigrants at different time periods. But with the growth of colonial mercantilism and the reordering of agrarian practices, immigration took an altogether different turn when it was incorporated into government policy. It was also during the colonial years when the citizenry had its sentiments mobilised against outsiders, led by local elites (Sharma, 2012). Historically, the different state formations (kingdoms) in the region whether in Assam, Tripura, or Manipur, gave royal patronage to Aryan migrants from the northern and eastern parts of the subcontinent. Their migration was supported as kingdoms required

people steeped in the knowledge of administrative governance, agricultural techniques, priestly matters, and matters of revenue collection. These migrants married into the local culture and helped form a social identity that was broad-based. Migrations until then happened more or less organically. With the coming of the British, migration patterns were in for massive disruption. The British conquest attracted migration in the hordes, that continually kept changing the region's landscape. Needless to say, the British saw it as bringing 'progress' and 'civilisation' to the *terra incognita* (Baruah, 2001). The discovery of tea and oil in Assam sent shockwaves in London, to an extent that every trader, financier and investor found himself scrambling for a slice of the pie. Already they were uncomfortable seeing the vast tracts of uncultivated land everywhere around them. The economic prospects of tea and oil saw the region suddenly bustling with unprecedented economic activity. Plantations mushroomed across the geography. Every piece of untilled land was deemed marketable. An ideology of wasteland colonisation which was a by-product of the colonial imagination soon found its takers in the British administration. It was guided by the belief that the soil in the region was rich in nutrients and promised exceptional economic returns if put to commercial use. Land was seen as a resource to be controlled. To meet these interests, areas were classified into "'waste', 'arable' and 'forested' regions" (Misra, 2011: 97).

Under the British land settlement policy precolonial property rights were gradually phased out for a more utilitarian perspective to be put in its place. Earlier modes of engagement with land that were largely enshrined in local social meanings were replaced with the concept of exclusive proprietary rights that the British introduced. New patterns of authority and power relations in the rural areas thus began to emerge. The thinking that went into British policy-making emphasised the discreteness of each village unlike the precolonial conception of local peasants practicing cultivation in a continuous topography. Shifting cultivation was to be replaced with settled forms of agriculture. The simultaneously expansionist and aggressive drive for agrarianisation encouraged the immigration of

peasants from East Bengal. Immigration of settlers from East Bengal to Assam picked up pace because of severe land scarcity in the former. At the beginning these settlers were reluctant to migrate despite the diversity of incentives that were on offer from the British administration as there was no population pressure on them. However, this changed with the "exceptional rise in rural densities and impoverishment in the Bengal districts (Mymensingh, Faridpur and Dacca) bordering Goalpara." (Misra, 2011:105) The increased population pressure and the news of the 'land of promise' spread like wildfire in East Bengal, driving them to arrive in Assam in hordes. On the other hand, labour demand in the tea plantations surged with the economic demand of the marketplace. As wage labour was inconsistent with the social life of the local peasantry, the British had to rely on migrants from the Chhotanagpur region. The economic transformation of the last land Frontier of the British saw requirements of immigrant labour across all enterprises: coal and oil fields, construction work, official and administrative purposes, etc. What ensued was a stream of migrants into the Northeast Frontier that caused enormous demographic shift and economic transformation (Baruah, 2011).

14.4 THE STREAM OF IMMIGRATION

The 1911 census upended the earlier displeasure of British officials at the low rate of spontaneous immigration that was recorded in the 1901 census. It was observed that settlers began to advance towards Assam at phenomenal rates. People from Mymensingh and its adjoining districts (Pabna, Bogra, Rangpur etc.) constituted the bulk of the migrants. 10 years down the line, the figures looked yet more promising. It was observed that the settlers formed a substantial part of the population of the lower and central districts of Assam, numbering nearly 300,000 as per the 1921 census (Misra, p. 107, 2011). It is worth taking note that most of these immigrants from East Bengal were Muslims. The demographic landscape was being transformed at a rapid pace, causing astonishment among some

British officials. C.S. Mullan, who was the superintendent of the 1931 census compared this demographic shift with an invasion. In the Barpeta subdivision alone, the percentage of Muslim population skyrocketed during 1911-41, from 0.1 percent to 49 percent (Sharma, 2016). Soon after, these migrants had to shoulder the responsibility of extending the frontiers of cultivation throughout Western Assam. The immigrant cultivator was favoured over the native for his knowledge of intensive agricultural techniques and labouring skills. For example, the production of jute in the *char* areas, where these immigrants settled, steadily rose to extremely profitable levels. Although local tribes such as the Hajongs and the Rabhas also were competent in the cultivation of jute, it was the immigrant population who increased production on a market scale. The British adopted a policy of settling these immigrants in the *chaporis* or floodplains. These chapori belts were traditionally used for shifting cultivation. Except for the cultivator's *ga-mati* or paternal acres in his own village he was not allowed to have any hereditary rights of occupancy of lands in other villages. This tactic was taken to exclude the native cultivator/peasant from lands outside the bounds of his own ga-mati, to open up a new land regime centred around the migrant cultivator. By dispossessing the native peasantry of the Valley, the colonial state reallocated land to settlers from East Bengal who it thought were more enterprising. The settlement of East Bengal immigrants followed its course during the Muslim League-led coalition ministry under Sir Syed Muhammad Saadulla. What started off as a policy to incorporate the Frontier into the engine of global colonial resource-use soon took on a political objective. The Saadulla ministry had its own agenda of turning Assam into a Muslim majority province. This scheme ran into a confrontation with a slew of protests by the Congress leaders, most prominently by Gopinath Bordoloi. (Sharma, 2016)

There were other groups of immigrants who migrated to the Frontier at different time intervals, both before and after independence. Apart from the cultivators from East Bengal, there were others who migrated as a direct result of colonial policies of commerce and administration. Plantation work

being highly labour-intensive required labourers to work as plantation workers. Initially the British experimented with the Chinese but it quickly proved unsustainable. As they had also failed to lure the natives, both tribals as well as non-tribals to work in these plantations as wage labourers, the British had to look for labour elsewhere. As such, labourers were imported from the Chhotanagpur region that encompassed areas in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa as contract workers. They had the option to return to their native places on expiry of the contract. But their systematic oppression by the tea planters under dismal conditions and the poor state of communication networks made sure that they overstay their fixed term. Along with the settlement of this labouring class of plantation workers, Marwari traders too saw opportunity around the plantations and started setting up shops. They had a prominent role to play in the plantation economy as suppliers of rations. The new cash-based British land revenue policy furthered the role of the Marwaris as money lenders. They were instrumental in transforming the economy from a non-monetized one to a monetized market economy. They carried so much clout that a 1906 government report even mention that completely monopolized trade in the Assam Valley (Baruah, 2001). The economic transformation of Assam led to the establishment of an administrative system that was reliant on Hindu Bengali officers and clerks. The new modes of administration instituted by the British required people with skills to do the new jobs. The Bengali officers were given roles in government offices, courts and the tea plantations. Furthermore, there presence in the medical, legal and teaching professions became conspicuous. This predominance of the Hindu Bengali in public life became a cause of deep-seated resentment which we will talk about a little later. However, not all Bengali Hindus were immigrants. Since the territory of Assam also incorporated the Bengali-majority Sylhet, they were just migrants travelling from one part of the province to another. Thus it was mostly a case of intra-provincial migration. But their growing presence in the Brahmaputra Valley was seen as a cause of concern by the elite Assamese who feared losing their identity to the immigrants' ways of

life. They held significant influence in the politics of the region and the natives were uncomfortable with that. We will briefly discuss how these two groups ran into trouble with each other in the next section. Then there were other smaller groups among whom the Nepalis hold prominence. The Nepali influx occurred through Sikkim, Bhutan and the then undivided Darjeeling district of North Bengal (Sharma, 2012). In the post-colonial era, treaties between India and Nepal also facilitated the immigration of Nepalis.

Another important aspect to look at is the stream of immigration in the states of Tripura and Manipur, as they were not part of colonial Assam. We will briefly discuss the historical timeline of immigration as it unfolded in these two states. The story of Tripura is a story of transition. Its geographical proximity to Bangladesh (formerly East Bengal) and the neighbouring states of Mizoram and Assam (often the cause of population spill-over) has had a deep role in its socio-political metamorphosis. Tripura has also been the quintessential setting for cultural antagonism between the ethnic hill tribes and the non-tribal plains communities. In the sphere of cultural practices, the hills tribes were animistic whereas the plains people were ritualistic (Ali, 2011). The ritual practices of the plains communities are among the reasons why they earned the patronage of Tripura's monarchy. The monarchy in Tripura actively settled thousands of Bengali Hindus in the plains beginning in the 15th century. Bengali Brahmins, owing to their mastery over ritual practices, were settled in different parts of the state. Many people, including the royals, took up Hinduism as a result. Simultaneously, Bengali literature too earned royal patronage. However, in the era of decline (1563-1783), the Manikya Kingdom found itself bruised when Mughals amassed substantial portions of its plains territory. The wars fought with the Mughals decreased the kingdom's earlier share of revenue. The King sought to alleviate the pains to its exchequer by taxing the tribal population after laying claim to the hilly marshlands. Meanwhile there were some other developments. Bengali became the official language of the Court and Muslim cultivators were

settled in large numbers in the wasteland areas. Mog tribals from Chittagong too started migrating in batches, increasing demographic pressure on the indigenous tribals. Taxation increased with the advent of the British when the East India Company levied higher revenue charges from the Tripura plains, leading to a series of revolts and uprisings involving both the tribals and the plains people. The Burmese invasion of 1755 led to the migration of tribal Manipuri refugees who were swiftly assimilated owing to the then ruler's marriage ties with the ruler of Manipur. Several inter-tribal conflicts occurred with Bir Chandra Manikya's succession to the throne. Sensing complicity on the part of the King, the British started appointing Bengali political agents to help the king better administer his territory. These appointments were followed by the enactment of the Tenancy Act in 1885. It changed the course of Tripura's history forever, in that it gave the Bengali subjects tenancy rights at throwaway prices. Jhum cultivation was banned with the Jhoomia Rehabilitation Scheme of 1889, thus attracting further land incursion by the non-tribals (Ali, 2011). Leading into the 20th century, significant portions of tribal land was amassed through a land settlement policy imposed by the King. Ethnic conflicts shot up as tribal livelihood became more and more difficult as large tracts of forestland to the order of 3861 square miles was designated 'reserve forest'. The King displayed an inability to be even-handed with his policies which saw land rehabilitation schemes for the tribals being unevenly drawn; some received greater land reservation benefits than the others. The problem later got compounded with the arrival of the refugees from neighbouring Bangladesh, leading to further marginalisation of the tribal populace. In the post-independent era a demographic inversion took place which reduced the tribal population into a minority and the non-tribal Bengali population into a majority, leading the state into an era of politics governed by the majority-minority divide.

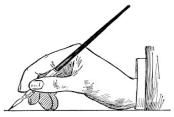
Manipur is a state with a rich demography. As Bhagat Oinam (2005) points out, Manipur has since time immemorial exhibited a pluralistic ethos. It has ethnic communities tracing their origin to Yunnan province in southern

China through Myanmar to as far as Thailand. Starting in the 15th century, many people from the western frontier migrated to Manipur that accounts for the sizeable Hindu population in the Imphal Valley. Manipur, as mentioned in the royal chronicle *Cheitharol Kumbaba* was loosely-defined region having seven (initially nine) ethnic principalities, both in the valley and in the hills. These principalities were later consolidated into the Meitei state. Internal migration took place that resulted in hill tribes like the Tangkhuls settling in the valley region. Similarly, there were also valley-to-hill migrations. A feudal social system was put in place which was followed by a process of hinduisation at the aegis of the King. During King Garibniwaz's reign, relationships between the Manipuri kingdom and neighbouring countries like China and Burma soured (Oinam, 2005). This compelled the king to come into alliances with the other neighbouring kingdoms like the Ahoms and the Tripuris. Forging of military alliances soon branched out to matrimonial and other cultural alliances that began a two and a half century process of hinduisation. Closeness with the Tripuri king also opened the roads for Bengali migration. One important thing to note here is that local administration of tribal chiefdoms were left relatively unaffected, although tributes to the Meitei king were still collected. The tribal groups had strong diplomatic ties with the Manipuri kings. Examples include those of the Tangkhuls, Rongmei, Chiru, Koirao, Thadou. The pattern of migration to and from Manipur had a trans-border character to it. The nomadic lifestyle of communities like the Kuki and the Hmar saw them settled along a vast geography that even cut across countries. Political boundaries came to be more clearly defined after the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo between the British and the Burmese in 1826. Manipuri king Gambhir Singh was a signatory to the treaty, whose involvement led to the transition of Manipur into a modern state formation (Oinam, 2005). The British annexed the region into one of its territories by defeating the king in 1891. This marked the beginning of British suzerainty over Manipur until its merger with the Indian union in 1949. The insider-outsider dichotomy present in Manipuri politics is a vestige of the political and social

transformation of the region. The early colonial history of Manipur suggests that both the tribal people and the Hindu converts in Manipur lived more or less peacefully with each other. There was no population pressure on land. Neither were settlement patterns disrupted dramatically like in the case of the Tripuri tribal population mentioned previously. As such, no one envisaged a threat to material resources for a foreseeable future. However, things began to change gradually in early twentieth century that was later aggravated by people who entered Manipur for commercial purposes. In the adjoining areas of Manipur, the Naga and Mizo identity formation started taking a violent turn. Ethnicities got tied to land; it was of utmost importance for the tribes to gain control over the land to ascertain their native identities. Following from such conceptions ethnic rivalries picked up heat. There were many clashes between the Nagas and the Kukis, the Kukis and the Paites and so on (Oinam, 2005). Fear of enforced migration into 'ethnic homelands' took the political landscape by storm. Armed insurgent groups such as the United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF), Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA), Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) mushroomed along ethnic lines, thereby making ethnic strife a regular sight in Manipur. With the development of trade and commerce in Manipur came increased military presence (bestowed with great impunity) which itself caused hurdles in the path of bringing stability to the region. The business community kept growing and an insurgent economy based on collection of extortion money was built, leading to backwardness of the region. In fact, the language of insider versus outsider politics gathered steam with the onset of mercantalism in Manipur. The genesis of this idea of the native versus the rest has implications in much of what goes on in Manipuri politics, that of the insider versus the outsider. The insider here is the native (indigene) and the outsider is the migrant. Business migrants in Manipur are often referred to as *Mayang* (mainland Indian), sometimes as a slur. Albeit it does not just stop at that. Migration and settlement has been a bone of contention in Manipur for far too long. Any group beyond another's perception of collective ethnic consciousness (linked to ethnic

homelands) was at risk of being referred to as an outsider. As the states of Nagaland and Mizoram were created, such sentiments came to be echoed vociferously as political boundaries were redrawn. Inter-state and inter-ethnic tussles broke as boundaries were fiercely contested. Thus, we see that it is the battle for dominance between neighbours and a fear of population increase of the migrants that feeds the immigration debate in Manipur.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



1. How did the British policy-making encourage migration into Assam?

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2. What role did taxation play in non-tribal migration to Tripura?

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3. What's the nature of the immigration debate in Manipur?

14.5 RESISTING CHANGE

Assamese leaders were disconcerted at the mass immigration of Muslim peasants from East Bengal. They were apprehensive that unfettered immigration will result in conflicts between the migrants and the locals.

Ambikagiri Raychaudhuri, who was one of the key players in the Indian National Congress's anti-colonial efforts in Assam, raised the issue of immigration persistently. Gyananath Borah, who wrote for Raychaudhuri's magazine *Chetona* (Consciousness) even penned an anthology of essays entitled *Axomot Bidexi* (Foreigners in Assam) (Baruah, 2001). Raychaudhuri was instrumental in the establishment of a national forum for Assam through the Xonrokhwini Xobha that pressed for Assamese sub-national assertion. The collective assertion was to protect the identity of the native Axomiya from the looming threat of economic and cultural marginalization. This was also a time when the Assamese public identity began to emerge which we have already discussed at length in the earlier unit. This was also a time when the settlement of immigrants resulted in the displacement of the tribal peasantry. The immigrants encroached on tribal lands disrupting their traditional practice of shifting cultivation. As such, many tribal villages disappeared, with inhabitants moving to sub-montane areas. Fearing mass displacements of tribals, the colonial administration enacted the Line System to designate villages as open, mixed and closed. However, this system soon collapsed because the immigrants were aggressive land-grabbers. The Muslim League-led coalition ministry under Sir Syed Saadulla did away with the Line System in 1940, facilitating the settlement of immigrants in all wasteland areas of Assam. Saadulla's initiative drew the ire of people, especially those who led the sub-nationalist discourse, pushing his ministry to fall. There was an environment of discord that led to panic. The consensus among the Assamese and tribal leaders was firmly against the possibility of Assam being merged with the Muslim-majority East Bengal and later East Pakistan. To this date, this discourse runs in the veins of the Assamese citizenry and in political circles.

When Saadulla returned to power in 1942, he went ahead with his pet project— the Land Development Scheme. Under the resolutions of this scheme, grazing reserve areas and wastelands in the three districts of Nagaon, Darrang and Kamrup were to be opened up to immigrants from

Bengal. The scheme incorporated a rhetoric of "Grow More Food". It was the time of the Second World War and this programme of "Grow More Food" was seen to be a boost for the war economy. It must be noted here that Saadulla did not take a militant approach towards settling the immigrants. He did have a political agenda at the back of his mind to create a Muslim-majority province which would eventually merge with Pakistan after partition. However, it was Maulana Abdul Hamid Bhasani who was virulent in demanding more power for the immigrants. Saadulla warded off Bhasani's challenge by advocating the Line System that he argued would provide a checks and balances mechanism to protect the plains tribal population from the aggressive settlers. One of his chief accusations was that the headmen of the immigrant villages were driving out both tribals as well as Assamese Muslims from the reclaimed lands. Despite these liberal views, Saadulla was all for the policy of opening up of grazing land and forest reserves for the immigrants. The Congress party in Assam with collaboration from Raychaudhuri's platform protested against this policy. They vehemently opposed the inclusion of the Bengali-speaking Sylhet district and the Cachar plains as they feared that would lead to many Bengali immigrants being settled in Assam. The immigrant question was yoked with the sub-national aspirations of the Assamese people as there was a difference of opinion among the Assamese and the pan-Indian politicians. On the one hand, the Assamese were raising the concern of exceptionally high migrant numbers. Gyananath Borah even argued for "freeing Assam from the grip of foreigners to safeguard its autonomy" (Baruah, p. 82, 2001). On the other hand, there were pan-Indian politicians with a Cabinet proposal that Assam be incorporated as a part of Bengal following independence. The idea was that there would be two provinces in independent India, one Hindu and the other Muslim. Assam was to be part of the province that represented the Muslims. In the Constituent Assembly debates, this proposal found stiff opposition from the Assam Congress that ultimately led to Gopinath Bordoloi saving Assam from joining East Pakistan. However, the perennial fear of the Assamese for the immigrants,

or the foreigners so-called, continued post-independence. This fear reached its pivotal point during the Assam Movement.

14.5.1 The Citizenship Tangle

The post-partition scenario of India was such that migration continued unabated from East Pakistan, and later on even Bangladesh (after the 1971 Liberation War). Some of these were economic migrants whereas the rest (mostly Hindus) were political refugees. The Government of India had a protective scheme to prevent the infiltration of East Pakistanis who were designated as 'foreigners' in the Foreigners Act of 1946. The policy was to deport these infiltrators as their presence was 'illegal' now that India had become a nation-state. In the wake of East Pakistan's call for independence from its Western Province, the Indian government sensed geopolitical opportunity of crushing Pakistan and thereby softened its stance. This renewed position helped legitimise all the illegal immigrants from East Pakistan who came to Assam before 25 March 1971.

In the earlier unit we read about the cultural politics behind language. The issue of language-based cultural politics was closely interlinked with immigration. There was overwhelming fear among the Assamese elites that Bengali was poised to become the official state language of Assam as the number of Bengali speakers was in the majority in the pre-partition days. Although the Muslim immigrants provided temporary relief to the Assamese elites by way of enumerating themselves as Assamese speakers, the danger of a regional hegemony by Bengali speakers still remained. The Muslim immigrants being economically poor and illiterate adopted the Assamese language to fast-track their integration with the larger Assamese community. The Hindu Bengalis on the other hand, notably those based in Cachar did not cooperate on this front. The Language Riots of 1960-61 was fought over the status of Assamese as the de facto official language in Cachar. It was part of the Bengali-speaking Surma Valley while the Brahmaputra Valley comprised of an Assamese-speaking majority. When Sylhet went to Pakistan after the partition, Hindu-majority areas were

incorporated into Cachar. The Hindu Bengali intellectuals showed deep resentment for the Assamese elite who wanted the entirety of the state to have an Assamese public face. The Hindu Bengalis never showed a proclivity to accept Assamese culture and identity unlike their Muslim counterparts (Sharma, 2012). They were sufficiently well-off and deeply entrenched in the modern sector which bought them certain leverage on issues of identity. These differing realities embroiled the Assamese and the Bengali Hindu in a protracted culture war. Nonetheless, the memories of Assamese playing a second fiddle to the Bengali language in administrative and cultural matters during the colonial rule was still fresh in the minds of the Assamese. They were ready to stave off any threat that could emerge in the event of the Bengali Hindus and the Bengali Muslims coalescing together under the rubric of language. To make matters worse for the Assamese, there was a huge influx of Hindu Bengali refugees from Sylhet post-partition— a phenomenon that rose significantly in the immediate aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War. The Muslim immigrants of East Bengal origin even after accepting an Assamese way of life could not earn the trust of indigenous groups because of their aggressive land-grabbing habits. Being landless they would encroach upon the traditional common property resources, displacing the indigenous from their lands and inviting their ire. On top of that the indigenous Assamese Muslims too started to feel a sense of identity crisis as they were marginalised in the domain of politics by the immigrant Muslims who were numerically stronger. The post-independent political reality in the region was that of immigration. The state was actively involved in settling immigrants in the *chars* (flood sediment islets) and other areas to create 'vote banks' for electoral gain. This can be attested by the census figures that show that between 1971 and 1991 the Hindu population in Assam grew by 41.9 percent while Muslim population grew by a whopping 77.4 percent (Sharma, 2016). This data has been contested by some commentators who are of the opinion that the high reproductive rates among the Muslim population is what is driving their growth and that the actual number of

illegal immigrants are low. All these factors combined to make the immigration question the most popular refrain in Assam and Northeastern politics.

14.5.2 A Climate of Agitation

The anti-immigrant rage took on epic proportions in early 1979 that lasted for six years till 1985, in what was called the Assam Agitation or the Assam Movement. What started the agitation was a controversy surrounding the by-election to the Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency in 1978. There were reports floating around that the number of voters had drastically increased. At around the same time there were other reports that claimed that fresh immigration from Bangladesh to Assam has increased. This strange coincidence led the Election Commissioner to review the voter list which then detected almost 45000 illegal immigrants. This raised the alarm bell in Assam and there was a huge outpour of angst. The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) demanded that the voter lists of thirteen other constituencies be made public and cleared of the names of the illegal immigrants (Ibid). They stopped the holding of elections until this demand was met. On June 8, 1979 they sponsored a twelve-hour strike across the state to "detect, delete and deport the foreigners" (Baruah, 2001). Two months later political and cultural organizations came together to coordinate a state-wide campaign against this serious issue and thus was born a six-year long anti-foreigners' struggle. The state government in the state was challenged by the agitators as they alleged that the government had won their seats riding on the back of invalid rolls full of foreigners. The movement ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 between the Government of India and the leaders of bodies that led the agitation. It was originally demanded that deportation of foreigners be done on the basis of the cut-off year of 1951 as the National Register of Citizens (NRC) was also prepared on the basis of 1951. Although initially 1 January 1966 was decided as the base year for detection of foreigners in Assam and 25 March 1971 as the cut-off year for identification and deportation, it was

the latter that remained in public discourse. It remains another issue that till July 2012, less than 2500 illegal migrants have been deported. The Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act of 1983 made it almost impossible to detect foreigners as the burden of proof was to be shouldered by the accuser and the police. This was a significant departure from The Foreigners Act of 1946 which was applicable to the rest of the country. Finally, in 2005, The Supreme Court of India struck it down calling it unconstitutional. Meanwhile, the numbers of illegal immigrants and their descendants multiplied. It became both a political and a constitutional blunder as there was no sound mechanism to differentiate between these immigrants and the ones who had come before 1971 so as to define their citizenship. The NRC updating process which began in 2013 and came to an end in 2019 too witnessed multiple roadblocks—absence of documents to prove legacy, difference of opinion in regards to which voter list to be used as reference, false exclusions, etc. There were cultural meanings of acceptance of citizenship as well. The Constitution and the laws were as much the arbiters of who among the immigrants were to be considered illegal as much as it was for those who were to be termed legal. Political manoeuvres on the part of the state that implicitly fast-tracked the citizenship of Hindu settlers as compared to their Muslim counterparts made sure that the immigration question would turn secular eventually. That it would not just be an issue of illegal Muslims or Hindus but of illegal Bangladeshis. There was a palpable anxiety that if East Bengal-origin Muslims and Hindus join hands, they could easily upend the political dynamics of the state by their sheer numbers. Although it is also true that majority of the Muslims of East-Bengal descent have been returning their mother tongue as Assamese in the censuses, the question of their suspect allegiance still remained. The scrutiny of law became all the more important than just a category of illegal immigrants who were to be distinguished on the basis of religion.

As mentioned in one of the previous sections, Manipur's entire political landscape is ordered by the insider-outsider dichotomy and the recurring inter-ethnic strife that ensues. The situation went so out of hand that Manipur saw the colonial instrument of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) as the only mechanism to safeguard the rights of the insiders. ILP is a travel document given to non-indigenous people to enter the state where it is implemented. The Inner Line areas have restrictions on acquisition of landed property. The ILP agitation was started by the Meitei organisations from the valley who were at frequent loggerheads with continuous land grabbing by traders, commercial establishments and the government. They saw it as a threat to their predominance. Although Meiteis are numerically stronger in the valley, land and resources are available to be bought by all. This has resulted in centripetal migration of the tribals and a host of "outsiders" (mainland India as well as trans-border) to the valley. One thing that does not act in the favour of the Meiteis is the fact that they are constitutionally clubbed together along with the non-tribals, which bars their access to reserved land in both the valley and the hills. Meiteis were alarmed at the increased growth of outsider population who are just two lakhs short of the Meitei population of 9.18 lakh in the 2001 census. Following the agreement between the Government of Manipur and the Joint Committee on the Inner Line Permit System (JCILPS), the Manipur Legislative Assembly passed three bills: Protection of Manipur People Bill 2015 which fixed 1951 as the cut-off year for detection of outsiders, Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Amendment Bill 2015, and the Manipur Shops and Establishments Bill 2015. The tribal organisations in the hill districts opposed these bills on grounds of a purported fear of the Meiteis making inroads into the hills. For e.g., Kukis who have been accorded with the refugee status have expressed fear that they could be treated as outsiders. Others too expressed similar concerns that those who did not fit the criteria of the base year or proper lineage might face a grim future. As of January 1, 2020, the ILP system in Manipur has come into effect after years of violent protests and political crossfire. This leaves

Meghalaya as the only tribal-majority state in Northeast India that is outside the scope of the ILP. The issue with implementation of the system in Meghalaya is that the Khasi and the Jaintia hills still fall under the jurisdiction of Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, the progenitor of the ILP. Extension of the colonial era regulation over the whole state would amount to tinkering with a subject that is covered under the Union List over which the state cannot exert any authority. The Centre has time and again referred to the unconstitutionality of such a move. Incurring the ire of the tribal groups, the state has enacted a set of monitoring tools to check movement into and inside the state. The protectionist drive by the tribals is aimed mostly at securing jobs for the locals as there are already land laws that prevent the sale of land to non-tribals. They see it as a restrictive mechanism to prevent their culture and economy usurped by immigrants who they deem "outsiders". The anxieties of the tribal groups in Meghalaya pressing for the ILP are fraught with nativist ideals that are exclusionary in nature. Sometimes these anxieties are real, but more often than not— imagined and linked to political motives.

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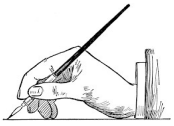

1. What were the effects of post-partition politics in the settlement of immigrants?

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2. How did citizenship of immigrants become an issue in Assam?

14.6 LOCATING INDIGENEITY IN THE WAR ON ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

The inability of subsequent governments to tackle the problem of illegal immigration made the indigenous communities paranoid. Some saw the government and the immigrants as active collaborators. The key demand of the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), with its core support base being people of Muslim-immigrant descent, that the NRC be prepared on the basis of the 2011 voter list also caused suspicion in the minds of the indigenous population. The fear of being overrun by immigrants in their own land provoked feelings of anxiety in the minds of the indigenous people. The usurpation and encroachment of tribal lands and common property resources by the immigrants—legal or illegal—dispossessed the indigenous people from their lands. In doing so, the socio-cultural meanings of land use and the lifeworld of the tribal people and their ecology was severely disrupted. They were forced to migrate to remoter sub-montane areas to avoid living next to immigrant villages. There were environmental and economic factors too behind the immigrants' land-grab of indigenous lands, such as constant flooding of the char areas and the extreme poverty levels. Of the indigenous people who were forced to migrate, some tribal communities took up residency in forest reserves and protected areas thus inviting the prospect of eviction unto themselves. Meanwhile, government inaction against external migrant communities—Bangladeshi and Nepali— who also encroached designated forest areas was seen by the indigenous people as being disloyal to their own people (Sharma, 2001). It also became common practice for the indigenous people to lease out their land to the immigrants as they found it difficult to compete with the upper hand that the latter held in commercial agriculture. The dispossession of land has since been a running theme in the assertion of indigeneity.

Stop and Read

The debate on the updating of the NRC was centred around the base year. AASU and some other political bodies initially wanted the base year to be 1951, the year when the first NRC of independent India was prepared. On the other hand, minority parties demanded that the 1971 voter list be taken as the reference for the base year. The minority parties were representatives of immigrant Muslims and they were opposed to the 1951 base year as the NRC then was seen to be incomplete. However, the signing of the Assam Accord legitimised 1971 as the base year.

14.7 SUMMING UP

There are considerable roadblocks in finding a solution to the issue of immigration and indigenous discontent. Piecemeal measures such as the updation of the NRC and the amendment of the Citizenship Act have only aggravated the situation. Deportation as an option has been ruled out in most diplomatic circles in the absence of a repatriation treaty between India and Bangladesh. In addition, it would be a massive bureaucratic exercise that may come at huge economic costs and lead to no end. There are geographical hurdles to border fencing as well, as rivers are likely to change course once in a while. It would also be extremely difficult to fence and fix the boundaries of a 272 km border that runs across a diverse topography. The impending threat of a climate change-induced mass migration due to rising sea levels in coastal Bangladesh also cannot be taken lightly. The asymmetry in economic development between the two nations has been somewhat nullified now given the rise of Bangladesh's GDP growth rate to nearly 8%. Bilateral economic partnership between the

two nations could help stabilise the influx further more. The federal response to the geo-political reality of the Northeast has to take a cautious demeanour. Spill-over effects of immigration have been felt in the states adjoining Assam and Tripura too. In the case of Tripura, its indigenous population is already a minority. Likewise, gradual demographic transition in the Northeastern states that were fairly protected through instruments like the ILP have potential to spur the growth of insurgency. The strategy will have to take into account the dichotomy between the indigenous communities and the immigrants. As the immigrant-lineage makes up more than half of the population, rhetoric of exclusionary divisive politics will only add fuel to the fire. There have been multiple instances of othering of Bengali Muslims and Hindus in which historical complications such as the addition of Muslim-majority Goalpara and the presence of a Hindu-majority Cachar have been side-lined. Such instances are giving way to a differentiated notion of citizenship and belonging, a situation that would raise a second class of citizens inside their own territory. A pragmatic approach would warrant an inclusionary policy that would protect the rights and interests of the indigenous and at the same time pave the path to inclusion of the immigrants, while not losing sight of the illegal influx problem. This would ensure that the indigenous-immigrant question is not flexed further beyond its tipping point.

14.8 QUESTIONS

1. What were the conditions that led to a dramatic growth of immigrant population in Assam?
2. How did the policy of settlement of immigrants run into a problem with the tribal populace?
3. Explain the relation between tribal land alienation and assertion of indigeneity.
4. What is the significance of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) in the immigration debate?

5. Do you think that cultural politics acts as a roadblock to solving the question of immigration once and for all? Justify your argument.

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