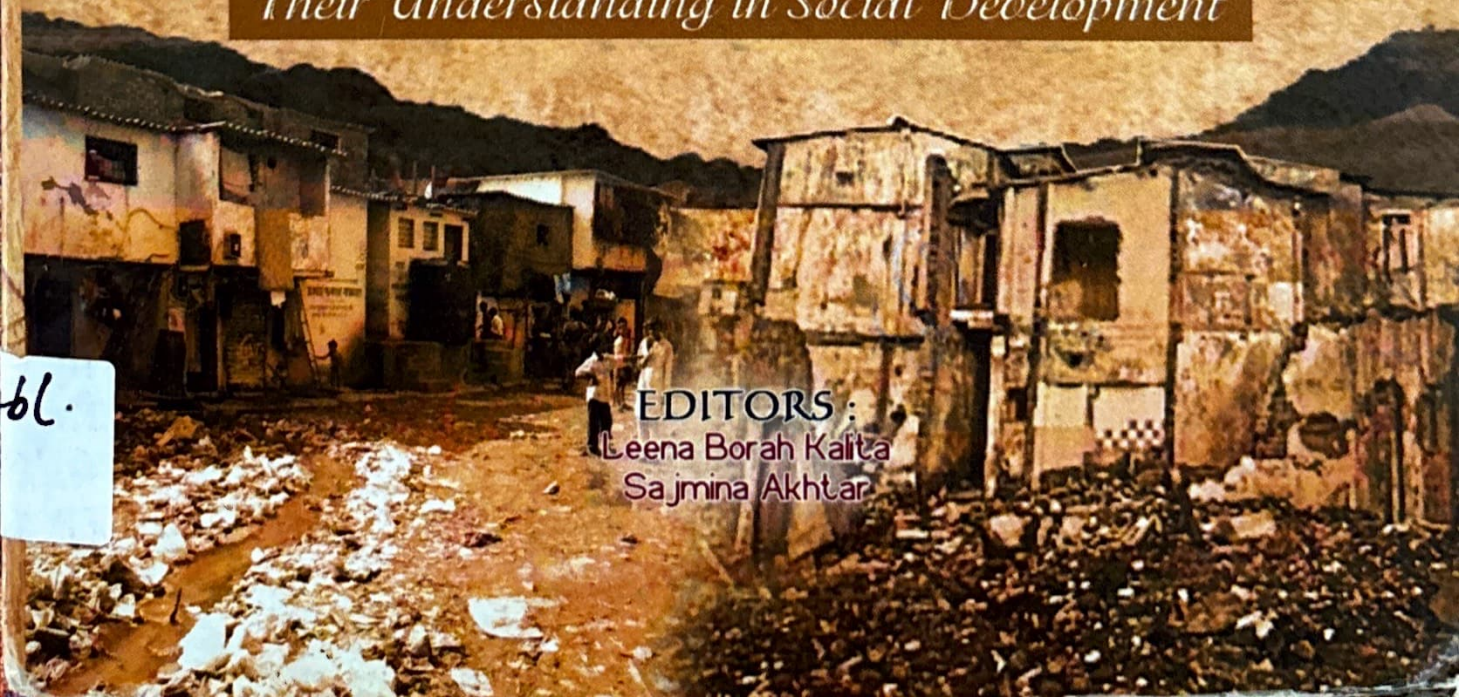




"The backward community is the measure of civilization"

BACKWARD COMMUNITIES OF **ASSAM**

Their Understanding in Social Development



EDITORS :
Leena Borah Kalita
Sajmina Akhtar

**BACKWARD COMMUNITIES OF
ASSAM:
THEIR UNDERSTANDING IN SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT**



Editors

Prof. Leena Borah Kalita

Prof Sajmina Akhtar

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**BACKWARD COMMUNITIES OF ASSAM: THEIR
UNDERSTANDING IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT:**

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FEW WORDS FROM EDITORS

Society is a web of social relationship. According to Prof. Wright, 'Society is not a group of people, it is a system of relationship that exists between the individual of the group'. When a society is formed with different group of people with different identity and culture, than that society would come out with a complex character where the people establish themselves by assimilating with each other. Indian society has an old and quite complex character. From the time immemorial, several waves of immigrants, representing different ethnic groups, linguistic communities and religious background have merged into its population to contribute to its diversity, richness and vitality. In the process of its evolution, Indian society has acquired a composite culture characterized by stable but varied patterns. The Indian culture is a result of contact, diffusion, conflict and assimilation among the different ethnic groups.

Like the Indian society, the Assamese society has also been marked by simultaneous assimilation and acculturation of different communities that have settled in Assam from time immemorial. Assam has witnessed the migration of various groups of people irrespective of their caste and creed. Assamese society cannot fulfil its aspiration without the contribution of these indigenous immigrants. These indigenous people are mostly belongs to the backward classes of the society. The term 'Backward' refers lack of adequate opportunity for group and individual self development, especially in economic life and matter of health, housing, and education. In Assam also, there are lots of backward communities who have their own contribution in the field of language, literature, culture and rite and rituals. To find out the contribution of different communities to Assamese society, we the Department of History organized National Seminar on *Backward Communities of Assam: Their Understanding in Social Development* on 29th and 30th of

April, 2013.

The College authority and the editorial board have decided to publish the submitted papers of the Seminar in an edited form with an ISBN No. The editorial board have laid emphasis on those papers of the scholars where importance were given on backward communities and their assimilation with the host society, their culture, impact of globalization, education and status of women. The Resource persons Dr. Girin Phukan, Dr. Sristidhar Dutta, Dr. Homeswar Goswami, Dr. Rup Kumar Burman from Jadavpur University, Prof. Chandan Sharma from Dibrugarh University and Dr. Anil Saikia have forwarded their valuable observation and suggestions over the presented papers on the Seminar.

At the very outset, we take pride to offer our sincere thanks to ICHR who helped us financially to organize the seminar. It is not possible to organise the seminar and publish the edited book of the presented papers without the help and cooperation of the honourable Resource persons and the participants. We take the opportunity here to offer our heartfelt thanks to all of them. We extend our special thanks to Md Hadi Mustaque Hussain, President of the Governing Body; Dr. Dibyananda Chetia, Principal of Khowang College; Head, OIL, Moran; Teachers' Unit and Office Staff of Khowang College for their sincere support to organize the Seminar successfully.

We are hopeful that this book on '*Backward Communities of Assam: Their Understanding in Social Development*' would be able to fulfil the thrust of the people who are interested in this issue as well as the Researchers.

Prof. Leena Borah Kalita
Sajmina Akhtar
Khowang College

Key-Note Address

By
Dr. Girin Phukon

After Independence, India was found to be sinking under numerous socio-economic problems. One such pressing problem was its poverty-ridden weaker section of the society who had been backward for ages. For all round development of the country, it was necessary to provide additional attention to these depressed communities who are economically weak, educationally backward and politically deprived, so that by means of special privileges these groups could be brought forward and integrity with the national mainstream. These groups were identified and categorised as

- I. Scheduled Caste (SC)
- II. Scheduled Tribe (ST)
- III. Other Backward Classes (OBC)

The scheduled class belonged to the Hindu community who were placed at the bottom of its order-Sudras. They were called to serve the upper classes like Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Baishyas and so on. On the other hand, the scheduled tribes were those traditional communities who failed to reap the benefit out of modern civilization. Backwards classes are categorised on the basis of the groups who did not have adequate representation in the field of education, service and commercial undertakings etc. To safeguard the interest of these groups, the constitution of India has inserted certain special provisions for their speedy development which subsequently resulted in the form "Reservation policy". According to article 340 of the Indian constitution the first Backward Class Commission was set up in 1953 under the chairmanship of Kaka Saheb Kalelkar with the objective to investigate the social and educational condition of backward classes and to suggest measures to improve their condition. The Kaka Kalelkar Commission listed 2399 castes as

socially and educationally backward and suggested reservation in Govt. Jobs for them to the extent of 25% in class I, 33.13% in Class II, and 40% in Class III and IV to improve their social standing. The recommendation made by Kaka Kalekar Commission were not executed for a long time. Therefore, the Janata Govt. At the centre in 1979 appointed other Backward Classes Commission headed by B. P. Mandal. Considering the Castes compositions, the commission classified as many as 3734 Castes excluding SC and ST as backward with a population of over 52%. While observing the socio-economic condition of the people of Assam as many as 44 Caste have been declared as OBC by Kalekar Commission, but the Govt. Of Assam accepted only 29 castes as OBC from the report of the Commission including Ahom, Chutia, Chaodang, Moran, Matak, Koch-Rajbanshis, Tea-Tribes and so on.

Although the SC's and ST's are certainly the most backward, they are not the only one in few of preferential treatment by the State. The Other Backward Classes, sociologically speaking refers to heterogeneous populations and a residuary category after excluding the SC and ST, on the one hand and the forward class on the other. They constitute roughly 52% of the population as per Mandal Commission's estimate. The people belonging to these castes tended to consider themselves as the deprived groups in the society in regard to social and economic opportunities. It appears that constitutional recognition of certain groups as SC, ST and OBC has generated a sense of unity among the unprivileged section of the society. In this write up however an endeavour is made to understand the notion of backward communities of Assam in social development.

II

Assam has been a meeting place of diverse groups of people. It is a miniature India. It represents a complex demographic configuration. In fact, it is a melting pot of diverse Lingo-cultural groups. Although in its restricted sense the "Assamese" is comprised of those people in Assam whose mother tongue is Assamese, but the appellation embraces within its fold various ethnic groups and immigrant communities inhabiting the plains of Assam and the hills on its finges. Many of those groups belonging to different

Indo-Mongoloid, Tibbeto Burman, Austric, Dravidian and Ariyan entered Assam from time to time during the long course of her History, each group having different language, culture and custom. Therefore components of "Assamese Nationality" today are numerous, uneven and complex. However a large majority of the social groups racially belong to the Non-Ariyan origin. Despite having differences all of them contributed their respective chairs towards the growth and development of a composite Assamese society and there began a process of socio-cultural fusion among them. The Mongoloid communities, a large segment of the Assamese society failed to take advantage of economic avenues created by the British administration. The Aryan Assamese caste Hindu allied, who had held important positions in the bureaucracy even during the Ahom role, obviously could occupied important position in the Govt. And commercial undertaking under the British rule. Therefore, they became the dominant community in Assam both socially and politically due to their upper caste status and economic upliftment. When the National Movement developed in Assam, the congress organization came to be entirely dominated by the caste Hindu allied. On the other hand, various elite of the Mongoloid groups such as the Ahom, the Bodos, the Miris (now called the Misings), the Deoris, the Chutiyas, the Koch-Rajbanshis, the Morans, the Matakas, the Lalungs(now called the Tiwas), the Rabhas, the Dimasas, couldn't reap any meaningful benefit from the British administration. As a result, the Mongoloid tribes became backward educationally, socially, economically and even politically. In the light of this background, the notion of the social development of the backward communities of Assam may be examined.

III

The emerging educated elite of Backward Communities began to feel that they were being deprived of their 'due share' of administrative job and other privileges under the British Government. Considering their contribution to the History of Assam and their numerical strength, they felt that they deserve much more than what they could achieve. They thought that from a position of 'dominance' they sank to the position of 'Backwardness'. In view

of this, the elite of Backward Communities gradually felt the need of organising their respective groups on the basis of distinct Lingo-Cultural traits so as to remove their socio-economic backwardness which culminated in the formation of organisation like the Ahom Association (1893) , Kachari Sanmilian (1921), Kachari Students Association (1922), All Bodo Chatra Sanmilian(1918), Koch-Rajbanshi Sanmilian (1912), Boro Maha Sanmilian (1924), Matak-Maran Sanmilian(11937) and so on. These organisations came forward with demands, such as adequate representation in the provincial legislation, recognition of Minority Rights, reservation of Govt. Jobs and the seats in the educational institution, adequate step for development of ethnic languages and culture , removal of social inequality etc. as a measure of social development of the respective backward communities. In fact, the elite of the Backward Communities of pre independent period felt socially so neglected that a memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission on 4th September, 1928 at New Delhi, the Kachari Sanmilian complained that :

Socially, tribals are regarded as untouchable. To call them Hindus will be misname in as much the Hindu do not received then into their society, do not dine with them and are mostly unsympathetic with their ideal and aspirations. As the students of their communities are not allowed to mess together with those of the Hindus, they naturally looks for provision of separate messing in all the Scholl and Colleges of Assam. (*Memorandum of the Kachari Jubak Sanmilian before the Simon Commission on 4th September, 1928 at New Delhi*).

Although the backward communities were virtually absorbed into the Hidnu Social Structure, they were accorded only low caste status in the Hindu social hierarchy. Indeed it seemed to them that they received a degraded position in the caste Hindu dominated Assamese society. This was the trend of their understanding in social development during the pre independence period.

Even after the decades of independence of the country the same feeling and sentiment continued among the backward communities. They increasingly felt that they remained much more backward than the dominant section of the Assamese society. Indeed, they had not only been experiencing the problems of land alienation, unemployment, economic and political oppression under the existing socio economic system but also discrimination in achieving their "rightful" share in the society. In an underdeveloped country like ours, an economic development is accompanied by increase inequalities, because the rewards are allocated on the basis of the strength and persistence of organized sector of society. Therefore, it appears to them that unless they are organized on a sound footing, nobody would care for the development of the backward community. In view of this, the backward communities of Assam began to organize with a new vigour. In fact they realized that without organizing their respective communities they cannot conserve and developed their language and cultural heritage which they considered as "social development". As a result, since the late sixties, the socio cultural organization such as the *Bodo Sahitya sabha*, *Mising bane Kebang*, *Rabha sahitya sabha*, *Ban Ok Pap Lik Mu Tai*, *Chutiya Jati Sanmilan*, *Koch-Rjbanshi Sanmilan*, *Deori Sahitya Sabha*, *Moran Sabha* and so on became articulate and began to revitalize the community consciousness. The student wings of most of the backward communities such as the *All Bodo Student Union*, *Moran Student Union*, *All Tai Ahom Student Union*, *Karbi Student Union*, *Tea Tribe Student Union*, *All Rabha Student Union* became very active in mobilizing their respective communities in order to generate sense of identity among them. While examining the basic causes of backwardness of the autochthon tribals, a reputed intellectual maintained :

There has never been a sincere attempt on the part of the Assamese to uplift the tribal brethren to their level through reservation and other available constitutional method. Since the state machinery is dominated by

Assamese caste Hindu, reservation in job and educational institution has been sabotaged through neglect and obstructionism. And what is worse, the areas reserved for them as tribal belt and blocks, there is no lack of evidence that this important safeguard has been hollow to begin with and has been made meaningless by the way it has been encroached. (Hiren Gohain, "Assamese Nationality and Tribal Anxieties" *The Telegraph*, February 8, 1991).

In view of this, the elite of backward communities increasingly realized that they were being deprived of their 'legitimate' share of political power. This resulted in the discontentment and frustration of the backward communities. Even the Ahom, a ruling race, complained that till the late sixties there was no cabinet minister in the state ministry from the Tai Ahom Mongoloid group (*Memorandum demanding a Separate State comprising the two Upper Assam districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur to the Prime Minister, Govt. of India submitted by Ahom Tai Mongoloid Rajya Parishad, New Delhi, April 16, 1968, p-36*). In a similar vein, the Tribal leaders also alleged that :

The plain Tribal have been systematically and in a planned way uprooted from their own soil, and the step-motherly treatment towards them by the administration dominated by Assamese caste Hindu has reduced them to the status of second class citizens in the state. (*Memorandum to the Prime Minister of India, New Delhi by the Plains Tribal Council of Assam, October 22, 1972*).

Thus, it appears that the Backward Communities realized that the monopoly of political power of the dominant section of the Assamese was bound to restrict the scope their effort of development. A section of emerging educated elite of backward communities began to feel that in order to establish their community into a 'rightful' place they must be politically powerful and assertive. For this purpose some of them started forming political platform to

such as *Ahom Tai Mongoloid Rajya Parishad*, *Plains Tribal Council of Assam*, *Bodo People's Action Committee*, *Karbi Autonomous State Demand Committee*, *Mising Autonomous State Demand Committee*. It appears that since the early seventies some of the Backward Community became more articulate and organized capable of challenging the dominant position of the ruling Assamese elite and bargaining for adequate share of administrative jobs and political power.

Subsequently, bargaining for a 'legitimate' share of political power began to be viewed as one of the means for social development of the Backward Communities. Therefore, the increasing political mobilization has been aimed at overcoming their socio-economic backwardness. Indeed, 'adequate' share of political power, they believe, is necessary for all round development of their respective communities. At the same time, they strongly feel that maintenance of distinct identity is essential to bargain with the ruling elite for 'adequate' share in the decision making process and to realize other benefits for their communities. It appears to the elite of backward communities that unless they do not maintain 'identity' on the basis of the identity symbols they cannot organize the respective communities for bargaining for share of power. Thus the maintenance of distinct identity and development of the communities appears to be identical and complementary to each other.

Epilogue

Over last few decades, Backward Communities in Assam have their political presence felt. Most of the under privileged groups have become politically active and conscious with the growing process of democratization who were traditionally ignored by the 'elite dominated' congress and now they have thrown their weight in the politics of the state. In fact, economic development and the spread of egalitarian values have slowly undermined the hold of upper caste elite over these numerous dependents. Organized and sustained political activities of these groups have challenged the authority of dominant 'Assamese Ruling class' who sought to promote social economic development within the framework of 'elite

dominate democracy'. The resulting forces of commercialization and globalization have thrown up the backward Communities demanding a share of society's power and wealth. The leaders of these group manipulate 'primordial' attachment so as to gain access to the share of authority and power as a means of their socio economic development. The emerging Backward Class elite in Assam like it's counterpart of other region , is no longer content with physical and material p[progress alone and demand higher quality of life which among other things entails greater political right, greater participation in deciding the future and constitutional guarantees. Therefore, it seems obvious that Assam Backward Communities have emerged as major instrument of social change and development. Thus, since last few decades Assam has been witnessing the emergence of the downtrodden into a position of political importance if not prominence.

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