

# Ethnic Tribes of Assam, India

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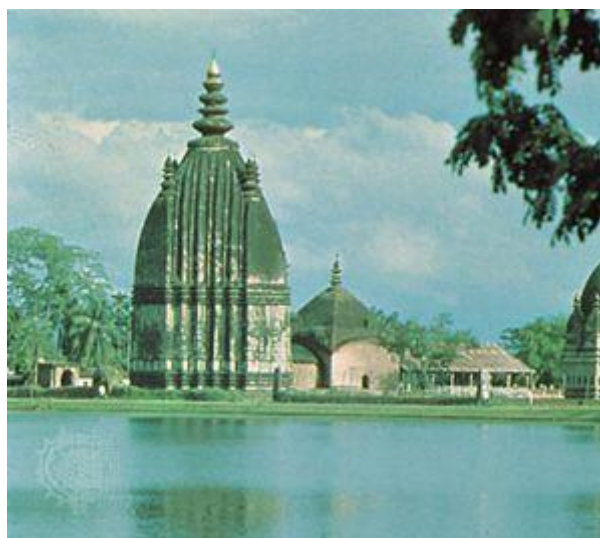
**ABSTRACT:** Diverse tribes like Bodo, Kachari, Karbi, Miri, Mishimi, Rabha, etc co-exist in Assam; most tribes have their own languages though Assamese is the principal language of the state.

**KEYWORDS:** Assam, India, ethnic, tribes, people, culture

## I. INTRODUCTION

The people of the plains of the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys are mainly of Indo-Iranian ancestry. By the time of their arrival in the region, however, the local Aryan peoples had become intermixed with Asiatic peoples. The Ahom people, who arrived in the region from mainland Southeast Asia during the 13th century, ultimately stem from Yunnan province of southern China. A significant minority of the population consists of rural Indigenous peoples who fall outside the Indian caste system; as such, they are officially designated as Scheduled Tribes. The Bodo constitute the largest of these groups. Most of the Scheduled Tribes live in the south-central hill region and are of Asiatic descent.[1,2,3]

Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language, is the official and principal language of the state, and an unbroken record of Assamese literary history is traceable from the 14th century. Tibeto-Burman languages are spoken by most of the Scheduled Tribes, although the Khasi people speak an Austroasiatic tongue; some groups have adopted Assamese as their first language. The people in the Barak valley in southern Assam mostly speak Bengali (also called Bangla), which, like Assamese, is an Indo-Aryan language.



Sibsagar, Assam, India: Shaiva temple

Shaiva temple in Sibsaagar, Assam, India.

About three-fifths of the Assamese are Hindus, the majority of whom follow Vaishnavism, which venerates the deity Vishnu. Roughly one-third of the population practices Islam, most Muslims being settlers from Bangladesh or converts from the lower strata of Hindu society. Although many of the Scheduled Tribes have converted to Christianity, some continue to practice traditional local religions; the Mikir and Kachari peoples are mostly Hindus.

Settlement patterns and demographic trends

The great majority of Assam's people live in rural areas. The distribution of population is uneven, however, reflecting the hilly terrain, the number of rivers, the forests, the small amount of cultivable land, and the lack of industrialization. The agricultural zone of the Barak River valley supports relatively dense settlement.



Guwahati, Assam, India

Aerial view of Guwahati, Assam, India.

Since the late 20th century, population growth has been unusually rapid, mostly due to immigration into Assam of tea garden laborers, herders from Nepal, Muslims from West Bengal, and refugees from Bangladesh. Increasing population in the state's urban areas reflects not only the growth of industries and the expansion of commercial activity but also the tendency of many of the immigrants—particularly those from Bangladesh—to live near towns. In the early 21st century Guwahati had the most significant urban population.

#### Economy

Agriculture, forestry, and fishing

Agriculture is of basic importance to Assam, engaging about half of the total working population and generating roughly one-third of the state's gross product. Rice accounts for more than two-thirds of the sown area. Tea and jute, widely cultivated in the Brahmaputra valley, are important foreign-exchange earners. Assam grows a large portion of the country's tea and this strong tea has a rich, deep amber color. Founded in 1911, the Tocklai Tea Research Institute in Jorhat is the world's oldest and largest tea research institute. Other crops grown in Assam include oilseeds, pulses (legumes, such as peas, beans, or lentils), corn (maize), sugarcane, rape (an oil-yielding plant, the leaves of which are used for fodder), mustard, potatoes, and fruits. Through improved cultivation methods, some farms yield more than one crop per year.

Livestock and dairy farming have shown moderate growth since the late 20th century, largely promoted by the government. Nevertheless, those activities remain but small contributors to the state's economy. Sericulture (the raising of silkworms), on the other hand, is well established, and Assam is a major producer of silk. Muga, the golden silk, is the most expensive and prized silk in Assam.[4,5,6] Made by Indian Muga silkworms (*Antheraea assamensis*), found only in the Brahmaputra valley, Muga was given the geographical indications tag (which is used on products that originate from a specific geographical location and whose qualities or reputation are linked to that geographical origin) in 2007. Assam is also known for its mulberry silk (paat) and endi silk (eri)—a warm, sustainable variety of silk.

In the forestry sector, sal and other tropical hardwoods are highly valued. Depletion of forest resources and increased erosion, however, have led the government to impose logging bans and enact other legislation to reestablish the country's woodlands. Aside from timber, important forest products include bamboo, firewood, and lac (the source of shellac).

Aquaculture has been a major focus of agricultural development since the mid-1990s, and yields have increased. Overall yield, however, has continued to fall short of domestic demand.

#### Resources and power

Minerals exploited commercially in the state include petroleum, coal, natural gas, and limestone. Since the late 19th century, extensive oil reserves have been discovered in northeastern Assam. A refinery, built in the region in 1901 at Digboi, was the first in South Asia. In 1962 another refinery was established in Noonmati, Guwahati, followed by a refinery in Bongaigaon. The state's fourth refinery was set up in Numaligarh in 1999. Coal—used locally by the railways, tea estates, and steamships—also is found in northeastern and south-central Assam. Liquefied natural gas is produced in the northeast, and limestone is quarried in the Mikir Hills (Karbi Anglong).

Assam's energy is provided by thermal and hydroelectric plants. Less than half of the state's energy is generated locally, however. A significant portion of Assam's power is purchased from the national government, private sources, and, to a much lesser extent, other state governments.



#### Manufacturing[7,8,9]

Development of the manufacturing sector has been inhibited by the state's isolation from the rest of India, by an underdeveloped transport system, by a small local market, and by the lack of sufficient capital. Small-scale industrial enterprises produce (or process) fertilizer, jute, paper, silk and textiles, sugar, chemicals, electronics, and cement. Sawmills and plywood and match factories make use of timber resources.

#### Transportation

Historically, geography has inhibited the growth of efficient transport systems, and underdeveloped transport and communication systems have in turn hindered economic development in Assam. The Brahmaputra, for example, long has been a major barrier to integrating the transportation networks lying north and south of the river. The situation improved, however, with the opening of several rail and road bridges since the late 20th century. The Saraighat Bridge (1962) was the first bridge across the Brahmaputra in Assam. The Kalia Bhomora Bridge (1987), the Naranarayan Setu (1998), and other bridges have been constructed on the Brahmaputra since then.[2,3]

With Assam's abundance of waterways, inland water transport is important. The Brahmaputra and Barak (Surma) rivers are the state's primary water channels. Numerous passenger ferries operate between various points on the Brahmaputra, and freight service is offered between Guwahati and Kolkata, West Bengal.

There is considerable air traffic between Assam and Kolkata. Among the towns with air service are Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Tezpur, and Silchar. The Guwahati airport offers international service.

#### Government and society

##### Constitutional framework

Like most other Indian states, Assam has a governmental structure that is defined by the national constitution of 1950. The governor, who is the head of state, is appointed by the president of India and is assisted by a popularly elected unicameral legislature and a Council of Ministers led by a chief minister, who is head of government. The state of Assam comprises nearly three dozen districts, each of which is administered by a deputy commissioner. Districts are subdivided at several levels, with the village as the smallest administrative unit.

The high court at Guwahati has jurisdiction not only over the state of Assam but also over the states of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh through outlying benches. The chief justice and all other high court justices are appointed by India's president. Permanent[10,11,12] judges serve until they are a maximum of 62 years old. Short-term judges are appointed to help with periodic backlogs. Lower courts include district courts, sessions courts, and magistrate's courts.

#### Education and welfare



Jorhat Engineering College

Jorhat Engineering College, Jorhat, Assam, India.

Education, which is free up to the secondary level, is compulsory for children between the ages of 6 and 14. Government universities and colleges are located in the state's larger cities, including Guwahati, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Tezpur, and Silchar. Assam also has specialized colleges in the arts, sciences, commerce, law, and medicine. The Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Guwahati, one of the 23 institutes set up by the central government for excellence in training, research, and development in science, engineering, and technology, was established in 1994. Welfare-extension projects, operating through dozens of centers, provide recreational and cultural facilities for women and children.

### Cultural life

The cultural life of Assam is interwoven with the activities of a number of cultural institutions and religious centers, such as the satra (seat of a religious head known as the satradhikar) and namghar (prayer hall). Satras, which are also centers of performing arts, have been looking after the religious and social well-being of the people since the 15th century. The first satra was founded in Majuli, one of the largest inhabited river islands in the world, by Vaishnavite reformer and saint Srimanta Sankardev. Auniati Satra, Kamalabari Satra, and Samaguri Satra are some notable satras. Devotees are usually skilled at making masks[2,3,4] out of clay and bamboo, hand fans, and musical instruments. The masks are used for bhaonas, which are cultural performances usually based on one-act plays depicting stories from Hindu mythology.



Bihu dancers celebrating Rongali Bihu (Bohag Bihu)

Rongali Bihu celebrations: Men and women dancing the Bihu dance as a dancer plays the pepa.(more)



A community fishing event to celebrate Bhogali Bihu (Magh Bihu)

Villagers participating in a community fishing event to celebrate Bhogali Bihu.(more)

The Assamese people observe all the pan-Indian religious festivals, but their most important celebrations are the three Bihu festivals. Originally agricultural festivals, they are observed with great enthusiasm irrespective of caste, creed, and religious affinity. The Bohag Bihu,[13,14,15] celebrated in the spring (usually mid-April), marks the commencement of the new year (first day of the Bohag or Baishakh month). Also known as Rongali Bihu (from the Assamese word rong, connoting merrymaking and fun), it is accompanied by much dancing and singing. Men and women dance the Bihu dance to the beat of drums (dhol), the melody of pepas (a wind instrument usually made out of a hollow buffalo horn), and many other instruments. The Magh Bihu, celebrated in mid-January (in the month of Magh), is a harvest festival. Known also as Bhogali Bihu (from bhog, meaning enjoyment and feasting), it is a time of community feasts and bonfires. The third Bihu festival, the Kati Bihu (in mid-October or November), is also called the Kangali Bihu (from kangali, meaning poor), because by this time of year the house of an ordinary family is without food grains, as the stock is usually consumed before the next harvest.

Weaving is another important aspect of the cultural life of the people of Assam, particularly the women. Looms are found in many village homes. In the village of Sualkuchi, 22 miles (35 km) from Guwahati, nearly every Assamese





household, irrespective of caste, creed, and social status, has at least one loom, and most inhabitants of this village are skilled weavers.

Assamese cuisine is based on rice, a variety of vegetables and fruits, and fish. Distinctive are its bitter (khar) and sour (tenga) dishes, which are often served at the beginning and end of meals, respectively. A popular [1,2,3]tenga dish is masor tenga, a stew made with pieces of fried fish that are then simmered with fenugreek seeds, vegetables, and lemon or lime juice. Khar recipes often achieve their slightly astringent taste by using a sodalike substance made from the ashes of the banana plant.

## II. DISCUSSION

### Bodo

Anthropologists and linguists refer to a group of ethnic communities as Bodo-Kacharis (also known as Bodos or Kacharis) who primarily inhabit the Northeastern Indian states of Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya. These communities speak either Boro-Garo, which is a sub-branch of Tibeto-Burman languages, or Eastern Indo-Aryan languages like Assamese, and may have some common ancestry. However, some Tibeto-Burman speakers who live in the Brahmaputra valley region, such as the Mising and Karbi people, are not considered part of the Bodo-Kachari group.

### Karbi

The Karbi community is the main indigenous group residing in the Karbi Anglong district and West Karbi Anglong district of the Indian State of Assam. These districts have been granted autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India since November 17th, 1951. The Karbi people also inhabit other areas, including Dima Hasao, Kamrup Metropolitan, Hojai, Morigaon, Nagaon, Golaghat, Karimganj, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, and Biswanath Chariali districts in Assam, as well as Balijan circle of Papumpare district in Arunachal Pradesh, Jaintia Hills, Ri Bhoi, East Khasi Hills, and West Khasi Hills districts in Meghalaya, Dimapur District in Nagaland, and parts of Mizoram and Sylhet district in Bangladesh, although their distribution in these areas is not proportional.

### Mising

The term "Mising" is an endonym that translates[5,6,7] to "man of the soil." However, the term "Miri" is an exonym commonly used by people from the plains of Assam. The origins of the term "Miri" are still a topic of scholarly debate. Some colonial scholars believed that it referred to the Miri hills as an intermediary location between the Brahmaputra Valley and hill tribes to the north, while others like Grierson (1909) interpreted it as "gentleman," and Crooks thought it meant "hill man." More recent research links the term to religious functionaries in certain Tani hill-tribes. According to this theory, when the Misings migrated to the plains, they were recognized as coming from the Miri hills, whose mythical powers were well-known, and the name stuck.

### Dimasa

The Dimasa people are an ethnic and linguistic community that presently resides in the Northeastern Indian states of Assam and Nagaland. Their native language is Dimasa, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family. The community is rather uniform and exclusive, with members being required to belong to both of their parents' separate clans. These people established the Dimasa kingdom, which was one of many early states in Assam after the fall of the Kamarupa kingdom. The Dimasas were historically agricultural, focusing on shifting agriculture; however, significant changes in the community have occurred in recent times. Due to political difficulties in the 18th century, the Dimasa ruler moved further south to the plains of Cachar, which resulted in a division among the Dimasa people. While the hill Dimasas maintained their traditional way of life and political exclusivity, the plains Dimasas did not attempt to assert themselves.

### Tiwa

The Tiwa tribe is a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group primarily found in the Northeast Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Nagaland, as well as some parts of Bangladesh and Myanmar. While they were historically known as Lalungs or Lalong in Assamese Buranjis and Colonial literature, the Tiwa people prefer to call themselves Tiwa, meaning "the people who were lifted from below." However, some of their neighbors still refer to them as Lalung.

The Tiwa community is divided into two sub-groups, Hill Tiwa and Plains Tiwa, which display contrasting cultural features. Pha Poroi "Indrosing Dewri" is the founder of the Tiwa community, and his contributions were essential in building the Tiwa society. He even wrote the Tiwa national anthem called "O Angé Tiwa Tosima." This tribe is known for their unique cultural practices and significant contributions to the cultural heritage of the Northeast Indian region.



#### Deori

The Deori tribe is a prominent Tibeto-Burman ethnic group residing in the Northeast Indian states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. In their native language, they call themselves "Jimochayan," which translates to "children of the sun." The Deori people have a rich history of inhabiting the regions of Sadiya, Joidaam, Patkai foothills, and the hinterlands of the Brahmaputra Valley.[2,3,4]

#### Rabha

The Rabha people, an ethnic group of Tibeto-Burman origin, primarily reside in the Northeast Indian states of Assam and Meghalaya, with some populations in West Bengal. They predominantly inhabit the plains of Lower Assam and the Dooars, while some are also found in the Garo Hills. Although most Rabhas in Dooars identify themselves as Rabha, some declare themselves as Kocha.

The Rabha community has a distinct and diverse culture of their own, which they are proud of. The Rabha society follows a patrilineal system, and the village economy is largely dependent on agriculture, with both men and women working in the fields. Women weave their colorful clothing and wear a lot of beads and silver ornaments.

#### Sonowal Kachari

The Sonowal Kachari, or Xonowāl Kosāree in Assamese, are an indigenous group in the state of Assam in Northeast India. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group and are closely linked to other Kachari communities in Assam. They are primarily concentrated in the districts of Dhemaji, North Lakhimpur, Tinsukia, and Dibrugarh, with smaller populations in Jorhat and Golaghat. The headquarters of the Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council is located in Dibrugarh.

The Sonowal Kachari tribe derives its name from the Assamese word 'Son,' meaning gold. Traditionally, the Sonowal Kacharis were involved in gold panning, extracting gold from riverbeds. The Ahom kings employed Kacharis as gold washers, who were then organized into a group known as Sonowal Khel, which later became known as the Sonowal Kacharis.

#### Tea Garden Community of Assam

The tea-garden community in Assam is composed of various ethnic groups, including many tribal and caste groups, who are the descendants of indentured laborers brought by British colonial planters from regions such as Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh to work in tea gardens in colonial Assam during the 1860s–1990s. They are not a homogenous group, but rather a diverse, multi-ethnic group of people [1,2,3] who speak different languages and have different cultures. They are primarily found in Upper Assam and the Northern Brahmaputra Belt in districts with a high concentration of tea gardens, such as Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Sonitpur, Biswanath, Nagaon, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Charaideo, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, and Lakhimpur. They also have a significant population in the Barak Valley region of Assam, specifically in the districts of Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi.

#### Garos

The Garo people, an ethnic group of Tibeto-Burmese origin, primarily reside in Northeast India, specifically Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura, and Nagaland. They also inhabit some neighboring regions in Bangladesh, such as Madhupur, Mymensingh, Haluaghat, Dhobaura, Durgapur, Kolmakanda, Jamalpur, Sherpur, Jhinaigati, Nalitabari, Gazini Hills Madhyannagar, Bakshiganj, and Sribardi. The Garo people are the second-largest tribe in Meghalaya, accounting for approximately one-third of the local population.

#### Khasi

The Khasi people are an indigenous group primarily residing in Meghalaya, a state in north-eastern India, but they also have a significant presence in Assam and parts of Bangladesh. They make up the majority of the population in the eastern region of Meghalaya, known as Khasi Hills, and account for 78.3% of the population in the area. They are recognized as the [4,5,6] largest community in Meghalaya, comprising roughly 48% of the state's total population. The Khasi people speak an Austroasiatic language, making them one of the few such groups in South Asia. They are also noteworthy for their matriarchal system, which is rare in today's world. As per the Indian Constitution, the Khasis have been granted Scheduled Tribe status.

#### Tai Ahom

In Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, the Ahom (also known as Tai-Ahom) are an ethnic group that resulted from a mixture of Tai people and local indigenous people. The Tai people, led by Sukaphaa and 9000 others, arrived in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam in 1228 and founded the Ahom kingdom, which ruled over a large portion of the



Brahmaputra Valley until 1826. Today, the Ahom people and their culture are a blend of original Tai culture and the cultures of the Tibeto-Burman people they encountered and assimilated in Assam.

#### Mech

The Mech people are a Bodo-Kachari ethnic group and a scheduled tribe in both West Bengal and Assam, India. They are found in West Bengal, Nepal, Assam, and Nagaland. The Bodo-Kachari people migrated to India and spread throughout Assam, North Bengal, and parts of East Bengal. During their migration, one group settled in Assam and became known as Bodo or Boro, while another group moved west along the Himalayan[6,7,8] foothills up to the Mechi River, settling on the north bank and becoming known as the Mech or Mechia. Later, they migrated to Darjeeling Terai, Baikantapur in Jalpaiguri district, and further east to settle in the Dooars. Due to frequent floods, many Mech families migrated toward Assam by crossing the Sankosh river.

#### Tai Khamti

The Tai Khamti, also referred to as Hkamti Shan or simply Khamti, are an ethnic group that belongs to the Tai community. They are originally from the Hkamti Long, Mogaung, and Myitkyina regions of Kachin State in Myanmar, and the Hkamti District of Sagaing Division. The Tai Khamti are also found in several districts of India, such as Namsai, Changlang, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia in Assam, and possibly in some parts of China. The Tai Khamti has a population of 12,890 in India, according to the 2001 census, while their total population in Myanmar is estimated to be around 200,000. The Tai-Khamti people practice Theravada Buddhism and use their own script, known as 'Lik Tai', which is derived from the Shan (Tai) script of Myanmar.

#### Hajong

The Hajong people are an ethnic group residing in the Northeastern region of India and the northern parts of Bangladesh. The majority of the Hajongs have settled in India and primarily engage in rice farming. They are credited with introducing wet-field cultivation to the Garo Hills region, where the Garo people traditionally employed slash-and-burn agricultural techniques. The Hajongs are recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in India and are the fourth-largest tribal group in the state of Meghalaya.[8,9,10]

### III. RESULTS

The anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act protests have brought demands of the Adivasis and tea tribes in Assam to the forefront.

- The Adivasis, comprising 106 sub-groups, are the largest of the six communities demanding the Scheduled Tribes (ST) status. The others are Chutiya, Koch-Rajbongshi, Moran, Matak, and Tai-Ahom.
  - The Adivasis comprise 18% of Assam's population.
- The grant of ST status to these communities will make Assam a tribal-majority State.
- Tea Tribes
- The tea garden workers were originally brought by the British from Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal to work in the tea plantations of Assam during mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Later they permanently settled in Assam.
- They are known as tea and ex-tea garden tribes, who are recognized as Other Backward Classes (OBC) by the Government.
- These people not only constitute a sizable chunk of the population in the State but also play a major role in tea production of the State (about 53% of the total tea production of the country).
- Economically, they are quite backward and literacy level among these communities is extremely low. Thus, they are demanding ST status in the state of Assam.[10,11,12]
- Koch Rajbongshi
- Koch Rajbongshi is an ancient tribe originally from the ancient Koch kingdom. The word "Rajbongshi" literally means "royal community".
- The homelands of this ancient tribe include West Bengal, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and various North-Eastern parts of India.
- They speak Rajbongshi/Rajbanshi language. This language is also spoken in Bangladesh and Nepal.
- The Rajbongshi was primarily animist (perceiving all things animated and alive.), but later on, they followed Hinduism/Sanatana (both Shaiva and Vaishnavite), A few sections of Rajbongshi people were also found to be followers of Christianity.
- Moran Community
- The Moran community is one of the aboriginal tribes of Assam.

- In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, they lived in the south eastern region of the Brahmaputra valley.
- They had their own independent kingdom before the advent of the Ahoms.
- It is possible that it is a tribal word that means a group of people like, Mising, Mulung, Mung tai, etc.
- In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Aniruddhadeva converted them to Vaishnavism and thus brought about the regeneration of their society and culture.[16]

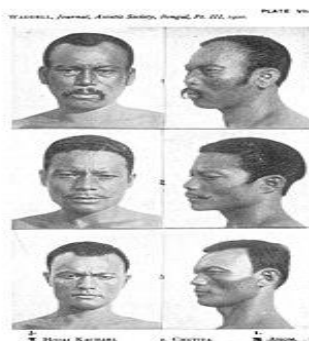
#### IV. CONCLUSION

The Assamese people are a socio-ethnic linguistic<sup>[5]</sup> identity that has been described at various times as nationalistic<sup>[6]</sup> or micro-nationalistic.<sup>[7]</sup> This group is often associated with the Assamese language,<sup>[8]</sup> the easternmost Indo-Aryan language, and Assamese people mostly live in the Brahmaputra Valley region of Assam, where they are native and constitute around 56% of the Valley's population.<sup>[9]</sup> The use of the term precedes the name<sup>[11,12,13]</sup> of the language or the people.<sup>[10]</sup> It has also been used retrospectively to the people of Assam before the term "Assamese" came into use.<sup>[11]</sup> They are an ethnically diverse group formed after centuries of assimilation of Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan and Tai populations,<sup>[12]</sup> and constitute a tribal-caste continuum<sup>[13]</sup>—though not all Assamese people are Hindus and ethnic Assamese Muslims numbering around 42 lakh (4,200,000) constitute a significant part of this identity.<sup>[14]</sup> The total population of Assamese speakers in Assam is nearly 15.09 million which makes up 48.38% of the population of state according to the Language census of 2011.

#### Etymology

The name "Assamese" is of British colonial coinage of the 19th and 20th century. Assamese is an English word meaning "of Assam"<sup>[15]</sup>—though most Assamese people live in Assam, not all the people of Assam today are Assamese people.

#### Definition



Plain Assamese tribal communities (depicting from top to down: Ahom, Chutia, Hojai Kachari)

The Government of Assam faced difficulties in defining Assamese people for Assam Accord, due to linguistically and culturally heterogeneous population. Though there is a political dispute over the definition of Assamese people, in general; the people belonging to the state of Assam are referred sometimes as Assamese people or more appropriately as People of Assam.<sup>[16][17]</sup> The lack of a definition has put stumbling blocks in implementing clause 6<sup>[18]</sup> of the Assam Accord, an agreement signed by the activists of the Assam Movement and the [15,14,16]Government of India in 1985.<sup>[19]</sup> Since a legal definition is important to provide "constitutional, legislative and cultural" safeguards to the Assamese people, the Government of Assam had formed a ministerial committee to finalise the definition in March 2007.<sup>[20][21]</sup> To address the clause 6 issue, AASU had announced a definition on 10 April 2000 which was based on residency with a temporal limit: All those whose names appeared in the 1951 National Register of Citizens and their progenies should be considered as Assamese.<sup>[22][23][24]</sup>

Despite the lack of a legal definition, social scientists consider the Assamese identity to constitute a tribal-caste continuum that has been the result of a historical process.<sup>[13]</sup>

#### History

##### Origins of the nationalistic identity

Assamese as a nationalistic identity was seeded when the Ahom kingdom came under repeated attacks from the Bengal Sultanate in the early 16th century and the people banded together under [16,17,18]Suhungmung (1497–1539) to resist





a common enemy. The kingdom not only succeeded in resisting the invasion, but a general pursued the invaders to the Karatoya river and freed most of the Kamrup and Kamata regions.<sup>[25]</sup>

The process of identity formation sped up during the rule of Pratap Singha (1603–41) when the Mughals began repeated incursions from 1615 and the Battle of Saraighat in 1671; and finally the Battle of Itakhuli (1682 CE) when the Ahoms took direct control over western Brahmaputra valley.<sup>[26]</sup> Many Muslim soldiers and professionals who had accompanied invading armies or immigrated peacefully since the 13th century, including those from the 16th century, were given power and eminence by the Ahom kings, and they in turn helped the Ahoms in repelling the Mughals.<sup>[27]</sup> This was also the time when the Assamese language progressively replaced the Ahom language in the court and outside.<sup>[28]</sup> As a result of the Ahom kings increasingly patronising Hinduism alongside the proselytising activities of Ekasarana Dharma since the 16th-century—a large section of the Bodo-Kachari peoples converted to different forms of Hinduism in the 17th-18th century and a composite Assamese identity comprising caste-Hindus, tribals and Assamese Muslims began to form.<sup>[29]</sup>

On the eve of British colonialism in the early 19th century the Assamese society consisted of the hinduised ethnic groups, the caste Hindu groups, the plain tribal groups, and the Assamese Muslims; and the expression of Assamese nationalism in the 19th/20th-century was confined to the Brahmaputra valley.<sup>[30]</sup>

Tribe-Caste continuum[18,19,20]

Social movement due to state formations

Scholars believe that with the arrival of Indo-Aryans in Assam, there was a simultaneous Sanskritisation and deshification processes<sup>[31]</sup> beginning in the 5th–8th century during the reign of the Varman dynasty of Kamarupa;<sup>[32]</sup>—and all Assam's kings were originally non-Indo-Aryan who were gradually Sanskritised.<sup>[33]</sup> This enabled many of the common folks to follow the ruling classes into Sanskritisation and also bring along with them elements of their own local customs and religions.<sup>[34]</sup>

Social movement due to Ekasarana religion

The Ekasarana dharma that emerged in the 16th century and the proselytising activities of the Sattras created a path for individuals of tribal origins to traverse the tribal-caste continuum. Tribal people could take initiation at a Sattras—and a neophyte would be called a modahi if he still took liquor. A modahi successively advanced to the Sarania group (also called saru-koch), Koch, Bor-Koch, Saru-Keot, Bor-Keot and then a Kalita.<sup>[35]</sup> At the end of this tribal-caste continuum were the Brahmins and often the pontiffs of Sattras were Brahmins called Goswamis. Some of these Goswamis were a few generations earlier Kayasthas, and some Kayastha pontiffs were earlier tribal and low caste.<sup>[36]</sup> It is this process by which many groups such as Chutia, Borahi, Moran, Deori, Boro peoples to become Assamese peasants, especially in Upper and Central Assam; and it was noted that some kayastha sattradhikars were originally Morans, Kaibartas, Chandalas, Tantis<sup>[37]</sup> and Sankardev had himself instated gurus from Muslim, Kaibarta, Nagas, and Garo communities.[20]

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5. ^ "As an socio-ethnic linguistic community, Assamese culture evolved through many centuries in a melting pot syndrome." (Deka 2005:190)
6. ^ "All this suggests that Assamese nationalism was a post-British phenomenon. As an ideology and movement it took shape only during the second half of the 19th century, when such questions as the preservation and promotion of the mother-tongue, jobs for the sons of the soil and concern over colonial constraints on development, began to stir Assamese minds." (Guha 1984:54)
7. ^ "Assamese micro-nationalism began in the middle of the nineteenth century as an assertion of the autonomy and distinctiveness of Assamese language and culture against the British colonial view of Assam as a periphery of Bengal." (Baruah 1994:654)



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8. ^ Saikia, Yasmin (2004). *Fragmented Memories: Struggling to be Tai-Ahom in India*. Duke University Press. ISBN 978-0822386162. the group that now identifies as Tai–Ahom were historically seen as Assamese people. However, the term ethnic Assamese is now associated by the Indian government at Delhi with the Assamese speaking Indo-Aryan group (comprising both Hindus and Muslims) of Assam. The latter group is the majority people of Assam, while the Tai-Ahom people were a dominant minority during the Ahom Rule
9. ^ "Battleground Assam a tale of two valleys and the CAA quandary Assam bengal polls 2019 | Opinion News – India TV". 18 February 2019.
10. ^ "Assamese language and literature played a major role in forming the Assamese cultural mind even before they came to be known as Assamese." (Deka 2005:192)
11. ^ "Yet once the community adopted Assamese as its name, even their ancient language started to be referred to as Assamese." (Deka 2005:192)
12. ^ Yasmin Saikia (9 November 2004). *Fragmented Memories*. ISBN 978-0822333739.
13. ^ b (Sharma 2009:355)
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