
UNIT 10 TRIBAL ETHNICITY : THE NORTH-EAST

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10.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading and studying this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the relation between tribes and ethnicity;
- Outline the ethnic composition of the North-East;
- Discuss stratification of tribals in the North-East;
- Describe tribal movements in the North-East; and
- Delineate tribal ethnicity as a basis for stratification.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

The term tribe, which is of general use in anthropology sociology and related socio-cultural disciplines as well as journalistic writings and day-to-day general conversation, has attracted a lot of controversy about its meanings, applications and usages. For one thing the

term has come to be used all over the world in a wide variety of settings for a large number of diverse groups. This diversity and the fact that all the groups referred to have been undergoing varied changes while the term has remained more or less fixed has made the task of providing a definition rather unmanageable.

10.2 TRIBES AND ETHNICITY

According to the Macmillan dictionary of anthropology, the term has passed into general usage as a synonym for a primitive group. Related to this is the anthropological neo-evolutionary usage wherein the term figures as part of the ascending order (1) band. Mainly confined to hunting and food gathering society characterized by simple co-operation (2) tribe-referring to communities of subsistence with limited exchange between communities (3) chiefdom-related to more advanced horticulture or pastoralism with the beginning or social division of labour and constitutionalised authority and (4) state in which there are classes based on exploitation, centralised monopoly of force, and. Mobilization of surplus product .

In the context of Africa, E.F. Evans Pritchard used the term tribe to refer to a distinct politically organised sunit of the wider Nuer linguistic and cultural group. Thus here the term is used to distinguish tribal from a political organization from a state as well as from the wide cultural group of which such an organised unit is a part. In the context of India, a number of earlier British colonial ethnographers used the term tribe not only to refer to distinct 'primitive' socio-cultural groups but also to castes, without making any real effort to distinguish between tribes and castes. Risley, Lacy, Elwin, Gignon, Talents Sedgwith, Martin were some of the more primitive among the ethnographers.

A. V. Thakkar who wanted to emphasize the autochthonal character of tribals (not necessarily true, for many had traditions of migration to the area they lived in) called them as a aborigines or aboriginals, implying thereby that their Hindu and other neighbours were latecomers to the areas. G.S. Ghurye on the hand, called them backward Hindus to emphasize the religious and cultural overlap between the tribals and neighbouring Hindu peasants. However, it is only after the independence of India in 1947 that political and scholarly concern for providing a more systematic definition of the term tribe and to distinguish clearly the tribals from the peasant became more pronounced.

Dube while pointing out the lack of precision and unsatisfactory nature of attempts to define the term tribe in India content, notes that of late the usage has 'tended to be restricted only to the autochthonous; the aboriginal and the premature groups. At no stage, however, we had a set of clear indicators of tribalness' (Dube 1977:2). He further notes that popular definitions mostly see in the tribes some, if not all of the following characteristics. They are original or oldest inhabitants, live in relative isolation in hills and forest, have a shallow sense of history, remembered upto five to six generations, have a low level of techno-economics development, stand out from other sections of society in cultural ethos, are non hierarchic and undifferentiated if not egalitarian. Although none there criteria are fully satisfactory, yet, Dube finds, distinctions between tribes and non-tribes and 6.9 percent of the country is classified as tribal. Since the classification is influenced by political consideration and includes groups known to the non-tribals and excludes others known to be tribals it has failed to satisfy the scholars as well as those excluded from the list. Finding the debate over the definition of tribe. Still Dube (1977:4) suggests it may be best now to view it as an ethnic category defined by real or putative descent and characterized by a corporate self-identify and a wide range of commonly shared traits of culture. racial, religious and linguistic groups can also acquire ethnic character and it is necessary for us to consider tribal ethnicity alongside the ethnicity of such groups.

10.2.1 Distinguishing Features of Tribes

On the scholarly level the distinguishing features of tribes are emphasized in comparison to caste. It is assumed that tribes and castes present two different kinds of social organisations, attributes like hereditary, division of labour, hierarchy, principle of purity and pollution, civic, and religious disabilities, regulating castes; while tribes function purged of these factors. Similary in terms of governance of social organisations kinship, leanage clan are paramount in tribal societies.

While inequality dependency and subordination highlight caste societies. Similarly in terms

of this contrast tribes do not differentiate sharply as caste groups do between the utilization and non-utilization function of religion. Tribal society is seen as more homogeneous in contrast to society which are more homogeneous. Tribal societies are seen to be segmental in character with distinct customs, rituals taboos and trace their origin to common territory, ancestor etc. However, this ideal distinction does not exist in India while some may be marked on either end of a continuum, the majority of tribal groups stand somewhere in the middle possessing a number of diverse elements. The feature common among them which has been emphasised by Betilla relates to 'that they all stand more or less outside Hindu civilization.

Bailey tries to explain this distinction in terms of the relationship of a community with land. 'The larger the population of a given society which has direct access to land, the closer is that society which has direct access to land, the closer is that society to the tribal end of the continuum.. the larger is the proportion of people whose right to land is achieved though a dependent relationship the nearer that society comes to the caste role, (c.f. Chanana 1994: 170).

While Surajit Sinha criticised this criterion of Bailey and gave his own distinction, 'it (Tribe) is isolated in ecology, demography, economy, politics.. from other ethnic groups. This isolation generates, and in turn is bolstered by a strong in group sentiments. .. Viewing ones culture as autonomous with reference to those of other groups and consequently disconnections from the great traditions of Indian civilizations in terms of objective reality and in terms of subjective awareness, a value of system of equality, closeness of the human, natural and supernatural world, lack of systematization of ideas, a sophisticated stratum of culture, ethical religion, and puritanic asceticism. In contrast caste is seen as 'typically connected heterogeneous and stratified and is characterized by multiethnic residence in the local community: inter-ethnic participation in an economy (c.f. Channa 1994: 171).

10.2.2 Transformation of Tribes

A major discussion on tribal society relates to the transformation of tribes to caste and their gradual absorption in the caste structure. This process largely undertaken through the process of:

- i) Adoption of technology
- ii) Sanskritization
- iii) State formation
- iv) Hindusation
- v) Language
- vi) Religion

This is followed by the transformation of tribes to peasant and socially differentiated societies.

However, this approach ignores the study of tribe as they are and as communities. To resolve this crisis these days attempts, have been made to study the problem of tribals from the concept of ethnicity in order to have deeper insight into inter-group relations and how the tribals perceive themselves in contrast to the others. 'The key feature of this concept are the identification and labeling and contrast applied to groups and categories of people.. study of self, identify systems, stereo typing class, systems, systems of recourse competition systems of political and economic domination and change.. cultural persistence and the construction of boundaries that both separate and bind together people in a myraid of ways.

10.3 ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF NORTH-EAST

The North-East India is a well defined region and is characterised by a diverse and heterogeneous, geographical economic and cultural tapestry. The region represents 'an ethno-cultural frontier, encompassing much of India's rich but lesser known Mongloid heritage, a complex transition zone of linguistic racial and religions streams. It is also a unique bio-geographic frontier where the mingling of India, Sinic and Malaysian-Burmese strains have produced a treasure house of floral and faunal bi-diversity' (Verghese 1994:2).

However, its role as a 'bridge and buffer' region changed after the partition which physically separated the North-East from the rest of India. Now it has virtually 3000 km. Of international borders touching China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and is linked to the rest of India by a narrow corridor. It covers an area of over 2.55 million sq. km. The total population of the region in 1991 was 314 lakhs representing 3.73% of the country's total population (Verghese 1994: 2).

It is composed of seven states Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura. In terms of its terrains two sub-regions can be differentiated. These are a) the plains of the Brahmaputra, Barak, Imphal rivers, and b) the vast mountainous terrain covering almost 72% of the area. The states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya and Assam are largely hilly, while Assam, Manipur and Tripura are encompassed by the plains. The division between the tribal and non-tribal population too takes place along these lines. While the tribals who constitute almost 6 million inhabit almost 80% of the hilly states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh (with the exception of Assam), the non-tribals inhabit the plains. The majority of the tribals are of Mongoloid origin while the plains people trace their origin to the Caucasoid who migrated in different epochs.

10.3.1 Tribal Population of North-East

However, the tribal population of the North-East displays a great deal of heterogeneity and diversity. There are more than hundred tribal groups with different language, rituals, beliefs religions and cultural patterns. Similarly out of the 325 languages listed in the people of India, Vol. IX series, the largest number belong to the Tibeto-Burman family and 175 north-east communities are shown speaking them. This heterogeneity is also reflected in the types of customs prevailing, specially contrast between the matrilineal and patrilineal tribes. The similarities between the different tribal groups relate to their preservation of traditional economic patterns, indulging in shifting cultivation, social and cultural patterns etc. Similarly the manner of their response to modernization and development of ethnic consciousness gives them a bonding of kind with each other. The composition of different North-Eastern states are:

- o) The state of **Mizoram** has almost 94.26% of tribal population. The oral traditions of Mizo history show the emergence of the Mizo ancestors from a cave or rock known as Chunlung in distant China from where they moved through Tibet, into the Hukwang valley in Burma and finally entering the Lushai hills in the 18th century. However, the Mizo's maintained their isolation for a very long time finally becoming a part of the British empire in the 18th century. The term Mizo means hill men and is a generic term which encompasses almost fifteen tribes (e.g. the Lushais, Ralte, Hmar, Pawis or Pols, Laker ses) who have got together under the rubric of the single Mizo identity. The two important factors which facilitated this process were adoption of christianity and the Luesi dialect; written with the roman script.

Mizoram consists of two cultural sub-regions, the first influenced by Christianity constitutes the Lushai hills area which include most of the Mizo groups. The second region is inhabited by the Buddhist chakmas and Maghs and the Hindu influenced Riang who inhabit the western belt bordering the Chittagong Hill tracts (Verghese 1994: 135:165; Chib 1984: 132-142; Singh 1998:19).

- i.) The state of **Nagaland** is dominated by 88.61% of tribals. Naga is a generic term roughly meaning warrior for a cluster of thirty-two tribes, five of who reside in Burma while the others are scattered in Nagaland (sixteen), Manipur (seven), Tirap in Arunachal Pradesh and the North Cachar and Karbi Anglong district of Assam. The important tribes among the Nagas are the Angamis, Ao's Chakesangs, Sangtams, Metikumi, Yimchunge etc. The different tribes speak their own Tibeto-Burman dialects and use Nagamese as a lingua franca. Christianity which has played an important role in forging a sense of unity within them. Thus 'Ethno-Linguistically and culturally the individual Naga tribes maintain internal uniformity and intra-community homogeneity' (Verghese 1994:83-84). However, there has been a tendency for larger groups formations to take place with different tribes having some common traits coming together e.g. the Zemis, Langmei and Rongmei came together in 1974 as Zeliangrong. While the Chakrlu, Kheza and Sangtam formed the Chakesang and the Sapo, Kechue and Khury became the Pochury. (Chib 1984: 156-158, 160-162)

- iii) The state of **Meghalya** distinguished by its matrilineal society is one of the more comparatively peaceful states of the North-East. Almost 80.84% of the state is comprised by the tribals population. The dominant tribes living in Meghalya are the Garos, Khasis and the Jaintias. The Garo's who consist of the Bnodo Tibetan – Burman stock have been inhabitants of the Garo hills for the past four hundred years. They are divided into five matrilineal clans, the Sangmas and the Maraks being among the most prominent. The head of the clan or nokma family is the youngest daughter whose husband administers the property.

The Khasis belong to the Mon-Khmer group. They are also matrilineal groups with the mother's brother having an important control and dominance. The twenty-five Khasi principalities were divided into sixteen limas or territories, each under a Syiem or chief. This was followed by three semi-independent units under Lyndohs, five subedarships and a Wahadar. The Jaintias are also a generic term for the Syntax or Pnars. They are also matrilineal tribes and the inheritance which is handed on from uncle to nephew. The Jaintias have been strongly influenced by exposure to Hinduism and Islam. However, Christianity continues to have a strong presence in the area with almost 47% of the population following the faith. On the other hand revivalist movements like the Seng-Khasi have tried to bring back the traditional tribal customs, religion and festivals (Verghese 1994: 195-197; Chib 1984: 132-142).

- iv) Manipur is an ancient state of the North-East. The name Manipur came into prominence in the eighteenth century under the King Garib Nawaz when Vaishnavism became the state religion. The important tribes dominating this area were the Meities, Marangs, Luwangs, Khumans. Among these the Hindu Meities are the most powerful and dominant tribe. They are probably of Tibeto-Burman origin and consist of seven clans locally called Salai: Ningthouja, Luwang, Khuman, Moirang, Angom, Khaba – Nganea and Chenglei. The other important tribal communities are Aimol, Anal, Angami, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Hmar, Kabui, Kacha, Koirao, Kioreng, Kom, Lamgang, Marram, Marring, Mao, Monsang, Moyuon, Sema, Tangkhul etc. However, these tribal groups are sub-divided into two broad general categories the Nagas and the Kukis or Kuki Chin as they are probably known since they inhabit the hilly terrain of Manipur, Cachar, Letha and Arakan hills of Burma. In Manipur almost 60% of the population is Hindu, while the rest are Christians with a smattering of Muslims. (Chib 1984: 75-76, 86-87; Verghese 1984: 198-202).
- v) The state of **Arunachal Pradesh** previously known as NEFA constitutes of nearly 79.02% of tribal population. It has roughly 110 tribes of which twenty-six are quite popular. The prominent tribal groups being the Bafflas and Banguis. Minyongs, Mishmis, Noctes, Apatanis, Miris, Akas, Shredukpens, Mikirs, Tangeas. Compared to the rest of the North-East, the Arunachal region has remained more remote, distant and isolated. (Chib 1984: 280-281, 288-295; Elwin 1959: 38-39)
- vi) The large state of **Assam** has around only 10.99% of tribals who inhabit the plains of Brahmaputra. The important tribes being the Ahoms, Bodo-Kachari, Raba, Mech, Jojai, Lelung, Mikirs, etc. A majority of them have been absorbed by Hinduism and reflect a transition from tribe to caste.
- vii) The state of **Tripura** is interested by six low ranges of hills from the northwest to the south east with an elevation between 100 to 3000 feet, the height increases from the southwest to the north east, while the margins are characterised by a strip of plains. There are a total of eighteen tribes largely belonging to the Tibeto-Burman groups. They are mostly Hindu with two Buddhist tribes Chakma and Magh and six tea garden tribes. The important tribes are the Tripuris (who belong to the Bodo stock). Reang, Jamatia, Naotia and Halam.

10.4 SOCIAL STRATIFICATION OF TRIBALS IN THE NORTH-EAST

The system of social stratification covers two main dimensions, the traditional system of stratification based on age, sex, kinship, etc. and the stratification emerging in the society as a result of the influence of a number of modernizing processes, education, industrialization, occupational differentiation, status hierarchies associated with

parliamentary democracy, government employment etc. which tend to stratify the society in terms of new class and status hierarchies modifying, reinforcing or undermining the traditional hierarchical divisions.

Traditional the tribe of the North-East have not been homogeneous egalitarian units. A number of factors have contributed to the development of the stratification system among the different tribal communities, most important being lineage, relationship to land, ritual status, position of economic, social and political dominance. The manner in which these factors are distributed leads to the formation and perpetuation of hierarchies within the various tribal groups and of the dominance of one tribal group over the other. Among the Garos, for example, the land meant for shifting cultivation and homestead plots was the property of seven lineages (Mahari) known as a king.

Box 10.01

The right of management of a king is vested in a particular family. Similarly, among the Khasi, while every member of the village of Reid could claim his right on the Ri land (Communal Land); the Ri Kynti were lands exclusively meant for some clans who enjoyed on it proprietary, hereditary and transferable rights. A village study of the area showed that 22 percent of the households controlled 70% of the village land, 54% of the household controlled the remaining 30% leaving no land at all to cultivate for as much as 24% of the household.

10.4.1 Mizo Administration

The Mizos had a well established system of administration through their chiefs. All activity in the life of a village involved around the chief and his house. Each village was ruled by its chief. It was the normal practice that the son of a chief was given on marriage a certain number of households by his father to set up their own village and become independent. Generally, the youngest or the eldest son depending on the clan would remain with the father to succeed him and all his property on death.

Among the Silos hereditary succession is through the youngest while for the Paite it is the eldest. In his work of administration the chief was assisted by council of elders known as Upa and Zawlbuk, the youngmen's dormitory. Upa were given preference in the choice of field for Jhums and favour at the time of feast or any other functions organised or patronized by the chief. The other important functionaries in the village were the Tlangau (the village crier), the Thirddending (the village Blacksmith) and the Puithiam (the village priest) each of these functionaries received a basketful of Paddy for performing professional work for the members of the village. Similarly the Zawlbuk was an important institutional and played a very crucial role.

The Mizo chiefs also had certain rights and privileges like (i) Fathang (paddy tax); (ii) Schhiah (meat tax) (iii) Salam (fee in the form of fine) (iv) building and repairing of chiefs house whenever asked to do so. The chiefs also granted the privileges to a class of farmers called Ramhual and Salen who the first choice of jhum fields.

However after independence it was through the internal struggle, awareness, growth of urbanisation and emergence of middle class with its aspirations that the institution chieftainship was abolished giving rise to stratification on the basis of class and other new emerging interests (Thanga 1998:26-256).

10.4.2 Power and Prestige Among Nagas

Among the Nagas too this inequality is reflected through the unequal sharing of power, prestige and wealth, largely acquired through the feast of merit where, perishable food substances were redistributed which has social function to secure symbolic prestige, and honoured alliances during the war as well peace for example the Semas were differentiated in term of (i) Kekami (chiefs), (ii) Chockomi (chiefs associated) (iii) Mughamis (Orphans or commoner), Akahemi (chiefs dependents) and (v) Anukeshimi (chiefs fields cultivators). Haimendorf has shown how the institution of chiefs survived among the knoyaks on the principle of purity of blood.

Activity 1

In which way does power and prestige among Nagas differ or is similar to from other groups in the North-East. Discuss with students at the study centre and put down your findings in your notebook.

Further Haimendorf's (1992: 29, 286-313, 315-323) elaborate study of Arunachal Pradesh drew attention to the prevalence of similar trends there too. The most important tribes of the region are the Apatanis who live in seven villages ranging in size from 160 to 1000 houses. The Apatanis are agriculturists and live in a rigidly stratification society. There are primarily two classes differing in status. There are primarily two classes differing in status: an upper class whose members owned a large part of the land and wield political power in class and villages, and lower class which used to consist of few men owning their own land as well as domestic slaves. The primary difference being between the Mate, Mite-Guth (Patricians) and the Mura, Cuchi (slaves/commoners).

10.4.3 The Jaintias and Khasis

The Jantias too had a more elaborate stratification system. They were differentiated between.

- i) Raja (king),
- ii) Dolois (Governor),
- iii) Wahan Ch Nong (Village headman),
- iv) Myntries, Patas, Laskars, Sangat, Maji (who are commoners and include all categories of officials).

Tilput Nongbri has discussed an interesting aspect of the stratification system of the Tribals in the context of gender. She mentions that tribal customary laws like the non-tribal societies deny them equal right to property. This discrimination is specially meted out in the case of inheritance laws, where women are entitled only to maintenance rights and expenses. In matrilineal society too, in the context of land, a sharp distinction is made between 'ownership' and 'control'. Thus while ownership is passed on through women, the control rests with men e.g. the Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, Rabha etc. Similarly where women possess usufructory rights in the patriarchal societies, they are subject to a number of conditions like their remaining unmarried, having no brothers, being widowed and forced to marry a prescribed in. Similarly women face a bias in the allocation and management of common property resources. Women also face discrimination in matters of marriage and divorce. The practice of bride price by which women become almost like commodities is particularly delimiting. The women also face the problem of being treated as threats to their descent group and ethnic identity particularly in the context of the demographic repercussion of a women's marriage with the outsiders have made many men want to change the matrilineal system of inheritance to matrilineal thus weakening its base.

10.4.4 Traditional Ranking Systems

All these examples show elaborate and varying traditional ranking systems conditioned by the particular ecological and historical circumstances of different tribes. The beginning of the colonial rule and its ending at the time of independence of the country led to a number of important changes which shook the carefully protected relatively isolated world of the North-East Tribals. These included linking up the tribals with colonial system of administration with meant opening up further towards. Shillong, Calcutta, Delhi and even London, the coming in of the Christian Missionaries, introduction of the market economy, the formalization and consolidation of status hierarchy within the tribes by the British for their administrative and political convenience, extension of protective discrimination and development schemes for backward areas and finally participation in the democratic process in independence India and resulting changes at various levels.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Write a note on Mizo Administration. Use five to ten lines for your answer.

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- 2) Discuss social stratification among the Jaintias and Khasis of North-East. Use between five to ten lines for your answer.

These led to a weakening of the traditional system of social stratification, the emergence of new socio-economic and political interests and linked disparities together with a growing emphasis on class position in society. Thus co-existing with ascribed status and both reinforcing and modifying it, the achieved status became a significant factor of increasing importance.

Box 10.02

The emergence of a new middle class, the contractors, middlemen, businessmen and the politicians operating at local, district, state or national levels, all tended to divide the society along class lines. However, those who held an economic and socially dominant positions traditionally were often able to exploit their initial advantage to obtain high ranked positions in the new setting as well. Thus all these interactions created a society broadly stratified and linked to political, economic and social trends outside the region, state and even nation.

At the same time these factors created also a need to preserve, protect and emphasize a distinct identity.

10.5 TRIBAL MOVEMENTS IN THE NORTH-EAST

We need to bear in mind the unique geo-political and historical background of the tribal people of the North-East in order to understand the specificity and very different character of the tribal movements of this region from those of other areas. These background factors include:

- i) Because of their location of international borders, many of these tribal communities played the role of bridge and buffer communities and so had developed bonds with certain groups across the borders.
- ii) British colonial administration followed a policy of insuring economic social and political isolation on these tribes from the rest of the country. The tribal areas were categorized as excluded or partially excluded areas and contacts of the outsiders with

these areas were strictly regulated, particularly in the excluded areas where no outsiders could enter without obtaining a permit. Thus their areas not only remained unaffected by the political influence of the freedom struggle in the country, but also developed apprehensions about maintaining their own separate identity and political autonomy in relation to independent India.

- iii) Unlike the tribals of middle India, tribals in the North-East have throughout constituted an overwhelming majority (except in Tripura) and being free from exploitative economic and social contacts with their Assamese neighbours including alienation of their land and forests, failed to develop agrarian and millenarian movements which frequently characterised the tribals of other regions of the country.
- iv) Spread of the Christianity and mission education gave the tribals a distinctive sense of identity and made them apprehensive about their future in Independent India.
- v) Influence of the second world war as threatres of war came close to their habitat in the North-East.
- vi) Impending independence of India and resulting heightening of political consciousness and struggle.
- vii) After independence there was open unrestricted contact between the tribals and outsiders. A number of traders, refugees and other migrants began to settle in the area, acquiring land and resources. All these generated fears of being swamped by outsiders and loosing land, forests and other resources to the outsiders.
- viii) The impact of modernization on Tribal life and social institutions, especially the conflict between members of the growing middle class and traditional chiefs as well as dislocations of the traditional pattern of land control and land relations.

Depending on the particular circumstances and objective of the individual movements, many of these factors in different combinations affected the formation and development of the different tribal movements. Because of the characteristic conditions of their genesis, thrust of these movements has been largely political, centring on issues of 'identity and security', with 'goals ranging from autonomy to independence and means from



Tribal Woman in North-East
Courtesy : Prof. Kapil Kumar

constitutional agitation to insurgency'. Although a majority of the movements have also centred on issues of language, script and cultural revival, the same political struggle appears to have been reflected in these movements also. We will now look at some of the movements in detail to understand their specificity.

10.5.1 The Naga Movement

A large number of factors acted as catalysts for the Naga Movement. These were:

- i) fear of the losing special privileges bestowed upon them by the British
- ii) the danger of erosion cultural autonomy and district 'ethnic identity'
- iii) fear of losing the customary ownership of the hills.
- iv) The spread of Christianity
- v) Development of formal education in the Naga Hills.
- vi) Reaction to the formation of complex political structures.

Though the Naga ethnic identity and the movement were sharply articulated after independence, the roots were sworn with the formation of the Naga Club in 1918 at Kohima. The first taken by the club was a memorandum submitted to the Simon commission in 1929 seeking the continuity of the direct British Administration of the hills and number of other issues. The memorandum was signed by representatives of most of the Naga tribes.

A very important role in the resurrection of Naga identity was played by Zapu Phizo, who had assisted the Japanese and the INA with the hope of getting help to form a sovereign Naga State (Verghese 1994: 85). There was a great deal of debate over what the Naga's wanted after the British left India. The issue centred primarily on autonomy Vs independence.

Box 10.03

The Assam Governor reached a nine-point agreement with the Naga National Council in Kohima on June 29, 1947. An agreement which too was not without its controversies specially the interpretation of clause 9. While the Naga's claimed it meant a right to self determination after ten years, the government felt that all aspects of the agreement had been subsumed and taken care off under the sixth schedule of the constitution. While a large number of members of the NNC were prepared to give this agreement a fair chance, a majority under Phizo were arrested, but after his release took charge of the NNC and conducted a 'plebiscite' on the question of Naga autonomy which on the basis of the opinion of a few thousands declared a 99% preference for Independence.

The Nagas boycotted the first General Election in 1952 and the District Council Scheme. This agitation took a violent turn when Phizo announced the formation of a Republican Government of Free Nagaland at 'Kautaga' on September 18, 1954. In this endeavor the moderate elements like Sakhrie were completely outnumbered. Soon, he was assassinated and underground gorilla warfare began in earnest. The army was called out to aid the civilian government on August 27, 1955. Gradually the gorilla struggle lost momentum but the people continued to suffer acute hardship under harsh army control. This situation became a rallying point for the moderates who abandoned independence and discussed the possibility of a Nagaland within the Indian Union with full freedom to preserve and protect their heritage and way of life. A Naga Peoples' convention was called in Kohima in August 1957. It was a conglomeration of 1760 delegates representing all the tribes in the Naga Hills and the Tuensang district of NEFA. After a long deliberation, the council decided to seek a single Naga Hills - Tuensang administrative unit within the Indian Union. The NHTA was created as an autonomous district directly administered by the governor of Assam on behalf of the President. This convention was followed by two more conventions. The deliberation of the October 1959 convention led to a historic landmark agreement with the government of India in July 1960. Under the agreement the NHTA was to be redesigned as Nagaland and became an independent state in December 1963. Even as the elections took place to the assembly, the underground movement continued. Several inconclusive rounds of the talks were held between the underground leadership and the Government of India. A peace mission was set up in 1964 which had J.P. Narayan, B.P. Calika, Rev. Michael Scott and Shandkaro Dev as its members. All these activities and efforts finally culminated in the Shillong accord of November 11, 1975.

Under this agreement the underground accepted the constitution of India; deposited their arms, security forces halted their operations and gave enough time to the underground organisations to formulate other issues for discussion for the final settlement to take place. Though this accord brought peace to the area, a section of the underground under the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland set up in 1980 is still struggling for a sovereign state. (Doley 1998: 16-20; Verghese 1994: 87-85, 89, 90; Dhanda 1993: 482-485).

10.5.2 Tribal Policy in Tripura

Tripura represents an example of a state which despite being ruled by a tribal ruler followed policies which reduced its original tribal inhabitants to a minority. The state consisted of nineteen major tribes of which the Tripura is to which the ruler belonged were the most dominant. Due to a variety of historical reasons most tribals had come under the influence of Hinduism, particularly Vaishnavism. For economic reasons the Maharaja, who had zamindaris in the adjoining districts of Comilla, Noakhali and Chittagong, invited the Bengali peasants from there to develop settled agriculture in Tripura. They were known as Ziratia tenants and, they apart from promoting agriculture, generated much needed revenues for the state. For humanitarian considerations also the ruler allowed the Bengali refugees to settle in his kingdom and reclaim forest lands for cultivation. Similarly a number of entrepreneurs were encouraged to establish tea gardens. Bengali being the language of the administration a number of Bengali professionals and white collared workers, teachers and others also got settled in the state.

Activity 2

Evaluate through discussion with other students at the study centre, the tribal policy in Tripura. Put down your findings in your notebook.

This process changed the demographic profile of the state, the tribals who constituted 64% of the population in 1974 were only 36% of the population in 1911, and by 1931 the number of immigrants from various other regions mostly Assam and Bengal had risen to 114,383. However the maharaja of Tripura in his proclamation of 1931 and 1943 reserved certain area almost 5050 sq. km. for settled agriculture of five designated tribes the Tripuris, Reangs, Jamatis, Naotis and Halams.

Box 10.04

With Independence of the country, Tripura acceded to India on 13 August 1947. However, surrounded by east Pakistan on all (except one) sides, socio-political developments there, particularly communal riots, had a tremendous effect on the state particularly in terms of the influx of the Bengali refugees. Not only the population of the state increased considerably (from 645,707 in 1951 to 1156,342 in 1971) (Mukherjee and Singh 1982: 320). There were also important repercussions for the tribal population, which though increased in numbers, was reduced to 28.44% of the total in 1971. Further population density rose from 17 per sq. km, in 1917 to 49 in 1941 to 196 by 1981).

- i) This demographic change meant an increasing dominance and control of immigrants in various departments particularly the market and the credit system as well as professional and service sectors. This also resulted in large number of tribals being pushed back to the interior, tremendous pressure on land, increase in mortgages and indebtedness, banning of slash and burn cultivation, increased alienation of land and transfer from tribals to non-tribals. Thus, the changing demographic balance, economic pressures created by the sudden influx of population, and the spread of education, combined to generate new impulses, a mix of expectations and discontents (Verghese 1994: 171).

The first response to this unrest was the formation of the tribal militant organisation the Seng Krak in 1947. This was followed by two other tribal bodies, the Adivasi Samiti and the Tripura Rajya Admivasi Sangh, both of which came together in 1954 in the Adivasi Sansad. The Eastern India Tribal Union also established its branch in Tripura and contested election in 1957 and 1962. Similarly the communists had established a strong presence in Tripura forming the Rajya Mukti Parishad in 1948 and taking up the cause of the tribals vis-à-vis the non-tribals, communist leaders. The split and decline in the communist party and the reemergence of the congress as a result of changing equations created a lot of disillusionment and resentment among the younger generation who formed

the Tripura, Upajati Juba Samita (TUJS) under Samacharan Tripura on June 10, 1967. TUJS is a political organisation of the Tribals, With a four point agenda (a) creation of an autonomous district council for tribals under the sixth schedule of the constitution (b) restoration of tribal lands illegally transferred to the non-tribals (c) recognition of the Kek-Barak language (d) adoption of Roman Scept.

- ii) The TUJS campaigned massively for the fulfilment of its demands. Resorting to agitation, propaganda, petitions, dharnas and protests, through phases of upswings and downswings, the TUJS managed to retain its hold and work for the cause of tribal upliftment as Tripura became a full fledged state in 1972. The 1977 elections saw the recovery of the communists who were returned back to power marginalising both the congress and the TUJS.

The CPM government made a number of moves to restore and strengthen the tribal position. Among them being the recognition to the Kek-Barak language, measures to implement the agrarian laws on illegally alienated lands, set in motion the process of forming an autonomous hill council. Though these moves were welcomed by the tribals and the moderate section of the TUJS, a section of redicals smarting under the declining influence of the TUJS, came into prominence under the leadership of a Christian Missionary Vijay Kumar Rankhel who saw the bond of Christianity as an important vehicle to forge unity and assertion among the tribal. He also sought the help of the MNF and other organizations to train the TUJS volunteers. He become the self-styled leader of the Tripura Tribal National Front and the Tripura Sena. The secession and independence of Tripura became important goals for him. This revival of the movement coincided with the movement against foreigners in Manipur, Meghalaya and Assam. The TUJS Conference of March 1980 gave a call for the deportation of all foreigners who came to Tripura after 15 October 1949. The violent agitation was begun by a call for boycott of foreigners, particularly traders and protests outside important government offices. A lot of violence took place against the Bengali and other settlers who countered it through the Arma Bengali. The carnage reached a crescendo in almost a month. The fuse being ignited by the Lembucherra incident.

- iii) The Dinesh Singh Committee on Tripura set up by the centre saw the real solution of the problem in the economic development of the region. It took note of the transformation brought in the state as a result of inroads made into tribal society by traders, land grabbers, refugees and missionaries. The committee made an elaborate list of suggested short and long term measures to ameliorate the problem. These included elimination of disparities, restoration of land to the tribals and ensuring their rehabilitation. The TUJS disassociated itself from the militant Tripura National Volunteers led by Rankhal and called a peaceful agitation for implementation of the Dinesh Singh Committee report, a judicial inquiry into the June incident and the formation of Tribal Area Autonomous Council, while the Anti-foreigners agitation was put on hold. After a period of intense struggle the TNV militants finally negotiated a settlement with the government on Aug. 12, 1988. Under the agreement promised speedy action in the restoration of alienated lands, the formation of a Autonomous district council, stringent measures to prevent infiltration from across the border, etc.
- iv) However, not all factions of the TNV were satisfied with this agreement. They established breakaway groups to continue the agitation like the All Tripura Tribal Force (which signed agreement with the state in 1993), the National Liberation Front of Tripura. The Tripura Rajya Raksha Bahini Tripura State Volunteers, Tripura National Democratic Tribal Force. However, the intensive, conviction and commitment of the agitation has waned. But the groups continue to survive patronized and supported simultaneously by different political parties and underground movements across the borders who provide resources and ammunition.

(317-339; Doley 1998: 30-32; Verghese 1994: 165-195).

10.5.3 Tribal Struggle in Manipur

Manipur has a long history of struggle. The prominent among them being the Zeliangrong Naga uprising (1930-32), the Kuki rebellion (1917-19), the womens agitation, Meiti state ccmmitee and a number of other agitations. Manipur was a princely state which merged with India in 1949, remained a UT till finally granted statehood in 1972. To account for the

agitations to resurface in the state, Kabui relates it to crisis of identity, weakness of the Indian political system, economic exploitation, corruption, unemployment and influence of foreign power and ideology (cf. Doley 1998: 21). The various agitations launched in the state were.

- i) The Meitei State Committee was formed in 1967 in protest at Manipur's merger with the India Union. This organisation gradually became a revolutionary body seeking an independent Manipur governed on the lines of a Socialist ideology developed by Irabot Singh. The movement weakened and the committee surrendered in 1971. This movement failed as result of (a) low level of education of leaders (b) lack of clarity about the objectives of the movement (c) lack of strong infrastructural organization and support. (Doley 1998: 24).
- ii) The Kukis in Manipur revolted against the British in 1917-19 in response to the alien intervention in the traditional pattern of and way of life of the tribal people. Though this response was suppressed by the British. It found expression against the treatment of the melties by the government became an important turning point in the agitation. A fillup has been provided by the growing prominence of the Sanmahi cult, which explodes the myth of the Aryan origin of the Meities who converted to Hinduism in the eighteenth century. An important role has been played by the Manipur National Front which aims to revive the Mongloid heritage which would unit the Sanamahis as well as other Mongloid people of the NE. The front, as it trines to go back to its own tribal religion, seeks to get rid of the borrowing and domination and exploitation imposed on them by brahmin and Vaishnav practices. The Resurgence of the Sanamahi cult revived the Meteir script, language and literature, thus giving from to a distinct Meitei identity. At the same time this asertion was also a reaction against Hindus and outsiders. It emphasised the glory of Manipur and its cultural distinction from India. An offshoot of the emergence of Meitei, Nationalism has been the gradual erosion of the word Manipur and Manipuri and its repalcement by Kangleipak and Meitei respectively (Kabui: 1983, p. 236-237) which can only be achieved by the formation of a Meitei homeland.

All these factors have contributed to the spread of insurgency in Manipur. of the two main organizations active in the state, the people's revolutionary party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) and PLA (people's liberation army), PREPAK is seen as a Marxist - Leninist party closely linked to Meitei revivalism while the PLA has a radical ideology and a strong rural base and prefers to propogate communist ideology and integrated insurgent groups across the N.E. Thus the Meities represent an interesting group at the cross roads who have revived their traditional religion and yet are unable to get the status of tribals which they aspire for and failure to achieve which prevents them from getting privileges under the sixth schedule (Doley 1998: 22-27, Verghese 1994: 113-134; Kabui 1983: 234-237; 1992: 5357)

Resurfaced with the Kuki National Assembly in 1946, which gradually articulated a political demand for a autonomous district or state for Kuki Inbals in order to fully reaplise the cultural and glory of their own culture and may of life. (Doley 1998: 25).

- iii) The Manipur women protested agaisnt the British regarding Rice Trading and the British export policy. The immediate cause of the movement was the shortage of foodgrains in Manipur due to the vagaries of the weather; the high price of rice in the local market due to exports and the pressure of the vested business interests. It was one Manipuri woman, Aribam Chaotian Devi, who organised a few women to stop selling rice to the mill owners. A chain reaction followed and other women got involved in the agitation. Though this was suppressed by the British in 1941 but left its impact on the administrative set up and cultural pattern of the state. (Doley 1998: 26-27).
- iv) The Zeliangrong movement was started by three tribal groups the Zemei, Liangmei and the Rongmei who together were called the Zeliangrong. This movement began essentially as a social reform movement and was led by a young Rongmei Naga Jadonang and his cousin Rani Gaidinliu. They formed the Heraka cult which sought to abolish some cuational customs, and to reform and revive the traditional religion, as a response to Hinduism and impact of Christianity. The movement was also anti-British and anti-Kuki, and it sought to establish Naga rule by forging a single Zeliangrong identity Jadonang's subsequent arrest and execution gave a jolt to the

movement. However, his cousin Gainilui carried it forward linking it to the struggle against British rule and civil disobedience movement of the Congress (Kubui 1982: 56). She was, however, imprisoned for almost 14 years and in the mean time the movement lost much of its steam. It gradually got converted to a purely peaceful movement and various tribal organisations like the Kabnui Samity (1934), Kabui Naga Association (1946), Zeliangrong Council (1947) Manipur Zeliangrong Union (1947) all came into the picture with the objective of overthrowing the British rule. After more than two decades the aim of the movement became political, seeking the creation of a separate Zeliangrong Administrative Unit consisting of the Zeliangrong inhabited areas of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam's Cachar hills.

10.6 MIZORAM

The process of identity formation among the Mizos was essentially about 15 local tribes assuming a district Mizo identity. Political consciousness began in the Lushai hills area with the return of a number of first world war veterans. However, the level of political articulation was low, and no expression of political solidarity took place before the Simon Commission. The area remained concerned as an 'excluded' area under the 1935 act. With the end of the second world war and the impending grant of independence, the new Christian educated elite, curbed by the authoritarian style of functioning of their chiefs, formed the Mizo Common People's front and a Mizo Union in 1946 demanding equal right to vote for chiefs as well as commoners. Gradually as they organised themselves they sought to assert their cultural and political distinctiveness as well as demand self determination and a number of other benefits to preserve and protect their identity. The commoners were incorporated in the District Conference. This also created a cleavage between the common people and chiefs who began to feel sidelined. They formed a political party the United Mizo Freedom Organization on July 5, 1947 which sought to merge the Mizo area with Burma. However, the leaders of the Mizo Union felt an affinity with India and opted for remaining within India with limited autonomy and the freedom to opt out when they wished to do so. The government in response gave protection to the tribes under the sixth schedule and certain special privileges to the Lushai hills including a District Council.

10.6.1 Mizo Identity

However, the perceived threat to the Mizo Identity became sharpened in reaction to the decision of the Assam Government to introduce Assamese as the state language. The UMFO teamed up with the Eastern India Tribal Union seeking separation from Assam. In this endeavour they were also supported by the All Party hill Leaders Conference.

The immediate cause for the Mizo unrest was the 'efflorescence of the bamboo ormautam in 1959' which led to acute famine in the region. The inept handling of the issue by the government, suppression of the farmers and the inadequate relief measures added fuel to the fire on the issue of separate statehood. In an attempt to come to terms with this situation, the Mizo cultural society was converted into a Mizo National Famine Front, which gained popularity for its activism relief measure. Later it emerged as Mizo National Front in 1963 under the leadership of Laldenga. The organization gained popular appeal and sought help from Pakistan for its cause. On February 28, 1966 Mizoram was declared an independent sovereign state with the launch of 'operation Jericho' Major government buildings, installations, etc. were taken over. The IAF and the army had to move in. Consequently MNF was declared unlawful and the 'rebel govt.' was forced to move underground. Mizoram was declared a disturbed area and placed under Army control. Following this, a strategy of grouping of villages was carried out in four phases between 1967 and 1970 under the Defence of India rules and Assam maintenance of Public Order Act.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss the Naga Movement in the North-East. Use about ten lines for your answer.

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10.8 TRIBAL ETHNICITY BECOMES AS A BASIS FOR STRATIFICATION

An important feature of ethnicity is that like caste it is a status group; intermediate between the family and the state or nation. In Weberian terms a status group is a group which enjoys a characteristics prestige and honour in relation to similar other groups. In any wider group there are always cultural differences, but with the rising ethnic consciousness, certain cultural differences come to be used as ethnic markers of group identity. This stress on group identity and selected markers facilitates the mobilisation of the group for various collective ends, economic, political, social cultural etc. These collective ends to the extent they are realised and not realised affect the process of stratification.

10.8.1 Ethnic Movement

Ethnic movements are generally seen as a reaction to a particular social situation in which the groups feel deprived because it fails to get what it feels as its due recognition. This due recognition may be that their members are not treated as status equals, or are ranked inferior to some other unduly. Concern may be for equality of status or for higher status as ones 'due'. Thus aside from considerations about material interests, concern about status, social recognition, prestige becomes equally important. The tribe may seek equality, or emphasise the superiority of their culture and language e.g. The carving out of states of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya after an intense struggle by the tribal people from the state of Assam. Followed by the continuing struggle of the Bodos for their own state as well as language and script affected the inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic stratification system in important respects.

An important aspect of ethnic struggle is concerned with mobilization to gain positions of economic advantage, jobs, educational facilities etc. This may take the form of demands that certain positions may be given exclusively to a particular tribe or distributed in relation to the respective ethnic population. Thus the process of ethnic mobilisation effects at two general levels struggle for (a) due recognition and (b) for greater economic and political advantage on some special ground. As soon as the ethnic mobilisation process and struggle starts, new positions come into existence at the various organizational and leadership levels enjoying varying amount of power, prestige and economic advantage, this new phenomena may alter already existing similar relationship within the group.

10.8.2 Mobility and Ethnic Groups

This new kind of opportunity may become available to individuals and sub-groups within the broader ethnic groups leading to upward and downward mobility between sub-sections and the individual levels. The overall occupational differentiation in income, lifestyle, education etc. may further develop with one group emphasizing within group differences in culture, honour, prestige etc. This process may even threaten the boundary markers between ethnic groups by creating cross group similarities and increasing intragroup differences, especially when class affiliations and class lined lifestyles cut across ethnic group may form a new formation combine, emphasise closeness to win material recognition and reward. It may even seek a claim for a separate state or separate provincial autonomy. The moment this objects is achieved, then there is a possibility of new fault lines developing in this group particularly in the context of the North-East the implementation of the sixth schedule of the constitution, policy of protective discrimination, policy of development and integration, participation in the electoral process have sharpened the ethnic consciousness as a stepping stone towards greater political power, resources, and mobility. Due to these factors the overall relationship between the tribals and non-tribals is also changing. Tribals as a category are no longer despised or inferior; infact they may be the dominant group in the state. The tribal group may be a deprived group within which strong inequalities exist. Thus to an extent differences between tribals and non-tribals are getting reduced as against people of comprable educational, class status, where similarity may be much more egalitarian then between Tribals and Non-Tribals.

10.9 LET US SUM UP

Viewed positively Ethnicity is a means of equality, greater means of self-worth, preserving

cultural heritage, cultural diversity, spreading egalitarianism social order etc. In that sense the ethnic group mobilization may be seen as a means of curtailing the power of the state. However at the same time it can lead to strife, ethnostrife, ethnic-intolerance subordination of groups etc.

10.10 KEY WORDS

Absorption	:	A process by which tribes were assimilated into other groups and communities.
Ethnicity	:	Comprises cultural layers of habits, traits and origin which bind into solidarity the entire community which is of a particular ethnic stock.
Identity	:	Characteristic features of a particular person group or community
Power	:	Ability to influence a person or group, even against their will.
Prestige	:	a type of status which has become associated with a person, group or community.
Tribe	:	Can be distinguished through various features of such a group/ community. See text for elaboration.

10.11 FURTHER READINGS

A.C. Bhupender Singh (ed.), *Tribal Studies of India Series T. 183 Antiquity to Modernity in Tribal India*. (Vol. II) (p. 221-247).

Burman, B.K. Roy, 1972. 'Integrated Area Approach to the Problems of Tribals in N.E. India' in K. Suresh Singh (ed.) *Tribal Situation in India*. New Delhi/Shimla: Motilal Banarsidas.

10.12 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Through the institution of their chiefs, the Mizos had a well established administration system. The chief and his house were the centre of activity. On marriage the son of a chief was given some households to set up their own village and be independent. One son however remained with the chief to succeed him. Administration of the village by the chief was aided by a council of elders.
- 2) The Jaintias were divided into king Governor, village Headman and Commoners (including officials) ownership is passed on through women, the control rests with the men. Where usufructory rights were there women were to remain unmarried, have no brother etc. Women also face discrimination in matters of marriage and divorce. Bride price was also a humiliating practice.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) There were many factors which were important in creating the Naga Movement. These included fear of losing privileges created by the British and erosion of their ethnic identity. Naga ethnic identity traces back to 1918 when the Naga Club was formed. In 1947 the Assam Governor reached an agreement with Nagas. The Nagas boycotted the General Election of 1952 was reached, and the Naga underground accepted the Constitution of India. However in 1980 the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland was still struggling for a sovereign state.
- 2) Tribal struggling in Manipur have a long history including Zeliangrong Naga 1930-32 uprising and the Kuki rebellion 1917-19. These struggle have been attributed to various reasons including identity crisis, weak political system of India exploitation of all sorts, corruption, and unemployment. Other agitations include the Meitee State Committee formed for an Independent Manipur in 1967. The Committee surrendered in 1971. Lack of education, and weak infrastructure were reasons which led to failure. The Kuki rebellion of Manipur (1917-19) was against the British. Other organizations include Manipur National Front which aims to revive the Mongoloid heritage. Finally script language and literature, provided to them a distinct Meitei identity.