

The Struggle of Indigenous People for Self-determination: An ethnographic Analysis of Assam India with a Special Focus on the Bodo Experience

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Abstract: The forces shaping civilization and history have not been kind to indigenous peoples. In fact, they have caused indigenous cultures to be under enormous pressure, face disruptive challenges, and experience threats to their existence. Consequently, indigenous people struggle to effectively manage external impositions that threaten to disrupt their chosen way of life and hinder them from maintaining their integrity, identity, and existence. This article analyzes the challenges imposed on indigenous cultures and offers a theoretical model for a progressive and sustainable response (i.e., one that supports the right to self-determination of indigenous people). The impact of the interface between the forces shaping history and indigenous peoples is analyzed through the lens of the indigenous cultures of Assam, India, with a special focus on the experience of Bodo culture. The article argues that deeper insight into the struggles of indigenous cultures can be gained by analyzing the issues from the perspectives of ethnology, cultural anthropology, and political anthropology. The article contributes to research that addresses and attempts to resolve the disruptions indigenous cultures are subject to as a result of being challenged by a type of determinism that can be imposed by powerful external forces.

Keywords and phrases: integrative, political anthropology, imposition, determinism, migrations

Introduction

India is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. India is reported to have over two thousand ethnic and tribal groups, each with its own worldview and traditions, and, as well, some have their own dialect or language (Times of India, 2020). Consequently, India is also one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world,

with over 1,600 languages and dialects spoken by its citizens. This means that India is faced with the challenge of protecting what is not only one of the most important features of its own heritage (the world's remaining aboriginal and indigenous people), but what is, in fact, a significant aspect of the world's heritage. That is to say that protecting the rights of indigenous peoples is an essential aspect of protecting world heritage sites and, in addition, the world's cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2022: 1-2). In particular, this has meant being sensitive to the difference between protecting the heritage of indigenous peoples (and in some cases, even aboriginal cultures) and advancing a nation's post-colonial endeavors for economic development. Therefore, the article analyzes the meaning of freedom, how migrations impact the lives of indigenous cultures, the interface between indigenous cultures and colonial rulers, freedom movements, which in some cases were spearheaded by indigenous people, and the ongoing struggles of indigenous people for self-determination given the pressures imposed by globalization and techno-economic determinism.

The article focuses on the Bodo culture of Assam. Assam is one of the seven sister states of Northeast India. Assam is a good context for analyzing the issues addressed in this article because of the unique and multi-faceted migrations that shape its diverse ethnic population. The article explains the migrations during India's preclassical and classical periods that shaped the unique features of the ethnic and indigenous populations of Assam. Assam is also a good example because of the role it played in sparking the vision for independence. Assam's role in India's freedom movement is important for several reasons. First, because they date back to some of the earliest movements for independence during the colonial period (e.g., the 1828 revolt spearheaded by the Ahom royal family and the Phulaguri Uprising of 1861). Secondly, because of Assam's proximity to Bengal there was a close affiliation and affinity with the Bengali reform and freedom movements (the nationalistic movement for Indian independence emerged from the province of Bengal). Therefore, there was a close interface between the rising cultural pride of the people of the region, the aspiration of the people of Assam to achieve self-determination, and the influence this had on the national movement in Bengal. The interface between Assam and national movements was evident in the activities of the Cachar district of the Barak valley of Assam. This part of the history is well documented. What historians also stress is that Assam's freedom movement was pioneered or spearheaded by the peasants and tribal cultures of the region. However, what is less documented by historians is the role that Bodo culture, as the largest tribal group in Assam, played in shaping the vision, principles, values, and ideals that served as a unifying force.

The article also explains that the movement at all three levels (at the level of Bodo culture, at the Assam regional level, and at the national level) was sparked by

concerns about the nature of human relations, good governance, freedom, and self-determination. These concerns also represented the desire to live in accordance with principles of human existence that were not only pan-Indian but were also deeply rooted in the ancient cultural heritage of the people of Assam and continued to be cherished during the classical period and prior to colonialism. A basic example of such principles is the assertion that Satyam awakens individuals to a type of knowledge that impels right thought, which is followed by right action. Satyam inclines individuals to act in ways that are in their best interest (i.e., to act in ways that enable them to experience their highest good) (Miller, 2023: 25). In short, the desire to live in accordance with such principles can be described as a desire to act on the basis of values and principles that are deep-rooted in the cultural heritage of the region. In other words, individuals were highly motivated to pursue a peaceful path toward experiencing the true meaning of Swaraj, Satya, and Satyagrahi (Satyagraha), which were core values that inspired their movement for independence. Swaraj generally means self-determination, self-rule, or self-governance. Satya, in a practical sense, refers to liberation, but it also implies that the path to liberation is truth, self-cultivation, authenticity, connecting with the inner self, and self-realization (Upanishads, 1950: 461). However, the two terms were often put together in the form of a rallying cry for Satyagrahi (Satyagraha): “Uphold what is personally and socially uplifting, and you will get Swaraj”. Satyagrahi (Satyagraha) refers to a refusal to do anything that would have a debilitating effect on a person or society. However, it can also mean upholding what is personally and socially uplifting.

This article explains the culturally based principles that played a role in arousing a passion for self-determination in the indigenous peoples of Assam and, as well, explains why they served as a unifying force that bonded the tribal groups, the literary class, and the political elite into a single cause. These principles, values, and ideals inspired reformers, freedom fighters, and nationalists. Such ideals aroused “A grandiose vision of representative government” (Gordon, 1979: 36). The pioneers of the movement also expressed a unique conceptualization of the nature of consciousness, what it meant for individuals to have an awakened sense of consciousness, and the connection between self-cultivation (i.e., the holistic development of the self) and freedom. This means that the movement was actually far more than a mere protest, political activism, and an independence movement. The movement represented a rising interest in shaping human, social, and political relations on the basis of their cultural values and heritage. The people of the region, in general, shared the conviction that political reform, within itself, will not liberate people nor enable them to experience their highest good. For individuals from tribal villages, their commitment to these deep-rooted cultural principles also heightened sensitivity to the difference between social relations and notions of governance prescribed by their cultural values and the patterns of social

relations and governance practiced by the colonial rulers. They became increasingly aware of the fact that living in accordance with principles rooted in their culture could be the basis of their experience of self-determination and liberation. This realization established a unifying force that consolidated their movement into a unified cause that influenced, contributed to, and inspired their claim to self-determination.

This article argues that because the endeavor of indigenous people to live in accordance with what they have reason to value is anchored in deep-rooted cultural values, an analysis from the perspective of anthropology provides insight into the theoretical and methodological issues related to ethnicity, ethnology, intercultural relations, and political anthropology. This includes explaining the difference in assumptions about the plight of indigenous peoples, human and social development, and the Modernization Theory of economic development from the perspective of international experts as compared to those of the indigenous people themselves. This includes notions of the use and fair distribution of natural resources and good governance. The article explains why analyzing the issues from the perspective of ethnology, cultural anthropology and political anthropology provides insight into the impact that political economic philosophy and socio-political ideology have on the external intervention on indigenous people and, thus, on the autonomy and integrity of indigenous cultural groups. Political anthropology provides a stronger theoretical and methodological basis for analyzing the difference between planning for maintaining equilibrium and social order based on the principles and values of a particular indigenous, ethnic, or cultural group as opposed to the strategies for maintaining equilibrium of external forces that intervene (Evans-Pritchard & Fortes, 1950: 6-7 & 10-14).

An Ethnographic Perspective on Precolonial Assam

Northeast India is typically characterized as one of the most conflict-prone zones in South Asia. The conflicts are often reported as resulting from a clash between the established indigenous people and new ethnic groups migrating into the region, which result in the pursuit of the indigenous people of the region for greater self-determination and in some cases for a greater sense of autonomy. However, a more detailed analysis reveals that the conflicts are connected with deep-rooted issues that stem back to the ancient and classical periods of history. To put these issues into a perspective that is manageable, given the scope of this article, the region of Assam will be used as an example of ethnological, cultural anthropological, and political anthropological issues that, in fact, continue to impact the plight of indigenous people. This is especially true regarding how the ethnology of Assam would have affected Bodo culture, its integrity, and its very existence. Therefore, special emphasis is placed on the historical and cultural experience of the Bodo people, who, if not the aboriginal people of the region,

are certainly, according to archeological and ancient historical records, one of the oldest groups of indigenous people to appear in the Brahmaputra valley and, as well, in the Chachar regions of Assam.

Ancient Assam was divided into two main parts: the mountainous and frontier regions to the north and east, and the plains. The plains consist of the mighty Brahmaputra River valley. The Brahmaputra River dominates the whole of Assam and intersects most parts of the current state, which has an abundance of evergreen forests. For millennia, the river has been a life-source for the people of the region (e.g., water for the fields, crops, and cattle; a source of drinking water; and providing fish as a staple food). All-in-all, Assam is composed of three geographic regions: e.g., the eastern slopes of the Himalayas, the northern plains, and the Karbi Anglong Plateau. Assam is the home of a variety of exotic flora and fauna and is listed as a UNESCO world heritage site because it is the home of the one-horned rhinoceros.

Developing a comprehensive picture of the struggles for self-determination of the indigenous people of Assam, the Northeast in general, and the Bodo people in particular requires understanding socio-cultural and socio-political dynamics that stem back to the ancient period of Assam and continue through the classical period. Therefore, gaining reliable knowledge can only be achieved by relying on important archeological sources, such as those provided by the earliest histories of the region (e.g., chronicles of kings and kingdoms) and the historical records that refer to the earliest periods of the region. It should first be noted that when reference is made to ancient Assam, it refers to much of the northeast region of India (e.g., Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya) (Bahadur, 1933: 1–10). Archeological surveys of Assam provide evidence of settlements dating back to 10,000 BCE. Therefore, according to archeological dating systems, most of what we know about ancient Assam is from the neolithic period of human existence. During this period, the earliest inhabitants lived in settled villages, made pottery and wove garments, engaged in both horticulture and husbandry, and there is evidence of rudimentary tools. All-in-all, archeological evidence suggests that the earliest tribal cultures that settled in the region that we now refer to as Assam existed for thousands of years as secluded aboriginal cultures with similar lifestyle characteristics. There are two cultural zones that play an important role in shaping the ancient history of Assam, e.g., the Brahmaputra Valley and Cachar Hill regions of Assam. That is to say that the archeological evidence reveals evidence of a predominance of cultural settlements in the Brahmaputra Valley and Cachar Hill regions of Assam (Dani, 1960: 42).

Assam was inhabited by people of various ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. The identity, origin, and heritage of the people represent four different ethnic-linguistic groups: e.g., Indo-Aryan, Tibetan-Burmese, Austroasiatic, and Tai-Kadai. Ancient Assam was a mixture of indigenous egalitarian tribal villages, chieftains

who were clan leaders of social groups that included warriors, and kingdoms that ruled over extensive territories (e.g., the mythological Asura Kingdom that was also known as Pragjyotisha in antiquity and later was known as the Kamarupa kingdom). This means, according to numerous accounts, that in addition to housing the indigenous population ancient Assam, indeed, also had several competing kingdom that encompassed large parts of the Northeast of India.

The evidence suggests that the earliest tribal communities engaged in various types of exchange with the other tribal groups in the region, all of which had distinct cultural features and ethnic identities. However, what is highly important to our study is that there were as many as eleven major waves and streams of migrations into the region during the period between ancient Assam and classical Assam. In some respects, like in other areas of the world where populations converged, this resulted in mixing. These migrations included other branches of the Kirat ethnic group that attempted to establish territorial rule. However, it also represented some forms of intrusion on the lives, integrity, and land of the earlier populations, which required devising means to manage cultural and security give the intrusions.

“The most important group of tribes of the Tibetan-Burman race, known as the Bodo, forms the most numerous and important section of the non-Aryan peoples of Assam” (Baruah, 1951: 6). But they are also scattered throughout other parts of the Northeast (Gait, 1926: 247). Ancient history places them as related to a Tibetan-Burmese ethnic group that was certainly present 5,000 years ago (i.e., they are related to the more ancient Bodo-Kirat ethnic group). The Bodo language is a member of the Sino-Tibetan family (the Tibeto-Burman branch). Historical records referring to the ancestry of the Bodo appear in various sacred texts. Reference to such ancestry appears in the Kalika Purana, the Yajurveda, and the Mahabharata. And Manu’s Dharmashastra refers to them as a group of tribals who are outside of Brahminical influence (The Laws of Manu, 1886: 412). The Bodo ethnic group also refers to a number of subtribes known as the Boros, Rabhas, Dimasa, Garos, Lalungs, and Tripuris. In ancient times, the Bodo economy was mainly dependent on agriculture, husbandry, weaving (for which they are famous), and a form of social exchange and trade referred to in ancient history as bartering. Consequently, the Bodo were able to establish effective trade, diplomatic, and intercultural links between Assam, Bhutan, Nepal, India, and China. Any attempt to understand the ongoing pursuit of self-determination would be incomplete without a comprehensive understanding of how this struggle is deeply rooted in dynamics and factors that have transpired for thousands of years and play a crucial role in the formation of the state of Assam.

No doubt, one of the most significant migrations into the region was that of the Indo-Aryans. The impact of this ethnic and cultural group is important from the perspectives of both cultural and political anthropology. This is especially true regarding

understanding the impact that the Indo-Aryan migrations had on the indigenous people. Between 1800 and 1500 BCE, a clearly and distinctly different ethnic, language, and cultural group migrated into parts of the region from the west and/or northwest. This claim is supported by what is recorded in the Kalika Purana. They were a nomadic people who relied on a pastoral economy with little agriculture. By 1500 BCE, this new migratory group had created small communities across parts of northern India and thus began to settle. As their migrations into the region advanced, it became evident to local chieftains and rulers that they had a strongly hierarchical social system, were extremely effective in establishing social order, had relatively good martial skills (relative to the other chieftains and rulers they encountered), were masters of warfare, had advanced weapons, and coveted luxury goods—all clear markers of power. Therefore, the Kamarupa rulers were willing to pledge their allegiance to them (Parpola, 2015: 67–68). However, the Rigveda describes the early period of Indo-Aryan migrations as also involving conflict (e.g., the Battle of the Ten Kings).

Mention of the earliest Indo-Aryan activities is recorded in the Ramayana and Mahabharata. For example, *the Danava* (also referred to as the Asura) is a legendary ethnic group of ancient Assam that is mentioned in the sacred literature of India as establishing a dynasty that eventually became pro-Aryan. According to both the Brahma Purana and the Vishnu Purana, *Naraka* (also known as *Narakasura*), a legendary ruler who was blessed by Vishnu and Bhumi (a mother earth goddess who is in some records referred to as Prithivi), established a pro-Aryan dynasty that was clearly distinct from the prior Kirat line of rulers. The ancient Assam kingdom of Kamarupa (established in the vicinity of present-day Guwahati) was associated with this dynasty. Ancient historians point out that the new dynasty line was favorable to the Brahmanical influence, thus “Granted special Agrahara settlements [i.e., a grant of land and royal income] to more than two hundred Brahmins for promotion of Vedic religion and culture” (Barua, 1951: 8). For example, the Nidhanpur copperplate inscription (also known as the Kamarupa inscriptions) *details these land grants given to Brahmins*. This possibility is further supported by the fact that the lineage of the rulers from this dynasty is recorded in the Mahabharata as being spoken of in respectful terms by Krishna and as a close friend of the Pandava family (Barua 1951: 16). Therefore, it could be interpreted as indicating the increasing influence of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas, which began to change the character of the prior Kirat influence in the region. Consequently, the Brahmins began to spread the practice of social duties and status based on the Vedic understanding of the concept of Dharma. This included prescribing and adapting the Sanskrit language and culture (Sarmah, 2021: 2).

A resistance to the Brahmanical infiltration into Assam was established by what is referred to as the Mlechhas, or members of the Mech tribe of Assam (Sanskritized as Mlēccha), whom the Indo-Aryans regarded as tribal outside of their sphere of influence.

The conflict between the two groups was long and bitter. The Bargaon copper-plate inscription refers to the Mlechhas as a branch of the Bodo-Kachari and/or the Bodo-Garo ethnic groups (Chatterji, 1951: 97). The Mlechhas came to be thought of as resisters of the Brahmanical influence, non-Aryan overlords (i.e., *mlecchadhinatha*). For example, the records of kings and rulers of the region point out that Sala-stambha was a Bodo chief of a Mlechhas tribe that established a non-Aryan movement. However, an important note on the history of the region is made in the readable fragments of the Hayunthal copper plate inscription of Harjjaravarman. In these inscriptions, the lineage of the Mlechhas is described as attempting to mediate the conflict between the empires. It goes on to mention the character of a Mlechhas ruler as “Possessed of all virtues in equal proportion, constantly engaged in works pertaining to the welfare of the subjects, and always accessible to others” (Sharma, 1978: 92).

Thus, there are some indications that the Mlechhas were affiliated with establishing a complementary connection between the indigenous people of Assam, pre-Aryan folk practices, and Aryanism. It might be interesting to note that there was an attempt in the early classical period of Assam to establish a type of syncretic relationship between the indigenous practices of the region and the Indo-Aryan influx by means of devotion to Shiva (Das, 1772: 31). Shiva is regarded as a pre-Aryan avatar who prefers mountains, forests, the wilderness, and the frontier regions (i.e., in other words, he is known for not preferring large villages and the earliest trade centers). As a consequence of later being adopted by the Brahmins as a member of the Hindu trilogy, he served to establish a connection between the folk practices of the aboriginal people and the Brahmins. Therefore, this approach to syncretism was of interest to the Brahmanical infiltrators of the region. In addition, a link was established as a result of the reverence the local indigenous people had for Mother Earth. A temple was established in honor of the mother goddess Kamakhya (the god of love and attraction) (Barua, 1954: 68–72). Therefore, temples devoted to both Shiva and Kamakhya were built on the hillocks of the ancient Kamapura empire. The surviving portions of these temples (in addition to housing ongoing practices) reveal that they were among the most significant endeavors to integrate the practices of the indigenous people with Indo-Aryan practices. Thus, it established one of the oldest and most respected traditions of yogic practices that are known as Tantra (i.e., which later became the most influential practices of India that later influenced Tibet, Bhutan, China, Japan, and subsequently parts of Southeast Asia) and which ultimately influenced the development of Theravada Buddhism. In fact, Assam is sometimes referred to as the foundational center from which Tantra originated (Gait, 1926: 15; & Bahadur, 1933: 14).

What is important in regard to our study is the fact that this syncretism represented one of the early indications that there the practices of the indigenous people of Assam

were based on values and principles that could serve as a unifying force. This will become more evident during a later period when the principles and values of indigenous people can serve to bring people together across status, religious, ethnic, and cultural lines. This encounter is important to a cultural and political anthropology analysis of the issues because it addresses cultural anthropological claims about symbolic and cultural boundaries between groups. “The differences between cultures and their historic boundaries and connections have been given much attention; the constitution of ethnic groups and the nature of the boundaries between them have not been correspondingly investigated” (Barth, 1969: 9). In fact, the analysis of boundaries in the remainder of this article addresses an assumption that was prevalent with early British anthropologists: that more advanced societies serve to inform indigenous cultures how to modernize their socio-political systems, but they had little to offer the more advanced societies in terms of socio-political knowledge.

However, this issue will be analyzed in more detail in the following sections of the article when the issue of the boundaries between the indigenous people of Assam is brought up again to explain additional, and perhaps more important, times when the values and principles of the indigenous people serve as a synchronizing, unifying, and liberating force. The point that this section of the article emphasizes is that the struggle of indigenous people for self-determination is deep-rooted. For thousands of years, indigenous peoples have been challenged by various types of migrations and attempts at establishing kingdoms or empires. Thus, for thousands of years, indigenous peoples have struggled to protect their cultural boundaries and integrity (see figure one below). And there are additional thousands of years to consider in terms of Assam and the experience of the Bodo people in particular. This section of the article must also point out that there was a significant influx of the Ahoms and Mughals, both of whom were empire-minded and thus tried to extend their authoritative rule over the indigenous people. Of course, there is also the impact of British colonialism to consider, but that will be taken up in the next section of the article.

“Early in the 13th century of the common era, a band of hardy hill men wandered into the eastern extremity of the Brahmaputra valley. These were the progenitors of the Ahoms. They are the offshoot of the great Tai or Shan race” (Gait, 1926: 70). The Ahoms originate from a region somewhere in the extreme southwest of China or the extreme north of Burma. The Ahoms appear in Assam under the leadership of Sukapha, who was a Shan prince of the Tiger clan of the Mao kingdom. The Mao kingdom was an ethnic state covering territories on the frontiers of Yunnan China, Burma, and part of Northeast India. According to historical records, Sukapha entered Assam with a retinue of 9,000 family members, advisers, warriors, and servants. Therefore, as history points out, Sukapha came to Assam as a strong-minded prince with a clear sense of

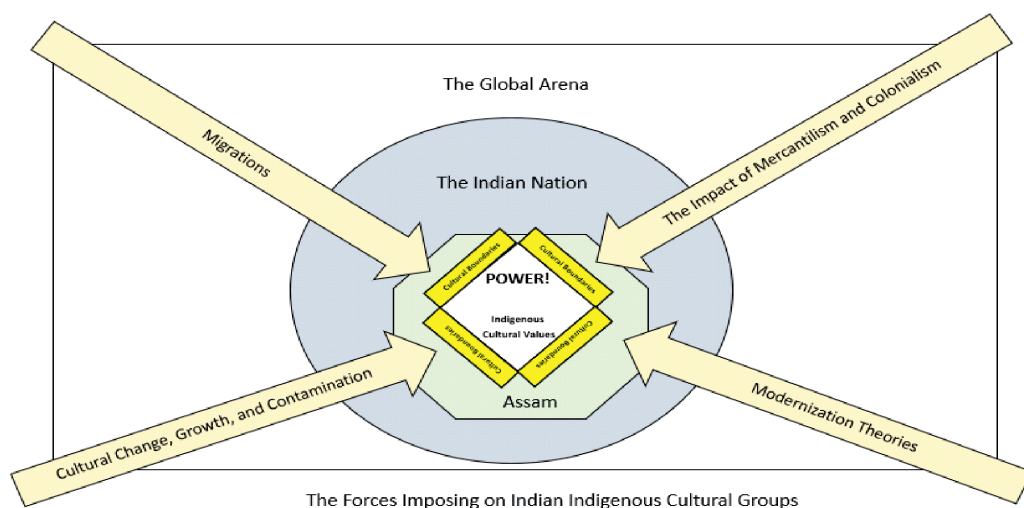


Figure 1: An illustration of the types of external forces imposing on an indigenous cultural group. The drawing also illustrates that it is the cultural values, heritage, and identity of the cultural group that enables it to withstand these external pressures

social development. However, there are some historical accounts that suggest that the 9,000 people were a part of the ongoing migration of Sino-Tibetan and Tai people into Northeast India. There are also mixed accounts regarding the intentions of Sukapha. According to some accounts, Sukapha used diplomatic means to gain the respect of the local indigenous people, who increasingly began to admire him. However, they gradually moved south and west, trying to find a place to establish a kingdom. This infringed on the territories of other established chieftains, which resulted in violent conflict and Sukapha had to move from place to place in order to find a place to settle until he eventually settled in Assam. “It may be mentioned here that the Ahoms called Assam Mungdunsunkham, which means the country full of golden gardens” (Gait, 1926: 79).

It is also important to note that following the establishment of the Ahom empire in the northeast and the Kamapura empire in the south, there were Islamic attempts at infiltration during the classical period. As a result of constant raids, an Islamic colony was established in the Kamapura region of Assam. That is to say that it should be noted that activities regarding the infamous Silk Road were having an impact on Assam’s ethnic population. A route for the silk road passed through Kamarupa, the ancient silk route through which there were trade connections with Kamarupa (as Assam was known then) as part of a trade route between West and Central Asia and Southwest China. This route attracted the attention of Islamic leaders in the West, who used it as a route to China. Consequently, this initiated “Another wave of fateful interactions

between settled indigenous people and a new intruding ethnic and religious group with economic, political, and military ambitions differing completely from those of the established inhabitants (Karr, 1970: 67). One of the Islamic leaders this route attracted the attention of was none other than the founder of the Mughal Empire, Zahiruddin Muhammad *Babur*. Babur seized many of the localities along the *western* silk road route and then turned east until he reached India (Dale, 2018: 29–30, 95–103, & 119–129). However, it wasn't until they had established a stronghold in Bengal that the Mughals attempted to gain complete control over the trade route through Assam to other parts of the region and into China. This increased the Islamic migrations into the region to the point that the Mughals overthrew parts of Kamarupa, displaced the local people, and became the majority population in several parts of Assam.

Therefore, there were four forces (socio-cultural and socio-political in nature) shaping the dynamics of Assam during antiquity and throughout the classical period. The first was adjustments to the waves of migrations from the north and northeast and, as well, the Indo-Aryan migrations from the west and northwest. The second was the impact of a dynastic influence situated in the vicinity of what is now Guwahati that encouraged establishing a Brahmanical system, which meant a notion of society and social status as was prescribed in the Laws of Manu. The third was a dynastic influence in the northeast of Assam and the southern dynasties that aimed to establish administrative rule over the region. And the fourth is the struggle of the earliest indigenous people of the region to maintain cultural integrity in the midst of all of this.

Assam's Indigenous Cultural Values Acted as a Unifying and Liberating Force during the Medieval and Colonial Era

The Bodo found themselves facing threats on almost all sides. Their longstanding pursuit of self-determination and autonomy caused friction with the Ahom empire, which resulted in an effort to bring them under submission. It was this conflict that forced the Bodo-Kachari branch to take refuge in Cachar. The Bodo-Kachari established settlements in the Cachar, practiced agricultural activity, continued their traditional practice of showing reverence for nature and attuning themselves to harmonious interaction with nature, established a form of governance, and demonstrated a propensity for holistic well-being and personal and social harmony (Ahmed, 2014: 244). Cachar and the North Cachar hills border with the Khasi-Jaintia and the Barail hills to the north; the hills of Manipur to the east; and the hills of Mizo and Tripura to the south. On the western side are the plains of Bengal. The interactions between Cachar and the Bengal Plains resulted in the two being cojoined in several respects. This means that the region between Cachar and the Bengal Plains was often regarded as a linked social and cultural sphere.

The extreme south portion of Assam was in proximity to unique Bengali socio-cultural and socio-political dynamics. This proximity subjected the Bodo-Kachari to additional socio-cultural, political, and religious influences. For thousands of years, the region was known as a transitional hub of cultural, ethnic, socio-political, and religious migrations, which shaped the unique ethnology of the region. For example, in the early medieval period, the region was dominated by the Baro-Bhuyan zamindars. The term Baro-Bhuyan zamindars refers to a number of autonomous chieftains and feudal landowners who were active in the region between Assam and Bengal. And, it seems, the Baro-Bhuyan confederacy was made up of chieftains from both Assam and Bengal. Eventually, the Mughals invaded the region and established a significant presence in the plains between Cachar and Bengal. Finally, the Burmese were making inroads into Assam from the north, which the combined resistance of the local people could not repel. Therefore, it was only with the help of the British, who had established mercantile activities under the East Indian Company, that the Burmese could be defeated. Subsequently, the British began to increase their influence in the region until, ultimately, they established India as a British colony.

This motivated the Bodo-Kachari of the Cashar region of Assam to endeavor to find a source of power (or a source of empowerment) that would enable them to withstand the onslaught of the impositions that were beginning to overwhelm them. They found such empowerment by committing to a set of constitutive principles that they believed could shape their future in a more progressive way. Constitutive means that when evoked (especially during a crisis), people realize that they would prefer (or that it is better) to live in accordance with such principles and values. Thus, constitutive means that the principles and values have social power in that people begin to rely on such principles in order to experience a better life. In other words, such values and principles have the power to bring about the type of social reality people hope for because they serve as a force for transforming hopes into the types of social action that shapes social reality. And, as we will see in the next section of the article, the principles continue to be regarded as progressive because they indicate what it means to practice participatory governance. However, in the case of the Bodo-Kachari of the Cachar region, those principles and values were influenced by the culture and heritage of the indigenous people of the region.

This is then evidence of a second time that the indigenous people drew from their heritage to establish a unifying force. The unifying force was the outcome of two things. First, Cachar represented a synthesized mixture of Bodo-Kachari, Brahmanical, Bengali, and the cultural principles and values of the indigenous people of Assam, which served as a unifying force. Second, the solidarity of the intercultural groups was reinforced by intermarriage as a practice for establishing and/or strengthening alliances.

Consequently, there were significant attempts at establishing progressive, stable, and somewhat autonomous socio-cultural practices in the region. The positive interactions generated a progressive strategy for multi-level governance shaped by a blend of traditional practices and the established Raja bureaucratic system. One such example is the khel system. “The fundamental operational principle of this system was a number of persons connected by voluntary association. By the development of this system, they practically obtained a constitution, which in quiet times was sufficient to protect them from all interference on the part of royal officials” (Hunter, 1975: 395). Where in other indigenous villages and communities the people were bound together by kinship and ethnicity, the members of the khel system of Cachar were joined together by voluntary association. However, khels formed a particularly significant form of social activity because they can be described as examples of self-determination.

Another form of positive and somewhat progressive dynamics was established in the form of several types of syncretism that were unique to the region. The Bodo-Kachari found that there was a compatibility between their own cultural convictions and reverence for nature and the Brahmanical traditional reverence for Shiva. Shiva, according to legend, actually has his abode on the slopes of the mountainous Himalayan region of North India. In addition, he prefers the wilderness and forests and is sometimes portrayed as a rustic dreadlock. The cult of nature reverence, in association with Siva, was widely popular in Cachar. However, there was a community of Brahmins who sought to curb its predominance amongst the indigenous people, because such practices were regarded as too liberal, providing too many privileges and too much status to the indigenous people. The Brahmins also felt that the reverence for Sakti, who was Siva’s female counterpart, had become too closely affiliated with the Tantric practices of the Kirat indigenous people of the mountainous parts of the region (Malakar, 2014: 138–139). Consequently, a member of the Baro-Bhuyan communities of Assam, as a result of a deep sense of anguish over the social and moral conditions of the people, developed poetic, theatric, philosophical, and other artistic socio-religious expressions to elevate (and/or liberate) the life experience of the people. This movement initiated Eka Sarana Naam Dharma. The Eka Sarana Naam Dharma became popular because it promoted the social practice of equal respect regardless of status and ushered in a strong sense of fraternity, equality, and the rule of the people. This movement played a great role in generating a sense of unity, solidarity, and a strong sense of social justice. In other words, the spirit of reform was strengthened in the minds and hearts of the people in the region.

Ultimately, this intercourse between Assam and Bengal ushered in what historically came to be known as a renaissance, or a type of awakening that was regarded as a new discourse for reform. And, as well, those principles found favor with (or were compatible

with) the other social groups of the region. Thus, the Bodo-Kachari aroused a strong and deep-rooted desire for self-determination. They began organizing themselves on the basis of principles and practices of Bodo culture (e.g., natural rights, social justice, and equality), which they proclaimed “Are derived from the nature of existence itself” (Narzary & Miller, 2023: 132). The mingling of the Bodo-Kachari with the clans and ethnic groups in the region strengthened their movement and also served to uplift the spirits of the other social groups and spark the vision of freedom. Thus, the indigenous cultural groups began to assemble themselves to make decisions regarding their well-being. Such associations, like Rajj-mel, had the characteristic of being true democratic institutions that were open to everyone, irrespective of caste, gender, and ethnicity. This vision and spirit aroused in the hearts and minds of the indigenous people a power that enabled them to face and withstand the brutal resistance coming from several sides. Therefore, some of the earliest stages of the independence movement occurred in this region, with organized freedom fighters being active as early as 1832 following the British announcement that it would formally annex Cachar, making it part of the British dominion.

The Struggle Continues! Indigenous People’s Struggle for Self-Determination given the Challenge of Techno-Economic Determinism

Certainly, to provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of ongoing migrations, the attempt of the empire builders to bring indigenous people, their land, and the resources of their land under their authority and control, and ultimately the disruptive impact of colonialization on the culture, land, and resources of indigenous people would indeed require a book. Thus, the aim of this article is not to squeeze an explanation of thousands of years of imposition into a brief summary. History, the progression of civilization, notions of Modernity, and colonialism have not been kind to indigenous people; this is certain. However, the aim of this article, in response to the facts of history, is twofold: first, to employ an ethnographic approach to analyzing the plight of indigenous people (using the indigenous people of Assam and the Bodo cultural group in particular as an example); and second, to point out that a part of the problem stems from an ill-informed perspective on cultural and political anthropology that has persisted until recently, thus ill-informed views on human, social, and sustainable development have shaped approaches to development until recently. This concluding section of the article points back to the unifying and liberating force generated from the principles and values of indigenous people and points ahead to consider the role these values and principles play in enabling humanity to address and resolve some of its most perplexing problems and, as well, to the prospect that contemporary state-of-the-art views on cultural and political anthropology will enable us to take a better-informed approach to intercultural

relations, ensuring the rights of indigenous people to self-determination, drawing from indigenous knowledge to establish a more effective participatory approach to multi-level governance, and planning for sustainability.

There are countries where the indigenous people or the aboriginal people no longer exist; they are extinct. In many places where they still exist, they only make up between 3 and 10 percent of the population. And there are places where the indigenous population has become mixed with the dominant population. In such places, as many as 30% of the population would say they are mixed. So, imagine that it is possible today to go to a country and have a hard time seeing any indigenous people. Given this fact, it is possible to argue that the diminishing population of the indigenous population corresponds with the diminishing of our world's natural resources, thus the deterioration of our environment and atmosphere. This has particularly been true as a result of the impact of Western expansionism, colonialism, and mercantilism, which aimed at supplying the natural resources needed to fuel the industrial revolution. At the end of the colonial period (following World War II) and during the decolonial movement, indigenous cultures were subject to increasing globalization, the modernization economic development agenda, and the impact of powerful international corporations. An emphasis is placed on the fact that such assumptions about social evolution and intercultural relations emerged at a time in the rise of Modernity when anthropology had not yet developed as a distinct academic field. Therefore, assumptions about social evolution and intercultural relations lacked theoretical and methodological insights from contemporary cultural and political anthropology.

One of the most historically well-documented periods of imposition in Assam occurred during British colonial rule. In accordance with the anthropological issues addressed in this article, it should be noted that the British were ill-informed in terms of their understanding of cultural and political anthropology and thus intercultural relations, although informed by the established views at the time. Views on cultural anthropology were influenced by a British scholar who was actually an official in India for several years helping to establish policy, Sir Henry James Sumner Maine. He was the vice chancellor of the University of Calcutta and was awarded the Most Exalted Order of the Star of India and the Fellowship of the Royal Society. He later went on to become a chair professor at the University of Oxford. Maine claimed that all cultures pass through stages from primitive to advanced. This implied that the British (an advanced society) were in a position to lead India toward successfully achieving development. Views on political anthropology were influenced by the British political philosopher Thomas Hobbes and his theory of the original state of nature. Hobbes proclaimed that advanced societies rescue humanity from the perils of life in the original state of nature. He viewed people in the original position as being asocial, aggressive, and each a threat

to the other. Hobbes influenced an approach to intercultural relations called Realism, which prescribed that the threat of the other must either be controlled or eliminated. Therefore, Hobbes believed that to eliminate the threat imposed by the tribal stage of social existence authorities should have absolute power, which includes the use of coercive force. Thus, authoritative power rescues humanity from the original state of nature and enables people to live under government.

Therefore, the prominent view of progress in the West was a linear progression from an undeveloped state (i.e., one that is old-fashioned and out of date) to one that is modern, advanced, and up-to-date. And no doubt, the assumption is that, as we move ahead into the near future, technology will be regarded as the main driver of progress (including Industry 4.0, artificial intelligence, and even robotics). But the most aboriginal or indigenous cultures persist in determining what is best for their cultural existence in terms of circular patterns. They believe that there are certain values and traditions that are handed down and should be passed on unchanged. It is this pattern of unchanged traditions that ensures the perpetual strength, vitality, and survival of their culture. This impact of powerful international techno-economic forces can subject indigenous cultures to determinism in two respects. Indigenous cultures are faced with the fact that very powerful macro-level forces can subject them to the developed world's notion of development. The mounting environmental, climate, and virus problems not only threaten indigenous cultures but further subject them to the direction of the most technologically advanced countries for a solution (see figure 2 below). For example, there are increasingly indigenous cultures where the young people admonish that the current crises can only be managed by adopting the patterns of technologically advanced countries. However, the older generation admonishes that it is breaking with the traditional patterns of their heritage that put them in this situation, and if they continue on this path, they will only be more deeply trapped.

This creates a unique challenge for indigenous cultures in that they have to discern how to not only respond in a way that reinforces the complementary connection between the culture and the natural forces that surround the culture but they must also devise an effective response to the powerful technological forces that are responsible for creating the current reality imposed on indigenous cultures (Miller, 2018: 89). Indigenous cultures can only adjust to the current challenges by establishing effective boundary protection mechanisms. However, the culture also must consider to what type of growth is required in order to adjust to the impositions of powerful techno-economic forces (Onuf, 2007: xiii). Culture is defined as an organized and systematic strategy for structuring social relations so as to effectively manage the complicated processes involved in the interchange between its members and the surrounding system(s). Therefore, a culture is subject to influences that it did not constitute but are

able to influence its system—thus a culture can be challenged by the need to establish an effective response to forces that could otherwise threaten the flourishing of the culture. To withstand the forces that could diminish the vitality of the culture, a social group institutionalizes principles, values, and structural systems that serve as functional strategies for maintaining equilibrium (i.e., the endeavor to maintain a complementary integration between the culture and its environment). “Equilibrium is a fundamental reference point for analyzing the processes by which a system either comes to terms with the exigencies imposed by a changing environment without essential change in its own structure or fails to come to terms and undergoes other processes, such as structural change [and/or] dissolution as a boundary-maintaining system” (Parsons, 2007: 423 & 426).

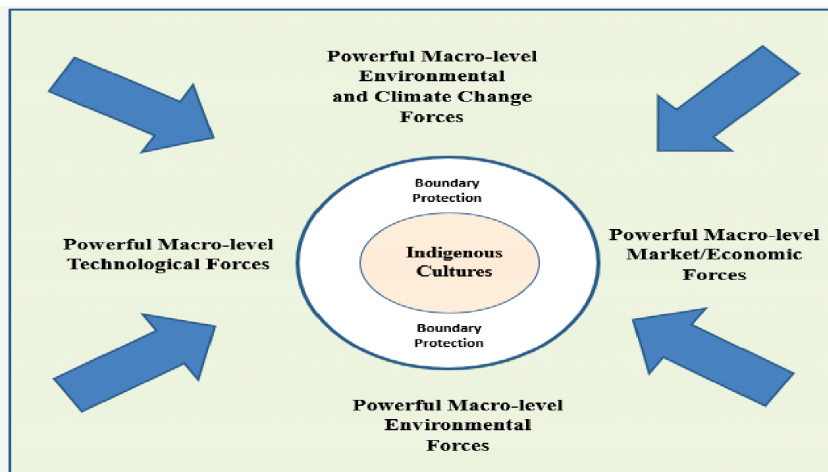


Figure 2: Figure two illustrates the powerful techno-economic, environmental, and climate challenges that indigenous cultures must form some type of adjustment to

What, then, is the possibility of recompense for the dilemma indigenous cultures find themselves in given the historical and contemporary challenges they are confronted with? Solace can be found in the fact that there is in the cultural principles, values, and practices of indigenous cultures a model for shaping improved relations between themselves and public authorities (thus, when put into practice, contributes to their efforts for self-determination) and, as well, a model for sustainability (thus, how to play a significant role in the regional and national aims to achieve the UN’s Sustainability Agenda).

The struggle of indigenous people for self-determination is often regarded as necessitating a conflictual relationship with the government and authorities. However, self-determination can also be thought of as living in accordance with “The various

things [individuals and social groups] value doing or being” (Sen, 1999: 75). By thinking in this way, freedom and/or self-determination can be achieved by individuals and social groups being empowered to live in accordance with their chosen values and principles. In fact, in the analysis of Bodo culture as an example of a struggle for determination, it was discovered that those principles are not only rooted in their heritage but, at various stages of history, served as a unifying force. When applied to contemporary challenges, those principles represent a viable approach to cooperating within local community groups to implement a proven effective and viable approach to self-determination, which enables individuals and social groups to realize what they aspire to do and/or be. That to say that “The exercise of freedom is mediated by values, but the values in turn are influenced by social interactions, which are themselves influenced by participatory freedoms. Such an approach also allows us to acknowledge the role of cultural values and prevailing mores, which can influence the freedoms that people enjoy and have reason to treasure” (Sen, 1999: 9). Therefore, “Reconciliation [or recompense] begins with taking steps toward instituting a contemporary approach to social formation that integrates Bodo cultural values with a cultural value approach to freedom and the social networking approach to creating public value (Miller, 2017: 35).

In the Bodo case, this means being committed to the principle that living in accordance with the forces shaping the natural order (i.e., natural law) is the basis for realizing their natural rights. Those forces are described as (e.g., the natural forces of Hailong, Agrang, Khwila, Sanjabwrlee, and Rajkhumbree). This means that by living in accordance with their understanding of natural law, Bodo people practice respect for the human rights of each individual and the sense of mutuality that accompanies it. In contemporary social practices, this means implementing a form of multi-level governance known as the Village Council Development Committee (i.e., a grassroots-level self-governing body). This practice is based on a form of self-governance that was initiated during the Vedic period called Panchayat Raj. It’s a unique type of participatory governance system where participants discuss and forward their decisions to higher authority. By applying a strategy for social formation that integrates traditional practices with contemporary strategies for empowering individuals and social groups to live in accordance with their most cherished values, indigenous people create “Futuristic-type administrative zones that are exempt from conflict, operate on the basis of public policy and authority that is compatible with the state-of-the-art model of good governance, and resolve what heretofore was the seeming incompatibility of the interests of the multi-level stakeholders” (Miller, 2017: 36).

By applying this state-of-the-art strategy, the indigenous people of the region have the opportunity to cooperate with public officials to establish an operative model based on the vision of the founding father of India. In this respect, the values and principles

of the indigenous people would once again serve as a unifying force. This reverses the notion that the indigenous population is involved in an oppositional relationship with the government. In fact, both indigenous people and public authorities mutually engage in a common struggle to resist oppression, domination, gender discrimination, injustice, and a denial of human rights. It is by applying this approach to realize their right to self-determination that they put into place a strategy for empowering the members of their community to experience the highest good possible by means of organized social action and, as well, to experience sustained happiness and social well-being (Aristotle, 1998: 192–193; Cicero, 2004: 38–43 & 83–86; & Confucius, 2005: 12).

When countries around the world committed themselves to the post-World War II economic development agenda, the indigenous people of their societies were they often regarded as holding back the pace of national development. This was because indigenous people persisted in their traditional sustainability practices. However, with the switch from the economic development paradigm to the sustainability discourse, there is increased recognition of the value of indigenous knowledge and the compatibility between indigenous sustainability practices and regional, national, and international attempts to plan growth in accordance with the UN Sustainability Agenda. This means that there is increased recognition that, rather than holding a society back, indigenous knowledge and sustainability practices offer a viable way of moving the society forward. Such knowledge is often intimately tied to local social organizations, their socio-economic practices, religious beliefs, sense of eco-aesthetics, ritual observances, and material culture (UNESCO, 2009, p. 40).

In terms of the indigenous people of Assam (Bodo culture in particular), cooperating with regional, national, and international stakeholders to implement strategies in line with the UN Sustainability Agenda establishes a complementary link between the cultural practices and values of Bodo people and the endeavor to establish a means of remedying problems caused by the prior approach to development. The traditional ecological knowledge of Bodo culture—which has proven for centuries to be successful as a model of sustainability—could be a viable basis for establishing an effective approach to social and economic growth while, at the same time, establishing greater cooperation with regional, national, and international stakeholders.

In this respect, rather than being regarded as holding back economic development, the indigenous knowledge of Bodo culture becomes a viable model of a futuristic approach to improving human, social, and economic conditions. In other words, Bodo culture has the potential to establish a unique futuristic model of growth that balances material prosperity with harmonious and beneficial nature-human interactions and a harmonious blend of human artifacts and that create eco-aesthetic harmony. This would then be an additional instance where the cultural values and principles of Bodo

culture act as a unifying force that integrates the interests of local, regional, national, and international stakeholders. This contemporary unifying force acts to establish cooperation and collaboration between local indigenous people, regional authorities, and international economists in an effort to co-create constructively disruptive-type sustainable eco-innovations that provide social economic benefit by converting imperfections in performance and practice into wealth-generating opportunities. This approach proposes that indigenous knowledge has the potential to shape the future of the region into “A harmonious blend of nature, people, and sustainability innovations. Thus, the strategy provides knowledge of how to transform unsustainable social and economic conditions into practices that upgrade both the eco-aesthetic features and social-economic conditions of society” (Miller 2023, 49 & 50).

Conclusion

The article underscores the harsh effects that historical and contemporary forces have had on indigenous peoples. These forces have caused considerable pressure and threats to their ways of life, leading to disruptions in their cultural integrity and existence. Indigenous cultures are grappling with external impositions that threaten their traditional ways of life. This struggle is marked by efforts to manage and resist changes imposed by powerful external forces that challenge their autonomy and identity. The experience of the Bodo people in Assam is used as a case study to illustrate the broader issues faced by indigenous communities. The Bodo culture has been impacted by external pressures and the efforts made to preserve and assert their cultural identity. By offering a theoretical model and analyzing the situation through various anthropological lenses, it seeks to advance the discourse on how to effectively support and sustain indigenous communities in the face of external challenges.

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