
UNIT 4 TRIBE AS A POLITICAL IDENTITY

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVE

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- discuss ‘tribe’ in South Asia;
- examine the relation between ‘tribe’ and ethnicity;
- analyse the relation between ‘tribe’ and class; and
- identify the relation between ‘tribe’, politics and development.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

‘Tribe’ is generally understood as a social anthropological classification of human society. The use of the concept of ‘tribe’ in South Asia can be traced to the colonial period (i.e. anthropology as practiced by British/Europeans in South Asia). In fact, ‘tribe’ can be considered an output of colonial anthropology. One of the fundamental assumptions that 19th century colonial anthropology premised itself upon was that of human evolution, modern industrial Europe being the most developed stage of evolution till the period. It was assumed that one can locate a general principle in the change in the nature of society and its organization along politico-economic, cultural or social lines over long duration of time. In that scheme of change, a society from a hunting gathering stage would evolve into that of tribe which would then evolve into that of state society (whether republic or monarchy). Further, it was also assumed that industrialism as a socio-economic system was the most developed form of state society and that every society would or ought to progress towards an industrial society.

The classification of ‘tribe’ in colonial anthropology came to be associated with the notion of primitive or backward. There were other classifications of people that were also carried out. For example, there were classifications along lines of religion, language, or region. To be noted is that one of the basic problems with classification of ‘tribe’ was to be found in the other types of classifications as well, viz. the parameters of classification were misconstrued in many cases. Classification requires that types or the units be identifiable under strict set of markers. In the case of South Asia, there was substantial overlapping of markers

of one type or unit with others. For example, many 'tribes' practiced wet rice cultivation like 'peasants' or traditions being significantly oral (i.e. culturally less developed than written) was a characteristic of not only the 'tribes' but also of most other communities in South Asia because of the history of written – oral continuum rather than cultures being exclusively oral or written. In a historically ancient and extremely heterogeneous society, the process of homogenizing of the society under codes of classification was fraught with problems. In the case of 'tribe' particularly, what constituted 'primitiveness' emerged as a problem. Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that the problems of classification did not affect colonial anthropology, its assumptions and its practices. The problems came up as critique of colonial anthropology in the post colonial studies in/on South Asia.

In contemporary period, therefore, 'tribe' has come to be seen increasingly not as a stage of evolution of human society but more as a type, i.e. as a specific nature of social organization, among numerous other types. In most cases, 'tribe' is still used to refer to social groups or societies that were termed thus in colonial anthropology. However, it is increasingly shown that to assume that a general principle of socio-economic or political and cultural existence characterizes 'tribes' across the subcontinent is problematic. Different 'tribes' carry their different markers of socio-economic or political and cultural existence. For example, in the case of many 'tribes' of North East India, the processes of middle class formation can be significantly located. In other words, class formation is not external to 'tribe', quite unlike that any prescriptive features of 'tribe' would argue. Further, even in terms of UN Human Development Index of education, health, or standard of living, many of the 'tribes' of North East India show indices higher than populations that are not 'tribes' in the other parts of the country. Thereby, it is evident that the prescriptive relation that any evolutionary model would emphasize between 'tribe and 'primitiveness' would be of little explanatory value in this regard. However, these markers may be absent for 'tribes' that are to be found in other parts of the country.

In the subsequent sections, we shall highlight some of the important distinctive markers of socio-economic or political and cultural existence of various 'tribes' across India and based on it, we shall focus on three cases of differences with regard to relation between 'tribe' and political identity.

4.2 TRIBE, ETHNICITY AND POLITICAL IDENTITY

In this section, we shall try to understand the relation between tribe and ethnicity in politics and identity politics that develops through this relation. This nature of politics is particularly to be seen in North East India (which covers the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and Sikkim). One of the notable characteristics of 'tribe' and contemporary politics in the region is that of ethnic or ethnic-nationalist politics. The significant point that is evident, therefore, is that the feature of 'primitiveness' that colonial anthropology emphasized for 'tribe' play little role in the politics of identity in the region. Further, it will be also evident subsequently that the various politics of identity among the 'tribes' do not generally follow the same or similar trajectory. For example, identity politics among the 'tribes' of Assam could differ markedly from that to be found in Nagaland. In other words, attempts at identifying general principle of 'tribal' politics in the region could be problematic.

If the case of Assam, more appropriately the area of the Brahmaputra valley, is taken into account, it is possible to distinguish two kinds of politics of identity vis-à-vis 'tribe' in the 20th century, viz. (a) 'tribe' and identity politics within the larger framework of Assamese identity, and (b) 'tribe' and identity politics as critique of Assamese identity. In the first kind of identity politics, the distinct political identity of 'tribe' was conceptualized within the larger Assamese identity. For example, the various 'tribes' like Deuri, Chutiya, Moran and others can be taken as examples of this process. The larger Assamese identity was seen as constitutive of multiple smaller identities. In the latter case, political identity of a 'tribe' is conceptualized as critique and/or exclusive of the larger Assamese identity. The example of politics of Bodo identity may be suggested in this regard. There are two notable points vis-à-vis the two kinds of identity politics noted above, viz. (a) region, and (b) historical context.

With regard to region, it can be pointed out that if the valley is divided into two broad region of central to eastern Assam and western Assam (both in the valley of Brahmaputra), the two kinds of politics already noted can be also meaningfully placed in this spatial division of the area. The identity politics of 'tribes' historically in the area of central to eastern Assam has had ascribed to the concept of larger Assamese identity constituted by numerous smaller political identities of 'tribes'. In contrast, identity politics of exclusion or critique of Assamese identity has had a more visible history in the area of western Assam. It is to be noted that for much of the colonial and post colonial periods, the two spatial divisions have also existed as two cultural-economic divisions of the valley, the former having secured greater benefits of the processes of modernization and nation building than the latter during the period. This can be also seen from the process of middle class formation historically more predominant in central to eastern Assam (importantly even among the 'tribes') than western Assam. It is possible, therefore, to highlight that though 'tribe' as political identity and as a politics can be found in both the areas of the valley, their nature differs (or has historically differed) depending upon their respective spatial-cultural-economic location in the valley.

The specificity of historical time in understanding different nature of 'tribe' and identity politics can also be emphasized herein. In the preceding discussion, we have seen what role spatial-cultural-economic location of an area play in the nature of 'tribe' and identity politics. In this context, one may also focus on the content of that critique of Assamese identity. Importantly, the primary content of the critique of Assamese identity was that of cultural and political marginalization rather than economic. However, the 'tribes' of western Assam were not the only constituency that made that cultural and political critique of Assamese identity. Due to the shift in the foci of regional predominance in the valley since the colonial period, the critique against the construct of Assamese identity also came from other quarters, for example, cultural zones. However, among these various constituencies of critique that emerged in the course of the 20th century, it was that which came from the 'tribe' (for example, Bodo 'tribe') that consolidated itself into a significant politics. The cultural zones did not become consolidated into a politics in the valley. Two reasons have been generally forwarded to explain this phenomenon, viz. (a) social composition of the valley, and (b) role of the state. With regard to nature of social composition in the valley, majority of the population in the valley, including that in western Assam, were classified into 'tribes' by the colonial state. They were 'tribes' in colonial anthropology not in

terms of 'primitiveness', but because they followed kinship structure and social relations based on it which were not caste based as was to be found in many other parts of South Asia. In this given context of social composition, the state from colonial to post colonial times have had consistently found 'tribe' a cognizant constituency vis-à-vis cultural zones. The legitimacy that the politics of ethnicity (i.e. political identity of specific or unique socio-cultural groups) gained vis-à-vis other kinds of politics in the course of the 20th century was also related to the political conceptualization of the valley along lines of 'tribe' and the practices of the state (for example, the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution that allows for 'tribal' self government councils) that legitimized the politics. In other words, what we see is that historical context played a crucial role in the politics of 'tribal' identity emerging as a legitimate critique of Assamese identity rather than other kinds of politics that also existed in the same locale.

In the above discussion of 'tribe' as political identity, we focused on how political identity of 'tribe' could exist or emerge as constitutive of a larger identity (i.e. Assamese identity) as well as critique of the same larger identity depending upon locale and its historical specificity. In contrast, however, the case of the Naga 'tribes' (Nagaland) could be taken as a different example of relation that could exist between 'tribe' and political identity in North East India. It is not that Naga 'tribes' have over the span of last six decades struggled for independence from the Union of India that could be significance in this discussion. Of significance in this discussion would be the possibility of politics of 'tribal' nationalism that the Naga case highlights. In most discussions of nationalism premised upon Western scholarship, 'tribe' and nationalism were conceptual incongruities. The stage of social evolution that the politics of nationalism required was higher than the stage of 'tribe'. Nationalist politics of the Naga 'tribes', both in the colonial and the post colonial periods, have shown that the disjuncture drawn between 'tribe' and nationalism could be a conceptual flaw. The case of Naga nationalism has highlighted that loyalty along lines of tribe/kinship need not necessarily be impediments to politics of nationalism. In this regard, therefore, 'tribe' (or kinship) becomes a constituent of the larger unifying political identity of nation. It is to be noted here that political unity among the various Naga 'tribes' is an entirely modern political development of the 20th century.

The case of Naga nationalism is also unique in another context. Firstly, the process of middle class formation among the various Naga 'tribes' has been evident throughout the 20th century. However, the role of politics along lines of tribe within the larger politics of nationhood has also been predominant. Therefore, Naga nationalism could not be seen as only the manifestation of middle class identity politics, as has been argued in many cases vis-à-vis studies of other parts of South Asia. Further, the classification of 'tribe' attributed to the Naga people could also stand problematic, especially in the contemporary times. In terms of indices of standard of living such as health, education or incidence of poverty, Naga 'tribes' give better indices than many other communities both 'tribe' and non-'tribe' in the rest of India (i.e., excluding North East India). Therefore, if the above three factors of middle class formation, politics of 'tribe' within the larger politics of nationhood and better indices of development, are taken into consideration, the politics of Naga nationalism emerges a more complex political development than a mere case of collection of 'tribes' under the euphemism of nation. Despite multiplicity of 'tribes' and their respective polities,

the simultaneous role of Christianity and nationalist consciousness made possible the unique case of Naga nationalism. The location of the Naga people at the frontier of the country facilitates the dimension of struggle for independence from the Union of India.

Check your progress 1

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each:

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

1) Give an example of 'tribal' nationalism in detail.

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2) What role does locale and its historical context play in 'tribe' and identity politics?

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4.3 TRIBE, CLASS AND POLITICAL IDENTITY

In the previous section, we have seen the relation between 'tribe' and ethnicity vis-à-vis political identity. We have also seen that there could be multiple processes of identity formation and identity politics within a same region or area in this regard depending upon the specifics of the locale and its historical context. In this section, we shall focus on the politics of 'tribe' and class that is found in contemporary central India. In the post colonial period in India, Naxal politics emerged as a significant kind of politics. It is commonly referred to as Naxalism or Naxalite movement. The name was derived from the Naxalbari area of present West Bengal, where the movement started in late 1960s. Socialist in nature, the Naxal movement emerged as a powerful movement for land re-distribution among the poor farmers. By the late 1970s, the Naxal movement petered out in West Bengal. However, it grew in strength in areas outside West Bengal in the subsequent decades.

It is generally argued that the Naxal movement in the contemporary period has a social base of 'tribal' population of Central – Eastern India. There have been two approaches vis-à-vis why they constitute a 'tribal' population. Firstly, the colonial anthropology notified them as 'tribal' based on 'primitiveness' and the role of kinship structure in their socio-economic organization. In post colonial

period, 'tribal' has been generally seen in terms of the latter criterion than the former.

The 'tribal' population of Central–Eastern India presently constitutes the primary social base of the Naxal movement. Further, the movement is based on the principle of violent revolution rather than non-violent methods of politics. As a movement with popular base, the Naxalite movement exposes the irony of development in Central–Eastern India. Rich in forest and mineral resource, the majority of the 'tribal' population of the area have benefited little from the twin resources. Two aspects of the twin resource use needs to be emphasized in this regard. Firstly, with regard to extraction of mineral resource (such as iron ore or copper), the role of the private sector has been significant, especially since the 1980s. The result of mineral exploration and extraction in the area has been twofold. It has led to destruction of quality of soil for agriculture and gainful employment for the local population in the industrial exploration and extraction has been minimal. The area continues to be one of the major supply zones of migrant labour in India. As a result, there has been a massive pauperization of the local people in the area. The other resource, i.e. forest, constituted a major component of livelihood strategies of the population of the area. However, two hurdles have emerged in the use of forest as resource for the people. Firstly, expansion of the mineral industry has led to depletion of forest resource. Secondly, forest conservation has limited the access of forest as traditional resource for the local people. This process too has led to the impoverishment of the local people and thereby contributing to becoming the supply zone of migrant labour. It is in this context that the Naxal movement needs to be understood.

The Naxal movement is generally referred to as class politics because it is founded on the loss of control or access to (natural) resources that the local 'tribal' population has experienced. In this loss, as indicated earlier, the role of private capital and that of the state are involved. The politics that has emerged based on this economic loss of control is therefore considered an example of class politics, though with a 'tribal' social base. Numerous studies have shown that Naxal leadership, in the areas that they control, has devised methods of redistribution of surplus agrarian produce among the people. These studies have also shown that when seen from the perspective of the Indian state, the Naxal movement stands anti-state or 'illegal'. However, when seen in terms of its popular base, it appears an attempt to construct a polity through military means which is anti-capitalist in nature.

Herein, it could be important to make a comparison between 'tribe' as political identity as seen in Naxal case and in the cases of North East India discussed in the preceding section. As was evident in the cases of North East India (both Assam and Nagaland), economic deprivation or economic exploitation did not constitute the primary focus of the politics. The focus was of ethnicity. The fact that both the colonial and the post colonial state institutionalized 'tribe' as a political factor in the region facilitated the emergence of 'tribe' and ethnic politics. In the case of Central–Eastern India, 'tribe' though was institutionalized (the category of Schedule Tribe), it did not get institutionalized as a politics. On the contrary, it was class that came to characterize the politics of the people. One could also take into account the historical experience of the economic exploitation that the region had undergone since the colonial period. Mineral extraction as an industry commenced in the area in the 19th century itself. The large scale migration

of people from the area to various parts of South Asia as well as beyond (such as Caribbean plantations or plantations of Mauritius) as indentured labour (i.e. bonded labour) was also a result of loss of control and access to land and forest due to the expansion of the mineral industry. The economics of this historical experience played a major role in the difference of the politics of the region vis-à-vis that of North East India. Another point to be noted is that politically the region (Central – Eastern India) has been active since the colonial period, including anti-colonial agitations. However, the nature of the politics had generally been based on methods of violence. It is evident, therefore, that mobilization of the ‘tribal’ population along political lines of class by Naxal leadership in the region was possible due to its historical context of loss of control over resources and landlessness.

4.4 TRIBE, CLASS AND ETHNICITY

In the preceding discussion of this Unit, we have seen cases of (a) politics of ‘tribe’ and ethnicity and ‘tribal’ nationalism and (b) ‘tribe’ and politics of class. In this section, we shall focus on a case wherein a ‘tribe’ and its political identity display characteristics of both class and ethnicity in the construct of its identity. We will focus on the ‘tea tribes’ (i.e. tea plantation workers community) of Assam in this regard.

The tea plantation workers of Assam were imported into the valley, mostly between 1860s and first quarter of 20th century, under colonialism from central India. Imported primarily from the Chotanagpur area, the plantation workers population comprised of the various ‘tribes’ such as Oroans, Mundas and others that were and are still to be found in the area. The colonial state classified them as ‘tea tribes’ of Assam, a classification that continued to be used by the state even in the post colonial period. In the post colonial period, one of the most distinctive features of their plantation politics was that of trade union politics. In other words, the political mobilization of the workers was along lines of labour or working class politics. However, especially since the 1990s, changes in the nature of plantation politics became evident. The fundamental change was their political mobilization along lines of ethnicity, i.e. ‘Adivasi’, rather than labour or working class. As regards the content of the politics, similarities continued. For example, the primary protest in their politics continued to be their socio-economic exploitation in the plantation industry. The change was in the nature of political mobilization as a people in protest against their exploitation. It needs to be noted herein that the living conditions of the plantations workers in the industry have been historically abominable.

The question that has emerged from this change in nature of political mobilization has been that what caused or made possible the above change. It has been pointed out in this regard that the plantation workers as a community shared an intermediate process of identity formation in the plantations of Assam. Firstly, their working class consciousness was evident in their trade union political mobilization. However, the colonial plantation industry did not and could not destroy their pre-plantation socio-cultural modes of existence in the plantations. This was because (a) colonial planters found labour mobilization, both for recruitment and work, effective when practiced along lines of ‘tribe’ (i.e. along pre-plantation lines of social organization), and (b) due to the relative exclusion of plantation workers from the local society and due to the absence of local

society as part of the plantation labour force, earlier socio-cultural modes of existence became the means of social solidarity and society formation among the workers historically. As a result, despite their political mobilization as working class, they also bore the socio-cultural markers of ethnic identity. It is also evident, therefore, that the social constituency of plantation trade unionism could be 'tea tribes' as well.

Nevertheless, despite their peculiarity of social organization, it was only towards the 1990s that change of politics indicated earlier began to take shape. Two of the reasons that have been generally forwarded to explain the change are (a) the peculiar nature of society formation among the plantations workers, and (b) the increasing predominance of ethnic politics vis-à-vis other kinds of politics (viz. class or nationhood politics) since the 1990s in the Brahmaputra valley. Therefore, even though the content of 'Adivasi' politics continued to be protest against the socio-economic exploitative order of the plantation system, its political articulation and political mobilization began to show signs of ethnicity rather than class.

The case of 'tea tribes' of Assam and their identity politics can be taken as another example of specificity that the politics of 'tribe', 'tribalism', or 'tribal identity' bears depending upon its locale and historical context. In other words, 'tribe' as political identity in India cannot be classified into homogeneity. On the contrary, it shows multiple forms of identity formation depending upon spatial and historical specificities. This is especially of importance because as seen in the cases of the Brahmaputra valley and Nagaland, the multiplicity in the specifics of 'tribe' as political identity comes from the same region, viz. North East India, generally referred to as a relative homogeneity, wherein one politics of identity of 'tribe' is different from the other.

Check your progress 2

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each:

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

3) What is Naxal politics?

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4) Discuss an example of 'tribe' in which both ethnic and class politics can be located.

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4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we first discussed what a ‘tribe’ is and the role of colonial anthropology in instituting and institutionalizing the classification of ‘tribe’ in South Asia. We also discussed the drawbacks in the classification of ‘tribe’ as was practiced in colonial anthropology and the challenges that contemporary socio-economic parameters pose to that classification of ‘tribe’. In this Unit, we also discussed in detail how ‘tribe’ as political identity varies in contemporary India across regions. We took up for detailed study three areas/cases. Firstly we discussed the nature of relation between ‘tribe’, ethnicity and identity politics in Assam. The discussion further focussed on ‘tribe’ and nationalism in Nagaland. Secondly, the discussion centered on the Naxal movement in Central – eastern India wherein the politics of ‘tribe’ is primarily in terms of class. Thirdly, we discussed the case of ‘tea tribes’ of Assam. It was shown how the political mobilization of the ‘tea tribes’ has been both along lines of class as well as ethnicity. This was due to the nature of social organization that they historically developed in the tea plantations of Assam. One of the central points that the unit has tried to highlight is that the specific nature of relation between ‘tribe’ and political identity depends upon the locale in question and the historical context of which the locale forms a part of.

4.6 GLOSSARY

Anthropology	:	study of the origin and customs of the mankind
Kinship	:	man or thing regarded as supreme in some way
Impediment	:	obstruction
UN	:	United Nation

4.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

- 1) In most discussions of nationalism premised upon Western scholarship, ‘tribe’ and nationalism were conceptual incongruities. The stage of social evolution that the politics of nationalism required was higher than the stage of ‘tribe’. Nationalist politics of the Naga ‘tribes’, both in the colonial and the post colonial periods, have shown that the disjuncture drawn between ‘tribe’ and nationalism could be a conceptual flaw. The case of Naga nationalism has highlighted that loyalty along lines of tribe/kinship need not necessarily be impediments to politics of nationalism. In this regard, therefore, ‘tribe’ (or kinship) becomes a constituent of the larger unifying political identity of nation. It is to be noted here that political unity among the various Naga ‘tribes’ is an entirely modern political development of the 20th century.

The case of Naga nationalism is also unique in another context. Firstly, the process of middle class formation among the various Naga ‘tribes’ has been evident throughout the 20th century. However, the role of politics along lines of tribe within the larger politics of nationhood has also been predominant. Therefore, Naga nationalism could not be seen as only the manifestation of middle class identity politics, as has been argued in many cases vis-à-vis studies of other parts of South Asia. Further, the classification of ‘tribe’

attributed to the Naga people could also stand problematic, especially in the contemporary times. In terms of indices of standard of living such as health, education or incidence of poverty, Naga 'tribes' give better indices than many other communities both 'tribe' and non-'tribe' in the rest of India (i.e., excluding North East India). Therefore, if the above three factors of middle class formation, politics of 'tribe' within the larger politics of nationhood and better indices of development, are taken into consideration, the politics of Naga nationalism emerges a more complex political development than a mere case of collection of 'tribes' under the euphemism of nation. Despite multiplicity of 'tribes' and their respective politics, the simultaneous role of Christianity and nationalist consciousness made possible the unique case of Naga nationalism. The location of the Naga people at the frontier of the country facilitates the dimension of struggle for independence from the Union of India.

- 2) The identity politics of 'tribes' historically in the area of central to eastern Assam has had ascribed to the concept of larger Assamese identity constituted by numerous smaller political identities of 'tribes'. In contrast, identity politics of exclusion or critique of Assamese identity has had a more visible history in the area of western Assam. It is to be noted that for much of the colonial and post colonial periods, the two spatial divisions have also existed as two cultural-economic divisions of the valley, the former having secured greater benefits of the processes of modernization and nation building than the latter during the period. This can be also seen from the process of middle class formation historically more predominant in central to eastern Assam (importantly even among the 'tribes') than western Assam. It is possible, therefore, to highlight that though 'tribe' as political identity and as a politics can be found in both the areas of the valley, their nature differs (or has historically differed) depending upon their respective spatial-cultural-economic location in the valley.

The specificity of historical time in understanding different nature of 'tribe' and identity politics can also be emphasized herein. In the preceding discussion, we have seen what role spatial-cultural-economic location of an area play in the nature of 'tribe' and identity politics. In this context, one may also focus on the content of that critique of Assamese identity. Importantly, the primary content of the critique of Assamese identity was that of cultural and political marginalization rather than economic. However, the 'tribes' of western Assam were not the only constituency that made that cultural and political critique of Assamese identity. Due to the shift in the foci of regional predominance in the valley since the colonial period, the critique against the construct of Assamese identity also came from other quarters, for example, cultural zones. However, among these various constituencies of critique that emerged in the course of the 20th century, it was that which came from the 'tribe' (for example, Bodo 'tribe') that consolidated itself into a significant politics. The cultural zones did not become consolidated into a politics in the valley. Two reasons have been generally forwarded to explain this phenomenon, viz. (a) social composition of the valley, and (b) role of the state. With regard to nature of social composition in the valley, majority of the population in the valley, including that in western Assam, were classified into 'tribes' by the colonial state. They were 'tribes' in colonial anthropology not in terms of 'primitiveness', but because they followed kinship structure and social relations based on it which were not caste based as was to be found in many other parts of South

Asia. In this given context of social composition, the state from colonial to post colonial times have had consistently found 'tribe' a cognizant constituency vis-à-vis cultural zones. The legitimacy that the politics of ethnicity (i.e. political identity of specific or unique socio-cultural groups) gained vis-à-vis other kinds of politics in the course of the 20th century was also related to the political conceptualization of the valley along lines of 'tribe' and the practices of the state (for example, the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution that allows for 'tribal' self government councils) that legitimized the politics. In other words, what we see is that historical context played a crucial role in the politics of 'tribal' identity emerging as a legitimate critique of Assamese identity rather than other kinds of politics that also existed in the same locale.

- 3) In the post colonial period in India, Naxal politics emerged as a significant kind of politics. It is commonly referred to as Naxalism or Naxalite movement. The name was derived from the Naxalbari area of present West Bengal, where the movement started in late 1960s. Socialist in nature, the Naxal movement emerged as a powerful movement for land re-distribution among the poor farmers. By the late 1970s, the Naxal movement petered out in West Bengal. However, it grew in strength in areas outside West Bengal in the subsequent decades.

The 'tribal' population of Central – Eastern India presently constitutes the primary social base of the Naxal movement. Further, the movement is based on the principle of violent revolution rather than non-violent methods of politics. As a movement with popular base, the Naxalite movement exposes the irony of development in Central – Eastern India. Rich in forest and mineral resource, the majority of the 'tribal' population of the area have benefited little from the twin resources. Two aspects of the twin resource use needs to be emphasized in this regard. Firstly, with regard to extraction of mineral resource (such as iron ore or copper), the role of the private sector has been significant, especially since the 1980s. The result of mineral exploration and extraction in the area has been twofold. It has led to destruction of quality of soil for agriculture and gainful employment for the local population in the industrial exploration and extraction has been minimal. The area continues to be one of the major supply zones of migrant labour in India. As a result, there has been a massive pauperization of the local people in the area. The other resource, i.e. forest, constituted a major component of livelihood strategies of the population of the area. However, two hurdles have emerged in the use of forest as resource for the people. Firstly, expansion of the mineral industry has led to depletion of forest resource. Secondly, forest conservation has limited the access of forest as traditional resource for the local people. This process too has led to the impoverishment of the local people and thereby contributing to becoming the supply zone of migrant labour. It is in this context that the Naxal movement needs to be understood.

The Naxal movement is generally referred to as class politics because it is founded on the loss of control or access to (natural) resources that the local 'tribal' population has experienced. In this loss, as indicated earlier, the role of private capital and that of the state are involved. The politics that has emerged based on this economic loss of control is therefore considered an example of class politics, though with a 'tribal' social base. Numerous studies have shown that Naxal leadership, in the areas that they control, has devised methods of redistribution of surplus agrarian produce among the people.

These studies have also shown that when seen from the perspective of the Indian state, the Naxal movement stands anti-state or 'illegal'. However, when seen in terms of its popular base, it appears an attempt to construct a polity through military means which is anti-capitalist in nature.

- 4) The tea plantation workers of Assam were imported into the valley, mostly between 1860s and first quarter of 20th century, under colonialism from central India. Imported primarily from the Chotanagpur area, the plantation workers population comprised of the various 'tribes' such as Oroans, Mundas and others that were and are still to be found in the area. The colonial state classified them as 'tea tribes' of Assam, a classification that continued to be used by the state even in the post colonial period. In the post colonial period, one of the most distinctive features of their plantation politics was that of trade union politics. In other words, the political mobilization of the workers was along lines of labour or working class politics. However, especially since the 1990s, changes in the nature of plantation politics became evident. The fundamental change was their political mobilization along lines of ethnicity, i.e. 'Adivasi', rather than labour or working class. As regards the content of the politics, similarities continued. For example, the primary protest in their politics continued to be their socio-economic exploitation in the plantation industry. The change was in the nature of political mobilization as a people in protest against their exploitation. It needs to be noted herein that the living conditions of the plantations workers in the industry have been historically abominable.

The question that has emerged from this change in nature of political mobilization has been that what caused or made possible the above change. It has been pointed out in this regard that the plantation workers as a community shared an intermediate process of identity formation in the plantations of Assam. Firstly, their working class consciousness was evident in their trade union political mobilization. However, the colonial plantation industry did not and could not destroy their pre-plantation socio-cultural modes of existence in the plantations. This was because (a) colonial planters found labour mobilization, both for recruitment and work, effective when practiced along lines of 'tribe' (i.e. along pre-plantation lines of social organization), and (b) due to the relative exclusion of plantation workers from the local society and due to the absence of local society as part of the plantation labour force, earlier socio-cultural modes of existence became the means of social solidarity and society formation among the workers historically. As a result, despite their political mobilization as working class, they also bore the socio-cultural markers of ethnic identity. It is also evident, therefore, that the social constituency of plantation trade unionism could be 'tea tribes' as well.

Nevertheless, despite their peculiarity of social organization, it was only towards the 1990s that change of politics indicated earlier began to take shape. Two of the reasons that have been generally forwarded to explain the change are (a) the peculiar nature of society formation among the plantations workers, and (b) the increasing predominance of ethnic politics vis-à-vis other kinds of politics (viz. class or nationhood politics) since the 1990s in the Brahmaputra valley. Therefore, even though the content of 'Adivasi' politics continued to be protest against the socio-economic exploitative order of the plantation system, its political articulation and political mobilization began to show signs of ethnicity rather than class.