

Contribution of Bhimbor Deuri to the Upliftment of Tribal People in Assam

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Abstract: Assam is the homeland of several tribes. These tribes migrated to Assam in the distant past from different places and at different times. They are the aboriginal people of Assam. Each of the tribes has its own dialect and culture. The backward tribal communities of Assam had to face various political, economic, and social changes during colonial rule. They were exploited by the government. They also began to feel that they were oppressed and subordinated by the people of the upper castes of Assam. So, some of the tribal peoples of Assam aimed to establish their identity through their efforts. They decided to form their organizations for the development of their respective communities. As a result, several organizations were formed by the ethnic communities of Assam. Initially, the organizations worked independently, but later they merged to form a united organization. This happened because tribal leaders like Bhimbor Deuri and some others decided that only a united front could help their organization in achieving its objectives. Assam's tribal leaders saw that they would become stronger if they worked unitedly, which would gain them attention from political parties and the government. As a result, the Tribal league of Assam, specifically the All-Assam Plains Tribal League, was established in 1933 with the primary objective of protecting tribal lands and rights under the leadership of Bhimbor Deuri. He was the key figure of the tribal movement advocating for the rights and interests of the tribal people of Assam. The Tribal League under Bhimbor Deuri worked to safeguard tribal lands in Assam's plain areas and advocated for their inclusion in the Fifth or Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The league played a significant role in shaping tribal politics in Assam and emphasized the distinct cultural and socio-economic experiences of tribal communities. At the same time, the Tribal League under Bhimbor Deuri sought the development of Assam as well as the people of Assam.

Keywords: Assam, Tribal League, Bhimbor Deuri, tribal upliftment.

1. INTRODUCTION:

After the Sepoy mutiny of 1857, the British government enacted several laws in the political administration of India. These laws gave the people of India, as well as Assam, at least some benefits, power, and exemptions. However, the tribal people of Assam did not get the desired position and benefits in the new system. Therefore, they decided to form an organization to fight for themselves, and as a result, the Tribal League was formed in 1933.¹ The missions of the Tribal League were to make collective efforts for the comprehensive development of the educationally and economically backward tribal communities and to integrate them into the advanced communities, and to protect their legitimate interests. There were two main reasons for the rise of tribal awareness in upper Assam. Firstly, the tribes of upper Assam expressed anger that the national parties of India were not willing to consider or resolve their problems. Perhaps the national parties of that time were too busy to liberate India from foreign rule and did not have the time and opportunity to address the problems of the tribes. Therefore, like some other parts of India, the tribes of Assam were offended by the national parties and tried to unite politically to solve their problems. Secondly, the tribes of Assam felt socially exploited and oppressed. The caste system prevalent in Hindu society was the main reason for this. In 1942-46, Andrew Clow, the then Governor of Assam, testified to the truth of such a situation. He said, "The Assamese, both caste Hindus and the Muslims, professed solicitude for the tribes, but neither had troubled to study the question nor had any real sympathy with the tribes."

It is worth mentioning that the background of the awakening and struggle for self -self-establishment and self-dignity among the tribal communities of Assam was Dangori, a village of Dibrugarh subdivision of the former Lakhimpur district of Assam.² In 1916-17, the Dangori Kachari Youth Association was formed at this place. In 1927 meeting was held at Dangori among the representatives of various tribal organizations already formed for the development and unity of the tribes of Assam. The founding secretary of the Association was Jadab Chandra Khakhlari. The association held sessions in various parts of Assam from time to time. Later, the tribes realized the need for a strong political organization to replace this apolitical organization, and therefore, the Kachari Youth Association was dissolved.

The tribal people of Assam formed local tribal organizations to protect their interests. These were the Kachari Sanmilan, Koch Rajbangshi Sanmilan, Matak Association, etc. Initially, these institutions worked independently to promote the interests of their respective tribes. In 1933, these institutions united to form the Sadau Asom Bhayam Janajati Sangha or All Assam Plains Tribal League. Bhimbor Deuri, a young entrepreneur, became active in the tribal League and soon got appointed as the General Secretary, a position he held until his last day. Bhimbor Deuri travelled throughout Assam learning about the plight and condition of all the indigenous people, tribal and non-tribal. His excellent leadership soon made him a well-known leader among all the communities in the mountains and plains.

Bhimbor Deuri, born on May 11, 1903, to Gadaram and Bajang Deuri, was a worthy member of the indigenous Deuri community of Assam.³ He was an exceptional figure who made a significant contribution to the politics of Assam in the mid-fourth and fifth decades of the 20th century. After graduating from Guwahati Cotton College in 1927 and earning his law degree from Calcutta University, Bhimbor Deuri joined the Dibrugarh Bar (Law) Association and began practicing law. He was known for his intelligence and amiable nature. People of all communities admired him for his academic excellence and social and political skills.

In the politics of Assam, there was already an unprecedented situation. The Indian National Congress launched a vigorous independence movement at that time. Many communities from the hills and plains of Assam, tribals and non-tribals, joined the freedom struggle. The Tribal League, led by Rupnath Brahma and Bhimbor Deuri, took a very important position in the politics of Assam. The Tribal League became a notable political party that was formed in Assam during that period.

Gopinath Bordoloi, the Lokopriya of Assam, who was honoured with the Bharat Ratna posthumously, said, "Bhimbor Deuri was a people's leader of Assam. While he lived, many of his colleagues and followers, as well as many of his rivals from other parties, proved or still do prove him to be a purely communal or 'sectional leader'. If we believe it is wrong for him to become a tribal leader himself and lead the backward communities on the path of development, then we must say that it is wrong for him to try to show the way to the blind."⁴

2. Literature review:

As an important topic in the history of Assam, the study on the contributions of Bhimbor Deuri to the upliftment of the tribes of Assam should be given more importance. Because this topic has not been properly studied, and there are very few writings on it.

1. *Janajati Sourabh*: This book collects articles about the contributions of tribal leaders in Assam. It includes a brief life history of Bhimbor Deuri.
2. *Sonowal Kacharir Somaj aru Sanskriti*: Edited by Mohan Sonowal and Guneswar Sonowal, this book has several articles primarily related to the Sonowal Kachari people of Assam. The history of the Tribal League, as well as Bhimbor Deuri, is included in this book.
3. *MANCOTTA* is a souvenir from the 5th International Boro Festival and 3rd Sonowal Kachari Cultural Festival, 2013. This source is reliable for studying the contributions of Bhimbor Deuri to the upliftment of the tribal people of Assam.
4. *JANANAYAK*, edited by Ratneswar Basumatary, is a magazine whose articles are about prominent tribal personalities of Assam.

The above-mentioned sources are very reliable for studying Bhimbor Deuri's contribution to the upliftment of the tribes of Assam. This study is a re-attempt to explore the contributions of Bhimbor Deuri.

3. Objectives of the paper:

The paper is aimed at examining the condition of tribal people under colonial rule in Assam. It is an attempt to study the tribal socio-political upliftment that occurred under the leadership of Bhimbor Deuri.

4. Methodology of the paper:

The historical method is used in writing this research paper. This study is mostly based on secondary sources, such as books, journals, periodicals, the internet, and the like.

5. Findings of the study: The findings of the study are as follows:

Bhimbor Deuri was an indigenous tribal leader of Assam. Under the leadership of Bhimbor Deuri, the Tribal League was formed in 1933. He advocated for tribal rights in Assam, and the members of the Tribal League under him worked to create social and political awareness among the tribal people of Assam. Bhimbor Deuri succeeded in gaining some political benefits from the then Bordoloi Ministry and Sadulla Ministry. He supported the 'Line System' for the protection of the lands of the tribes. Bhimbor Deuri took steps for primary education among the tribes and kept them away from opium. Although many would like to say that the Assam Tribal League adopted a Machiavellian policy of colluding with one government to serve its interests, that was the duty of the Tribal League at the time. The tribes of Assam would not have been able to establish their existence without taking advantage of the British Government and the then Government of Assam in any way. On the other hand, while pursuing their interests, the members of the Tribal League joined the freedom struggle individually if not collectively and tried to liberate Assam from British rule.

The Tribal League also played an important role in the agitation against 'Group C' of the Cabinet Mission in Assam. During the government of Gopinath Bordoloi, Bhimbor Deuri led the Tribal League to save Assam from being included in 'Group C'. He was not only a leader of the tribal people but also of every ethnic community of Assam. Bhimbor Deuri wanted only the equal development of the entire people of Assam.

6. Discussion of the paper:

The tribal association known as the Tribal League was an organisation made up of all the communities and tribes of Mongoloid descent to solve the socio-economic issues of these tribes and to unite them on a single political platform. This organisation created social awareness, which slowly transitioned to political awareness.

Activities of the Tribal League under Bhimbor Deuri:

The objective of the Tribal League was to improve the tribal people by receiving as many facilities as possible from the government before the country gained independence. Therefore, this organisation sometimes supported the Bordoloi Ministry, which was led by Gopinath Bordoloi (Congress), and sometimes the Sadulla Ministry (Muslim League) led by Sir Muhammad Sadulla. Some important works of the Tribal League are mentioned below.

The first session of the Tribal League:

The first session of the Tribal League was held in Roha in the Nagaon district of Assam on April 17, 1935.⁵ The first session was organized by Jadav Chandra Khakhlari and Bhimbor Deuri. Jadav Chandra Khakhlari chaired this first session, and Herambanath Bora served as secretary. Two resolutions were passed at this session. One was a demand that the underdeveloped tribal communities be treated as a common group. The other demanded reserved seats in the proposed Assembly, at least seven seats in proportion to their population. The Tribal League's efforts brought the tribes four reserved seats in the Assam Legislative Assembly under the new regime of the Government of India Act.

Works for the spread of Primary education:

The programs by the Tribal League, which provided education for poor tribal people in Assam, significantly improved literacy in tribal areas. The League's efforts to spread primary education led to gradual but steady literacy growth among people in those areas.

Support for the Line system:

The Line system hurt the economy of Assam because it caused migrants from East Bengal to encroach on arable land, pastures, and reserved forests. It also led to migrants buying agricultural land from impoverished indigenous farmers. All of these occurrences hurt the economy of Assam.

In 1916, the Nagaon administration prepared a scheme in this regard. It was first implemented in Nagaon and Borpeta in 1920. As an outcome, the local administration sought to solve law and order problems by concentrating land in three different ways, such as allowing immigrants to settle wherever they wanted in a given area, preventing them from establishing themselves in any other designated region, drawing a line, and only allowing migrants to walk along it. The native people were designated to live in the areas on the other side of the line, and migrants were not allowed

entry. This well-known arrangement is referred to as the Line System. This system separated migrants and indigenous people in certain settled regions.

CS Mullan, the Census Superintendent of Assam, realized the perilous nature of migration, and in 1931, he said that the Assamese nation, language, and culture would disappear if migration continued at that rate. Bhimbor Deuri was an advocate for the Line System and said that it should be enforced in tribal areas to protect the tribes from migrants. He asserted that immigrants would negatively impact the economic, social, and cultural advancement of the Assamese people. For these reasons, he opposed the Sadulla government and instead supported the Congress. He commended the Congress for defending the interests of the Assamese tribes while criticizing the Muslim League for speaking solely for the interests of Muslims. The objectives of the Tribal League were to redistribute land to tribal farmers and to prevent any Muslim migrants from East Bengal. Furthermore, the League aimed to enhance the economic and educational systems of the tribal people. The British government anticipated a potential conflict between Muslim migrants and the indigenous people of Assam and, through the Line System, established areas to house the migrants.

Formation of the Congress League Allied government:

During the reign of the Sadulla government, the Congress League Morcha government was formed on the 20th of September, 1938. The Tribal League supported the Congress against the Sadulla government. The reason for this support was Bordoloi's proposition to protect the tribes against migration from East Bengal.

Support to the Tribal League by the Bordoloi Ministry:

On September 13, 1938, a no-confidence motion was brought against the Assam Sadulla Cabinet by the Tribal League. Their movement was successful and brought the Assam Coalition (Congress) Cabinet to power. Under the leadership of Gopinath Bordoloi, the Cabinet was formed, and Bordoloi sought support from the Tribal League. In return, the League sought government jobs for unemployed tribal youth, and their requests were met. The League was also granted land from the Bordoloi Cabinet for tribal farmers. In addition, the League secured positions for its members. Their member, Nandaram Das, was appointed to the post of Class II Administrative Officer, a testament to their power and influence with the Bordoloi Ministry. ⁶

Works for the greater interest of Assam:

In 1939, World War II began. The Congress Cabinet for all of India resigned in protest against the British imposing war on India against the wishes of the Indian people. Assam's Congress rule also came to an end as a result. After the Bordoloi Cabinet resigned, Sir Sadulla formed a new Cabinet, which remained in power until 1941. During this time, the Tribal League worked to advance the interests of Assam and the Assamese people.

Bhimbor Deuri in the Bordoloi Ministry:

As the Congress party won a majority in the Assam Assembly in the 1946 elections, a Congress-led government was formed. Gopinath Bordoloi became the leader of the provincial government. However, this led to problems with the Tribal League, whose members were often elected on Congress tickets, despite the views of the League. The leaders who stood for Congress from the Tribal League were Bhimbor Deuri, Rabichandra Kachari, Karkachandra Doley, and Kharsing Terang.

In 1946, Bhimbar Deuri became the Minister of Forests and Labour on the advice of Sardar Patel and served the people and the motherland with his skills and loyalty until his death. Rupnath Brahma later served as a Cabinet Minister in the Cabinet and served the country for the development of the country.

The Tribal League, however, did not give up its duty. The League continued to work for the development of the tribes as well as the unity and independence of the country. The Assam Land and Revenue Act, 1886, Chapter X, was passed by the Gopinath Bordoloi Cabinet in 1947 to protect the rights of the tribes to their land.

Opposition to the Cabinet Mission plan of 'Group C':

The Tribal League also opposed the plan to include Assam in 'Group C' of the Cabinet Mission (1946) and make it a part of Pakistan.⁷ In March 1946, a delegation from England arrived to grant independence to India. During the partition of the country, the British Mission and the Muslim League planned to include Assam in the grouping. Bhimbor Deuri opposed the British and Md. Ali Jinnah. He said, "Assam is not a Hindu or Muslim country. This country is the motherland of the indigenous people who have cleared jungles and lived there for centuries. Therefore, this country will not be allowed to join East Pakistan at any cost." Bhimbor Deuri surprised the British mission with such strong arguments. He also spoke boldly and clearly to Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's leading National

Congress leaders. He also said that if the National Congress of India did not support this cause, then the indigenous people would start their movement. The British and the Muslim League abandoned the plan to include Assam in Pakistan and allowed it to join India.

The tribal league requested equal rights for tribes in the Constitution of independent India. Dr. Ambedkar was informed by Bhimbor Deuri to make special provisions in the Constitution of independent India for the backward classes of Assam before India achieved independence. Bhimbor Deuri's contributions to the whole of India, as well as Assam, are no less than those of Dr. Ambedkar.

7. Conclusion:

Bhimbar Deuri was a great political leader of Assam. Not only was he the head of the Tribal League, but he was also dedicated to developing all the ethnic groups of Assam, making him a true "people's leader." His commitment and contributions to the people and the welfare of Assam make him an undeniable hero.

8. Limitation:

This paper explores the contributions of Bhimbor Deuri, a tribal leader of Assam during the colonial period, to tribal development and socio-political awareness. Moreover, he also thought for the greater Assamese nation as well as for Assam. But studies on Bhimbor Deuri's contributions and tribal awareness movements in Assam are not sufficient.

9. Recommendation:

Assam's tribes are the state's indigenous people, so it is essential to document their contributions and their role in the development of the state. The tribes also have a long history and tradition, which is another reason why it is vital to conduct further research into their lives and history.

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