

# Editorial

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## BJP, Liberals and Mayang Settlers in the time of CAB

The issue of CAB, NRC and mayang migration is going to spring up again, given the motivation BJP has gained in the last parliamentary election. Hemanta Biswas has boldly declared that CAB is on the plate again. CAB is an anti-Muslim version of NRC exercise in Assam, especially designed political propaganda for the consumption of the mainland Indians. BJP alleges that Congress has been doing the same thing for both Muslims and Hindus coming from Bangladesh in the region. The tactic of BJP to accumulate power in peripheries and the mainland must differ, if they have any sense of how this country was made. It seems they do have sense, at least from what Ram Madhav says in the "preface" of Rajat Sethi and Shubhrastha's book *The Last Battle of Saraighat*. He says the strategy should be to groom local leaders who can represent BJP's interest. However, he cautioned the desire to sound nationalist and integrationist for the time being in the region. This instruction seems to be for the mainland Indian advisors of BJP in the region. Madhav says "even in the desire to look and sound national, one should not disrespect or discard the diversity and uniqueness." He understands that BJP is walking in a terrain which has never suited the nationalist and integrationist parties. So, the task is to tolerate the aspiration of the masses for sometime till they are in a position to dictate the people of the land. One way of attaining this dictatorial power that any nationalist parliamentary party, including BJP, want is by bringing more mayang settlers. Mayang settlers are not just votes. They bring a different culture, a politics loyal to the nationalist and integrationist project and a whole new economy. Congress did it quietly, according to BJP. BJP wants to do it and show it to the world to gain more support among regular, mostly Hindu, voters in the mainland India. Hence, CAB becomes a must.

Congress, on the other hand, have no issues in bringing people in the region. It just does not like the fact that the bill is not inclusive. Same goes for CPI or other national parties. No national party has talked about the contradiction between the indigenous people and people coming to settle in the territories of the indigenous people, except Trinamool Congress. Trinamool Congress tried to milk the contradiction between the indigenous people and Bengali settlers in Assam. It wanted to exploit the contradiction between the indigenous people of the region and Bengali settlers and wanted to emerge as the shepherd of the Bengali settlers. Both mayang liberals in India and pro-mayang liberals in the region only saw it as a Hindu-Muslim matter and as a problem of dalit migration in the region. For them, the world is an even ground. The cow-belt stretches from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and from Raan of Kutch to Moreh. There are no oppressed nationalities, there are no oppressed indigenous communities in the northeast region, everyone is either a Hindu or a Muslim or an upper caste or a Bahujan, for them. Indigenous communities are not sites of historical injustices. They are the people who are Islamophobic and anti-migrants. The concrete analysis of the concrete situation is completely abandoned. Such an understanding, conveniently takes the burden of the mess from those who perpetrate it and shifts it to those who are going to suffer because of the coming of settlers.

Mainland India reels under severe agrarian crisis. The gap between the rich and the poor is sharply increasing in the mainland. The economically and socially persecuted dalit masses because of their feudal social order of caste system are moving out from their native places under these pressures. The same goes for the Muslims in mainland India. To make the matter worst, Hindutva fascist forces have come to power in this country. Bangladesh is not a happy story too. It suffers from huge inequality and severe economic crisis. The burden to make things better for the toiling masses of mainland India and Bangladesh lies on progressive forces of those place, those who are capable of doing so in mainland India and Bangladesh. Forcing the responsibility to accommodate the settlers in a land inhabited by a people already under subjugation is nothing but running away from addressing the matter at home. It is pushing out the responsibility those they can, without taking the responsibility themselves. It is case of not taking moral responsibility for the suffering of toiling masses of mainland by the mainland Indian progressives that they are forcing the indigenous people to accept those they do not want to keep in their homes. A question should be asked to test their hypocrisy, will they support the Israel's policy of settling marginalised people from different parts of the world as Israeli citizens in the territory Israel has snatched from Palestine? Most will answer no because they are not Zionists.

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## William Pettigrew's contribution to the reformation of social practices of Tribals

Prof. (DR) M. Horam

### Background :

Tribal values, heritage and ways of living were considered uncouth, often associated with primitive and uncivilised by the early white Christian Missionaries. Tribals of the world are normally considered inferior and at times looked down upon with contempt. The outcomes of such attitude towards tribals are disastrous. Millions of Red Indians, like the Incas of Latin America were butchered by the Spanish in the name of Christian religion and racial superiority, thousands of Red Indians of South and North America were slaughtered in the name of superior God and race by the Britishers, French and other Europeans races; many thousands and hundred Indian tribals' way of living were made abandoned in the North Eastern Indians including Manipur tribals by the early missionaries. Methods were/are simple: through conversion and proselytizing. I shall discuss these subjects a little later.

But of the assumption that some race are superior and other are inferior is absolutely false and I strongly object to such claim. Superiority and inferiority, equality and inequality are all relative terms. For instance, around the equator the Black races and certain of the coloured and tinted races are superior in certain aspects to the white races and may be even more capable under certain conditions of creating greater civilisation. I would personally consider the racial superiority and inferiority are partly matters to intellectual and spiritual evolution which guides one race after another into periods of great ascent too often followed by sad and catastrophic decline.

Who is a tribal? To many, very often, tribals would mean persons who are primitive, uncultured, savage, heathen, barbarian, lost souls and uncivilised. These derogatory attitudes were commonly used by the early missionaries and western administrators, and Rev. William Pettigrew was not an exception to this group. But to the social scientists the word 'tribe' or 'tribal' has an exotic flavour. A tribe is a group of individuals united by physical ties, linguistic identity, overall social organisations and above all, a well-defined and developed political system and cultural homogeneity. Speaking of tribals, Desmond Morris (a brilliant writer on the subjects from Oxford University) wrote :

"Man is a tribal animal. We must fully appreciate this if we are to understand one of the most important facts of human nature. To ignore or deny it as so many priests and politicians do is to court disaster. The tribal qualities of the human species colour almost every aspect of our social lives. They are no basis to us that, we are ever to lose them. It would mean that we had mutated into another species altogether".

In wide ethnographic sense, therefore, all men have culture and they neither more cultured. Culture be generally characterised as a set of ideas including, among other things, law codes, songs and dances, festivals, quaint customs, such as language and literature, attitudes towards one's parents, form of gambling, religion, philosophy, science and government, etc.

It is, therefore, proved beyond any shadow of doubt that tribals too have their own form of perfect culture as any other society of the world. Tribal's culture thus flourished for hundred and thousand years, almost romantically in their dollestates. In the North Eastern Indian States, particularly in Manipur, tribal culture was abruptly jolted and many of the traditional 'gos' were destroyed beyond redemption due to missionaries and British administrators' intervention during

the early or late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Speaking about tribal culture, Sir Edward Taylor said :

"Culture or Civilisation taken in its wide ethnographic sense is that complex whole included knowledge, belief, art, moral, laws, customs and by other capabilities and habits acquired by men as a member society."

Having defined very briefly on Tribals, we may now turn to our subject namely : "William Pettigrew's contribution to the reformation of social practice of tribals."

William Pettigrew began his official work on February 6, 1894 at Imphal. Pettigrew thought that he would convert the Meitei Hindus into Christianity through preaching the gospel but the Meiteis Hindus considered that Pettigrew's intention was a "deliberate attempt" (Lal Dena) to impose upon them the government's religion' (Foreign Deptt: nos. 24-28, January 1895). Pettigrew had to leave Imphal consequent upon the closing his work at Imphal under Arthington Mission. Pettigrew thus applied for membership to American Baptist Missionary Union and eventually he was sent to Ukhrul : the Tangkhul Naga Tribe of Manipur. Thus he began his work in 1896.

Conversion like any other missionaries, William Pettigrew started his work among the Tangkhul tribals assuming that tribals are 'primitive' and 'lost souls' and therefore they should be converted into a higher religion and culture.

Accordingly, then conversion would mean (a) a radical change in the beliefs entertained by the person, (b) radical change in his behaviour, (c) rejection of his former ways of belief (social practices) and (d) acceptance of foreign social practices which were/are implanted on the tribals. For early missionaries demanded from the tribals the change of hearts and ways of living which a convert Christian was/is supposed to comply with and failing which he was/is told that his soul was/is doomed for hell. A convert must denounce his earlier habits, ways of life and social practices.

Needless to repeat that the erstwhile tribal social life made for a basically classless society : there was no social stratification. When I say tribals were classless, I also imply that they were, in a sense, socialists without being imposed by the concept of modern socialism.

Also there is none in a tribal society who does not belong to one or the other of the clan which constitutes village and which in turn go to from the tribal.

An individual in tribal society finds it difficult to exist without the security of belonging to a group which will share his joys and sorrows and with those well-being he can identify his own. The implication of this system may be illustrated thus : if I were living in my village, I would be part and parcel of my village, if my villagers decide to clean the village, the village area, I would have to help. If they are repairing the road approaching the village area, I must be present and active.

Tribal social life, particularly of Manipur, is basically a classless society, there being no low, nor high nor rich nor very poor, there is no social stratification. Speaking of the Nagas, A.W.Davis, write, "Nagas have no caste, so the column which had reference to distinction of Castes presented no difficulties to the enumeration" (A.W.Davis, census of India, 1891. Assam vol. 1).

But when Christian Missionaries, like William Pettigrew arrived to tribal areas, particularly to the

Tangkhul country, a sharp distinction was created namely, the Christian (Reformed man) and the non-Christian (the heathens). The cleavage artificially created between these two groups ran much deeper than one could imagine, the non-Christians led normally by the headman forced the newly converted Christian to move out from the original villages and ordered them to stay away from the non-Christians villages. To-day, we find in many villages clearly, Christians and non-Christians villages. Basically this division, every aspect of life such as, a thought mannerism, dress and mental make-up were changed. Anyone who comes to see can find in them. There is little about being tribals but they have been rendered to neither culturally tribal nor foreign ; imitating others' culture, more appropriately of the western. But sadly, in doing so, they do not fit in such society where their culture is totally different from the original one, they become misfit to their own established tribal society.

It is my honest conviction that you can be a good tribal and at the same time a good Christian ; changing habits and imitating others way of life does not necessarily make anybody a better Christian.

There are elaborate moral codes in the tribal society. The outsiders' missionaries very often arrive at the hasty conclusion that the tribal live a life of unbridle license and youthful corruption. You need not be reminded that tribals are free society, there is free mixing of boys and girls, men and women, but it does not certainly indicate that they had/ have immoral life. In their approach they commit two errors ; one of the methods and one of the fact.

Missionaries method of approach is wrong, because they impart their own mores and standard into tribal culture. They are also wrong on point of fact. Tribal life is regulated by exact and far reaching unwritten laws which are strictly obliged. For example, if a stranger comes from far away, to entertain him is obligatory, tribals are thus famous for their hospitality. Among the Tribals hospitality, specially women, is universal ; a girl who does not smile with the strangers finds difficult to get a suitable life-partner ; and thus any or stranger enters a home, it is the duty of the women to get food before him. This custom is often misconstrued as wickedness by the early missionaries and the outsiders. While introducing Christianity in the Tribal areas, such extremely beautiful was/is sudden jolted.

Traditional rules governing the sexual life of the Tribals are strict and generally observed. Breaches of the rules are sufficiently gave to be talked of and to be severely punished. Sexual relationship must be conducted in proper manner. For instance, rape is very rare and if raped, culprit is severely dealt with. But after the conversion, the missionaries become/became soft to a convert who commits such a crime and can be forgiven through confession and eventually he is restored to Christian community. Sexual derivatives are almost unknown, beatality, homosexuality, lesbianism, sodomy, prostitution and masturbation are unheard of in a tribal society. It is true that there are cases of pre-marital relationships but under strict disciplines and restraints and eventually lead up to marrying. But now such practices are taken lightly and look away as though they are symptoms of westernisation/modernisation. This concept is devastating to a healthy tribal society, for, westernisation is not a modernisation. Too often, tribals mistake westernisation as modernisation and they ape blindly western ways of life and habits. To sum up, tribal ethics and morality combine a firm belief in taboos and restraints coupled

with the fear of endangering the age-old communities if they are flouted. The erstwhile tribal culture and 'gos' have limitless faith in the value of certain social values and niceties which make up in the village amicable and happy.

The status of women is remarkably high among the tribals, and they are honoured for their role in the family and their accomplishments. They have the same status as the men in many ways and suffer no discrimination on account of sex-wards are remarried without any stigma. When Christian Missionaries arrived many 'dos' and 'don't' were imposed on women, and made women a distinct entity. Writing about the Naga women for examples, Prof. Haimeendorf said : 'Many women in more civilised parts of India may well envy the women of Naga Hills their high status and their free and happy life ; and if you measure/measures the cultural level of a people by the social position and personal tradition of its women, you will think twice before looking down on the Nagas as 'Savages'."

Tribals are excellent builders of arts and crafts. To cite a few, the Nagas, specially the Kabuis (Zelaingrons) have an impeccable taste for design and colour ; their women weave prettyclothes, make splendid head-dresses, armlets and neckless of bone and ivory. They also make splendid houses, gates and drums with various designs full of meanings. But when the missionaries arrived, and after the conversions, all these excellent arts and crafts were destroyed on the plea that these were full of "Pagan-nonsense". Every type of race, society, of beliefs or institution, every way of life, constitute a ready made experiment whose preparation has taken thousand of years, and as such it is irreplaceable. When a community disappears, a door closes forever, locking away knowledge that is unique.

The tribals have no written history ; therefore, if they want to record their history in written form they have to rely heavily on arts and culture, songs and dances, legends and stories.

Tribals by nature are fond of music, songs and dances. Each song had dance is pregnant with meanings.

Let us take songs, for instance ; singing comes as naturally to the tribals as breathing. They sing in mirth and in sorrow, when alone or in groups, in sunshine and in rain. The wisdom of tribals seem to tell, "Laugh and be merry, remember, better the world with song". Then there are dances graceful and slow or energetic and quick, depicting various moods and used on different occasions. All literature must have begun as an oral tradition handed down from one generation to the next. For the Tribals much of their writing, and still later painting. For the Tribals much of their literacy heritage is still oral and every villages has certain families or a group of venerable old men who are usually the custodians of the legacy.

With their country having been the scene of turmoil for several decades and the onslaught or Missionaries over-zealous pursuit for conversion of Christianity, much of the cultural heritage is in danger of being submerged or forgotten. Some powerful villagers, however, realised the influence of the missionaries as dangerous game, so the introduction of Christianity in certain part of the tribals were eager avenged the presence of the new creed. We were told that missionaries stopped the tribals to follow their customs, such as singing, dancing, drinking and festivals and forced them to take a new mode of life. As stated earlier, the Christian Missionaries had been only persuasive, but after getting power from the British administrators ; missionaries method became even more co-ercive and compulsory.

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