



Frontier Colonies and the Indigenes Response to Assimilative Policy: Identity movements among the Ainu in Japan and the Bodos in India's North East

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The main concern for the speaker in this presentation was to interrogate the process of 'state formation' in border and frontier regions of India and Japan. Border regions, she held, were crucial areas for the state in terms of both security considerations, trade and economic development. The Speaker uses the categories of the 'periphery' and the 'core' to understand the relationship between the state and its border areas. In this regard the Speaker is comparatively examining the Ainu of Hokkaido in Japan and the Bodo tribe of Assam in India's Northeast region. She throws light on how the two have been negotiating their ethnic identities since the late colonial period. Focus of the presentation was on the various issues related to the construction and preservation of identity, consequent identity movements and the question of cultural assimilation.

Beginning from a colonial perspective the Speaker explained the manner in which the colonial regimes in India and the imperial regime in Japan played a crucial role in shaping the arrangements that would locate the tribal/peripheral people in relation to the 'mainstream' (and often hegemonic) narratives of state formation. The Speaker makes a conceptual distinction between 'frontier' and 'border'. While the term border denotes a physical aspect of a territorially demarcated space, frontier includes peripherality as well as hierarchies of culture and modes of living. In respect to colonialism, she argues that there was a certain way in which the colonial subject was conceptualized by the regime. She applies this insight into explaining the expansionist policy of Japan and the British colonial policy in Northeast India.

It was with this background that the Speaker sought to look at a framework that would draw comparisons between the Ainu of Japan and the Bodos of India. She argued that the broad historical forces which had shaped the 'identity' and the consequent assertion in both the cases were comparable. In this aspect, symbolic representation concerning nomenclature plays a crucial role of rule legitimization. The change of name from Ezochi (Land of the Ainu) to Hokkaido served this purpose. Accordingly, the Speaker says that the Ainu people in Japan become victims of physical and cultural dislocation and in the Meiji period (1868-1912), the Japanese government forced the Ainu people to assimilate into the mainstream of the Japanese society. Ainu land was redistributed to the Japanese farmers and the Ainu language was banned and children were put into Japanese schools. Japanese names also became compulsory for them. In addition, the Japanese government pushed the Ainu people to acculturate into the mainstream of the Japanese culture. Around the same time, in 1826, British colonial expansion has also begun in Northeast India. In both the cases the Speaker draws parallel to the manner in which the Ainu and the Bodo served as the 'cultural other' for the process of

consolidation of the Japanese and the British Empire. The Speaker adds that this 'othering' also served to act as the 'internal other' for the process of state-building.

In the case of the Ainu the Speaker displayed the paintings of the Ainu that were made by the Japanese where she sought to explain the manner in which the Ainu were perceived by the Japanese mainstream. She suggests that in those paintings one could observe a sense of a 'civilizing mission' which was used as a pretext for an impending cultural assimilation of the Ainu. The Speaker explained how issues of 'health and hygiene' and 'hunting' related to the Ainu were converted into cultural constructs of 'barbarism' that required assimilation through intervention. Drawing from such a context the speaker contends that 'tribes' in the Indian case also underwent such social and cultural constructions. In the case of Ainu the everyday material practices of the people were subject to cultural change and assimilation. This was particularly true in the case of dress, language and culture.

Migration, in both the Ainu and the Bodo case was particularly important. The Speaker focuses on this point and holds that while in the Bodo case there was in-migration of the Hindu caste migrants who were moneylenders and held ideas of 'civility' and 'untouchability' against the Bodo people, for the Ainu there was a physicality of forced migration. The Bodo resistance and the consequent identity formation were also tempered by such a response from the migrants. In the case of Bodos the Brahma religion, the Bodo Students Union and the formation of the Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) in the 1960s was crucial. In addition to this the All Bodo Sahitya Sabha managed to carve out a linguistic autonomy for the Bodo language that supplemented the identity movement.

In contrast to this, argues the Speaker, the Ainu response was more 'passive'. This was made possible by equating survival with assimilation with the Japanese culture. The Ainu tattoo was consequently banned and since 1868 there was an additional ban on hunting and fishing which forces the Ainu to take up agriculture. The physical migration also brought new diseases to the Ainu people like TB and syphilis while at the same time outnumbering them. On the other hand with regard to the Bodo socio-religious reform movements like the Brahma Samaj (not Brahmo Samaj) brought about a change in marriage rituals (like the use of rice wine) and questions concerning a type of dowry.

A Participant questioned as to why didn't the author, in her presentation, problematize the word "movement" in her title? The participant was of the view that while the Bodos could be thought of having a 'movement' that was spearheading their claims, in the case of Ainu there was a clear lack of it. Thus, this way the whole point of having a comparative framework collapses. The Participant added that it was necessary to see the Bodos themselves as 'hegemonic', which the Speaker clearly failed to bring out. The Participant argued further that there was no detail given by the Speaker on the self-perception of the Ainu themselves. Where was Ainu's own representation? By extension the Participant stressed the need for a greater involvement of looking at movements through their internal dynamics as well.

It was also pointed out by the Participant that there was no need to include the word 'assimilation' in the title of the Speaker as this was clearly a wrong way to characterize the Bodo experience. The title also grossly undermined the manner in which tribal populations were sought to be accommodated rather than 'assimilated' in India. The Speaker failed to adequately respond to these questions.

Another participant questioned regarding the nature and manner of inter-marriages in the case of Ainu and what consequences did it have on the larger question of assimilation? There was also a question on the role of the media in highlighting the plight of the Ainu. The Speaker pointed out that the names and surnames of the Ainu even in marriage were given in such a way so as to promote a homogenization. To the second question the Speaker responded by saying that it was only in 2008 that

Japan's parliament adopted a resolution formally recognizing the Ainu as "an indigenous people with a distinct language, religion and culture" but there was no state help in protecting and promoting the Ainu language.

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