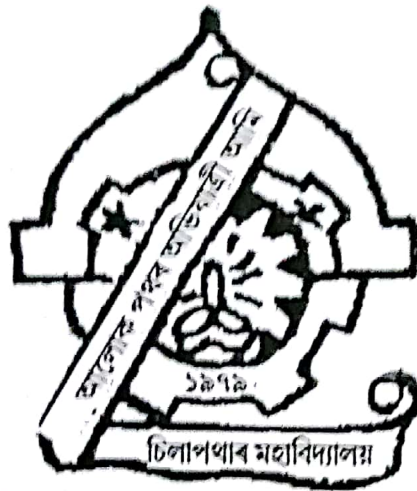


**QUEST  
FOR  
ETHNIC IDENTITY  
IN NORTH-EAST INDIA**



**Collection of Seminar Papers presented in the UGC  
Sponsored National Seminar**

**Organized by  
Department of English, Assamese & History  
Silapathar College, Silapathar  
on 24<sup>th</sup> & 25<sup>th</sup> August  
and  
21<sup>st</sup> & 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 2013**

**Tribes in making:  
A Note on identity movements among the  
'Hill *Tanis*' and the 'Plain *Tanis*' of  
Arunachal Pradesh and Assam**

**Tajen Dabi**

The title of the paper and its narrative on the concerned tribes are unconventional. I can foresee silent agreement from many readers and rancorous acrimony from other, both by members from within and outside Tani constellation, academic and nonprofessionals alike. Purist will decry my methodology, or sheer absence of it in writing this paper and trying to get it published from a remote college of the region. Yet I undertake to risk writing one. I must admit that the critique developed by Nicholas Dirks and James C. Scott in looking at concepts like 'tribe' and the relationship between state and stateless societies partly inspired the theme of this paper. The methodology followed is common comparative case study method based on a random survey of some published literature.

'A real-world problem approach' as opposed to a 'theoretical contribution approach' enables one to frame a comparative case study around a search for explanation of important real world questions<sup>1</sup>. According to Charles C. Ragin, 'the case-oriented approach attempts to approximate experimental rigor by identifying

sociological formation of these tribes<sup>11</sup>.

Fourth and this is a new aspect, the Tani identity has so far been, explored in the realm of religion only. The *Donyi-Polo* movement, a recent cultural-religious reformist *protectionist* movement, often wrongly understood as 'revivalist', offers a common appellation to all these tribes in question. However, the main and immediate objective of the movement is to check conversion into Christianity, not evolving a common ethnic identity for political mobilisation. Therefore, how far this neo-religious movement will translate into political reality, or at least a demand for such, is a matter that cannot be ascertained with any certainty presently. While the 'Hill Tanis' sharpen their identity within the confines of a comfortable state politics of a tribal state, the 'Plain Tanis' struggle between their not so promising autonomy movement, culturally confused between their old tribal roots and their largely *Assamised* Hindu identity in a state plagued by the problem of the largest immigration in the recent history of mankind.

**(Footnotes)**

- 1 Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994, pp. 4-9 as cited in Pahi Saikia, *Ethnic Mobilization and Violence in Northeast India*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2011, p. 13
- 2 *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987, p. 31 as cited in Pahi Saikia, op.cit.
3. The common origin of the Tani tribes is an accepted and undisputed fact. All existing ethnological and historical researches attests to it. I am desisting myself from citing endless references to existing literature on the construction of various names of these tribes. While being inconclusive