

United Nation's Working Group on Indigenous People.
17th Session in Geneva
From 26 to 30 July 1999

WGIP 99/SAS.IND/14

Statement made by : Dr. Deva Kanta Ramchiary
Member

State Legislative Assembly
Assam, India.

ZONAL SECY. PEOPLES' DEMOCRATIC FRONT

Sub : The Indigenous people and their relationship with land

**Hon'ble Chairperson
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen
and all brothers and sisters of Indigenous people.**

✓ Thank you for giving me the floor to speak today on behalf of the Indigenous peoples' delegation from Assam - the beautiful North Eastern state of India. I feel it pride to represent the Boro community of this state and take this rare opportunity to convey all the good wishes of the Boro Tribe to all of you. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to you, Madam chair and the kindness of the Secretary Office in carefully considering our status of participation in this 17th session of UNWGIP.

Before coming to the main points, I would like to make a humble effort to give you a detail background of the Boro community - a branch on Indo-Mongoloid family which is facing serious threat for their existence in present time. The Boros are designated by various name in the country. In West Bengal state and Royal Kingdom of Nepal, they are known as Mech, as Sonowal and Thengal in upper Assam and Boro or Kachari in lower Assam and northern part of West Bengal. Presently, the Boros are concentrated mainly in the northern valley of the river Brahmaputra in the northern and western part of Assam in India. The Boro population at present, is ranging from 30 to 40 lakh while the accurate figure of Boro community can not be found from the census report conducted by the Government of India every 10 year only due to the reason that the census report are manipulated by the non-indigenous government officials. The aforesaid figure of the Boros is available in accordance with the census voluntarily conducted by various organisations belonging to the Boro community. However, this figure is subject to be verified.

The Boros, recognised as an ethnic tribal community in India are the indigenous people of this region having their own rich socio-eco-cultural heritage, language and tradition. Though authentic accounts of the origin of the Boros are difficult to find, yet it has been established by the different historians that the Boros, since the pre-historic days, were the dominant races in this region. The historians with impartial outlook admit that the Boros once ruled the erstwhile Kamrupa - a state that ^{comprised} ~~comprised~~ major part of present Assam, West Bengal in India, Rongpur - presently a part of Independent Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal for several hundred years before and after the Christ. It is also been established that King Bhagadutta (Bhugdath) of Mahabharata fame, reigned in 2900 B.C. in Kamrupa who belonged to the Boro community known as Kirat in those days. Therefore, the Boros ruled this region since the time immemorial till 1228 A.D. when the Ahoms from Burma migrated and established their kingdom in Assam. Even, Tula ram Senapati, the last king of Boro-Kachari ruled a major part of this region till 1854 A.D. when the British took over the kingdom.

The Boros who were described by Rev. Sidney Endle in his work 'The Kacharis' as simple, honest, truthful, Strait forward and trust worthy became the victim of the well planned conspiracy of the Ahom invaders who came from Burma (erstwhile Shun Country) in 1228 A.D. who were comparatively more intelligent and intellectual than the Boros. With their various tactics, the Ahoms were able to subdue the Boros who were also forced to withdraw their stronghold towards the South West of River Dhansiri. To avoid the frequent invasion, the Boro kings shifted their capital from Dimapur (Now in the state of Nagaland in India) to Maibong (in Assam) in 1750 A.D. And here, the Boro kings were came under the influence of Hinduism and in 1790 A.D. the then Kachari king Krishna Chandra and his brother Gobinda Chandra converted into Hinduism.

This effort to convert the Boros into the Hindu religion is still on and as the Hindus are more superior to the Boros both mentally and intellectually, they succeeded to a large extent in their mission. This has resulted a large number of Boro people to lose their rich culture, traditions, customs even their mother tongue and Boros have been compelled to live amidst utter negligence and exploitation both socially and economically. And the main aim of this exploitation is only to dominate the Boros depriving them from their right. This exploitation is still continuing at the behest of the non-Boro Assamese rulers blessed with the blessing of the divide and rule policy of Govt. of India even after 50 years of independence. This exploitation and negligence have later caused serious threat to the existence of the Boro people in this region and the leaders of various tribal groups made sincere efforts to unite all the indigenous people under one platform in pre-independence period and they formed the Tribal league. And as per the initiative of the Tribal league and the Tribal people of the state, the Govt. of Assam, in the year 1947, amended the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation 1886 adding a new chapter called the chapter X for welfare and protection of the tribal people so far as land settlements and allied matters are concerned. As per this amendment, 17 Belts and 30 Blocks were constituted for the protection of the Tribal People living in 14 plain districts of Assam covering a total area of 11,48,707 hectare of land in 3980 villages. The main aim of creation of this belts and blocks was to protect the Tribal People and transfer of land belonging to tribal people to non-tribals in this areas was prohibited vide this new amendment. But enough loopholes were left in this act to which the state Government of Assam did not take any proper steps to rectify it. On the contrary, the state Government Officials and the politicians with vested interest encouraged the non-Tribals to occupy and settle in these Tribal Blocks and Belts. The influx of refugees from erstwhile East Bengal, now Bangladesh occurred before and after the independence of India took serious ^{turn} and these refugees were settled mostly in these Tribal Belts and Blocks. The trend of influx is still on which has threatened the existence of the indigenous people of the state. The settlement of the refugees and the illegal foreign nationals in these areas adversely effected the socio-cultural and economy of the Boros and other indigenous people.

As a result, the areas once thickly populated by Boros, at present, occupied by the immigrant Muslims and other non tribal people. On the other hand in the name of industrialisation, the Boros were also evicted from their paternal land and industries were set up there. With the setting up of the industries, thousands of non-tribal working people naturally came to these areas in search of work and finally made their settlement in this areas. Even, for such purposes, the state Government did not hesitate to amend the relevant land revenue act to exclude the villages from the tribal blocks and belts. For instance, the Governor of Assam vide notification No. RD-74/46/172 dated 27-02-1950 constituted the South Kamrup (Guwahati) tribal belt, but vide notification No. RSD-26/64/pt/38 dated 30-07-1969 the Government, excluded a large area of greater Guwahati from the operation of chapter X of Assam Land Revenue Manual. As a result in the greater Guwahati area, now the capital city of Assam once inhabited by the Boros, they were compelled to vacate their paternal land they were holding since the time immemorial as the Government had acquisitioned their land. For another instance of such conspiracy, in the name of formation of Lakhimpur District Town, the Government of Assam vide notification No. RSD-26/64/100 dated 18-07-1969 excluded all land and villages of Lakhimpur Town from the operation of the chapter X of Assam Land Revenue Manual. This has compelled the Boros to vacate their land as they had to face tremendous pressure from the non-tribal people. The oppression and pressure on the Boros living mainly in the northern part of the River Brahmaputra in Assam is till on and these areas are now no more protected areas for the Boros. And significantly, the Government of Assam, who are duty-bound to safe guard the Boros, on the contrary, is backing the illegal foreign nationals of Bangladesh and other non-tribal people to settle in these protected areas.

Besides pertaining to the land problems of the indigenous people of Assam, the Boros are treated as second class citizen in Assam and they are denied from their birth right by the non-tribal people and the Government who also even treated them as untouchable. Over all , by means of fair or foul, the Boros are being suppressed and oppressed.

The Boro Sahitya Sabha — the apex literary organisation of the Boros, in 1971 decided to introduce the Boro language as the medium of instruction in all primary schools of the Boro areas in Assam. As the Government did not accord permission, the Sabha compelled to launch agitational programme peacefully and by democratic means. But the non-tribal Assamese people and the State Government branded the Boro people as separatist forces. In the year 1974, the Boro people launched a mass movement to achieve their legitimate right to choose the script for Boro language. But, the non-tribal Assamese people led state Government left no stone unturned to crush the democratic and peaceful movement killing as many as 15 Boro persons while a number of Boro Girls were gang raped by the Assamese goons and the Government forces. Even the president of Assam Sahitya Sabha - the apex literary

organisation of Assam representing only the non tribal Assamese people in its annual Session in 1971 branded the Boros as anti-Social, anti-national and urged the government to take stern action to crush their democratic movement. This example is enough to state the social, economical and cultural oppression on the Boros in Assam.

I would also like to tell you that the All Assam Students' union - the apex body of non-tribal students of Assam, demanded to abolish the scholarship awarded to the down trodden tribal students of Assam. Another glaring example of the cultural exploitation on the Boros is that the "Bagurumba" - a traditional Boro Folk Dance was adjudged as the best group in a dance festival of India held in Hyderabad state in 1983 and the group was invited to perform their show in an international festival held in USSR. But depriving this troupe, the government of Assam sent another cultural troupe (non tribal) to USSR.

The Boros are also deprived of their rights in getting employment in the Government offices as most of the employees belongs to non-tribal communities. Even the reservation policy adopted by the government of India for the tribal people is also not honoured in the state of Assam. It is a matter of utter dismay that a number of Boro people took part in the freedom movement of India and obtained "Martyrdom", yet, they have been treated as neglected class in their home state.

✱ ✱ The intolerant behaviour and the negligence of the government towards the Boros' can also be found in the development activities of the Boro dominated areas in the State. These areas are without any road Communication system, educational institutions, and Medical facilities, even the people have to live without potable drinking water since a long time. This feeling of hatred and indifferent attitude of the government and the non-tribal people of the state have compelled the Boro people to launch a democratic agitation demanding a separate state since 1987. During this movement, incidents of torching of Boro villages, demolition of dwelling houses, mass gang rape on innocent Boro womenfolk even the pregnant women were also took place at the behest of the state security forces and the non-indigenous people. However, in 1993, an accord known as "Boro Accord" was signed between the Government of India and All Boro Students' Union - the apex students body of the Boro Students who spearheaded the movement. As per the 'Accord', an autonomous district council was formed namely 'Boroland Autonomous Council' with a view to provide the safeguard in all spheres for the Boro community. But, it is heartening to say that the government is still keeping an indifferent attitude in implementing the Accord. The boundary of the autonomous district council area is yet to be demarcated while the government is not providing the required funds for the smooth functioning of the autonomous district council.

This apathetic attitude of the government and the non-indigenous people have compelled the Boro people to believe that unless and until a separate state is formed,

nothing can be expected from this anti-tribal and anti-indigenous government. This feeling has also compelled a section of dedicated Boro youth to take up arms to attain the separate homeland for the son of the soils.

Coming to the conclusion, I would like to make a humble appeal before all the hon'ble delegates of this august house to extend all possible help and co-operation towards this threatened indigenous Boro people for their struggle for survival and to put pressure upon the Government of India and the state government of Assam to provide safeguard in all spheres so that the Boro community can be able to live like other communities with their own tradition, culture and dignity in their own homeland.

Last but not least, once again, Madame Chair, we must thank you for your concern and support which have inspired us greatly, and for the partnership and friendship which we have cherished so much from all indigenous sisters and brothers all over the world that together have constantly motivated to launch the struggle for our existence. I heartily hope that, all of you will remember the Boros' who wish to have your full support in the coming days.

Thank you, Madame Chair.

28.07.93

Dr. DEVA KANTA RAMCHIARY, *Secretary for*

Member

STATE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

ASSAM, INDIA.