

WHO ARE THE SONS OF THE SOIL ? : QUEST FOR A CONSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION OF THE ADIVASIS IN ASSAM

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The present study takes up an unusual case of quest of the Adivasis (indigenous people)- Santals, Oraons, Mundas, Gond, Kharia tribes of Central India who were coaxed and cajoled by the British to migrate as indentured labourers to Assam and other parts of the North-East since the nineteenth century in the tea plantation industry. The migrant settlers inherit a strong sense of Adivasi-hood (an indigenous consciousness) and have recreated conditions to sustain this. The major contention is the denial of Scheduled Tribe (a Constitutional status) status to the Adivasis in Assam; those migrated from Jharkhand, and Central Indian Tribal belt for plantation purposes. Significantly and more ironic is that migrant Adivasi settlers possess Schedule Tribe status in the Indian Union except for the state of Assam and Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The Adivasi migrants, in large numbers, living there for over a century have made the place their home. They reclaimed virgin land from forest not only for the tea plantation industry, but also for themselves, creating clusters of villages. This way they have nurtured and cultivated their tribal culture of the homeland. Today they form a distinct cultural group in the ethnic mosaic of Assam, India and claim like their brethren in central India, that they are Adivasis/indigenous people or original inhabitants of India like other tribes. It is to be noted that due to political pressure from the state government in the Indian federation as well as anomalies in the scheduling of the Adivasis as Scheduled Tribe the Adivasis have been devoid of their Constitutional Rights in India.

In contemporary times, the Adivasis in Assam have lower human development indexes as well as prone to socio-economic- political disadvantages. In other words, there is exclusive exclusion of these communities that has continued since the colonial times in India. Not surprisingly, they are disparagingly labelled as ‘tea tribes’ owing to their work in Assam, India. In addition, they have been easy prey to existing Scheduled Tribes of Assam (especially Bodo tribe) who have been opposing their scheduling arguing that it would rob them (the Bodos) of

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various opportunities by the government.

This has given rise to conflicts initiated by Bodo tribes in Assam in 1996, 1998 and 2014 against the Adivasis in Assam. This has been termed as “ethnic cleansing” of the Adivasis in Assam by Bodos for the sake of creation of the Greater Bodoland. As mentioned earlier, the major concern of the Bodo tribe regarding granting ST status to the Adivasis would be a decline of various opportunities provided to them under the Constitutional provisions of being Schedule Tribe in the state of Assam, therefore frequent clashes between Bodos and Adivasis continue under the garb of vying for an ethnic identity.

The study intends to thoroughly examine the case of the Adivasis’ quest for the Scheduled Tribe status in Assam. It would look into the detailed reasons behind the anomalies of the Scheduled Lists that has been drawn post the Indian independence. Further, it vies to study all such treaties, constitutional arrangements, memorandum of understanding between the stakeholders(i.e., the state government, Central government and the Adivasi political groups) etc. A qualitative method of research would be involved in studying the situation. An ethnographic study of the subject could be employed in order to understand better the political nuances of the situation.

Given the strategic and sensitive border areas, low level of development, immense cultural diversity, and participatory democratic processes, social exclusion has resulted in perceptions of marginalization, deprivation, and identity losses, all adding to the strong basis of brands of autonomy seeking movements in the garb of regionalism, sub-nationalism, and ethnic politics, most often verging on extremism. It is argued that settled Adivasi community’s anxiety for preservation of culture and language, often appearing as ‘narcissist self-awareness’, and their demand of autonomy, cannot be seen unilaterally as dysfunctional for a healthy civil society. Their aspirations should be seen rather as prerequisites for distributive justice, which no nation state can neglect. ‘Consciousness of kind’ has long been an attribute of human groups, be it tribal or national communities. This ‘consciousness’ arising out of sharing a common habitat and culture-including language and social traditions-gives the tribe or a nation the resources for developing a common identity so essential for unified action as a group. It is a reference to consciousness, found expression in the assertion for self-identity, which is maintained and innate to them. Identity redefinition of the tribes on a wider scale and its assertion may be viewed as part of the overall process of social change and modernization of various groups of

tribes in Northeast India.