



## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Adivasi Identity and Accommodation in Assam

S Harsha<sup>1,\*</sup><sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India

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\* Corresponding author.

S Harsha

200harsha@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper examines the issue of Adivasi identity and accommodation in Assam. Although Adivasis have been inhabiting Assam from time immemorial, they have been subjected to exploitation and neglect by the state and rival ethnic groups of Assam. The present paper reviews the issues plaguing the community and discusses the viability of alternative institutional arrangements which could resolve the crisis.

**Keywords:** Identity; Accommodation; Land-grabbing

## INTRODUCTION

The Adivasis who inhabit Assam today can broadly be divided into two communities: tea garden workers and those who left the tea gardens at the end of their contracts and settled in and around the area after procuring a little land.

According to studies of scholars such as Karotemprel and B Dutta Roy (1990)<sup>1,2</sup>, Thomas Pullopillil (2005)<sup>3-5</sup>, R.N Chakraborty (1997)<sup>6</sup> and Walter Fernandez (2013)<sup>7</sup>, the identity of Adivasi community in terms of their social, political, cultural, and economy is at the critical juncture in present day Assam.

All Adivasis in Assam trace their origins to the torturous and oppressive regime of indenture. As B.B. Das (1990)<sup>1</sup> wrote 'Tea is the product of the cumulative toil of the labourers. It is mainly because of their hardships that we have the golden brew which cheers thousands. The Northeast region of India is home of the world's finest variety of tea. It

also accounts for a large bulk of the world's tea output.'

The Adivasis who inhabit Assam today can broadly be divided into two communities: the tea garden workers; and those who left the teagardens at the end of their contracts and settled in and around the area after procuring a little land (mostly through government schemes). They are most numerous in Khokrajhar in western/Lower Assam, in Marigaon, Nagaon, Sonitpur and Darrang in Middle Assam, in Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia in eastern/Upper Assam, in North Chachar and Karbi Anglong in southern Assam, and in the Barak Valley.

The position of the tea garden and ex-tea garden Adivasis is clearly different - but their experience of social and political disenfranchisement has been similar. The condition of the tea garden workers remains abysmal. As Ranjit Das Gupta (1986)<sup>8</sup> has shown, plantation labour is essentially un-free labour and while payment modes, work organization etc. may be similar to other segments of the industrial



labour force, there are also some distinctive socio-economic traits which derive from the fact that plantations are essentially enclave economies combining both agricultural and industrial characteristics. Workers are in essence captive to the command of capital.

But conditions were worse during the colonial era. From the 1850s until the 1920s, working conditions on the tea estates were akin to slavery. Recruits were confined in concentration-like camps in the tea gardens themselves, housed in segregated 'coolie' lines, and kept under strict surveillance. Discipline was enforced by flogging, rape, and torture, with the harshest punishments meted out for perceived laxness. They were required to perform their work despite the inclement weather. No concessions were made for women and children. Yet wages in the tea gardens were lower even than those received by coolies employed on public works or the railways. Not surprisingly, mortality was high, but such was the uncaring nature of the system that the bodies of workers who died were simply thrown into rivers.

While certainly not comparable to earlier times, working conditions today are still far from well regulated. The Plantation Labour Act of 1951 which was enacted to protect the interests of workers in plantations is routinely violated, and the same goes for other legislative measures meant to protect workers in general such as the Workmen's Compensation Act 1929 and the Assam Plantation Employees Welfare Fund Act 1959. In 2004 the Northeastern Social Research Centre, based in Guwahati, conducted a comprehensive study of 172 tea gardens in Assam, holding numerous interviews and group discussions with workers and their families. The study brought to light many cases of inadequate or non-existent provision of basic services such as drinking water, schools, health facilities and shelter. Women, who are the backbone of the tea industry and comprise the large majority of the work force, face particularly difficult working conditions. According to studies sanitation facilities dedicated for female use were either inadequate or lacking altogether. There were rumours of Adivasis being subjected to verbal, physical and sexual abuse. It is not surprising to learn that female labourers are preferred to males because managers feel that they are easier to exploit.

Witch-hunting is a curse in the Adivasi societies, where women are assaulted, beaten up, heads tonsured, murdered, dragged into public places, faces painted black, forcefully paraded naked in public meetings, and raped in the name of being witches. The peculiar thing about the violence is that most victims are widows, aged women and mainly women who are closely related to the accusers. Witch-hunting is one of the most brutal forms of violence against Adivasi women. Witch-hunting is a frightening phenomenon, which is on the increase in recent years in Adivasi dominated villages in the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, Assam, Tripura, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra. Realizing the gravity of the problem,

Guwahati High Court had asked the Assam Government to investigate the matter.

Issues surrounding gender deserve special mention due to the feminized nature of the tea-picking industry as well as the specific ways in which oppression and marginalization play out for Adivasi women, both inside and outside the tea gardens. While traditional norms of patriarchy and gender hierarchy are not as prevalent in Adivasi society as they are in many conservative upper-caste Hindu communities, local traditions do have women bearing a disproportionate socio-economic and cultural burden. They perform the bulk of unpaid labour in the household and are regarded as the bearers of Adivasi culture and tradition. Furthermore, a history of exotic sexualisation of Adivasi women dating back to colonial times has led to them being stereotyped as sexually loose and even deviant. This in turn has made them specific targets of sexual violence, especially in recent times in the context of communal clashes.

The conditions of the Adivasis who made it out of the tea plantations and settled down as cultivators around the gardens is certainly better-but not by much. Those who have land are managing well enough but those without it have been forced to look for informal laboring jobs in nearby towns and cities. Overall education and poverty levels, and health indicators for Adivasis are among the worst in Assam. Many Adivasi families find it difficult even to get their children into primary school. They are disproportionately affected too by natural disasters, with erosion and floods taking a toll of their small farms. Being denied loans in regular banks, they have to rely on usurious moneylenders. Occasionally their land is stolen from them by the state or private players because of a lack of proper documentation. Last but not least, they have little political voice. Although they account for nearly 20 percent of the population of the state, their representation in the legislative assembly is miniscule. Due to continued disenfranchisement and oppression, self-exploitation within the community is on the rise, with alcoholism becoming rampant and the trafficking of women and children to work as domestic workers or sex workers in cities like Kolkata and Mumbai also increasing.

Indeed, according to a recent study of the Adivasi problem in Assam by Thomas Pulloppillil, the community is at a critical juncture today in terms of its social, political, cultural, and economic identity. The Adivasis' situation, he suggests, is dire, and has been made even more perilous by the recent granting of regional autonomy to territories such as Bodoland, Lalung, Karbi and Mishing<sup>3-5</sup>.

The most potent cause for the emergence of Adivasi insurgent groups is the large-scale Adivasi land-grabbing in Assam. The land-grabbing has taken an ethnic guise in the districts of Karbi Anglong & Bodoland where Karbis and Bodos respectively are snatching land from the Adivasis by claims of indigenesness, ethnic cleansing and the provisions of autonomous council which prohibits alienation



of land to non-tribals. On November 3, 2010, The Forest department under Haltugaon Forest Division in the western part of the State had burnt down houses of more than 1500 Adivasi families of 33 forest villages in Longchung Forest area in the name of an eviction drive from forest land.

In this connection, Adivasi organization AASAA of Karbi-Anglong District has demanded land rights, special recognition, and creation of an Adivasi Development Council within the six schedule areas of Karbi-Anglong in Assam, besides permanent land patta (rights).

Apart from land-grabbing, in some areas of Assam such as Bodoland Territorial Council, the local Bodos consider the native Adivasis as intruders and there has been a series of attempts by Bodo militants to forcibly evict the Adivasis and other non Bodos through ethnic cleansing.

Furthermore, The Assam-Nagaland border dispute in the districts of Jorhat and Golaghat of Assam had exacerbated the plight of the Adivasis living in the border districts of Assam. Nagaland has been accusing Adivasis' of encroaching their land and Naga militant groups NSCN are tormenting and threatening the Adivasis of border districts. There have been complaints of NSCN kidnapping tea garden labourers.

Against this background of disenfranchisement, some prominent Adivasi Organizations such as the All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (AASAA) and groups active with tea garden workers such as the Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (ATTSA) are agitating for the granting of ST status to the state's Adivasis. This, they feel, would go a long way towards ameliorating the historically oppressed condition of the Adivasis in Assam. Indeed, it is often the central, if not only, point of many of their campaigns.

The Karbi organizations in Karbi Anglong are vehemently opposing the ST status demand of Adivasi in Karbi Anglong in particular and Assam in general. Some of the causes for the opposition to the ST demand of Adivasi are as follows:

1. Granting of NOC by council to Adivasi and their eventual declaration as ST would endow them with political power by enabling them to contest elections for reserved assembly & Lok Sabha seats. It would further consolidate their power in the district in particular and Assam in general.
2. There is an apprehension among Karbi and other Tribals in Karbi Anglong that declaration of ST status to Adivasi would embolden them to up the ante with regard to other demands such as creation of Adivasi development council exclusively for hill areas and ST Hill status.
3. There is a fear among Karbi and other tribals that Adivasi are not indigenous people of Assam and the granting of ST status tantamount to recognition of their indigenous status.
4. Lastly, there is disquiet among Karbi and other Tribals that recognition of Adivasi as ST would make a dent in their share of reservation pie.

Five Assam based Adivasi militant groups comprising Adivasi Cobra Military of Assam (ACMA), Birsas Commando Force (BCF), Adivasi People's Army, All Adivasi National Liberation Army, and Santhal Tiger Force, in ceasefire expressed unhappiness over the "tardy progress" in according to Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to Adivasis. The unhappiness was conveyed to the Centre by 15 leaders of the groups during a tripartite meeting held during November 2013. These groups had laid down arms in January 2012 with a declaration that they would continue to fight for Scheduled Tribe status for Adivasis.

## INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS TO ACCOMMODATE ADIVASIS IN ASSAM

Having analyzed the issue of Adivasi identity in the previous section, the present section focuses on the question of institutional arrangements to accommodate them. Adivasis in Assam have been clamoring for some sort of autonomy or institutional arrangement to represent their interests or identity.

To placate Adivasis, the Assam government established development councils for them and some other ethnic groups of Assam in 2007. Although development councils have been constituted, they have not been endowed with adequate powers and they have not become democratically elected bodies. Moreover, in Karbi Anglong autonomous council area, Adivasi's and their organizations have been demanding development council exclusively for hill areas. Disillusioned with such development councils, Adivasis have been demanding autonomous councils under the sixth schedule of the constitution. However, some of the studies on autonomous councils<sup>9</sup> indicate that working of these councils have been marred by corruption, nepotism, and intensification of ethnic conflict. According to Udayon Misra (2012)<sup>10</sup> the demographic transition of Assam alongside the growing prosperity of migrants and other non-Bodo communities is what provoked 2012 Bodo-Muslim clashes in the BTAD area. He avers that disproportionate representation and BTC's consistently anti-minority stance had provoked demands for the exclusion of Muslim-majority villages from BTAD and the Adivasis, too, claiming to comprise 9,00,000 of BTAD's population, wants to be excluded from BTAD jurisdiction.

Moreover, of late other ethnic groups of Assam such as Amri Karbi, Garos of Assam, Gorkha, Non-Dimasa (Kuki, Hmar, Biata, Hrangkhoh, etc.) communities in N C Hills and recently the scheduled caste communities in Assam have been demanding sixth schedule autonomous councils. Out of desperation, Adivasis are joining Adivasi insurgent groups such as Adivasi Cobra Military of Assam (ACMA), Birsas Commando Force (BCF), Adivasi People's Army, All Adivasi National Liberation Army, and Santhal Tiger Force. The emergence and reinforcement of Adivasi insurgency poses a threat to the peace and stability of the assam state in



particular and India in general. According to India Today report The All Adivasi National Liberation Army (AANLA) an Adivasi insurgent group in Assam with definite links with some of northeastern India's frontline separatist groups and a possible nexus with the Maoists could well turn out to be the new terror front in the state.

Hence, at this juncture it is imperative to interrogate the issue of autonomy in the context of Assam. Scholar Jayanta Krishna Sarma (2011)<sup>11</sup> recommends an alternative conception of differentiated citizenship which is based on the acknowledgement of the political relevance of difference. According to him differentiated citizenship in Assam will recognise the pluralist character of the democratic community in the state. Instead of difference-blind universalism, differentiated citizenship develops the sense of collective belongingness and equal respect for the "other". At the same time, a number of rights could be ensured and established, viz, special representation rights, multicultural rights, self-government rights or rights to self-determination, etc. the author opines that autonomy should not be viewed as a tool to govern people of the frontier or periphery. It is to be taken as the integral and inherent part of the democratic process. It should not be regarded as a process to deal with extraordinary circumstances, and instead must be taken as a spontaneous flow of political life.

However, the problem with deterritorialized autonomy is that it would open a Pandora's box for group recognition and might lead to mushrooming of ethnic groups in Assam state.

A review of the representation of two autonomous councils namely Karbi Anglong and Bodoland where Adivasis are living in large numbers, reveals that Adivasis are scarcely represented in these councils. Moreover, these councils have a history of Adivasi displacement and land grabbing perpetrated by dominant ethnic groups. In order to ensure the safety and voice of the Adivasis in these councils, it is imperative to establish some sort of consociational arrangement in which different ethnic groups along with Adivasis are represented in these councils through rotation. Furthermore, executive positions in these councils should also be reserved for Adivasi and other non-tribals.

The Standing Committee on Law and Personnel said in its latest report that it supports the proposal of the central government to create a second chamber in Assam in "larger public interest". Since parliament has made a provision for the second chamber for the Assam state, the possibility of providing representation to Adivasis in the second chamber should be explored. Many minority ethnic groups could be provided representation in the second chamber.

## CONCLUSION

The granting of ST status to Adivasis and accommodating them in the existing institutions through consociational arrangements would go a long way in empowering the Adivasis and nipping in the bud the menace of Adivasi insurgency in Assam.

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