

# Tea Garden Workers of Assam: Struggle to Reclaim their Schedule Tribe Identity

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## Abstract

*The tea plantation workers of Assam, who were brought to this part of India by the Britishers had undergone and is undergoing untold miseries, misfortunes, tortures, deprivation, and injustices. This community of people are the backbone of the tea industry in Assam producing more than half of the total tea produced in the country and in turn boosting the country's economy. Unfortunately, this toiling class have been exploited to a great extent, depriving them of availing their basic minimum amenities of life. Because of such negligence they have waged protest demanding their due rights and privileges. The paper will delve into one such demand of the workers i.e. the demand for enlisting them in the Schedule Tribe Category, so that they too can avail the affirmative remedy required for their upliftment and emancipation.*

**Key words:** Tea Garden Workers, Affirmative Action, Schedule Tribe, Assam, Upliftment.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Assam, the land of lush green tea gardens is located in the north-eastern region of India. The region has witnessed migration of different groups of people, communities at various points in history and thereby transforming the previously homogenous society into a complex multicultural society. Assam became the recipient of one such group of migrant community namely the tea labourers after the Britishers undertook the project of tea cultivation and production in the Assam valley. This initiative of the colonialist ensued the process of migration of numerous people from other part of British India

like Chota Nagpur, lower Bengal, Bihar, and southern parts of Western Provinces to be a part of the tea producing enterprise and work as indenture labour. It is this section of the tea community who settled permanently in the region, amalgamated themselves with the culture, society, and politics of the land and later became a part and parcel of the larger Assamese society.

However, history is testimony to the immense atrocities the workers had to undergo for their survival and existence in the secluded garden terrains. The migration of innumerable labourers was accompanied by episodes of torture, abduction, deceit, forceful recruitment. Their voyage to this land of 'two leaves and a bud' resulted in numerous deaths and aftermath misfortune. The process of ceaseless exploitation, marginalization, deprivation, started with the tea labourers setting their feet in the jungle laden frontiers of Assam. Nearly 27 districts in Assam cultivate tea and approximately 2 million people work directly or indirectly in the plantation sector. In Assam there are about 755 organized tea gardens, the small tea growers account for about 1, 20,000. Despite serving such a big income yielding sector, they are never given adequate housing, food, rations, electricity, medical, educational and other amenities needed to live a contended life. Their wage is the lowest amongst all industrial enterprise. The workers devoid of the basic minimum facilities have time and again agitated, protested and demanded their due share.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The study incorporates secondary literature in terms of books both of English and Vernacular language, journals, newspaper articles, magazines, records of history, government documents etc. While carrying forward the research qualitative method of analysis is adopted.

### III. DEMAND FOR SCHEDULE STATUS

Of the various demands raised by the tea Labourers, the demand for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes list has been subjected to severe controversy and is a burning political issue. During the colonial administration, the tea workers were bestowed with certain constitutional rights harbouring the belief that reserved seats for the worker's representatives will help them acquire better control over the pliable workers. The issue of enlisting the tea garden workers in the ST list was first raised in the 1930s. The workers were enjoying this privilege until 1945 and the year after India's independence this privilege was ruthlessly taken away from them. Various Commissions and Committee are constituted which forwarded arguments based on similar observations. The U.N. Dhebar Commission observed that- "The government of Assam has consistently opposed any change in their status on the ground that it would disturb the local political picture."<sup>i</sup> A.K Chanda Committee furthered the argument stating that, "The committee has accepted the overwhelming note that the Scheduled Tribes who have migrated from Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and settled down in Assam should be recognized as Schedules Tribes...there is no change in the social conditions of the persons who migrated in large number from one state to another and settled in the same place. The labourers had gone to Assam in large numbers some years back. They have carried along with them and retained the tribal characteristics and their way of life is the same. These tribes were recognized even in Assam before 1947. But after 1947, these tribes were descheduled, not because of any principle but purely on political grounds... the (state) government wants to perpetuate the ignorance, backwardness, poverty of the tribal people, only because that will disturb the political; pattern in the state. This objection is not valid and is against the principle of social justice and equality."<sup>ii</sup> Some others blame Assamese chauvinism for denying the legitimate right of the labourers to be included in the ST/SC lists. Those among the non-tribal origin of the labourers debate

the fact that "the plantation life is equally oppressive for all workers, and the social position of all ex- tea workers being similar, they are equally entitled to the benefits of reservation." Unfortunately The Scheduled Tribes Commission (1961), the Joint Parliamentary Committee of 1967, the Union Cabinet note prepared by the home ministry in 1978, the Advisory Committee on list of schedule tribes in 1994, had all denied the ST status to tea garden tribes, on the ground that these tribes do not show the homogeneity, the isolation, primitive traits (lost because of adoption into a more advanced economic system), and general backwardness that qualify a community for inclusion in the list of STs under Article 342.<sup>iii</sup> The Registrar General too commented that if the state government approves than some of the homogenous groups might be taken into consideration for inclusion.

Since the year after the curtailment of their right, the tea plantation workers are pressing hard on the government to grant them the ST status which their counterparts are enjoying in their native places. This community of people have lived in the state for hundreds of years contributing to boosting the economy of Assam in every possible way but still the unsympathetic government has deprived them of their rights and in turn abstaining them from availing the economic, educational, political, social benefits provided under this schedule. Instead, they are recognized as Other Backward Class (OBC) as per the Mandal Commission Report or Most Other Backward Class (MOBC) in the State Government list. The enlisting of them in the OBC or MOBC category is not the solution as the privileges provided under the ST status will help them avail constitutional reservation in jobs, education, representation in the Central and the State legislatures and many such other provisions which will definitely help in their upward mobility in the social ladder. This long-standing demand for the ST status has drawn the support of a number of organizations like the trade unions, political parties, Christian missionary and the like. Tea workers representative bodies like the Assam Shah Mazdoor Sangh (ACMS), Assam Tea Tribe Students' Association (ATTSA) have continuously demanded for incorporating the entire tea community whether tribal or non-tribal in the ST/SC list considering the fact that historical causes have rendered the whole community deprived and backward and it would be a great injustice on their part to deprive them of the

constitutional benefits on the basis of tribal/non-tribal origin in the present century also. Another hurdle in achieving this objective is the enormous opposition waged by the indigenous tribes who are already enlisted in the ST list. There has been a continuous insecurity prevailing among them that if such prerogatives are extended than the size of the cake will remain the same but their individual share will get reduced. The All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) claimed that unless the reservation quota is increased to 10%, the inclusion of 'tea tribes' or 'adivasis' will result in adverse consequences. Including them in the SC category will result in severe criticism as the other tribal communities are sure to protest on account of harming their interest. Thus considering the above analysis, we observe that the whole issue has become a very delicate one with people opposing as well as demanding for the rights and privileges at the same time. Incorporating the whole community or any section of it in the ST/SC list has indeed become a prickly task for the government.

#### IV. ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF THEIR STRUGGLE

Various writers have attempted to deconstruct the arguments placed against this fundamental privilege which they are to otherwise enjoy. One of the largest communities amongst the umbrella group of 'tea tribe' is the Adivasis. Adivasis are broadly divided into two communities- the ones working in the tea gardens and the ex-tea garden community. Severe exploitation, oppression, disenfranchisement has led to the emergence of many student unions demanding the grant of ST status. They are certain that availing such facilities will help them overcome their precarious life. Affirmative actions and the policy of protective discrimination will, in the long run, minimize the prevailing socio-economic inequality. However, various scholars and writers have expressed their discontent over this issue and stated reasons highlighting why such demand is invalid. Some of the arguments they muster are- they are not indigenous tribals in Assam and hence have not faced historic discrimination as other tribes, granting them ST status will hamper the benefits the other tribes are at present availing and that the 'tea tribes' have not yet assimilated with the larger Assamese society.

As a defense to the arguments stated above, scholars put forward their own points of view. Dr. B.B. Das indicated that "the effect of migration for adivasis included no choice or freedom and at the complete mercy of their recruiters and employers, further stating that the labourers settled in the tea belts of Northeast India are not a floating population but rather a settled population with no connection to their original homes, having adopted local ways and habits thus considering Assam to be their home."<sup>iv</sup> And granting the special status would try to undo their historic exploitation that they faced. So rather than migratory history, the history of injustice and exploitation should be given more consideration. It is also because of the past oppressions like all other oppressed communities that this community has not been able to grab the fruits of development.

The Human Development Index measures this section in the lowest rung, in terms of literacy, health, political representation, representation in Public Services, etc. To ensure their development, affirmative actions are the need of the hour. Helping this community to have an access to all the social benefits will only further the overall development of the state. Protective policy-making is not designed to make oppressed communities fight with each other for the same crumbs, but rather an exercise in redistributing power historically monopolized by the ruling classes- to create a more just social order.<sup>v</sup>

#### V. RESORT TO MILITANCY

The failure of the government to provide any assistance and relief from their troubled state had provided a new dimension to the Adivasi struggle. The frustrated members had taken arms as a last resort to achieve their goals and thus the minority movement demanding ST status had ended up in arms movement. Exploitation and injustice perpetuated upon the adivasis have rendered them helpless. Given these complexities, there is every possibility of the built-in adivasi anger and frustration being channelized into militant lines.<sup>vi</sup> If not through legal means they are ready to fight the battle against injustice by taking recourse through violence. Organizations like the Birsa Commando Force (BCF), Adivasi Cobra Militant (ACM) and Adivasi National Liberation Army (ANLA) Santhali Tiger Force, Adivasi People's Army were born. These organizations are induced in

kidnapping, abduction, train bombing, extortion and all sorts of violent activities. All they want is development and recognition of the community. Their demands are to enlist them in the ST list, better schools, better education, job opportunity and all such needs that would help them overcome the barriers of exploitation and underdevelopment initially practiced by the Britishers and later perpetuated by the government and the dominant section. However, most of the groups in the later period have surrendered and become dysfunctional.

## VI. STRUGGLE IN THE RECENT DECADES

The demand for ST status by the community and the denial of the other existing communities and the government to extend such privileges has time and again created an atmosphere of tension in the valley. Udayan Misra forwards a simple understanding in this regard- "There are 32 STs in the state, of which 14 are hill tribes and nine are plains tribes. It is an anomaly that those who have been accorded ST status in the hills lose their status if they settle in the plains and vice versa. This territory specific classification seems to defy all logic and is clearly a hangover of colonial ethnography."<sup>vii</sup> The tea workers who are listed as OBC are fighting for their inclusion in the ST list. This demand has resulted in serious political upheavals in the recent decade. A strong opposition is coming from the Bodos who would not allow including them at any cost. The tension revolving this issue has taken many violent forms. Ethnic conflict between the two communities started since 1996. One such incident is the Gossaigaon ethnic clash. The Bodo- Santhal ethnic conflict displaced about 42,214 families consisting of about 2,02,684 persons from their homes, further the second spell of ethnic clash in 1998 displaced about 48,556 families consisting of about 3,14,342 persons from their home (Govt. of Assam).<sup>viii</sup> On many occasions they waged protest and strikes in their individual capacity as well as in front of the government premises to make their voice heard. To mention another such incident, is the November 24, 2007 clash. During that day three thousand adivasi men, women and youths gathered near Dispur to wage protest for the ST status. They had bows and arrows, bamboo poles with sharpened ends, the old axe and machete, all cultural symbols, according to the youthful leaders and opportunist Assamese sycophants who should know better.<sup>ix</sup> There was chaos everywhere and the tribals and the non tribals

both were equally attacked with iron rod, wooden blocks, bamboo staves, and women were chased and molested. The utter failure of the state machinery was well reflected in the incident.

Some of the recent agitations waged by the Adivasis includes the rail blockade on 22nd February 2016 where nearly 5,000 Adivasis staged protest at Kojrajhar railway station demanding their inclusion in the ST list. The blockade was conducted under the instruction of the Adivasi National Convention Committee (ANCC) thereby disrupting the fee and timely movements of several trains. Similar kind of blockade was also carried out on 16th December the same year halting trains at different stations. On 28th September the ANCC undertook protest activities demanding ST status and to initiate peace talks with the rebelling groups. There were also agitations waged against the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) regarding their high-handed attitude towards granting schedule status. In 2017, the Adivasi National Convention (ANC), a conglomerate of ten adivasi group have called for a blockade at the Kokrajhar and Udalguri stations. They submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Assam's Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal stating lists of various demands like-inclusion in the ST list the various tribes, seeking a solution to the problem of adivasi militancy, rehabilitation and allotment of lands to the evicted adivasi and tea garden workers by the state forest department.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Sanjib Baruah remarked, "The issue of social justice and constitutional redress for the plantation workers in Assam is one of the ironical proportions. The very people claiming their stakes as primitive peoples of India are actually those who created the economy of modern Assam in the nineteenth century.<sup>x</sup> The state should try to resolve their demands by assuring them the constitutional advantages and privileges through affirmative actions and the policies of protective discrimination. Udayan Misra has rightly stated that- "the struggles for schedule status must, therefore, be seen as a part of a wider struggle of identity assertion by the adivasis- a search for their cultural roots and heritage." It is beyond doubt that the community has contributed immensely towards the Assamese culture, literature and in turn towards greater Assamese society. At the same time it will

be unjustifiable to deny the fact that this section of people also has their own distinct cultural identity. So, the conscious leaders and activists of a particular section prefer them to be called as 'Adivasi' rather than naming their community after a particular commodity. Although the entire issue is debatable but the fact that all these have stem from the years of oppression and misrecognition needs to be taken into account. The government while making and incorporating policies for the deprived and backward section must take into consideration

the concept of social justice. The government should get rid of their colonial mind-set and should set new criterion for the depressed section so that they too can avail the opportunities provided in independent India. This struggle is a part of the larger struggle of the tea labourers search for identity and recognition

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