

International Journal of Scientific Research and Reviews

The Politics of Scheduled Tribe Status and the Tai-Ahoms in Assam

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ABSTRACT

This article is an investigation into the constant demand made by various ethnic groups for recognition of Scheduled Tribes (ST) in Assam. It is often observed that political leaders such as members of the legislatures, parliament and even state ministers promise sympathetic consideration for such demands. But the procedures involved in amending the list of ST are often ignored by them. On the other hand, the associations of existing ST has been constantly opposing the demands made by the groups, arguing that they do not fulfill the established criteria for categorizing any of the groups into the ST list. Therefore, this article examines the way ethnic groups engage with the state and the larger social settings to secure the coveted status of ST in the contemporary times. At present there are six communities in Assam demanding ST status, viz., the Morans, the Matak, the Tai-Ahoms, the Chutias, the Koch-Rajbanshi's and the Tea-Tribes. However, in this study, focus will be exclusively on the demand made by the Tai-Ahoms with an attempt to give an overall picture of the current socio-political situations due to such demands in the state.

KEY WORDS: Scheduled Tribe, Tai-Ahoms, Ethnic, State

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INTRODUCTION

Situated in peripheral North-Eastern region of India, Assam has always been a vibrant plural society since time immemorial. It is one of the multi-ethnic hotspots frequently displaying ethnic assertion for resource distribution in the name of autonomy and classification of groups of people on the basis of caste and tribe. Classification has remained as an administrative exercise of the nation-state since colonial period. A constant practice of reconstruction of ethnic identity for maximizing political power and resources on grounds of ethnicity is a common feature of the pre-colonial and post-colonial India. Therefore, ethnicity has become a major resource for bargaining with the state. Inhabited by different groups of people belonging to diverse races since time immemorial, instances of increased interests in patterns of social and political setting is apparent in everyday life of Indian state. Existence of inequalities among groups on the grounds of race, religion and essentially on ethnic background has brought about varying degree of consciousness towards preservation of respective cultures and traditions. This phenomenon can be contextualized within the present scenario of Assam with the increased in demand for ST status and its associated autonomy demand on various grounds. However, the urge for distinct ethnic category often becomes obscure in a plural society like India under the praxis of national integration. With this backdrop the category of tribe has become essential element in the invention and reinvention of ethnicity to gain preferential treatment, as has been granted by the constitution. Therefore, there has been augmented demand for ST status by various ethnic groups in Assam. On the other hand, the fear among the existing ST has also increased with the apprehension that they might again lose their share of benefits. In this context, the problem lies with the framers of the new constitution adopted in India. As noted by Devalle,¹ tribal construct in India is a colonial category and i formed part of the colonial legitimizing ideology. Thereafter, this category operated as a device to catalogue conquered populations, which is still followed by the Indian State for policy formulations. Thus, the persistence of colonial knowledge is reflected in both official policy discourse and the political imagination of local activists forming ethnic associations for ethnic assertion.²

The category of ST and the problems embedded in its categorization has put forth many ethnic assertion and mobilization in the contemporary period. Such assertion and mobilization can be linked to the historical legacies of the groups concerned and the post-colonial developments. With the principle of ‘unity in diversity’ the post-colonial nation-state has subsumed the differences, multiplicities and pluralities through various mechanisms. One of such mechanism was the scheduling or categorization of certain group of people who were considered historically marginalised and backward, such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The motive of such categorization was to improve the social and economic conditions of

these groups through special administrative provisions of affirmative discrimination so that the gap of inequality can be reduced with that of the affluent sections of society.

The present study is particularly devoted to the demand made by the Tai-Ahoms of Assam. Here Tai-Ahoms and Ahoms are used interchangeably.

CONCEPT OF TRIBE

Defining the term 'tribe' and its application to people, its culture and societies has remained controversial and confusing basically in Africa as well as in other parts of the world. It has been conceptualized in many forms in the language of the anthropologists as well as in that of the other social sciences and in lay man's jargon only to misused and abused to cover a wide range of groups of people.³ The term tribe has its origin in the Latin word '*tribus*' meaning, a group of persons forming a community and claiming descent from a common ancestor.⁴ A wide range of Anthropological study covering regions like Africa, Australia, Asia and other parts of world exemplify the study on tribal. Among the studies mentioned may be made of L.H. Morgan, Mayer Fortes, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Bronislaw Malinowski, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and others who conducted intensive study on primitive tribes. With their ethnographic account they tried to understand family, kinship, marriage, religion, magic, economy, political institution, law and social relation of primitive tribes. In India the term tribe was used by the British anthropologists and the colonial administrators to categorize a large number of groups who do not fit into the categories of 'caste' or 'Hindu'.⁵ The words like '*adivasi*' (first settlers), '*vanvasi*' (inhabitants of forests), '*vanyajati*' (forests communities), '*pahari*' (hill-dwellers), '*adimjati*' (original communities/primitive people), '*janjati*' (folk people), '*anusuchitjanjati*' (ST), are also used in India to refer to tribes.⁶ Among all these terms *Adivasis* is known most extensively, '*anusuchitjanjati*' is the constitutional name covering all of them.⁷ The colonial term has stayed unquestioned. This is because scholars rigidly stick to the belief that tribe is a stage of human progress and not an autonomous unit of human progress. The *Oxford English Dictionary, Compact Edition* (1971) explains the original meaning of "tribe" as "a group of persons forming a community and claiming descent from a common ancestor".⁸

Verrier Elwin⁹ describes tribals as the original settlers of India and he proposed that tribals should be kept in isolation in response to G.S. Ghurye's¹⁰ idea of assimilation of tribal with the Hindus¹¹. N.K. Bose¹² tried to define tribe as original settlers and argued that they are increasingly coming into the fold of Hindu through the process which he called as "Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption", in his study of the *Juang* community of the *Pal Lahara* region, now in Odisha.

Beteille (1986)¹³ has tried to define tribe by adopting evolutionary and historical approach. According to him in the Indian context, the term 'aboriginals', 'hill and forest tribes' were widely used to refer to 'tribe'. He also argued that the process of designating or 'scheduling' tribes in India began during British rule and acquired a systematic character from the time of the 1931 census. The question of tribes in India is closely linked with administrative and political considerations.¹⁴ In anthropological literature the term 'tribe' is generally equated with the term 'primitive'.¹⁵ Xaxa, discusses the term tribe and its undergone transformation in Indian society in the past.¹⁶ He brings into light the inadequacies of different definitions of the term tribe. Xaxa defines tribes as indigenous people.¹⁷ They were primarily seen as a stage and type of society.

The difficulties and ambiguities inherent with the epistemology of the term 'tribe' posed enormous challenges in the past as well as in the contemporary period. However for administrative purposes the British administrators brought those groups and communities who were historically deprived and marginalized into an umbrella term called Scheduled Tribe (ST). Independent India continued to use the same as an administrative category with the approval of the constitution.¹⁸ The constitution of Indian union (Article, 366) has defined Scheduled Tribe as such tribes or tribal communities or part or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under article 342 to be scheduled tribes for the purpose of this constitution. So following the same measures adopted in the pre-colonial era the government of India has adopted some criterias laid down by the Lokur Committee to identify tribe to be enlisted in the Scheduled Tribe list. The criterias are (a) primitive, (b) distinct culture, (c) geographical isolation, (d) shyness of contact with the community at large, and (e) backwardness. But it is also not without ambiguity and remained contentious in terms of operationalization. In fact the criterias laid down by the committee are hardly relevant today to describe any tribe¹⁹

HISTORICAL PROFILE OF THE AHOMS

In order to contextualise the demand for ST status it becomes pertinent to look into the history of origin of the Ahoms. This would throw us some light to know how the Ahom's demand has accelerated in the contemporary times.

The Ahoms are basically known for their uninterrupted dominion in the Brahmaputra valley for nearly a period of six hundred years in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Their rule came to an end only after the annexation of their kingdom to the territories of the British East India Company in 1826 AD.²⁰ Both European and Indian historians have tried to trace the origin of Tai Ahoms. They were an offshoot of the great Tai or Shan race, which spreads eastwards; from the border of Assam over nearly the whole of further India.²¹ They belong to the Tai-speaking peoples who form the most

numerous and most widely spread peoples in Mainland Southeast Asia. At present they are found in northern Vietnam, in Laos, in all of Thailand, in Northern Myanmar, in the Chinese province of Yunnan, and in Northeastern India.²² They entered into the eastern extremity of the Brahmaputra valley in the early thirteenth century crossing the Patkai Range under the leadership of Sukapha, a Tai prince, and established a kingdom, in the neighborhood of modern Sivsagar.²³ After gaining a foothold in Upper Assam, the Ahom extended their control over a number of indigenous peoples and came to dominate the valley area south of the River Brahmaputra and east of the River Dikho.²⁴ Before their permanent settlement they had to confront the existing small tribal groups who initially remained hostile to them, in their process of establishing kingdom. The eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley was at that time ruled by a number of Indo-Mongoloid tribes like the Morans, Barahis, Kacharis and Chutias, the last being the most powerful.²⁵ However, they could subdue the Moran and Borahi tribes and were assimilated with the Ahoms through marriage. Gradually, they also brought under their effective control the most powerful Chutias and Kacharis through their friendly gesture, knowledge of advanced methods of cultivation including of astrology. Such attributes of the Ahoms highly impressed the tribesmen and ascribed to the Shan conquerors.²⁶ The Ahoms possessed a high degree of civilization with ideas and institutions of their own in the fields of polity, language, religion and society. With the gradual political consolidations over the new land and the population, it became necessary to modify some of their new systems to adjust with those of the local settled systems. Therefore, the Ahoms could contribute to a great extent to the political and social development in the new land of their habitation. As the process of assimilation and acculturation was enormous during their rule, the Ahoms had identified themselves with the greater Assamese society and in the end of their rule they had lost almost all their original way of life. Their history of origin can be found in the *Buranjis* or chronicles, which were written up from time to time, and which contain a careful, reliable and continuous narrative of their rule maintained by the Ahom priests and nobles.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study was undertaken to understand the context of the demand made primarily by the Ahoms for ST status along with other ethnic groups. The main objective of the study was to understand the various processes adopted by the ethnic groups to present their claim as an authentic tribe. The study is also undertaken to know how the ethnic groups engage with the larger state to fulfill their demand. In a broad sense it is an attempt to analyze the ethnic assertion of the Ahoms.

THE DEMAND FOR ST STATUS OF THE AHOMS

The demand for ST status by the Ahoms is not a new phenomenon. Besides this demand, various other demands have also been put forwarded by the Ahoms for their overall development after they lost their kingdom. The Ahom became backward educationally, socially, economically and even politically after the annexation of the British.²⁷ The root cause of the Ahoms demand is due to the atrocities in the past by the British and the influence of the high caste Hindu society. The impact of Hinduism among the Ahoms is considered to be the prime factor of the lost of their cultural identity. Consequently, Ahoms were unable to hold on to their earlier positions as a ruler. Gradually, they started to articulate their socio-cultural and socio-political backwardness. The first Ahom organization to represent their plight was the Ahom Sabha constituted in the year 1893 under the leadership of Padmanath Gohainbaruah, subsequently renamed as All Assam Ahom Association (AAAA) in the year 1910.²⁸ However, their demand for ST status was first made by the All Assam Tai Ahom Society (ATAS) in the year 1981. Prior to such demand they have made vigorous attempt to realize 'minority status' but on failing to attain such demand they have devised an alternative plan as a measure of maintaining distinct Ahom identity. But after the independence, the Tai Ahoms were included into the list of Other Backward Classes with certain aboriginal tribes of Assam in 1955 as per recommendations of Kaka Kalelkar Commission.²⁹ However, the Ahoms were not satisfied with this because they thought that it would not safeguard their political rights like that of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The present demand for ST status by Ahoms was a gradual process. Mentioned may be made here that prior to 1931 census the Ahoms were classified in the India census as a special sub caste but in the modern census the Ahom as a category is no longer in used. From such an observation it is clearly visible that they were considered as lowland Hindu Assamese.³⁰ In the pre-independence period their demand was to provide them with adequate constitutional protection to safeguard their distinct socio-cultural identity. In this context the census played a very important determinant of social categories. Several scholars also argued that modern politicized communities in India found their definite geographical and social boundaries through census enumeration initiated during the British rule.³¹ Hence the British after failing to find a distinct community of Ahom in Assam, they dismissed them as "dead" in 1931 census and replaced the label "*Ahom*" with the newly constructed term and group called "Assamese".³² Census plays very crucial role in the formation of ethnic identities because it has not only counted people and communities but it has been involved in creating communities altering the traits of existing communities providing impetus to many social groups for political share.³³ Categorization of the *Ahoms* by the British in the census to be Assamese has made them feel that their ethnic identity is under threat. Therefore it was not merely a movement

against the British but was also emancipation from the advanced caste Hindu.³⁴ Gradually various organizations united under one banner of “Ahom Tai Mongolia Parishad” demanded a separate Mongolian state in the year 1967 to be formed in Upper Assam including the *Tai Ahoms* along with various tribes to ensure social recognition and political rights.³⁵ Such an effort was to separate themselves from the larger Assamese group which remained inconsequential and the Ahoms were considered as the backward Hindu community. All Assam Tai Students’ Union (AATSA) formed in the year 1964 later renamed as All Tai Ahom Students’ Union (ATASU) in 1988 had successfully mobilized the Ahom students in favour of various demands of the community particularly, during the period of late sixties and seventies.³⁶ It is observed that since 1990s the movement for the demand of ST status among the *Ahom* has gained considerable momentum. Prior to this in the year 1981 a memorandum was submitted to the Prime Minister of India regarding the recognition of ST to the *Tai Ahom* and other *Tai* groups of the state by the All Assam Tai Ahom Society (AATAS).³⁷ Again in the year 1992 Assam *Phralung* Council also submitted a memorandum arguing that if the six *Tai* clans namely *Tai Khamti*, *Tai Aiton*, *Tai Phake*, *Tai Khamyang* and *Tai Turungha* have been included the Scheduled Tribe list, so the *Tai Ahoms* are also supposed to be enlisted under the modified Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes order Bill, 1978.³⁸ It is also true that their demand for parity of status with the existing ST arose in large part because of the significant benefit opportunities that result from being ST. Ethnic aspirations leading to demand for ST status in state like Assam has its root in the British policy of administrative divisions and introduction of territorial politics.³⁹ The *Ahoms* demand for inclusion in the ST list on ethnic line could also be cultural or social discrimination, where the governing ethnic group outlaws the language and cultural practices. Presently the demand for ST status of the Ahoms has gained momentum which is being spearheaded by the ATASU.

CONTESTATION AND ETHNIC GROUPS

Assam being a homeland of multifarious social categories there has always been convergences and divergences among the groups on ethnic lines. Convergences and solidarity can be seen in matters of long standing common social problems like flood, immigration, etc. On the other hand, divergences also take place when it comes to resource allocation in terms of ethnic categories. One of such problems has been the demand made by certain groups like the Ahoms, the Morans, the Matakas, the Koch-Rajbongshis, the Chutias and the Tea-tribes. Their demand has been a contentious issue which is evident from the upsurge of the existing ST against the demand made by the said communities. The apprehensions of the communities at present included in the ST list are observed when they argue that the groups demanding ST status are much more advanced and more in number.

Therefore, they cannot compete with them. They might get wiped out from the opportunities they currently enjoy. Moreover, it would also usurp the land rights of the existing ST communities.⁴⁰ Contrast to their views, the groups that demands such status argue that they belong to the indigenous groups and they posses all the traits necessary to be enlisted in the ST list. Drawing from the fieldwork, the Ahoms also argue that even after their adoption of Hindu tradition in the past they still practice their own tribal culture having animistic traits. Animism and primitivism being the primary requirement of becoming a tribe as stated by the administrative modality, effort has always been to select such qualities of animism and primitivism in their everyday life as observed in the field of study. One of the respondents went on saying in their own words that “*amarkhaidyo, pindharsal solon, amar dhormo hindu hokolor logot olopu nimile, aami hindu nohoye. Tao amardhormo*” (our food, dress pattern, our religion do not match with Hindus. We are not Hindu. Tao is our religion). Such self assertive evaluation could be observed among the members belonging to the community. But so far the parliamentary approval is concerned the Ahoms demand for ST status still remains pending despite their continuous effort.

THE PROCESS OF DEMAND FOR ST STATUS

Numbers of associations and organizations are involved in the process of their demand. Among those All Tai Ahom Students Union (ATASU) is considered as the most pioneering student union in this regard. They have been relentlessly demanding for the overall betterment of the community in particular and Assam as a whole. They are locally called as “*Sodou Tai Ahom Chatra Santha*”. As stated by the leaders of the association one of the major demands of this union in the contemporary time is the demand for ST status. They firmly believed that the ST status alone can safeguard their overall interests and enable them to struggle for their backwardness with reservation in the political sphere.⁴¹ It must be stated that the communities demanding ST status have been carrying out intense protests in various forms for many years. Keeping their movement for demand democratic in nature meetings are often held with the top bureaucratic and political leaders, both at the central and state. It has been observed that to press their demand they have submitted several memorandums, carried out strikes such as bandhs, burning effigies, half naked strike, holding of press meet, etc. They are also involved in organizing ethnic food festivals, workshops in the national and international level to bring awareness and to draw attention of the common masses of their demand.

THE STATE AND DEMAND FOR ST STATUS

Primarily the procedures involved in the recognition of any group into a particular category takes into account its cultural dimensions. Likewise, in the recognition of certain ethnic groups as

‘tribe’ also employ the cultural criteria which are officially determined. Therefore, ethnographic knowledge plays the fundamental role for the groups that wish to be recognized as ST. Cultural attributes and traditional practices of particular social group are documented in ethnographic studies what they really are. If we observe the struggle for classification as ST, we witness social actors engaged in the extensive use of ethnographic knowledge across the nation. Middleton called it as a space between the anthropologists and cultural groups where the cultural material is made to conform to state criteria of tribal recognition.⁴² Government employs anthropologists to evaluate conformity of the ‘cultural characteristics’ of ethnic groups to the official criteria determining tribal traits.⁴³ Introduced way back in the colonial period and its anthropologists of the study of the people of Indian society the way category of ‘tribe’ was defined still holds dominant paradigm.⁴⁴ The most serious consequence of following this kind of anthropological perception of different groups of people is the construction of a still persisting anticipation and opposition for inclusion in the ST list.

Endeavor of the Ahoms for inclusion in the ST list is supported by numerous ethnographic studies during the British regime as information having tribal characteristics in the form of memorandums used by the ethnic groups to communicate with the state. The memorandum contains lengthy lists of all the attributes ranging from socio-cultural to socio-economic aspects amenable to tribal traits of the Ahoms.

The Ahoms demand for ST status relying heavily on colonial discourse on ‘tribalness’ now confronts historical juncture due to the absence of distinctive way of life than before. This is because the categories of *jana*/tribe and *jati*/caste have become porous if not mutually defining.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

Historically, Ahoms being a ruling class presents a typical case being reduced to a minority and marginalized community by the colonial empire to which they now consider as the ground for their demand. Officially, determined as OBCs, the Ahoms demand for ST status shows how the politics of identity in the modern nation state has acquired importance for rights and entitlements on the grounds ethnicity. The state plays a vital role in engineering such claims by different ethnic groups, encouraged with the allocation of substantial resources for the upliftment of the tribal communities. Moreover, directly or indirectly the state has always supported such ethnic resurgence but without resolving the essentialist (colonial) invention of the category of tribe. On the other hand, the enterprise of anthropology is quite critical regarding the granting of such demands. Therefore, one can easily understand the ‘vested interests’ of the political parties and their political gimmick in handling such issues. Additionally, the obscure definition of tribe also facilitates such demands in the contemporary competitive social structure. Largely, bestowed with the state in determining the

categories of population ethnic associations constantly work in accordance with the officially determined attributes to satisfy the state administrators as authentic tribe. The ethnic leaders occasionally interacted with the politicians, bureaucrats at the local and national level. Alongside this, protests movement of different kinds has also taken place to pressurize the government.

From the study it is revealed that the category of tribe and its sociological understanding is at the crossroads multiplying ethnic cleavage with the increase in its demand all over the nation. Therefore, the issue of ethnicity faces more challenges. Populated with diverse ethnic society and situated in the South Asian region, Assam is more likely to illuminate the challenges of ethnicity. Further, it has threatened the existing social fabric of synchronization between different communities' accompanied by socio-political unrest and turmoil in the recent time.

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