

AN EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY AMONG ADIVASIS IN ASSAM THROUGH MIGRATION AND ASSIMILATION

Munmi Gogoi

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Bihpuria College, Bihpuria, Assam

Jonison Daulagajau

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Bihpuria College, Bihpuria, Assam

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the intricate conflicts that may arise from an identity crisis within a community as it endeavors to integrate into a larger social group. To truly understand one's identity, individuals must embark on a journey of introspection, grappling with profound questions such as "Who am I?" and "Who are we?" This introspective journey underscores the notion that identity is not only a fundamental human desire but also a critical factor in many enduring social conflicts. Historically, Assam has stood as a vibrant crossroads of various ethnicities and cultural groups, often referred to as the gateway to Northeast India. Among the notable communities in Assam are the Adivasis, whose history is deeply intertwined with colonial narratives. These individuals are primarily the descendants of migrant laborers transported by the British colonial administration from what are now the states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and parts of West Bengal. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, as the tea industry rapidly expanded in Assam, the British East India Company sought to fill the labor gap by bringing in these workers, largely because the indigenous Assamese population was often hesitant to engage in plantation work. This study will delve into the identity conflicts faced by the Adivasis as they navigate the complexities of adapting to a dominant culture that overshadows their own. The central focus of the essay will be to conduct a thorough theoretical analysis of the pertinent facts and an extensive review of the existing literature related to this significant issue. By examining these dynamics, the study aims to shed light on how identity struggles manifest in the context of cultural integration and community belonging.

Keywords: Identity, Migration, Conflicts, Assimilation.

INTRODUCTION:

Assam, often referred to as the gateway to Northeast India, stands as a vibrant cultural and racial tapestry, home to a multitude of diverse ethnic groups. This state is characterized by a fascinating amalgamation of tribal and non-tribal populations, each contributing to its rich heritage. However, Assam has also faced a myriad of challenges; issues such as insurgency, ethnic conflict, migration, and underdevelopment have marked it as one of the most volatile and sensitive regions in the country for an extended period. Among the myriad communities inhabiting this lush landscape, the Adivasis represent one of the largest and most prominent groups. Before the advent of British colonial powers in the early eighteenth century, Assam was often perceived as "nobody's land," an expanse of untamed wilderness. The British established tea plantations in the region, transforming the agricultural landscape and introducing a flourishing tea industry that became renowned not only across India but also in Europe for its exceptional quality. It was during the British colonization that Assam's borders were transformed into what is now recognized as a "natural" land frontier. This designation underscores Assam's relatively low population density and its breathtaking natural beauty, which together create a unique confluence of rich culture, deep history, and diverse geography. The state boasts stunning landscapes that include rolling hills adorned with

vibrant tea gardens, expansive forests teeming with wildlife, and winding rivers that meander through picturesque valleys. These features not only illustrate Assam's rich biodiversity but also reflect the cultural depth of the region, where traditional practices and diverse communities coexist harmoniously with the environment. Visitors to Assam can experience a symphony of nature and culture, from the serene beauty of its tea estates to the vibrant festivals that celebrate its heritage.

OBJECTIVES:

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To explore the challenges faced by a community as it strives to adapt to a broader cultural landscape while simultaneously working to preserve its unique identity.
2. It will examine the various factors influencing this struggle, including the pressures of assimilation, the desire for cultural continuity, and the impact of external perceptions.
3. To analyze the ways in which the community navigates these complexities, it aims to shed light on the delicate balance between embracing change and honouring tradition.

METHODOLOGY:

This study primarily focuses on a comprehensive theoretical analysis of relevant facts, alongside an extensive review of existing literature in the field. By synthesizing various scholarly perspectives and empirical studies, the aim is to provide a well-rounded understanding of the topic, highlighting key findings and identifying gaps in the current research.

STUDY AREA:

Before the 1972 reorganization of states, Assam included the territories that are now Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. Geographically, Assam is situated in the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas and shares borders with several other north eastern states. This research primarily focuses on Assam, which is currently bordered by Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ADIVASI IN ASSAM:

During the colonial era, the tea plantation sector in Assam experienced a significant influx of laborers, largely driven by the British colonial ambitions. The transition of governmental authority from the Myanmar's to the British was formalized with the Yandaboo Treaty of 1826, marking the beginning of a new chapter for Assam. In 1833, Charles Alexander Bruce, a British colonial administrator, made a remarkable discovery of wild tea plants in the hilly regions around Jaipur. This discovery laid the groundwork for the tea industry that was to flourish in Assam. The formation of the Assam Tea Company in 1834 marked a pivotal moment in this narrative. With the aim of commercial tea cultivation, the company recognized the pressing need for a dedicated workforce capable of meeting the demands of tea production. However, the local population demonstrated apathy towards employment in tea gardens, often viewing the work as arduous and undesirable. To address this labor shortage, the British turned their attention to the residents of Jharkhand, whom they believed possessed a resilient spirit suitable for the demanding work in the plantations.

Initiating the recruitment process in 1840-41, the British embarked on journeys from Jharkhand to Assam, facing harsh conditions; numerous individuals succumbed to the challenges faced during these expeditions. Initially, the workforce predominantly hailed from regions such as Bengal, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh, alongside contributions from Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh. This influx created a rich tapestry of cultural

and ethnic diversity within the tea garden communities. Among them were the Santhal, Munda, Kharia, Bhumij, Ho, Oraon, Khond, Gond, and Oriya people, each bringing their own unique traditions and heritage to the landscape.

As time passed, many of these laborers chose to settle in Assam after completing their stints on the tea estates, establishing rural communities adjacent to the gardens. The population within these tea gardens became stratified into two main categories: Tea Garden laborers and Ex-Tea Garden laborers. In the aftermath of India's independence, there emerged a degree of opportunity for greater equality within the tea garden population, with some benefits extending to workers and fostering interaction with the surrounding non-plantation society. Although employment protection measures and improved living standards were introduced, the community faced persistent challenges, such as abysmally low literacy rates. Moreover, healthcare and educational services often fell short, contributing to an environment where civil society groups and NGOs found little room to operate within plantation estates. As a result, meaningful engagement with the external world remained limited, although access to societal and governmental services has improved for the older tea garden population in recent years.

Assam has firmly established itself as India's leading tea-producing state, providing livelihoods for over 1.1 million workers. This community is increasingly recognized as a vital part of Assam's demographic fabric, contributing significantly to the state's cultural and social landscape. They have achieved notable political representation in several districts, including Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, and Darrang. Despite these advancements, tea garden laborers continue to be viewed as marginalized outsiders, primarily due to their lack of property ownership and precarious living conditions marked by unsanitary environments, inadequate housing, and meager wages. Many suffer from chronic health issues stemming from poor living conditions and insufficient access to clean water, leading to persistent food shortages. The laborers identify as part of the tea tribe, a classification reflecting their unique socioeconomic status within Assam. Although historically recognized as a distinct cultural group, they are now primarily seen through the lens of economic laborers. The Trade Union Sah Masdur Sangha actively voices concerns about essential needs for this community, advocating for improved labor conditions and rights.

However, progress remains slow in the tea industry, with workers still lagging significantly in terms of development. Nevertheless, the resilience of these communities has fostered the emergence of new social and cultural identities. The Adivasi population, in particular, has made repeated requests for Scheduled Tribe status, although these petitions have been met with skepticism from the federal government, which claims that their unique tribal characteristics have been diluted by their current societal status. The Adivasis assert that they have preserved their tribal identity through the use of indigenous languages, adherence to traditional dietary practices, and the maintenance of historic ceremonies and customs. While they frequently engage with Assamese in non-Adivasi interactions, they also communicate in their native dialects. Significant cultural expressions, such as the annual Jhumur dance and festival, continue to celebrate their rich heritage. At the inter-tribal level, Sadri, also referred to as Nagpuri, serves as a common language. Other Adivasi languages, including Santali, Mundari, Kurukh, Saora, and Kharia, have been actively safeguarded through the establishment of tribal Sahitya Sabhas. These communities assert that the fundamental tenets of tribal identity are inherent within their lives. Ultimately, the experiences of tea garden laborers, marked by historical injustices and ongoing hardships, have fostered a profound sense of restlessness and a desire for recognition within the larger societal framework of Assam.

A CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE TERM "ADIVASI" IN ASSAM, INDIA:

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the social and political characteristics of Adivasis, it is essential to delve into the exploitative dynamics that have historically influenced this group. The term 'tribe' was introduced by colonial administrators in India to categorize various communities that did not fit within the rigid frameworks of 'caste' or Hindu identity. As India transitioned into an independent nation, the term 'Scheduled Tribe' (ST) was formally adopted to designate those communities recognized under the Constitution of India. These groups are typically characterized by their relative isolation, cultural distinctiveness, and low levels of economic production and subsistence. The classification of 'tribe' has undergone significant redefinition, often being associated with a primitive stage of human evolution. During colonial rule, the British viewed the so-called 'wild' and 'barbaric' tribes residing in the hills and forests as hazardous elements, contributing to unrest and rebellion. The lexicon used to describe these communities includes terms such as 'Adivasi' (meaning 'first settlers'), 'Vanyajati' (forest communities), 'Pahari' (hill-dwellers), 'Adimjati' (original communities or primitive people), 'Janajati' (folk people), and 'Anusuchit jati' (Scheduled Tribes) (Munshi, 2015:1).

Joseph Bara argues that the negative connotations associated with the term 'tribe' are not merely a by product of colonial attitudes but are also rooted in ancient Brahmanical texts. He describes this phenomenon as a 'Darwinian Twist' (Bara, 2009:90), illustrating the evolution of societal perceptions over centuries. Additionally, he notes that both colonial texts and Sanskrit traditions have historically depicted these aboriginal communities in derogatory terms, often likening them to beasts and demons with labels such as 'Dashyus' and 'Daityas.' This historical context highlights the layers of discrimination and stigmatization that Adivasis have faced, revealing underlying power dynamics that continue to shape their social and political realities today.

ADIVASI VICTIMIZATION:

The fear of losing land has become increasingly prominent among the Bodo community, the indigenous tribe of Assam, as the Adivasi group has begun to demand Scheduled Tribe designation. In response, the Bodos have initiated a peaceful and nonviolent struggle for autonomous statehood. However, tensions in Assam escalated during the 1980s with the emergence of two Bodo separatist factions—the Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)—which targeted non-Bodo individuals in Bodo-dominated areas of lower Assam. The conflict between the Bodos and Adivasis began in 1993, with Bodo militants launching assaults against the Adivasi minority living in the forests of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts starting in the early 1990s. Systematic violence led to the murder of Adivasis and other non-Bodo residents in these regions. The 1996 conflict resulted in 198 fatalities and displaced 202,684 individuals from 42,214 households. A subsequent conflict also caused widespread displacement; 186 individuals were killed, displacing around 94,000 people from various villages. Most of the displaced remain in relief camps in Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts. Overall, the estimated number of displaced individuals from both the Bodo and Adivasi populations during the conflicts in 1993, 1996, and 1998 is 314,342 (Talukdar, 2012:12).

The attack on December 23, 2014, against Adivasis in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) is regarded as one of the worst humanitarian disasters in Assam. This assault, perpetrated by the heavily armed Bodo insurgent group NDFB(S), resulted in the deaths of 81 individuals, including 26 mothers and 18 innocent newborns. National media coverage and

condemnation from human rights activists and civil society have brought attention to this brutal act of violence, particularly against vulnerable populations. This incident has reignited fear among the Adivasi community and further fractured the bond of kinship and solidarity between Bodos and Adivasis. Several factors contribute to the ongoing conflict. First, the aggression towards Adivasis can largely be attributed to their settlement in forested areas, which the Bodos fear could lead to their marginalization. The Bodos have historically lost much of their land, and the presence of Adivasis in the forests heightens this insecurity. Second, the persistent demand for Scheduled Tribe recognition by Adivasis may create constitutional entitlements within the Tribal Belt and Block, allowing both groups to assert land rights. Despite this, Bodo leaders argue that it is unfair to place the blame for the violence solely on the Bodos. They contend that the government's failure to address the social and economic conditions of both Bodos and non-Bodos has fueled the conflict. Bodo leaders also believe that third-party involvement has misled young Bodo individuals seeking statehood, which often leads them to resort to violence. However, targeting a specific community cannot be dismissed as coincidental, as civil society organizations have accused both the BLT and NDFB of conducting orchestrated attacks against Adivasis.

In response to escalating violence, Adivasis began to organize. Following the severe assault in 1996, they established armed groups, such as the Birsa Commando Force (BCF) and the Adivasi Cobra Militant Force (ACM for ACF), in the late 1990s to enhance their capabilities against the Bodo militants. These organizations do not seek independent autonomy, unlike many other groups in Northeast India. Instead, they aim to protect tribal's who were reportedly subjected to 'ethnic cleansing' during the 1996 riots caused by Bodo insurgent groups. They advocate for restitution for the Adivasi, particularly the Santhals who were displaced or killed during these riots, and they call for government recognition of 'Adivasis' as a protected group. Although the Adivasi armed groups may not be as active as the NDFB and BLT, their presence in the state is significant and cannot be ignored.

THE FIGHT FOR POLITICAL EMANCIPATION:

Adivasis in India are increasingly found living in precarious situations, grappling with profound identity crises that pose the essential question of whether they are truly 'indigenous' or merely labelled as 'outsiders' by broader society. This struggle is highlighted by recent developments concerning their status in Assam, where the Central government has announced the conferral of Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to six specific groups, including members of the Adivasi community. However, this decision has sparked significant controversy. Adivasi leaders and representatives have expressed their frustration and discontent, accusing the government of engaging in discriminatory politics. They argue that the new list of groups granted ST status has notably excluded many communities that are integral to the Adivasi identity, thereby undermining the diversity and complexity within the Adivasi population itself.

Civil society organizations have joined the outcry, condemning the government's move to grant ST status to the six identified groups as a superficial measure. They assert that this decision serves as a diversion from the contentious Citizenship Amendment Bill of 2016, which has faced fierce resistance from numerous indigenous groups in Assam and across the country. Many citizens perceive this action as a tactical manoeuvre aimed at deflecting attention from the ongoing controversies surrounding the Amendment, or as an attempt to restore public confidence in the ruling administration amid rising discontent. At the grassroots level, reactions to the government's commitment to these six communities are mixed and are being closely analyzed. While some may welcome the recognition, there is a palpable sense of skepticism among the Adivasis and the other groups involved. They are

scrutinizing whether this recognition will translate into tangible benefits or if it is merely a politically motivated gesture without real substance or impact on their lives. The situation reflects a deeper-seated struggle within Assam regarding identity, representation, and the ongoing complexities surrounding the status of marginalized communities in contemporary India.

CONCLUSION:

The discussion highlights that Adivasis in Assam have consistently faced marginalization from both the government and political leaders of the state. One of the most significant challenges for Adivasi residents is the fear of losing their identity. Additionally, this community has been repeatedly targeted by insurgent groups, which has exacerbated their struggles. Poverty, social prejudice, and numerous assaults have contributed to their difficult living conditions. In this context, the Adivasi community and its leaders share a primary aspiration for Scheduled Tribe recognition or a form of political autonomy that would grant them certain rights and stronger preservation of their tribal identity. Moreover, there is a societal failure in recognizing them as part of the indigenous identity. The legacy of British colonial policies continues to influence the Adivasis, who remain victims of governmental actions to this day. It is also noteworthy that the indentured laborers who once worked in countries like Kenya, South Africa, and Malaysia have now become leaders in those nations. In stark contrast, the Adivasis have retained their identity, often referred to by terms such as "Sardar" and "Coolie." Regrettably, the pejorative term "Coolie-Bagania" is still used to describe them, reflecting the colonial-era prejudices that persist today. This disparaging attitude illustrates the social class divide between owners and laborers that has endured since the colonial period. Currently, there is an emerging movement for the rights and dignity of a community that has faced significant degradation and continues to operate in conditions reminiscent of colonial times. The Adivasi people's contributions to the growth of the tea industry in Assam cannot be overlooked. Their assimilation of Assamese culture and language makes it impossible to separate them from the mainstream Assamese population.

It's important to note that unlike other immigrants, the Adivasis did not come to Assam for personal gain or to exploit its natural resources. They were compelled to relocate to support the establishment of the tea industry, which has become the primary economic foundation of the state. However, it is crucial for the community to unite in addressing their ongoing issues and to advocate for their cause—self-respect and identity—rather than depending on the government for a miraculous solution to their difficulties.

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