



STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY OF ADIVASIS IN ASSAM

Geetali Phookan

**ICSSR Doctoral Fellow , Centre for Gandhian Thought and Peace Studies,
School of Social Sciences , Central University of Gujarat,
Sector 29: 382030, Gandhinagar, Gujarat.**

ABSTRACT :

The paper explores the possibility of conflicts due to identity crises of a community to assimilate in a larger group. Identity is a self-referential description that provides answers to the question "who am I?" or "who are we?". Thus, identity is one of the several fundamental human needs that underlie many intractable conflicts. Assam is the gateway of NorthEast India has long remained the hub of many ethnic race and community. Adivasis are one of the largest communities residing in Assam. They are mainly the descendants of labors brought by the British from present Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and some parts of West Bengal. The British East India Company brought them to Assam mainly as tea garden labourers after the rapid growth of tea plantation Hence, the purpose of their migration was mainly to make them work as labour in the tea Gardens of Assam as the British found that Indigineous community of Assam were not at all interest in working with the British. Thus, the article will try to focus on the struggle of identity of a community to assimilate in a larger society. This article is mainly based upon theoretical analysis of fact and review of literature.



KEYWORDS : *Identity, Adivasi, Bodos, Conflict, Struggle and Assam.*

INTRODUCTION

Assam, the gateway of NorthEast India is the hub of many ethnic races and culture. The state is the amalgamation of both tribal and non-tribal population. The state has long remained one of the most volatile and sensitive regions in the country because of insurgency, ethnic conflict, migration, underdevelopment etc. The Adivasis¹ are one of the largest communities residing in the state. Before the advent of British in the beginning of the Eighteenth century, Assam was considered to be 'nobody's land'. British developed tea plantations in the state. The state is known by its high quality tea in India as well as in the European world. It is only the British conquest of Assam that turned it into what came to be seen as a 'natural' land frontier- a sparsely populated region located next to a densely populated region of the Indian subcontinent (Baruah, 1999: 47).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ADIVASI IN ASSAM:

The origin of Adivasi influx in the state can traced with the discovery of tea by Scottish adventurer Robert Bruce in 1823. Following it, the British East India Company set up tea plantations in the region. Most of the workers engaged in the cultivation of teas, known as coolies, were recruited

¹ The other popular term refers to 'Adivasi' in Assam are *Sah Janagusti, Sah Janajati* and *Tea tribes*. During British period till 80's they are also referred as '*Bagania*' or '*Coolie*', but these two words were not much presently in use.

from tribals group which lived in Central and Eastern India. Firstly, steamers and roads, and at a later date railways, carried men, women and children to the jungles and gardens of Upper Assam. They were sent wearing the red jackets symbolising their degrading prison life. Most of the then Chottanagpur origin peasants viewed Assam as unknown wilderness, 'the end of the world'. Though, the circumstance of their home region left a little choice for them but, for the migration. After, Indian Independence, they were remained a labour reserve for the tea sector, since most lacked the skill and opportunities to venture outside this occupation. Thus, the then indentured labourers, now often called by themselves as well as by the larger Assamese society as Tea Tribes, Sah Janagusti or Adivasi (Sharma, 2012: 71- 74).

Theoretical and Methodological Understanding of the term Adivasi in India-Assam:

To bring about the social and political nature of Adivasis, let us explore the proper exploitative nature of the community. The colonial government used the term 'tribe' in India to categories a large number of groups who did not fit the categories of 'caste' or Hindu. Hence, After Independence, the term 'Scheduled Tribe' (ST) came to be used to denote tribes which were scheduled as such under the Constitution of India, distinguished from other communities by relative isolation, cultural distinctiveness and low level of production and subsistence. The term 'tribe' was also given a new dimension, of seeing it as a lower stage of human progress. For the Colonial administrators the 'wild' and 'barbaric' tribesmen of the hill and forest are only meant for trouble in the rebellions. Indian words like '*Adivasi*' (first settlers) (inhabitants of forest), '*Vanyajati*' (forest communities), '*Pahari*' (hill-dwellers), '*Adimjati*' (original communities/primitive people), '*Janajati*' (folk people), '*Anusuchit jati*' (ST), are popularly used to describe them (Munshi, 2015:1). However, Joseph Bara argue that, the negative traits associated with the term 'tribe' is not only a colonial state but it is transformed from old 'Brahmanical' text which he refers to as 'Darwinian Twist' (Bara, 2009: 90). Further, he elaborates that the Colonial and Sanskrit text largely depicted the aborigines as beastly and daemonic term such as '*Dashyus*' and '*Daityas*'.

Origin of Adivasi in Assam:

The literal meaning of Adivasi is aboriginal or 'indigenous peoples'. While in Assam, Adivasi means descendants of tea labourer brought by the British in 19th century. They include all the community such as- Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Khamer etc. and are recognised as Other Backward Community (OBC), while in rest of India they are considered as Schedule Tribes (ST) (Narzary, 2006: 57). In Assam Adivasi can be divided broadly into two categories tea garden workers and ex-tea garden workers. Ex-tea Garden workers are those who come out of the garden after the expiry of their contracts and settled in the surrounding areas. Today's they are settled in almost all parts of Assam. But their presence is highly visible in the districts such as Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia in Upper Assam and also the present Bodo Territorial Area District (BTAD) area of central or lower Assam as well as their population can also be found in the Barak valley districts of Silchar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. The total population of Adivasi including both tea garden and ex-tea garden workers is estimated to be around 6 million (60 lakhs) which comprises 17% of the entire population of the state (Census, 2011).

The term Adivasis is used to classify 'tea garden tribes, ex-tea garden labour and ex-tea garden tribes' in Assam and they are divided into 96 ethnic groups (Misra, 2007: 12). As mentioned above, they comprise Munda, Oraon, Santhal and other tribals of Jharkhand, Odisha and Chattisgarh origin. The British East India Company brought them to Assam mainly as tea garden labourers after the rapid growth of tea plantation. They were settled both in upper as well as lower Assam. In lower Assam they were mainly settled in BTAD as well as in Sonitpur and Bongaigoan district while others were settled in the district of upper Assam. Although in upper Assam they were mainly engaged in tea gardens as labourer and had regular daily wage and other facilities such as housing, health, education while in BTAD they were engaged with minor labour work. It should be mentioned that in upper Assam tea tribes were recognised as the part of Assamese society as they have adopted Assamese language, culture and traditions. But the picture is totally different in BTAD where the Adivasis were often

accused as outsiders who have captured the land and resources of the indigenous tribes (Mahanta, 2013: 54).

Violence upon Adivasi:

The fear of losing land became more prevalent among the Bodo community (who happens to be the indigeneous tribe of Assam) as the Adivasi community have started demanding Schedule Tribe status. In the meanwhile, the Bodos have already started their autonomy movement for separate statehood in a peaceful and nonviolent process. But, later during 1980's, the emergence of two Bodo separatist groups namely Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) had vitiated the atmosphere of Assam by attacking non-Bodo population residing in the Bodo dominated regions of lower Assam. The first attack by Bodo militants began in early 1990's on the Adivasi community residing in the forest of Kokrajhar and Bongaigoan district. They started killing Adivasi and other non-Bodo residents in the Bodo dominated areas of Kokrajhar and Bongaigoan district in lower Assam.

The Bodo and Adivasi clash took place from 1993 onwards. The clash of 1996 claims 198 lives and 2, 02,684 people were displaced out of 42,214 families. Another clash occurred again and this time displacement took place in a large scale. The death claimed at 186 displacing about 94,000 people from both the communities. Most of the people are still staying in relief camps in Kokrajhar and Bongaigoan district. The total estimate of the displaced people belonging to both the communities Bodo and Adivasi from 1993, 1996 and 1998 accounts at 3, 14,342 (Talukdar, 2012:12). The attack of December 23, 2014 on Adivasi in BTAD has been considered as one of the worst humanitarian crises witnessed in Assam. This attack was one of the brutal attacks upon them by heavily armed Bodo insurgence outfit National Democratic Front of Bodoland-Songbijit, popularly known as NDFB (S). The merciless attack on Adivasi has resulted to the death of 81 persons, including 26 women 18 innocent infants. The national media has also highlighted the issue and human rights activist, civil society has condemn this cowardly act of targeting innocent specially infants and women. This entire incidence has again caused a fear psychosis among Adivasis. The bridge of friendship and brotherhood among Adivasis and Bodos again got shattered as it has again rooted out the insecurity and fear among them.

Analysing the above statement, the following factors can be regarded as the cause of conflict between the two communities. Firstly, the hidden truth of attacking on Adivasis may be because of their settlement in the forest area (Narzary, 2006). It is already a known fact that Bodos have lost their land. In such circumstance the settling of Adivasi in the forest has feared the Bodos to be marginalised in their own land. Secondly, the frequent demand for ST status by the Adivasi may result into the constitutional right in Tribal Belt and Block. In such circumstance, the right over land can be equally claimed by both the communities.

However, on many occasion the Bodo leaders have said that it is wrong to blame Bodos for the conflict. They blame Government for failure to bridge social and economic conditions of Bodos and the non-Bodos. They also blame third party involvement in conflict which is misguiding the young Bodo aspirant for statehood demand by using violent means which is the most aspiration of every Bodo youth. But at the same time targeting a particular community cannot be a fact of coincidence as civil society organisation accused both BLT and NDFB's attack as a well planned massacre (Deka, 2012). Here to mention that, Adivasis have also started to retaliate themselves and after the worst attack of 1996 they constituted their arm organisation. According to the Intelligence sources they have formed their own underground armed groups - the Birsa Commando Force (BCF) and the Adivasi Cobra Militant Force (ACMF or ACF) - in order to better equip with the Bodo extremists. It was formed in the second half of 1990's in Kokrajhar district. Its ideology is not the demand for separate autonomy like many other groups in of NorthEast India. It claims to be an organisation to protect the tribals who were allegedly 'ethnically cleansed' during the 1996 riots from Bodo Insurgent groups. They demand reparations for the Adivasi specially (Santhals) displaced and killed in the riots and demand that 'Adivasis' be recognized as a protected people by the Government of India (Choudhary, 1998). Although, they were not much active as NDFB and BLT but still their presence in the state cannot be negligible.

Struggle for Political Empowerment:

It is found that Adivasis are living in a vulnerable conditions and they are suffering from acute identity crises with the frequent question in their mind-whether they are 'indigeneous' and often termed as 'outsiders'?

Recently, the Central government has announced to provide Schedule Tribe status to six communities of Assam including the Adivasi. However, it is accused by Adivasi leaders that the Government is again playing their discriminatory politics as the list has left out many communities who together make Adivasi community. Apart from that, the civil society organisation is condemning the govt. for the announcement of ST status to all the six communities is only to divert people from the issue of citizenship amendment Bill 2016 as most of the indigeneous groups were against the Bill. Rather, the people of Assam has felt that it is a strategy of the ruling government to divert people from the Amendment issue or it can be said as gaining trust from the people again. But, in the ground level, this promise by the government is being questioned by all the 6 communities including the Adivasis.

CONCLUSION:

From the above discussion, it has been proved that Adivasis in the state of Assam has been constantly pushed back by the administrations as well as political leaders of the state. The fear of loosing identity has emerged to be one of the most threats to Adivasi residing in Assam. At the same time it is a known fact that the community has been attacked in numerously by Insurgent outfit. Poverty, social discrimination and innumerous attack upon them have made their life pathetic. In this circumstance Adivasi community and their leaders have only one hope of ST status or a kind of political emancipation can help them to have some rights as well as acute protection of their tribal Identity. Also it is failure as a societal norm, being a tribal they are not considered to be the part of their indigeneous identity. The faith of Adivasis which has been written by British colonial policy has been still continuing in the state and till date they have become the victim of government policies. Also to mentioned, the indenture labourers who have worked in countries like Kenya, South Africa, Malasiya have now became ruler of those nation. But the faith of Adivasi has still remained the same, the "Sardar" and "Coolie". Infact, they are still named with derogatory term as "Coolie-Baganian". This derogatory attitude towards them itself shows how their identity has remained same as colonized by British making a social class division of owner and labour. The present upsurge seems to be the beginning of a wider struggle for securing the rights and dignity of a community who have suffered some of the worst forms of degradation and who still continue to work in an atmosphere reminiscent of the colonial days. The contribution of Adivasi community towards the development of the tea industry cannot be overlooked. The community cannot be seen apart from mainstream 'Assamese' community because of their adoption of Assamese culture and language. Here to mentioned that, Adivasi migrated to Assam was not for their personnel gain or to exploit the natural resources of the region (like other immigrants). But they were forced to migrate in order to build the tea industry which is currently the major economic infrastructure of the state. However, the community should come forward joining hands together in order to solve their perennial problem permanently and fight for their own cause- self respect and identity without pinning hope on the Government to do something miracle to solve their problems.

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**ICSSR Doctoral Fellow , Centre for Gandhian Thought and Peace Studies,
School of Social Sciences , Central University of Gujarat,
Sector 29: 382030, Gandhinagar, Gujarat.**