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## The 'ST' game



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"They had migrated to Asom about 150 years ago as labourers for tea gardens and are not the sons of the soil here. When the Bodos are not given tribal status in other parts of the region like the hill district of Karbi Anglong in Asom and Meghalaya, how do the Adivasis consider themselves as indigenous tribals?" -- Anjali Daimari

The above statement made by Anjali Daimari, the advisor of the Indigenous Women's Forum of North-East India, who is also the President of the Bodo Women Justice Forum, regarding the ST politics in Assam justifies her stand on the issue. If the whole thing is observed apolitically the matter finds its just solution in the second sentence itself and is enough to solve the dispute.

Matters have been worsened further by the interference of politicians of the State of Jharkhand into internal conflicts of Assam and added fuel to fire by rekindling separatist politics. The process of 'Nativization' of the Adivasis was almost complete in Assam but leaders from Jharkhand tried to give a communal colour to the entire situation by sowing seeds of unreliability and identity crisis among the Adivasis of Assam. They have driven a wedge of mistrust among the Adivasis who have been staying in this North-Eastern State for about 150 years and the other people who till now were in harmonious coexistence.

That the tea garden labourers were hired by the British tea planters in Assam is history. The Britishers brought hundreds of Adivasis from the Chhota Nagpur Plateau in Central India to work in the newly established tea gardens in the 19th century Assam. Gradually, there culture and language took a new shape unique to the region after years of assimilation.

The recent upheaval in the community and the active role of politicians in the dispute makes one ponder as to who would be the most benefited by the ST status to the Adivasis in Assam? And, who would be benefited by such categorization at the Centre?

Will it be the politicians in Assam or the ones in Jharkhand as everything ultimately boils down to the number game in the Parliament.

Where were the likes of Arjun Munda, Babulal Marandi or even the notorious self styled so called political leader of Jharkhand, Shibu Soren, since the post-

independent era in India? A 'Vote Base' in Assam would definitely make a Mani Kumar Subba of Shibu Soren.

It is high time the layman realizes that, 'ST' label is not a key to an all around socio-economic development as there's nothing lucrative for the community as a whole but it is the politicians who are playing the "vote" game with them.

The contribution of the Adivasis to the economy of Assam is immense. If Assam is known for its Tea, it is because of the toil and sweat of this section of the Assamese populace.

Before being tagged as Adivasis, they are the 'Saah Janagosthi' (i.e., the 'Tea Garden Community') of Assam.

Therefore, going by the logic of aboriginality, the Adivasis cannot be granted the 'status' of 'Scheduled Tribe' in Assam. Again, as I have mentioned earlier, the interference of leaders from Jharkhand have raised questions about the 'indigenosity' or 'nativity' of the Adivasis. From the image of 'Adivasis of Assam', they have been projected as 'Adivasis from Jharkhand'.

Is there any gurantee that the so called 'ST' label will do miracles to the Adivasis at the grass root level? Poverty, Illiteracy, poor sanitary facilities, miserable health facilities, alcohol-addiction among a large number of Adivasi males, superstitious practices like witch-hunting, would they disappear under the ' magic wand' of 'ST' status?

An 'ST' status is not a solution to the woes that afflict the Adivasi society. In order to ensure an all round development of the Adivasis both the State and the Central Governments have to come up with 'Special Economic Packages' for the Tea Garden Community of our State. More than anything else, this marginalised section of Assam needs all around community development schemes in order to be at par with the rest of the population of the State.

But the question here is do the political leaders really want to solve the dispute or do they want to keep it hanging while they reap political mileage?

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