

# Analyzing the issues of migration and identity with special reference to the Tea Tribes (Adivasis) of Assam

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## ***Abstract***

*Migration, a historical phenomenon, deals with several issues relating to the structures of society. Identity issue of groups living within the boundaries of a society is such an issue that has a close linkage with the process of migration which involves both immigrants and the natives of the land. In this research paper, an analysis would be done on the issues of migration and identity in the context of the tea tribes (Adivasis) of Assam state. It will also put lights upon the demand of granting Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to this community. While migrating or moving from their previous habitat, the migrated population has to encounter several obstacles that are directly or indirectly linked with the issue of identity. As an outcome of the colonial policy of exploitation adopted by the British imperial power, plantation labours arrived at the land of Assam. After their unfruitful experiment with the natives of the land, the British imported the Adivasis from the Central Indian States to engage them in the tea industry. Since their arrival the issue of identity remains the major cause of concern for this community. Unlike the other states of India, where they enjoy the status of Scheduled Tribe (ST), in Assam they are being enlisted as Other Backward Classes (OBC) and are named as Tea Tribe. On the contrary to this, most of them would like to call themselves as Adivasi. To maintain their ST status in Assam they have been struggling hard by upholding the demand of granting Scheduled Tribe (ST) status under constitutional safeguard.*

**Key words:** *Migration, immigrant, natives, tea tribe, adivasi, scheduled tribe.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION:**

The phenomenon of migration refers to the process of movement of population from one place to another mostly for survival purpose. The population who moves from its earlier habitat to a new one is termed as immigrant. In this process of migration both the immigrants as well as the native people of the land have to encounter several problems that are somehow related with the issue of identity. In this paper, an attempt is made to address the various

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problems faced by the immigrant population of the central Indian states particularly the Adivasis, especially in the context of Assam. Identity plays a crucial role in the societal setting of every human society irrespective of their position in the hierarchal ladder as for every human being social recognition is like a license for living. There is a close relation between the process of migration and the issue of identity. When a population migrated to some place unfamiliar for various reasons, the question of assimilation or assertion comes into being which has a direct connection with their previous identity. The process of assimilation is neither that simple nor the process of assertion. In both the cases they have to confront varied forms of challenges. Most of these challenges are motivated either by economic forces or political forces at large. In this connection a detail discussion is being made in the paper elaborately keeping the Tea Tribes at the centre.

Establishment of the tea industry in Assam was the result of colonial policy of economic expansion as well as exploitation. Tea industry of Assam contributed more than half percentage of tea produced in India. Since colonial period, a huge amount of share in the economy of the State comes from the tea plantation. The workers who are involved in the process of tea production in Assam have always been a part and parcel of the economy. The need to make a study regarding their status by keeping in mind the political perspective of the region can be justified as they constituted almost 18 percent of Assam's total population who are spread all over the State. Though they provide a large share to the economy of the State yet economically they are the most deprived section of the region. As a part of their policy of exploitation, the colonial ruler setup tea industries in the region of Assam. Initially, they employed the local people of Assam for the purpose of tea plantation. But gradually they found the locals of the land unfit for the job due to their irregular and revolutionary nature. In place of the local inhabitants, the colonial ruler brought the Adivasis of the Central Indian States like Orissa, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and others, who were hard working enough for the purpose. In the initial stage, large portion of the migrated labours died due to several diseases as well as inhuman punishment by colonial rulers. With the changing course of time, they are struggling hard to adapt themselves in the changing environment with challenges from various forces. Since their arrival to till date this community has been subjected to the subjugation of a higher authority in different forms. During colonial period, it was the Colonial rulers who dominated them and after the end of colonial era, they have been dominated by the neo-colonial forces.

#### **OBJECTIVES:**

1. To examine the relation between migration and identity.
2. To analyze the identity issues of Tea Tribes in Assam.

#### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS:**

1. How does the process of migration influence identity issue of immigrant population?
2. What are the identity issues of Tea Tribes in Assam?

## II. METHODOLOGY:

This research work is both descriptive and analytical in its approach. In order to conduct the proposed study data is collected from secondary sources. The secondary sources include books, newspapers, websites and research papers.

### *The process of assimilation and the tea tribes of Assam*

As stated earlier, the process of assimilation is very crucial in the context of identity formulation. In case of the tea tribes in Assam, the process is very difficult as numbers of obstacles are there in this path of assimilation. Among all other obstacles, the major one which comes in the way is their social arrangement. As a strategy of their colonial expansion, the British tea planters kept these people apart from the other communities of Assam. For this purpose, Bastis or Coolie lines were constructed nearby the tea gardens for their living. Colonial power did so because they want to avoid any chance of agitation while exploiting these people at their best. Even basic facilities were not provided to them like economic facilities, health facilities as well as educational facilities which are necessary for the development of human being. It was possible only because of their isolated living. In due course of time, they are gradually crossing their boundaries of social isolationism and even some of them have put examples of their non-conformism in various aspects of the society. In this regard we can cite the names of famous literary figures like Sameer Tati, Sanatan Tati, late Meghraj Karmakar and others. The tea tribes residing in Assam have also adopted some of the religious or cultural practices of the land such as celebration of festivals like Durga Puja, Bihu, using Assamese gamusa and traditional attires of women and so on. The process of assimilation of the tea tribes into the greater Assamese society was not entirely one sided which is evident from the examples of their influence in the cultural field of Assam like the making of the movie “*Chameli Memsahab*” directed by Abdul Majid, performance of Jhumur dance in the cultural functions during Bihu and the like. Though there are instances of assimilation between tea tribe and other communities of Assam yet the picture is not clean and explicit. After coming to the state of Assam, these diverse tribes and sub-tribes found it difficult to communicate with each other due to their different mother tongues. Gradually they developed the “*Sadri*” language which is their Lingua Franca i.e. their common medium of communication. Even today, except the Santali language, no other language of this diverse population of tea tribes has got the chance to grab a distinct place in the constitutional manuscript of the country. Rather than using their own language, people of this community are using the prevailing languages of a State for the purpose of communication. For example, in the context of Assam we have seen that most of the time they give preference to Assamese language, which is evidential in the writings of various profound literary figures of this community. Such a scenario put query regarding the protection of their language which is a crucial element that forms the core of the identity issue. This is because of the fact that being a tool of expression, language plays a pivotal role in highlighting the identity of any specific group.

### **The demand of Scheduled Tribe status and the tea tribes of Assam**

After India attained independence from the colonial rule, the deprived sections were given special privileges under the supreme law of the land i.e. the Constitution. Unlike other states of India these Adivasis don't get the constitutional status of Scheduled Tribe in Assam. But as they are named as tea tribe, one may misinterpret them as Scheduled Tribe. Rather they have been incorporated in the category of Other Backward Classes. As they are being categorized as Other Backward Class, the fruit of positive discrimination can't be enjoyed by them. During colonial rule, they enjoyed the Scheduled Tribe status under the categorization of "depressed classes" and were branded as tea garden coolie tribe. But they lost their status in the year 1951 when Indian Constitution came into force. Gopinath Bordoloi, the then head of the state machinery, said that if scheduled tribe status would be granted to the Adivasis it would disturb the political scenario of Assam and the existing tribal groups. In other words, the Adivasis of Assam have been deprived of their constitutional recognition as the Scheduled Tribe since India attained independence. The issue of their tribal identity is addressed by the elite group of this vulnerable community in the state of Assam. Along with the other communities who are struggling hard to acquire tribal identity, they have also raised their voices and are constantly demanding for their inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe category by means of several protest movements. Involvement of their student organizations i.e. Assam Tea Tribe Student's Association (ATTSA) and All Adivasi Students Association of Assam (AASAA) has further strengthened their stand in the concerned matter.

### **III. CONCLUDING OBSERVATION:**

From the above discussion on the issue of migration and identity in the context of Assam where special focus is laid upon the tea tribes, it is seen that tea tribes of Assam is the conglomeration of different tribes and sub-tribes who are brought to the land by British tea planters for plantation purpose. Denial of their Scheduled Tribe status in Assam as well as their identification with terms containing derogatory meaning remains a matter of concern over a long period of time. The issue of ST status raised by the immigrant Adivasis in Assam has acquired a prominent place in the political arena of the state. With the passing of time, their level of consciousness is increasing as a result they are pressing more focus on the issues related to their abuse in different aspects of life that are directly or indirectly linked with their identity. The state machineries have so far adopted steps for their upliftment by formulating various policies from time to time such as Plantation Labour Act of 1951, establishment of Department of Tea Tribes by Assam Government, pre-matric and post-matric scholarship and so on. Mere formulation of policies without an effective agency for their implementation will not alter the circumstances so the higher authorities need to pay more interest as well as energy in this direction with greater caution.

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