The out-of-place people

Sanjib Baruah

While Manipur’s specific issues of identity politics and the “bonds of kinship” are undoubtedly behind the range of incidents in the state, communities over demands for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status — sometimes referred to as “decolonized” — are long-rooted in India.

The developments in Manipur have strong parallels with what happened in Assam in 2007. There, gujar perceivers demanded ST status for their community, which clashed with the police and with a long-recognized ST community, the Mishing, who challenged the gujar’s claims. In Assam, the demands for ST status by six communities — Kukapheng, Yumani, Chaka, Misam, Matki and Ahirni — have long been controversial. In 2010, following the Assam government’s order to the affected communities to vacate the area, the Marawi United Front of Nagaland, a pro-independence outfit, was formed. The movement later merged with the Nationalist Front of Nagaland.

“Delays in the preparation of the tribal forests, the recognition of tribes, and the drafting of the tribal law are the result of the failure of the government to recognize the indigenous people,” an executive of the Nationalist Front of Nagaland said at the time. “We will continue to fight until our demands are met.”

While casta has long been the primary focus of India’s reservation controversies, since the turn of this century, ST status has become a contentious issue. There are about 720 recognized STs in the country today. At least 10 thousand more groups are seeking recognition as STs. They would benefit from the advantage of reservations, such as reserved government jobs, and access to agricultural and financial protection available to the scarpent. But the Indian government has also noted that some of these communities are more likely to use the available benefits in ways that may not always be in their best interest. Within these communities, there is a strong belief that “tribal” identity is the key to political power and social status.

The draft National Tribal Policy 2008 stated that the Labour Committee’s criteria “are hardly relevant today.” Other, more accurate criteria are “now being developed.” The policy notes that “these criteria can be used in the tribal areas to the advantage of the disadvantaged, to the benefit of the people, and to the benefit of the country.”

The question for Assam’s Adivasi community is the same one that has been asked for centuries: how can we recognize the rights of indigenous communities? And who are the people who will benefit from this recognition? The answer is complex and will depend on the specific case.

The writer is a Professor of Political Studies at Bard College, New York.