



# The Indian Express

## The out-of-place people

May 10, 2023 | Delhi | Pg No.: 13 | Top Left | Sanjib Baruah | Sq Cm: 748 | AVE: 1166551 | PR Value: 5832755

# The out-of-place people

If Adivasis are among Northeast India's most deprived today, it is to no small extent the result of the precedence accorded to indigeneity over citizenship



SANJIB BARUAH

WHILE MANIPUR-SPECIFIC issues of identity politics and the "wounds of history" are undoubtedly behind the surge of violence in the state, controversies over demands for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status – sometimes leading to bloodshed – are no longer rare in India.

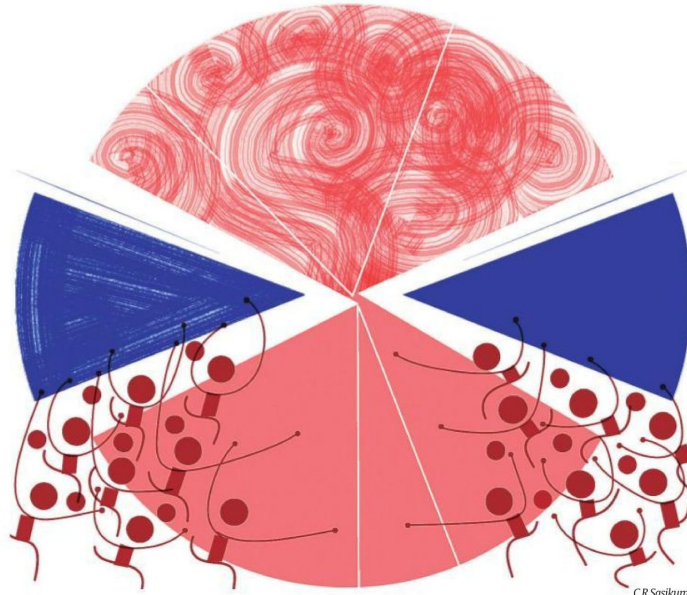
The developments in Manipur have strong parallels with what happened in Rajasthan in 2007. There, Gujar protesters demanding ST status for their community clashed with the police and with a long-established ST community, the Meenas, who challenged the Gujar's claims. In Assam, the demands for ST status by six communities – Koch Rajbongshi, Tai Ahom, Chutia, Moran, Matak and Adivasi – have long been controversial. In 2019, following the Union cabinet's recognition of these communities as ST, a bill to the same effect was passed by the Rajya Sabha. But it was allowed to lapse in the face of protests in Assam by established ST communities such as Bodos and Sonowal Kacharis.

"Amid the turbulence of economic liberalisation and neoliberal reform", observes anthropologist Townsend Middleton who has studied India's reservation system closely, the stakes of reservation or affirmative action have become a lot higher. Many marginalised groups not recognised as STs watch as "their ST neighbours reap the advantage of affirmative action benefits – sending children to college, obtaining reserved governmental jobs, and accessing legal and financial protections unavailable to the unrecognised". That such disparities would spark inter-community tensions and conflicts should not be a surprise.

While caste had long been the primary focus of India's reservation controversies, since the turn of this century, ST status has become a contentious issue of late. There are about 720 recognised STs in the country today. At least a thousand more groups are vying for recognition as STs. They seek that status not only because of the advantages that come with reservation but also because of the perception that the category "tribe" is used in a flexible way in Indian governmental parlance. Middleton believes that these are symptoms of a crisis in India's "over-burdened, out-of-date, and severely backlogged" reservation system.

There have been important policy documents that have made the same point in one way or another. For instance, the 2006 draft "The National Tribal Policy for the Scheduled Tribes of India" observed that, "There is an increasing clamour from many communities to get included as STs... Adding new communities to the list reduces the benefits that can go to existing STs and is therefore to be resorted to, only if there is no room for doubt".

The draft pointed to the problematical nature of the official criteria for defining STs laid out by the BN Lokur Committee in 1965 that remain in effect to this day. They are one, primitive traits, two, distinctive culture, three, geographical isolation and shyness of contact, and four, backwardness. The formula clearly takes the ideal type of the anthropological conception of a tribe as its starting



CR Sasikumar

point – the specified norms are obvious proxies for supposed traces of a tribal past.

A similar critique of the procedure for recognising new groups as STs was made in the report of the Justice Jasraj Chopra committee appointed in 2007 by the Rajasthan government to examine the Gujar's demand for ST status. While recommending against acceding to the demand, the report suggested that the state government convey "to the Centre that a national debate should be initiated on the existing norms for according ST status to any community. It should impress upon the Centre that certain criteria should be abrogated as they had become outdated".

The draft National Tribal Policy 2006 said that the Lokur Committee's criteria "are hardly relevant today... Other more accurate criteria need to be fixed". But "fixing" norms that are "more accurate" may be easier said than done. How does one go about picking a handful of communities from the one thousand-odd groups aspiring to ST status and recognise them as STs with "no room for doubt"?

If the task is the identification of communities left behind in the struggle for survival under the conditions of capitalist modernity – that include the legacies of plantation capitalism – and make them eligible for affirmative action, even a modified version of the Lokur Committee's criteria is unlikely to be of much use.

The question for Assam's Adivasi community seeking ST status raises profound questions about our system of reservation. In Northeast India, unlike in the rest of the country, the word Adivasi, which literally means "indigenous people", is not used as an equivalent for ST. The only major group of

While caste had long been the primary focus of India's reservation controversies, since the turn of this century, ST status has become a contentious issue of late. There are about 720 recognised STs in the country today. At least a thousand more groups are vying for recognition as STs. They seek that status not only because of the advantages that come with reservation but also because of the perception that the category 'tribe' is used in a flexible way in Indian governmental parlance.

people that call themselves Adivasi are not officially recognised as ST. They are the descendants of tea workers brought as indentured workers to Assam. The region's established STs don't self-identify as Adivasi because of the "backwardness" associated with the term; they prefer the English words tribe or tribal for self-identification.

Though known to have been recruited from among the "aboriginal tribes of Central India", the census of 1891 classified them simply as labourers. But the term Adivasi has a special appeal to their descendants because its original use in its contemporary sense – as the equivalent of the global category "indigenous people" – was by tribal leaders of Jharkhand, the place that many regard as their original home. "How can people who have spent years in tea plantations", asks Rameswar Kurmi, an Assamese scholar of Adivasi descent, "be expected to retain their primitive traits and distinctive culture that marked their ancestors in other states wherefrom they were brought by Britishers to work in tea gardens?" "Reality warrants some relaxation in the criteria. After all, they are descendants of those having ST recognition [in their places of origin]," he says.

If the Adivasis are among Northeast India's most deprived people today, to no small extent it is the result of the precedence accorded to indigeneity over citizenship and successful cultural adaptation into local societies. A global activist and policy discourse and a national reservation system that privilege indigenous belonging have turned the descendants of tea workers into a starkly out-of-place people.

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