CIVIL SOCIETIES AND PLIGHT OF MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES – A CASE OF THE TEA TRIBES OF ASSAM

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Abstract: Civil Society, a concept which appeared for the first time in the 18th Century West represents a separate sphere of human relations and activity. It is solely neither public nor private but perhaps both at once, embodying a whole range of socio-economic and political interactions linking the state with the individual. In India, especially North-East the role of civil society is gradually gaining grounds while addressing many a complex issues affecting this multicultural topography. However, dilemma exists over a common man's perception of civil society as against the state's. While individuals as members of communities have been taking the route of civil society organisations in order to highlight their rights, aspirations as well as grievances in front of the state; on the other hand, state in the name of welfarism is also aiding and promoting certain civil society organisations that develop quasi-political attributes. This is truer in the case of underdeveloped, discriminated and marginalised communities. Hence, increasingly we see a conflict of interest between the individual and the state over the actual role of civil society organisations.

Through this paper, an attempt will be made to understand the dichotomy between state and individual over the sphere of civil society against the backdrop of a marginalised community of the state of Assam,*i.e.* the Tea Tribes. Herein, we will try to analyse the role played by the three premier civil society organisations representing the community viz. the ACMS, ATTSA, and AASAA in ensuring the empowerment of the community in the state.

Keywords: Civil Society Organisations, State, Hegemony, Tea Tribes, Assam.

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Ms. Borah is pursuing her research work under the supervision of Prof. Sandhya Goswami and Ms. Talukdar is pursuing her research work under the supervision of Prof. Nani Gopal Mahanta.

Introduction:

Assam – situated in the North-Eastern part of India is the meeting ground of a number of communities and races which starkly expostulates its diverse and multicultural character. Talking especially about the greater Assamese society, it was ideally semi-tribal during the pre-Colonial days and continues to be an admixture of both tribal and non-tribal population until date. Prior to the coming of the British to the region, there were tribal communities residing like the Bodo-kacharis, Deoris, Hojais etc who till date consider themselves as aboriginals of the state. While certain other tribes such as Santhals, Mundas, Oraons, Gonds, Khonds – Adivasis from the Chotanagpur plateau of the Indian subcontinent were migrated or brought in by the Colonial rulers to work as indentured labourers in the newly established tea plantations in the state. Today, these communities are collectively known as the Tea Tribes of the state.

The British policy towards the tribal population in the state, both aboriginal and migrated alike was one of isolation and exclusion. While the rulers tried to segregate the plains from the hills by measures such as Inner Line Regulations Act 1873 and creation of 'Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas' under the Government of India Act 1935, the Tea Tribes, on the other hand were strictly confined within the plantation complex. This resulted in their marginalization. While there is no agreed definition of marginalization, our focus, however is on the overt actions or tendencies of human societies whereby those perceived as being without desirability or function are removed or excluded from the prevalent systems of protection and integration, so limiting their opportunities and means for survival. The Education For All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report 2010: *Reaching the Marginalized* defines marginalization as "a form of acute and persistent disadvantage rooted in underlying social inequalities"[1]. Some examples of the most disadvantaged sections of society are girls and women, hard-to-reach groups such as indigenous people and ethnic minorities, poor households, people living in informal settlements, individuals with disabilities, rural populations, nomadic populations those affected by armed conflict and HIV and AIDS, and street and working children.

Independent India brought into its strong fold the tribal-belts of North East subjecting them to the rights and obligations upheld by the Constitution. This inclusion of the tribals within the

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[1] Tenth meeting of the Working Group on Education for All (EFA) : *Concept paper on Marginalization*, Paris, 9-11 December 2009 sponsored by UNESCO

greater Indian nation-state was ironically non-consensual thereby leading to numerous protests and movements for autonomy and secession, both violent as well as non-violent. In order to pacify these communities and to keep the integrity and sovereignty of the country intact, the Indian state met with their demands in different forms like separate statehood within the Union (Nagas, Mizos), provision of autonomous territorial councils under Sixth Schedule in the Constitution (Bodos, Khasis, Chakmas), creation of autonomous district councils (Rabhas, Thengial-Kacharis) as well as reservation in socio-economic and political sectors like education, public employment, representation in electoral bodies. Thus, efforts were made both on the part of the concerned communities and the state to relieve them from their isolationist, backward and marginalized positions. From a multi-cultural perspective, it was an integration of reluctant communities into the greater Indian nation hood.

However, in comparison to other tribes, we see a different approach of the state towards the Tea Tribe communities of Assam. The British legacy of marginalization of these communities continues till date and a study into the social and historical conditions will help us understand this phenomenon in a better perspective.

A Brief History of the Tea Tribes of Assam:

The Tea Tribes of the state constitute a cluster of communities like the Santhals, Gonds, Mundas, Kharias, Khonds, Oraons, Nagesias, Hos etc. who originally were aboriginals of present day Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Bihar, Orissa, Tamil Nadu etc.. Brought to Assam by the British colonial rulers to work as indentured[2] labourers in the tea plantations, they are today concentrated in the districts of Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Jorhat, Golaghat, Morigaon, Sonitpur etc. They constitute 20% of the state's population (Census 2001) and are major contributors to the organized workforce and economy of Assam. They are also the only communities in the state who have been named on the basis of their occupational status.

Since the time they were brought to the state, the British took stringent measured to confine them to their place of occupation. The rulers debarred the communities from developing any

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[2] In simple terms indenture refers to a contract committing an apprentice or servant to serve a master or employer for a specific period of time. This system restricted the movement of labourers outside plantation complex. Workmen's Breach of Contract Act IX of 1859 started this system of indenture which was in operation till the act was ultimately repelled in 1926.

form of contact with the outside world as well as inter garden communications. By using both legal and extra legal methods, a number of strategies were developed in order to dominate, discipline and control labour in both private and public sphere. For example: The Workmen's Breach of Contract Act XIII of 1859 introduced the system of indenture binding the labourers to their respective gardens. Act VI of 1865 introduced the system of ration, the cost of which was retrieved from the salary of the labourers and thus became another source indebtness and bondage for the labourers[3].

Moreover, the tea planters acted as the prosecutor, judge and jury in every aspect of the labourers' lives. Any small discretion on their part was met with severe punishment which included flogging, salary cuts, suspension, corporeal punishment and conviction. Labour resistances were forcefully suppressed. Even the abolition of the indentured system in 1926 could not stop the planters from bringing out newer ways to control labourers and labour mobility[4]. The dismal and pitiable condition of the communities continues to persist even today when sovereign India is enjoying its 66th year of independence.

While independent India confirms and promotes the principles of Liberty, Equality, Justice and Fraternity under conditions of unity and diversity, yet realization of these with regards to the Tea Tribe communities of Assam is still an unfulfilled dream. We notice a sort of quasi welfare mechanism on behalf of the state when it comes to issues of their development and empowerment as well as redressal of grievances. Even the tea garden management entrusted with the responsibility of managing the day to day affairs of the labourers is neglectful in performing its duties diligently. To substantiate, even permanent workers of the gardens have the status of "daily wage labourers" and are paid way below the minimum wages scale of the Indian state (Rs.89 per day).

Apart from wages, the management is responsible for providing housing, rent, ration, pension, gratuity, education as well as health facilities to the labourers. However, we see the tribes suffering in these regards. According to clause 58 of the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 at least 8% of the labour household should be made pucca annually. But there are gardens where

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[3] Behal, Rana P. (art.) (2006): *Power Structure, Discipline, and Labour in Assam Tea Plantation under Colonial Rule*, IRSH, Pp. 162-166.

[4] Behal, Rana P. (art.) (2006): *Power Structure, Discipline, and Labour in Assam Tea Plantation under Colonial Rule*, IRSH, Pp. 168.

not even a single house has so far been made pucca [5](Kar 1999:39). In terms of education, a survey conducted by the Asom Sarva Sikhsha Abhiyan Mission (ASSAM) during 2002 reveals that 25% of children in the age group of 6-14 are out of school in entire Assam of which 43% are among the tea gardens. It was only recently that the Government of Assam, through the Assam Venture Educational Institution (Provincialisation of Services) Act, 2012 amendment put forward the proposal to provincialise venture schools in tea gardens which are otherwise under the authority of garden managements. From these statistics, it is clear that there is an absence of goodwill on the part of the management to work for the empowerment of the communities. The data reveals that the management is only guided by profit motive and suffers from an inert fear that providing the labourers with adequate facilities might make them more conscious and assertive of their rights.

But, we cannot point our fingers to the management only. The labourers are equally to be blamed for their poor economic and social conditions –

- They are not as conscious as they ought to be

- They do not express much interest in future prospects

- They are influenced by alcoholism, superstition and practices like child marriage

- They do not express much interest towards education

The above discussion has strikingly revealed the underdevelopment, backwardness and exclusion of the tribes. However, amidst such conditions an aware and educated section has slowly and gradually emerged out of the tea tribes taking advantage of available facilities like government education, scholarships, public jobs etc. This section can therefore be regarded as the middle class of the tea tribes. Coming out from their confinement in the gardens, these people got an opportunity to understand the larger society as well as the faster pace of development of other communities as against the tea tribes of the state. This understanding has led to their realization that the plight of the tea tribes is pitiable and sadly discriminatory and marginalized. In order to make their community progressive and developed, and to project their

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[5] Kar, R. K., : *A Panoramic View of the Tea and ex-Tea Tribes of Assam in* Pulloppillil, Thomas (ed.) (1999): *Identity of Adivasis in Assam,* Delhi, p. 39.

grievances and current conditions in front of the state, the middle class today is using the realm of civil society through creation of certain organizations.

Before discussing the structure and functioning of these organizations it will be apparent to put forth a general idea of the concept of civil society.

Civil Society – A Conceptual Understanding:

Civil society is the site where the legitimacy of the state is forged; it is also the terrain of contestation. It is precisely here that the subaltern classes can challenge the power of the state.[6] As a concept it saw its beginning in the works of classical political economists like James Steurt and Adam Smith who argued for a strict delineation of an economic sphere and argued for its separation from and autonomy from the state. They viewed civil society as a sphere of rights, individualism, property and market; and hence, sought to establish it as independent against a powerful and parasitic mercantilist state.

Hegel too provided an economic basis of civil society. However, for him civil society is a space where people come with self interest as their self interest will not be fulfilled without the help of others in society. Hence, it is a sphere of need aimed to fulfill the needs of the people. In civil society cooperation is based on egoism and self interest which might lead to discrimination. For Hegel, this discrimination can be addressed only by state intervention as state is not egoistic and is an ethical institution working for the betterment of the society.

Karl Marx unlike Hegel was not comfortable with the notion of the state. He was of the view that state always reflects class interest and is an instrument of domination of the *proletariat* by the *bourgeoisie*. In civil society, there exists class division which the state promotes. Hence, state is not an ethical institution and will increase the problems of inequality in civil society by discriminating against the non-propertied class.

Antonio Gramsci expands the Marxist notion of state and civil society. He asserts that a proper understanding of the state requires a thorough knowledge of the civil society. He makes a distinction between political society representing *coercion* and civil society representing *consent*.

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[6] Chandhoke Neera (1995): *State and Civil Society: Explorations in Political Theory*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, p. 115.

The coercive apparatus is concentrated in prisons, judiciary, police and armed forces whereas the state uses the civil society to enforce subtle forms of power and the statist ideology through consent by means of educational, cultural and religious systems and institutions. This consensus leads to the creation of hegemony, a sort of domination of the powerful over the powerless. It must be reinforced time and again to ensure its sustainability and maintain the power balance. Although hegemony is not the exclusive property of any particular class, Gramsci accorded it to the capitalist class in a liberal democracy driven by market economy which creates the *haves* and the *have-nots*. For Gramsci, civil society is the space which creates a cultural and ideological consent among the people especially the powerless that the state in which they exist is the best. It works as the bodyguard of the state, more particularly the capitalist state. Let us now analyze the working of civil society apparatus with regards to the tea tribe communities of Assam and see how various organizations within the communities are using this platform to address their problems and prospects.

Rise of Civil Society Organisations within the Tea Tribes of Assam:

Probhudan Marik Sarowan, a tea tribe prodigy can be credited with the creation of the first "trade union" and political party exclusive to members of the tea tribe communities in independent India – the Assam Chah Shramik Sabha and Sarbadal. These two organisations, highly successful in the initial years, however diminished as a result of lack of competent successors to Sarowan. Simultaneously, on 9th July, 1947 the Indian Tea Association entered into an agreement with the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and the then Chief Minister of Assam Gopinath Bordoloi for the creation of two premier tea garden labourers' trade unions: Cachar Cha Shramik Union and Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) in 1958. Today, these two organisations together boost the highest number of membership in any trade union from Asia as memebership of tea labourers to the two is mandatory.

Apart from these unions, there are certain other organizations like ATTSA, AASAA. In 1947, two student leaders Santosh Kumar Topno and Saimon Singh Horo established the first tea tribe student's organization namely the *Axom Chotanagpuri Chatra Sanmilan* which was later renamed the All Assam Tea Labour Communities Students' Organisation. In 1984, it took the form of Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (ATTSA), a premier students' organization in Assam today. Another students' organization the All Adivasi Students Association of Assam

(AASAA) owes its origin to All Assam Munda-Oraon-Santhal Association later re-christened the *Axom Adivasi Parishad*. Moreover, there exist a number of community-based organizations such as the *Xadou Axom Gowala Sanmilan*, *Xadou Axom Santhal Sanmilan, Xadou Axom Munda Sanmilan* etcetera. These organizations are, however, restricted only to the task of promoting and preserving the unique art, culture, literature of their respective communities.

The ACMS, ATTSA and AASAA are the premier and most powerful tea tribes organizations enjoying mass support base cutting across specific community identity and affiliations within the generic tea tribe communities. Ever since their emergence, these organizations have been raising a number of issues in front of the state and garden management concerning discrimination against the tea labourers resulting in backwardness and marginalization, education, poor housing facilities and health facilities, lack of availability of drinking water and electricity, and insecurity with regards to life of labourers in case of accidents and retirement and their involvement in state policy formulations. They believe that only an urgent meeting of these demands will help these communities emerge out of years of despondency and become equal and active citizens in the process of Indian nation building. In addition to these, ATTSA and AASAA have also taken up the issue of identity concerning the tea communities and are expressing their desire for increased reservation and grant of Scheduled Tribes status.

Coming to the general issues, though we see a convergence of the three organizations yet the *modus operandi* of the ACMS distinguishes it from the other two. While the ATTSA and AASA are students' organizations basically dealing with students' issues, their recent undertaking of issues mentioned above have contributed to expansion of their horizon, strength, power and mass support base. The ACMS on the other hand, owing to its affiliation to the INTUC has managed to enjoy some sort of authenticity and legitimacy in front of the state and tea garden management as a representative body of the tea communities. Moreover, due to its identity as a trade union it has succeeded in engaging more frequently with the state and the garden management on behalf of the communities.

After independence, we saw management of the Tea Gardens organize under different Employers' Associations. Since 1997 the ACMS has entered into a number of "Memorandum of Settlement" with five Tea Management groups-Indian Tea Association (ITA), Tea Association of India (TAI), Bharatiya Chah Parisad (BCP), Assam Tea Planters Association (ATPA) and North

Eastern Tea Association (NETA). The last agreement was signed on April 2012 determining the daily wage of tea labourers as below:

Table 1

Daily Wage of Tea Labourers

Period	Wage
2012	Rs. 84.00 per day
2013	Rs. 89.00 per day
2014	Rs. 94.00 per day

Source: www.assamchahmazdoorsangha.org

We can see that these agreements are conspicuously silent on housing, healthcare, educational and other facilities. It is also evident that the wage of the tea plantation labourers has increased only numerically and there has been no rise in their real wage. Surprisingly disheartening is the fact that prior to 1997, the organization just acted as a mere mouthpiece without taking up any viable and constructive actions. What propelled such late action? The answer to this can be attributed to emergence of newer organisations and their subsequent increase in power and support base.

Another explanation can be found in the nature of constitution of the ACMS. The ACMS might be regarded as a state sponsored and state regulated civil society organisation through the medium of which the state as well as the management exercises a kind of hegemonic domination over the garden labourers. We must never forget that the ACMS owes its origin not to the dreams and aspirations of the garden labourers but to an agreement signed between the ITA, the INTUC and the state of Assam. So it owes its allegiance not to the tea tribes but to these three institutions. Despite this, the simple-minded labourers show their faith in the ACMS in their unquestionable acceptance to such agreements. This is because a kind of picture is drawn wherein the state and the organisation makes the labourers believe that what is happening is for future good. Moreover, taking advantage of the simplicity of the tea tribes, political parties and leaders too do not budge from using them as vote banks. In this regard, the Congress party clearly holds an upper hand against other political parties. This is evident from its successive

wins in state assembly elections in tea belts of Assam such as Naharkatia, Doom Doma, Digboi, Tinsukia,Chabua, Jorhat, etc. This shows that Congress has loyal and popular support base within the tea communities. Here also we see a sort of hegemonic projection in the sense that the INTUC, the parent organisation of the ACMS is indeed a branch of the Indian National Congress (INC). Thus, it can be observed that the ACMS projects a dual identity. While on the one hand it claims to represent the socio-economic grievances and issues of the tea garden labourers as an apolitical organisation, however its allegiance to the INTUC is indirectly reflective of its political support towards the INC.

The AASAA and ATTSA unlike ACMS were formed as initiative of the students' within the communities without any outside influence. The birth of these organizations is the result of an awakened section within the communities who availed themselves of modern facilities and came to a realisation that compared to other sections of society, the plight of the tea tribe communities were pitiable and dismal. While the ATTSA has no qualms on being labeled "tea tribes" of the state based on their occupational status, and concentrate on issues relating to their educational advancement, social and economic upliftment and political participation; the AASAA on the other hand strongly talks against the use of the term "tea tribes". It regards the tea tribe communities as *Adivasis* of the state and concentrates on their identity and grant of Scheduled Tribes status as its main agenda on the grounds that not only people belonging to these communities are regarded as aboriginals in their original places of residence but also those located in West Bengal and Tripura have already been granted ST status by the Indian state. The grant of this status the organization believes will ensure reservation for these communities in public sphere be it in public educational institutions as well as government jobs which will enable them to emerge out of their marginalized state and become empowered. Apart from this, the organization also demands larger representation of the tea tribes in governmental decision making.

Although these two organizations have taken up a number of vital issues concerning the communities yet their character as student bodies as well as absence of adequate finance limit their scope of representing the entire gamut of tea tribes.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion we can comprehend that though the communities are marginalized yet we have seen the gradual growth of a number of organizations within the tea tribes since colonial times. But, their active engagement as civil society organizations can be traced only from 1990s when ACMS took up the issue of wages of the tea labourers and subsequently AASAA took up the issue of identity. However, these organisations have restricted ambience in the sense that ACMS as a trade union has to exercise neutrality and apolitical character. At the same time, ATTSA and AASAA being student bodies are restricted from participating in policy formulations. Under these circumstances, there is a dire need for an all comprehensive organization encompassing every stratum of the tea tribe communities. In this regard mention can be made of the *Akhom Cha Jonogusthee Jatiya Mohasaba* established in 2003 with the aim of bringing about social, cultural, educational, economic and political upliftment for the tea communities without disrupting the unity of the region. But, this organization is at a nascent stage and will require some time to mature as a powerful representative body.

To conclude, we can say that the sphere of civil society must be taken as a neutral ground where the state restricts itself from promoting its hegemony and wherein members of organizations refrain from using it as a means of promoting their individual political aspirations. Instead the sphere should be used as a mutual meeting ground of the individual and the state. It is high time that the state government gives due consideration to the backwardness of the tea tribe communities in the state and take up urgent and necessary steps to ameliorate their conditions. To do this, it must engage in constructive dialogue with the civil society organizations representing the tea tribes and use these bodies as a medium to popularize and implement welfare measures and policies.

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217

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218

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