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Ahom Agency and the State in Contemporary Assam: Negotiation, Responses and Politics for Scheduled Tribe Status among Ahoms

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Abstract

The concept of 'identity politics' has become a widely used yet often ambiguously defined term within the social sciences. While numerous scholars have attempted to theorize it, its discursive nature is captured by Kwame Anthony Appiah, who observes that identity politics is frequently invoked not as a neutral analytical category. As Appiah notes, one's own political commitments are understood as just politics, whereas the claims of others are dismissed as 'identity politics'. This insight reveals how groups universalize their own interests while delegitimizing others. Within this purview, the paper examines the complex dynamics of identity politics among the Tai-Ahom community and the responses of existing Scheduled Tribe groups in Assam. Historically, the Tai-Ahom were a dominant ruling group with rich historical archive. But the identity of the Tai-Ahom was reconstructed by colonial governmentality. The paper examines the trajectory of Tai-Ahom identity and the contemporary revival movement led by various Tai-Ahom associations. It also focuses on the demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by the Ahom community and the response of other existing Scheduled Tribes. By analyzing the Ahom agency, this study demonstrates how affirmative action creates a contested political landscape for state patronage and resource allocation. The paper seeks to understand the interplay between the ethnic roles played by Tai-Ahom in their demand for Scheduled Tribe recognition and, similarly, the role of existing STs in responding to the development of that demand.

Keywords: Tai-Ahoms, Identity Politics, Just Politics, Demand for Scheduled Tribe Status, Governmentality

1. Introduction

The multi-ethnic and multicultural character of society has made it particularly prone to identity-based politics in India. In the post-colonial period, various states in India have experienced ethnic movements seeking political autonomy and economic and cultural recognition. Assam has often been perceived as a contested socio-political space and a recurrent hotspot of 'identity politics'. Sanjib Baruah argues that the ethno-territorial character of Assam

and the constitution's preferential treatment provisions led ethnic communities to bargain with the state for Schedule Tribe (ST) status, the Sixth Schedule for existing STs, and for those with a Sixth Schedule demand, a full-fledged state (Baruah, 2008). The preferential treatment policy of the Indian Constitution facilitates the mobilization of groups to demand preferences and benefits, leading to political tensions over how the state distributes resources, resentment among groups that avail of such benefits, and issues for policy debates (Weiner, 1983). This is currently evident in Assam's politics. The six communities, namely the Tai Ahom, Chutia, Moran, Matak, Adivasi, and Koch Rajbangshis, have been demanding Scheduled Tribe status, which is opposed by the existing ST of Assam. Their demand for recognition of ST status was approved at the winter session of the Assam Assembly on 29th Nov, 2025, which led to large protests by existing ST groups in Kokrajhar, resulting in the destruction of the Bodoland Territorial Council secretariat. The protest erupted after the *Group of Ministers* (GoM) report recommended ST recognition for the six communities. The protesters argued that extending ST status to these communities would dilute the constitutional safeguards affecting their political, educational and employment rights.

Assam, with a total population of approximately 3.12 crore, STs constitute about 12.45 percent of the Assam population. The question of 'tribality' of these communities is a recurrent theme of discourse (Misra, 2012), as the general and anthropological perception of tribes contradicts the constitutional understanding of the ST. This discussion broadens to include the communities demanding ST status in the contemporary period. The Constitution of India nowhere defines what constitutes an ST, nor does it mention specific criteria for recognizing ST in India (Middleton and Shneiderman, 2008). The Constitution, under Article 342, empowers the state to include and exclude any communities from the ST list. The scheduling process is lengthy: first, the concerned state sends recommendations and justification to the center; second, the center forwards it to the Registrar General of India; and then the proposal is referred to the National Commission for Schedule Tribe for their recommendations. Only those cases agreed upon by all these agencies are considered ST by the President's notification. However, ambiguity arises from the criteria used for identifying ST communities. The Lokur Committee outlined certain indicators such as primitive traits, distinct culture, geographical isolation, shyness, and backwardness which remains vague and open to interpretation. Moreover, the absence of religion as a defining criterion from the official indicator complicated the issue of identifying ST in India. The major issue in dropping religion has created serious ambiguity in the dichotomous relation of the caste and tribe binary, as the colonial construction of caste/tribe relied very much on religious distinction. This lack of clarity has produced conceptual and practical inconsistencies in identifying STs in India. Within this ambiguous framework, communities demanding ST are trying to revive their ancestral tribal religion to demarcate themselves as non-Hindu. This is seen in the case of the Tai-Ahom in their demand for Scheduled Tribe recognition.

The Tai-Ahom community has increasingly rearticulated their ethnic character in line with their demand for Scheduled Tribe status. The performativity of Tai-Ahomness serves as a strategic means through which the community demonstrate themselves as a 'potential other', capable to bargain with the state and the existing ST communities. The present paper attempts to understand the case of the Tai-Ahom and the process of tripartite bargaining among the Tai-Ahom community, communities already enjoying ST benefits, and the state as the ultimate arbiter.

2. Tai Ahom: historical antecedent and Revivalism

The emergence of the "*anthropological cast of mind*" transformed the social mobility of communities into a caste/tribe binary. Colonial knowledge production infused identity consciousness into different fractions of people by enumerating them and identifying their traits and features within fixed categories such as caste and tribe. This community consciousness is used or challenged by groups to augment their position in the social hierarchy or to bargain with state power. The case of Tai-Ahom is one such example that challenges the colonial positioning of their community.

Assam, as a borderland, has always experienced the circulation of new ideas, people, and material goods mingled with the existing institutions and discourses (Sharma, 2011). The migration of Indo-Aryan and non-Aryan people and their assimilation created a unique social structure in Assam. Tai-Ahom is one such historically dynamic community whose identity was shaped by migration, assimilation, and state formation in this region. The Tai-Ahom,

or Ahom, were a small group of the Shan branch of peoples, with 9,000 men, women, and children, 2 elephants, and 300 horses migrated from Upper Burma and established their kingdom in Assam and ruled 600 years in the region (Gait, 1926). They assimilated and accommodated the indigenous populations of the region within their administrative sphere. The tribal chiefs of indigenous communities were admitted to Ahom clans, and common people were transferred into *paiks*.¹ It is worth mentioning that the Ahom migrated to Assam long before the Tai Shans of Burma converted to Buddhism (Neog, 1996). Thus, it is evident that they had migrated with their tribal belief system. Over time, they expanded their political boundaries by annexing the neighboring polity. The expansion not only changed the political boundaries and tribal feudal political structures but also gave rise to a new, sophisticated state polity with Brahmanical influence (Guha, 1983). In this new sophisticated polity, the Ahom had become a minority in terms of population, and new branches of Aryanised people became the subjects of the Ahom kingdom (Terwiel, 1996). They adopted Assamese as their court language, began practicing Hindu rituals, and appointed Brahmins to various offices in the Ahom kingdom. Royal patronage of Hindu rituals and the spread of neo-Vaishnavism gradually reshaped the cultural milieu of the Ahom court and its subjects. This process produced a flexible caste-based social order within which mobility of rank and status remained contingent upon royal authority.

The trajectory of the Ahoms shifted with their incorporation into the colonial administrative framework. The emergence of colonial administration in Assam, with its enumerative modalities such as ethnography, gazetteers, and census, “created the sense of a controllable indigenous reality” (Appadurai, 1993). It reconfigured the region’s previously fluid social structure, recasting Ahom identity within fixed classificatory categories. A closer reading of ethnographic accounts and census reports suggests that Ahom remains a persistent site of colonial confusion and misinterpretation. The colonial ethnographers relied on Brahmanical texts and the interpretations of local elites to classify people into categories based on ‘religion’ and ‘custom’, ignoring marginalized local practices (Driks, 2001). Elite perceptions are evident in Haliram Dhekial Phukan’s *Assam Buranji*, in which he described the Ahom as a degraded and impure community. In a similar vein, the first census of 1872 referred to the Ahom as a “corrupt and degenerated race” that intermixed with the indigenous population. They clubbed them as semi-Hinduised aboriginals despite the fact that some of them still retained the habit of eating beef and the practice of burying dead remains (Hunter, 1975). They consider religion a factor in determining whether a community can be posited. The problem with religion was that the Hinduised aboriginals of Assam had not developed a caste structure as a fixed religious institution, but rather a social position where the wealthy class sought upward social mobility. This can be seen in the demand by 15 Tai-Ahom clans, under the leadership of Padmeswar Naobaicha Phukan, to be recognized as Kshatriyas, on the grounds that they wrote ‘Simha’ after their names and fought battles like Kshatriyas (cited in Barpujari, 1990). Their claim was refuted by the 1901 Census, which simultaneously categorized them as lower-caste. They used the ‘jalchal’ factor as the Brahmins did not take water from them (Sharma, 2022). The then Governor, Beatson Bell, regretted the blunder and assured the Ahom groups of the necessary correction in the preceding census. Although the Ahom were never recognized as Kshatriya, Padmanath Gohain Barua, in his 1937 book *Asamar Buranji*, noted in the chapter *Axomiyar Jat Bibhag* that the upper Ahom clans were Kshatriya (Gohain Barua, 2004).

The colonial discourse on tribes did not classify the Tai-Ahoms as a tribe. Their Hinduisation and abandonment of the Tai language portrayed them as more integrated into the Hindu caste society rather than fitting within the category of “tribe”. The Census Commissioner of 1931, C.S. Mullan, compared Tai-Ahoms with Kacharis; both were completely Hinduised, with the exception that Kacharis retained their tribal language and maintained a distant relationship with mainstream Assamese, unlike the Ahom (Mullan, 1932). Thus, they put the Kacharis as a ‘backward tribe’ and the Ahoms in the caste category.

The question of ‘tribal’ or ‘Scheduled Tribe’ status concerning the Ahom community is predominantly a post-colonial thing. The control over indigenous knowledge systems has transformed pre-colonial ‘fuzzy’ communities into more defined collective identities such as nation, tribe, and caste, by delineating community boundaries (Kaviraj, 1993). This process facilitates the cultivation of a unified identity, which in turn enables the articulation of collective interests. The post-colonial assertion of Tai-Ahom ethnicity and their demand for ST recognition stem from this collective sense of “we-ness”. Historical injustices coupled with hegemonic dominance by the upper castes within Assamese society over the Ahom community have accelerated this process. This is evident in the increasing number of civil society groups and various socio-religious organizations; the Ahom Sabha, Mohan

DeodhaiBailungSanmilan, Poi Phuralung Sangha, All Tai Ahom Student Union, Ban Ok Pup Lik Mung Tai, among others. These organizations work for ethnic mobilization of Tai-Ahom, along with creating a 'relational idea' of ethnic similarities and differences. They facilitate the ethnic renewal process by reviving cultural markers such as language, religion and traditional practices. Tai-Ahom, being assimilated and intermixed in terms of language and religion, use 'Buranji' or chronicles as their autoethnography and look back to their ancestral 'homeland', Southeast Asia, to reconstruct their cultural markers. Yasmin Saikia argues that the ethnic renewal process of Tai-Ahom operates bi-directionally. She argues that Tai-Ahom elites embrace Thai inputs by aligning their history with Thai culture, myths, and language, while Thai scholars simultaneously promote their connection to the Pan-Thai nationalist project (Saikia, 2006). Saikia and Hiren Gohain both express their skepticism over the Tai-Ahom ethnic renewal process. The founding president of Ban Ok Pup Lik Muang Tai, PuspaGogoi, stated that

"We have experienced how the upper-caste Assamese society treated us because of our food habits. They suppress us culturally, in terms of religion and language. It is a movement not only against Brahminical dominance but also to revive our age-old language and religion."ⁱⁱ

Adding to this, he also argues that:

"Tai-Ahom and the Thai people are similar in terms of tonal use, in terms of dress and cultural practices, which most of Tai-Ahom have forgotten to practice. That is why we are trying to revive those practices and language. We are not creating new but trying to revive what Swargadeo brought with him".ⁱⁱⁱ

The creation of the Phura Lung religion serves to support their demand for ST recognition, as it contrasts with the binary classification of Hinduism and tribal affiliations. Although the criterion of 'religion' was not included as a scheduling criterion by the Lokur Commission, a significant number of individuals within the Tai-Ahom community are converting to the Phura Lung religion through the 'tetete'^{iv} ceremony. At the grassroots level, the common people perceive religion as a criterion for inclusion in the ST list. They are projecting themselves as 'non-Hindu' by practicing certain rituals. Additionally, the Assam government facilitates their recognition of religious identity by providing funding for the establishment of 'Roucheng' or 'places of worship' for the Tai-Ahom community.

The revival of the Tai-Ahom ethnicity seeks to establish a unique Tai-Ahom identity while advocating for ST recognition. Over time, this movement has transformed Upper Assam into a significant platform for cultural expression, where symbols such as traditional attire and culinary customs are prominently showcased. The struggle for ST recognition is based on the community's capacity to translate culture into performance, rather than on historical indigeneity (Shneiderman and Turin, 2006). In public gatherings, whether cultural programs or protest rallies, the Tai-Ahom community is clad in traditional attire as a deliberate expression of their cultural identity. In contemporary times, this performative assertion of distinctiveness has become increasingly visible.

3.Claims, Justifications and Schedule Tribe: Interrogating Inside

The constitutional category ST is a colonial legacy with a politico-administrative benefit. The growing demand for ST recognition is seen as a "very attractive package deal" to acquire such benefits.^v Here, the paper seeks to analyze the justification for Tai-Ahom's demand for ST status. The identity consciousness of Tai-Ahom and the sense of historical injustice are not new feelings, but are now instrumentalized within the community itself. In the initial period of the ST recognition movement, the problem with Tai-Ahom identity articulation lay within the community; the people were divided along lines of religion, ritual practices, and ways of life. Thus, in the initial period, socio-political and cultural rights were demanded for different sections of Tai-Ahom. The cultural organizations, such as the All Assam Phuralung Buddhist Sangha in 1979, submitted a memorandum to the Joint Parliamentary Select Committee on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order Bill, 1978, demanding ST recognition for the Tai-Ahom, especially for followers of the Phuralung religion.^{vi} Their demand was limited to the Tai-Ahom, who have retained Tai practices, similar to other Tai groups in the Northeast that received ST status under the Constitution (Scheduled Tribe) Order 1950. Citing their exclusion, several Tai-Ahom associations have sought ST recognition, drawing parallels with groups such as Tai-Aiton, Tai Phake, and Tai Khamyang as their cousin brothers. In memoranda, they claimed their distinct culture, language, and religion as justification for inclusion on the ST list. The present president of *Phuralung Sangha* argues that:

“We Tai-Ahoms are a historically marginalized primitive tribe. We follow the Phuralung, we have our own dress, our own marriage ceremony, our own rituals and our own language. A total of 1,26,331 people have accepted Phuralung religion, and the number continues to increase”.^{vii}

He also reiterates that.

“Followers of these religions resemble the practices of other Tai groups. We practice elements of animism and use Tai-Ahom language in religious and chaklong (marriage) ceremonies. Thus, we should confer ST recognition to preserve and protect our distinctness”.^{viii}

Since the 1980s, the movement has progressed primarily through the submission of memoranda and ethnic demonstrations. In 1982, the All Tai-Ahom Society submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister for ST recognition (Phukan, 2010, p. 188). Again, in the year 1982, the All Tai-Ahom Society welcomed the Government of India’s proposal to amend the Constitution to provide linguistic, cultural, and economic safeguards for the ‘Indigenous Assamese’ and proposed adding provisions to protect, conserve, and develop the language, culture, and economy of the Tai-Ahom. The memorandum stated that the Tai-Ahoms were discontent with the political-administrative arrangement in Assam and thus needed political safeguards for their community (Phukan, 2010). Over the years, various Tai-Ahom organizations, whether separately or jointly, have demanded ST recognition through memoranda. The memoranda highlighted the justifications and rationale for granting recognition to the Scheduled Tribe. It reiterates the historical injustices produced by colonial governance and the continued dominance of caste Hindu groups in the post-colonial period. They also repeatedly emphasize the community’s cultural and linguistic distinctiveness and economic backwardness to demonstrate that they fulfill the required criteria for Scheduled status.

The All Tai Ahom Student Union and Tai-Ahom YuvaPrishad staged a road protest in various districts of Assam and in Delhi with the slogan ‘No ST, No Rest’. The present All Tai Ahom Student Union President, BasantaGogoi, stated that:

“Tai Ahom qualifies all the criteria of the Lukor Commission mentioned. Our people are economically deprived, our women are shy, we have our own religion and dress, and we live in remote villages. We qualify for all the criteria, yet we are deprived of this constitutional right”.^{ix}

Arguing the present movements, Manoj Gogoi, Chief Advisor of ATASU, says that,

“Our demand is not merely to avail ST benefits in employment and educational institutions, but to safeguard our land and our people. Granting ST recognition to these six communities would increase the proportion of the Scheduled Tribe population, which would, in turn, automatically qualify Assam as a *janajatiyarajya*”.^x

The Tai Ahom are currently enjoying OBC status and all its benefits. The OBC status is viewed as inadequate to deal with their issue despite having 27% reservation in Assam. One of the respondents argues that,

“OBC recognition does not provide us with a political and cultural safeguard. Without political rights, we cannot preserve our own land and our culture”.^{xi}

Their main argument was that in a multicultural society, where Tai-Ahom, being a small population, feared being wiped out by larger communities. They were not only afraid of cultural assimilation but also feared being deprived of political recognition. Three constituencies of Upper Assam, Dhemaji, Jonai, and Dhakuakhana, where a larger number of Tai-Ahom live, are reserved for ST, where they cannot contest elections. Another reason is that the existing ST(Plains), such as Deories, Missings, and Sonowal-Kachari, are concentrated in the seven districts of Upper Assam. But their population is not concentrated in one area; it is interspersed with other demanding communities such as Ahom, Moran, and Chutia(Phukan 2010). The rising demand for Sixth Schedule status among these communities created a sense of threat among the Tai-Ahoms, prompting them to assert their demand for ST recognition more strongly.

4.State’s response: a review of developments

The Constitution of India has empowered the state and central governments to decide whether a community can be recognized as an ST. In recent times, some communities across Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh have received ST recognition. This has, in turn, encouraged the Tai-Ahom to press more strongly for ST recognition.

A new wave was ignited by Hiteswar Saikia, who recommended that the Central Government include Tai-Ahom under the 6th Schedule of the Constitution. The Central Government had appointed a Joint Select Committee of Parliament, headed by Shri Amar Rai Pradhan, to study the causes affecting six communities in Assam. In 1997, they recommended Tai-Ahom and five other communities to be recognized as ST. But due to the dissolution of the Lok Sabha, the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) and (Scheduled Castes) Order Bill, 1996, did not proceed to the voting phase.

The Assam State Assembly debates often center on ST recognition. The Chief Minister Saikia responded that the demand would take time due to ambiguities in the criteria for Scheduled Tribe recognition, particularly in area restrictions and population (Assam Legislative Assembly, 1996). Bharat Chandra Narah, Minister of Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes, stated that the Assam government will submit a memorandum to the center seeking ST recognition for six communities, with an assurance that there will be no conflict with existing ST communities (Assam Legislative Assembly, 2004). On 5th August 2004, the State Government unanimously resolved to urge the Government of India to include the Tai-Ahom and the other five communities in the ST(Plain) within the state of Assam. But the Registrar General raised certain observations and requested additional clarification, and asked the Assam government to provide further justification on 7th Dec, 2005 (Standing Committee, 2006).

Therefore, the Government of Assam had appointed an Expert Committee under the Assam Institute of Research for Tribes and Scheduled Castes (TRI) to prepare their claims and justifications for enlisting the Tai Ahom as an ST. The committee responded to the RGI's queries through their bibliographic evidence submitted in 2012 to the Government of Assam (Report of the Expert Committee). Then the Government of Assam sent its proposal to the Central Government led by the United Progressive Alliance. The proposal did not get a positive response from the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government.

The demands of the Tai-Ahom and the other five communities have become part of the Bharatiya Janata Party's election manifesto. Their vision document stated that the BJP government is closely cooperating with the Central Government to secure recognition for the Tai-Ahom as a Schedule Tribe (Assam Vision Document, 2016-2025). They promise to form a khilonjiya government to protect the *jati, mati, bheti*^{xii}, which incorporates the six communities' demand for Schedule Tribe recognition. Prime Minister Narendra Modi promised to grant Schedule Tribe status to the Tai-Ahom communities in his election rallies in Assam. As a result, a new committee was set up in 2016 under Mahesh Kumar Singla to recommend modalities and consult with all three parties (state, Communities seeking Schedule Tribe and Existing Schedule Tribe) (The Hindu, 1st March, 2016). It was welcomed by various Tai-Ahom organizations and the coordination organization of the other five communities, JanagosthiyaOikya Mancha. The primary thrust of the committee was to examine the shift of the six communities from Other Backwards Class to ST, safeguard the interests of the existing ST, and formulate a mechanism to ensure fairness in reservations for these six communities. But the Committee repeatedly failed to submit its report, which prompted various Tai-Ahom organizations to stage statewide protests. The JanagosthiyaOikya Mancha took to the streets, staging a half-naked protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi. In October, the organizations called for a 36-hour Assam Bandh, which significantly disrupted everyday life by affecting routine work, transportation, and normal economic activities across the state (Saikia, 2017).

The Tai-Ahom and their demand for ST recognition made significant progress when the National Commission for ST recognized that these communities possess the characteristics to qualify for inclusion in the ST list (The Assam Tribune, 15th Dec, 2024). In line with this, the Minister of Tribal Affairs, JualOram, introduced the Constitution (STs) Order (Amendment) Bill, 2019. The bill was intended to amend the Constitution (STs) Order, 1950, to include certain communities in the list of STs for the state (Press Information Bureau, 2019). But the political context and timing of the Bill's introduction are called into question due to the delay in its approval. The Tai Ahom organizations within the Choi JanagusthiyoOikya Mancha express their dissatisfaction with the delay in the matter and reiterate the need for immediate inclusion in the Schedule list (Memorandum, 2024).

The most recent development in this matter of granting Tai-Ahom and the other six communities is that the Group of Ministers (GoM), a Cabinet-level committee of the Assam Government, was formed following the Central Government's 2019 recommendation. The Group of Ministers, a three-member body, consulted with all stakeholders and has prepared modalities for granting ST status to the communities. The committee is vested with the responsibility of determining the quantum of reservation for OBCs after the creation of a new Scheduled Tribe category and of preparing measures to ensure safeguards for the existing Scheduled Tribes (Lok Sabha, 2024). The report was presented on the last day of the Winter Session in 2025. The committee, headed by Dr. Ranuj Pegu (Minister of Education, Government of Assam), put forward a multi-layered recommendation that was likely to prolong the issue. The three recommended categories of STs in Assam are ST(Plains), ST(Hills), and ST(Valley), with the latter being newly added. The report provides its rationale for creating the ST(V) category to safeguard the existing ST, which includes Tai-Ahom, Chutia, Tea Tribes or Adivasi communities, and Koch Rajbongshi (excluding the undivided Goalpara district), whereas Moran, Matak, and Koch Rajbongshi of the undivided Goalpara district are included in the ST(P) (Group of Ministers Report, Nov, 2025). This structure will allow reservations in Parliament, the Legislative Assembly, and local bodies, with certain exceptions - Lok Sabha constituencies covering the Sixth Schedule areas will be permanently reserved for the existing STs through a constitutional amendment. Secondly, it suggests separate reservation quotas with distinct rosters and vacancy registers for all state Government recruitments (Group of Ministers Report, Nov, 2025). The category ST(V) will be the same at the central government level, as it has a 'single national ST list' (Group of Ministers Report, Nov, 2025). If the central government is satisfied with this report, the pending Bill of 2019 will be passed to give status to Tai-Ahom and the other five communities.

A myriad of events take place after the cabinet approves the recommendation. Some leaders of Tai Ahom Organisations, such as Tai Ahom YuvaChatra Parishad and All Tai Ahom Student Union, celebrated and called it a 'historic step'. Rana Ranjan Gogoi, General Secretary of the Tai Ahom YuvaChatra Parishad, said, "We are thankful to the state government and the chief minister for keeping their word. This is a moment of joy; we are finally getting what we deserve (Hindustan Times, 29th Nov, 2025). The government decision is also welcomed by Basanta Gogoi, President of the All Tai Ahom Student Union, who urges that the Tai-Ahom community should not be rushed into accepting or rejecting the proposal without fully understanding it (Northeast Now, 2025). ATASU held a 'Chintan Baithak' to review the Group of Ministers' report and created a high-level committee to systematically examine the consequences of implementing the current recommendations, with particular attention to their impact on the community's identity, rights, and existing social safeguards (Northeast Now, 2025).

The report is criticized by the opposition political parties. Immediately after the report was approved in the State Assembly, a huge protest led by Gen-Z students of Bodoland University took place, which vandalized the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Secretariat. The protesters argue that extending the status of a Scheduled Tribe to these advanced communities will dilute their constitutional safeguards (Assam Tribune, 2025). The Opposition leaders—including Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi, Rajbor Dal president Akhil Gogoi, and Assam Jatiya Parishad president Lurinjoyti Gogoi—criticized Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and the BJP government, and dismissed the report as another 'political gimmick' ahead of the 2026 Assembly election. The existing ST organizations staged a protest in various districts of Assam. The Coordination Committee of Tribal Organizations of Assam (CCTOA) also opposed the Government of Ministers' reports and demonstrated state-wide protest by 26 member organizations representing 14 ST communities of Assam.

The recent cabinet approval of the Group of Ministers' report has once again brought the issue into public focus; however, Tai-Ahom leaders remain skeptical. The proposed new categorization, ST(V), has raised serious apprehensions regarding its implications, intent, and long-term consequences. Rather than offering closure, this development has reinforced prevailing uncertainties and raises questions about whether the state's approach genuinely addresses their historical claims or merely uses them for political gain.

5. Responses of existing Scheduled Tribes of Assam

The existing ST communities of Assam have articulated their opposition to the demand for Scheduled Tribe recognition for the Tai-Ahom community through the banner of CCTOA, the All Assam Tribal Sangha, and the All Assam Tribal Student Union (AATSU). As an umbrella body representing various tribal groups, CCTOA has expressed its concerns to both the Union and the state governments regarding the proposed inclusion of the Tai-Ahom within the Scheduled Tribe category. They have staged protests in response to every development in the ST demand of the Tai-Ahom. A massive protest was held by CCTOA at Jantar Mantar in Delhi in response to the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order Bill, 2019. They submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister and the Home Minister, arguing that granting Scheduled Tribe status to the Tai-Ahom would eliminate the political rights of genuine tribal communities. They demand a tripartite meeting with the Union Home Minister, the Chief Minister of Assam, and the CCTOA regarding the matter (The Sentinel, 2024). They are asking for support from the existing ST communities across India, arguing that if ST recognition is granted to Tai-Ahom and the other five communities, which are populous in nature, it will open floodgates for enlisting non-tribal communities across all states in the country, thereby annihilating the very concept of tribe (The Sentinel, 2020).

The Chief Co-coordinator of CCTOA, Aditya Khaklary, argues that the Tai-Ahom and the other five communities are relatively more advanced than the existing Scheduled Tribes of Assam. If these communities get ST status, it will hamper existing Scheduled Tribes in terms of reservations in education, employment, and other sectors (The Times of India, 2016). Clarifying their stance, Khaklary stated that they are not opposed to the development of Tai-Ahom and the other five communities, but oppose granting Scheduled Tribe status at the expense of genuine tribal groups (The Sentinel, 2019).

The opposition is coming not only from existing Scheduled Tribes but also from various civil society organizations. In 2020, the Indigenous Lawyers Association of India (ILAI) appealed to the Government of Assam to reconsider its approval of ST recognition for the six communities. The President of ILAI, DilipKanti Chakma, argues that these communities are identified as OBC, based on caste, and there is no provision in law to include them from the OBC to the ST list, because the STs are totally different from caste. ILAI expressed their fear of further marginalization of the existing Scheduled Tribes of Assam (Press Release, 7th Oct 2020).

The GOM report of 2025 led to massive protests across Assam by various organizations and civil society groups representing existing Scheduled Tribes. The ST students of Cotton University, various Rabha organizations in Goalpara, various Bodo bodies in Kokrajhar, and the All Dimasa Student Union held a protest in Dima Hasao district against the government's decision to grant ST status. PramitChegyung, Dimasa Students' Union General Secretary, stated that the government's decision is politically motivated and targets the populations of six communities for the 2026 Assembly election (India Today NE, 2025). In Kokrajhar, students of Bodoland University help organize a massive protest rally at the Bodoland Territorial Council Secretariat and vandalize the secretariat hall. They submitted a memorandum to HimantaBiswaSarma, BTC Chief, HagramaMohilary, and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, demanding that the report be withdrawn through the District Commissioner (Hindustan Times, 2025). CCTOA rejects the recommendations in the GOM report and has formed a new Consultative Group comprising experts from various fields, including administration, law, and human rights, to review the GOM report and submit recommendations (Pratidin Time, 2025). They are also skeptical about the shift in the quota from OBC to ST, as Tai-Ahom and the other five communities are currently enjoying OBC benefits. It is problematic from a strategic standpoint that the caste data for Tai-Ahom and Other communities are not public, as the Socio-Economic and Caste Census of 2011 has not been officially released. In such a situation, the shift of the Tai-Ahom quota from OBC to ST becomes highly ambiguous.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the demand for ST recognition has remained a persistent feature of Assam's political landscape, significantly influencing state policies and regularly appearing in the electoral agendas of political parties. This demand is rooted in a historical experience of exclusion from the dominant social order and continued socio-economic marginalization within a caste-Hindu-dominated framework. Tai-Ahom elites and leaders of various organizations have consistently articulated their claims through memoranda submitted to government bodies and state institutions justifying ST recognition on the grounds of cultural preservation, social justice, and indigeneity.

Indigeneity, in particular, has emerged as a crucial framework through which the Tai-Ahoms assert their cultural and political rights. In the contemporary context, where Assam's politics is increasingly shaped by concerns over illegal immigration and its perceived impact on the region's demographic composition, the demand for ST status gains added urgency. Within this milieu, the Tai-Ahom community, along with the other five communities, reminds the government of its promise of protecting *jati, mati, bheti* through the constitutional recognition of ST status. Thus, ST recognition is envisioned not merely as a policy benefit but as a vital mechanism for securing cultural survival, political legitimacy, and socio-economic protection.

A counter-discourse emerging from existing Scheduled Tribe communities raises concerns about the seriousness and clarity of the government's approach to this issue. The Group of Ministers (GoM) report lacks precision regarding potential shifts in reservation quotas, particularly in the absence of a comprehensive caste census of the concerned communities. The proposed inclusion of the Tai-Ahom and the other five communities into the ST category would significantly alter the demographic composition of the group, increasing its population share from 12.4 percent to nearly 45 percent. Such a substantial expansion would inevitably have implications for the existing reservation framework. However, the GoM report remains ambiguous on these critical aspects, thereby generating resentment from existing ST communities.

The demand for Scheduled Tribe recognition, alongside the process of ethnic renewal among the Tai-Ahoms, has significantly reshaped the socio-cultural fabric of Assamese society. The assertion of Tai-Ahom identity, coupled with the reconstruction of what are presented as distinct tribal practices, has contributed to the emergence of a sharper sense of distinction between "us" and "them" within the broader social landscape. In this process, the Tai-Ahoms continue to actively negotiate their position within Assamese society. There is an urgent need to critically examine ST recognition by taking into account the perspectives of all three stakeholders. The issue extends beyond concerns of cultural representation, reservation, or social justice; it also has profound implications for maintaining social cohesion and harmony among the diverse communities of Assam.

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Notes:

ⁱ *Paik* is a system that consists of all adult males and had to render their service to the state as peasants and in time of war, they had to render their service as soldiers, for details see Gait, p 237.

ⁱⁱ Interview with PuspaGogoi founding President of Ban Ok or purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} TeTeTe ceremony is the religious conversion ceremony to Phura Lung religion. The literal meaning of the word is swearing.

^v For details see the Report of The Advisory Committee on the Revision of List of Schedule Caste and ST, Government of India, Department of Social Security, p. 8.

^{vi} Phuralung Religion is a religion of Tai- Ahom which has the elements of Hindu Tantric tradition and Bhudhisim.

^{vii} In the interview with the President of Phura-lung Sangha Jayanta Dihingia told the authors.

^{viii} In the interview with the President of Phura-lung Sangha Jayanta Dihingia told the authors.

^{ix} In the interview with the President of All Tai Ahom Student Union, BasantaGogoi told the authors.

^x Interview with the Chief Advisor of All Tai Ahom Student Union, Manoj Gogoi told the authors.

^{xi} Interview with Milan Buragohain, former President of All Tai Ahom Student Union

^{xii} The words *jati*, *mati*, *bhetit* translates as community, land and base..