

Performing Marginality and Contestation of Ethnic Identity: Dynamics of Identity Politics in Assam, India

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Abstract : Drawing upon empirical data, this paper tries to examine how ethnic groups like Ahom, Moran, Motok, and Chutia creates and recreates ethnic boundaries while making claims for recognition as Scheduled Tribes (STs) under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, in the state of Assam. Underlying such claim is the distinct identity consciousness amongst these groups as they assert themselves originally as tribe drawing upon primordial elements. For them, tribal identity promises social justice and give credence to their claims of indigeneity while preserving their exclusivity within the multifarious society of Assam. Having complex inter-group relationships, these groups under study displays distinct as well as overlapping identities, which demonstrate fluidity of identities across groups while making claims for recognition. In this process, the binary of 'us' and 'them' are often constructed amongst these groups, which are in turn difficult to grasp as they share common historical linkages. This paper attempts to grapple with such complex relationships the studied groups and their assertion as distinct cultural entities while making ethnic boundaries on the basis of socio-cultural identities. Such claims also involve frequent negotiation with the State as well as with other ethnic groups, which further creates strife among indigenous groups for tribal identity. The paper argues that identity consciousnesses amongst groups have persisted since the introduction of resource distribution on ethnic lines; therefore, issues of exclusive ethnic identity in the state of Assam can be contextualised within the colonial and post-colonial politics of redrawing ethnic and spatial boundaries. Narrative of the ethnic leaders who are in the forefront of struggle for ST status revealed that it is not merely to secure preferential treatment, but it also encompasses entitlement to land and their socio-cultural identity as aboriginal. While noting the genesis of struggle by the ethnic associations for ST status, this paper will also delineate the interactions among ethnic groups and how the identity of tribe is being performed by them to be included in the official categories of ST.

Keywords : ethnic, identity, sixth schedule, tribe

Conference Title : ICIPD 2022 : International Conference on Identity Politics and Democracy

Conference Location : Bangkok, Thailand

Conference Dates : August 16-17, 2022