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Affirmative action and the politics of recognition in Assam: Tribalhood demands and Caste Marginality

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Abstract
In recent years, the demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by six communities, Tai Ahom, Koch-Rajbongshi, Moran, Matak, Chutia, and Adivasi or tea tribes' communities, has intensified political debates around reservation and indigenous recognition in the state of Assam. These demands highlight the recurring pattern of tribalhood mobilisations, influenced by electoral considerations and contesting claims for political representation. At the same time, emerging discussions around Scheduled Caste (SC) recognition among Nepali lower-caste groups reveal hidden forms of marginality that remain outside the dominant political discourse of the state. By examining these developments together, the paper argues that although reservation policies aim to ensure social justice, in Assam, they are influenced by issues of indigeneity, migration, and ethnic competition, leading to unequal outcomes and making affirmative action a space of political negotiation.

Keywords: Assam reservation politics, Scheduled Tribe demands, indigenous recognition, ethnic competition

Introduction

Affirmative action is conceptualised as a public policy that deliberately provides advantages to socially marginalised groups to reduce inequality and improve their life opportunities. The Indian reservation system, or 'quota' system, is one of the most extensive forms of affirmative action in the world (Kumar, 1992) [25]. Bacchi (2004) [3] mentioned that a dominant understanding of affirmative action in India views it as a corrective mechanism for the "backwardness" of marginalised groups, seeking to integrate them into an assumed norm of social development. This constitutionally sanctioned mechanism for fixing 'quota' or reservations in education and public employment has its roots in the British period, when such measures were first introduced for 'untouchable' communities (Jayal, 2014). The Princely states, such as Kolhapur, Mysore, Travancore, and Baroda, also implemented welfare policies for disadvantaged groups (Mahajan,2016) [29]. These early efforts laid the foundation for postcolonial policies, aimed at addressing historical injustices based on caste and tribal identity. This was mainly done by including communities in categories such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs), and the Other Backward Classes, thereby facilitating their inclusion in affirmative action measures in education, employment and political representation (OBCs) (Jayal,2014; Deshpande,2024) [18]. Over time, the reservation framework has evolved, incorporating both vertical and horizontal reservations as well as provisions for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) (Pushpam & Singh, 2025) [37]. Although these policies remain contested, their impact has been uneven, as socioeconomic barriers and inequalities within groups continue to affect access and outcomes (Dabgotra & Gupta, 2022). Lee (2021) [16, 28] argued that the policy, designed to address structural discrimination, has not always reached those at the very bottom. Similarly, Jaffrelot (2006) [22] called Indian Affirmative Action 'paradoxical' because it has been more successful at transforming politics by mobilising lower castes, increasing their representation, and reshaping power structures than at reducing social and economic inequality. Therefore, caste and tribal groups that were historically disadvantaged continue to face structural and social discrimination (Deshpande, 2024) [18]. Another important aspect is that affirmative action policies do not work uniformly across all regions. States like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra have strong reservation policies, often above central limits, while others, such as Gujarat and Haryana, show less comprehensive implementation (Sahoo, 2010) [35]. The effectiveness of these policies is also influenced by local political dynamics, with some regions leveraging reservations for electoral gains, thereby complicating their intended purpose (Starikova, n.d.). The context of Assam is no exception to this. Located in the fertile Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, the region has long been a meeting ground of diverse communities and has historically been marked by shifting political and social dynamics (Baruah,1999) [7]. The Ahom kingdom, which consolidated political authority for nearly six centuries and laid the foundation of Assamese identity. Over time, however, it witnessed waves of migration and settlement, transforming it into a highly plural society (Boruah & Phukon, 2025; Baruah, 2005). Census data shows that more than 200 mother tongues are spoken in the state, reflecting its linguistic diversity (Langlex, 2011) [27]. Within this, the Assamese, Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Manipuri, Garo and Rabha were considered as the 'indigenous' to Assam and speakers of Bengali, Hindi, Nepali, Oriya and Santhali were seen as the 'non-indigenous'(Baruah,1999) [7]. This diverse composition has shaped Assam's political and social fabric, where questions of identity, language, and rights over land and resources have often been central to political mobilisations (Baruah, 1999) [7].

The Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Assam are classified into Plains Tribes and Hill Tribes. According to the Census (2011) [30], they have a population of about 3.9 million, making up nearly 12.44% of the state's total population. Here, tribal groups continue to struggle over issues of indigeneity, territorial rights, and recognition (Sharma & Khan,2018) [36]. Over time, six communities in the state, Koch Rajbongshi, Moran, Matak, Tai Ahom, Chutia, and

Adivasis or Tea Tribes, are demanding Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. Among them, the demand of the Adivasis or Tea Tribes, many of whom are descendants of Santhal and other tribal labourers brought during the colonial plantation economy, is the oldest and most vocal (Sharma & Khan, 2018; Lakra, 2024) [26, 36]. Despite their long-standing claim, their demand for ST recognition remains largely unresolved (Das, 2025) [17]. At the same time, less visible forms of marginality are also beginning to surface, particularly in the context of Scheduled Caste demands among Nepali/Gorkha lower-caste groups such as the Kami, Damai, and Sarki in Assam (AAGSU, 2025) [1]. Historically associated with untouchability within Nepali society, these groups have only recently begun to articulate collective demands for Scheduled Caste status. This paper examines the dynamics of affirmative action politics in Assam by focusing on two key aspects. First, it explores why reservation policies have become particularly contentious in the state, with special attention to the recent developments surrounding the demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by six communities and the broader trajectory of political contestation over reservation. Second, it highlights emerging discussions around caste-based marginality, particularly the recent demand for Scheduled Caste (SC) recognition among Nepali/Gorkha lower-caste groups. By bringing these discussions together, the paper argues that affirmative action in Assam has become a political space where different groups compete for recognition based on identity and indigeneity, resulting in uneven outcomes.

The Politics of Tribalhood Demands in Assam

During the winter session of the Assam Legislative Assembly in 2025 [4], tensions surrounding the demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status intensified when students in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) protested against the report of a Group of Ministers (GoM) recommending ST recognition for six communities, Tai Ahom, Chutia, Moran, Matak, Koch-Rajbongshi and the Tea Tribes (Adivasis). The protests turned violent when demonstrators stormed the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) secretariat in Kokrajhar, damaging property and expressing strong opposition to the proposed inclusion (Choudhury, 2025) [4]. Tribal student organisations argued that extending ST recognition to additional communities would dilute the constitutional safeguards and reservation benefits available to existing tribal groups (PTI, 2025; Baruah, 2025) [4, 37].

While these protests reflect recent political tensions, the demand for Scheduled Tribe recognition by these communities has a much longer history. The origins and identity assertion of these communities can be traced back to the colonial period and were further intensified after independence, with growing demands for Scheduled Tribe status. (Baruah, 2005; Borah, 2019). These demands are interconnected with struggles for political representation, socio-economic benefits, and cultural preservation. (Riamei, 2023) [34].The movement became more organised during the 1990s. At this time, community-based student organisations such as the All Tai Ahom Students' Union, All Moran Students' Union, All Matak Students' Union, All Chutia Students' Union, All Koch-Rajbongshi Students' Union, the Assam Tea Tribe Students' Association (AATTSA), and the All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (AASAA) played an important role in bringing these demands into the political sphere (Lakra, 2024; Ambagudia, 2011) [2, 26]. These organisations frame ST recognition not only as a question of identity but also as access to reservations in education, employment, and political representation. (Boruah, 2024; Das,2025) [10, 17]. The demand has also been shaped by shifting political positions across parties. In 2002, during the Congress-led government in Assam, a Group of Ministers was constituted to examine the feasibility of granting ST status to these communities, and in 2004, the proposal was forwarded to the central government. Subsequently, Congress reiterated its commitment in 2011 [30]. However, this move was opposed by the BJP-led government at the Centre. At the same time, the BJP, in its 2014 Lok Sabha manifesto, promised to fulfil the same demand (Lakra, 2024; Sharma & Khan, 2018) [26, 36].

Recent developments in 2025 show that these demands are still closely linked to electoral politics and identity mobilisation. On 28 October 2025 [17], the Tai Ahom community organised a torchlight protest march in Charaideo district, demanding immediate inclusion in the ST category (Habib, 2025) [19]. The protest was organised by the Tai Ahom Yuba Parishad (TAYPA) and the AllTai Ahom Students' Union (ATASU), where demonstrators marched with burning torches while raising slogans such as "No ST, No Rest." Leaders of the movement warned that the community could boycott the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2026 Assam Assembly elections if the long-standing promise of ST recognition was not fulfilled. (Choudhury,2025) [4]. Some of these groups, such as the Mataks and Morans, are already influential indigenous communities in Upper Assam. The Tai Ahom community holds considerable electoral influence, particularly in districts such as Sivasagar, Charaideo, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Golaghat, Tinsukia, Dhemaji and Lakhimpur (Boruah, 2024) [10]. Similar mobilisations were organised by other communities seeking ST status. In October 2025 [4], thousands of Tea Tribe workers participated in protest rallies in Tinsukia and Dibrugarh, raising demands for ST recognition while also highlighting continuing socio-economic marginalisation (Jaiswal, 2025; Choudhury, 2025). Earlier, in September 2025 [13, 23], members of the Matak community organised a large torchlight rally in Sadiya demanding both ST status and the upgrading of their autonomous council (*India Today NE*, 2025) [19]. If several of these communities were simultaneously recognised as Scheduled Tribes, their combined demographic strength could significantly reshape political competition in constituencies where tribal representation is reserved. in response to renewed demands, the Assam Cabinet approved a GoM report recommending the inclusion of these communities under a separate category, ST (Valley) (Choudhury, 2025) [13]. This again reflects an attempt to manage competing claims within the reservation framework, particularly ahead of the 2026 elections. So, Mobilisation often intensifies before elections, as political parties promise to support such demands. When these promises remain unfulfilled, it results in frustration and renewed protests.

On the other hand, a major contestation, with protests and opposition from already recognised Scheduled Tribe groups, against the demand. Organisations such as the All Assam Tribal Sangha (AATS) and the Coordination Committee of Tribal Organisations of Assam (CCTOA) have consistently opposed the extension of ST recognition to additional communities. For instance, in January 2019, the CCTOA organised a protest in Kokrajhar opposing the extension of

ST status to new communities (Das,2025) [17]. This dynamic is evident in the resistance of existing tribal groups to the extension of ST status, reflecting concerns over protection and resource sharing. As Payeng and Rao (2025) [32] argue, identity politics in Assam often complicates affirmative action, with indigenous groups prioritising cultural survival over inclusion.

Taken together, all these events reveal a recurring pattern of contestation over affirmative action in Assam. This pattern is marked by a wave of assertion for Scheduled Tribe status by the six communities, the government's response through committees and reports, and the subsequent counter-mobilisation by existing tribal groups.

Emerging Scheduled Caste demand among Marginalised Nepali Caste Group in Assam

The politics of reservation in Assam has largely revolved around demands for Scheduled Tribe recognition and the question of indigeneity. Movements by communities such as the Tai Ahoms, Morans, and Mataks clearly depict that tribal status has become central to the state's political dynamics (Lakra, 2024) [26]. Within the dominant discourse of indigenous rights and ethnic mobilisation, the other forms of marginality remain in the shadows. One such emerging issue is the marginality of the so-called lower caste groups within the Nepali/Gorkha community and their growing demand for Scheduled Caste (SC) status in the state.

Nepali, commonly referred to as Gorkhas in Assam, constitute a recognised ethnic community with a population of approximately six lakh (Census Report of India, 2011). Unlike broader caste societies in India, Nepali society integrates caste with ethnic identity, adding both uniqueness and complexity to its social structure (Subba,1989) [40]. In different parts of India, Nepali society generally follows a similar structure based on caste hierarchy, consisting of upper caste or *tagadharis* (wearers of the holy cord) or *thulo jat*, the middle castes as *matawali jat* or *pani chalne jat* (water acceptable), and the lower caste as sanu jat or *pani nachalne jat* (water unacceptable and untouchables) (Hoffer,1979; Subba,1989) [40]. Within this structure, particularly Kami, Damai and Sarki continue to occupy the lowest position in caste hierarchy. They have experienced social exclusion, occupational stigma, and restricted participation in religious and communal spaces (Sinha & Subba, 2022) [38]. Based on the recommendations of the Kaka Saheb Kalelkar Commission and later official reviews, the Nepali Kami, Damai, and Sarki communities are recognised as Scheduled Castes under the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order,1950(The Cord, 2025) [43]. They are therefore legally entitled to all constitutional protections, reservations, and welfare benefits in neighbouring states such as West Bengal and Sikkim. However, in Assam, they remain outside the SC category and are generally classified under the Other Backwards Classes (OBC) list (NCBC, n.d.).

This longstanding exclusion was publicly challenged on 25 November 2025 [1]**,** when the first large-scale mobilisation for SC status took place in Guwahati. The All Assam Gorkha Scheduled Caste Demand Committee announced a movement seeking recognition for the Kami, Damai, and Sarki communities in Assam. The programme was organised jointly by the Bharatiya Kami Unnayan Parishad (BKUP), Akhil Assam Gorkha Vishwakarma Samaj, Akhil Assam Gorkha Damai Samaj, and Akhil Assam Gorkha Sarki Samaj, marking one of the first coordinated public demands for Scheduled Caste recognition by three so-called lower caste groups (AAGSU, 2025). The mobilisation also received support from the All-Assam Gorkha Students' Union (AAGSU), indicating broader community engagement with the issue (NE Live24, 2025) [4]. This mobilisation represents a strategic assertion of constitutional rights by a historically excluded cate group. Although they remain on the margins as former "untouchables", and despite the same caste groups being recognised as Scheduled Castes in other states, they are still far from receiving justice (NE Live24, 2025) [43]. This situation has limited their access to education, employment, and social mobility. Alongside, they all continue to face cultural and ritual exclusion but need to compete on equal terms with other caste and ethnic groups across Assam (AAGSU, 2025) [1]. By publicly organising and articulating their demand, they are not only seeking legal recognition but also challenging existing social hierarchies and trying to redefine their position within Assam's ethnic and caste system.

Over the years, the broader socio-political context of Assam has also complicated the condition of this group. The Nepali or Gorkha community has a long history of settlement in the region, yet their social and political status remains complex (Sharma, 2012). The community often struggles within the state's dominant binary of native and immigrant (Nath, 2006) [22]. A major anti-foreigner movement and political disability in Assam from 1979 [8] onwards affected the Nepali-speaking population, first in an Assam Movement, spearheaded by the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the All-Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), primarily directed against "illegal immigrants" from Bangladesh. Yet, in practice, many Nepalis also became the victims of violence. Their physical resemblance, their settlements near forests and borders, and their outsider status made them targets of hostility (Boruah, 1980; Nath, 2003). Subsequently, the Bodo Movement, which gained momentum in the late 1980s and early 1990s, further complicated the position of Nepalis. As Bodo groups demanded a separate state and asserted their control over territories in lower Assam, non-Bodo communities, including Nepalis, became targets of eviction and violence (Chhetry, 2018) [42]**.** These two episodes created a sense of fear and anxiety as they remain caught between claims of citizenship and the stigma of being labelled as immigrants. This ambiguity has continued into recent times, with periodic tensions resurfacing during NRC (National Register of Citizens) and other identity-based mobilisations. Within this context, the specific concerns of internally marginalised groups, particularly of Kami, Damai, and Sarki, received limited attention. Their demands were often overlooked, and issues of caste and socio-economic marginalisation remained unresolved. Even as the state government has taken important steps since 2021 [41], such as halting the prosecution of Gorkhas under the Citizenship Act. It also withdrew cases from Foreigners' Tribunals, thereby recognising them as a protected class in some regions (Hindustan Times, 2018) [36]. However, these measures have not addressed the structural inequalities of the community.

Thus, the 2025 [4] mobilisation marks a significant moment. It reflects the emergence of the Nepali lower castes as active political actors asserting both constitutional and social claims. Despite facing social exclusion, occupational

stigma, and limited access to education, employment, and political influence, these inequalities remain largely unrecognised in public policies. Their marginalisation is often overshadowed by broader ethnic and political issues, making it less visible even within their own community.

Conclusion

As Baruah (2003) [6] observed, "the politics of protective discrimination for Scheduled Tribes in Northeast India raises difficult questions of justice, fairness, and system legitimacy." More than two decades later, the contemporary developments in Assam indicate that the politics of protective discrimination continues to raise similar questions of justice, fairness, and system legitimacy. The affirmative action policies are not merely instruments intended to address historical socio-economic inequalities. Instead, increasingly become a key political and institutional space where regional power dynamics are negotiated. The growing demands for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by communities such as Ahom, Koch-Rajbongshi, Moran, Matak, Chutia, and Adivasi (Tea Tribes) are shaped by several intersecting factors, including the native–immigrant binary that structures much of Assam's politics, anxieties among existing tribal groups over the dilution of reserved benefits, and the competing electoral benefits. At the same time, the case of Nepali lower-caste communities such as the Kami, Damai, and Sarki highlights a different dimension of marginality. Their demand for Scheduled Caste (SC) recognition shows that certain forms of exclusion remain less visible in the state's broader political discourse. Their recent mobilisation not only challenges existing inequalities but also signals the need for policy and political frameworks to recognise internal disparities within ethnic communities. While some groups are able to mobilise effectively and gain recognition, others remain at the margins of both policy and public attention.

By and large, the reservation policies, which were originally conceived as mechanisms of social justice, are applied differently by states through their policies and administrative practices. In a state like Assam, issues of indigeneity, migration, and ethnic competition plays important role in shaping policy outcomes. In such a context, the recognition of one group can influence the perception and responses of other group. As a result, the reach of affirmative action has often been uneven, and the communities most in need of protection have not always been the primary beneficiaries. Therefore, the paper suggests that affirmative action in Assam must be understood not only in terms of redistribution but also as a process shaped by political negotiation and recognition. There is a need for a more inclusive approach to policy design, one that takes into account hidden forms of marginality and ensures that the most vulnerable groups are not left behind.

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