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Identity, Power and Development: A Study of the Political Mobilisation of the Tea Tribes of Sivasagar and Charaideo Districts, Upper Assam

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Abstract

The tea gardens of Upper Assam have shaped the region's economy for nearly two centuries, yet the descendants of the labourers who sustained them remain among the most marginalised groups in the state. This paper examines how the political mobilisation of the tea tribes, often called Adivasis in public debate, has influenced socio-economic development in Sivasagar and Charaideo districts. The study follows a qualitative, descriptive-analytical design and draws on secondary sources: scholarly literature, parliamentary records, electoral data and press reports up to mid-2026. It traces the communities' movement from a dependable vote bank to an organised claimant of Scheduled Tribe status, higher wages and land rights. The paper argues that political attention has grown sharply but has produced mainly symbolic and episodic gains, while deficits in wages, health, education and land security persist. It also shows that in Sivasagar and Charaideo, the demand for Scheduled Tribe status is tied to the parallel claims of the Ahom, Moran, Motok and Chutia communities, which makes local politics both cooperative and competitive. The paper concludes that recognition without redistribution is unlikely to change the lives of tea garden households, and it suggests a combined approach of wage reform, secure land titles, investment in health and education, and inclusive dialogue among indigenous and tea garden communities.

This study is a part of a PhD study being undertaken in Auniati University, Kaliapani, Teok, Jorhat, Assam. The Author being the Research Scholar and Research Supervisor respectively.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tea is often described as the defining industry of Assam. It supports a large workforce, shapes the landscape of the Brahmaputra valley and carries a deep symbolic value in the state's public life. Behind this commercial story lies a history of migration. From the middle of the nineteenth century, the planters of the Assam Company and other firms recruited labourers from the Chotanagpur plateau, Odisha, central India, Andhra Pradesh and Bengal. That's because local labour was scarce and plantation work was harsh (Behal, 2014; Sharma, 2011). Their descendants, who now number in the millions, are known as the tea tribes, ex-tea garden communities or Adivasis.

The status of this population is unusual. Many of its constituent groups are recognised as Scheduled Tribes in their states of origin, but in Assam they are classified as Other Backward Classes (Drishti IAS, n.d.). They are one of six communities, together with the Tai Ahom, Moran, Motok, Chutia and Koch-Rajbongshi, that have long demanded Scheduled Tribe (ST) status in the state (Scroll.in, n.d.-a). The demand has moved through election manifestos, parliamentary speeches, street protests and, most recently, a report of a Group of Ministers of the Assam government (The Week/PTI, 2025).

A note on terms is necessary. The title originally proposed for this study used the word 'tribals'. Since the tea tribes are not legally Scheduled Tribes in Assam, this paper uses 'tea tribes' and 'Adivasi' as they appear in administrative and public discourse. Treats the question of tribal status as part of the object of study rather than as a settled fact. 'Power politics' is understood broadly as the competition for political representation, public resources and social recognition among groups of unequal strength.

Sivasagar and Charaideo districts offer a useful setting for this inquiry. They lie at the historical heart of the Ahom kingdom and are home to many old tea estates. The tea tribes there live alongside communities such as the Ahom, Moran, Motok and Chutia, who are themselves claimants of ST status. The meeting of these claims makes the two districts a compact case of how identity politics shapes, and sometimes distorts, the development agenda.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Historical scholarship has established that the plantation system in Assam rested on coercion and dependency. Guha (1977) showed how planters, the colonial state and the local elite shaped the early political economy of the province. Behal and Mohapatra (1992) documented the rise and fall of the indenture system and the high human cost of recruitment, transport and work in the gardens. Behal (2014) later extended this analysis to a century of servitude on the plantations, arguing that labour control was built into the structure of the industry. Sharma (2011) placed the Assam plantations within the wider story of empire and the making of India. Showed how the identity of the 'coolie' was created for administrative and commercial convenience.

Studies of the post-colonial period focus on isolation and exclusion. Bhowmik (2011) argued that tea plantation workers in India are marginalised through a combination of ethnic difference, spatial enclosure inside the gardens and dependence on the employer for housing, health and schooling. Xaxa (2008) discussed how the category of 'tribe' in India is shaped by state classification, which explains why a community can be a Scheduled Tribe in one state and not in another. Nathan and Xaxa (2012) used the idea of 'adverse inclusion' to describe how Adivasi groups are drawn into markets and politics on unfavourable terms.

A second body of work concerns ethnic politics in Assam. Weiner (1978) coined the phrase 'sons of the soil' to describe movements that seek to protect the claims of local populations against migrants. The idea remains useful for understanding the objection that tea tribes are not indigenous to Assam. Baruah (1999, 2005) explained how questions of nationality, migration and territory have driven political conflict in the region, while Misra (2000) examined the tensions between the Assamese sub-nationalism and the demands of smaller groups. Brass (1991) offered the general argument that ethnic identities are mobilised by elites who compete for resources and power, which helps explain why the language of identity rises when benefits are scarce.

This study uses three ideas as its conceptual frame. The first is Fraser's (2000) distinction between recognition and redistribution, which asks whether cultural acceptance and material justice move together. The second is Sen's (1999) view of development as the expansion of real freedoms, which directs attention to health, education, income security and political voice rather than aggregate growth alone. The third is Chatterjee's (2004) notion of political society, in which marginal groups negotiate welfare through collective claims and bargaining with the state rather than through formal citizenship alone. Together they suggest a sequence of recognition, representation and redistribution, and the central question of the paper is whether the first two steps have led to the third.

3. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The study has four objectives. First, to trace the historical roots of the political position of the tea tribes in Upper Assam. Second, to analyse how the demand for ST status, wages and land has been shaped by electoral and organisational politics in Sivasagar and Charaideo. Third, to assess the effect of this politics on the socio-economic condition of tea garden households. Fourth, to suggest policy directions that connect recognition with material improvement.

The central research question is whether political mobilisation has translated into measurable improvement in living conditions.

The study is qualitative and descriptive-analytical. It relies entirely on secondary material: books and articles on the plantation economy and ethnic politics, debates recorded in the Lok Sabha, official election results published by the Election Commission of India. Reports in national and regional media up to mid-2026. Press reports are used mainly to document events, statements and official decisions, and they are treated with caution where they involve party claims. Because the study does not use a field survey, it avoids district-level numerical claims that the sources do not support. The findings are

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therefore interpretive and should be tested further through primary research.

4. Historical Background: Tea, Labour and Political Subordination

The tea story of Assam begins in the Upper Assam districts. Indigenous tea plants were identified in the region in the 1820s, and commercial cultivation expanded after the formation of the Assam Company in 1839 (Guha, 1977). The local population showed little interest in plantation wage work, and planters turned to recruiters who brought labourers from distant provinces. Contracts, advance payments and penal provisions tied workers to the gardens. The experience of the voyage and of life on the estates was marked by disease and high mortality (Behal & Mohapatra, 1992).

Upper Assam also produced early resistance to this order. Maniram Dewan, a prominent Assamese entrepreneur who had worked with the Assam Company and later criticised its conduct, was executed by the British at Jorhat in 1858 after being accused of involvement in a conspiracy during the uprising of that period. His name is still invoked in local memory as a symbol of resistance. The episode reminds us that the geography of tea and the geography of political dissent overlap in this region.

Over time the plantation labourers became a settled community, but one set apart from the surrounding society by language, religion, housing and legal status. The gardens operated as enclosed worlds in which the manager-controlled access, and the workers rarely entered the wider civic space of the village or town. Bhowmik (2011) argued that this isolation limited the interaction between plantation workers and other groups and made collective claims on the state more difficult.

After independence, the Plantations Labour Act of 1951 gave statutory form to obligations such as housing, medical care and education. The implementation of these obligations has been uneven. Political life in the tea belt was organised through trade unions. The Congress-aligned union structure is widely regarded as having secured the loyalty of workers for decades, which made the tea gardens a stable electoral base without producing a matching expansion in welfare. Over the last two decades, new organisations of students and community groups, such as the Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association, have given the community an independent voice and have focused on the question of ST status (Scroll.in, n.d.-a).

5. The Study Area: Sivasagar and Charaideo

Sivasagar district was the seat of Ahom power for much of the eighteenth century, and its tanks, temples and palaces remain central to Assamese historical memory. Charaideo, regarded as the first capital established by the Ahom founder Sukapha in the thirteenth century, is known for the Moidams, the mound-burial sites of Ahom royalty, which were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2024. Charaideo was carved out of Sivasagar as a separate district in the mid-2010s. Politically, Sivasagar comprises the Demow, Sivasagar and Nazira assembly constituencies, while Charaideo includes Sonari and Mahmora (LatestLY, 2026; Wikipedia contributors, 2026).

Both districts lie in a region where the Ahom, Moran, Motok and Chutia communities have a strong presence and where Ahom heritage has political weight. Media analyses describe Sivasagar and Charaideo as part of a group of six Upper Assam districts, along with Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia, where tea tribe voters are concentrated and where about two dozen assembly seats are located (The Quint, n.d.). The overlap of heritage politics, tea garden demography and competing demands for ST status gives the two districts a particular importance for the study.

6. Power Politics of the Tea Tribes

6.1 From vote bank to claimant

For much of the post-independence period, the tea tribes were courted at election time but seldom treated as partners in governance. Their votes were mobilised through unions and local patrons, and their demands on wages and housing were handled mainly through negotiations between unions and employers. This pattern began to change as the community produced its own educated leadership and as political parties recognised the importance of its numbers. A press report records that the head of the Assam Tea Tribes' Students' Association noted that the community had backed the Bharatiya Janata Party, which then had six legislators and two members of Parliament from the community, yet the demand for ST status remained unmet (Scroll.in, n.d.-a).

6.2 The ST status demand and the indigeneity debate

The demand for ST status is the most visible expression of tea tribe politics. In a parliamentary submission, members from Assam described the claim as long-standing, noted that Koch-Rajbongshi had enjoyed ST status for a short period through an ordinance in 1996. Observed that the Adivasi and tea communities already held ST status in other parts of the country (Lok Sabha Secretariat, n.d.). Successive governments have promised action. A bill was introduced in the Rajya Sabha before the 2019 general election but was not taken up for discussion (Scroll.in, n.d.-b).

In late 2025 the Group of Ministers of the Assam government tabled an interim report recommending a three-tier classification of Scheduled Tribes, intended to include the six communities without disturbing the reservations of existing groups, with a proposal for a distinct category for the valley (The Week/PTI, 2025; Devdiscourse, 2025). The report also suggested that 35 tea garden communities not yet in the state's OBC list should be added to it, which would allow their cases to be examined for ST or SC status in the future. The state Cabinet cleared the report soon afterwards (Scroll.in, n.d.-b).

Opposition came quickly. The Coordination Committee of Tribal Organisations of Assam, which represents fourteen tribes, described the recommendations as illegal and unconstitutional and argued that the real purpose of the six communities was to secure political reservation in panchayats, autonomous councils, the Assembly and Parliament, since their educational and employment needs were already served by the 27 per cent OBC quota and by several autonomous and development councils (Scroll.in, n.d.-c). The sharpness of this response is explained by the arithmetic. The six communities

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together could lift the tribal share of Assam's population well above the 13 per cent recorded in the 2011 Census. Some reports suggest it could approach half of the state (Scroll.in, n.d.-a).

A second line of objection is the indigeneity argument. Critics hold that the tea tribes are not indigenous to Assam because their ancestors arrived in the colonial period and because they are already Scheduled Tribes in their states of origin (Scroll.in, n.d.-a). Supporters answer that more than a century and a half of residence, labour and cultural contribution has made them a part of Assamese society. That the denial of status to a community on the grounds of the very migration forced upon it is a form of injustice. This disagreement is a direct local version of the 'sons of the soil' argument (Weiner, 1978). In Sivasagar and Charaideo, it has a particular edge. That's because the neighbouring communities that make the indigeneity argument are, in the case of the Ahom, Moran, Motok and Chutia, also claimants in the same package. The result is a fragile coalition: the six groups share a common cause. The tea tribes are also the group whose claim is most contested by others in the region.

6.3 Electoral competition in the study districts

The 2026 Assembly election showed how heavily parties now invest in the tea belt. The Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies won a two-thirds majority in the 126-member House, with the party securing 82 seats and the Congress a distant second with 19 (Republic World, 2026). In Charaideo, both Sonari and Mahmora went to the BJP (Wikipedia contributors, 2026). In Sivasagar constituency, however, Akhil Gogoi of the Raijor Dal defeated the BJP candidate by 17,272 votes (Election Commission of India, 2026). The result in Sivasagar suggests that regional peasant-rights politics retains appeal in the heartland of the Ahom kingdom, even in a year of strong state-wide consolidation.

It would be unwise to read these results as a direct verdict of tea garden voters, since constituency data do not separate their choices from those of other groups. No booth-level analysis is available for this study. What can be said is that every major party included tea tribe demands in its pitch. The Congress promised ST recognition and industry-level minimum wages in its manifesto, the Raijor Dal promised ST status and diversification in the tea sector. The BJP-led government pointed to its welfare measures (Business Standard, 2026; Sunday Guardian, 2026). A competitive market for the community's votes is, in principle, favourable to the community, but only if promises are converted into enforceable commitments.

6.4 Welfare politics and the state response

Pre-election governance has produced a visible set of measures. The state government raised the daily wage for tea garden workers in the Brahmaputra valley by thirty rupees, to Rs 280, although workers' groups had asked for at least Rs 350 (The Quint, n.d.). The government also reported the distribution of Rs 95 crore among 486 tea gardens under an incentive scheme. A programme to give land ownership to workers in 106 tea gardens across 20 districts (Business Standard, 2026). These steps are significant, but they illustrate a pattern: the visible gains are timed with the electoral calendar. Some of them, such as the incentive scheme, flow primarily to garden owners rather than to workers. In earlier campaigns the Congress had promised a wage of Rs 365 and set up a committee to explore constitutional routes to ST status and residential land rights (Sentinel Assam, n.d.). The common thread is that promises are made in the language of rights, while delivery tends to take the form of schemes.

7. Socio-Economic Conditions and the Developmental Impact of Political Mobilisation

7.1 Wages, land and livelihood

Wages are the first test of whether political attention has changed material conditions. The daily wage of a tea worker has risen in recent years. It remains low relative to the cost of living and to what workers' organisations consider adequate (The Quint, n.d.; Sunday Guardian, 2026). Land is the second concern. Tea garden households typically live in line houses on land owned by the estate and have no title, which blocks access to credit, limits investment in the home and leaves families insecure when a garden is closed or sold. The reported move to grant land rights in 106 gardens is therefore potentially important, although its reach and implementation will need independent evaluation (Business Standard, 2026).

7.2 Health and education

Health outcomes reveal the depth of deprivation. The Morbidity Status among Tea Garden Workers of Assam report of February 2025, as cited in the press, found that 34.7 per cent of workers had a low body mass index, with the figure higher for women at 37.7 per cent than for men at 30.2 per cent (Business Standard, 2026). The same coverage notes that tea garden regions report some of the lowest life expectancy levels in the state, along with a high burden of disease, malnutrition and anaemia. These patterns are consistent with earlier research that links low wages, poor sanitation and limited access to health facilities in plantation areas (Bhowmik, 2011).

Education follows a similar pattern. Literacy and school completion in tea garden communities have long been below the state average. The quality of garden schools, which are meant to be provided under the Plantations Labour Act, has been uneven (Bhowmik, 2011; Drishti IAS, n.d.). Low educational attainment limits entry into government employment and reduces the pool of leaders who can negotiate with the state. It also explains why reserved seats and quotas have such a strong appeal: they are seen as a route to an institutional presence that the community cannot yet command through numbers alone.

7.3 Does politics deliver development?

The evidence reviewed here supports a qualified answer. Political mobilisation has certainly raised the visibility of tea garden issues. Wage revisions, land measures and welfare schemes have appeared at a pace unthinkable in the past, and the community's leaders have become participants in state-level bargaining. In Sen's (1999) terms, the expansion of political voice is itself a gain. However, the improvement in health, education and income security is much slower than the growth

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of political attention, and several demands remain unresolved (Business Standard, 2026).

Three mechanisms help explain this gap. The first is the timing of policy. Concessions are bunched around elections and tend to be announced as schemes rather than as legal entitlements, which makes them reversible. The second is the diversion of energy into symbolic recognition. The ST campaign absorbs the organisational capacity of the community and dominates its public image, although, as opponents point out, education and employment benefits are already available to the six communities through the OBC quota (Scroll.in, n.d.-c). The third is fragmentation. The tea tribes include close to a hundred or more sub-groups, with estimates varying between 96 and 106 in different reports (Scroll.in, n.d.-d; Drishti IAS, n.d.), and the interests of these groups are not uniform. A single label for political action can therefore hide internal differences in language, religion, region of origin and economic condition.

8. DISCUSSION

The findings can be summarised through the three-step frame introduced earlier. Recognition is the most advanced and the most contested step: the state has moved closer to a formal decision on ST status, but the question of indigeneity has made it controversial. Representation has expanded, as the community now has legislators in the Assembly and Parliament and organised student and civic bodies, yet it still operates within parties that treat tea tribe demands as one among many electoral commitments. Redistribution, the third step, is the weakest. Wages, land, health and schooling have improved only slowly. In Fraser's (2000) terms, politics in the tea belt has been far more successful in the field of recognition than in redistribution.

Table 1 summarises the main demands, the current position and the main obstacles, on the basis of the sources reviewed.

Table 1. Major demands of the tea tribes, current position and obstacles

Demand	Position (as reported up to mid-2026)	Main obstacles
Scheduled Tribe status	Group of Ministers report cleared by the state Cabinet; three-tier classification proposed; central action pending	Opposition from existing Scheduled Tribes; indigeneity dispute; constitutional procedure
Higher wages	Daily wage reported at Rs 280 in the Brahmaputra valley; workers seek at least Rs 350	Industry viability; absence of a regular indexation mechanism
Land ownership	Land rights announced for workers in 106 gardens across 20 districts	Implementation and verification; coverage of other gardens
Health and education	Persistent malnutrition, anaemia and low life expectancy reported	Weak service delivery; dependence on garden facilities

The North East context adds a further dimension. Across the region, constitutional devices such as autonomous councils and the Sixth Schedule have been used to accommodate group claims, and the Assamese tribal organisations themselves point to the existence of several autonomous and development councils for the six communities (Scroll.in, n.d.-c). These arrangements protect cultural identity and give some control over local resources, but they have also sharpened competition among groups over boundaries, quotas and funds (Baruah, 2005; Misra, 2000). The tea tribes, who are dispersed across plantations rather than concentrated in a territory, cannot easily benefit from a territorial model, which is one reason why they have turned to the national ST category. A solution that satisfies them while reassuring existing Scheduled Tribes will require careful design, as the debate on a three-tier classification already shows.

9. FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

The study reaches five main findings. First, the tea tribes of Sivasagar and Charaideo have moved from a passive electoral base to an assertive claimant, and every major party now competes for their support. Second, the demand for ST status is the central political issue, but it is entangled with the claims of other valley communities and with an unresolved dispute about indigeneity. Third, recent wage, land and welfare measures are significant but are tied to the election cycle and are not yet backed by sufficiently secure legal guarantees. Fourth, health, education and land security remain weak, which indicates that political voice has not yet been translated into structural change. Fifth, the diversity inside the tea tribe population is large, and a single political label risks leaving the most vulnerable groups behind.

On the basis of these findings, the paper offers the following suggestions. A transparent, time-bound and consultative process should be adopted on the ST question, with the participation of existing Scheduled Tribes, so that the issue is settled by constitutional means rather than by electoral bargaining. Wage setting should move towards a regular, evidence-based mechanism that links the minimum wage to the cost of living and is monitored by an independent body. Land titles for residential plots should be completed in a verifiable manner, with public disclosure of the gardens covered and the families benefited. Health and education services in garden areas should be integrated with the public system, with special attention to maternal health and nutrition, and with scholarships and hostels for first-generation learners. Finally, a data-driven socio-economic survey, as already suggested in official discussions, should map the sub-groups of the tea tribes so that benefits reach those most in need (The Week/PTI, 2025).

10. Limitations and Scope for Further Research

This study has limitations that readers should keep in mind. It rests on secondary sources, and several of them are press reports, which may reflect the position of one party or another. It does not provide district-level quantitative indicators for Sivasagar and Charaideo, since such data were not available in the sources used. The status of the ST proposal was evolving at the time of writing, and later developments may change the picture. Future work could use household surveys in selected gardens, interviews with union and student leaders and with representatives of other valley communities, and booth-level analysis of voting patterns to test the arguments made here.

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11. CONCLUSION

The political story of the tea tribes of Upper Assam is one of a community that has used its numbers, organisations and moral claims to move from the margins towards the centre of electoral competition. In Sivasagar and Charaideo, where Ahom heritage, tea garden demography and the claims of several communities meet, this movement has been especially visible and especially contested. Yet the evidence suggests that recognition and representation have advanced faster than redistribution. Wages are still low, land rights are incomplete, and health and schooling remain below the standard that the people who built the tea economy deserve.

The central lesson is that identity politics and development do not work against each other by necessity, but they will not converge by themselves. Scheduled Tribe status, if granted, would be an important gain for a community that has long been excluded, but it will not by itself end hunger, anaemia, insecure housing or low wages. A durable improvement will depend on turning the promises of the campaign season into enforceable rights, on settling the question of status through an inclusive process that respects the concerns of existing tribes, and on investing in the human capabilities of tea garden households. If these steps are taken, politics in the tea belt can become a means of development and not only a contest for recognition.

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