

Discourse on Ethnonyms and Scheduling of Tribes in India: A Case of Mising Tribe of Assam

DREETI HAZARIKA

Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, India

Abstract

The conceptualization of tribe and its anthropological understanding have been a source of many debates, deliberations, and disagreements. Beginning with the colonial conception of tribes as primitive savages until the recent focus on tribe as an ideal manifestation of an adaptive process, the concept of tribe has traversed a long academic journey. Many attempts have been made to define the word tribe or tribal society in India, but a comprehensive definition of tribe still eludes us. Although any reductionism is undesirable, a constant endeavour for a comprehensive understanding is essential for a more meaningful academic pursuit. This is essential in view of more and more demands for the inclusion of communities in the list of Scheduled Tribe (ST) as per Constitutional provisions. This article analyzes the problem of identifying and scheduling tribes in the ST category in the contemporary situation. It also discusses the possible solution to the complex issue with reference to the Mising, a community from Assam. The Mising community has already been declared a Scheduled Tribe by the Government of India but only as 'Miri,' the name others use to refer to them. While attempting to find out their 'tribal' characters, the present paper discovers some methodological discrepancies in identifying them as a tribe and as a Scheduled Tribe. The paper is based on qualitative data and fieldwork has been its primary source, with scholarly literature providing the supplementary or secondary sources. Pertinent issues have been dealt with mainly from two angles. First, it attempts to fit the anthropological definition of 'tribe' to the community (Mising) under consideration, which has been found to be inadequate for this purpose. Second, it evaluates the government guidelines released from time to time, which include criteria for conferring tribal status on a community and establish its tribal character.

Key words: Tribe; Mising; Identity; Transformation; Inter-tribal Relationship; Common Ancestor.