EPH–International Journal of Humanities and Social Science
Published by: **Southern Cross Academic Press**
ISSN (Online): **2208-2174**
Volume 11 Issue 04 October 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.69980/9w7w0d10

PROMISED AND DEFERRED: THE CHUTIYA ST DEMAND AND THE POLITICS OF SUBSTITUTE CONCESSIONS IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

In Assam for decades, total six ethnic communities have been agitating on the demand for according Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, and the Chutiyas are one of such community. The political parties functioning in Assam have also been supporting this demand. However, the governments in the centre and in Assam have not shown any sincerity to fulfil this demand. Opposite to it, the government in Assam has tried to appease the Chutiya community through substitute concessions. Recently, a cabinet sub-committee formed by the Government of Assam has proposed for a new categorisation among tribals in Assam i.e. ST (Valley), to accord ST status to the Chutiyas and other agitating communities. But this proposal has also been strongly opposed by the existing tribal communities. Against this backdrop, this paper is an attempt to understand how and why the Chutiyas have been agitating for the ST status, how this demand has faced strong opposition in the politics of Assam from existing tribal groups and how the government has been playing the game to strike a balance between the agitating and opposing communities for ST status.

Article History:

Article Type: **Research**

Received Date: **18/07/2026**
Revised Date: **26/09/2026**
Accepted Date: **06/10/2026**
Published Date:**29/10/2026**

Keywords: Chutiya community; Scheduled Tribe; ethnic recognition; Assam; electoral politics; political concessions

1. Introduction

The Scheduled Tribe (ST) status of the Chutiyas has been a long-standing issue in Assam's politics. The Article 366(25) of the Indian Constitution defines Scheduled Tribes as "such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for this Constitution." Under Article 342, the President, after consultation with the Governor of the state concerned, specifies these communities as ST by public notification. Any later inclusion in or exclusion from the list can be made only by an Act of parliament. The constitution itself does not lay down any criteria for identifying a Scheduled Tribe. In practice, the Government of India follows the five criteria recommended in 1965 by the Advisory Committee on the Revision of the Lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (the Lokur Committee): a) indications of primitive traits, b) distinctive culture, c) geographical isolation, d) shyness of contact with the community at large, and e) backwardness. The Indian Constitution, apart from providing fundamental rights to the Indian citizens as a shield towards protecting their basic rights, also provides another shield to the socio-economically and politically backward classes of people in the form of recognition as Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and Other Backward classes (OBC) for their all-round development. Article 15(4), 16(4), 19(5), 29,164 (1), 243(D), 243(T),244, 244(A), 275(1), 330, 332, 350 (A) are some of the articles of the Indian Constitution which aim to empower the ST people by protecting their rights, safeguarding their cultures as well as promoting their socio-economic development. The demand for ST status by the six ethnic communities, namely Moran, Matak, Chutiya, Tai-Ahom, Koch Rajbongshi, and Tea Community (Adivasis), has been a long-standing issue in the politics of Assam. However, this article will confine itself to the issue of the Chutiyas only.

The demand for ST status by the Chutiyas is rooted in historical experiences, socio-economic position, and the quest for constitutional recognition. The Chutiyas of Assam are an indigenous community who ruled one of the powerful medieval kingdoms in the upper Brahmaputra valley from the 13th century until the early 16th century, with its capital at Sadiya. The kingdom was well known for its wealth, skilled metalworkers, and a strong military tradition. However, the rise of the Chutiya kingdom has brought them into repeated conflicts with the Ahoms, who entered this land in the early 13th century. After prolonged warfare for several decades, the Ahom king Suhungmung (Dihingia Raja) conquered and annexed the Chutiya kingdom around 1523- 1524. After its annexation, many Chutiya nobles, soldiers, and artisans were absorbed into the administration and society of the new state. This is why the people of the Chutiya community today are spread mostly across upper Assam. Over time, most Chutiyas adopted Vaishnavite Hinduism while keeping distinct customs, folk traditions, and a strong sense of shared history.

After independence, the Chutiyas are officially categorised as Other Backward Class (OBC). However, their organised community politics are decades old. The Chutiya Jati Sanmilan was formed before independence in April 1925 to address various issues faced by the Chutiya of Assam and promote their all-around development. Over time, the student, youth, and women wings have grown around it. Their central demand is ST status, which they pursue alongside five above mentioned other communities in Assam. The organised ST movement of the Chutiyas began in 1979, according to the Chutiya community bodies, although the issue was an old one. In November 2025, the Assam Cabinet approved a group of ministers' report proposing a distinct ST (valley) category to accommodate them under the ST status. But the initiative has faced criticism and opposition from existing tribal groups, and the Assam Government has not shown any activity on it. For the Chutiyas, the demand for ST recognition is not merely a claim for reservation but rather an assertion of historical distinctiveness and a quest for recognition within

the state's established framework of ethnic categorisations. In this regard the role of the voluntary organisations of the Chutiyas is very significant, as they have helped articulate this demand by linking historical narratives to contemporary concerns about employment and educational opportunities, representation in the political sphere, and socio-economic development.

In contemporary Assam, the demand for ST status is part of a broader debate that encompasses indigenous identity, the distribution of affirmative action benefits, and the state's management of competing ethnic claims. The government has responded to this issue, but the responses often raise questions regarding the distinction between constitutional recognition and measures intended to accommodate the aspirations of the Chutiya masses without granting the requisite status of the ST. The central focus of this paper is whether concessions granted by the government to the Chutiyas, rather than tribal status, can address the community's concerns, or whether the demand for ST status remains a distinct and unresolved political issue. The article will address why the ST status has been repeatedly promised by the parties in Assam but never granted. As an interim solution to the ST demands of the Chutiyas, the state offers benefits in place of the core demand, but the state neither fulfils nor rejects the demand completely.

2. From Kingdom to the Status of Other Backwards Classes

The history of Assam throws significant light on the ethnic identity of the Chutiyas, which has undergone a vital transformation from rulers of an independent sovereign kingdom to a socio-politically marginalised community in the contemporary period. The Chutiya kingdom was centred in eastern Assam, particularly around Sadiya. It extended its influence over present upper Assam and adjoining territories before its incorporation into the Ahom Kingdom in the 16th century. The political incorporation marked a significant turning point in the Chutiyas' ethnic identity, shifting from political sovereignty to subordination. Even though the Chutiyas lost their political sovereignty, that didn't mean they lost their social and cultural identity. Those identities continued through kinship networks, customary practices, language, religious traditions and collective memories of their historical past. Before the annexation of the Chutiya kingdom, their identity was associated with sovereignty, kinship, and political authority. Post-annexation, their political identity became that of mere subjects within greater political formations of Ahoms. The transformation of their ethnic identity from rulers to ruled was not only a change in political power but also the start of a lengthy transition in their ethnic and social standing.

During the colonial period, the transformation was further institutionalised as the Chutiya identity acquired a new administrative dimension. The 1891 Census categorized the Chutiyas as a tribe. The nineteenth-century ethnographers commonly regarded them as a tribal or aboriginal people who had undergone extensive Hinduisation. Together with it, they also described the processes of Hinduisation, Sanskritization, and social differentiation within the community. The 1891 census placed the Chutiyas in the category of 'forest and hill tribes.' But the 1901 census marked a transition. This census categorized and described the Chutiyas as a 'race caste' because, during that period, caste was generally assumed to apply to Hindus, while tribe was a label for groups seen as outside the Hindu social order. Since most Chutiyas were by then became Hindu, they were recorded as a caste rather than a tribe. Rather than the question of historical and political sovereignty, questions of caste position, social status, and backwardness became the focus. Likewise, the contradiction between the historical memories of the Chutiya kingdom and the experience of declining social and political status characterised the Chutiyas' ethnic identity in the colonial period.

The post-independence period witnessed a shift in the Chutiyas towards a closer association with the constitutional and administrative framework for backward-class recognition. During this period, their identity was further transformed, and they were officially recognised and listed as an OBC. This period witnessed the role of the Chutiyas' voluntary organisations, seeking to

mobilise their ethnic masses for recognition as an ST, signifying a shift from an identity rooted in historical political sovereignty to one defined primarily by socio-economic and administrative categories. This contrasting identity has resulted in a debate over recognition, representation, and the demand for ST status. In other words, this has created a politics of recognition whereby historical memory is mobilised to challenge the present status and identity of the Chutiya community.

3. **The ST Demand: Contestation and Counter-Claims**

The Chutiya ethnic group is one of the prominent ethnic groups of Assam. History shows that they were residing in this region even before the advent of the Ahoms. But the annexation of their kingdom made them limp in every walk of life, and their ethnic identity had transformed. The impact of the prevalent caste system compelled them to undergo Sanskritization. It forced them to call themselves general caste Hindu people rather than enlisting them as ST people in the censuses during the colonial period. While they were enlisted as Stin 1891 census, the Chutiya people were not happy. So, since 1901 Census, they were not categorized as ST. However, after 1901 Census it decategorized the ST status, there was a resurgence in Chutiya ethnic consciousness, and, as such, a voluntary organisation called 'Chutiya Jati Sanmilan' was formed in 1925, under whose banner the Chutiya masses-initiated measures to preserve their cultural heritage and to recognise themselves as an ST in India. In the post-colonial period, the Chutiyas have reached far behind other sections of society in Assam. They are neither advanced educationally, economically nor politically. Although the Chutiyas were listed as a tribe in the Government of India's Census Reports from 1891, after independence, they were recognised as OBCs under the Kaka Kalelkar Commission Report. Although the Assam Government declared them as a More Other Backwards Class (MOBC), their economic and social backwardness has never been addressed, even after their inclusion in the MOBC category. It is because they always have to compete with other advanced groups under the OBC. In such a situation for the socio-economic development and more political representation the Chutiya organisations, such as All Assam Chutia Jati Sanmilan (AACJS) and Chutiya Jati Yuva Sanmilan (CJYSA), have played a crucial role in advocating for the Chutiya ethnic group's ST status in Assam. The CJYSA was formed in 1944 to address the issues similar with its parent organization i.e. AACJS but it is the youth wing of the community. These organisations have been instrumental in maintaining the demand's momentum and ensuring that the Chutiya masses' voices are heard. Their persistent efforts have brought national attention to their cause and have kept the pressure on the government to address their demands. It can be said that the issue of ST status is not only a question of administrative classification for the Chutiyas; it is closely linked to the restoration of their collective dignity, the recognition of their historical identity, access to institutional mechanisms designed to address the disadvantages experienced by eligible communities, and an aspiration to secure constitutional safeguards.

The ST status claim of the Chutiyas has encountered opposition and competing claims from other communities, particularly from the existing communities included within the tribal list. One of the prime concerns surrounding the opposition to the Chutiyas' ST status claim is the potential redistribution of benefits, particularly in education, public employment, representation, and access to development programmes. Existing ST communities expressed apprehension about the inclusion of additional groups, as it will increase competition for limited resources and opportunities. At this stage, the constitutional recognition of the Chutiyas' ST status reflects a broader conflict between aspirations for constitutional recognition and the concerns of groups seeking to protect their existing entitlements. The issue became intertwined with other emerging issues, such as electoral politics and negotiations between community organisations and the state. The government has responded to the issue, which involves discussions of additional benefits,

autonomous councils, and other concessions. Still, these responses may provide only limited accommodation and do not necessarily resolve the central demand for constitutional inclusion in the ST list. Significant opposition to the ST status to additional groups emerged from the Coordination Committee of Tribal Organisations of Assam (CCTOA), a coalition representing existing tribal organisations. The situation can be interpreted as a politics of competing claims, in which others perceive one community's pursuit of recognition as a potential threat to their existing benefits. In January 2026, the CCTOA rejected the Assam Government group of Ministers' recommendations regarding the grant of ST status to the six communities of Assam. The rejection primarily focused on the eligibility criteria for tribal recognition, the constitutional basis of the proposal, and the possible eradication of existing ST communities' political representation at all levels of government, whether in panchayats, autonomous councils, the Assam Legislative Assembly, or in the Parliament. The All-Assam Tribal Students' Union (AATSO) submitted a memorandum opposing the Assam Government's proposal, arguing that the inclusion of additional communities could adversely affect smaller tribal groups that heavily depend on existing constitutional safeguards.

4. Constitutional Recognition to Substitute Concessions: An Analysis

This section of the article discusses the transformation from the Chutiya community's demand for ST status to alternative policy measures and development benefits offered by the state government. The gap between the Chutiyas' demand for ST Status and the government's inability to fulfil that demand has led to certain substitute measures from the part of the government. The term substitute concession implies alternative benefits offered as a concession rather than fulfilling the main demand. The government offers policy assurances without granting the specific status the community demands. Major forms of substitute concessions for the Chutiyas include Chutiya Development Council, special opportunities in education and public employment, development assistance and political assurance, etc. Such concessions, although they grant tangible benefits, do not fulfil the demands for constitutional recognition, the associated safeguards, and political representation. Such initiatives may result in significant developmental benefits and institutional support, but cannot be equated with formal recognition of a community as an ST under the Constitution. These concessions function as an interim response while the main demand remains under consideration. From this viewpoint, the transition from constitutional recognition to substitute concessions highlights the complex relationship between ethnic mobilisation, electoral politics and state response in Assam. This transition also raises questions about the nature of the relationship between the state and the community, as well as about the politics of Assam's ethnic groups. Consequently, the effectiveness of these concessions must be assessed in terms of their actual benefits, institutional scope and relationship to the principal demand for ST status recognition.

As mentioned in October 2025, the government of Assam responded positively to the demand for ST Status for the Chutiyas. But this initiative has also been debated by many and regarded as a substitute concession in the context of the Chutiyas' demand for Scheduled Tribe. The government of Assam has proposed a new category, Scheduled Tribe (Valley), and included the Chutiyas within it. It is a new categorisation of tribals. Assam already has two categories of tribals- Hills and Plains. It is intended to accommodate the ST (Status) demand of the Chutiyas, reduce immediate political pressures, and to serve as a bridge for negotiations between the state and the community's voluntary organisations. But the actual effectiveness will be determined by time and to the extent to which they address the community's stated demand. The ST(V) framework can be analysed in terms of the relationship between ethnic mobilisation, state accommodation and constitutional recognition.

5. Conclusion

The transmutation from a historical identity centred on political sovereignty to a contemporary demand for constitutional recognition illustrates how ethnic groups reinterpreted their past to articulate claims for representation, social justice, and political inclusion. In this regard, the issue of ST status demanded by the Chutiyas is not only a question of administrative classification. It is also a struggle over historical recognition, collective identity and access to constitutionally guaranteed safeguards. The main challenge for the government is to reconcile the Chutiyas' aspirations with the legitimate concerns of existing tribal communities through a transparent, evidence-based and constitutionally sound process.

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