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Battle zone

Violence by protesting Adivasi mobs and retaliatory attacks by local Assamese residents turned the streets of Guwahati over the weekend into a bloody battle zone. Around 10,000 Adivasis took out a protest rally demanding Scheduled Tribe status for the community. The protest got out of hand, the activists started throwing stones on vehicles and shops and local residents hit back. The clashes have resulted in the death of around five Adivasis. Scores were injured. Clearly the authorities had not anticipated trouble. Police presence along the route of the rally was thin and even after the clashes erupted, police officials were slow in swinging into action. They should have called in reinforcements at the first sign of trouble i.e. when the protestors began to break the security cordon. The confrontation between Adivasis and the locals is unlikely to end with the clashes over the weekend. Adivasis have called for a 36-hour bandh and have threatened severe action against anyone who defies its orders. The All-Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (AASAA), which backed the rally has admitted its inability to control the activists. There is a possibility of the Adivasi activists engaging in retaliatory violence in the coming days.



Violence in Assam could spin out of control.

Neither the Adivasis nor local Assamese stand to gain from the confrontation. The Adivasis might have genuine grievances but damaging vehicles and shops is not the way to press demands. As for the Assamese, their brutal assault on the protestors will only serve to harden Adivasi protests. The Assamese must bear in mind that the Adivasis provide the bulk of the labour in the tea plantations and the economy can be brought to a standstill should the unions go on strike.

The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which has been smarting from the mass surrender of its cadres a month ago, will smell opportunity in the Adivasi-Assamese conflict. It will seek to revive its dwindling support among the Assamese by positioning itself as their champion. It has in the past attacked 'outsiders' working in Assam. The possibility of ULFA attacks on Adivasis in the coming weeks cannot be ruled out. Jharkhand's politicians have already descended on Guwahati to seek mileage from the clashes. Their presence in Assam is not going to help the Adivasis; on the contrary it will make the latter more vulnerable to accusations that they do not belong to the state. The violence in Assam is in danger of spiralling out of control.