



## AN ANALYSIS OF THE AUTONOMY MOVEMENT OF HILL TRIBES OF ASSAM

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### ABSTRACT :

*Movements for Autonomy have marked the political discourse in Northeast India for the last decades. The aim and purpose of the autonomy movement is not only to bring about change in the existing system but also to augment legitimate expressions of aspirations by the people having a distinct culture, tradition and common pattern of living. In the post colonial period, Assam which is a land of diverse ethnic communities has witnessed a serious of autonomy movements based on the political demands for statehood. The autonomy movement of the Hill Tribals in North East India in general and North Cachar Hills District and Karbi Anglong District of Assam in particular is a continuous effort and struggle of the Hill Tribal to protect and preserve their distinct identity, culture and tradition and to bring about a change in the existing socio-political arrangement. Although the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution has provided for Autonomous Councils in these two districts but much improvement could not be achieved due to limited power of the Autonomous District Council and the State government's apathy. Their demand for an autonomous state is rooted in the long history of similar movements in the north east and has been demanding a separate state for the Dimasas and the Karbis in the name of 'Dimaraji' for Dimasas and 'Hemprek' for Karbis.*

**KEYWORDS :** *Autonomy, Sixth Schedule, Hill Tribes, Karbi Anglong, North Cachar, Karbis, Dimasas.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Movements for Autonomy have marked the political discourse in Northeast India for the last decades. While some have resolutely expressed the need for more autonomy within the present set-up, other movements have evolved more militant, secessionist idea of political and geographical demarcation of territory. The aim and purpose of autonomy movement is not only to bring change in the existing system, but also to augment legitimate expressions of aspirations by the people having a distinct culture, tradition and common pattern of living. The question of autonomy has become a subject of attention in the last few decades. Increasing demand for autonomy by various ethnic groups and religious communities has been behind persistent ethnic conflicts around the world both in the developed and developing countries.

The term "autonomy" is derived from the Greek words "auto" meaning "self" and "nomo" meaning "law" or "rule. Thus, autonomy basically means to make one's own laws or "self-rule". After independence the leaders of new India adopted a federal polity reflecting the diversity of Indian Union. The North East India was constituted as one federating unit i.e. Assam with diverse tribal ethnic groups. Significantly some tribal ethnic groups were provided with political-administrative autonomy within the framework of new constitution to preserve, protect their uniqueness. But in the post independence

period these tribal ethnic groups have raised the demands for separate administrative homeland for themselves with greater degree of self rule.

Assam has been the meeting place of different races and consequently a large number of ethnic groups have been residing in Assam. In the post colonial period, Assam which is a land of diverse ethnic communities has witnessed a serious of autonomy movements based on the political demands for statehood. The autonomy movement of the Hill Tribals in North East India in general and North Cachar Hills District and Karbi Anglong District of Assam in particular is a continuous effort and struggle of the Hill Tribal to protect and preserve their distinct identity, culture and tradition and to bring about a change in the existing socio-political arrangement. Although the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution has provided for Autonomous Councils in these two districts but such arrangements could not contain the ethnic aspirations of the tribal communities in Assam and a strong sentiment of tribal nationalism based on their identity has emerged. Moreover, much improvement could not be achieved due to limited power of the Autonomous District Council and the State government's apathy and so the tribal ethnic nationalism has been asserted by the respective tribal groups by raising various demands i.e. demand for autonomous district councils, separate statehood and even independent sovereign state. Their demand for an autonomous state is rooted in the long history of similar movements in the north east and has been demanding a separate state for the Dimasas and the Karbis in the name of 'Dimaraji' for Dimasas and 'Hemprek' for Karbis.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

- To understand the Autonomy Movement of Hill Tribes of Assam.
- To find out the causes of its emergence.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The paper is descriptive and analytical one, primarily based on secondary data. The secondary data are consulted from the published materials in the form of books, research journal papers, magazines and from other internet sources.

## IV. CAUSES FOR THE EMERGENCE OF AUTONOMY MOVEMENT OF HILL TRIBES OF ASSAM

The growth of regional aspirations led to the proliferation of autonomy movements. The unequal role of state government, economic problems in the post independence period paved the way for fear of losing one's ethnic identity have led to the emergence of the movements for autonomy and statehood. Assam has witnessed a joint Dimasa-Karbi movement for an autonomy comprising the North Cachar Hills District and the Karbi Anglong district. The various causes which led to the emergence of Autonomy Movement of Hill Tribes of Assam are highlighted below:

- **Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas:** The tribes in Assam are called as the 'son of the soil' of this land and are living in this part of the territory with their own system of rules and traditions unique to others. Under the Government of India Act 1919 and the Government of India Act 1935, the tribals were separated from the mainstream by the Government of India Order 1936 (Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas). The then North Cachar Hills Subdivision of Cachar District was included under the Excluded areas. As per the rule in the governance of these areas, the powers of the provincial legislature were not extended to these areas. Thus, the Colonial Rulers had adopted a different policy for the governance of the tribal areas in North East India, devoid of the general administration of mainland Assam which had infused a sentiment of differentness of those people from the rest. Scholars have alleged that this policy of the colonial masters had largely contributed to the growth of an identity centric distinctive ethnic national sentiment against the mainstream Assamese nationalism among the tribal groups in North East India.
- **Introduction of Modern Education and Spread of Christianity:** With the introduction of modern education by the Colonial rulers the number of literate and educated people started increasing not only in the relatively advanced core Assamese society but also in the Non-Assamese indigenous societies of Assam. Along with education the spread of Christianity helps in emergence of a middle

class in the indigenous tribal societies. This very class of people played a pioneering role in unfolding, consolidating and then spreading an identity consciousness among the members of their society. Consequently a clash of interest and contradiction between the middle class elements of core Assamese and peripheral Assamese (tribal) societies has emerged.

- **Social Discrimination and Step Motherly attitude towards the Hill Tribals:** The alleged social discriminations, superiority complex of the caste-Hindu Assamese peoples and the caste based social stratification gradually started to push the tribal people away from the proximity with the core Assamese society. Such an atmosphere of neglect and indifference provided the fertile ground for the competitive middle class in the tribal societies to politically mobilize the tribal communities on the issue of ethnic identity. Along with this the hurt sentiments of the tribal middle class realized that without political power no malady could be remedied and as a result bargaining for political power was started.
- **Identity Crisis of the Hill Tribals:** The emergence of tribal ethnic nationalism has been viewed by the scholars as the resurgence of their lost identity due to erosion of language and traditions. Apart from this the settlement of the immigrants in the open and forest lands traditionally owned by the tribals have aggravated the sentiments of the tribal communities to think for a protected homeland. Though the tribal belts and Blocks have been created by the Government of Assam after the independence for the protection of the tribal lands yet, the lands in these areas have been encroach by the non tribals who created a challenge for the tribals to protect their land right. Even this encroachment of the non tribals and the settlement of the immigrants in the Tribal areas have led to the emergence of the ethnic clash in different areas of Assam.
- **Socio-Economic Factors:** The social and economic backwardness is an important factor behind the emergence of the autonomy movement in Assam. The problems of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy are acute among these people which led to the degradation of the overall living standard of these communities. One major cause of poverty and unemployment in the tribal society is the problem of land alienation. The severe economic backwardness and the unequal role of state government led to political frustrations and thereby demands for autonomous state were raised.
- **Imposition of Assamese Language on the Tribals:** The imposition of Assamese language on the unwilling tribals and attempting to introduce it as a medium of instruction in the University and Secondary levels of education ignited the movement for a separate state comprising the two hill districts.
- **Article 244(A) of Indian Constitution:** It is believed that the constitutional provision of the nation ignited the autonomy movement because Article 244(A) of Indian Constitution empowers the parliament to form an autonomous state within the state of Assam. In due course of time the movement has gone through several changes in their earlier demand for an autonomous state comprising the two hill districts to a separate state for the Dimasas and the Karbis in the name of 'Dimaraji' for Dimasas and 'Hemprek' for Karbis.

## V. AUTONOMY MOVEMENT OF HILL TRIBES OF ASSAM

The hill tribal people of Assam inhabit the two hill districts of Assam viz. the North Cachar Hills (N.C. Hills) district and the Karbi Anglong district. These two Hill Districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills have worked in close cooperation for two decades. The Karbi Tribe of Karbi Anglong has lived in peace with the Dimasa Tribe of N.C.Hills. Infact these two were a single district till the 1950s. Even after their division into two districts, Karbi Anglong remains the largest district of Assam and shares the distinction of being a melting pot of different culture, religious, ethnic and linguistic groups. Historically, the indigenous people of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills have been subjugated. The exploitation and subjugation perpetrated upon them led the hill people to raise several demands. The hill tribal inhabiting the state have been launching movement either for the creation of separate or autonomous state on the basis of their ethnic identities or for special constitutional safeguards of their respective identities. Though at the beginning, they started their assertion with non-political issues

such as the development of their language and culture, the uneven economic development gave it a political direction in the subsequent period. As a result, they have become assertive of their political right and started movement for adequate share of political power in order to maintain their distinct identities. The formation of State Reorganization Commission (SRC) in 1954 received mixed reactions in the hills of Assam. Concerned with the language policy of the Assam Government, demand for a separate hills state was stronger.

The beginning of the Karbi and Dimasa ethnic consciousness can be traced back to the time of the Indian independence. The coming of the Christian Missionaries in the hills of Karbi Anglong during later decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought the illiterate and tribal people of the hills under the purview of colonial modernity. The *white men's burden of civilizing the savage* led to the twin processes – religious conversion to Christianity and spread of western education. Within a short span of time, a considerable section of the Karbis adopted Christianity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The demand for a separate Karbi-Dimasa state (combining Karbi Anglong and NC Hills) was raised in the meeting of All Party Peoples Conference (APPC) held on 20<sup>th</sup> August, 1978 under the Presidentship of Joysing Dolui.

The Autonomy Movement of the Hill Tribes of Assam got the momentum under the provision of Article 244 (A) of the Indian Constitution. As the Article 244 (A) empowers the Parliament to form an autonomous state within the State of Assam and as a result Meghalaya comprising the Hill Districts of the undivided Assam i.e. Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hill Districts became first Autonomous State of the Indian Union and later upgraded into a full fledged state in 1972.

Although the twin hill districts i.e. Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao (North Cachar Hills District) were given an option to join the newly created autonomous state, but the districts decided to stay with Assam as they were aware of their backwardness as compared to the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Moreover they were strongly persuaded by the Assamese leaders not to join the new autonomous state and in return they assured equal facilities to them as the Meghalaya related to developmental matters.

To carry on the demand for the implementation of Article 244 A in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, the Karbi political elites finally formed an organization called Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) on 17<sup>th</sup> May of 1986. Most of the leaders of ASDC were the students who took part in the Assam Movement. The ASDC brought together peoples from different political and non-political organizations of the Karbis and Dimasa community to make the movement stronger. In the same year of formation of the ASDC, another organization called Karbi Anglong North Cachar Hills Autonomous State Demand Committee (KANCHASDCOM) was also formed. However, the ASDC could form its branches in the entire district of Karbi Anglong and NC Hills. The Karbi Students Association (KSA) joined hand in hand with ASDC in the movement right from the inception of ASDC. The political activism of ASDC was included mobilizing of people through meetings, strikes, protest-rallies and so on. The movement, which was led separately by ASDC-KSA and KANCHASDCOM, got its peak during the years 1986-1989. The growing influence of ASDC and rising demand for implementation of Article 244 A became stronger with the increasing intensity of the movement. It also warned the government that the delay in fulfilling the demand would only worsen desperation in their minds which could then drive them hard to lose faith in democratic traditions. This frustration resulted in the formation of extremist organizations in the later period of Autonomy Movement.

But however their demand for a separate autonomous state was not granted but rather their demand was modified and they were granted autonomy under the Sixth Schedule i.e. North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC) AND Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC). As a result of the decision the then Chief Minister of Assam, Hiteswar Saikia handed over 30 departments to NCHAC and KAAC from the State List 1997. Although to some extent the transfer of power had broadened the autonomy of the two councils but these powers continued to be administered by the officers from the government as before and because of too many denying terms and conditions and procedures that were laid down neither the powers nor the scope for the development of the area were least enlarged. As such they were not satisfied and expected for an Autonomous State which led them to start another movement that was extreme in nature. In due course of time, the movement has gone through several changes in their earlier demand for an Autonomous State comprising the two hill districts to a separate



state for the Dimasas and the Karbis. In 1995 when, Jewel Gorlosa, a descendent of Dimasa National Security Force (DNSF) formed the Dima Halam Daoga (DHD) with Dilip Nunisa and Pradip Nunisa, the movement assumed a violent character. However it was because of ideological differences and struggle for power Jewel Gorlosa later broke away from DHD and formed another outfit called as DHD (J) or Black Widow by turning up the lease fire agreement which was signed by the old faction DHD in 2003. Later on both the factions of DHD realized the futility of violence and so they came forward and expressed their willingness to give up violence and seek solutions to its problems peacefully within the framework of the constitution which resulted in signing of a tripartite Memorandum of Settlement (MOS) among Central Government, Government of Assam and both factions of DHD on 2012 at New Delhi.

The North Cachar Hill District was renamed as Dima Hasao Autonomous Territorial Council. It was again in 2013, the creation of Telangana by the Congress led UPA, and the Demand for Autonomous State for the Hill Tribes was revived. On 29<sup>th</sup> March 2018, various student, youth social organizations and political parties of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Hill District and Dima Hasao Autonomous Hill District of Assam submitted a memorandum to Narendra Modi, the PM of India at New Delhi in support of the earlier demand for creation of an autonomous state within the state of Assam as provided \under Article 244 (A) of the Indian Constitution.

## VI. SUGGESTIONS

a) Protection of identity is a legitimate right of any ethnic group. In a heterogeneous society, protection of diversity is a necessity through which unity can be achieved. In Assam, the Tribal ethnic groups have enormously contributed to the growth of Assamese Nationality. Therefore, it is necessary to protect and nourish the cultural and ethnic identity of these small Tribal Communities. The protection of language, institutions and customs are very important in this regard. They should be allowed to practice their customary laws and social institutions in their society. In Assam, the emergence of Tribal sub-national assertions should not be treated as antagonistic to the greater Assamese nationality. The Assamese socio-cultural organizations representing the Assamese nationality should accept, recognize these Tribal sub-nationality to accommodate them within the broader national identity. All the organizations (socio-political) in Assam should practice mutual tolerance and accept the multi-culturalism. This will strengthen the unity and integrity of the State.

b) Development of the Tribal communities should be given top most priority by the Government in the State. Every Government undertakes various development schemes for the development of the tribal peoples. But due to misuse of funds, corruption and lack of awareness among the Tribal peoples hinders the development process. Moreover the Autonomous administrative systems are also fails to bring the expected change in the Tribal communities. Considering all these, sincere effort of the Government is needed through effective monitoring and implementation of the schemes for achieving the goal of development of the Tribal communities.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Since independence, Assam has been experiencing several movements; peaceful, violent and a combination of both. As a result of these movements, Assam has experienced reorganizations several times leading to the drastic reduction in size. Now, once again, the threat of further reduction of the size and reorganization has sharpened in the wake of new movements launched by various tribal groups both in the plains and the hills. The root cause of movement for Autonomous State lay in the severe economic backwardness and political frustrations.

In conclusion we can say that the fear of losing one's ethnic identity, the discriminatory attitude of the state government, inherent deficiency in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution are the main factors that pushed the Hill Tribes of Assam to start the autonomy movement. Although initially it was a peaceful movement limited to submitting memorandum by Hill Tribes Intelligentsia but with the birth of various youths and students organizations, the movement gained mass character and their means of agitation was extended to holding strikes and conducting sit-in demonstrations and so on. The

movement assumed violent character with the formation of militant groups by the sections of youths who had lost faith in the democratic process of movement.

The autonomy movement of the hill tribals in North East India in general and Hills district of Assam in particular is a continuous effort and struggle of the hill tribal to protect and preserve their distinct identity, culture and tradition and to bring a change to the existing sociopolitical arrangement of the system. They have been discriminated on various grounds and their frustration burst out into a successive demand for a separate state to be carved out of Assam since they firmly believe that progress and development could never be achieved under the step-motherly treatment of government of Assam.

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