

# Autonomy Movement in Assam

## Abstract

The ethno-nationalist conflict has shaken the stability of states not only in India but in many states of Asia, Africa and Middle-East. The question of ethnic identity in North-East India is a very complex issue which leads to the emergency of many tribal movements. Article 244 (2) of the constitution provides for a sixth schedule which shall apply to the administration of the tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. The arrangement of the sixth schedule was a product of the recommendations of the sub-committees chaired by Gopi Nath Bordoloi. Thus the farmers of the constitution had enacted a local Autonomous Administration under the sixth schedule of the constitution for some tribal communities (Hill Tribes) of North-East India to preserve and protect their identity, culture and development. The other plain tribes living in Assam were left outside the ambit of constitutional protection. The plain tribes are no longer lagging behind so far as their political assertions are concerned. Like the Hill tribes, the plain tribes of Assam also demanded for autonomy, which sometimes they seek to realize through separate state, separate territorial arrangement and even through separate independent state. Along with the Bodos some other plain tribes like Tiwas, Rabhas, Mishings, Deuris, Sonowal Kacharis are asserting for separate political arrangement. Like Bodos, Tiwas, Rabhas, Mishings, were given Autonomous Council in 1995, in this study, an attempt will be made to analyze the historical background of the Political autonomy provided by the act of state legislature in Assam to the plain tribes and also will try to analyze the working of Autonomous Council and causes of growing demands of sixth schedule of these plain tribes.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, Tribal, Sixth Schedule, Constitution, Plain Tribes.

### Introduction

Since independence the government of India has taken various measures to improve the lot of the tribal people of the country. Moreover in order to bring the tribal people into the mainstream of national politics and also for their welfare, there are provisions in articles 330, 332, 338 and 339 of the constitution of India. These articles are applicable for all tribes of India including North-East. But article 244 (B) of the constitution provides for a sixth schedule for bringing development of the tribes of North-East India only because it was assumed that these tribes have some special problems of their own. The constituent Assembly referred the matter to a sub-committee under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi, popularly known as Bordoloi sub-committee. The recommendation of this committee are included in the draft sixth schedule. The idea behind the sixth schedule was to provide the tribal people with a simple administration of their own, so that they could safeguard their own customs and tradition and to provide them maximum autonomy in the management of tribal affairs. Thus we see that by the time some of the District councils are coming up. All these District Councils are autonomous. Autonomous means self governance. Although, tribal autonomy was ensured through the sixth schedule of the constitution yet, the tribal movement for autonomy did not come to an end rather the plain tribes like Bodos demanded for creation of separate state.

### Aim of the Study

In the Northeast India there have been a large number of distinct tribes of ethnic groups. For the hill tribes constitution of India make special provision of sixth schedule and for plain tribes Autonomous Councils are formed to ensure the rights of self-rule and managing their own affairs in the territory in order to preserve their ethnic identity. However, the proposed greater autonomy does not seem to satisfy the leaders of these communities and they are still firm in their demand for autonomy under sixth schedule. The aim of the study is to find out how for the Autonomous Councils able to maintain the ethnic identity of the plain tribes of Assam.

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**Genesis of Autonomy Movement in Assam**

The autonomy movements by the tribal in Assam are not the product of a single factor. Some of the factors are social which is related with the different attitude of Upper Caste Assamese people towards the tribal. Historical factor provides a subtle basis for the tribal of Assam to exert their pressure for autonomy. The tribals are the earliest community to migrate to this land. On the other hand Bodo, Tiwa, Rabha, Mishng or such other tribal is concentrated in a particular area. Such concentration of a particular tribe into a particular area helped the tribal people to articulate their grievances among themselves. It is also known that tribal people are generally educationally and economically backward people. Gradually a section of tribal people educated themselves. Therefore, they felt an urgent necessary of a mass movement for the upliftment of their own communities. They also realized that unless and until the tribals are provided with greater autonomy with a separate political arrangement, it would be difficult to upgrade the tribal people. Alienation of tribal land is another problem which developed a frustration among the tribals. As the tribal societies are agriculture based, therefore, protection of tribal land is important for tribals. But very significantly the government not only failed to protect the tribal land from the non-tribals but government itself allotted the tribal lands for the purpose of development. Although the constitutional arrangement for Belts and Blocks are there, yet encroachment of non-tribals takes place into these Belts and Blocks. In most cases the non-tribal people, by taking the advantage of economic weakness, try to buy the lands of tribal people from their protected lands has created discontentment among them and therefore protection of tribal land become one of the important issue of autonomy movement.

The Chauvinistic attitude of mainstream Assamese people is also responsible for the emergence of different autonomy movements. The Assamese Chauvinism was first reflected in two successive language movements official Language Movement (1960) and Language Movement for Medium of Instruction (1972). Both the movement created an apprehension regarding the intension of the Assamese people towards the linguistic minorities in general and the tribal in particular. A part from such linguistic Chauvinism, the Assamese people, particularly the upper caste Hindus looks down upon towards the tribals in their day-to-day social relation. The plain tribes of Assam have their own culture, own tradition, own language and their own distinct way of celebration which altogether gives them a distinct identity. But under the process of assimilation some of the plain tribes gradually adopted Assamese culture, language etc. However a reverse trend has started when tribals become conscious about their own identity would be submerged if they donot become conscious about their own identity. Thus, the conciousness for identity has started among the tribals and they started movement for the protection of their identity. Not only in Assam but also in different parts of the world the movement of self determination

is going on. The UN meet of indigenous people is the global forum for the movement of self determination for the indigenous people. The application of the Multi Layered Autonomous Arrangements:

One may find that in a bid to address the socio-political expectations and aspirations of different indigenous communities living inside the geo-political boundary of Assam three types of political autonomy have been introduced. These are:

1. Political autonomy under the sixth schedule of Indian constitution.
2. Autonomous Councils without well defined boundary.
3. Development Councils for different ethnic communities.

In this context it is worth mentionable that one of the three types of arrangement, autonomy under the sixth schedule has been in force in the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, Dima Hasao Autonomous Council. Accordingly an administrative area can be created by the governor for the administration of the hill arrears. Such administrative areas is known as District Council. Regarding the constitution of District Council it has been mentioned in the sixth schedule that there shall be a District Council for each autonomous district consisting of not more than thirty members of whom not more than four persons shall be nominated by the governor and rest shall be elected on the basis of adult suffrage. Each District Council has an Executive Council with a Chief Executive Councilor. The Chief Executive Councilor is responsible for the administration of District Council. In the sixth scheduled Autonomous Councils the state government plays a decisive role. The governor of the state is the constitutional head of these sixth scheduled Autonomous Councils and the bugets for these Councils have to be passed in the state assembly and accordingly the state government releases funds through the department of Planning and Hill Area Development. Therefore, to a very great extent smooth administrative function of these sixth scheduled Autonomous Territorial Councils depends on the state government and its bureaucracy.

The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) is the first experience of plains tribes (Bodos) with the autonomy under the sixth schedule of the constitution. The BTC come into existence on the basis of memorandum of settlement which was signed by BLT, Govt. of Assam and central Govt. in 2003. The basic objective behind the creation of the BTC was to create a self governing body for the Bodo people to fulfill their aspirations relating to their cultural identity, language, education and economic development under the sixth schedule of the constitution. The BTC has 46 executive members each looking after a specific area of control called Somisthi (Constituency). The area under the BTC jurisdiction is called the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD). The BTAD is to consists of four contiguous districts – Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri and Chirang.

Along with the Bodos some other plain tribes like – Tiwas, Rabhas and Mishings have started their movement for autonomy. Under that circumstances Hiteswar Saikia planned to win over the confidence of

tribal ethnic groups towards his government and decided to relieve some concessions in the form of Autonomous Council to the tribals. It is to be noted that in the Assam Movement almost all the tribal groups extended active support and even some of them sacrificed their lives. In the meantime central Govt. constituted a three member expert committee headed by Bhupendar Singh in consultation with Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia to examine the tribal autonomy issue. This committee visited Tiwa and Mishing populated areas of Assam. The committee recommended creation of a separate Bodoland Autonomous Council and with slight modification Autonomous Council for other plain tribes. Like the Bodos, Tiwas, Rabhas and Mishings were given with Autonomous Council in 1995. But the proposed Autonomous Council could not satisfy for all sections of these communities. Hence another movement for demanding autonomy under sixth schedule has started. "No Sixth Schedule no rest" became their motto. Considering the ongoing demands of these communities the government of Assam appointed a committee to investigate the autonomy question of these tribal groups. Dr. Bhumidhar Barman was the chairman of the committee; the Government of Assam amended the Autonomous Council Acts of 1995 and ensured greater autonomy to those communities in April 2005. The Government also introduced a new Act granting autonomy to the Deuries and Sonowal Kacharies. In addition to the above mentioned autonomous Councils, Govt. of Assam also make legislation for the formation of Development Councils for various communities. If we come to the Development Councils arranged for the development of different communities, then found that those have been now appeared as a mere tool to increase influence of the political party in the steering wheel of the Assam Government. An accusations come from different quarters. These Development Councils have only developed the political status of few middle class leaders those belongs to communities like Moran, Mottok, Chutia, Manipuri etc. instead of bulk of the population of these communities for whom actually the much discussed Development Council had been constituted.

#### **Structure of Autonomous Councils**

The Autonomous Council is a unique innovation in the politics of Assam. It is composed of General Council, Executive Council, Village Council and a Chief Executive Councilor. The General Council consists of forty members out of whom thirty seats shall be reserved for ST (P) and ten seats shall be for general candidates from the constituencies of concerned area.

The Executive Council consists of Chief Executive Councilors elected by the members of General Council. However in case of Mishings, the Executive Council consists of Chief Executive Councilor, Deputy Chief Councilor and seven executive Councilors elected by the members of the General Council. The Chief Executive Councilor is the chairman of Executive Council and presides over the meetings of the Executive Council. He is the Chief of the Autonomous Council and under this credit he is

responsible for the administration of the Autonomous Council.

The village Council is consists of ten members of which five seats shall be reserved for respective tribal community, out of which at least one shall be a women. Every member of the village Council shall be entitles to such setting allowances as may be fixed by the village Council subject to the approval of the General Council and the Government. The member of the Village Council elect a President and a Vice-President who shall act as the Chief of the Village Council and the Deputy Chief of the village respectively.

Besides these there is also provision for core areas and satellite areas for the better representation of tribal community. The preamble of the Tiwa Autonomous Council stated "whereas it is expedient to provide for the establishment of a Tiwa Autonomous Council with the state of Assam with maximum autonomy within the framework of the constitution, comprising of the satellite areas and core areas, for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement of the Tiwa and other scheduled tribes communities residing therein."

#### **Functioning of Autonomous Councils**

The constitution of the Autonomous Councils in Assam for some of the plain tribal groups was a response of the state Government towards the growing political assertion of some plain tribes of Assam. It has been observed that these Autonomous Councils could not fulfill the aspiration of the tribal communities (plain tribes) in Assam, because many tribal groups, having Autonomous Councils are now demanding for more autonomy under the sixth schedule of the constitution. The Autonomous Council does not possess any financial autonomy except preparing its budget basing on the fund provided by the Government. It cannot generate finance itself. The Autonomous Councils could not fulfils the demands, as forwarded by the tribal communities for it could not able to be the appropriate mechanism for the redressal of grievances. There are lots of drawbacks in the existing systems of the Autonomous Councils. These are:

1. The state Government does not take any initiative to constitute the Village Councils at the grass root level which is clearly mentioned in the provisions of the Tiwa and Rabha Autonomous Acts.
2. The Autonomous Council Act did not mention specially about the territorial boundary of the Autonomous Council it was mentioned that the Autonomous Council within the state of Assam with maximum autonomy, within the framework of constitution, comprising satellite areas and core areas. In reality the Autonomous Councils Act did not mention any specific area. Absence of any specific boundary could not satisfy some section of tribal community and that is why they demanded for specific boundary of Autonomous Council.
3. Moreover the commonly leveled criticism against the Autonomous Councils is the misuse of funds. The funds for the welfare of the community are used by the leaders at their own discretion

without any transparency. Huge amount is spent in the name of T.A., D.A. and vehicle hire by these functionaries.

The tribal leaders who opposed Autonomous Council regarded the Autonomy that was granted through the Autonomous Council as "Puppet Autonomy". For them it was an Autonomy, which would be controlled by state government. The members of the Autonomous Council could not be able to do anything without the green signal from state capital. Thus the Autonomous Councils, instead of bringing any solution to the tribal problems, engulfed the tribal politics.

#### **Suggestions**

For successful functioning the Autonomous Councils some suggestions are forwarded

1. The election of the Autonomous Councils are to be held regularly to make the authorities more responsible to the people.
2. Since the Autonomous Council have to depend upon the Line department of the state government to carry out the development functions in Council area, the administrative control over the line departments in the Council area should be entrusted to the Council.
3. People of different communities living within Autonomous Territories should be made aware of their common problems. In this case, advanced sections of the society or the progressive forces should come forward and mobilize the people about the basic needs of the people.
4. It should be emphasized while educating the people that the uninterrupted large scale corruption prevailing in our society is nothing but the outward expression of the anti-people neo-liberal global economic situation and the administrative system which follow its command.
5. The Council authorities always have an allegation that the state Government has not release funds for the development of Council area in time due to bureaucratic redtapism. Therefore the state Government must simplify the process of fund allotment to the Autonomous Council.

#### **Conclusion**

As concluding opinion, it may be said that though the story of the political autonomy and its arrangement in different forms in the heterogeneous Assam is more than half a century old. The tribal ethnic movements for securing political autonomy have been regarded as the movement for securing social justice and equality of rights by these communities. The Govt. is yet to formulate a wise policy for the promotion of the interest of the ethnic people. The provisions of the Indian constitution, particularly those included under the sixth schedule the seventh five year plan of India suggested that the self management trust of the sixth schedule should be generalized for all the tribal areas. Moreover proper devolution of power to these Councils is essential for the success of this mechanism of tribal development in Assam

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