

THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALISED: DEMANDS FOR AUTONOMY AMONG THE TRIBES OF NORTH EAST INDIA, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM.

Dr. Chuchengfa Gogoi*

Abstract

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The history of Northeast India is the history of ethnic self-determination whose seeds have been rooted by *the crown and the company*. The demands for separate geographical space for the native Ethnic community are the outcome of British administrative arrangement which created a exclusive-geographical boundary among the ethnically different communities of northeast India. It was the background on which the entire northeastern states were seen bifurcated in different homelands in post independent period. The demands have created a vicious cycle among almost all the communities who started demanding for a unique geo-political arrangement which is often an outcome of the reference point they made in terms of other. The state however has recognized the inherent differences among the communities to an extent which results into the creation of northeast that one noticed today. It was again a fact that ethnic contestation often led to a mass violence involving two distinctly different communities which completely jeopardize the process of coexistence among the communities. Therefore, the present paper tries to highlight the demands for autonomy among the hill tribes and plain tribes and their trajectory in different forms and ends. The

***Assistant Professor and Coordinator, PG classes, Department of Political Science, North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous).**

paper adopted a methodology which is analytical and the necessary references to the resources have been made from secondary sources.

1. Introduction

The region North East refers to the frontier region of the Indian state which comprised presently with eight states, namely, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Recently Sikkim was added into the list. But the northeast was not created on the lines of shared history or shared cultural traditions; rather, it was an administrative zone created by the *British Company* to entertain there vested interest.¹ The nomenclature of northeast hence is a colonial underpinning; believed as many social scientists as *colonial hinterland*². Moreover, some of the areas which were there in the earlier colonial mapping are not present in the present geo-political map of Indian state. A reference to the colonial understanding of the frontier northeast is important to mention here. Alexander Mackenzie a colonial administrator who extensively discuss the social, political and tribal history of the north east in his famous work originally named “History of the Relations of the Government with the Hills Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal”, mentioned that,

*“The north East frontier of Bengal is a term used sometimes to denote a boundary line, and sometimes more generally to describe a tract. In the latter sense I embrace the whole of the hill ranges north, east, and south of the Assam Valley, as well as the western slopes of the great mountain system lying between Bengal and independent Burma, with its outlying spurs and ridges.”*³

Another perspective which shades light on the term northeast goes as that - the earlier landscape of northeast was comprised of three distinct regions, namely, Assam Valley, Purvanchal and Meghalaya-Mikir region. The Assam valley which is also known as Brahmaputra valley is a well demarcated physical unit within the griddled formed by the Eastern Himalayas, Patkai and Naga hills and the Garo-Khasi-Jaintia and Mikir hills.⁴ This region composed of 720 km in length 80

km in breadth, it covers an area about 56,274 km. Whereas the Purvanchal region composed of 94,800 km and the Meghalaya-Mikir hills region composed of 53,291 km.⁵

North-Eastern India (NEI) is a frontier region having common strategic borders with - China, Burma, Bhutan and Bangladesh on virtually all sides leaving a short stretch to its north-west frontier which provides the region a strategic link with West Bengal and the mainstream India.⁶ This strategic link is also popularly referred as chicken neck. It is estimated that the region NEI shared a just minimum 27 kilometer corridor with the Indian mainstream land. This small channel constitutes only about 1% of the region's borders, thus, the region is surrounded by thousands of kilometers as international border.⁷ This symbolizes how the northeastern region has been geographically isolated from the mainstream India. This geographical isolation often can be blamed as responsible in engineering exclusivists' tendencies among the people of northeast. This geographical exclusion has been further carried out into political exclusion by the colonial rulers. It has been seen that even after establishing a homogenous administrative entity followed by the process of annexation these geographical terrains have been left culturally diverse. However the process of annexation of the Northeast took place at different point of time like Assam plains (1826), Cachar plains (1830), Khasi Hills (1833), Jaintia plains (1835), Karbi Anglong or Mikir Hills (1838), North Cachar Hills (1854), Naga Hills (1866-1904), Garo Hills (1872-73) and Mizo Hills (1890) respectively.⁸ All these provinces together made the British Assam province. But the diversity to the British Assam remained intact. Hence the region northeast become a region for several cultures confluence.

These cultural confluences are shaped by some indigenous individual life style and cultural characters often in ethnic lines. The territory of north east is ethnically, linguistically, culturally, religiously, psychologically diverse.⁹ Because of its immense diverse character many people believed it as the world's largely diverse region.¹⁰ These broad diversities can be summed up in three important groups, the Hill tribes, the Plain tribes and the people of the Plains.¹¹ But the ethnic distinctions among these three categories of people become so diverse that at times it is the major source of conflict. Therefore it is evident that why the entire north east is suffered by ethnic assertion with different patterns and intensity. According to Udayan Misra and Tilottama Misra the difference between these movements are essentially related to its goals and adaptation

strategy.¹² Therefore the demands for recognition of smaller identities, the demands for separate statehood and the tactics adopted by the movements are mostly shaped by the contours of their specific ethnicity. It will be a one sided discussion if we do not refer to the movements for autonomy, their pattern and its trajectory of change in the state of Northeast. Autonomy has been the most cherished term in the region and has been most widely demanded thing. If one retrospect the region's political history, than it will be noticed that, the presence of extended demand for autonomy is inevitable. Therefore the next section of the paper will highlight the basic nuances of the term autonomy.

What is Autonomy?:

Autonomy is believed as a device to allow ethnic or other groups to claim a distinct identity and to exercise direct control over the affairs which are important for the group and which may become a common interest for them. It also means self-government and decentralization of power.¹³ The idea of autonomy also referred to minority and indigenous rights and the right to self determination. It also stands for self-legislation.¹⁴ Therefore it seems that autonomy stands for a localized form of exercising power which may provide arrangement for the local community to practice its own indigenous culture and tradition and also provide opportunity to utilize the public resources and brought necessary development at its maximum. Autonomy in northeast India hence been understood from an ethnic framework, where groups are extended demands for *self-rule* to foster their indigenous and individual identity.

It is already been discussed how the colonial apparatus had contributed in framing autonomous frontiers in the region, specially, in the hill areas. The extension of the post frontier arrangement in the independent India and the state reorganization shall also important to refer. The intension of referring to these events is the roots to which the history of autonomy movement in the region has gripped with. It is important to mention that the movements for autonomy in the states of northeast are the outcome associated with the demands made mostly by the hill tribes; who never visualized themselves with the mainstream India and remained isolated and autonomous ever since and insisted to remain further. The demands for separate Naga homeland, Mizo homeland, and subsequent reorganization of northeast from the colonial Assam become the starting point. It

is therefore understandable that the movement for autonomy initially started with the demands for separate autonomous statehood.

The Demands for Autonomy in Northeast India:

To deal with the question of autonomy in the states of northeast in general and Assam in particular a perspective on the identity construction need to discuss. The whole notions of autonomy do essentially move around the questions of identity and the right for a natural and cultural possession of land. In a common parlance, one important dimension can be noticed among the movements for Autonomy, which shows that, all these demands aimed at achieving certain amount of territorial independence and administrative concession for a community, which is claimed as historically possessed by the concerned community. Land in this sense is referred as an ethno-symbolic entity. Question does not arise in the pattern of the land nor on the quality and quantity of the land in direct forms, rather on the question to which community the land belongs to. *Therefore ethnic possession or the cultural ownership over the land is allied with the notions of autonomy.*

Based on this argument many ethnic groups in Northeast have demanded for an autonomous council and virtually many of them got recognized and many others are still demanding. This is indeed a special point to mention that most of the demands in northeast have been the outcome of reference point they made to each other. With this early assumption we may now develop a pattern to study the genealogy of history of demands for autonomy in Northeast in general and Assam in particular. There are frequent changes in the nature and intensity of the autonomous movement. The most striking among them is the pattern to which these movements are employed and the techniques and ambitions which are changing frequently. To have a better understanding following line of arguments are made.

Extensions of Colonial Arrangement: Demands for Autonomy for the Hills Tribe

It is already mentioned that Colonial demarcations of terrain have deep impulse on the region's present geographical and political structure. The demands for many autonomous states were the made on the demands of the extension of the British administrative design. It was a historical case for reference that many areas which were recognized by the British colony as – excluded or

as partially excluded were remain independent even after their annexation to the British administration. It was simply because of their indigenous cultural tradition exclusive to them which also recognized by the colonial administration. One may refer to Prof. Hussain in this context, who mentioned that,

“..historically speaking, the hill tribals of north-eastern India were neither a part of India nor of Assam prior to the British colonisation of this region.....They maintained their own distinct tribal culture, traditions, taboos, social systems which were quite different from the people of the valley.”¹⁵

The areas inhabited by different but distinct ethnic communities were soon recognized as areas with separate administrative arrangement. The arrangement was made under the landmark provision of the *Scheduled District Act of 1874* and the *Assam Frontier Tract Regulation, 1880* and off course the *Inner Line Regulation of 1873*. Assam province was considered as special case in all these regulation. The reason for such special treatment was the realization that most of the areas of Assam province were covered by hills tribes.¹⁶ It is interesting to note that, before these regulations nothing regularized arrangement for any province in the undivided northeast frontier had been made and these had brought the change. The Act of 1880 had transferred the power of monitoring the tract of Assam province from the hands of the government of Assam to the governor.¹⁷ It means that, these areas were declared as autonomous in their respective locality. The Inner Line (IL) Regulation had brought further fervor in the whole discourse of making of internal boundary in Assam. Inner Line Regulation came into being with the ambitions to regularize the Frontier districts with the declarations of several notifications by the Government of India, Foreign Department since from the year 1873, 8th March. The first regulation was made to prepare an inner line for the then Durrung District, and also made provisions for the Governor General in Council in further pleased to prohibit any British subjects from entering beyond the Line. With another regulation made on 30th, September, 1875, an IL was drawn in the district of Luckhimpore (present Lakhimpur district), and same for the Sebsaugor (presently Sivasagar) on 21st, June, 1876 and with modification on 24th February, 1882, for the Cachar district on 19th June, 1878, for the Chittagong Hill Tracts on March, 1879.¹⁸ The ambition of these policies was

to regulate certain areas which were not favorable for the British to govern and also for the fact that they were less productive in terms of revenue generation.¹⁹

Following these legislative sanctions different other reform initiatives were conducted by the British as an extension of their attitude towards the Hills people. Important among them were the report of Montague-Chelmsford in 1917, Simon Commission in 1929 and Government of India act of 1935. Although the British company had adopted these provisions for their administrative benefit but these had become major reference point for the hills leaders to demands for separate geographical space for them. Therefore one may refer to the demands of separate hills states as the result of the frontier arrangement of the British colony. The demands in these lines had been first popularized by the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) who demanded for a separate hills states for the hills tribes by referring to the earlier colonial arrangement. Subsequent demands for separate state among the plain tribes were also noticed in the Brahmaputra valley. The movements have got so deep-rooted that GOI and the Hill Tribes have to accept the colonial criterion of exclusion.²⁰

These autonomous state arrangement in the post independent period were heralded by an important committee known as – Gopinath Bordoloi Committee. With the recommendations submitted by the Bordoloi sub-committee the areas which were declared as excluded and partially excluded under the colonial administration now declared the Autonomous Statehood and also stands for some Autonomous District Councils (ADC). The Bordoloi Committee made provisions for Regional Council for other tribes other than the main tribe in the Hill areas. This scheme sought to build up ADCs in the hill areas of Assam (than northeast frontier) which are named as- United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District, Garo Hills District, Lushai Hills District, Naga Hills District, North Cachar Hills District, and Mikir Hills District.²¹ The Committee also recommended abolishing the colonial arrangement of the excluded and partially excluded areas, yet provisions of IL regulation have been made prevalent as a means of protective discrimination. But, after the recommendation made by the Bordoloi subcommittee and following the provision of Sixth Schedule, specially the para 2 of the schedule, GOA has farmed the “Assam Autonomous District (Constitution of District Councils) Rules 1951,” and the “Pawi-Lakher (Constitution of Regional Councils) Rules, 1952” for the autonomous region in the

Lushai Hills District. Consequently, the District Councils and the Regional Councils were constituted in 1952 and 1953 respectively.

No State No Rest: Demands for Autonomy among the Plain Tribes

No State No Rest was the most popular bills wrote in most of the walls in Diphu town, situated at the heart of the Karbi Anglong, a district of Assam in the mid 1980's. This was meant for the demands of separate state initially then an autonomous state made by the Karbi leaders. Similar patterns of such demands for extensive autonomy were raised by other tribes living in the northern and southern part of the Brahmaputra River. It is noticed that, the movement for autonomy got popular among the hills tribe first, but slowly similar and simultaneous wave of ethnic based autonomy movements were noticed among the plains tribes of Assam as well. The roots to these movements for autonomy had started during the colonial time although not directly towards autonomy but latter these had contributed to foster the sense of autonomy among the plains tribes. These movements were led by different organizations of different plains tribes. For example one ma refer to the following organizations such as – Bodo Chatra Sanmilini (1918-19), Kachari Sanmilan (1921), Kachari Students Association (1922), Bodo Maha Sanmilan (1924), Bodo Sahitya Sabha (1951) etc. of Bodos, Karbi A' Darbar (1945) of Karbis, Deori Sanmilan (1951), Sadou Asom Chatra Santha (1951) of Deoris, Miri Sanmilan presently known as- Mishing BaaNou Koubang (1924), Miri Chatra Sanmilan (1938), Uttar Pub Simanta Miri- Abor Sanmilan (1945 – 47) of Mishings, Sonowal Kachari Hito Sadhini Sabha (1921) of Sonowal Kachari etc are some of the prominent.

As it is mentioned these organizations had not directly asked for any political demands for their respective community initially, rather their demands were more confined towards social needs. It was indeed believed that, the demands made were more inclined towards social change and welfare to the community.²² But it is not to say that, the sense of ethnic distinctiveness had never realised among the plains tribes. Even the organizations referred above were the outcome of that realization. The colonial demarcation of hills and plains had also contributed to strengthen such distinctiveness. It was in the year, 1928-29 various tribal leaders came together and submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission stating the reservation of seats in various elected bodies for the tribals.²³ This had stimulated the leaders of the plain tribes to form an umbrella

organization for the plain tribes named as- **Assam Plain Tribal League** in 1933. With the inception of the organization it had started demanding autonomy for the plain tribes.²⁴ This league with the successive leadership of the Bhimbar Deori had able to make an important place in the state's political decision making for quite sometime. There were three parallel political forces during that time, namely the Congress, Muslim league and the Tribal League. Tribal league interestingly seems to be active in politics and had different rounds of understanding with the governing elites of that time, first with Congress in 10th September, 1939 and latter with Muslim League in 16th March, 1940.²⁵

But till then nothing concrete was made to sustain the demands for the recognition of identity and autonomy of the plains tribes. It was under the auspicious of the then MLC Surendranath Buragohain, the tribals of the undivided Assam came together and seat in three daylong conference organized in the Hall of the Shillong Darbar in 21st to 23rd March, 1945. The conference was known as- "**Assam Tribes and Races Conference**".²⁶ In this meeting they had taken a decision to bring solidarity among the plain as well as the hills tribes and also to stand together in the matters of securing political, social and economic cooperation. This shows how the conference has brought the tribals and other ethnic communities together and made them realized the essentialities of a co-operative movement. Tracing these cooperative histories of the plains tribals in the pre-independence era, the leaders of the plain tribes organized an important organization which practically spelt the issue of autonomy for the plains tribes for the first time in Assam. The organization was, "**Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA)**" formed in February, 1967. The PTCA demanded for a separate plains' tribal land named as- **Udayachal**, which they demanded to be recognised as a separate Union Territory.²⁷ But the demands made by the PTCA were not successful as there was constant failure of the leaders to address and to accommodate all the tribes living in the Brahmaputra Valley. That was not the only reason why PTCA failed but there were many. Firstly, the overwhelming importance of the leaders of the PTCA towards the issues of the Bodos and their demands for identity, language and culture made the leaders to neglect the major ambition of the organization. This was mainly because the majority of the leadership of the PTCA were from the Bodo community.²⁸ Secondly, the emergence of the individual movements for autonomy among different tribes and ethnic communities made the collapse of the cooperative fight for autonomy. For instance the Lalaung

Darbar for the Tiwas, the Ujjani Asom Rajya Parishad for the Ahoms,²⁹ Mishing Autonomous Council for the Mishings, Deori Autonomous Councils for the Deoris so on and so forth.

The situation became worst after the Assam Movement, as the aspirations of the leaders and of the common people were assumed to be not represented by the movement. There was a general belief of distrust among the plain tribes people, as they believe that, the leaders of the Assam Movement had failed to address the grievances of the tribal population. This situation had been illustrated by the Bhupinder Singh Committee as-

“The Assam Accord of 1985 was hastily hammered out in compulsive circumstances. It aroused hopes in the minds of the ethnic Assamese and generated fear and resentment in the minds of tribal and religious and linguistic minorities. The fact that from the Assam side only AASU negotiated with the Government of India and other political tribal and minority groups were excluded, circumscribed its utility. The latter groups viewed it suspiciously.”³⁰

Therefore the demands for autonomy in the latter phases for the plains tribes transcend cooperative feelings of identity and enter into a phase of separate and distinct process of assertion. Important among these which finds the way of success are, Tiwa Autonomous Council (enacted by the State Legislature by enacting Lalung (Tiwa) Autonomous Council Act), Mishing Autonomous Council (1995, with an accord signed between the signatories of the Mishing leadership and the GOI on 1995)³¹, Bodo Autonomous Council (2003), Deori Autonomous Council (the DAC was Established Under The Assam Act No XXV Of 2005- Deori Autonomous Council Act 2005, under Govt. of Assam)³² and Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council (created according to the direction to the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council Act of 2005)³³. But some other movements which are still prolonging in Assam which certainly posed an important question for demands of autonomy for the ethnic groups including, the Rabhas, Koch Rajbanshis, Gorkhas etc.

Carrot and Stick Policy of the Indian State: Development Councils and the Future of Autonomy in Assam

The question that captures the attention in this conclusion section of the paper is the response of the state in directing concession for the communities who are demanding autonomy. The ongoing demands of the tribal communities for extending autonomy and administrative provisions for regulating the traditional way of life has crushed under the brutal and slow administrative expertise of the state. Therefore it is the responsibility of the liberal democratic state to address the demands and to fulfil what is seem to be just. It is believed that, democratic state often adopts mixed strategies by combating threats and by offering negotiation.³⁴ Therefore carrot and stick policy stands for a bargaining where the state tries to use maximum diplomacy of coercion to render advantages for the state. The state's attitude here in the region northeast is very much crucial. State is turning witty in handling the present situation of demands for autonomy and identity. It is seen that there are several ongoing autonomy movements in the state of Assam and in the different parts of northeast as well, which creates pressure in front of the state. Therefore it is the responsibility of the state to initiate provisions to accommodate the demands raised by different tribes, ethnic communities. State so far successful in moulding the demands via some successful negotiation and also limits the possibilities for threat of the autonomy movement. There are all total three ADC, and seven Autonomous councils created in Assam and it took the advantage to regulate the funds and other financial sanctions for these councils, which in a way prevails the state's control over these decentralized units.

Although these arrangements are made, there remain certain communities whom demands are still stagnant and unanswered. The communities who are profoundly demanded for recognition of ST status (namely the Ahoms, Koch Rajbanshis, Morans, Mattoks, Chutias, Tea Garden Laborer also known as Adivasis, etc.) and some other who are demanding for extending the existing provisions for autonomy (the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council, Gorkha Development Council are important). Taking into consideration GOI under Congress had find out one very interesting solution to these demands, which they named as- Development Council. In the late 2007, the GOA announced the formation of 'Development Councils' for a number of ethnic groups as a reverence of consolation which are demanding for ST status. These communities include the Koch Rajbanshis, Tai Ahoms, Morans, Mattocks, Chutias, and the Adivasis.

Interestingly, although decision of formation of these councils have been decided in the year 2008 but nothing concrete has been noticed till late 2010. After the late 2010, the government has become quite active on the formation of the 'Development Councils' (DC). During the tenure of Tarun Gogoi led Congress Government in Assam had formed a total of 29 DCs in Assam. The major ambition of these councils was to secure socio-economic development of the certain social categories such as – ethnic groups, caste groups etc. It was expected by the GOI, the then GOA and the leaders on the success of these DCs which may come handy in realizing the goal for development. However, the newly formed BJP led government in Assam did not show much interest in these DCs and decided to dissolve these DCs and stopped further investment for them.³⁵ This again shows the reluctance of the government in adopting a development agenda to the communities who are living in the socio - economic marginalization. However, the incumbent government blamed the earlier government for not able to seriously scrutinized the functions of these councils leading to serious financial anomalies. They have further accused the preceding government for using this DC policy for political agenda and profit.

Conclusion:

For some obvious reason these DC are seen as a state's carrot and stick policy to divert the major demands of the demanding communities by locating smaller concessions for them. Therefore the future of the demands of autonomy based on the ethnic identity can be seen from this perspective and also via the paternalistic reaction against these carrot and stick policies of the state, which have recently been noticed with the dilemma created by the Central government for recognizing ST status. But the inevitable fact is that deepening of the democratic principles and constant referral to the majority community by the smaller communities will always fuel the exclusivist sentiments among the minds and hearts of the communities, who see themselves relatively inferior, deprived or imaginatively superior from others, but in both the cases ethnicity going to play a crucial role in shaping what a person is ought to be and it would always a vicious cycle in northeast unless and until state become more serious about the issue.

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