
**AUTONOMY MOVEMENT IN NORTH EAST INDIA: A STUDY OF THE
HILL TRIBAL IN THE STATE OF ASSAM**

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ABSTRACT

Movements for autonomy have marked the political discourse in North East 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 this 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 autonomy movement by the tribals of the North Cachar Hills (N.C. Hills) district of Assam state in India is a result of continuous resentment and frustration of the hill tribal people, due to discrimination and oppression by the government of Assam and the plain people of Assam. Although, Autonomous District Council (ADC) existed in N.C. Hills district since 1952 to give some sort of autonomy to the tribal people to administer themselves and take some developmental steps, much improvement could not be achieved due to limited power of the ADC and the state government's apathy.

Key Words: Autonomy, Autonomous District Council, Local self-government, Hill Tribal.

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INTRODUCTION

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. (Cornell, 2004, p.249) Despite its popularity, autonomy is controversial, and many conflicts are themselves about the demand for and resistance to autonomy. At other times, autonomy seems to offer a way out of conflict or the transformation of the conflict. However, autonomy has also become an instrument for negotiating competing claims in multi-ethnic and multi-religious state. In fact it has been seen as a panacea for solving ethnic conflicts in different parts of the world. (Ghai, 2000, p.1 & Nordquist, 1998, p.7)

Autonomy in the ethical sense is individual autonomy. His free will is significant here. Kant is the one who introduced it in the language of moral philosophy. (Bhattacharjee, 1994, p.35) By autonomy of the will, Kant means the faculty that the will possesses of being its own law giver, of being itself by its own nature, the source of the moral law, the moral itself. The will is autonomous only when it acts according to law. (Wolff, 1973, pp.177-178) For Kant, to be autonomous means to be free and to be free means to act as per the voice of the Universal reason. T.H. Green, departing from Kant taught that each will seek self satisfaction. But each will is satisfied only when it accomplishes moral actions. Each will seek autonomy. True autonomy is not freedom to do anything but the freedom to pursue such things which are worth pursuing. (Suda, 2005, p.158) Thus, although individual's freedom was given preferences, like Kant, T.H. Green also emphasized that individual freedom should be sacrificed for the general well being.

The term "autonomy" is derived from the Greek words "auto" meaning "self" and "nomo" meaning "law" or "rule". (Benedikter, 2009, p.18) Thus, autonomy basically means to make one's own laws or "self-rule". Self-rule has two components: the independence of one's own deliberations and choice from manipulation by others and the capacity to rule oneself. In its political and legal context, autonomy mainly refers to the "self-governing of a people or the power to regulate their own affairs by enacting legal rules". (Cornell, 2004, pp.248-249)

In international law, autonomy denotes "parts of the state's territory are authorized to govern themselves in certain matters by enacting certain laws and statutes, but without constituting a

state of their own”.(Heintze,1998, p.7)However, there is no generally accepted definition of autonomy in international law. While the degree of autonomy or self-government enjoyed by a territory often has been utilized by international legal scholars to determine in which category of special sovereignty or dependency--protectorate, vassal state, dependent state, colony, associated state, or other category—a territory should be placed, these categories often are overlapping and frequently subject to scholar disagreement.(Hannum&Lillich,1980, p.885)Thus, autonomy is a relative term that describes the extent or degree of independence of a particular entity rather than defining a particular minimum level of independence that can be designated as the status of “autonomy”.

In the middle ages, Pope asserted that it has power given by God to control all aspects of the ages of the individuals from birth to burial. This brought into existence resistance. Certain groups claimed autonomy. Such groups seceded from the church and formed separate denomination, like the Protestants. Feudalism claimed autonomy. Guilds claimed autonomy.(Rao,1994, p.1)Thus, the doctrine of autonomy was fully established in the middle ages. The doctrine of autonomy penetrated into social, economic and political spheres as well. The very early writers were therefore concerned with all aspects of individual life.

In the modern state system, the concept of autonomy is a vexed one. At the operational level, nevertheless, the concept relates to the access to power and resources which are basically a state monopoly. At the same level, we can draw a few important and working features of autonomy: (I) Autonomy is a matter of degree (II) It is functional (III) the concept of autonomy is institutionalized in view of the multi-national make up of a modern state (IV) It aims at giving expression to distinct cultural and linguistic identities and at uplifting the backward socio-economic conditions of the nationalities (V) It aims at consolidating the units within the state system (VI) the autonomous units have certain degree of independence in decision making in internal matters (VII) this independence is regulated by the state and (VIII) as it is regulated, there is latent or patent conflict potentialities.(Ray,1997, p.255)

Autonomy is also a particular form of external relations. Its need is felt at a particular stage of internal development of a community and can never be an independent demand. It occurs when a fairly large number of people or an otherwise identifiable segment of the population deliberately band together for collective actions in order to change, reconstitute, reinterpret, restore, protect, supplant or create some portions of their culture or social order or better life changes by

redistributing the power or control in a society. Such movement may continue over a length of time through repeated actions. But their collective activities pursuing instrumental rewards are the least threatening to the national interest insofar as their aim is to bring change in the system. Such movement should be encouraged as these indicate legitimate expression of aspirations of the people.(Prasad,1994, pp.11-12) Thus, the demand for autonomy movement is raised from a wide spectrum of political commitments. In a political system which has a written Constitution, some of the norms of the political system are laid down in the constitutional law, (Basu,2005, pp. 285-286) itself and the political structure. The Autonomous District Council (ADCs) in the states of North East India may be mentioned as a result of the autonomy movement by the tribals of North East India as well as instances of such political structures.

The form of Autonomous District Council (ADC) took shape after a good deal of deliberations in the Constituent Assembly of India. It carried a strong legacy of Government of India Act of 1935.(Basu,2005, p.9) In spite of some opposition who viewed ADC as an isolationist ploy, the Government of India viewed that ADC under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India was the best form of autonomy that would help the tribal in the hills of North East India grow according to their culture and genius and protect them from the plains people's exploitation. A number of alternative autonomy plans like the Autonomous State within the State, Concept of Hill State and concept of Autonomous Region could not stand the test. Movements for ethnic autonomy have marked the political discourse in North East 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. However, these ADCs are meant to devolve judicial, legislative and executive powers to the hill tribals of North east India(Barbora,2005, p.196&Samaddar, 2005, pp.541-564)The idea behind the setting up of ADC under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India was to provide the tribal people of North East India with a simple administrative set up which can safeguard their customs and ways of lives and to provide autonomy in the management of their affairs.ADCs not only give the hill people of North East India, training on local self-government but also try to bring faster economic development by associating people with the developmental works through their representatives in the District Council.(Hansaria,1993, p.9)

AUTONOMY MOVEMENT BY THE HILL TRIBAL 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. Here the study mainly confines to the autonomy movement in N.C. Hills district of Assam. The N.C. Hills district is one of the twenty seven districts of state of Assam in India. It is situated at the southern end of Assam covering an area of 4,890 Sq.km. It is one of the two hill districts in Assam and one of the backward districts as well. The mainland of Assam is inhabited by the Assamese who are plainsmen having different culture, features, languages and traditions from the tribals in the hill districts. They are also economically and educationally advanced and developed than the hill tribal people. The main constituents of the hill tribes living in the N.C. Hills district are the *Dimasa*, the *Zeme Naga*, the *Hmar*, the *Kuki*, the *Biate*, the *Karbi*, the *Khasi*, the *Hrangkhoh*, the *Vaiphei*, the *Khelma*, and the *Rongmei*. Haflong is the district headquarters of N.C. Hills district which is at an altitude of 3900 feet from the sea level. (Hand Book of N.C. Hills, 2002, p.5)

The autonomy movement by the tribals in the N.C. Hills district was a result of continuous resentment and frustration of the hill tribal people, due to discrimination and oppression by the government of Assam and the plain people of Assam. Although, Autonomous District Council (ADC) existed in N.C. Hills district since 1952 to give some sort of autonomy to the tribal people to administer themselves and take some developmental steps, much improvement could not be achieved due to limited power of the ADC and the state government's apathy.

The movement for autonomy was initially articulated by the leaders of the N.C. Hills district in around 1946, but the movement gained momentum in 1960. On October 10, 1960, The Assam Official Language Bill, 1960 was moved by the Chief Minister of Assam which caused unprecedented upheavals in the state assembly of Assam since the bill tried to enforce the use of Assamese language in all offices through out Assam. The tribal people of N.C. Hills district were not familiar with the Assamese language and considered such move as a sign of oppression since official work in the hill district had been conducted in English. The Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) from N.C. Hills district, Hamdhan Mohan Haplongbar vehemently opposed the content of the bill. (Debates of the Assam Legislative Assembly, 1960, p.64) This incident may be considered as the commencement of demand for autonomy in the form of separate state by the hill tribal people of N.C. Hills district.

During the re-organization of Assam in 1969, N.C. Hills district was given an opportunity to exercise option to join the proposed separate state of Meghalaya, to be constituted with the *Khasi*

& *Jiantia* Hills and *Garó* Hills districts of erstwhile Assam. (Dutta, 1993, p.29)The political leaders of Assam persuaded the tribal leaders of N.C. Hills district not to join the proposed state and to remain with Assam and assured of all possible steps to be taken to safeguard the interest of the people of this district. Consequently, the tribal leaders relying on these assurances, preferred to remain with Assam. (Dutta, 1993, p.30) However, these promises remained unfulfilled and instead the expectations of the people of N.C. Hills district was frustrated by the decisions of the Government of Assam taken on 1972 which imposed Assamese language as the sole medium of instruction in university and secondary levels of education. (Dutta, 1990, p.115)In protest against the decision, a series of meetings were organized by the leaders and educationist of N.C. Hills district on January 16, 1973. In order to review the decisions taken at the meetings, a Joint Conference was held with the leaders of another hill district of Assam- Karbi Anglong district at Diphu (headquarters of Karbi Anglong district) on February 18, 1973. The conference adopted resolutions mainly on demanding the creation of a separate state and other related matters.(Proceedings of the joint Conference,1973)

Consequently, leaders of the N.C. Hills and Karbi Anglong district submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India explaining how they were discriminated and oppressed by the government of Assam and how their distinct identity was at stake. They also highlighted that the only solution to such indefinite hardships faced by them was separation from Assam and creation of a state for them. In response to their demand, the Prime Minister disagreed with the creation of a new state but allowed to enhance the allotment of funds to these two hill districts. (Memorandum, 1980)Although the leaders of N.C. Hills district were not satisfied with the outcome, they decided to keep it as a trial but they were again disillusioned and bewildered after some years by the decisions of the All Assam Student Union which tried to do away with the reservation and privilege hitherto enjoyed by the tribals and students belonging to schedule tribes in the hill district.(Memorandum, 1980)

To further their claims, the Central Executive Committee of the Karbi Anglong and N.C. Hills State Demand Committee submitted another memorandum to the Prime Minister of India on January 18, 1982.(Memorandum,1982)This memorandum deliberated on the re-organization of Assam in 1969, backwardness of the people of the hill district, political aspirations of the tribal people, medium of instruction etc. and urged upon the Government of India to immediately create a separate state for the hill people to redress their adversities.(Memorandum,1982)

With the birth of Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) in 1986, which was constituted for creation of autonomous state to safeguard the language, culture and tradition of the hill tribal people of Assam, demand for autonomy accelerated to a higher level. (P.S. Dutta, 2004, p.5) Thus, after a long decade movement spearheaded by ASDC, KSA (Karbi Student Union), NCHSF (North Cachar Hills Students Federation) and DSU (Dimas Student Union) for creation of an 'Autonomous State' comprising N.C. Hills and Karbi Anglong district of Assam under the provision of Article 244 (A) of the Indian Constitution, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed as compromise between the Chief Minister of Assam and the leaders of these organizations on 1st April 1995 in New Delhi under the auspices of the Government of India. (Memorandum, 1995) As a result, although a separate state was not granted, the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India was amended and thirty additional powers were incorporated in the form of Paragraph 3A of the Sixth Schedule for these two hill districts. (Souvenir, 2008, p.14) The ADC which had been operating in N.C. Hills district since 1952 with some powers was also to be called as NCHAC (North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council) as per the Amendment in sub-Paragraph 3 of the Paragraph 2 of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. (The Constitution of India, 2001, p.204) The amendment of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India increased the power of the ADC of N.C. Hills district by handing over 30 (thirty) additional departments to it so that it could involve itself with more developmental works to develop the hill district and the people.

However, it is found that on many occasions, the elements of the memorandum of understanding signed in 1995 for larger autonomy of the ADC of N.C. Hills district was also not implemented. (An interview with Mr. J.K. Thousen on 6.8.11) Financial power was not given and most important of all, law and order was not in the hands of ADC which made it incapable of handling and solving the insurgency problem in the district. District Transport Office was still in the hands of the state government which was supposed to be handed over to N.C. Hills district. There had been no full-fledged officers to head various departments, no technical secretary etc. The state government was supposed to consult the ADC before transferring state officials to the district and for transferring any officials, a no objection certificate (NOC) had to be issued by the ADC. However, such rules were not followed and not given due importance by the state government.

Besides, the Assam Government also did not sanction and release the grants on time which makes the N.C. Hills district face financial crunch. (Interview with the Sr. Finance and Account officer on 23.08.11) In January, 14, 2003, Mr. Purnendu Langthasa, the Chief Executive Member of the ADC of N.C. Hills district proposed to the Government of India for direct funding of the development plan/schemes of N.C. Hills district since the funds made available by the Government of India under NLCPR (Non-Lapsable Central Pool of Resources) were not released by the state government to N.C. Hills district on time and thus led to delay in implementing the sanctioned projects. (Assam Tribune, Jan 14, 2003) In case of release of fund under annual plan, the release by the state government in two installments on six monthly bases was also often delayed. Moreover, since developmental funds from the Central government were also deposited in the state government's account, releases to the N.C. Hills district were most of the time irregular. Sometimes, funds were not released for three to four years. (Report of the Expert Committee, 2007, pp.35 & 41) The state government had not been able to release the budget amount in full under non-plan head as well. According to some officials, funds made available by the Government of India under Article 275 (1) were sometimes diverted to other plain districts of the state of Assam and only small amount were allocated to N.C. Hills district. (Assam Tribune, Jan 14, 2003)

To sum up, the state government's indifferent attitude and irresponsible activities contributed to the resentment of the hill tribal of N.C. Hills district.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the autonomy movement of the hill tribals in North East India in general and N.C. 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 socio-political arrangement of the system. In N.C. Hills district of Assam, the autonomy movement by the hill tribal is a repercussion of a discriminate treatment meted out towards them by the government of Assam and the plains people. They have been perplexed and disillusioned by the oppressive and irresponsible actions and policies of the government of Assam a number of times, which further enhanced their doubt, suspicion and bitterness over the Assamese speaking plain people. 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.

To conclude, it can be said that this kind of movement deserves encouragement not only because the aim and purpose of this autonomy movement is 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. Further, a proper understanding of the needs and aspirations of the people involved in this movements and sincere effort to tackle their problems within the national framework are strategic steps in dealing with these movements.

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