

An outline on the growth and development of Autonomy Assertion among the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam

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Abstract: *Movement for autonomy among various communities becomes a common phenomenon in the cotemporary political scenario of Assam. Thinking about the losing identities of diverse ethnic communities inhabiting on this land since long because of the present socio-political developments, these people choose the path of autonomy only as the remedy. Few of them have already emerged as successful in this regard, yet several others are not. The Sonowal Kachari community (an ethnic community of Assam) is one of those who have granted autonomy by the government of Assam. They had to struggle almost ten years for it. But, its background was established much earlier. Therefore, through this paper an attempt is being made to analyze the various factors that made the Sonowal Kacharis conscious on their existence which culminated to the birth of Sonowal Kachari Autonomy Movement in the subsequent days.*

Keywords: autonomy, ethnic, autochthon, community, tribal, colonial, immigrants, procession, assertion, descendent, belt and block movement, inhabitants, council, legitimate, Mongolian, aspiration.

Autonomy refers to a person's right to self management in terms of his conduct and affairs. Its literal meaning comes from the Greek word "*autonomos*" with '*auto*' meaning '*self*' and '*nomos*' meaning '*law*'.¹ Autonomy also defines a person's right to make decisions on his own and not be forced or manipulated by anybody else.

In the first decade of the 20th century, autonomy has been become one of the major concerns of our social and political existence. As is currently understood, the notion of autonomy, both as something that belongs to human beings and human nature, and as something that is the source or basis of morality, that is duty of our time. The term began to be applied primarily or even exclusively in a political context, to "*civic communities*" possessing independent legislature and self governing authority.² Then the term was taken up again in the context of their individual rights and existence, for their individual modes of behavior.³ In the background of the upsurge of anti-colonial movements the term gained new perspectives as meanings, which would now imply not only new rights, but also new responsibilities.⁴ In time the idea of autonomy became not only the standard of rights or responsibilities, but also, an issue of governmentally - Something that denotes transaction, government negotiation and relating to others on the basis of set rules.

The notion of autonomy and the frequent occurrences of such movements particularly in North East India has recently been attracted several scholars to be dealt with the issue. The work of P.S Dutta i.e *Autonomy Movement in Assam: Documents* is one of the most felicitated achievements in this regard. Besides, scholar Monirul Hussain has devoted a valuable part of his life in studying and understanding the ethnic issues of North-East India. Some of his remarkable works published in Economic and Political Weekly are "Tribal Question in Assam," "State, Identity Movements and Internal Displacement in the North-East," "Tribal

Movement for Autonomous State in Assam” etc. Many articles and writings have also been published in different magazines, souvenir, journal etc.

OBJECTIVE

After Independence of India, the North-Eastern region has been witnessing increasing movements for autonomy. In fact all these movements are not similar in nature. Some movements aimed at only attaining autonomous district Council Status while the others are fighting uninterruptedly for separate political entity within the Indian Union. It would be important to note here that the Bodo Kacharis, the Karbis and the Dimasas are demanding autonomous state status. Through this paper an attempt is being made to understand the autonomy aspiration, its origin and effects of the Sonowal Kachari Autonomy Movement as a part of the greater ethnic movements in Assam.

METHODOLOGY

It is an analytical approach towards understanding different aspects of Sonowal Kachari Autonomy Movement and it depends upon both the primary and secondary sources including personal interviews.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAIN TRIBES OF ASSAM

Assam is the home of diverse ethnic tribes. There are broadly two groups of tribal population, i.e. the *autochthon tribals* and the *non-autochthon tribals*. The first category can again be subdivided into two distinct groups, viz. the tribals of the plains and the tribals of the hills. The non-autochthon tribals include various tribal groups which migrated mainly from Jharkhand area during colonial period in search of livelihood.⁵ The autochthon plain tribes of Assam can broadly be divided into two groups⁶ -

- a) *The Bodo groups*: The Bodo kacharis, the Hojais, the Kacharis including Sonowals, the Lalungs, the Meches, the Rabhas, the Deoris and the Barmans in Cachar.
- b) *The Miri or the Mishings*.

Both of the above tribal groups belong to Mongolian origin. Ethnologically these people are different from the rest of the so-called Assamese people. In fact Bodos are the earliest known inhabitants of Assam and they had been maintaining their sovereignty till their king Tula Ram Senapati.⁷

BACKGROUND OF THE AUTONOMY ASSERTIONS

The autochthon tribals are the earliest known inhabitants of Assam. They have significant contributions towards the growth and development of Assamese nationality and its language, literature and culture. According to the historian Dr. Dambarudhar Nath, as far as possible Madhav Kandali translated Ramayana into Assamese language under the patronization of Kachari king Mahamanikya.⁸ Even today a large number of tribals have fully identified themselves with the Assamese. But in the process of social transformation both in colonial and post colonial Assam, the tribes have some certain grievances. These not only made them anxious about their ethnic identity, but also stimulated their sentiments to establish them in a legitimate position in the society. Among such grievances some important are as follows-

Firstly, the tribes of Assam are forming an important component of Assam's demography, society and polity. With the development of the idea of Assamese nationality, many of them started to forget their individual identities and introduced themselves as Assamese. For example, *the Sonowals* and *the Meches* of Upper Assam have completely assimilated and identified with the *Asamiyas*.⁹ This process of assimilation with the mainstream of Assamese society not only led to the extinction of their own dialects, customs and traditions, but also their population decreased drastically. According to the census report of 1872 the total population of tribals in Assam was 22.5% which decreased to 10.7% in 1971.¹⁰ Besides, the ongoing process of *Sanskritisation*, particularly during the pre-colonial period absorbed many tribals into the caste-fold both in the '*shakta*' and the '*Vaisnava*' forms of Hinduism in the Brahmaputra Valley.

Secondly, The constitution of India under Article 350 (a) keeps provision for practicing and imparting education in the primary level through its own dialect of a particular community. However, the attitude of the state govt. of Assam towards the tribal languages is not at all encouraging. Contrary to this provision the state govt. tries to suppress the interests shown by the tribals. The Bodo could get their language recognized as medium of instruction in primary stage in 1963, yet no other group of the plains tribals has been recognized as the medium of instruction in the primary schools.

Thirdly, Large number of East Bengal immigrants started to pour into the tribal areas since the beginning of 20th century and settled therein. Besides, local non-tribal traders, businessmen and money-lenders also have been onslaughting the lands belonging to the tribals. At the time of Independence, the Govt. of Assam created 37 tribal belts and blocks to protect the plain tribals and their land from intrusions by non tribals. However, in 1973-74, 2,000 hectares of land changed ownership from tribals to non-tribals in the protected tribal belts.¹¹ Besides, establishment the capital of Assam at Dispur and gradual expansion of urban areas in and around Guwahati, a large number of tribal people, particularly *Bodo* and *Karbi* were alienated from their homeland. This trend of land alienation pushed the tribals deeper into poverty, unemployment and the debt trap.

Fourthly, the tribes of Assam are also experiencing unending discrimination under the present socio-economic system in getting their limited but rightful place in society. Bhimbar Deori, an important leader and his contemporary tribal students faced various types of discrimination during their education in Cotton College.¹² Besides, the All Assam students Union, at one stage demanded the abolition of all constitutional safeguards provided to the tribals during Assam Agitation.¹³ They also suffered heavily in the anti-election violence in 1983.

Assam's society has been extraordinarily plural in its composition and highly uneven in structure. Among them, the autochthon tribes have experienced a very distorted process of social transformation both in colonial and post colonial Assam, which poses a great threat to their identity. Under such circumstances, the seeds of identity consciousness or identity assertion were first sown by the newly emerged middle class, as a product of colonial rule in Assam.¹⁴ The major contribution of this modern middle class was that they could provide a definite direction to their identity through articulations in tune with changed rational legal framework.

If we pay a closer look, it can be seen that the first concrete plains tribal political aspiration may be traced back to January 4, 1929, when four memoranda were submitted to the *Simon Commission*. But that was a phase of the protectionist behavior. Autonomy aspiration of the plains tribals however required about four more decades to be articulated and in fact on February 27, 1957 with birth of *Plains Tribal Council of Assam* (PTCA).

The PTCA stood for *the Barmans of Cachar, the Bodo- Kachari, the Deoris, the Hojais, the Kacharis including the Sonowals, the Lalungs, the Meches and the Rabhas*. On 20th May, 1967 it submitted a memorandum to the president of India demanding full autonomy in the predominantly plain tribal areas of the Northern tract of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sivsagar districts including all the tribal Belts and Blocks of those areas. The main objectives behind their demand for autonomy were:

1. To protect their land.
2. To give effective check to economic exploitation of tribals by non tribals.
3. To conserve their language, culture, customs.
4. To prevent political domination by non tribals over tribals.
5. To create an environment for growing their own genius and traditions.

As a result of autonomy assertions of the tribes of Assam, the govt. has granted autonomy power so far to the *Karbis* (*karbi Anglong Autonomous council 1952*), *Dimasas* (*Dima Hasao Autonomous District council 1976*), *Bodos* (*Bodoland Autonomous Council 1995*), *Rabhas* (*Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council 1995*), *Mishings* (*Mishing Autonomous Council, 1995*), *Tiwas* (*Tiwa Autonomous Council 1995*), *Sonowals* (*Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council 2005*), *Thengal Kacharis* (*Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council 2005*) and *Deoris* (*Deori Autonomous Council 2005*). Among the councils, only three of them are under six schedule of Indian Constitution.

THE SONOWAL KACHARIS AND THEIR MOVEMENT FOR AUTONOMY

Among the greater *Bodo race*, the Sonowal Kachari is an important autochthon tribe of Assam. According to the *Census Report of 1972*, the Sonowal Kacharis constitute the third largest plain tribe of Assam with a total population of 1, 98,619.¹⁵ They are chiefly found in the districts of Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sivsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dhemaji and Lakhimpur. Even in Arunachal and Nagaland also, a large number of Sonowal Kachari people have been living since long past.

The Sonowal Kacharis believe that they were the descendants of great Bhaskarbarmanas Narakasur, Ban, Bhagadutta, Hidimba, Ghototkos, Bhim, Prahlad and Bali. Although it is not definitely known about the origin of the Sonowal Kacharis, yet it can be assumed that their ancestors were '*Manick- Mukuta*'. Dr. Lila Gogoi opins that a Sadiyal Kachari king named Manick ruled at Sadiya some time in 11th/12th century A.D.¹⁶ Besides, renown historian Upendra Chandra Guha mentions in his book "*Kacharer Itibritta*" that the Kachari Kingdom known as '*Halali*' was established by Koundily Narayan at Sadiya. These opinions reveal the existence of a Kachari Kingdom before the advent of the Ahoms in the Brahmaputra Valley.

Being an aboriginal tribe, the Sonowal Kacharis were too similarly concern to their socio-economic backwardness in the existing society. In the field of economy and education, the community was lagging far behind from other groups of people in Assam. At the same time, the community also faced some serious challenges to uphold their ethnic identity. Under such circumstances, a section of educated people from the community made their appearance assuring to work for the welfare and all round development of the community. This trend of community consciousness led to the birth of its first student organization viz. "*All Assam Sonowal kachari Student's Union*" in 1968. After some time "*The Sonowal Kachari Kalyan Sangh*" was also formed.

In the history of Sonowal Kachari Autonomy Movement, the foundation of "*All Sonowal Kachari Jatiya Parishad*" on 12th June 1994 was a significant event. Its foundation marks the virtual beginning of the autonomy movement among the Sonowal Kacharis because the members gathered at District Library of Dibrugarh on that particular day besides forming the organization, swear for fulfilling all kinds of aspirations of the community through mass mobilization. The first president of Jatiya Parishad was Sri Keshab Chandra

Sonowal and Sri Lobhit Kumar Saikia was its secretariat. The organization for the first time prepared a memoranda demanding autonomy for the Sonowal Kacharis and placed it before the President and the Prime Minister of India.

The Sonowal Kachari autonomy movement got momentum with the formation of *The Sonowal Kachari Autonomy Demand Committee* in 1996, *Sonowal Kachari Nari Hontha* in 2000 and *Sonowal Kachari Yuva Parishad* in 2003. A number of discussions, strikes, demonstrations and rallies were undertaken by these organizations for attaining autonomy.

Demands

1. *Assertion for granting autonomy power to the community was the prime demand of the movement. It urged the government to incorporate all the areas into the council predominantly inhabited by the Sonowal Kachari people.*
2. *The movement demanded ultimate power of economic, legislative and executive for the council.*
3. *The movement demanded full application of fifth and sixth schedule for all plains tribes through constitutional amendment.*
4. *The movement had strong standpoint against the inclusion of villages having majority Sonowal Community people to the proposed Mishng or other autonomous councils.*
5. *Instead of community base autonomy, it demanded area wise autonomy.*
6. *The movement urged the government to deal with all the issues without hampering the interest of greater Assamese society.*
7. *It demanded immediate solution of all the problems facing by the ethnic tribes of Assam.*

The Sonowal Kachari community had to fight for ten years since 1994 to 2005, till the govt. granted autonomy on 4th March 2005. The main objectives of setting up the Administrative Authority is to provide maximum possible Autonomy within the framework of the constitution of India for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement of the Sonowal Kachari people in the state. It is agreed that the state govt. of Assam shall by suitable legislation, constitute a council which shall be known as *Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council* (SKAC) and it would be the apex council consisting of satellite areas of village council called the *Sonowal Kachari Village Council* (SKVC). *The Sonowal Kachari Village Council* shall be constituted with population of 3000 to 5000. The list of villages verified by the Deputy Commissioner and scrutinized by the *Assam Institute of Research for Tribes and SCs*, which is to be included into the Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council.

The Sonowal Kachari organizations have been claiming inclusion of 600 villages into the council. But only 440 villages have been enlisted in *annexure-III* for notification as SKAC villages. The Govt. agrees to consider inclusion of the rest of the 160 villages on further examination by the WPT & BC department.

Each village council shall consist of ten (10) elected members out of which five will be from Scheduled Tribe Community. Out of five (5) reserved seats one will be reserved for a woman member. Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council shall consist of thirty (30) elected members out of which four members shall be

nominated by the Govt. of Assam to give representation to those groups/communities of the Council area which are not otherwise represented in it. Out of twenty six (26) seats, thirteen (13) seats shall be reserved for Scheduled Tribes and five (5) seats shall be for women. MPs and MLAs belonging to reserved constituencies (ST) of the area shall be ex-officio member of the Council. Each Village Council shall have elected President and Vice President while the Autonomous Council shall have elected Chief Executive Councilor. Term of office of the Sonowal Kachari Village Council and Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council shall be five (5) years and co-terminus.

From the above discussion it is apparent that the ethnic consciousness among various tribal communities of Assam is deep rooted and concerned to every aspect of the society. We see that the pace of socio-political and economic transformation in the long run of history frightened these people for the existence of their identity. Therefore, in the context of Assam several ethnic movements had been occurred so far with the sole objective of safeguarding their respective identities through self-rule. Mention may be made that these movements were not purely non-violent in nature; instances of violent activities can also be seen.

Similarly, autonomy movement among the Sonowal Kacharis was also guided by some certain objectives. It aspired for all round development of the community through self-rule so that they could also have equal footing with other groups of people in the greater Assamese society. In fact, the Sonowal Kachari Autonomy Movement had never been put any demand for a separate state which could hamper the Assamese Nationality. Their political ambition just confined to achieve autonomy so that the community could be upgraded in the field of literature, economy and culture through self-rule remaining as an integral part of the Assamese Society.

End Notes;

1.Oxford English Dictionary

2.Report of the CRG Dialogue on “Constitutional Provisions for Accommodating Pluralism; The Indian Framework of Autonomy.”

3.Ibid

4.Ibid

5.Monirul Hussain: Tribal Question in Assam, P- 1047,EPW Vol.27, No. 20/21(May 16-23, 1992)

6.P.S Datta: Autonomy Movement In Assam: Document, P- 122,New Delhi:Omsons Publication 1993.

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9.Monirul Hussain: Tribal Question in Assam, P- 1047, EPW Vol.27, No. 20/21(May 16-23, 1992)

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- 11.Ibid,P-1049
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