

# POLITICS OF AUTONOMY IN NORTH EAST INDIA: A CASE STUDY OF ASSAM

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## Abstract

This paper emphasize upon the non-princely North Eastern States which took part in the movement of politics of autonomy in Assam. They are namely: Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. These four states were within Assam before the autonomous movement and were sharing their borders with Assam. There exist a large number of tribes & ethnic communities for which the area is also called as huge diversified place in entire India. The States are so much concern about their identity, language, ethnicity, religion and land etc and they were in a threat that they might lose their originality, for which these states stood up for protest and appealed the Central Government demanding their entrance in Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The research article gave a detailed discussion about the difficulties faced by the inhabitants that tended them for the movement in Assam. The region had witnessed huge difficulties due to illegal immigrations from neighboring countries with which it shares the border, slum areas settlement, illiteracy, non-employment, ethnic conflict, tribal conflicts, language conflicts, identity conflicts etc. Their demand for autonomy has a valid reasonable history which is elaborated in this paper and suggestions are also discussed which entails the solution of the North Eastern Region inhabitant's.

Keywords – North Eastern States, Autonomy, Assam, Politics, Tribes.

## Introduction

The north east region comprised of eight states currently named: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Sikkim was recently added in 2002 among the north east states. Hence, most of the time the region is considered seven sisters and one brother. Rest among the seven states only Manipur and Tripura were princely geographically demarcated states from independency of Nation onwards and the remaining four states got separate statehood due to their autonomous demand and movement. Prior to this demarcation Assam, Tripura and Manipur were the only states in North East Region. “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” (Gogoi, C, 2018).

“The region is a gateway to South East Asia as it is bordered by Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal and China” (Rocky, 2013). And this region has been geographically isolated from mainstream India. The entire region, especially Assam had witnessed bulk of problems due to both migration & immigration and for

political autonomy movement. Because of existence of large number of tribes and ethnic group the region had gone through vast movement demanding for autonomy and separate statehood. Specially, the demand was made by the people of North Cachar hill district and Karbi Anglong for an autonomous state in Assam that resulted in the creation of new states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya. “And moreover, it has been alleged that hill-plains or tribal-non-tribal equation in Assam has never been stable” (Chaube, 1999).

“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” (Gogoi, C, 2018). The North Eastern Region is composed of mostly hilly or mountainous areas and plain land (the modern state of Assam).

### **Concept of Politics of Autonomy in North East**

The whole idea of autonomy revolve around the question of identity of the Local inhabitants of North East which entails that up to how much extent the people are conscious about their language, religion, culture, ethnicity, norms, traditions, land, tribes, practices, belief, rituals etc. Not only between the hilly and plain people there exist clashes in this region but also among the tribal and non tribal these clashes exist till date.

The concept of identity politics came into existence due to this issue. This violence is repetitive in nature and never ending conflict due to existence of different perspectives in a particular geographical area. Therefore, deep level historical understandings exist which resulted to the separate statehood namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland in North East. More than twenty six major tribes are present in Arunachal Pradesh, more than sixteen tribes are in Nagaland, more than five tribes are in Mizoram, more than eighteen tribes are present in Assam which entails clearly the reasons behind the consciousness exist among each tribes about their originality and that is why they are always up to its conservation.

Thus, it can be clearly stated that due to their movement currently there exist the Sixth Schedule in Indian Constitution for developing the tribal communities in North Eastern Region. “Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (Article 275 and Article 244(2)) supports developing provisions for tribal areas majorly in four states such as Assam, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya” (Jacob, 2015).

Demands are still ranging from separate homeland to more Autonomy which resulted to the emergence of Bodoland Territorial Council, 2003. In defining ethnicity, it will be useful to adopt Horowitz’s definition who defined it as “a sense of collective belonging based on common descent, language, history, culture, race or religion or an amalgamation of these factors” (Ashutosh, 2009). Smitana Saikia defined ethnicity as a common consciousness of collective origins and traditions. Ethnic Conflict can be defined as “a form of conflict in which the goal of at least one conflict party are defined in exclusively ethnic terms and the primary dividing line of confrontation is one of ethnic distinction” (Smitana, 2015). There exist these ethnic conflicts among all the tribes of more than fifty in numbers residing in one geographical area.

Statement of the Problem- The huge protest regarding Autonomy and achieving independent political status has a historical reason behind it. Migration has been continuing in this region since the time about 5<sup>th</sup> century before Christ & from pre-British era. Literary, the immigration started during pre-British period, during British rule, during Partition, Post Partition and during Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Moreover, the region is hugely diverse in nature with more than twenty five numbers of tribal communities, their specific identity, religions, languages, ethnicity, culture etc, and there exist conflict within the tribes since ages from time immemorial due to which there is a severe threat among them regarding preservation

of their identity. The inhabitants feel themselves marginalized from the Centre for which they demanded separate statehood, political identity and entrance in Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution from the Government of India. They don't want to become minority in their own religion by not being able to preserve their culture.

Research Objectives- The objectives of this research are mentioned below:

- To examine both the situation before and after the separation of the north eastern states which were within the territory of Assam before autonomous movement.
- To assess the sufficient information from various resources regarding the diversity in perception of all the tribes present in Assam including the hilly and plain areas.
- To explore the hidden issues & challenges faced by the inhabitants of the region which led them to the movement and demand from Centre.
- To suggest some measures this may solve their disputes.

Research Questions- Looking at the statement of the problem, this research will try to find answers to the following questions:

- Why the different tribes in Assam rebelled for political autonomy?
- Why they demanded separate statehood from Assam?
- What is the post-separation status of the population in the area?
- What are the measures need to be taken to resolve the conflict?

Nature and Scope- This research includes the view and concern of the tribal peoples in Region regarding their Autonomous movement for separate statehood status from Assam and also the study provides the perception about the people through which it can be identified the reason behind the conflict among their own religious groups and inhabitants. The study of the paper also comprises the suggestions of the grass root level population related to the movement for political Autonomy in Assam. However, the scope of this research is limited to North Eastern State Assam.

Limitations- The lack of financial support for the research is the first limitation, but there is time constraint for which the study may be limited in nature. Due to the current vicious situation of COVID 19 it is not possible to collect primary data for which practically visiting the study area is necessary, which may limit the research because this paper is based upon the secondary sources of Data. There is an existence of insecurity, unwillingness among the people in the study area to share their respective view points on issue of the politics of autonomy for which the study may be limited. So, the responses cannot be taken as an adequate and honest which can affect the findings of the research.

### Literature Review

There are many literatures available on the issue of North Eastern states related to different ethnic and tribal groups and Politics of Autonomy in Assam. Here are some of the works accessible on the autonomous demand and issue.

**Dr Gogoi, C. (2018)** in his research article named “The Voice of Marginalized: Demands for autonomy among the tribes of North East India with special reference to Assam.” Gave a clear and vivid description from beginning onwards about the history of north east India prior British Era. Due to British administrative arrangement the thought of demanding separate geographical territory within Assam by the different ethnic & tribal community came into the mindset of the population. In actual sense the groups

not only demanded about separate geographical area, they also demanded for separate political status. The huge difference between the hill tribes, the plain tribes and people in plains resulted into the mass violent movement for autonomy in Assam. This paper discussed about the huge and diverse nature of languages, cultures, ethnics, religious, psychologies etc of North East India because of which the place is believed as world's largest diverse region. The inhabitants were scared enough of losing their distinct identity due to large number of communities residing in one specific area and it is probably natural to raise the voice in demanding separation which they felt as the solution of their problem through which the tribes can preserve their distinct land, culture, norms, language, practices, traditions, identity and ethnicity. And this is what they termed as Autonomy. Practically, the local peoples especially the hilly tribal's doesn't consider themselves under the population of mainstream India and feel demarcated as well as marginalized which can be one of the most authenticate reason behind the mass movement for political autonomy in Assam and separate autonomous council.

**Dr Doungel, J (2018)** in the research article entitled "Autonomy movement and Development constraints in the sixth schedule area of North East India." Discussed elaborately about the autonomous movement and its development related to both the political and economic sector of 6<sup>th</sup> schedule of Indian Constitution. This paper discussed in brief about the Autonomous District council, Autonomous council, Territorial council for socio-economic development of the area. Both the term autonomy movement and development are closely interrelated as because the question of autonomous protest came in view of developing economy of the North East India because the then local population felt fully or partially excluded from the mainland Centre India. The main factor behind the emergence of sixth schedule in Indian Constitution is their demands and desire for separate statehood and autonomy.

**Dr Kumar, B.B (2015)** in his book titled "Problems of Ethnicity in the North East India." Gave a detailed explanation about the perception of viewing North East both as an outsider and as an insider and after that expressing the scenario because the conditions which are observed from outside are quite different from within and this is what writer entailed in his book. He discussed about the egocentric view and non-egocentric view of the North East. The huge number of separateness & differentiations exist there results into numerous problems in the region such as insurgency activities, mass revolutionary movements against various policies of Central Government, mass movement for political autonomy, mass movement against illegal immigration, language movement, tribal movement etc. This region consist both strengthen and weakness but focuses neither on the weakness nor on the strength and results into discrimination.

**Dr Babar, A** in his research paper named "An interface between 6<sup>th</sup> schedule and tribal autonomy: A Constructive critique on the working of sixth schedule of the Constitution of India" discussed about the diplomatic relation between the tribal's autonomous movement and sixth schedule of Indian Constitution. The supreme law of India has certain features and provisions for administering the tribal communities which defines that the tribal's of North East are not excluded from the central and Government of India in fact lays special emphasis on this issue for which the Sixth Schedule of the constitution exist. The schedule's main objective is to provide them to get self ruled and self regulate themselves according to them. The political development of the north eastern states is due to 6<sup>th</sup> schedule but there is no institutional and structural development yet on this schedule based. This paper elaborated in detail about the region's condition from British Era till date (both pre and post 6<sup>th</sup> schedule). The tribal areas are being administered as autonomous district council on the basis of central legislative law's implementation. There are both advantages and disadvantages of the schedule and its provisions. The author discussed critically about the formulation of educational, cultural, and technical policies framed for north eastern

tribal communities in contrast to its practical implementation.

**Dr Borah, S.M** in her research paper titled “Autonomy Movement & Durable Solution: A Historical Interpretation of Bodo Movement” described about the origin of Bodo people in Assam and the issues and challenges faced by the community which forced them to demand for separate land .i.e. Bodoland. Bodos are the historically marginalized community within Assam; they are also termed as Kacharis. Author elaborated about the specific and unique identity, ethnicity, culture, tradition, norms, rituals, cultural practices, language, costume etc due to their characteristic’s preservation they demanded for an autonomous land and 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule from the Central Government of India. Government granted and accepted their demand which led to formation of Bodoland separated from Assam with specific Territorial Council and status in 6<sup>th</sup> schedule of the Indian Constitution. Because they went through lots ethnic and ethnicity conflict, economic deprivation, Assam movement, the cultural politics of Bodo sub-nationalism. Even though the Bodo tribes demanded in the form of militant phase as well.

### **Research Methodology**

The paper is explained with both the nature of quantitative and qualitative. It is based on the secondary data derived from reports & journal articles, books, websites, magazines, newspapers, research papers and unstructured personnel interview.

Tools and Techniques- The research is conducted in a village named Darikapar situated in Sivasagar District of Assam. The locality holds approx 2500 of population from which for the purpose of primary data collection five residents of five different tribal community namely: Sumi or Sema tribe of Nagaland, Singpho tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, Garo tribe of Meghalaya, Chutia tribe of Assam and Lushei tribe of Mizoram are selected.

### **Discussion of findings and Results**

Through the literatures and secondary resources reviewed while writing this paper it is clearly understood that the local inhabitants of the north east area are very much up to their identity preservation. Even after the successful autonomous political movement they don’t possess the uniting feature of brotherhood towards Assam and other north eastern states. In actual sense, there are still people of different tribes of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh residing in Assam and assimilating with the local Assamese people in their day to day life. But this is seen only among the minority section of people, practically the people of other north eastern states don’t want to assimilate or adopt the culture except their indigenous one. This is because of their orthodox mindsets that carry the viewpoint that they will lose their specific statehood identity if they adopt or follow other culture of other north eastern states, In spite of having the feeling of Indian nationality they have the feeling of their original tribes. They do not carry the feeling of oneness even though they are separated from Assam but are considered under the states of North East India. Their conception are limited and restricted to their territory and will continue in this manner until they allow to bring any progressive change. The concept of regionalism is still in prevailing in the region. The political parties there are wholly solely indulged into this regionalism and works accordingly.

The proper spread of knowledge regarding accepting and adopting new cultures need to be done in the areas of north eastern states along with their education system where the young generations of the states will come to know about the importance of new traditions, cultures, languages, beliefs, practices, rituals, customs, ideologies etc. Still disputes takes place in the area where the interstate borders are being shared

between Arunachal Pradesh – Assam, Nagaland – Assam, Meghalaya – Assam, Mizoram – Assam. In fact conflict also exists between the plain tribes and hill tribes' people within Assam. Since, time immemorial the ideologies, thoughts, practices, languages differs a lot from the hill tribes to plain tribes, therefore till date they shares a conflictual relation among themselves.

### **Conclusion**

The North East region is full of diversity, even the whole nation India is a diverse nation but the NER possess heterogeneous character among the inhabitants within the territory. Which makes them conscious regarding their ethnic identity including languages, cultures, traditions etc and hence, each and every groups & communities that belongs from different hilly tribes & plain tribes in Assam wants to preserve their unique identity. In order to safeguard their interest huge contrasting protest & inter-state dispute were done by the population among themselves to gain political autonomy and independent statehood before independence. These were only done due to non willingness of Assamese people becoming minority in its own land. But even after going through all those several autonomous revolution still the problem is not yet resolve. The region is suffering a lot for the illegal immigrants, unwanted population and contrasting ideology in their mindsets. There is a lack of National consensus key issue for which the management principles are responsible. We cannot say that the Management is doing different things or performing what is illegal but it can be said that they are doing things differently which may be not the efficient manner to resolve the disputed issue of the nation. The public service delivery mechanism is not proper in the NER this is the reason why the migration issue, statehood issue is still a burning one.

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