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Political autonomy for the plain tribes in Assam: An analysis

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Abstract

The North-East India is living home to many tribal groups. The question of tribal ethnic identity is a very complex issue which leads to the emergence of many tribal movements in the region. After the independence of India, the nation-building process took place amidst large ethno-cultural and religious diversities. Our nationalist leaders embarked on a balancing mission by designing a federal state apparatus to reflect the diversities of the nation. At the same time our national leaders have decided to keep the large variety of ethnic groups of North Eastern region in to one federal unit the state of Assam. However, the central government created a local autonomous administration for some of the tribal communities i.e. Hill Tribes under the Six Schedule of the Constitution to preserve protect their identity, culture and development. The other tribal groups living in the plains of Assam were left outside the ambit of constitutional protection. They have assimilated with the mainstream Assamese nationalism. Subsequently these plain tribes of Assam also mobilized their ethnic identity to get a share in the political process of Assam. In response to their various demands these tribal groups are allowed to enjoy some political privileges by way of constituting tribe specific Autonomous Councils' in Assam. In this paper an attempt will be made to make an analysis of the articulation of the demand for political autonomy based on their ethnic identity by the plain tribes of Assam and the working of the autonomous councils constituted for their autonomy.

Keywords: Autonomy, development, movement, ethnic group, deprivation etc.

Introduction

The problem of ethnic movements for securing political autonomy is a common issue for majority of the nations in the South Asian regions. These ethnic movements involving minority ethnic groups has shaken the stability of the South Asian States. In these multicultural plural societies of South Asian region, the centralizing tendency of the democratic polity led to the emergence of identity consciousness among the relatively minor groups which puts a challenge to the nation building process. In India the nation-building process took place, during the post-independence period amidst large ethno-cultural and religious diversities. Our nationalist leaders embarked on a balancing mission by designing a federal state apparatus to reflect the diversities of the nation. At the same time our national leaders have decided to keep the large variety of ethnic groups of north eastern region into one federal unit- the state of Assam. However, the central government created a local autonomous administration for some of the tribal communities (Hill Tribes) of North East India under the Six Schedule of the Constitution to protect their identity, culture and development. The other tribal groups living in the plains of Assam were left outside the ambit of such constitutional protection. But in the socio-cultural and political condition of contemporary Assam and of course due to the hegemonic character of the majority Assamese speaking community in the socio-political process of the state has resented the tribal people's sentiment which led them to start their movement for establishing their cultural identity and to create a space in the socio-political structure of Assam. The basic objective of this paper is to analyse the growth and nature of the tribal ethnic movements for political autonomy in Assam particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley in the post independence period. Apart from this attempt will be made to analyse the problem of ethnic identity crisis and the issue of tribal development and its relation to the autonomy movement of the plain tribes in Assam.

Objectives

1. To find out the reasons for the emergence of the demand for autonomy in Assam.

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2. To find out the factors of autonomy demand by the plain tribes in Assam.
3. To study the functioning of the Autonomous Councils for the socio, economic development of the plain tribes in Assam.
4. To find out whether the autonomous councils fulfill the aspirations of the respective tribal communities.

Methodology

This is a theoretical, descriptive and analytical paper based on the secondary sources of data. The major sources of the data used in this paper for the description and analysis of the proposed subject are the printed books, journals, newspaper reports and other published bulletins. Of course, some data and facts are collected from the web materials available in the different Google web page.

Review of literature

The demand for political autonomy by the tribal ethnic groups is a universal phenomenon in contemporary world. Since modern nations-states are not composed of homogenous communities the smaller ethnic groups have raised the demand for political power within the state. Therefore, the studies on ethnic movements have occupied prominence in social science research. Various books and articles on this issue have been published not only in India but through out the world. A brief review of the relevant literature on this issue is given below.

Nani Gopal Mahanta in his article, *"The State vis-à-vis Periphery in the book Crisis of State and Nation, John P. Neelsen and Dipak Malik (eds.)2007, Manohar Publisher and Distributors, New Delhi-110002"*, argued that the problem of identity movements is common in all South Asian Nation. These nations are 'multicultural' having plural society. But democratic polity with strong centralizing tendency negates its multicultural and plural character. Thus identity consciousness has crop up among relatively minor groups and puts a challenge to nation-building. In this study attempt will be made to investigate how hegemonic tendency of the present socio-political construct of the Assamese nationality nurtured the ethnic aspirations among the relatively minor tribal ethnic groups.

S. D. Muni in his paper *Ethnic conflict, federalism, and democracy in India*, seen in the website <http://archive.unu.edu/unupress/unupbooks/uu12ee/uu12ee0j.htm> Viewed on 4/12/2012, stated that the ongoing autonomy movement resulted in the awareness and politicization of ethnic identities. According to him, in the process of politicization of ethnic groups and their identities, a number of factors played a critical role. These include the state, pace and pattern of development and role of political elites and forces.

Jay Barbora, in Article, *"Autonomy or Death: Assessing Ethnic Autonomy Arrangements in Assam, North East India"* 2005, viewed autonomy arrangements in Assam as construction of frontiers, negotiations for political space which redefines sovereignty, citizens and subjects within an autonomous regimes. The author viewed that the ethno-nationalist demands for autonomy can be seen in a distinct pattern in which most of the political demands for self-determination are linked with the idea of a distinct identity of an ethnic group.

Ruth Lapidoth in his book *"Autonomy: Flexible Solution to Ethnic Conflicts"*, Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996, observes that 'Autonomy is a means

for diffusion of powers in order to preserve the unity of a state while respecting the diversity of its populations'.

Rajat Ganguly in his edited book, *"Autonomy and Ethnic Conflict in South and South-East Asia (Asian Security Studies)"*, Routledge Publication 1st edition, 2012, is of the view that the territorial or regional autonomy is supposed to be able to reconcile two paradoxical objectives: the preservation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state, and the satisfaction of ethnic minorities' right to national self-determination.

From the above survey of literature, it is clear that the territorial autonomy is being provided in the world for the ethnic conflict management. Today ethnic groups have yielded their distinct identity and culture in order to get some political power within their respective territories. Autonomy movements of the ethnic groups more particularly by the tribal peoples can be viewed as a process of political bargaining in the national politics. Through political autonomy they wanted to secure their group rights. Autonomy is considered as a suggested solution to the ethnic conflict. It is a way to protect minority groups. In modern era the territorial autonomy is a compliment to the notion of the right of all peoples to self-determination.

Political movement for autonomy by the plain tribes of Assam

The tribal people are considered as the son of the soil of Assam. As per the 2011 census, the total population of Assam is 3,12,05,576. The tribal population of the state is 38,84,371, which is 12.4% of the total population of the state. The State has registered 17.4% decadal growth of tribal population in 2001-2011. The tribal peoples in Assam is predominantly rural with 94.4% tribal people are residing in rural areas. Major tribes of Assam are: Bodo (35.1%), Mishing (17.52%), Karbi (11.1%), Rabha (7.6%), Sonowal Kachari (6.5%), Lalung (5.2%), Garo (4.2%), and Dimasa tribes (3.2%). They constitute ninety per cent ST population of the state. The other tribal people in Assam are Deori, Hajong, Thengal Kachari, Khasi, Jaintia, Mech, Chakma, Mizo, Hmar, Kuki tribes, Naga tribes, Barmans (in Cachar), Man (Tai speaking), Khampti and Singpho tribes. The spatial distribution of tribal population in Assam could be broadly classified under two groups: Hill tribes and Plain tribes. Most of the plain tribes are inhabitants of Brahmaputra valley and only a small proportion lives in Barak Valley.

The ethnic identity-based consciousness among the tribal groups of the Brahmaputra Valley has emerged during the early part of 20th century (prior to independence). This was evident when the Simon Commission visited India; three memorandums were submitted to it by different Plain Tribal groups of Assam. In 1933 the Tribal League was formed in Assam at the initiative of Bhimbora Deuri which represented the grievances of the plain tribes of Assam. The major issue that had raised by the plain tribes during that period were the problem of immigration under the patronage of colonial rulers, newly introduced land and revenue policy by the colonial rulers. It was under the continuous pressure of Tribal league that Gopinath Bordoloi during his second ministry passed Assam Act XV of 1947 amending Assam Land and Revenue Regulation 1886 Act, through which 37 tribal Belts and Blocks were created ensuring land ownership for the plain tribes of Assam. It is noteworthy that during the freedom movement and also immediately after the independence of India, the plain tribes of Assam

extended cooperation to the Congress leaders as well as to the newly formed state government for the upliftment of their socio economic conditions. Therefore, their common political platform, the Plain Tribal League, was converted into a socio cultural organization, the "Tribal Sangha". But gradually after independence the plain tribes of Assam had realized the need of special political measures for their socio-economic development as well as for the protection of ethnic identity. A sense of relative deprivation compared to the caste Hindu Assamese society has been developed among the plain tribes. Moreover, they had realized that due to the assimilation in the caste Hindu Assamese society they lost their socio- cultural identity. As a result some newly emerged leaders of the Plain Tribes society had raised the demand for political autonomy to protect their identity and to ensure equal development.

Factors behind the growth of political movement for autonomy by the plain tribe of Assam are

The following factors can be considered as the source of autonomy demand by the plain tribe's of Assam.

a) **Feeling of identity crisis:** The tribals of Assam particularly the plain tribes have immensely contributed towards the growth of the Assamese nationality, language, literature and composite culture. The tribals have identified themselves as the Asamiyas and have given up their mother-tongue/dialect. In fact, if any group in Assam faces an identity crisis, it is the autochthon tribals (Monirul Hussain, 1992, Tribal Question in Assam). Prof. Hussain stated that the percentage of tribals to the total population of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam was drastically decreased from 22.5 to 10.7 during the two census report from 1872 census to 1971. Such decrease in the percentage of tribal population to the total population of Brahmaputra valley of Assam was due to the fact that many of the tribals identified fully with the Asamiyas and gave up their original tribal identity. The process of Sanskritisation absorbed many tribals into the caste-fold both in 'shakta' and the 'vaisnava' forms of Hinduism in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam (ManirulHussain:1992). But very unfortunately, these people were treated as inferior in the socio cultural strata of the Assamese society. They were being treated as "na-asomia" means new Assamese people. This has hurted the sentiments of the tribal people who used to accept the Assamese way of life. As a result of such social negligence as well as for some other political-economic reasons a new awakening has come up in these societies to re-establish their socio-cultural identity through the political autonomy in Assam.

b) **Problem of illegal immigration and tribal ethnic identity:** The issue of Immigration is a very contentious subject in the politics of Assam. The tribal's of Assam are also getting affected by the immigration problem. Settlement of immigrants in the lands inhabited by the Tribal's is serious issue for Assam. Even during the colonial administration, in Assam the Bengali Muslims were settled in the Tribal inhabited areas by the patronage of the colonial rulers which changed the demographic pattern in the Tribal inhabited area. Even after independence, it is observed that that illegal immigrants as well as some Muslim peoples from the Charr areas of Assam were settled in the tribal Belts and Blocks violating the provisions of the Assam Land

and Revenue Regulation Act 1886. This has created resentment among the Tribal communities which led to the emergence of an inter-ethnic clash between the Tribals and Muslims. The clash between the Tiwas and the Bengali speaking Muslims in Neli during the Assam Movement in 1983 where more than 3000 Muslim of Bengali origin are killed by the Tiwas and the violence in the BTAD area between the Bodos and the Muslims where thousands of people were died is the testimony of this fact. On the other hand, during the post-independence period the Assamese nationalism has assumed a hegemonic character denying the fact that the root of Assamese culture and nationalism lies in its diversity. The passage of the Official Language Act in 1960 had created an apprehension among the tribal leaders of North East India that their culture and identity will be lost in Assam with the establishment of the hegemony of Assamese nationalism through Assamese language. These socio-political conditions had led to the emergence of political as well as socio-cultural movements of the tribal's for ethnic identity establishment and political rights in Assam.

c) **Social and economic factors:** Socially and economically the tribal's of Assam are very backward compared to the other sections of the society. According to the Census Report 20011 the S.T. population of Assam has recorded 62.5 per cent literacy rate, which is below the overall literacy rate of the state which is 71.18%. The economic conditions of the tribal's in Assam are very weak. Basically, they are living on agriculture. Very few people are engaged in the services both in the government and private sector. As per the 2011 census report, in Assam only 43.2% of the STs have been registered as organized workers (Source: Office of the Register General of India). The major economic issue for the tribal's in Assam is the issue of land alienation. For majority of the tribal people of Assam, agriculture is the main occupation. But due to some reasons these people are alienated from the possession of land. During the time of independence Gopinath Bordoloi, passed Assam Act xv of 1947, created 33 tribal Belt and Blocks which gives exclusive right to some special categories of peoples to posses land within these areas. The plain tribes were included within that notified special categories of people. But it has been observed that there is encroachment in the tribal lands within the Belt and Blocks by the non-tribal peoples. Even outside the Belts and Blocks in Assam the tribal peoples were losing their land due to various economic reasons. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for most of the tribal people in Assam. But due to lack of modernization and commercialization of agriculture they are unable to improve their subsistence. As a result they sell their land to the well to do people in their localities who were mostly non tribal. Moreover, temporary alienation of lands in the shape of 'paiks' 'sukti' 'bandhak' etc. is taking place at an alarming rate. A crafty mechanism evolved by the vested interests to encroach the lands in the tribal belts. Such land alienation led to the problem of poverty, indebtedness, severe unemployment of the Tribal peoples in Assam.

d) **Feeling of political deprivation:** In the post independence period, the plain tribes of Assam regretted the fact that they neither enjoyed the benefits

of the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution like the Schedule Tribes living in the states other than the state of Assam nor that of the Sixth Schedule, which provides self-rule to the Hill Tribes of North East India. They began to consider themselves as the victim of political dominance by the Caste Hindu Assamese leaders in the post independent Assam. They formed various organizations for their socio-cultural revival as well as for the constitutional protection of their rights. In a significant development a common Plain Tribe's organization, the Plain Tribes Council of Assam, was formed in February 1967, which submitted a memorandum to the President of India on 20 May, 1967 demanding autonomy for the Plain Tribes in the northern tract of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts including all the Tribal belts and Blocks. However, the PTCA movement comes to an end with the emergence of separate Bodo movement after the formation of All Bodo Students Union in March 1987. The success of Bodo movement had a consequent impact on the sentiments of the other smaller tribal ethnic groups of Assam. As a result of that almost all the plain tribal groups has articulated their demand for political autonomy in Assam. The tribal political assertion in Assam can be viewed as a demand for greater economic and political equity. According to Patricia Mukhim, renowned columnist, "since independence the dominant caste Hindu Assamese elite have been dominating the political and economic resources in Assam. A section of Assamese intellectual society has favored to bring all the ethnic groups of Assam under the broad umbrella of 'Assamese', but it is highly problematic. Some tribal groups i.e. Bodos refused to say Assamese rather wish to be called Bodos of Bodoland in Assam. This is because the very word Assamese has over the years been identified with a particular ruling and dominant economic elite. In Assam, bulk of resources in the tribal inhabited areas has been used for the greater good of Assam and its economic development. But they do not have any say in such development. The tribals appear as an integral part of Assamese template but they hardly feature in political discourses." (*Ethnic identity, conflict and responses*' by Patricia Mukhim, *The Assam Tribune*, 28-4-2011). R.N. Ravi, renowned columnist is of the opinion that, ethnic identity centric awareness among the tribal groups of Brahmaputra valley of Assam was aggravated by the Assam Movement. The core issue of the movement was to protect the identity and rights of the indigenous Assamese nationality. This has radiated the logic of preservation of identity and culture among the constituent communities of Assam (*'Assam: A State on suicide course'* by R N Ravi, *The Assam Tribune*, 5-8-2012). The plain tribes of Assam were actively participated in the Assam Movement. But the leaders of the movement failed to comprehend the plight of the tribal communities of Assam (Monirul Hussain, 1992, Tribal Question in Assam). Due to this negligence of the Assamese elites, a group of tribal elites has emerged during and after the Assam Movement, among the entire major tribal communities in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and formed many tribal specific organizations that raised the ethnic-identity based political demand for autonomy.

Constitution of the tribe specific autonomous councils in Assam

In response to the growing tribal ethnic movements, the state govt. in 1993 for the first time decided to constitute one tribe specific autonomous council for the Bodos in Assam. Accordingly, the Bodo Accord was signed in 1993, following which the Bodo Autonomous Council was formed in Assam. Subsequently the State formed another three tribe specific autonomous councils for the Tiwas, Rabhas and Mishings in 1995. Again in 2005 the state govt. constituted another three tribe specific autonomous Councils for the Deoris, Sonowal Kacharis, and the Thengal Kacharis. At the same time the Bodo Autonomous Council was up graded into Bodoland Territorial Administration (later on renamed as Bodoland Territorial Council) under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003. At present, in Assam the Plain Tribes autonomous institutions are-

- a) The Bodos have the Bodoland Territorial Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Now they are demanding for creation of a Bodoland State in the Northern part of Assam.
- b) The Tiwas, Rabhas, Mishings have their tribe specific Autonomous Councils and now demanding creation of Autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.
- c) The Deoris, Sonowal and the Thengal Kacharis have their tribe specific Autonomous Councils.

Findings of the study

1. There is a need for the protection of the rich socio-cultural identity of the tribal ethnic groups of Assam. The loss of identity led to the emergence of ethno-centric nationalism among the tribal ethnic groups in Assam which may create new political conflict Assam.
2. Preservation of the culture and identity is a legitimate right of each community. Protection of this right of the tribal's will strengthen the unity and integrity of Assam. Protection of tribal culture and institutions will enrich the greater culture and nationality.
3. Although the tribe specific Autonomous Councils are constituted in Assam as a result of the demands of the Plain Tribes but the Autonomous Councils are criticized as ineffectiveness so far as the development of the tribal people is concerned. For a long time these councils are governed by the members nominated by the ruling Government in the state, not by the members elected by the people. At that time the council authority was more concerned to satisfy the ruling party leaders to protect their position rather serving the people. However, today the councils are governed by the elected representatives of the people. But the strong presence of the party politics in the council elections influences the functioning of the Autonomous Councils.
4. The critics have criticized the Autonomous Councils for its failure to bring the expected development among the concern tribal groups. Rather the councils are seen as an opportunity for a section of newly emerged tribal elites to serve their political interest.
5. Moreover, critics argued that the Government decision to create tribe specific autonomous councils haphazardly led to the emergence of a trend of "ethno-exclusivism" in Assam. The tribal ethnic groups have started to consider the non-tribal communities as

“others” within the council area with whom they are living contiguously for a long time.

Last but not the least, the Government of Assam must be committed to the development of the tribal ethnic groups of Assam. Government should be careful enough while devising any policy to handle the fragile issue of ethnic assertion in Assam. Government must pursue the politics of inclusion, a survival imperative for this ethnically heterogeneous society of Assam.

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