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TRACING OVER THE DEMANDS OF SEPARATE STATE IN HILLY AREAS OF ASSAM

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Assam and the plain people of Assam. Although, Autonomous District Council (ADC) existed in Karbi Anglong and N.C. Hills (Present Dima Hasao) 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 Autonomous District Council (ADC) and the state government's apathy. This paper will focus all those facts of growing separatist tendency in the hilly areas of Assam.

ABSTRACT

Separatist movement in the North-Eastern region of India was a form of challenging the inevitability of assimilation. This becomes an important carrier of ethnic group identity that provided possibilities of encouraging social and economic regeneration. At the same time, leaving adequate anomalies for assimilation to take place. Among the cultural distinctive groups in the region separatism was resorted to as a justification for separate existence and which provided an ideology with full of opportunities. In the process it ensured upward mobility for the members of the ethnic strata

who had hitherto been denied or excluded from the local – regional power equations. The demand for Separate state expressed the need for more autonomy within the present set-up; political and geographical demarcation of territory. The purpose of the separate state demand is to augment legitimate expressions of aspirations by the people having a distinct culture, tradition and common pattern of living. The autonomy movement in the hilly areas 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

KEYWORDS: Secessionism, Ethnicity, The Mikir', Autonomous District Council, Hills Tribal.

INTRODUCTION :

The Mikir Hills and the North Cachar Hills are the only two autonomous hill districts remaining in Assam. After the Independence, the then hill districts of Assam namely, the Naga Hills, Khasi & Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills and Mizoram separated one

after another from Assam. The former Naga Hills district became a full-fledged state of Nagaland in 1962 and in the recent years the Khasi & Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills and Garo Hills districts formed the Meghalaya State and the Mizoram District has been elevated to the status of Union Territory.

At the time of last reorganization of Assam creating a sub-state of Meghalaya, these two districts were given an option to join the proposed sub-state, but they did not exercise their right of option. Firstly, because of economically, politically, educationally and in many respects these two districts were particularly Khasi & Jaintia Hills. Secondly, they were strongly persuaded by the Assamese leaders not to join the new state in which case they would be given equal facilities as the Meghalaya sub-state especially in development matters. Relying on the assurances the people of these two districts did not opt for the new state and decided to remain in Assam. But the promises were soon forgotten and nothing new was done to develop their areas. While a feeling of being let down and deceived was mounting on this score, came the medium issue imposing Assamese in all levels of education throughout the state and the lawless atrocities to enforce the issue upon the linguistic minorities.

This was the proverbial "last straw on the Camel's back". The Assamese people made no secret of their determination to 'ASSAMESE' the linguistic minorities by wiping out their district language, culture, traditions and ways of life. A wave of indignance swept over the mind of every Hillman of the area and they saw the solution only in their going out of Assam. The leaders of the two hill districts, therefore met, discussed and formally organized themselves into the "Mikir and North Cachar Hills Leaders' Conference" and decided to demand creation of a separate state with the two hill districts and the contiguous tribal areas of Assam.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. The paper seeks to explore the accommodationist policy of the Government of India with Government of Assam to 'manage' various ethnic aspirations through multiple provisions that have been adopted time to time.
2. To find the factors responsible for inculcating the ethnic identity movement and separate state demands in the Hill districts of Assam.

METHODOLOGY:

The study is descriptive in nature, and the required information was collected from books, memoranda, pamphlets chronicles, research books, research paper, periodical articles, magazines, encyclopedia journals, and other archival records both official and non-official as well as different govt. and non-govt. publications. Besides, some persons having knowledge of the subject were also interviewed.

GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Bounded by the plains districts of Nagaon and Sibsagar on the North and Meghalaya on the West, Nagaland and Manipur on the East and the district of Cachar on the South, these two districts cover an area of 8,000 sq. mile with a population of 5,53,805 souls. The area and population of the contiguous areas will roughly be 500 sq. mile and 70,000 respectively.

Before the advent of the British this area was a part of the Kachari Kingdom which the British annexed in the year 1854 after the death of Tularam Senapati. During the days of British rule, North Cachar hills was a sub-division under the plains district of Cachar and the Mikir hills of the present was parts of the Nogaon, Jowai and Sibsagar districts. Both the areas were administered as the so called 'Excluded and partially Excluded Areas'. On the eve of the country's Independence the Constituent Assembly of India had appointed a sub-committee for the "Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas" of Assam hills which was known as "Bordoloi Sub-Committee" to enquire into the will and aspiration of the tribal people of this area under the new National Government. The tribal people of this area had represented for separate autonomy to

safeguard their language, culture, customs and ways of life. The outcome of “The Bordoloi Sub-Committee’s” report was the provision of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution and creation of Autonomous District Councils for all the hill districts of Assam. Thus only in 1951, the Mikir Hills came into being out of those portions of Sibsagar and Nogaon districts which were predominantly inhabited by the Mikir tribes and formed a new civil district with North Cachar Hills (Presently Dima Hasao) sub-division. The latter was raised into the status of a district in 1970 just after the reorganization of Assam.

The Mikir and Dimasa Kacharis are the main tribes living in the Mikir Hills District while North Cachar Hills (Presently Dima Hasao) district is inhabited by mainly the Dimasa Kachari, Jeme Naga, Hmar, Kuki and Mikir tribes. These tribes have their own languages, cultures and traditions, distinct from one another. The only one thing they have in common is their backwardness, educationally, economically and politically.

BACKWARDNESS OF THE PEOPLE:

Aware of their own misfortune of being more backward than other hill tribes like the Khasis, and Mezo’s in particular, the tribal people of these two hill districts had always been hesitant in giving their full support in the past movements demanding creation of a separate hill state with the hill Districts then existing in Assam. But the demand of these two hill districts was for a separate autonomy with equal status to other hill areas. The tribal people of these two hill districts are more akin to one another and their problems are common. This is the reason they stand unitedly in the question of demanding a separate state.

REORGANIZATION OF ASSAM (1969):

At the time of the last reorganization of Assam, the Mikir Hills and the North Cachar Hills District Councils were given a right of option to join the proposed Meghalaya Sub – State to be constituted with the Khasi & Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills districts. For reasons stated above, the people of these two hill districts proposed sub-state above; the people of these two hill districts did not see the solution of their problems in joining the proposed sub-state. The four M.L.A.s of these two districts therefore submitted a representation demanding a separate political unit for their districts with equal status with other hill areas. But the Central Government did not take the representation into consideration and thought the provision of option enough for them. The right of option given, the people were faced with great dilemma whether to remain in Assam or to join with Meghalaya. At this juncture, they received certain significant assurances from the highest authorities of the Government of Assam and the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, which decided for them in favour of remaining in Assam.

ASSURANCE OF THE ASSAMESE LEADERS

On 2nd February, 1970 the New District of North Cachar Hills was inaugurated by Shri Chattra Singh Teron, then as also now, Minister of Tribal Areas, Department of Assam. On this occasion, Sarvashree M.M. Choudhury, then Acting Chief Minister and later Chief Minister of Assam B.C. Bhagawati, then President, Assam Pradesh Congress Committee and all the M.L.A.s and leaders of Mikir Hills District visited Haflong. At the instance of the Acting Chief Minister and President, APCC an informal meeting with the above mentioned gentlemen and the local leaders was held at the Haflong Circuit House in the afternoon of that day. At that meeting, the Acting Chief Minister, the President APCC and the T.A.D. Minister persuaded that Mikir and North Cachar Hills should not join the proposed sub-state and declared in bold terms that if it would remain in Assam, it would be given equal facilities for developing their own areas as would be enjoyed by the outgoing districts. On the following morning, a formal meeting was held in the local Congress Bhavan and the same assurance was reiterated. Relying on the promise made by the highest authorities of the State Government and the Ruling Party, the two District Councils refrained from exercising their right of option to join the proposed Meghalaya Sub-State. For, all that they wanted was scope for developing themselves while preserving their own separate entities as tribes. But too soon they were disillusioned. The

promises were forgotten and no serious attempt was made towards the development of their areas. Rather, the central grants under Art. 275 have always been misused apart from uniform mismanagement and negligence in all the levels of administration. The per capita expenditure of these two hill districts is much less than other hill areas of this eastern region.

TRANSFERRED SUBJECTS:

In the name of fulfillment of the promise, the State Government transferred functions in relation to certain developmental schemes to the administrative control of the District Councils under the provision of paragraph 6 (2) of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution with effect from 16th September, 1970. The schemes so transferred came to be called as the Transferred Subjects in the District Council and the arrangement was sought to be equated with the conferment of larger powers to the District Councils. But these schemes continued to be administered by the officers from the government as before and because of too many denying terms and conditions and cumbersome procedures that were laid down, neither the powers of the District Council nor the scope for the development of the area were least enlarged. Rather much of the council's autonomy was robbed as a result of the amendments in the Sixth Schedule and now it was the District Council solely to blame if the schemes failed for the fault of the executing officers who are practically not under its control. The District Council was dubious of the success of the scheme at the very beginning, but here again; the Government assured them that they would go on making suitable changes and improvement of the terms and procedures in the course of actual implementation of the scheme. So they decided to give it a fair trial. As apprehended, the shortcomings of the plan soon showed themselves but till today nothing has been done by the Government to improve the position. It must be stated here that even with the best working conditions the "Transfer of subjects" as envisaged under the provisions of Para 6 (2) of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution falls far short of meeting the need of economic development of the people of these hill district.

MEDIUM ISSUE:

While the discontent of the people was mounting for all these step-motherly treatments of the State Government, there came the medium issue imposing Assamese in the University and Secondary stages of education. The hill people of these district in which the regional language is English would not even be allowed to go under the Central University which is going to be established in Shillong. To enforce the issue upon the linguistic minorities, lawlessness was let loose in large scale in the Brahmaputra valley. This was the second language riot in Assam in the course of barely a decade. The tribal people of the hill districts along with other sections of linguistic minorities are left with no doubt that the Assamese junta are determined to 'Assamese' them by forcing Assamese language and culture upon them and wiping out their own language and culture which they too cherish to develop. Such naked imposition, the hill people are not going to tolerate. Nor are they prepared to lose their distinct identity as a tribe. Since the Assamese people also have gone too far to withdraw, there is no meeting point of the two. The only solution for the hill people is separation from Assam to have their own state and this they will have at whatever price.

POLITICAL ASPIRATION:

The desire to have their own state has been enhanced by the fact that all their erstwhile sister districts have, after going out of Assam, not only had their political aspirations fulfilled but also enjoying much larger shares of national resources. They are now in a position to shape their own destiny whereas the people of these two hill districts are lagging far behind.

CONTIGUOUS TRIBAL AREAS

There are number of areas in the districts of Cachar, Nogaon and Sibsagar, contiguous to the two hill

districts which are predominantly inhabited by the people of the same tribes living in these districts. The tribal people of these contiguous areas have been facing great hardships on account of the fact that their customs, manners, practices and beliefs are different from those of the majority in the district in which they are and because in the very nature of things, the plain district administration cannot pay that special attention to their problems which again differ from those of the majority. As a matter of fact, there have been numerous complaints that their interests and sentiments have not only been ignored but at times measures and policies which are repugnant to them have also been imposed on them. Moreover, they are not regarded as members of the scheduled tribes to which they ethnically and linguistically belong because they are geographically outside the autonomous areas and this deprives them of the safeguards and advantages which are extended to the scheduled tribes of the autonomous districts.

They have, therefore, on various occasions petitioned both the State and the Central Governments to be brought under the purview of the Sixth Schedule by inclusion of the areas inhabited by them in the contiguous autonomous districts, but so far their cases have gone unheard. It will be to the advantage of all concerned to include the contiguous tribal areas in the proposed new state.

NATURAL RESOURCES:

Comparing with the cases of Nagaland and other new states that have come into being in the eastern region, the area, population and the natural resources of these two hill districts more than justify the formation of a state comprising the two districts, with or without the contiguous tribal areas.

A meter gauge track of the railways in the N.E.F. zone already runs from one end of the area to the other. If serious attention given, there is a great scope for improving its existing road communications. The abundance of hilly rivers provides great scope for generating power. The proposed Kopili Hydro-electric project, should it ever be implemented, would go a long way towards the development of the area, but unfortunately, the fate of the Project remains to be anybody's guess ever since it was first proposed some 25 years ago. There is an ample reserve of coal and cement, also the extensive forest and agriculture lands provide great scope for industries based on forest, agriculture and horticulture. Properly developed, these two districts have all the potentialities to make the proposed state self-sufficient in all respects.

CONCLUSION:

Considering all these points, there is an indisputable case for constitution of a separate state for Mikir and North Cachar Hills together with the contiguous tribal areas. Only by this means they will be able to exist unhampered, preserve and develop their entities, their languages, cultures and ways of life, to run their own affairs and at the same time to be in tune with the main stream of national life, to sail in the wide ocean that is India and not to be restricted to the backwaters of the Brahmaputra Valley. They are convinced that their remaining in Assam would defeat all these purposes. The only solution is to have separation. It is far better to live separately in peace than to live together in a mixed set-up with the possibility of incessant discords. In the final analysis, this solution will be the best for the hill areas, for Assam and for India.

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