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## The Autonomy Movement in Dima Hasao District of Assam: Some Observations

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**Abstract:** In the last four decades of the twentieth century, Assam witnessed a joint Dimasa-Karbi movement for an autonomy comprising the North Cachar Hills District and the Karbi Anlong District. The severe economic backwardness and the unequal role of state government led to political frustrations, the imposition of Assamese language on the unwilling tribals and the attempt of introducing it as a medium of instruction in the University and Secondary levels of education, paved the way for fear of losing one's ethnic identity have led to the emergence of the movements for autonomy and statehood. It is also believed that the constitutional provision of the nation ignited the movement because *Article 244(A) of Indian Constitution* empowers the Parliament to form an autonomous state within the state of Assam. In due course of time the movement has gone through several changes in their earlier demand for an autonomous state comprising the two hill districts to a separate state for the Dimasas and the Karbis in the name of 'Dimaraji' for Dimasas and 'Hemprek' for Karbis. The main objective of this paper is to highlight the factors responsible for the demand for an autonomous state by the Dimasas and also to review the nature of the movement.

Key Words: Autonomy, Dimasas, Identity, Karbis, Statehood.

**Introduction:** In the last four decades of the twentieth century, Assam witnessed a joint Dimasa-Karbi movement for an autonomy comprising the North Cachar Hills District and the Karbi Anlong District. It is stated that '*the growth of regional aspirations led to the proliferation of autonomy movements*' (Deb Bimal J, 2015, p.41). The unequal role of state government, economic problems in the post-independence period paved the way for fear of losing one's ethnic identity have led to the emergence of the movements for autonomy and statehood. Komol Singha and M. Amarjeet Singha holds the opinion that '*the ethno-nationalistic assertions over the land and resources and articulation of grievances in terms of the 'others' have given rise to contestations over the same shared by multiple ethnic groups*' (Singha Komol and Singh M. Amarjeet, p.16). The intricate contours of the conflicts are getting convoluted with the attempts of the dominant groups to establish their hegemonies, and that are being challenged by the emerging subalterns sharing the same space. According to Komol Singha and M. Amarjeet Singha '*state's interventions to contain the non-state violence with rewards and incentives along the lines of ethnicities have compounded the situation further accelerated the growth of newer identities or hybrid identities, and it often leads to recurrence of demand for autonomy within the region*' (Singha Komol and Singh M. Amarjeet, p.16). It is also believed that the constitutional provision of the nation also plays a vital role because the policy of the

central government to carve new states have encouraged movements for separation and discouraged a policy of accommodation. Hanjabam in his '*Roots of Self-determination Movements in India's North-East*' holds fight for autonomy by different ethnic groups such as the Bodos, Karbis, Kukis, Hmar, Dimasa, etc. as reason for self-determination movements (Sharma Shukhdeba Hanjabam and Burmam J.J Roy, pp.vi-vii).

Though the movement for autonomy actually began in 1973 with the formation of an action committee by the name of *Action Committee of the Mikir and N.C Hills Leaders Conference*, the initial ultimatum of the movement was only in the succeeding years under the provision of *Article 244(A) of Indian Constitution*. As the *Article 244(A)* empowers the Parliament to form an autonomous state within the state of Assam so under this Meghalaya, comprising the hill districts of the undivided Assam. i.e., Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia hill districts became first autonomous state of the Indian Union and later upgraded into a full-fledged state in 1972. Although the twin hill districts, Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong were given an option to join the newly created autonomous state, but the districts did not utilize the option and instead decided to stay with Assam as they were aware of their backwardness as compared to Khasi and Jaintia Hills also strongly persuaded by the Assamese leaders not to join the new autonomous state in return of which they were assured with equal facilities as the Meghalaya sub-state related to developmental matters. Although certain developments schemes were transferred, 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 procedures that were laid down, neither the powers nor the scope for the development of the area were least enlarged. Such type of attitude of the state government led them to launch a movement for the creation of an autonomous state within a short period. In due course of time the movement has gone through several changes in their earlier demand for an autonomous state comprising the two hill districts to a separate state for the Dimasas and the Karbis in the name of '*Dimaraji*' for Dimasas and '*Hemprek*' for Karbis.

**Area of Study:**The present study is geographically confined to one of the hill districts of Assam i.e. Dima Hasao district, situated at the Southern end of Assam, which covers an area of 4, 890 sq.km. As the movement is associated with the Karbis of Karbi Anlong district so references are made of that tribe and district also.

**Objectives:**

1. To highlight the factors responsible for the demand for an autonomous state.
2. And review the nature of the movement.

**Methodology:**

- Basically Historical methodology is adopted for the work.
- Multi – disciplinary approaches are adopted.
- Both Primary and Secondary sources are consulted and examined in the light of information given in other sources also.
- An extensive study of existing literature is conducted.

The root cause of movement for autonomous state lay in their severe economic backwardness and political frustrations. The replacement of Congress by the *Assam Gana Parisad (AGP)* government which political outlook and behaviour contributed decisively towards the emergence of the movement in a relatively short span of time. The policy of *AGP* government of large scale eviction of tribals from the government reserved forest lands without any alternative arrangement and the continuous discriminatory policy and practice in the employment of tribals have deeply sharpened the process of alienation of the people. Again the imposition of Assamese language on the unwilling tribals (besides the Bengalis of Cachar district of Barack valley), attempt of introducing it as a medium of instruction in the University and Secondary levels of education ignited the movement for a separate state comprising the two hill districts and the contiguous tribal areas which includes Cachar, Nagaon and Sibsagar. Even in 1960, when the *Assam Official Language Act* was passed and although 'it authorised the use of Assamese for all or any official purpose of the state and Bengali in the Cachar district and English in the autonomous districts but the non-Assamese people perceived it as the Assamese hegemony' (Komol Singha and M. Amarjeet Singh, p.6). By organizing a series of meetings at Haflong and Diphu the leaders and educationist of N.C. Hills and Mikir Hills protested the Government's decision and demanded for retaining English as medium of instruction in both University and Secondary levels of education. They also unanimously resolved to demand a separate state from the Government of India for two hill districts in accordance with the pattern to be adopted by the *Action Committee of the Mikir and North Cachar Hills Leaders Conference (later known as the Action Committee)* constituted on 18.02.1973 at 'Diphu Club' (Dutta. P. S, 1993, 35). On 09.07.1973 the leaders took the initiative to submit a memorandum before the then the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi demanding for a separate state comprising the North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills districts and contiguous tribal areas of Assam, so that they can preserve and develop their entities, their language, culture and run their own affairs (*Ibid*).

Although their demand was not accepted by the Government of India, but entrusted the Planning Commission to enhance the allotment of fund for the development of the two hills districts. The *Action Committee* accepted the offer though not satisfied and expected for a fair trial but disillusioned after few years (Dutta. P.S, 1993, p.50). The *Assam Movement* spearheaded by *All Assam Student Union (ASSAU)* and *All Assam Gana Sangram Parisad (AAGSP)* to remove all kinds of reservation and privileges hitherto enjoyed by the tribals and students belonging to scheduled caste and scheduled tribes in the state made them frustrated and on 24.11.1980 they again submitted another memorandum to the Prime Minister of India. The Committee not only demanded an autonomous state under the provision of *Article 244(A)* comprising the two hill districts but also demanded that the state and other constitutional provisions of the new state should be like that of Meghalaya autonomous state when it was created (Dutta. P.S, 1993, p. 53).

Different committees were formed to wage a demand for an autonomous state between 1985-1986. The *Central Autonomous State Demand Committee (CASDC)* and *Karbi Anglong State Demand Committee (KAASDC)* organized several meetings to bring the agitation under one umbrella resulting in a formation of *Karbi Anglong North Cachar Hills Autonomous State Demand Committee (KANCHASDSOM)* on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1986 (Bezbaruah, I. 2010, p.170).

In 1986 with the formation of *The Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC)*, the autonomy movement took a new turn and was no more limited to submitting memoranda which adopted constitutional means like strikes, sit-in demonstrations etc. On 18<sup>th</sup> May 1987, the *ASDC* and the *KSA (Karbi Students Association)* submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India reflecting the suppressive, expansionist policy and exploitative nature of the Assam Government and demanded for the creation of an autonomous state comprising the two hill districts. The memorandum also manifested the financial policies of the state highlighting the restlessness of the people caused by the indifference of the Central Government. It also warned the government that the delay in fulfilling the demand would only worsen desperation in their minds which could then drive them hard to lose faith in democratic traditions (*A Memorandum to the Prime Minister of India, submitted by ASDC and KSA, 18<sup>th</sup> May, 1987*). This frustration resulted in the formation of extremist organizations in the later period of autonomy movement.

However, on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1995 with signing of a *Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)* between the Chief Minister of Assam and the leaders of *ASDC*, *KSA* and few other organizations like *NCHSF (North Cachar Hills Students Federation)* and *DSU (Dimasa Student Union)* in presence of S.B Chavan, Union Home Minister of India the movement for creation of an autonomous state came to an end. Although the *MOU* did not grant their demand but amended the Sixth Schedule and the *Autonomous District Councils* of the North Cachar Hill District and Karbi Anglong district were renamed as *North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC)* and *Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC)* respectively (*Memorandum of understanding signed on 01.04.1995*). As a result of the decision the then Chief Minister of Assam, Hiteswar Saikia handed over 30 departments to *NCHAC* and *KAAC* from the state list 1997.

Although to some extent the transfer of power had broadened the autonomy of the two Councils, but they were not satisfied and expected for an autonomous state which led them to start another movement that was extreme in nature. The conflict between decentralized governance and centralized finance exposed the hollowness of the *MOU*. On 18<sup>th</sup> April 1995 organisation like *KANCHASDCOM* showed its utter dissatisfaction by not only sending a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India but also demanded an autonomous state; the *All Party Forum*, a conglomeration of political parties vehemently criticized the *MOU*, blaming it to be arbitrarily planned, grossly inadequate and did not reflect the realities of the society (Bezbaruah. I, p. 181).

Also after the signing of *MOU* with the Assam Government in 1995, the internal divisions among the members led the Party to lost their grip on the younger, a group of both Dimasa and Karbi more radicalized in nature who aspired for a 'protected' separate home state by force (Vandekerckhove, Nel, 2009, pp. 523-548).

With the formation of *Dimaraji Revival Demand Committee (DRDC)* in 1994 the movement acquired a new dimension who with the help of the *All Dimasa Student's Union (ADSU)* by adopting constitutional means submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narasimha Rao in 1996, demanded for the creation of 'Dimaraji' state comprising all Dimasa-inhabited areas including North Cachar Hills and various parts of Karbi Anlong and neighbouring Nagaland so that they could safeguard their ethnic identity, enjoy all constitutional rights and privileges and also bring all round development in their homeland (*Decoding Statehood Demand, 'Northeast Today'*, September 22, 2017). But when in 1995, Jewel Gorlosa a descendent of *Dimasa National Security Force (DNSF)* formed of the *Dima Haram Daoga (DHD)* with Dilip Nunisa and Pradip Nunisa, the movement assumed a violent character. However it was because of ideological differences and struggle for power Jewel Gorlosa later on broke away from *DHD* and formed another outfit called as *DHD (J) or Black Widow* by turning up the cease-fire agreement which was signed by the old faction *DHD* in 2003. Under the leadership *DHD* Chairman Dilip Nunisa, a six member delegation met Union Home Minister Shivraj Patel on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2004 and submitted a memorandum demanding a separate homeland for the Dimasa people. As the government paid little attention to the matter Dilip Nunisa became quite disappointed who termed the negotiation process as 'intentional procrastination' (*Demand for Dimaraji*). In terms of a separate state Dilip Nunisa made the similar demand with that of *ADSU* and *DRDC* but the newly created faction *DHD(J)* led but Jewel Garlosa demanded *Dima-Hasao-Raji* only for the Dimasas of North Cachar Hills.

Later on as both the factions of *DHD* realized the futility of violence so they came forward and expressed their willingness to give up violence and seek solutions to its problem peacefully within the framework of the constitution which resulted the signing of a tripartite *Memorandum of Settlement (MOS)* among Central Government, Government of Assam and both factions of (*DHD*) on 8<sup>th</sup> October 2012, at New Delhi providing for enhanced autonomy for *North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council* in Assam and also a special package for socio-economic and educational development of the area for which has been set up. As an organization the *DHD* was to be dissolved within a reasonable time as a precursor to implement the agreed decisions of this agreement and also that the existing *NCHAC* will be renamed to the *Dima Hasao Autonomous Territorial Council (Memorandum of Settlement signed with DHD on 8.10.2012)*

To bring peace and development in the district, the *DHD* factions had laid down arms and stopped violence but even too the promises of *MOS* made by the government of India was not fulfilled. Consequently on July 8<sup>th</sup> 2015, a meeting was held by the ex *DHD* leaders to discuss on the delay of the implementation of the *MOS*

and the leaders stressed the need for quick implementation of the *MOS* in a time-bound manner, emphasized on the withdrawal of case related to *ex-DHD* and *ex-DHD(J)*, proper rehabilitation of all cadres and demanded some economic relief to the families of killed cadres ( Ex –DHD leaders meet, ‘*The Telegraph*’, Thursday, July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

It was again in 2013, the creation of Telangana by the Congress led *UPA* the demand for *Demaraji* revived. As the peaceful protest and demonstration by various students and youth organizations turned violent in the district so a forum called the *Joint Action Committee for Autonomous State (JACAS)* was formed on August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013 with main objective to make collective efforts to prevent the widespread violent protest, to give right leadership and also proper direction to the student and youth force ( *A Memorandum submitted to Narendra Modi in support for the demand for creation of an Autonomous State on 29.03. 2018*).

In recent years, as the leaders of the two hill district take some initiative of joint movement for autonomous state comprising the two hills district was revitalized. On December 15, 2017, by holding a conference at Hemren, Karbi Anlong dissolved the *Hill State Demand Council (HSDC)* which was formed in 2012 with their demand for the creation of hill state comprising the two hill district. The *ASDC* was revived by adopting a new constitution to streamline the organization and continue the hill state movement. Further, the conference called upon the *BJP* government to implement all classes of *MOU* and *MOS* as promised by the party and welcomed the prospect of peace finally returning to Nagaland after decades of untold miseries suffered by the Naga masses, while apprehending the looming threat of dismemberment of the constitutional territorial boundaries of Assam, particularly of Karbi Anlong and Dima Hasao.

On 29<sup>th</sup> March 2018 various student, youth, social organizations and political parties of *Karbi Anlong Autonomous Hill District* and *Dima Hasao Autonomous Hill District* of Assam submitted a memorandum to Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India at New Delhi in support of the earlier demand for creation of an autonomous state within the state of Assam as provided under *Article 244(A)* of the Indian Constitution. It also included the immediate implementation of *Article 244(A)* as promised by the *BJP* leaders before the election and the other demand was to sign peace pact with the *Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF)* ( *A memorandum submitted to Narendra Modi in support for the demand for creation of an Autonomous State on 29.03. 2018. p.5*) Under the leadership of *Indigenous People’s Forum (IPF)* the district has also witnessed a demand for bifurcation of the district into two autonomous district-one for the Dimasas and the other for the non-Dimasas under the *Articles 244(2)* and *275(1)* of the *Sixth Schedule* of the *Constitution of India* which has posed a great challenge to the autonomous state demand by the Dimasas in association of the Karbis of Karbi Anlong (*Indigenous people’s Forum*).

## Conclusion:

In conclusion we can say that the fear of losing one's ethnic identity, the discriminatory attitude of the state government, inherent deficiency in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution are the main factors that pushed the Dimasas to start the autonomy movement. Although initially it was a peaceful movement limited to submitting memorandum by Dimasa Intelligentsia but with the birth of various youths and students organizations, the movement gained mass character and their means of agitation was extended to holding strikes and conducting sit-in demonstrations and so on. The movement assumed violent character with the formation of militant groups by the sections of youths who had lost faith in the democratic process of movement. In this particular phase of movement, there was enhanced assertion of exclusive identity leading to a few ethnic conflicts in the district and with their former partner (Karbis) in the movement for autonomy. As the Dimasa tribe while raising the movement for 'Dimaraji' ignored the identity question of the other indigenous tribes of the district so the other ethnic groups started demanding initially for a separate administrative council and later on for bifurcation of the district. Therefore, it is necessary on the part of the government to take into consideration the measures for addressing their autonomy issues.

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