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Ethnic Identity Question and the Autonomy Movement in Karbi Anglong

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Abstract

The word 'ethnicity' is generally used to identify groups of people who have evolved from their primitive stages of tribe and clan identity in to a more unified group looking for a coherent political identity. The growth of the spirit of ethnicity or ethnic self-assertion among various groups leads to the aspiration for a distinct identity for themselves. Generally, the ethnic groups with a small population and faced with the competition for subsistence with the larger groups tend to suffer from an identity crisis. This very question of identity crisis of the ethnic groups impels them to resort to various sorts of ethnic movements demanding either autonomy or separation from the larger groups. The state of Assam itself has undergone several splits in the post independence period only to satisfy the ethnic aspirations of the different ethnic groups of the region. As in the other parts of the region, among the Karbis of Karbi Anglong district of Assam, the question of ethnic identity is responsible for the ethnic movements of the Karbis demanding autonomy or statehood at different periods of times in the post independence period of the country.

Objectives of the study: *The main objectives of this study are:*

- (1) To study the autonomous and separate state movement of the Karbis from the angle of ethnic identity question of the tribe.*
- (2) To find the factors responsible for inculcating the ethnic identity question among the Karbis.*
- (3) To study the role of some ethnic based political parties of the district in leading the autonomy/separation movement in Karbi Anglong.*

Methodology: *While conducting the study, both the primary and secondary data were used. The primary sources of data included the official records and data collected from the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), different the Memorandums submitted by the ethnic based organizations of the district to the Union Ministers from time to time in support of their demand for autonomy/separation. Apart from this, datas were also collected through personal interview with some the leading pro-autonomy/separation leaders of the district. The Secondary data included the various books, journals and news papers related with the topic of the study.*



Introduction: The North Eastern part of India in general and Assam in particular have witnessed a series of ethnic movements relating to the autonomous or separate state demands ever since the independence of the country. The question of distinct ethnic identity and the fear of either annexation or assimilation by the larger groups have been the prime factors responsible for most of the ethnic movements of the region. Assam itself has undergone several splits in the post independence period only to satisfy the ethnic aspirations of the different ethnic groups of the region. Nagaland(*created as a separate state in 1963*), Meghalaya (*granted the status of autonomous state under Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution in 1971 and then the status of a full fledged state in January, 1972*), Mizoram(*granted the status of a Union Territory in 1972 and then a full fledged state in June, 1986*) and Arunachal Pradesh(*granted the status of an Union territory in 1972 and later a full fledged state in 1987*) have been separated from Assam only to satisfy the ethnic aspirations of the tribes inhabiting in these areas. In the recent past also, Assam has witnessed a series of ethnic flare ups with a number of ethnic groups like, the Rabhas, the Tiwas, the Mishings, the Sonowal Kacharis, the Koch Raj Bangshis, the Boros , the Dimasas and the Karbis intensifying their demands for either greater autonomy or separation citing threats to their ethnic identity. Compared to the demands of other ethnic groups of the state, the Boros, the Dimasas and the Karbis have been leading prolonged and more vibrant ethnic movements demanding separation from Assam as the sole means for the preservation of their

ethnic identity. Speaking about the Karbis of the Karbi Anglong district of present Assam, the ethnic sentiment of the tribe and the question of its ethnic identity have given rise to a series of autonomy and separation movement ever since the formation of the district . This paper tries to study the autonomy and separation demands of the Karbis of Karbi Anglong district from the point of view of the ethnic identity question of the Karbi ethnic group .

Meaning of Ethnicity, Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Identity:

The word ethnicity is closely related to the word ‘ethnic’ which is increasingly used “to identify groups of people who have evolved from their primitive stages of tribe and clan identity in to a more cohesive group looking for a coherent political identity.”¹ On the other hand the word ‘ethnic’ itself is derived from the Greek word ‘*ethnikos*’ which refers to: (a)nations not converted in to Christianity,(b) races or large groups of people having common traits, and (c) groups of an exotic primitive culture .

Again, an ethnic group is defined as “any hereditary group with shared values, style of life, and symbol of identity and consciousness of kind.”² The ethnic groups possess a strong awareness towards their self endorsed distinctive characters which they wish to be recognised by others.

Ethnic identity on the other hand is an affiliative construct, where individuals view themselves and others view them as belonging to a particular cultural group.³ The growth of the spirit of ethnicity or ethnic self-assertion among various groups leads to the aspiration for a distinct identity for themselves. Generally, the ethnic groups with a small population and faced with the competition for



subsistence with the larger groups tend to suffer from an identity crisis. This very question of identity crisis of the ethnic groups impel them to resort to various sorts of ethnic movements demanding either autonomy or separation from the larger groups so that they can preserve their distinct identity and also manage their own affairs without interference from the larger groups whom they fear as the invaders of their distinct ethnic identity .

Ethnic Identity Question and the Autonomy Demands of the Karbis: The Karbi Hills, politically known as Karbi Anglong is one of the two hill districts of present Assam, the other being the NC Hills(Presently known as Dima Hasao). At the beginning, i.e in 1951, when the districts were carved out were known as the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills. In the year 1952, both the Karbis and Dimasas were granted autonomy in the form of separate District Councils under the 6th Schedule of the Indian constitution. The present Karbi Anglong by then was a sub division, namely, the Mikir Hills and this was further renamed as Mikir Hills district in the year 1971 by separating North Cachar district from it. Since 1976, the name of the district was changed to Karbi Anglong. Again, in the year 1995, the Union government by granting more powers to the Autonomous District Council upgraded it to Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC).

The Karbis, formerly known as the *Mikirs* are the major community of the districts of Karbi Anglong and the district is named after them. It is worth mentioning that the Karbis, who have been classed as ‘Scheduled Tribe Hills’ by the census of India, occupy an important position among the tribal communities of

Assam in particular and the North East India in general. They constitute the third largest tribal community in Assam after the Bodos and the Mishings and are the principal tribal community in the Karbi Anglong district, the largest district of Assam having an autonomous administrative system vested by the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Ethnically, they belong to the Indo-Mongoloid race and linguistically to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages.

Genesis of Ethnic Identity Question among the Karbis : As in other hill areas of the then Assam, the ethnic identity question among the Karbis began to take shape even prior to the independence of the country when a section of the educated Karbis formed the *Karbi Adarbar* , the first national organization of the Karbis in 1946 to put forward the demand for the creation of a separate district for the ethnic group. The lead in this regard was taken by Semson Sing Ingti, the second graduate of the community who was then serving as a sub-inspector of schools in the then Mikir Hills tract and Khorsing Terang, the first MLA from the tribe who was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly from the Mikir Hills tract in 1937. It may be mentioned that the Karbis were given representation to the legislature for the first time by the Government India Act of 1935. The prime motto of the *Karbi Adarbar* was to unite the hitherto scattered Karbi inhabited areas in to a single political entity to preserve the separate ethnic identity (cultural, linguistic and political) of the tribe. It was because of the organized movement led by the *Karbi Adarbar*, the Karbis were given a district of their own in 1951 and a district council in the following year.



The question of ethnic identity surfaced with a renewed spirit among the Karbis particularly in the post independence period of the country and this ethnic identity question was responsible for giving rise to the demand for autonomy/statehood in the region. It was during the 1960s that the demand for autonomy/ statehood formally surfaced in the politics of the hill areas of the then Assam including in Karbi Anglong district, although such a demand was occasionally raised by the hill leaders ever since the formation of the State Reorganization Commission in December, 1953.

The immediate reason for the sudden spurt of the demand for separate state for the hill tribes of the then Assam can be traced to the ethnic identity question of the hill tribes who considered the “*Official Language Act 1960*” passed by the Assam Legislative Assembly as a threat to their separate ethnic existence . The Act declared “Assamese as the official language in Assam valley districts and Bengali in Cachar while languages in the hills to be decided by the District Councils.”⁴ In its amendment in 1961, it was categorically stated that ‘there is no intention to make the knowledge of Assamese compulsory for recruitment to state services. However, despite assurances for the government of not imposing the Assamese language in the hill areas, the Language Act of 1960 created doubt in the minds of the ethnic groups of the hills of the then Assam. The Language Act (1960) hastened the formation of the *All Party Hill Leaders Conference* (APHLC), an umbrella organization of a number of ethnic groups of the then Assam in July 1960. The

leadership in this regard was taken by Captain Williamson Sangma, a Garo leader who was then a Cabinet Minister in the ministry of Bimola Prasad Chaliha. Captain Sangma, resigned from his ministerial post and launched a strong movement for a separate hill state to be known as ‘North Eastern Frontier State’ comprising all the six autonomous districts (including Mikir Hills) of Assam. And thus began the crucial period in the history of movement for separate hill state for the ethnic groups of the hills of the then Assam.

Ethnicity and Demand for Autonomy / Separation in Karbi Anglong: As has already been found above, the ethnic identity question was primarily responsible for the demand for autonomy/ separation in the hill areas of the then Assam. As in the other hill areas of the then undivided Assam, in Karbi Anglong , then known as the Mikir Hills also the demand for separate hill state under the banner of the APHLC began to get momentum. By that time, the *Karbi Adarbar* was in full control of the District Council at Diphu and it generally associated its policy with those of ruling Congress party at the national and state levels. Although the Mikir Hills district unit of the APHLC was formed much later in 1965 only, a number of important Karbi leaders joined the APHLC and intensified the movement for the hill state in the then Mikir Hills even prior to the formal launch of the APHLC in the district . Some of the important Karbi leaders who associated themselves with the APHLC from its very inception included, David Long Inghi, Jhon Ingti Kathar, Moniram Langneh and Raidang Ingti etc. All the above mentioned Karbi leaders were the former members of the



Karbi Adarbar. Raidang Ingti was a Member of Mikir Hills District Council (not from *Karbi Adarbar*) at that time. He took active role in organizing the APHLC in the Mikir Hills. He was even the part of the twelve member APHLC delegation that met Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India in November 1960 to press for the creation of a separate hill state. In March 1964, the APHLC General Conference was held at Deithor of the then Mikir Hills District under the presidentship of Moniram Langneh. The Conference was attended by a number of important leaders of the APHLC including Stanly Nicholas Roy, Darween Pugh and B.B. Lyngdoh etc. In that conference, Barelong Terang, who was then an important leader of the *Karbi Adarbar* formally joined the APHLC. The Mikir Hills District unit of the APHLC was officially formed in 1965 with Barelong Terang as the president and Bapuram Singnar as the General Secretary.

As a result of the strong movement for the hill state and under tremendous pressure from the APHLC for the creation of the hill state, the Government of India on 11 September 1968, with a view to satisfy the growing demands of the APHLC for a separate hill state, made announcement about its intention to create an Autonomous State of Meghalaya within the state of Assam. The proposed autonomous state was to have its jurisdiction over the Garo hills districts and Khasi and Jaintia Hills districts of then Assam. "The Mikir and North Cachar Hills districts were given the option of joining the autonomous state, if they so desired in the District Councils, by a two third majority before a prescribed date."⁵ Accordingly, Darween Pugh and B.B.

Lyngdoh, two of the prominent leaders of the APHLC visited Diphu twice and individually approached the MDCs of the Mikir Hills District Council to support inclusion of the Mikir Hills in the proposed autonomous state of Meghalaya. However, all their efforts failed to yield any result as the *Karbi Adarbar* which was in the helm of affairs in the Mikir Hills district council summarily rejected the idea of the hill state or inclusion of Mikir Hills in the autonomous state of Meghalaya. The option to join the autonomous state did come before the Mikir Hills district council in the month of February 1970, but the general body of the Council overwhelmingly supported the position of status-quo. All MDCs except one member, i.e. Raidang Ingti supported the resolution to remain with Assam in the Council session held on 21 February that year. As a result of this, the autonomous state of Meghalaya formally came in to being on April 2, 1970, without the inclusion of the Mikir Hills in it. The autonomous state was created on the basis of the Bill passed by the both the Houses of the Indian parliament on 24 October 1969 that inserted Article 244(A) in the constitution of India which provided for the creation of the Autonomous state for the hill areas of Assam.

Though the ethnic identity question of the hill people of the then Assam was responsible for the upsurge of the hill state movement led by the APHLC, it must be accepted that the ethnic identity question of the Karbis was responsible for the failure of the APHLC movement in the Mikir Hills district (now Karbi Anglong). The Karbis did not participate actively in the hill state movement because there was always an apprehension of Christian



domination in the hill state. The Mikir Hills district council was of course rewarded by the Assam Government for its refusal to join the autonomous state. In June 1970, the Government of Assam vested certain additional powers to the Mikir Hills district council vide Government Notification No. AAA/95/70/36 dated 1.6.1970.⁶

Despite the failure of the hill state movement in Mikir Hills, it must be accepted that the movement was responsible for making the Karbis realize the need of their ethnic assertion to preserve their distinct ethnic identity. This ethnic assertion of the Karbis found outlet in the form of the demand for autonomous/separate state movement of the tribe in the subsequent years. For example, even prior to the creation of the autonomous state of Meghalaya, the Mikir Hills District unit of the APHLC was dissolved by the local leaders of the organization and in its place Mikir Hills Progressive Party (MHPP) was formed on 1st January 1970 with Barelong Terang as the president and Bapuram Singnar as the general secretary. The main objective of the MHPP was to carry on the separate state movement in the district till it was achieved. Apart from this, a number of other organizations were formed in the district from time to time to demand either autonomous or separate state comprising of Karbi Anglong and NC Hills (presently Dima Hasao). Some of the organizations that were formed for the purpose included, *All Party People's Conference* (APPC) formed in 1978 and '*Separate State Demand Committee*' (SSDC) formed in 1979 etc. However, these organizations failed to garner much public support as these were formed by some of the

politically ambitious leaders of the district who unsuccessfully tried to exploit the ethnic identity question of the Karbis to fulfill their own political ambitions.

The question of ethnic identity crisis of the Karbis once again found prominence in the politics of the district after the AGP government under the leadership of Prafulla Kumar Mahanta assumed power in the state in 1985. Some of the ultra nationalist policies followed by the AGP government were responsible for creating doubt among the tribal population in different parts of Assam including in Karbi Anglong and N.C. Hills (presently, Dima Hasao). Particularly, two moves of the AGP government created mass discontentment among ethnic groups of the region which in a way led to the intensification of autonomy/statehood demand in the hill districts. These factors were:-⁷

(A) The Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) Circular No. SEBA/AB/Syll.11/85-86/1, Dtd. 28th February, 1986, according to 'Clause Four' of which Assamese was to be introduced as a compulsory 'Third Language'.

(B) Introduction of a new Language Policy making mandatory the knowledge of Assamese for all recruitment to government services.

The two hill districts considered the above policies of the government as the violation of Bimola Prasad Chaliha's commitment of not making the knowledge of Assamese compulsory for recruitment to government service. The people of the districts considered the above move as conspiracy of the AGP to impose Assamese culture among the ethnic communities of the districts. A cross



sections of people, elderly politicians and students leaders of the region were agitated over the policies of the AGP government. In the backdrop of such discontent among the people of the hill districts, Congress leaders of Karbi Anglong and NC Hills decided to strengthen the autonomous state movement in the region. In this regard a meeting was convened at Haflong on 6th March 1986 in which a new organization, called 'Central Autonomous State Demand Committee' (CASDC) was formed comprising of the leaders from both the hill districts. Immediately after its formation, the CASDC leadership decided to pressurize the central government for the creation of an autonomous state for Karbi Anglong and N. C. Hills. A delegation of the CASDC led by Mongal Sing Ingti, the then CEM, Karbi Anglong district council met the then Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi in New Delhi on 9th May 1986 and submitted a Memorandum demanding the creation of an autonomous state for the hill districts of Assam. It may be mentioned that the CASDC was primarily a Congress led organization as all the leaders were the prominent Congress leaders of the hill districts.

In the aftermath of the SEBA circular of 28th February 1986 and the employment question relating to the recruitment to the government service, a large number of socio-political organizations of the district including the Congress party while expressing their strong resentment, felt the need of launching the statehood movement in an organized and united manner. In this regard, the Karbi Anglong Tribal Youth Organization (KATYO) convened a meeting of all the socio-

political, cultural and student's organizations of Karbi Anglong at Diphu Indoor Stadium on 30th March 1986. The deliberations while stressing the need of intensifying the autonomous state movement formed an umbrella organization called, 'Autonomous State Demand Co-ordination Committee' (Ad-hoc) with Roy Enghee, Chairman, Karbi Anglong district council as the president and Bijoy Phangcho, general secretary, Karbi Riso Adarbar (KRA) as the general secretary. This was followed by a meeting of the Autonomous State Demand Co-ordination Committee (Ad-hoc) on 20th April 1986 at Diphu Indoor Stadium under the presidency of Roy Enghee. The meeting resolved to form a full fledged Autonomous State Demand Committee. However, differences cropped up among the constituents of the ad-hoc co-ordination committee over the election of the president of the proposed organization and the inclusion of the political parties in to it. It was therefore decided to entrust the responsibility to 'Karbi-Adarbar' and the 'People's Democratic Front (PDF) to create a consensus among the different organizations and convene a meeting of the organizations at an appropriate date. Accordingly, Lunse Timung, secretary, Karbi Adarbar and EM, Karbi Anglong district council and Monsing Rongpi, secretary, PDF convened a meeting of different organizations at Diphu Indoor Stadium on 17th May 1986. On the stipulated date, the meeting was held amidst animated arguments among the participating organizations. The meeting was presided over by Dhoram Sing Teron where Karbi-Adarbar and all its allies were completely sidelined and a full-fledged *Autonomous State Demand Committee*



(ASDC) was formed comprising mainly of the KSA, PDF and their allies such as the Karbi Employees Association (KEA) and the Karbi Cultural Society (KCS).

The formation of the ASDC was a landmark event in the politics of Karbi Anglong district as the organization in close collaboration with the KSA was able to organize a mass ethnic movement for the creation of an autonomous state. Further, it came to dominate the politics of the district for a long time in the subsequent years. Just after its birth on 17th May 1986, the ASDC formally launched its movement for an autonomous state on 2nd June 1986 by calling a 12 hour Karbi Anglong bandh which totally paralyzed normal life in the district. On 2nd May 1987, a joint delegation of the ASDC/KSA comprising of Dr. Jayanta Rongpi and Elwin Teron (both the Joint spokesmen of the party), Bharat Kumar Timung (Convener of the party), Dipendra Rongpi (advisor KSA) and Borsing Rongphar (general secretary, KSA) went to New Delhi to meet the central leadership and press for the creation of an autonomous state. The ASDC/KSA delegation was able to meet Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India in New Delhi and submitted a memorandum to him demanding the creation of an autonomous state. The ASDC/KSA delegation also met Chinta Moni Panigrahi and P. Chidambaram, both of whom were then the Union Ministers of State for the Home Affairs. It may be mentioned that the ASDC/KSA movement for the autonomous state received recognition from the state government when a delegation of the organizations was invited for a talk by Bhirgu Kumar Phukan, the then Home Minister of Assam on 28th

August 1987 at Janata Bhavan, Dispur. On 15th October 1988, the ASDC central committee by a resolution decided enters in to the electoral politics of the district with a view to strengthen the autonomy movement from inside the floor of the legislature. The party decided to contest in all the 26 MDC constituencies of the District Council election to be held 7th January 1989 and ultimately, when the results were declared, the party managed to secure an absolute majority in the District Council by securing 22 seats out of 26 seats of the council and on 25th January Dr, Jayanta Rongpi was unanimously elected as the CEM of the ASDC led the Karbi Angong district council. The ASDC led autonomy movement reached its climax when the Karbi Anglong district council was upgraded to the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) following a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the ASDC and its allies in one hand and the representatives of the central and the state governments on the other hand on 1st April 1995. The provisions of the MoU were formally implemented when the Assam Government published its Office Memorandum (OM) in this regard on 31st December 1996 and on 12 January, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, the then Chief Minister of Assam formally declared the transfer of 30 departments to the KACC.

Conclusion: The provisions of the MoU of 1995, when put in to practice proved to be insufficient and inadequate to fulfill the ethnic aspirations of the Karbis and the demand for autonomous/ separate state of the ethnic group was still waiting to come in to a logical end. The conflict between decentralized governance and centralized



finance soon proved the hollowness of the MoU. In the mean time the ASDC which was the undisputed political force in the district began to lose its ground among Karbis due to internal bickering among the leaders of the organization. The situation was shrewdly capitalized by the Congress party to return back to the power of the Karbi Anglong council in 2001 after which the party has managed to win every election in the district till date (till 2013). With the assumption of the power by the Congress party in the district, the ethnic organizations demanding autonomy/separation of the district found it difficult to regain their lost ground in the politics of the region and the issue of ethnic autonomy/separation was relegated to back-burner for the time being. In a new twist of events, the Hill State Democratic Party (HSDP) formed on 1st December 2012 by the leaders of the erstwhile ASDC and the leaders erstwhile United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) declared separate state and not mere autonomous state as its motto. The prominent leaders of the organization like Chomang Kro, Longsodar Senar and Chandrakant Terang while addressing the media at Diphu on 4th December, 2012, asserted, "*Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts are the most backward district of the country, and facing serious threat of marginalization in every sphere. The people are of these two hill districts suffering much under political orientation of the Congress, the BJP, the CPI (ML) and other external forces which always overlook local problems*"⁸. For them "*the hill area should not be developed for the ecological benefits of the plains people. No national party with a*

culture of high command decision can tackle the problems of the hill people of the district, therefore urgent need was felt for the formation of a new political party to uphold the dignity, autonomy, rights of women and development etc of the ethnic people of these two hill districts"⁹ The party has managed to garner considerable following in Karbi Anglong and has emerged as a real threat to the ruling Congress party in the district. In the mean time, the ethnic autonomy question of the Karbis once again came to prominence following the resolution adopted by the All India Congress Committee (AICC) favoring the creation of a separate state of Telangana in July 2013. A number of socio-political organizations of the district have given birth to an umbrella organization called, Joint Action Committee for Autonomous State (JACAS) and launched a violent movement for the creation of an autonomous state in the district. The spontaneous mass response that the issue of autonomy/separation received is a clear indication of the fact that the aspiration for autonomy/separation intensely persist among the members of the ethnic group as they are highly conscious about the preservation of their distinct socio-cultural and political identity. Under such circumstances the issue requires sensitive and delicate handlings by the governments, both the state and the central. "The first step in finding a solution to the issue is to understand their aspirations and respect their cultural, economic and social autonomy and identity."¹⁰



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