

Ethnic Autonomy in Assam: A Study Through the Lens of Viksit Bharat

Dr. Dilip Kumar Sonowal¹

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Kaliabor College

Abstract: The demand for ethnic autonomy among indigenous communities has centered on the protection of identity, land, traditional cultures, customary practices, and political representation, as well as the need to address uneven development. In the post-2014 period, these autonomy movements have undergone a significant transformation in the context of the national vision of *Viksit Bharat@2047*. Within this framework, the Union Government and the Government of Assam have combined peace accords and insurgent surrenders with extensive infrastructure development, capital investment, and targeted welfare programmes. Consequently, ethnic communities are increasingly negotiating their identity, land rights, and political representation through a development-oriented approach. Against this background, the present paper examines identity movements among Assam's tribal communities and analyses the changing trends in ethnic autonomy movements in relation to the vision of *Viksit Bharat@2047*.

Keywords: Ethnic Autonomy; Indigenous Identity; Land Rights; Tribal Communities; *Viksit Bharat@2047*

1. Introduction:

Over the past decade the quest for identity among many communities has shaped Assam's political conversation a great deal. These movements began because people want to keep their identities, traditional cultures and customary practices alive. These movements arise when migration, unemployment, underdevelopment and the feeling that society has left them behind grow stronger. Some groups ask for autonomy while still following the current government structure. Other groups want their places recognized in the constitution. Some movements turn to secessionist actions pushing for separate political or geographic areas.

Fred W. Riggs (1998) argues that globalisation has strengthened ethnic consciousness by making communities more aware of cultural differences and perceived threats to their identity. Consequently, self-determination and sovereignty have become important political demands. Udayan Misra (1991) links movements in Northeast India to the region's economic backwardness, while Grinin Phukan (1996) attributes regionalism to ethnic diversity, political pluralism, politicised identities, wider political participation, and competition over resources. Scholars such as H. K. Barpujari, Sanjay Kumar Pandey, M. Amarjeet Singh, and C. J. Sonowal

show that identity, land, cultural preservation, uneven development, and political representation have shaped autonomy movements in the region. These concerns are particularly evident among the Naga, Mizo, Khasi, and various Assamese communities, whose demands for states or autonomous councils reflect efforts to protect identity, secure political power, and promote development.

These studies show that identity and autonomy movements in Northeast India especially in Assam come from many old social economic, political and cultural reasons. With that background this paper wants to look at identity movements among different tribal communities, in Assam and study their recent patterns in the context of Viksit Bharat.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- a. To examine the historical rationale behind identity movements among tribal communities in Assam.
- b. To analyse the recent trends in ethnic autonomy movements in Assam in the context of Viksit Bharat.

3. Methodology:

The present study is based on the interpretation and analysis of secondary data collected from various sources, including books, academic journals, newspapers, periodicals, and reliable websites. The author's direct observations and experiences have also been taken into consideration while drawing conclusions.

4. A Historical Perspectives of Autonomy Movements:

Assam, one of the seven states of India's northeastern region, has long been regarded as a politically sensitive and volatile state because of insurgency, ethnic conflict, migration-related pressures, and underdevelopment. It is a multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multiracial society. During British colonial rule, several laws were introduced to maintain the separate identity and administrative isolation of tribal communities. These included the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874 and the Assam Frontier Tracts Regulation of 1880. In 1873, the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation introduced the Inner Line system, which restricted the entry of non-tribal people into certain designated areas without official permission.

A significant portion of Assam was later classified as a "Backward Area" under the Government of India Act of 1919. Subsequently, under the Government of India Act of 1935, several tribal areas were designated as "Excluded" and "Partially Excluded" Areas from 1937 onwards. These areas were kept outside the ordinary jurisdiction of the provincial administration and were administered through special arrangements under the authority of the Governor. This system encouraged the hill tribes to maintain social and administrative distance

from the people of the plains. As a result, the tribal communities developed a distinct political and cultural identity, which later influenced the political development of Assam and the wider northeastern region.

After India's independence, the Constituent Assembly examined the question of safeguarding the interests of the tribal communities of the Northeast. For this purpose, it constituted the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi, the then Premier of Assam. The Committee recommended the establishment of Autonomous District and Regional Councils to protect the land, customary practices, language, culture, and traditional institutions of the hill tribes. These recommendations formed the basis of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

Article 244(2), read with the Sixth Schedule, provides special arrangements for the administration of tribal areas in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. In undivided Assam, the tribal areas included the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District, excluding Shillong; the Garo Hills; the Lushai or Mizo Hills; the Mikir Hills, now known as Karbi Anglong; the Naga Hills; the North Cachar Hills; the North-East Frontier Tracts; and the Naga Tribal Area.

The Sixth Schedule provides for Autonomous District and Regional Councils with elected representatives. These councils exercise legislative, executive, judicial, and financial powers in matters relating to land, shifting cultivation, village administration, inheritance, marriage, social customs, and the administration of justice. Under the original provisions, a District Council could consist of not more than twenty-four members, of whom at least three-fourths were elected through adult suffrage.

Initially, the Sixth Schedule was intended mainly to protect the tribal communities residing in the former Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas. The interests of the plain's tribes of Assam, including the Bodos, Mishings, Lalungs, Sonowals, Deoris, Tiwas, and Thengals, were addressed separately through the constitutional arrangements relating to minority and tribal rights. In accordance with these provisions, several autonomous district councils were established in Assam from 1952 onwards.

5. PLAINS TRIBES' MOVEMENT:

5.1 Since independence (1947) to formation of Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) in 1993:

The movement of Assam's plains tribes, particularly the Bodos, developed from a long-standing search for political representation, cultural recognition, and regional autonomy. Although its roots can be traced to the early twentieth century, the movement became increasingly organised after independence. In 1929, Bodo representatives submitted a memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission demanding greater political rights. In 1933, the Tribal League was formed to advance the political interests of the tribal communities.

During the 1960s, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) emerged and, in 1967, launched a movement demanding a separate territory called “Udayachal” for the plain’s tribes living on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The demand gained strength because of concerns regarding cultural assimilation, economic backwardness, land alienation, and inadequate political representation. The language and foreigner-related movements led by the All-Assam Students’ Union further intensified the insecurity felt by the Bodos and other plains tribes.

From 1986 onwards, peaceful protests gradually became confrontational and, at times, violent. The All-Bodo Students’ Union and the Bodo People’s Action Committee played leading roles in the agitation. After negotiations with the governments of Assam and India, the Bodo Accord was signed on 20 February 1993. It provided for the creation of the Bodoland Autonomous Council through state legislation. The proposed council consisted of forty members, including thirty-five elected and five nominated members.

However, unresolved boundary demarcation and disagreements over the inclusion of villages weakened the arrangement. Since the territorial limits of the BAC remained disputed, elections to the council were not held. Thus, although the 1993 Accord marked an important attempt to address Bodo aspirations through regional autonomy, it failed to provide a lasting political settlement.

5.2 Political Development from 1995 to 2005:

Following the unsuccessful experiment of the Bodoland Autonomous Council, the Government of Assam adopted a policy of creating community-based autonomous councils for other plains tribes. In 1995, under Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia, the State Government established three councils through separate legislation. The Mising Accord led to the creation of the Mising Autonomous Council to protect the community’s social, cultural, educational, and economic interests. An agreement was also signed with the Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee, resulting in the establishment of the Lalung, or Tiwa, Autonomous Council. In the same year, the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Act was passed to provide an autonomous institutional framework for the Rabha and Hasong communities.

However, the functioning of these councils was affected by unresolved territorial questions. The Mising, Tiwa, and Rabha communities had historically shared geographical spaces and socio-cultural relations with other communities. Consequently, the boundaries of their councils could not be clearly demarcated, limiting their administrative effectiveness and weakening the practical impact of autonomy.

5.3 Emergence of the BTC:

The BAC also remained largely ineffective because of inadequate financial resources, limited administrative authority, and the substantial control exercised by the State Government. Dissatisfaction among the Bodos consequently increased, and the demand shifted from limited autonomy to a separate state of Bodoland. This development contributed to the emergence of militant organisations, including the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), formed in 1996 with the objective of achieving a separate Bodo state.

The resulting violence severely affected the Bodo-inhabited areas. In 1999, the BLT declared a unilateral ceasefire in response to the Union Government's appeal for negotiations. After further discussions, the BLT surrendered its arms in 2001. This created the conditions for a tripartite Memorandum of Settlement between the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and the BLT on 10 February 2003.archive.

The settlement provided for the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), an autonomous self-governing body under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Its objectives included fulfilling the Bodos' economic, educational, linguistic, and socio-cultural aspirations; protecting their land and ethnic identity; and accelerating infrastructure development in the BTC area. The Council was subsequently formed under the leadership of Hagrama Mohilary.

Political Development in 2005

The policy of granting community-based autonomy continued in 2005. During the final phase of Tarun Gogoi's first term as Chief Minister, the Government of Assam created three additional councils: the Deori Autonomous Council, the Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council, and the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council. The Deori and Sonowal Kachari Accords were signed on 4 March 2005, while the Thengal Kachari Accord was signed on 10 August 2005. The Assam Legislative Assembly subsequently enacted separate laws for the establishment of all three councils.

These developments reflected the State's attempt to respond to the political demands of smaller ethnic communities through decentralised and community-specific institutions. However, the effectiveness of such councils continued to depend on clear territorial jurisdiction, adequate financial powers, administrative capacity, and meaningful autonomy from the State Government.

6. Ethnic Autonomy Movements with the Vision of *Viksit Bharat@2047*:

The autonomy movements of ethnic communities in Assam—particularly in the post-2014 era and aligned with the national policy vision of *Viksit Bharat@2047*—have undergone a fundamental paradigm shift. The Central and State governments have strategically combined peace accords and insurgent surrenders with

unprecedented infrastructure development, capital investment, and targeted welfare delivery. Consequently, these ethnic groups are now negotiating their identity, land rights, and political representation within a growth-centric framework. Through the lens of *Atmanirbhar* and *Viksit Bharat*, these movements are increasingly re-imagined as localized expressions of self-reliance and inclusive growth.

6.1 Protection of Land and Resource Rights:

Ethnic autonomy demands primarily aim to prevent land alienation and ensure local benefits from region-specific resources. Correspondingly, the vision of *Viksit Bharat* emphasizes rural prosperity, agrarian resilience, and equitable resource governance.

6.2 Preservation of Indigenous Languages and the Indian Knowledge System (IKS):

Autonomy movements seek to protect and preserve indigenous languages through mother-tongue education, cultural revival, and the safeguarding of local traditions and customs. Parallely, *Viksit Bharat* explicitly highlights IKS, heritage, and cultural industries as vital pillars of national development.

6.3 Strengthening Institutions, Governance, and Participatory Development:

Contemporary Autonomy movements place significant emphasis on strengthening Autonomous Councils/District Councils and securing constitutional safeguards. Alignment occurs as *Viksit Bharat* stresses good governance, administrative decentralization through participatory frameworks, and result-oriented development programs.

6.4 Empowering Youth, Women, and Livelihoods:

Ethnic autonomy demands highlight educational advancement, youth employment, and women's empowerment through traditional domains such as weaving, heritage tourism, and cultural entrepreneurship. Similarly, *Viksit Bharat* centers on skill development, startup ecosystems, and women-led growth.

6.5 Ensuring Peace and Stability:

Recent trends show autonomy movements seeking peaceful resolutions to long-standing demands to establish regional stability, recognizing that unresolved identity issues fuel unrest and deter economic growth. To achieve the goals of *Viksit Bharat*, the government has initiated structured dialogue to address legitimate aspirations, adopting institutional reform as a proactive conflict-prevention strategy.

7. Conclusion:

The study reveals that ethnic autonomy movements in Assam have continued primarily to protect the identity, culture, land rights, and political interests of indigenous communities. The vision of *Viksit Bharat@2047* has provided renewed momentum to these movements by emphasising that India's cultural diversity can be preserved and strengthened alongside the pursuit of national development and prosperity. Consequently, ethnic leaders are increasingly negotiating questions of identity, land rights, and political representation within a growth-oriented framework.

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