

# **CHAPTER-1**

## **Introduction**

### **1:1 Introduction:**

Ethno-nationalist conflicts involving minority ethnic groups have attracted the attention of scholars during recent times. These ethnic conflicts have threatened to be a destabilizing factor in the process of governance not only in India but in many of the states in Asia, Africa, Balkans and the Middle-East.

North-East India is home to many tribal ethnic groups. The question of ethnic identity in this region is a very complex issue often characterized by various forms of mobilization along ethnic lines leading to the emergence of different types of tribal movements. Such articulation of tribal ethnic sentiments was initially observed among the hill tribes of North-East India. In the subsequent period, the plain tribes of the region started asserting ethnic identity as well even as they demanded similar institutional safeguards to protect their socio-cultural distinctiveness along the lines of those available in favour of the hill tribes.

During the post independence period in India the nation-building process took place amidst large ethno-cultural and religious diversities. The 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 framers of the Indian Constitution had enacted a local Autonomous Administration for some of the tribal communities (Hill Tribes) under the Six Schedule of the Constitution to preserve and protect their identity, culture and development. The other tribal groups living in the plains of Assam were left outside the ambit of constitutional protection. Subsequently, these plain tribes of Assam also mobilized their ethnic identity to get a share in the political process of Assam following the path of hill tribes. 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. Today the Bodos formed the Bodoland Territorial Councils (BTC) under the Six Schedule of the Constitution; Autonomous Council's are constituted by

the Government of Assam for the Rabhas, Tiwas, Misings, Deoris, Sonowal Kacharis, and Thengal Kacharis.

In this study, an attempt will be made to analyze the various aspects of ethnic mobilization for the demand of political autonomy by the plain tribes of Assam and also a practical evaluation of the functioning of Autonomous Councils for the socio- economic and cultural advancement of these tribal groups with a case study of Tiwa and Rabha Autonomous Councils.

### **1:2 Theoretical Statements: Ethnic Identity formation and Territorial Autonomy:**

In North East India the ethno-centric demand for autonomy by the Tribal ethnic groups is closely associated with the question of protection of their ethnic identity. Before going to the detailed empirical study of the issue, it is pertinent to have a theoretical understanding of the propositions regarding the ethnic identity formation and territorial autonomy arrangement.

There is lack of widely agreed definition of the term ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is an affinitive construct, where an individual is viewed by themselves and by others as belonging to a particular ethnic or cultural group (Trimble Joseph E. and Dickson Ryan; 2000). According to Jean Phinney(2003), “Ethnic identity is a dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one’s identity, or sense of self as a member of an ethnic group.” She further added that, “Ethnic identity is constructed and modified as individuals become aware of their ethnicity, within the large (sociocultural ) settings.” Ethnic identity formation is a means (now) for disadvantaged groups to claim a set of rights and privileges which the existing power structures have denied them (Bell Daniel, 1975). Paul Brass (1991) further stated that, ethnic identity formation involves, in addition to subjective self-consciousness, a claim to status and recognition, either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other group. Thus, the ethnic identity formation is not merely a self-consciousness of an ethnic group but it involves some claims for rights, recognition and status.

The problem of ethnic movement for securing territorial autonomy is not a problem unique to India, but a common problem in the entire world. In South Asia, most of the nations are ‘multicultural’ having a plural character. In these multicultural plural societies the key factor behind the various ethnic or secessionist movements has been that the post-colonial states desires to produce a pulverized and uniform sense of national identity to coincide with

artificial and arbitrary state boundaries, which seldom overlap with the real ethnic divisions on the ground. The nation-building process in these countries typically legitimized the over-centralization of state power in an effort to safeguard territorial integrity and achieve political stability. This in turn resulted in the neglect or ill-treatment of ethnic minorities and the denial of political rights of the minority ethnic groups, thereby producing an 'ethnic backlash' in the form of ethno-nationalist and secessionist movements (Ganguly Rajat, 2002).

Thus, the problem of ethnic conflict in South Asian countries is a governance problem. In contemporary era, the forces of globalization and democratization has ushered some far reaching changes in the socio-political life in these societies. It is in this context that the concept of 'autonomy' has gained currency in the discussion on ethnic conflict resolution in South Asian countries (Ganguly Rajat 2002).

By Autonomy, it is understood that "parts of the State's territory are authorized to govern themselves in certain matters by enacting laws and statutes, but without constituting a State of their own" (Heintze Hans-Joachim, 1998). Autonomy in simple term means transfer or devolution of certain powers from a Central Government to that of the autonomous entity (Wolff and Weller, 2005).

In a general sense territorial autonomy means self-rule or self-government of a specific territory or region (in most cases a recognized 'ethno-national homeland') where one particular ethnic group may form a substantial numerical majority. Territorial Autonomy in a political and legal context refers to the power of social institutions to "regulate their own affairs by enacting legal rules." In international law, autonomy is taken to mean that 'parts of the state's territory are authorized to govern themselves in certain matters by enacting laws and statutes, but without constituting a state of their own' (Ganguly Rajat 2002).

The territorial autonomy arrangement involves sorting out of several issues—

1. Territorial demarcation of ethnic homeland.
2. Type of regional institutions and their legislative, executive and judicial functions.
3. Division of power between the centre and periphery.
4. Degree of fiscal autonomy for regional institutions.
5. Arbitration procedure in case of conflict between the centre and periphery.

## 6. Regional representation and the question of joint decision making at the centre.

Furthermore, for territorial autonomy arrangements to work, the centre has to recognize the ethnic minority as a “distinct nationality” with the right to national self-determination in each “traditional homeland” (Ganguly Rajat 2002).

According to Ranabir Samaddar, autonomy has become emblem of group rights and minority rights. To him Democracy has to be redefined on the principles of autonomy as it cannot proceed without autonomy (Samaddar Ranabir 2008). In the same way it has been argued that the territorial autonomy, by protecting diversity and their institutionalization enrich the world more than endanger it.

Today, Democracy has been considered as the most accepted way of Government by almost all the countries of the modern world. In a democratic regime, more particularly in the multi-ethnic states, the diverse ethnic groups got the opportunity to assert their rights and were able to preserve their language, culture, religion and consolidate their identity. But there are failures of the democratic practices in the multi-ethnic countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, which have been characterized by the attributes of social injustices, unemployment, underdevelopment, problem of exclusions, lack of good governance and centralized power system. Such failures of democratic regimes have fuelled the marginalized ethnic groups to mobilize their demand for political autonomy to have an equal share in the political process (Lapidoth Ruth 1997).

Scholars have argued that to reconcile a state’s legitimate aspirations to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty with a non-state ethnic nation’s legitimate aspirations for self-rule in its ethnic homeland, the concept of territorial or regional autonomy holds centre stage. Because it has the potential to accommodate two paradoxical objectives- a) the preservation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state, b) the satisfaction of ethnic minorities’ rights to national homeland, a greater voice and participation in the governance of that homeland and equal opportunity to participate fully in all aspects of life within the State (Lapidoth Ruth, 1997).

In the context of democratization and deconstruction of the post-colonial over-centralized state in South Asian region, if the non-state ethnic nations are allowed to lead an autonomous self-rule in their ethnic homeland, could provide a way forward to finally

resolving the decade-old ethno-nationalist and secessionist insurgencies that have ravaged the states in these regions (Lapidoth Ruth, 1997).

### **Critical discourse on autonomy:**

However, some theorists on ethnic conflict have argued against the structural solution of ethnic conflict through an autonomous administrative-political arrangement. Svante E. Cornell argued that autonomy arrangements by empowering ethnic elites with state-like institutions that enhance their leadership capacities and ambitions, by generating greater economic viability of the autonomous territorial entity may promote a greater sense of separate ethnic identity amongst minority people and increase their motivation and capacity to seek secession and independence (Cornell Svante E., 2001).

Other critics argued that the autonomy arrangements failed to resolve the ethnic conflicts because it fails to deliver positive outcomes for people across all areas of governance (either as a result of deliberate design or faulty implementation). In other words if ethnic conflict is a result of mal-governance then there is no reason to believe that just because territorial autonomy arrangements have transferred political authority to the local leaders and created new institutional arrangements, the quality of governance would automatically improve. In fact in such cases the reverse actually happens.

It has been argued that autonomy arrangements may sometimes endanger peace. The greatest obstacles to peace negotiations and agreements have come from a fraction of leaders who come to regard the peace arrangements as undermining their power, interests and ideological beliefs and values. They therefore, try to undermine the peace process through stepped up violence. Therefore, it seems logical to argue that autonomy arrangements have a better chance to succeed in those cases where the leaders are not divided into various parties, factions and cliques. However, very few cases of ethnic conflicts fit this profile.

In the multi-ethnic states, there are often minorities who are discriminated against and are prone to idealize the deceptive solution of autonomy. However, after achieving autonomy, within their autonomous regimes they will create their own minorities and circle begins all over again. The agitations/demands for autonomy by the ethnic groups have led to the transformation of many countries by creating many new states. Therefore, it is argued that the solution to the problems that fuel the desire for an autonomous regime among the ethnic

groups or nations are good governance, justice and equal opportunities, rule of law and other civil values, not the structural balkanization of the country on the basis of ethnicity.

In spite of all the criticism against the autonomy arrangement, scholars have argued that, an increasing number of ethno-political conflicts over territory have been settled through administrative-political dispensations evolving regional autonomy, such as the provision of autonomy to the Basques of Spain in 1980, the Miskitos of Nicaragua in 1990, and the Afars in Ethiopia in 1977. The popularity of autonomy as a solution undoubtedly stems from its being one of the few conceivable compromise solutions in conflicts over the administrative control of a specific territory (Lapidoth Ruth, 1997).

### **1:3 Statement of the problem:**

#### **History of autonomy demand by the tribal ethnic groups in North East India:**

The Tribals in Assam are called the ‘sons of the soil’ meaning the indigenous population of the region. These tribal groups have been living in this part of the country with their own distinct cultural norms and traditions. It is said that in the ancient Kamrupa (the antecedent of modern Assam) three dynasties namely Bhauma-Naraka, Salastambha and Palas, ruled for more than seven hundred years; scholars suggest that all these three dynasties were of Indo-Mongoloid origin who faithfully followed Brahminical Hinduism. Even the Ahoms, who conquered Assam in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, ruled this territory for more than seven hundred years mostly on the strength of their tribal solidarity and their state-policy retained most of the tribal traits in the spheres of administration, social organization as well as economy. In the periphery of mighty Ahom rule in Assam there existed smaller tribal principalities mostly as the tributaries of Ahom king.

The British established their rule in Assam in 1826 following the Yandaboo Treaty. They also followed the policy of retaining the tradition of self-governance to some extent for the tribals. In fact many scholars have attributed the present political assertion of the tribal ethnic groups of North East India to the then colonial policy of isolation and segregation of the tribal communities from the caste-Hindu Assamese society.

The British colonial rulers consolidated the colonial rule in North East India at different point of time. The Assam Plains were annexed in 1826, Cachar Plains in 1830, Khasi Hills in 1833, Jaintia Plains in 1835, Mikir Hills in 1838, North Cachar Hills in 1854,

Naga Hills during 1866-1904, Garo Hills in 1872-73 and Lushai Hills in 1890. The colonial rulers established the Assam province on 6<sup>th</sup> February 1874 by separating it from the management of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, placed under the direct control of a Chief Commissioner. At the same time the Colonial masters have introduced the Scheduled District Act 1874, by which it is decided to remove the remote or backward tracts of British India from the operation of General Acts and Regulations. This was the beginning of the separation of tribal communities from the mainstream of Assam which is followed more vigorously in subsequent policies of the colonial rulers. Further, as per the Montague Chelmsford report in 1918, the colonial rulers inserted section 52A in the Government of India Act 1919, according to which the Governor General-in-Council may declare any territory to be a Backward Tract and deny any Legislative Act in the areas so declared. Consequently under Section 52A (2) of the Act, the following territories falling in the province of Assam were declared as Backward Tract:

- 1) The Garo Hills District
- 2) The British portion of Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts (other than the Shillong Municipality and the Cantonment)
- 3) The Mikir Hills (in Nowgong and Sibsagar Districts)
- 4) The North Cachar Hills
- 5) Naga Hills Districts
- 6) The Lushai Hill Districts
- 7) The Sadiya Frontier Tract
- 8) Balipara Frontier Tract
- 9) The Lakhimpur Frontier Tract.

Later on, the Simon Commission in 1927 too considered the administrative positions pertaining to these Backward Tracts and recommended that no legislature should be given power to pass legislation on these areas. Instead administration should be more centralized through the Governor. Accepting the recommendations of the Simon Commission, some

changes pertaining to the hitherto Backward Tract areas were introduced in the Government of India Act, 1935. As per the Government of India (Excluded and Partially Excluded areas) Order, 1936 the Backward Tract areas under the Government of India Act 1919 were regrouped as follows:

Excluded Areas:

1) North East Frontier (Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur) Tract 2) The Naga Hills Districts 3) The Lushai Hills Districts 4) The North Cachar Hills Sub-division of Cachar District.

Partially Excluded Areas:

1) The Garo Hills District 2) The Mikir Hills in Nowgong and Sibsagar Districts and 3) The British portion of Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts (other than Shillong Municipality and Cantonment).

As per the rule, in the governance of these areas, the powers of the provincial legislature were not extended to these areas. The Excluded areas were to be administered by the Governor himself in his discretion while the partially excluded areas were to be his special responsibility.

Thus the colonial policy adopted to govern the tribal areas in North East India, excluding the general administration of mainland Assam had largely contributed to the growth of an identity centric distinctive sentiment among the tribal groups from the mainstream Assamese nationalism.

Many scholars have considered that, during the colonial rule, a newly emerged 'middle class' in the tribal societies of north east India had articulated the sense of identity consciousness in their respective societies. Though the colonial administration was never expected to provide a people oriented education system, yet with the introduction of modern education the number of literate and educated people started increasing not only in the relatively advanced core Assamese society but also in the non-Assamese indigenous societies of Assam. Along with education, the spread of Christianity helps in emergence of a middle-class in the indigenous tribal societies. This very class of people played a pioneering role in unfolding, consolidating and then spreading an identity consciousness among the members of their society. Consequently a clash of interest and contradiction between the 'middle class'



elements of core Assamese and peripheral Assamese (tribal) societies has emerged. Moreover the alleged social discriminations, superiority complex of the caste-Hindu Assamese people and the caste-based social stratifications gradually started to push the tribal people away from the proximity with the core-Assamese society. Such an atmosphere of neglect and indifference provided the fertile ground for the competitive 'middle class' to politically mobilize the tribal communities on the issue of ethnic identity. The hurt-sentiments of the tribal 'middle class' realized that without political power, no malady could be remedied and as a result bargaining for political power had started. They never take into confidence the governing caste-Hindu Assamese elite who refuse to share the political power. This stubborn situation provided motivation to the tribal elites to start thinking in terms of their own political boundary. They tried to arouse the latent identity-consciousness among their own people and direct it towards self-determination aspiration.

Therefore, during the time of independence of India, some of the Hill Tribes of North East India refused to accede to the Indian Union rather demanded complete political independence. Among the Nagas, Zapu Angami Phizo and other Naga leaders started fighting for political independence. In 1947 the Naga National Council, an organization demanding independence of the Nagas, wrote to the Governor General Lord Mountbatten in a memorandum suggesting that India might act as a guardian for 10 years after which the Naga people would determine their political future (H.M. Bareh:2001; Encyclopaedia of North East India, Vol.-II (Assam) page-34). Sir Akbar Hydari, then Governor of Assam held discussion with the Naga leaders at Kohima from 27-29 June 1947, and a nine point agreement was reached.

In Lushai Hills also the Mizo leaders raised some demands while joining the Indian Union such as: 1) that the existing safeguards of their customary laws and land tenure etc. should be maintained 2) that the Chin Hills Regulations 1896 and Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation 1873, should be retained until such time as the Lushais themselves through their District Council or other parallel district authority declared that this can be abrogated 3) that the Lushais will be allowed to opt out of the Indian Union, when they wish to do so, subject to a minimum period of 10 years.

Again in Khasi Hills also, 25 Syiems (Khasi Rajas, who were elected monarchs) of tiny States in Khasi Hills resisted signing the instrument of accession to India.

At this delicate time Pndt. Gopinath Bordoloi, the then premier of Assam, persuaded the Hill tribe leaders to accept the accession to the Union of India. However in order to satisfy the demands of the Hill leaders of North East India the Constituent Assembly of independent India appointed a Sub-committee called the 'North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas' under the chairmanship of Pndt. Gopinath Bordoloi. The recommendations of the Bordoloi committee were incorporated in the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India. According to Section-20 of the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Constitution the 'tribal areas' of Assam were specified in Part -A and B of a corresponding table. Part-A included- 1) the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills 2) the Garo Hills 3) the Lushai Hills 4) the Naga Hills 5) the North Cachar Hills and 6) the Mikir Hills. Part-B included- 1) North East Frontier Tract including Balipara Frontier Tract, Abor Hills and Misimi Hills Districts and 2) the Naga Tribal Areas. According to the Section-19 of the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Constitution, the Governor was to ensure constitution of an Autonomous District Council for each of these above areas.

### **Considerations of the Bordoloi Sub-Committee for the Hills Tribes Autonomy:**

Pndt. Gopinath Bordoloi in the Constituent Assembly debate explained in clear terms about the conditions in which the draft of the Sixth Schedule was prepared. In the debate, he stated that, the problems of the hill areas of Assam which were entirely excluded areas in the sense that none from the plains could go there and contact the tribal people, were quite different from the problems of those areas which were brought under the regular administrative measures of the British Government. During the World War-II, some of these were under war- zones. During war times, some military officers and British administrators engaged in these areas to fight against the Japanese infused in them a sense of separation and isolation. They assured the tribals that as soon as the war was over, they would have their independent states managing their own affairs according to their own way. Bordoloi strongly argued that instead of using brute military force, a method should be used in which willing co-operation from the people could be obtained by the Government for the purpose of governing these areas. Drawing the attention of the Hon'ble members of the Constituent Assembly, he had also pointed to the democratic culture prevailing in the village administration and the manner in which the different community works were distributed among the people of different age groups in the villages of tribal inhabited areas. Even the murder cases had been decided by the village panchayats. Therefore they must be allowed to

develop themselves in their own way.(Dr. B. N. Bordoloi, Tribal Development Plans and Programmes in the Sixth Schedule Areas of Assam with special reference to Management of land- A Critical Appraisal, published in Bulletin of Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, Guwahati-28, Vol-I No.-VII, 1990, Page-28)

Mr. J. J. M. Nichols Roy, a member of the Sub-committee participating in the constituent assembly debate on the draft of the sixth schedule stated that the Hill Districts inhabited by tribal hill people would under the Constitution of India be able to develop themselves in their own way without disturbing the main purpose of unity underlying the constitution presented in the draft. He further stated that these tribals had their self-governing bodies, though small, from time immemorial (Dr. B. N. Bordoloi, 1990, Page-28).

In the same way, A. B. Thakkar, who was also a member of the sub-committee, participating in the Constituent Assembly debate stated in support of the draft of the Sixth Schedule that the best way to keep the frontier people satisfied was to give them certain measures of self-government so that they might develop according to their own genius and culture. He pointed out that the advancement of the Hill Tribes could not be achieved by force. He further argued that advancement would be accepted by them only when they would see something more than what they had. Appreciating the role of the village panchayats in these societies he said they were better than the regular courts. The Hill Tribals, therefore, should not be deprived of the things which they considered to be good for them according to their own way (Dr. B. N. Bordoloi, 1993, page-28).

Thus, it is well understood that the Bordoloi Committee recommended for the enactment of self-governance for the Hill Tribes of north-east India to fulfill their political aspirations for self-rule and thereby allow them to develop according to their own genius.

However, the political autonomy provided under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian Constitution could not fully contain the political aspirations of the Hills tribes of North East India. In fact, soon after independence a rift emerged between the leaders of the Hill Tribes and the Assam Pradesh Congress party. (In 1957, antagonism between the Mizo Union and Assam Pradesh Congress had started when candidates were set up against each other in the District Council and to the State Legislature). It is to be mentioned that, in 1960 the All Party Hill Leaders Conference, a common platform of hill tribes leaders was formed which stood for creation of an 'Eastern Frontier State' comprising all hill districts of Assam, Meghalaya

and Tripura. However in later stage, separate demand for statehood was raised by the leaders from the regions of Mizoram, Nagaland, Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills and Meghalaya.

In Mizoram, the Mizo National Front (MNF) was formed in 1960 and raised the demand for 'sovereign independence of greater Mizoram'. The MNF under the leadership of Laldenga started an arms campaigning for Mizoram state. After a long revolution, on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1972 Mizoram was declared Union Territory and became Indian State in 1987.

In Meghalaya also they had a discontentment being a part of Assam as they have been dominated by the caste-Hindu Assamese leaders. In 1960 when the provincial Government of Assam passed the Official Language Bill, the hill tribes' leaders jointly opposed the move on the contention of cultural hegemony of Assamese over the relatively smaller tribal ethnic societies. Meghalaya was carved out of Assam on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1970 and become a State.

In Nagaland, the Naga National Council headed by Phizo, demanded for a sovereign independent political status of Naga Hills. Although the Naga Movement had started even during the colonial rule in India, the movement became very strong in the 1950's and in early part of 1960's. Even the Naga National Council declared its independence on 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1947, one day before India's independence. After much bloodshed and Naga Peoples Convention in 1957, 1958 and 1959, the Prime Minister of India announced the formation of the state of Nagaland as the 16<sup>th</sup> state of the Indian Union on 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1960. The state of Nagaland thus came into being by the 13<sup>th</sup> Constitution amendment on 1<sup>st</sup> December, 1963.

In Karbi Anglong and North Cachar (Dima Hasao) Hill Districts demand for separate statehood has been raised by several organizations and they have launched violent movements.

Thus the political autonomy under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Constitution of India could not fulfill the ethnic aspirations of the hill tribes of the North East India which consequently led to the balkanization of Assam.

Following are the states emerged in the North East India after the reorganization of Assam during the post-independence period.

**Table:1:1** (List of States, area and date of creation after the reorganization of Assam)

State	Area in Square K.M.	Year of formation
Manipur	22,327	1949
Tripura	10,416	15 <sup>th</sup> October,1949
Nagaland	16,579	13 <sup>th</sup> December,1963
Mizoram	21,081	21 <sup>st</sup> January,1972
Meghalaya	22,249	21 <sup>st</sup> February,1972

Source: Bedabrat Bora, 2013; Asomar Janajati, Sneha Publication, Guwahati-21, page-13

### **Political Assertion of the Plain Tribes in Assam:**

Besides the ethnic identity based political mobilization of the Hill Tribes of Assam, the tribal ethnic groups living in the plains of Assam too were become very conscious to protect, uphold their identity and development. The first concrete manifestation of the ethnic aspirations of Plain Tribes can be traced back to 4<sup>th</sup> January 1929 when four memorandums were submitted to the Simon Commission. But that was a phase of protectionist behavior because they demanded only the protection of rich ethnic identity and other socio-economic rights of the plain tribes. Similarly in 1933 the first plain tribals' organization the 'Tribal League' was formed and demanded for the protection of the plain tribals' from the clutches of migration, land and revenue policy introduced by the colonial rulers. It was due to the continuous pressure of the Tribal League that Gopinath Bordoloi, during his second ministry passed Assam Act XV of 1947 amending Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886 by which 37 no's of Tribal Belt and Blocks were created exclusively for the Plain Tribals of Assam to secure their rights over land.

During the time of Independence, the plain tribals of Assam extended co-operation to the Congress leaders as well as to the newly independent state and central government as a strategy towards uplift of their socio-economic conditions. But nearly after 20 years of independence the plain tribals of Assam derived an impression that the Government of Assam was not interested in giving adequate protection to the tribals. They are regretted with the fact that they neither enjoyed the constitutional privileges under the 5<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the constitution nor the autonomous self rule under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the constitution. Consequently, in 1967 the plain tribals of Assam articulated the demand for political

autonomy by constituting Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), the first ever political organization of the plain tribals after independence. The PTCA stood for the Barmans of Cachar, the Bodo-Kacharis, the Deoris, the Hojais, the Kacharis including Sonowals, the Lalungs (Tiwas), the Meches and the Rabhas. The PTCA, submitted a memorandum to the President of India on 20<sup>th</sup> May, 1967 demanding full autonomy in the predominantly plain tribal areas of northern tracts of Goalpara, kamrup, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar Districts including all the tribal belts and blocks of those areas. The main demands of the PTCA are:

The plain tribals can-

- i) Adequately protect their land
- ii) Give effective check to economic exploitations of tribals by non-tribals
- iii) Conserve their language, culture, customs and what is best in them
- iv) Prevent political domination by non-tribals over tribals and imposition of anything which would disrupt their traditions and customs
- v) Grow according to their own genius and traditions.

(P.S. Dutta, 1993: Autonomy Movement in Assam (Documents), page-17)

In 1973 the PTCA revised its demand for “the Udayachal” a Union Territory. But in 1977 some leaders of PTCA withdrew their demand for Union Territory and in lieu of Union Territory they demanded Autonomous Region. This has created a rift among the leaders of PTCA, as a result some leaders of PTCA formed PTCA (progressive) and raised their demand for a Union Territory called “Mishing Bodoland”. They submitted a number of memorandums to the Prime Minister of India in between 1980 and 1983.

The All Boro Students Union (ABSU), that have been playing a very active role in PTCA since 1967, trying to unite PTCA and PTCA (progressive) but could not succeeded in its effort. In 1984 PTCA (P) was dissolved and a new organization was formed as United Tribal Nationalist Liberation Front (UTNLF) which too demanded for a Union Territory called “Tribal land”.

But the Plain Tribes political mobilization for autonomy or self rule got a very strong root when ABSU articulate a demand for full-fledged statehood and give nomenclature

“Bodoland” in its 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference at Bashbari in Dhubri from 19 to 22 December 1988. The Bodos under the leadership of ABSU ushered a very strong movement for “Bodoland”. Consequently they resort to violent activities including abduction, bombing and killing of the non-bodos particularly the Muslims and the Hindi speaking peoples and became a strong anti-government force.

During 1990's in every day the Bodo movement remains in headline of the media in Assam and had shaken the political stability of Assam. To resolve the problem the historic Bodo Accord was signed on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1993 by the representatives of central government, state government as well as ABSU. Under the Accord the Bodo Autonomous Council was constituted to give political autonomy to the Bodos in Assam. But the Bodo Accord of 1993 could not resolve the political aspirations of the Bodos. This had ushered a very strong movement for securing Bodoland state. After a prolonged violence committed by some Bodo militant organizations i.e. National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Bodoland Liberation Tiger (BLT), another memorandum of settlement was signed on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2003. Through this settlement it has been decided to constitute the Bodoland Territorial Administrative District (BTAD) under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Indian constitution by a constitutional amendment. Accordingly the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) was formed on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2003 under the leadership of Hagrama Mahilary comprising the districts of Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Udalguri. However, some organizations in Bodoland, including ABSU still raised the demand for a full-fledged state of Bodoland for which they carried out a strong agitation in Assam.

Taking the instance of the Bodo movement and its consequent political developments, some smaller tribal ethnic groups particularly the Tiwas, the Mishings and the Rabhas have asserted their political aspirations for autonomy during 1990's. Various organizations were formed around the issue of securing political autonomy for their respective communities. The detail analysis of demand articulation for securing political autonomy by the Tiwas and the Rabhas in Assam will be thoroughly discussed in a later chapter.

### **Constitution of the Tiwa and the Rabha Autonomous Councils:**

Responding to the demands of the various Tiwa and Rabha organizations, the Government of Assam have decided to give political autonomy to the Tiwas and the Rabhas, by constituting an Autonomous Administrative Authority for the purpose of self-governance to the Tiwa and the Rabha ethnic groups. Accordingly, the Government of Assam concluded

Memorandum of Settlement with the Tiwa leaders on 13-04-1995 and the Rabha leaders on 10-05-1995. In the Preamble of the Memorandums of Settlement known as the Tiwa and the Rabha Hasong Accords it was mentioned that the Government of Assam has been making earnest efforts to provide more power to different tribal and ethnic groups within Assam, so as to bring about speedy development in the areas inhabited by these groups. Towards this end the Government has decided to constitute the Autonomous Administrative Authorities under the name and style of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council and Tiwa Autonomous Council under the Acts of the State Government.

### **Autonomous Councils and ethnic aspirations of the Rabhas and the Tiwas:**

After the signing of the Tiwa and the Rabha Hasong Accords in 1995, the Autonomous Councils are constituted by the Government of Assam by passing the Tiwa Autonomous Council Act and the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Act in 1995. But it has been observed that even after more than 18 years of constitution of the Tiwa and the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Councils, the Council authorities could not fulfill the aspirations of the Tiwa and the Rabha peoples in Assam.

Today, the organizations of both the Tiwa and the Rabha community in Assam have been raising the demand for a more meaningful decentralized autonomous self-rule which will help them to grow in their own way. The autonomy which is provided to them so far could not satisfy the aspirations of all the sections of these communities. They alleged that it is only a few leaders have got the benefit from these Autonomous Councils. This has created fractions among the leaders of these struggling communities. This will further complicate the issue if the real purpose of tribal ethnic development could not be ensured. To find out the ways and means of proper development of these hitherto backward communities an extensive in-depth study is required.

### **Main Demands of the Tiwa and the Rabhas:**

The basic demands of the Tiwa and the Rabhas are –

1. To ascertain self rule in the Tiwa and the Rabha dominated areas.
2. To ensure a bigger share of development for the Tiwa and the Rabha people in Assam.
3. To protect their land rights.



4. To preserve their ethnic identity by preserving own culture and linguistic identity.

#### **1:4 Objectives of the Study:**

The basic objective of the study is to critically analyze the following issues:

1. To outline the reasons for the emergence of the demand for ethno-centric political autonomy among the Tiwa and the Rabha tribal groups in Assam.
2. To understand the political awareness of the general Tiwa and the Rabha peoples about the autonomy granted by the Government of Assam.
3. To highlight the functioning of the Tiwa and the Rabha Autonomous Councils as autonomous institutions for the socio, economic development of the Tiwa and the Rabha communities in Assam.
4. To find out whether the Tiwa and the Rabha autonomous councils fulfill the aspirations of the respective tribal communities.
5. To find out whether more autonomy could be a solution to the ongoing demands of the Tiwa and the Rabha national organizations in Assam.

#### **1:5 Academic Rationale of the Topic:**

Assam is a multicultural and heterogeneous state inhabited by many different communities. The strength of the state lies in the unity among the ethnic communities of the Assam. But in recent times the ethnic assertion on the part of almost all the ethnic groups could be seen dominating the political landscape. Frequent bandhs, dharnas, protest rallies etc. in support of the various demands of the ethnic communities has increasingly contributed to political instability in the State.

Against this background, the present study will be an attempt to find out an amicable solution to the ethno-centric demands of the ethnic communities more particularly on the part of the Tiwa and the Rabha tribes of Assam.

Another reason of the selection of these two particular communities is their common lineage, grievances and demands.

Till now no such attempt has been made to undertake a study on the lines outlined in this research proposal. Herein lies the academic rationale of this study.

### **1:6 Scope of the study:**

The study will be carried out in the Tiwa and Rabha inhabited areas of Assam. For the purpose, field visits will be carried out in the Tiwa and the Rabha inhabited areas. Although the Tiwa people are living in different parts of the Assam and also in some areas of Meghalaya the study will cover only those Tiwa peoples who are living under the jurisdiction of the Tiwa Autonomous Council. The Tiwa villages under the jurisdiction of the Tiwa Autonomous Council are located in the Morigaon, Nagaon, and Kamrup districts of Assam.

Similarly the Rabha Tribal people are also living in the many parts of the Assam, in some areas of the Garo Hills in the state of Meghalaya and partly in some areas of the State of West Bengal. But this study covers only those villages which are under the jurisdiction of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council. The villages under the jurisdiction of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council are located in the Goalpara and Kamrup Districts of Assam.

### **1:7 Methodology:**

The study will be essentially an empirical one. It will be based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data will be collected from the following respondents for the proper understanding of the problem.

1. Relevant data will be collected from the interviews with the leading personalities of both the Tiwa and the Rabha communities.
2. Interview will be held with the office bearers of the respective Autonomous Council to know about the functioning of the Council's.
3. Empirical survey with the help of a questionnaire will be conducted among the selected common masses inhabited in the Tiwa and Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council area to know the awareness about the demand for political autonomy as well as about the functioning of the Autonomous Council's for whom the autonomy is demanded.

Since it is not possible to cover all the villages for the study, the sampling method will be applied for the data collection. An intensive study will be carried out in the selected villages inhabited by the Tiwa and the Rabha communities.

**Sample size:**

The respondents for the purpose of primary data collection will be taken from the village levels. The Villages will be selected from the Tiwa and the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council constituencies. For the selection of the Villages, the Tiwa and the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council constituencies were categorized into 4 (Four) special categories based on special criteria to ensure the representation of all types of areas. From each special criteria 1 (One) Constituency will be selected and from each constituency 1 (One) village will be taken based on single uniform criteria (Highest number of population concentrated Constituency and in the next level the highest number of voters concentrated Village).

Thus, the survey will be carried out in 8(Eight Villages), (4villages from each of the Tiwa and the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Councils). In the study, the total sample of the interview will be 3% of total population of the selected villages, which will be rounded off into 200 for the sake of equal distribution among both the Councils (100 from each Council area) and also to make equal representation of all the 8 (Eight) villages in both the Councils for the sake of comparative analysis of the findings between the two Councils. Following this, in each villages an equal numbers of 25 (twenty five) persons will be interviewed. The respondents will be selected from the Voters list of the respective Village specially prepared for the Council elections.

Secondary data will be collected from the published sources. The basic sources of the secondary data will be books, journals, proceedings of various organizations of both the tribal groups, publications of various Tiwa and Rabha organizations, Government notifications, orders and acts and materials available in the internet.

**1:8 Review of related literature:**

The issue of ethnic movement and their political assertion is a universal phenomenon in contemporary world. Since modern nations-states are not composed of homogenous communities the ethnic identity based ethnic assertion for their group right is universally evident. As a result, 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 trough out the world. A brief review of the relevant literature on this issue is given below.

Rajat Ganguly and Ian Macduff, in “*Ethnic Conflict and Secessionism*” in South and South East Asia: Causes, Dynamics and Solutions (eds.), Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2003, is of the opinion that the contemporary geo-political system witnessing the simultaneous process of globalization and localization in which revival of ethnic identities and associated conflicts is the main concern. Considering this fact, attempt has been made to study the causes, processes & outcomes of secessionist ethnic conflicts in South and South East Asia from a comparative cross regional perspective. In the book the factors like mass mobilization, intra-elite competition, primordialism or relative deprivation as the root causes of ethnic secessionist conflicts. Their solutions include partition, power sharing, democratization, constitutional entrenchment of ethnic or minority rights, and proportional division of key offices and so on. The author also proposed at the internal level, the principle of Conflict Management Design which includes increased autonomy, increased inclusion in national decision making and power sharing, while at the external level the principles of integrations which mean greater co-ordination of intervention and collaboration by agencies to accommodate the ethnic aspirations.

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/uu\\_12ee0j.htm](http://archive.unu.edu/unupress/unupbooks/uu12ee/uu_12ee0j.htm) Viewed on 4/12/2012, stated that the ongoing autonomy movement as a process in which the boundaries of a given ethnic group are activated, resulting in the awareness and politicization of ethnic identities. Further, political mobilization for given goals leads to the building up an ethnic movement. 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 regime in Assam as construction of frontiers, negotiations for political space within these frontiers 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, thus fighting for a political geographical space within contested territories such as "frontiers". Therefore, the autonomy granted must be compatible with the aspirations of given groups of people within the framework of the constitution through some political negotiations.

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'. 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. While defining territorial political autonomy Lapidoth explains, 'it is an arrangement aimed at granting to a group that differs from the majority of the population in the state, but that constitutes the majority in a specific region, a means by which it can express its distinct identity. Such groups may be granted power over cultural, economic and social concerns within their territory.

Rajat Ganguly in his edited book, *"Autonomy and Ethnic Conflict in South and South-East Asia (Asian Security Studies)"*, Routledge Publication 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2012, uses empirical evidence from various case studies to examine the relationship between territorial and regional autonomy, the nation-state and ethnic conflict resolution in South and South-East Asia. 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.

Monirul Hussain 1993, in *"The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity"*, Manak Publications, New Delhi, viewed that the Assam Movement is a reference movement for the ethnic movements based on identity in the post independent Assam. Almost all the ethnic movements that emerged in the aftermath of the Assam Movement carried forward the

lesson given by the movement, i. e. mixing of popular mobilization with violence against “others”. The other ethnic movements also characterized by unprecedented political mobilization followed by political violence and ethnic cleansing.

Sanjib Baruah, 1999, in *“India against Itself: Assam and Politics of Nationality”*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, argues that the issues of separatism, secessionism, and insurgency are linked with the nature of Indian federalism and Indian nationalism. Indian nationalism is plural in nature and unless this plurality of small and big nationalities is recognized there is every possibility of striking back. The author argues that the very project of nation-building in India is hollow. The discontents at the regional level bear out this fact. He has dwelt on the conflict between the national and sub-national aspirations taking into account the history of conflicts in Assam and its subsequent difficulty in assimilating itself with the pan-Indian identity. He has pointed out that negligence of intelligentsia and the public policy discourse on the issues of north east that has given birth to sub-national discontents which in recent times have turned into a dangerous violent manifestation. The author anticipates that a genuine federation-building process will enable the conflicting groups to resolve political controversies by making some arrangement of power-sharing between them.

Bedabrat Bora, 2013, in the book *“Asomar Janajati”* Sneha Publication, Guwahati-21, stated that the ethnic problem in India has its root in the system of centralized government adopted in the constitution of India. The centralizing character in the government has created a feeling of insecurity and deprivation among the smaller ethnic communities living in the periphery. For this, the indigenous people of Assam and North East India have raised their demand many a times to secure and protect their identity. The author also pointed out that the accession of the tribal societies of North Eastern region to the Indian Union was conditional. But the Constitution of India could not convince them that it is framed for the interest of all the section of the people. It is not only the tribal ethnic groups of North East India but also the majority of the indigenous communities of independent India were dissatisfied with the constitutional privileges. Therefore the indigenous people of India have demanded for more and more constitutional protections by amending the constitution of India. Criticizing the provisions of the Sixth Schedule and Article 244 (A) of the constitution of India, the author stated that it has planted the seeds of more divisions in the smaller tribal ethnic groups to demand for separate statehood and seek protection of their identity. For these provisions the State of Assam was divided several times to create the state of Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Arunachal; the Karbis in Karbi Anglong and the Dimasas in North Cachar Hills

demanding for statehood. The tribal societies of Assam thus segregated, refused to call themselves as Assamese. They felt that due to the centralized exercise of power by the central government as well as the national political parties, the failure of the political leaders to comprehend the tribal peoples in its true spirit, they have been deprived of equal growth and development along with the other sections of people of the greater Assamese society. Therefore the leaders from these tribal societies are demanding for a separate homeland. In such a situation the author concludes that it is an urgent concern for the academicians of Assam to find out a perennial solution to prevent further division of Assam and to ensure equal growth and development for the tribal communities of Assam to generate the feeling of oneness amongst the greater Assamese society.

Dr. Manuj Kumar Nath, 2013, in his book "*Asomar Janajati Rajneeti*" published by Pranjal Kumar Mahanta, on behalf of Aalibat, Kahilipara, Guwahati-19, stated that the tribal ethnic groups of Assam have so long attained recognition as distinct cultural entity only, but their political aspirations, socio-economic needs are not properly addressed. Therefore the pertinent question of their ethnic survival has been stressed now. The author said that the cultural and political resurgence of the tribal ethnic groups in Assam are the consequence of the hegemonic character of the Assamese nation-building process. The nation-building process in Assam stands for complete assimilation of all the sub-national smaller ethnic groups without caring the needs for preservation of the rich tribal cultures and traditions. But no ethnic community will prefer to flourish an alien culture and nationality at the cost of their rich culture, traditions as well as their identity. This will prevail only when they are convinced of attaining a better socio-economic condition and proper dignity within the greater nationality. But unfortunately, even after being assimilated to the greater Assamese nationality their rightful position is denied to them by the Assamese community who fail to understand the tribal culture and tradition in its true spirit. On the contrary, the author asserted that the tribal societies are suppressed by the Assamese chauvinism in the post-independence period. They are kept confined within the sociological and anthropological studies alone. Even the constitutional privileges under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution could not contain the long standing problems of the tribal ethnic groups in North-East India in general and Assam in particular. These tribal communities are basically suffering from the problems of poverty, underdevelopment etc. Moreover, due to continuous migration (from inside and outside the country) into the tribal inhabited areas, they are dispossessed of their land holdings. Withstanding such setback, a feeling of deprivation was evident in these societies, and the long suppressed grievances was articulated into various

political and economic demands shouldered by the emerging educated middle class and consequently becoming apparent in various political upheavals and identity distress. The author aggrieved the apathy of the subsequent Governments in Assam to get to the bottom of the point at issue of the tribal communities with a motive to resolve it. The persistent negligence of the Government to the long standing issue has posed a serious threat to the harmony of the state. Instead of mediating an affirmative arbitration, the Government of Assam is indulging in interim solutions by investing political pressures on some opponent tribal leaders through signing the Accords with the motive to dilute the tribal movement. This only aided such leaders to fulfill their vested interest. Such indifference to the hopes and aspirations of the common masses has complicated the tribal issues in Assam and their genuine entitlement remained unaddressed till date.

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.

Today, majority of the states in the world are composed of more than one ethnic group. Within the borders of the states in modern world there exist numerous ethnic, national, racial, linguistic or cultural groups. Sometimes these groups are not accepted as full members of their state or the nation, or at times are actually excluded from it. In such circumstances members of ethnic groups demand more rights and recognition that leads in many cases to ethnic conflict. In this proposed study we will make an attempt to explore the factors of the articulated demand for autonomy by the two dominant tribal groups in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam namely the Tiwas and the Rabhas and consequently the effectiveness of the respective Tiwa and Rabha Autonomous Councils as autonomous institutions to fulfill the demands of these tribal communities.

### **1:9 Hypotheses:**

From the above survey of literature we have formulated the following hypothesis which will be empirically verified in this study.



- 1) The ethnic mobilization of the Tiwas and Rabhas for achieving an autonomous political authority has its root in the sense of socio-political deprivation and backwardness.
- 2) The ethnic demand for an autonomous political authority for the Tiwas and Rabhas is a political aspiration of some newly emerged leaders in these societies.
- 3) The political autonomy provided through the constitution of the tribe specific Autonomous Councils is not an effective solution for the socio economic and ethnic uplift of the marginalized tribal peoples of Assam.

### **1:10 Chapter Plan:**

The *Chapter-1* is an introductory chapter. In this chapter a brief introduction about the issue of plain tribe's political assertion for the demand of autonomous administration and its brief history is been elaborated. Also in this chapter the main objectives of the study, theoretical statement of the problem, an extensive review of the published literature, the formulated hypothesis which guided the study, the methodology adopted, field of enquiry, area in which data is collected, list of tables and other information will be provided. In *Chapter-2* the ethnic identity, migration and present demography of Tiwa and Rabha community will be explained. In *Chapter-3* the articulation of the autonomy demand of the Tiwa and the Rabha tribal groups and the emergence of various Tiwa and Rabha organizations will be presented. In *Chapter-4* an analysis of composition of the Tiwa and the Rabha Autonomous Council under the Tiwa and the Rabha Autonomous Council Act, 1995 will be presented. In the *Chapter-5* an analysis of the functioning of both the Tiwa and the Rabha Autonomous Councils for the socio economic development as well as their role in the fulfillment of ethnic aspirations of both the ethnic groups will be presented. The common man perception regarding the autonomy demand of the Tiwa and the Rabha community as well as their views regarding the functioning of the Autonomous Council will be presented in this Chapter. A concluding observation from the overall enquiry of the problem will also be presented in the chapter.

### **1:11 Academic contribution:**

The subject of ethnic conflict has become a very relevant area of academic research today. The expected academic contribution of the proposed study will be as follows-

1. This study will help us to understand the articulation of the demand for autonomy by the Tiwa and Rabha tribal groups and also the working of Tiwa and Rabha Autonomous Councils. No study has been done so far on this important issue of Assam.
2. Moreover this will be a comparative study on the Tiwa and Rabha ethnocentric demand for autonomy and functioning of their Autonomous Councils which is not done yet in any academic research of Assam.
3. In this comparative study we will try to find out the similarity and differences in the demand and aspirations of these two communities and thereby it will be a reference point for any further study on this type of issue.