Formation Of Autonomous District Councils: A Study Of The Hill Districts Of Assam And The Kuki Tribes

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Abstract
This paper attempts to analyze about the formation of District Councils in the two hill districts of North Cachar Hills (now Dima Hasao) and Mikir Hills (now Karbi Anglong) of Assam. It highlights the crucial role played by ethnic inhabitants of the hills during the formative stage of the councils with special emphasis upon the role of the Kuki tribes and with special reference to the North Cachar Hills district. It also analyses the hectic politicking and bargaining political exercises that preceded the birth of the district councils. The District Council as an establishment was diametrically different from the administrative system of the plain areas and was in essence, an experimental, conceived and specifically designed for the administration of the hill tribal areas. It was an exclusive local administrative institution intended for the then isolated tribal areas of what was popularly known as ‘Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas’. Thus, by way of passing references the paper also examines a host of other related issues including the peaceful process of administrative transformation from the British model of isolationistic administration system to the new tribal approach model of District Council administration.

Key Words: District Council, Tribal, Hills, Administration transformation, Ethnic Inhabitants, Kuki tribes Role, North Cachar Hills district, Autonomous District Councils, Assam

1 Introduction
The districts of Karbi Anglong (then Mikir Hills) and North Cachar Hills (now Dima Hasao) are governed by the Autonomous Council constituted under the Sixth Scheduled of the Constitution of India. The establishment of District Councils in the hills under the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India has been a unique political experience in the country. This system of local self-government for the Hills Area was necessitated owing to the backwardness of the people and the difficulty to
govern them with the same system of government in the plains. Moreover, the tribal people have a distinct culture and are very anxious to maintain them. These circumstances required a type of administration simpler in nature than the one which may be applied in more advanced areas. In the history of independent India, an attempt was made for the first time to bring the backward and unlettered tribals of the hills into the fold of the modern administrative system through a unique local institution called ‘district council.’ District Council is therefore a unique local institution specially designed and fashioned to govern the tribals of the North-East India. Hence the district councils of the North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong are not an outcome of just a mere accidental overnight incident. On the contrary, they are the products of a great deal of strenuous politicking. Undeniably, hectic political activism and bargaining preceded the birth of the district councils. In this context it is significant to analyze the role and place of the Kukis in the formation of the Councils in the two hill districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills with more emphasis on the latter. The study is primarily empirical based on personal observation, informal discussions with knowledgeable persons and other primary and secondary sources that comprised personal interviews, books, booklets, memoranda and web pages.

2 A Brief Historical Profile of the Two Hills Districts

Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills are the only two hills districts of present Assam. Geographically the two districts are contiguous and strategically situated in the middle of Assam between the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valley. Under the original scheme advanced by the Bordoloi Committee for the creation of Autonomous Districts was recommended in respect of (a) the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, (b) the Garo Hills, (c) the Lushai Hills, (d) the Naga Hills, and (e) the North Cachar and Mikir Hills. However, North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong (then Mikir Hills) are now the two lone survivors of the original Frontier Tracts of 1880, Backward Tracts of 1919, Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas of 1936 and Tribal Areas of 1950. The two at birth (Nov.17, 1951) were known as the “United Mikir and N.C.Hills District” with its headquarters at Diphu (Mikir Hills) and Sub-divisional headquarters at Haflong (N.C.Hills.) The erstwhile Mikir Hills District Council came into being on June 23, 1952 with headquarters at Diphu. It was later re-christened as Karbi Anglong on October 24, 1976. The North Cachar Hills district which was formerly a Sub-division of the then United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district with sub-divisional headquarter at Haflong was formally inaugurated on April 29th 1952. The Karbis in Karbi Anglong and the Dimasas in N.C.Hills are the two major tribes of the two hill districts. Besides these two major tribes, there are many other ethnic communities that comprise of the tribal population in the hills districts. They are the Garos, the Bodos, the Kukis, the Zeme Nagas, the Rengma Nagas, the Hmars, the Khasis and as many as 37other sub-tribes of the Kukis like the Vaiphais, the Baites, the Hrangkhols etc.

3 Contemplation on Stetting-up of Local Tribal Administration

It was in 1945, the Government contemplated on the introduction of special local Government institution in the hill areas. Accordingly it directed one of its officers, P.F.Adams, to consider the means for establishing and developing local self-government among the hill people in such a manner as to secure advancement by peaceful and progressive administration, the growth of democratic spirit among them, and the equipment of the hill people to play their part in any larger unities of which they would form a part.
Adams in consultation with local officers made a number of recommendations such as the one he suggested for the Lushais, Kukis and Semas was the establishment of village council of the recognized Chief, assisted by elders. For the tribes having elected elders, he suggested that the village council would be composed of the Gaonburas and elders appointed by customary procedure. Likewise, Hutton and Parry, the D.Cs of the Naga Hills and the Lushai Hills also suggested that the hill districts on either side of the frontier in North-East India should be combined together and constituted into a province, known as the North-Eastern Frontier Province. J.P.Mills, Adviser to the Governor for Tribal Affairs, discussed the future of the hill areas in 1945 and suggested three alternatives, the inclusion of all the hills in Assam, the inclusion of some of the hills in Assam or the exclusion of all the hills from Assam. He was personally in favour of the third alternative. Thus, many views and suggestions, proposals, various committees’ reports, representations were taken into consideration for reorganization of the hills areas of North-East India. Various Committees were therefore constituted for the purpose of finding viable solution to the problem of reorganization of the hills areas.

4 Proposals of the Cabinet Mission

The history of the origin of the autonomous council can be traced back to the proposal of the Cabinet Mission. The Cabinet Mission suggested that there should be an Advisory Committee on the Rights of Citizens, minorities and Tribal and Excluded Areas. Sir Stafford Cripps said that an influential Committee should be set up to make proposals for the administration of the tribal areas. Accordingly, Constituent Assembly set up Advisory Committee in terms of the Cabinet Mission Statement of 24 January 1947. This Committee appointed a sub-committee, known as the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Committee with Gopinath Bordoloi the first premier of Assam as its chairman.

5 Bordoloi Committee

As the Constituent Assembly appointed the “North Eastern Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Area Committee” to study and suggest measures for the administration of tribal areas and the protection of tribal interests, many witnesses that appeared before the Bordoloi Committee suggested various means of reorganization of the tribal areas. In fact, all the representatives of the hill districts — the Khasi Hills, the Naga Hills, Lushai Hills, the Mikir Hills, the North Cachar Hills, the Garo Hills and the North-East Frontier Area has come up with different suggestions, plans and proposal for establishing a special type of administration in the hills suitable for the people. Suggestions were accompanied by their wide-ranging demands for their respective areas, varying from secession from Indian Union, autonomy, protection of land, exemption from taxation, representation in the provincial legislature to educational facilities, roads, hospitals etc. In this regard it is pertinent and worthwhile to analyze the actual position of the then united Mikir Hills and the North Cachar Hills districts concerning the people’s demands, suggestions and their aspirations.

6 Formation of District Council and the Mikir Hills

The Mikirs(Karbis) being aware of the impending constitutional changes had formed the Karbi-a-Darbar and the Mikir Jatiya Mahasabha in March 1947. A meeting of the Mikirs in Assam was held in Habiapur Huzar. The meeting constituted Karbi-a-Darbar and elected Khorsing Terang Haboi as its president and S.S.Ingty as its secretary. Both of them were co-opted by the Bordoloi Committee to represent the Mikir Hills. Khorsing Terang was succeeded by Sarsing Teron Habi.
Accordingly on 18th May 1947, Karbi-a-Darbar, the only organization of the Mikirs, submitted a memorandum to the Bordoloi Committee. Besides Sarsing Teron, Chatrasing Teron, Soi Soi Terang, Barelong Terang, Bonglong Terang and several others gave evidence before the committee. In their memorandum they demanded first, a separate district should be established so that all the Mikirs could be placed under a single administration. They suggested that the Mikir area of 4,174 square miles of the partially excluded area, the Mikir portion of the Nowgong, Sibsagar plains, North Cachar Hills and the Khasi and Jaintia Hills should form the new district. The memorandum also demanded that the Mikir of other areas which could not conveniently be added to the new district should be protected so far as their land problem, educational and social customs were concerned. They also demanded that the new district should form a part of Assam with autonomy so far as local matters were concerned. Another remarkable demand was that, all the tribes inhabiting the district should be allotted seats in the local council in proportion to their population strength in the district. The members of the local council shall be elected on the basis of adult franchise and on separate electorate system. The local council should have legislative, executive and judicial functions. It should decide all disputes relating to land and local customs. They also demanded that the Mikir Hills district should be represented in the Assam Legislative Assembly at the rate of one member for every fifty-thousand population. The candidate must belong to the Mikir tribe or the tribes living within the district. Among others the memorandum also demanded free and compulsory education, seats in professional colleges, scholarships, preservation of customs and cultures, reservation of Government posts for the Mikirs and compulsory military training for the Mikir youths etc. Thus the memorandum submitted by the Mikirs was a bread and butter business unlike the Nagas and the Lushais demanding interim Government or the right of secession. The main thrust of their demand was protection of their interests from external exploitation.

As can be seen from the above, the representatives of the Mikir Hills who were co-opted by the Bordoloi Committee and those who gave evidence before the Committee were Mikirs. As such their demands were mainly for the welfare of the Mikirs in spite of the fact that Mikir Hills was the home of a large number of other ethnic groups like the Boros, the Rengma Nagas, the Kukis, Cachari Dimasas, Khasis etc. Unlike the case of North Cachar Hills, other tribes of the district were not represented to give evidence before the Committee. Karbi-a-Darbar was in fact exclusively of the Karbis. Under such circumstances other tribes were not given any scope to appear before the Bordoloi Committee. The Committee co-opted the Mikir leader, Khorsing Terang Haboi and S.S.Ingty who were respectively the president and secretary of the Karbi-a-Darbar an exclusive body of the Mikirs. As such, not only the Kukis but other tribes such as the Dimasas who were more numerous than the Kukis were also not given any scope to raise their voice. Their memorandum also made no mention of any other tribes inhabiting the Mikir Hills. The only specific demand in this regard was the demand for all the tribes inhabiting the district should be allotted seats in the local council in proportion to their population strength in the district and nothing else more.

Accordingly it was not possible on the part of the illiterate Kuki minority, isolated and shy from the outside world, inhabiting deep interior forest of the hills like Singhason-Pahar to voluntarily come forward and take part in the decision-making process of the future political set up of the hills uninvited. In actual fact, the organization of Karbi-a-Darbar was essentially parochial and communal in nature. Initially the organization had a mass support base which was evident from the result of the
first general election in which the Darbar formed the Government in the Council. But soon the Darbar lost its popularity mainly because it did not want to give nomination to other tribes. Very soon its youth wing Karbi-Riso-a-Darbar had also become defunct. It is noteworthy that demographically the Mikir tribes constitute only 55.37% of the total population. From this perspective the demands before the Committee were biased as the interests of other tribes were overlooked. This is evident from the demand of reservation of all posts within the Mikir Hills district exclusively for the Mikirs. Under such circumstances equal chances were not given to other tribes including the Kukis of the Mikir Hills to participate and appear before the Sub-Committee to discuss their future political set up.

7 Formation of District Council in the North Cachar Hills

For some centuries, the hill areas of North Cachar were inhabited by a ‘tribal trinity’ consisting of Dimasas, Jemes and Kukis. Unfortunately the Kukis saw division in their ranks and the Hmars form the fourth of the tribal quartet now. The Government revised the Tribal List and declared the Hmars as one of the Hill Tribes of India in 1956. The Hmars are recognized by President Notification under Article 342 of the Indian Constitution in 1956, Amendments vide Government of India, Ministry of Law Notification Order SRO 24774, Gazette of India, Part ii, Section iii, No.316-A, New Delhi, 29th October, 1956. When the Sub-Committee led by Gopinath Bordoloi was investigating into the question of future political set up for the hills after the independence of the country, a delegation a waited on it. Unlike in the case of Mikir Hills, the Tribal Council, a body consisting of representatives from all tribes of North Cachar Hills was formed for the purpose. This tribal delegation was led by Hamdhan Maahan Haflongbar. The delegation wanted the preservation of tribal interests, their right to follow their own cultures and traditions. They demanded abolition of forced labour and beggary and total prohibition on the right of the non-tribals to purchase lands in the district. Only the bonafide residents of the hills should be permitted to participate in the political life of the district. There were many other demands and a large part of them were included in the Sixth Schedule provisions. The people were aware of their own interests in the field of political, social and economic.

As already noted the major tribes inhabiting the hill areas of North Cachar were the Dimasas, Kukis and Jeme Nagas. But the Tribal Council was a body consisting of representatives of all tribes inhabiting North Cachar Hills of the then sub-division of Cachar district. In fact the Tribal Body was formed with the sole purpose of mobilizing public opinion to decide the fate of the hill areas and its people inhabiting it. One can well imagine as to what would have been the situation in general and particularly the attitude and political outlook of the native tribals at that point in time. During those days, the present headquarters of Karbi Anglong (Mikir Hills) and North Cachar Hills – Diphu and Haflong respectively were so insignificant a place. It was said that the first Special Officer appointed for the new United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district, C.S. Booth had no place to go in the evening other than the railway station. Railway apart there were no other transportation and communication system available. When the district was inaugurated in November 1951, all dignitaries had come to Diphu by train. Gopinath Bordoloi as the Chairman of the Sub-Committee had to travel by train when he came to meet the tribal leaders of the region to discuss their demands before the finalization of his recommendations on the tribal administration. Dr.Tanmay Bhattacharjee noted that some elderly persons of Diphu town recounted about the Special Officer, C.S. Booth, who shortly after the inauguration of the district came to the railway station just to see some human beings. This episode obviously reflected the desolate situation of the then district headquarters of the hills. The
situation in North Cachar Hills was no exception. In fact the people of North Cachar Hills were more isolated than those of Mikir Hills. The people were living in their respective remote and secluded villages fully engrossed with their daily routine of attending jhums eking out their livelihood.

Table – I: Mills and Allen’s Reports of Tribe-wise Population of N.C. Hills in 1854 and 1859

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Hill Cacharis</td>
<td>3,940</td>
<td>6,735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>Hozai Cacharis</td>
<td>1,170</td>
<td>3,260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>Mikirs(Karbis)</td>
<td>1,820</td>
<td>5,076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>Old Kookies(Kukis)</td>
<td>3,335</td>
<td>3,709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>New Kookies(Kukis)</td>
<td>7,575</td>
<td>4,763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06</td>
<td>Aroong Nagas</td>
<td>3,505</td>
<td>5,885</td>
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Source: Alexander Mackenzie

Under such a state of affairs it was not easy to mobilize and form a body consisting of different tribes. However it was possible under some visionary tribal leadership. It may be noted that during those days among the major tribes of the N.C. Hills the Kukis were the most numerous after the Dimasa Cacharis as there was then no division among them as they are divided today on the basis of clan. In fact, they were the most numerous as per Mills’ Report of the Census of 1853 in which the Dimasa Cacharis stood only at the second place. As such the Kukis had played a leading role at the time when decision was to be taken for the future of North Cachar Hills. It was a time very significant in the formative stage of the District Councils. It was a time crucial to explore all possibility advantages out of the situation and thereby decide their political fate. This fact was known both to the Dimasas and the Kukis. And considering the thin population of the sub-division they could not effort to stand divided on community basis as is happening today. They knew that they must be united in their demands and thereby forged a bond of alliance among tribes that gave birth to the Tribal Council, a body consisting of all the tribes of North Cachar Hills that comprised of four major tribes and some others. It was even more necessary as there was discernible specter of divisiveness looming large among other tribal inhabitants like the Nagas, the Khasis, Mikirs and the Lushais (Mizos) inclining to join their brethren in their respective Tribal Homeland. The position of the Bengalis living in the North Cachar Hills was evident from the report of the then D.C. of Cachar who wrote that the North Cachar Hills were altogether backward, in matter of education and knowledge. The inhabitants of the area knew little or nothing of the outside world and they had no idea of the legislature or of its functions. The Bengalis and Hindus who were there in Haflong were also there only in connection with their business and they were not interested in the well-being or in the internal life of the hill people. An elderly Kuki, Pu. Tongkhojam Thado (Lienthang) who was one of the members of Tribal Council and first Kuki nominated Member of the N.C. Hills District Council from Mahur Constituency, in one of his interviews narrated the story of how the Kuki leaders had steadfastly supported and struggled for the creation of the District Council because other tribes were reluctant as they wanted to join their kinsmen in their respective homelands; the Jeme Nagas wanted to join their Naga brethren of Naga Hills, the Mikirs to join the Mikir Hills, the Khasis to join the Khasi Hills. The only tribe with hundred percent supports for creation of North Cachar Hills District Council in...
partnership with the Dimasas was the Kukis. Mr.(L) Tongkhojam Thado (Lienthang) also candidly stated that “though there was no such written record of agreement between leaders of the Kukis and the Dimasas, right from the beginning an implicit understanding was set to mutually accommodate and uphold each other interests”. The unwritten agreement was honoured by the Dimasa when Late. Chonhau Khotlang, a Kuki, was elected as the first Chief Executive Member (CEM) in June 1952 who selected Shri. S.R. Thaosen and Shri. Joy Bhadra Hagjer as his Executive Members (EM).

Accordingly the decision on formation of North Cachar Hills Autonomous District Council was accepted by the then Tribal Council with understanding and commitment to maintain an equal status between Dimasas and the Kuki tribes and that if the member of the State Legislative Assembly be from Dimasa community, the Chief Executive Member would be from Kuki community and vice-versa. Accordingly as noted above, Joy Bhadra Hagjer (Dimasa) became M.L.A. and C.H. Khotlang became the first Chief Executive Member in 1952-1957. But with the passage of time all such unwritten understanding and commitment had disappeared into oblivion.

The prominent leaders of the Kuki community who actively participated in the groundwork preparations and finalization of the demands and chalking out modalities for creation of District Council for North Cachar Hills Sub-division were, Chonhau Khotlang, Tongkhojam Thado (Lienthang), Ngullam Guite, Chunjamang Changsan, Seingul Thado, Thongchung Haolai and other. The Kukis elected members in the first general election to the North Cachar Hills District Council are shown in the following table.

Table – II: Elected Kuki Member Representatives in the First General Election, 1952

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of the elected Members</th>
<th>Constituencies</th>
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<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>C.H. Khotlang</td>
<td>Khuongluong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>Tongkhojam Thado (Lienthang)</td>
<td>Mahur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>C.T. Thanga</td>
<td>Kamphai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>Roia Biate *</td>
<td>Kamphai</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N.B.: Roia Biate was elected in the Bye-election held following the death of C.T. Thanga.

From the table above it is clear that out of the total number of 12 elected members 03 (three) belonged to the Kuki tribes. C.H. Khotlang, CT Thanga and Tongkhojam Thado became the first CEM, Deputy Chairman and Member of the District Council respectively. The active role played by the Kukis were reflected in the memorandum submitted to the Bordoloi Committee in which their demand was explicitly mentioned that, ‘the Kukis simply demanded the protection of their land’. The memorandum did not have any specific mentioned of any other tribes other than the Dimasas and the Kukis that point to the fact that the two tribes were the main behind the successful formation of the N.C, Hills District Council. Thus, the Kukis played an outstanding role during the crucial formative stage of the North Cachar Hills Autonomous District Council by uniting other tribes together that further reinforced the struggle and ultimately was successful and rewarding.

8 Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis it is seen that the District Councils played a very significant role in the life of the tribal people of both Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts of Assam. In
fact, District Councils have brought in a new order of administrative arrangement for the tribal people that revolutionarily changed their lifestyle. It is needless to say that not only the Kukis but all the tribes and non-tribes inhabiting the hills in effect have worked together to make the districts what they are today. However, the role played by the Kuki tribes in the formative stage of North Cachar Hills District Council were outstanding in so far they integrated and acted as a cementing force in such a crucial juncture when the Government was investigating into the future of the hills administration and thereby inviting the tribals to negotiate their demands and communicate if they have any reservation in respect of the proposed new administrative arrangement. As already stated the Kukis were the only tribe who enthusiastically extended full support and cooperation in the demand for District Council. The whole story would have been completely different had the Kukis showed similar attitude of reluctance like other tribes. But unlike other tribes who were fickle at that point of time and were getting ready to join their kinsmen in their respective homeland, the Kukis were firm in their decision with strong determination to fight and safeguard the interests of the hill district. The political situation of North Cachar Hills in the 50s was quite different from what it is now today. At that juncture (even now) tribes like the Jeme Nagas have a strong inclination to be a part of their kinsmen in Nagaland and have a separate unit called Zeliangrong Region. Similarly, most of the Lushais-Mizos and Khasis had no desire to settle down permanently and subsequently left for Mizoram and Meghalaya respectively. Even the Karbis(Mikirs) were flocking in the Mikir Hills. These were in fact some hindrances to tribal political unity and the situation highlighted above are glaring examples and pointer to the fact that some perceptible centrifugal forces have been working against the tribals’ unity ever since the new political administrative arrangement was conceived for the hill areas inhabited by different ethnic tribes. The Kukis have therefore made commendable contribution of spadework in mobilizing the people and thereby finalizing the memorandum containing the demands of the people and thus prepared the stage to set in motion a peaceful transition of new administrative set up of tribal administration.

From the days of its inception the two Autonomous Councils of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills have traveled a long way. They are presently in their 62th years of existence in 2014. Precisely, forty-four years and nineteen years have lapsed since the transferred of more functions under the 1970 Arrangement and the signing of MoU in 1995, respectively. But so far the role and performance of the two Councils are concerned it is not satisfactory and perhaps one might reckon more failures than success. In spite of great deal of powers and autonomy the Councils has miserably failed almost in all fronts. The dreams and aspirations of the people still remain unfulfilled. The districts are heavily besieged with a wide range of problems from all kinds of undesired underground militant activities of extortion, kidnapping, killing of innocents to rampant corruption and bloody ethnic conflicts. Today, the Councils are obsessed with powers and are indifference to public welfare and developmental works. Contrary to the increased in the powers and functions of the Councils, the spirit and determination to achieve the laid out objectives of the Councils are fast declining. Apparently, the Autonomous Council of North Cachar Hills in particular with its present position has lost all credibility.

With such a gloomy situation it is necessary to approach the crisis from the historical perspective in which all the tribes must stood united for the sake of their common future and political aspirations. The policy makers must therefore pay equal and due attention to the most negligible yet genuine needs and grievances of even the smallest minority tribe. The Government must promptly address, redress and accommodate, if any section or community of this hilly region feels neglected or
discriminated. This is for which the provisions of the Sixth Scheduled to the Constitution of India is meant for. Above everything else, the people must learn to live together as they cannot afford to be divided in the face of threatening challenges of divisive forces on the rise. The solution to the problems lies in peaceful co-existence among the tribes with mutual respect and proper understanding of their socio-cultural and political history who inhabited the two hills districts together since time immemorial.

9 References


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