

# Aspiration and Contestation for the Quest of Sixth Schedule: The Tiwa Case

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## Introduction:

North-eastern region of India is well known for its unique ethnic and cultural diversity. It has many tribes and communities who articulate a sense of identity in cultural, linguistic and ethnic terms. Such articulation of tribal ethnic sentiment was initially observed among the "Hill-Tribes" immediately after independence. The constitution of India through its "Sixth schedule" is committed to protect, preserve and promote this rich cultural diversity through giving Autonomous structure at grass root level. It was originally only meant for hill tribes living in the hill areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura particularly. But further development and quest for autonomy of the plain tribes of this region compels to set up adjustment in the constitution to implement in plain areas after amendment. Sixth schedule was implemented in the plain areas in 2003 in the form of creation of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) for administration of Bodo dominated areas after a long movement for autonomy and separatist violence<sup>1</sup>. This has encouraged other plain tribes of Assam viz. Tiwas, Rabhas, Mishings to raise demand for Sixth schedule status like Bodos.

## Objectives of the Study:

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the dilemma among the Tiwas regarding their aspirations and apprehension to be brought by the implementation of the sixth schedule. An attempt will also be made to suggest measures relating to this issue.

## Methodology of the Study:

The present study is descriptive and analytical in nature. The paper is basically based on secondary data which have been collected from the available sources. The sources of secondary data include various books, journals, articles, websites etc.

## About the Sixth schedule:

The sixth schedule of the Indian constitution is a weapon to promote self-rule in the north east, seeking to guarantee political dominance for backward groups, better local governance at the community level, better economic development and ethnic security for those who feel threatened by large scale influx of migrants from outside and within the country. In short, it is an attempt to preserve and protect the identity and culture of tribes at the same time bringing overall development of the tribal people.

<sup>1</sup> Boro, A.K., "Sixth Schedule and its implementation: Understanding the case of Bodoland (BTAD) in Assam", IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Volume 22, Issue 12, 2017.

The idea and aim behind the sixth schedule to the constitution was to create Autonomous structure for the tribal areas under the Part X of the Indian constitution. The provisions of the sixth schedule {Article 244(2) and 275 (1)} contains the recommendations made by the Northeast Frontier Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-committee of the Constituent Assembly, popularly known as Bordoloi Committee as it was chaired by then Chief Minister of Assam Gopinath Bordoloi. The committee tried to reconcile the aspirations of the hill people for political autonomy with Government drive to integrate them with the plains and suggested a mechanism of self-rule through Autonomous District councils for the hill tribes. The recommendations given by Bordoloi Committee were accepted by the Constituent Assembly with certain modifications and incorporated in the constitution. As per the sixth schedule, the four states viz. Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram contain the tribal areas which are technically different from the remaining scheduled areas. However, it is important to note here that the provisions of this schedule have already been extended to the plain tribes as evident from creation of the BTC for the Bodos.

### **The Tiwas:**

The Tiwas are one of the aboriginal tribes of Northeast, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman Linguistic family. They are also known as "Lalungs" but they prefer to call themselves as the "Tiwas". The people of Tiwa community are mostly inhabited in Nagaon, Morigaon, Kamrup, Karbi Anglong and Dhemaji Districts of Assam and the Khasi and the Jaintia Districts of Meghalaya. They are broadly divided as the Hill Tiwas- i.e. the Tiwas residing in hill areas of Assam and Meghalaya and the Plain Tiwas who live in plain areas. Although most of the Tiwa octogenarians have accepted both Hill and Plain Tiwa belong to the same race, yet the difference in certain aspects of their socio-cultural life is visible. This tribal community of Assam can easily be defined as an ethnic group because of their self-consciousness and their projected identity such as biological features (short-statured, gold coloured, shaven headed, rough skinned), religion (Traditional customs and deities; now Vaishnavism or Christianity has been accepted), language (The Tiwa language of great Tibeto-Burman family). Another special characteristic of the Tiwa social life is the institution of "Dekachang" or Samadi (as called in Tiwa Language) where generally youths are trained on the matters of social harmony and responsibility as well as to respect and practice Tiwa socio-cultural life. Jonbeel Mela is the most attractive and glamorous one where barter system is still practiced associated with Tiwa community. All these distinctive features of Tiwas lead them to a degree of common identity and again it has developed awareness towards autonomy to protect such identity.

### **The Aspirations of the Tiwas:**

The demand for autonomy by the Tiwas in Assam is not only a political issue, but it has its root in the overall socio-economic conditions of the Tiwa society<sup>2</sup>. Deprivation in the socio-political and cultural sphere forces to the Tiwa community to raise the demand of autonomy.

The foremost problem of the Tiwa community is their economic backwardness. Most of the Tiwas are cultivators and agricultural laborers. Their economy is agro-based rural economy

<sup>2</sup> Dewri, D., "Demand for Autonomy by the Tiwas and the Rabhas in Assam and Constitution of Autonomous Council", Ph.D. thesis KKHOU, 2016.

with indigenous cultivation method. Very few Tiwas are engaged in business and in public/private sector jobs. This shows the pathetic economic condition of the Tiwa community. This economic backwardness of the Tiwa people led to backward in the field of education also. Parents in most cases are even not able to send their children to avail basic education in primary level. Moreover, most of the Tiwa inhabited areas in the District of Karbi Anglong do not have schools. Even in the plain areas, there is a lack of sufficient number of educational institutions to meet the educational needs of the Plain Tiwas.

The encroachment of land by non-tribal people and migrants also creates dissatisfaction among the Tiwas. In the plains, the Tribal belts and Tribal blocks were constituted under the provisions of the chapter X of Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886. But non-tribal people and migrants are still occupying the land belonging to them. Most of Tiwa people of Sonapur, Jagiroad, Morigaon, and western part of Nagaon District lost their lands in their own villages for the lack of protection within existing belts and blocks. This has not only devastated their economy, but also adversely affected the socio-political life of the Tiwa community.

Another responsible factor for the Tiwa autonomy movement is the anti-tribal attitude of the mainstream Assamese society. The high caste Assamese people continues to campaign for greater Assamese nationality which threatens the existence of small ethnic group. These are some of the crises of the Tiwas which motivated them to demand autonomy and safeguard their identity.

Likewise, other ethnic groups, the Tiwa autonomy movement has also a long historical background. During the time of the Ahoms, there were smaller independent Tiwa kingdoms like the Nelly, Gova, Topakuchi, Mayang, Dhing, Tetelia, Rani, Dimoria and Beltola etc. The Ahoms allowed them to enjoy the political right to govern those kingdoms according to their own tradition but in consideration of payment of tax. But in 1835, Tiwas lost their sovereignty and their kingdoms came under British control. During British period not only the Tiwas but most of the tribes were not conscious for their identity. They became conscious after 1951 by the provision of the sixth schedule of the constitution of India<sup>3</sup>. In 1951, though the tribes of the hills (Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, Mizo, Mikir and Naga) of Assam got autonomy under sixth schedule of the constitution of India, the tribes of the plains including Tiwas were kept out of this scheme. On the other hand, after formation of Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hill Autonomous District in 1951, a controversy arose about the status of Tiwas of Hill areas. At that point of time, the idea of demanding a separate autonomous district for the Tiwas of the hill was raised. But the Tiwa dominated areas of hills were included in Mikir hills by submitting manipulated population data of the Tiwas.

The language controversy in 1960s also brought a sense of uncertainty among the Tiwas. The official Language Act, made Assamese the Official language of the state which led to a feeling of insecurity among the Tiwas. Therefore, they wanted to preserve their language, culture as well as their tradition. Many socio-political organisations have come up demanding autonomy among the Tiwas. Some of these are Lalung Darbar, All Assam Tiwa Sanmilan (previously known as Tiwa Yuva Chhatra Sanmilan), Lalung Youth Front, Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee, Tiwa Mathanlai Tokhra (previously known as Tiwa Vasha Unnayan Sammittee),

<sup>3</sup> Nath, R.C., "Growth and Development of Political Consciousness among Tiwa (Lalung) Community of Assam in Post-Independence Period", Ph.D. Thesis, Gauhati University, 1996.

All Tiwa Students Union, All Tiwa Women Association, Tiwa cultural society, Autonomy Demand Struggling Forum etc. All these organizations have been working for all round development of the Tiwas through raising of various demands. To achieve the goal of autonomy, they choose democratic way of agitation. The Tiwas submitted several memorandums to the Government of Assam and Government of India and took agitation programmes like bandha, dharna, strike, national highway blockade, public meetings etc.

Till 1992, no concrete effort was seen from both the State and Central governments. On the contrary the government tried to suppress it by applying divide and rule policy. But finally an agreement was signed between Assam government and ALDDC on 13th April, 1995 and Lalung Autonomous Council was formed. Later, it has come to be known as Tiwa Autonomous Council.

### **Dilemma of the Tiwas:**

Though the Tiwas have been granted Autonomous Council status, it is under state laws and not under the sixth schedule of the constitution. It does not have constitutional status. So this type of autonomy granted to the Tiwas has failed to satisfy many. It is opposed by many organizations like ATSU, ATWA, and LYF etc. They considered that the existing council arrangement was not appropriate for the socio political upliftment of the Tiwas. Of course, a small section of the Tiwas (ALDDC) are happy with the present arrangement and others are still struggling for autonomy under sixth schedule. Such diverse views have put the common people into dilemma.

Moreover, the demarcation of boundary of the TAC has not been possible till today. Some major Tiwa dominated areas are still not under the purview of TAC. On the other hand, inclusion of some areas of Kamrup (M) District in TAC has been strongly opposed by another ethnic group called Amri-Karbis. Rampant corruption and mis-management of funds have created the dilemma again among the Tiwas whether to support such autonomy or not. Sadly, the TAC has become more and more politicized instead of being an agent of development.

### **Suggestions and conclusion:**

- ♦ The autonomy movements are essentially the outcome of the intense desire of every ethnic group for the protection of their own distinct identity. The Tiwa case is also not different from this basic idea. Though their movements under the aegis of various socio-political organization have earned them Tiwa Autonomous Council, but it has not been able to satisfy the all sections of people of this community. Now it is the high time to address properly their socio-economic and political aspirations. Government should withdraw their unnecessary interference in the activities of TAC. It should not be used as a tool for political gains. Government has to strengthen the system by transferring the financial and administrative autonomy as provided by the Act. of 1995. Moreover, the leaders should be more accountable and masses are supposed to be conscious to prevent corruption and misuse of public fund.

- There is urgent need to resolve the boundary issue amicably. There should be attempts to rebuild mutual trust and understanding between the Tiwas and AmriKarbis. Civil society can play the role of catalyst in this regard.
- The protection of language, institutions, and customs are very important to reduce the feeling of identity crisis to a great extent. Therefore, the Tiwa community should be allowed to practice their customary laws and social institutions in their society. The government should take necessary steps to introduce Tiwa language at primary level in their inhabited areas. Though Assam government had assured it but till date neither the language introduced nor the teacher appointed.
- The issue of encroachment of land of tribal blocks and belts by non-tribal and illegal migrants in central Assam should be resolved. It has to be remembered that land is a precious economic asset as well as the Centre of people's culture and identity.
- Finally, in Assam, the emergence of Tribal sub-national claims should not be treated as antagonistic to the greater Assamese nationality. The Assamese socio-cultural organizations representing the Assamese nationality should accept and recognize these Tribal sub-nationalities to include them within the broader identity of Asomiya. All the organizations (socio-political) in Assam should practice mutual tolerance and accept the multi-culturalism. This will strengthen the unity and integrity of Assam.

To conclude it can be said that the State and Central government should show their goodwill and come forward to resolve the issues, which is by and large peaceful.

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