



Politics of Recognition, Rights and Representation of the Rengma Naga of Assam

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that historically the “Rengma Hills” was recognized in 1841, but it was incorporated into the Karbi Anglong district following post-independent administrative reorganization. Although the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) was established under the Sixth Schedule to safeguard tribal rights, the Rengma Nagas have been excluded from adequate representation and developmental benefits due to the political dominance of the majority Karbi population. Consequently, the Rengma Naga are facing a severe identity crisis, struggling to protect their cultural, linguistic and territorial rights, while being deprived of basic infrastructure, land rights, education, healthcare and employment opportunities. The present study has made an attempt to understand the historical presence and identity of Rengma Nagas, to explore the socio-economic, political, cultural problems and present position of Rengma Nagas in the region and understand the long standing demand, aspiration and state’s approach towards the issues

Introduction:

It is well known that Assam is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural state, where diverse ethnic communities’ are living together while maintaining a strong sense of their own cultural identity. As a



result, the politics of identity and recognition has become a significant aspect and instrument for demanding autonomy, political recognition and access to developmental resources. It has been seen that over the years, several tribal and ethnic groups such as the Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, Mishing, Rabha, Deori, Tiwa and Kachari have been accommodated through institutional arrangements in form of Autonomous District Council, Autonomous Councils and Development Council, Welfare Board etc. and developmental packages along ethnic lines within constitutional and statutory frameworks. However, many other ethnic groups and tribes in Assam are still demanding similar institutional recognition and developmental support to safeguard their rights, privileges and cultural heritage based on ethnic lines.

Among the many indigenous ethnic groups in Assam, the Rengma Nagas represent a small but distinct community currently facing a serious identity crisis, especially in the Karbi Anglong district. The historical records indicate that during British rule, this region was recognized as the “Rengma Naga Hills” in 1841, recognizing their unique socio-cultural, political and territorial identity. However, due to the post-independence reorganization of administrative boundaries, the erstwhile Rengma Hill areas in present-day eastern Karbi Anglong were placed under the Karbi Anglong district of Assam. To ensure self-governance and to protect the socio-political and cultural rights of tribal communities, an Autonomous District Council was established under provision of Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution in 1950, which was later renamed as the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) on 1st April, 1996.

Despite this institutional framework, the Rengma Nagas have not been granted adequate rights, privileges or representation in the affairs of the KAAC, primarily due to the administrative and political dominance of the majority tribe, the Karbis. As a result, the indigenous Rengma Nagas of the region have suffered the loss of their territorial identity and face serious challenges in preserving their linguistic identity, cultural rights and traditional practices. Moreover, they are deprived of essential facilities such as proper road and bridge connectivity, electricity, land rights, education and healthcare as well as job opportunities in the council. The present study has made an attempt to study the historical presence and identity of Rengma Nagas of Assam, explore the challenges faced by the Rengma Naga in socio-economic, political and cultural scene in the state and understand the ethnic demands and aspiration of the tribe in the state. A qualitative research methodology has been adopted to deeply explore historical, socio-political and cultural dimensions of the Rengma Nagas’ struggle for identity and inclusion.

The study based on both exploratory and descriptive method to accomplish the study. The study is essentially based on both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data are collected through



structured interviews conducted with Rengma Naga leaders, members of Rengma Naga Peoples' Council (RNPC), local political leaders, youth activists and ordinary community members, **Focus Group Discussions** (FGDs) and **participant observation** method. To collect the secondary source of data, various Books, Journals, magazines, souvenir, government reports annual reports, press release and memorandums, newspaper articles, press releases by Rengma Naga Peoples' Council (RNPC), All Assam Naga Welfare Society (AANWS) and United Naga Tribes Association on Border Areas (UNTABA) and official records of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) have been consulted.

Historical Presence and Identity of Rengma Nagas:

The historical records indicate that the Rengma Hills and Mikir Hills were remained two separate entities until 1951. The Mikir Hills extends to Kaliani River on the east to the Jamuna River on the west of Doboka, about sixty miles in length. On the north the Mikir Hills is bounded by the plains of Mikirpar Mehal, the Mongaks of Rungabegur, Kaziranga and Bokakhat. On the south it extends to Jamuna River. The distance from north to south in a straight line is about 35 miles. Beyond Kaliani River on the east, the Rengma boundary commences and ends with Dhansiri River. As far as the original homeland of the Mikirs/Mikir Hills is concerned, Sir Alexander clearly stated that "their length from east to west is about 50 miles and breadth from north to south about 30 mile.....Beyond that point the hills are occupied by the Rengma Nagas. From this written statement, the original Mikir Hills is situated in the present West Karbi Anglong District or Hamren District.

Historically, the Rengma Nagas are primarily inhabited in Tseminyu district of Nagaland and eastern part of the Karbi Anglong district of Assam in their ancestral lands since time immemorial. Before colonial period, the Rengma Nagas were politically well structured and independently ruling under chieftainship system. They had a good relationship with neighbourly kingdoms including Ahom. During Burmese invasion in Assam in 1816, 1819 and 1821 and when Assam was under Burmese rule from 1821 to 1825, at the request of the king of Ahom, the King of Rengma's keyhang extended military assistance and fought against the Burmese. During that time, he provided shelter for Ahom refugees on the Hills so called Keyhang Rencho now in Karbi Anglong, until the peace was restored in the kingdom. For this act of bravery and sacrifice, the Ahom King Purandar Singha conferred on him the title 'Phukan' and was known as 'Keyhang Phukan'. From this point of view, it is understood that the relationship between the Rengmas and Ahoms was peaceful and cordial.

During the early 19th century A.D. the British occupational forces came into contact with the Rengma Nagas in Assam. The first European to see Rengmas was Lieutenant Grange in 1839, when men



from several villages met him at Mohung Dehooa in the plains and by 1848 Rengma villages in the Mikir Hills were paying revenue. The villages in the Naga Hills, however, remained unvisited and independent for many years. About 1870 Captain Butler paid a friendly visit to the western Rengmas, and was well received. In 1874 Dr. Brown carried out an extensive tour of exploration, visiting not only the Western but also the Eastern Rengmas.

The Britishers launched expeditions in Rengma Hill in different point of times including Captain Butler in 1847. He visited the villages and fixed a house tax of one rupee per house. In the same year, Mr Masters, another Sub-Assistant Commissioner of Nowgong assessed 20 villages out of 32 recognized villages and also appointed Rengma revenue settlement in 1847. In 1870s, Captain Butler, the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills visited 20 out 32 explored villages. He appointed two Mouzadars for East Rengma and West Rengma mouza under the Rengma Hills to collect the revenues from these areas.

However, the Rengma Hills was created on the 18th April 1841, as per vide the political proceedings No. 79 to 80 with total geographical area of 8724 sq. km. The Rengma hill was first constituted into a Sub-division under Nowgong district in 1852 to look after the then Naga administrative areas with Asaloo as the sub-divisional headquarters. Later on, in the year 1866, the Rengma Hills was merged with the Naga Hills district. The first boundary of the then Naga Hills district was notified in 1866 with Samaguting as the first headquarter. A certain portion of Rengma Hills from Naga Hills to the adjoining districts of Assam was transferred into the districts of Nowgong and Sibsagar for administrative convenience in 1891. The Rengma Hills was then sub-divided into two Revenue and Administrative control units, known as i) East Rengma Mouza and ii) West Rengma Mouza.

In the year 1907, the East Rengma *Mouza* was further divided into two namely East Rengma Mouza and Naga Rengma *Mouza*. The East Rengma Mouza was again scrambled into two Mouza and appointed a Mouzadar separately. In the same year, the East Rengma Mouza was further divided into two Mouza namely East Rengma Mouza and Naga Rengma Mouza. The East Rengma Mouza was again scrambled into two Mouza and appointed a Mouzadar separately. After the bifurcation of East Rengma Mouza, late Lathi Himbu Rengma was appointed as the Mouzadar of East Rengma mouza and Shuga Nandu Rengma of Naga Rengma Mouza on 31st January 1907. After the death of Lothi Himbu Rengma in 1925, Lethe, a Mikir who claimed himself as the legal heir son of late Lethi Himbu Rengma and he became the Mouzadar of East Rengma Mouza.

Subsequently, the Mikir Hills district was created on 17th Nov. 1951 and Naga Rengma came under the direct administration of Mikir Hills District Councils. But interestingly, the Rengma Hills area



under the Bokajan sub-division comprising three land revenue mouzas were deliberately integrated in the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills area without caring the issue of political empowerment of the Rengma Hills region under article 244 (2) of the constitution of India and 6th scheduled areas and placed the Rengma Hills region as a part of United Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills now known as Karbi Anglong only. In Present time, the position of Rengma Nagas in Assam is in very pathetic and critical facing socio-economic, cultural and political crisis as discussed below.

Political Marginalization:

The Rengma Naga Peoples' Council (RNPC) argues that during the period of undivided Assam, most hilly regions inhabited by tribal populations were brought under the purview of Article 244(2) of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. This constitutional provision facilitated decentralization by empowering tribal communities to enact their own laws for the governance and administration of their respective areas. In accordance with this provision, the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) was established. However, the Rengma Hills area, particularly under the Bokajan Sub-Division, comprising three land revenue mouzas, was deliberately integrated into the then United Mikir and North Cachar Hills without ensuring political safeguards or addressing the question of political empowerment of the Rengma people under Article 244(2) of constitution of India.

In light of their continued marginalization and lack of adequate political representation, the apex body of the Rengma community the Rengma Naga Peoples' Council (RNPC) has strongly demanded the creation of a Regional Autonomous Council as per the constitutional provision exclusively for the Rengma Nagas in Assam. The proposed council is envisioned as a mechanism to ensure meaningful self-governance, equitable participation in local administration and effective implementation of development policies tailored to the unique needs of the Rengma people. It has been seen that currently, the Rengmas are underrepresented in the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), with only one nominated Member of Autonomous Council (MAC), despite having a significant population. Since 1952 to till 2023 only five members have been nominated and one member has been elected among the Rengma Naga community to the Autonomous Council. The first elected member among the Rengma Naga community to the Autonomous District Council was late Resulo Rengma from the Diphu constituency of autonomous district council. Late Khwenbu Rengma was the first nominated member to the Mikir Hills Autonomous District Council in 1954 followed by R.K. Rengma, Mr Jokhen Rengma for 16 days only and Mr Phenpiga Rengma in 2023 to Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC). This limited representation restricts their ability to influence decision-making processes, access developmental



resources and safeguard their socio-political interests. Moreover, the socio-economic and cultural dominance of the majority Karbi tribe in the region further marginalizes the Rengmas. The RNPC emphasizes that the creation of a separate autonomous structure would not only empower the Rengma community politically but also help in preserving their distinct cultural heritage, traditional institutions and language.

Lands Insecurity and Territorial Identity:

The loss of ancestral land and encroachment over the lands belonging to the Rengma Nagas has also emerged as serious challenges in the region. The Rengma community feels that their traditional territories are being gradually taken over and many of their historically significant sites are being renamed or neglected. In this context, the proposed Fifth Tiger Reserve project by the government of Assam in Karbi Anglong, which includes the Karbi Anglong Wildlife Sanctuary, East Karbi Anglong Wildlife Sanctuary and the Kaliani Reserve Forest, is a major concern.

It is said that the proposed reserve will cover a total area of 502 square kilometers. According to Chenobu Seb, Media and Publicity Secretary of the Rengma Naga People's Council (RNPC), echoed these concerns and stating that *“the proposed tiger reserve could displace approximately 4,000 individuals from 19 Rengma Naga and 10 Karbi villages which will severely impact on their lives, if the project is implemented. He also added that while the government has taken such steps towards environmental conservation by initiating a tiger reserve project, but it has neglected the long-standing demands of the Rengma Naga People's Council (RNPC) for the recognition of several non-revenue Rengma Naga villages in Karbi Anglong district such as Choselnari B, Khirang, Borlangso, Tseguchangri and Lorenyu in the district.”* On this issue, the President of All Assam Naga Welfare Society (AANWS), Mr Shompha Wangsu also expressed *‘concerns about the potential displacement of Rengma Naga families and stressed the importance of protecting the Rengma Naga people's livelihoods, culture, identity and land rights and opposing any eviction without proper rehabilitation. He also condemned land encroachment in tribal areas under the guise of conservation of projects and the failure to recognize forest villages where Rengma Naga people have lived for generations.’*

Thus, it has been seen that such disparity policy of the government reflects a deeply rooted policy gap, where the ecological concerns are prioritized by over the socio-political and developmental needs of indigenous communities. Such actions of the government have further marginalized the community and also raise a critical question about the inclusive governance and state's approach towards the indigenous peoples' rights.

***Dilution of Rengma Identity:***

It has been observed that, in an apparent attempt to erase the identity of the 'Rengmas', the West Rengma Mauza and East Rengma Mauza were sub-divided and renamed by the then Karbi Anglong District Council. As a result, West Rengma Mauza was renamed and divided into (a) Langlokso Mouza, (b) Langhing Mouza and (c) Langpher Mouza. While the East Rengma Mouza further sub-divided and changed into (a) Jamunapur Mouza, (b) Barpathar Mouza and (c) Surupather Mouza (Langmilib). Furthermore, in the year 1907, the East Rengma *Mouza* was again sub-divided into two namely East Rengma Mouza and Naga Rengma *Mouza*. In the same year, the East Rengma Mouza was sub-divided into two Mouzas namely East Rengma Mouza and Naga Rengma Mouza. It is also alleged that the Gaon Pradhan (GP) Association of Karbi Anglong attempted to remove the term "Rengma" from East Rengma Mouza under the KAAC. However, the move was not materialized due to strong opposition from various civil society organizations including the Rengma Naga Peoples' Council (RNPC) and the All Assam Naga Welfare Society (AANWS) as well as the lack of seriousness and priority given to the issue by the present Chief Executive Member (CEM) of KAAC. It is also observed that the Chokihola Development Block originally named in the Rengma language has been renamed Nilip Development Block. This administrative restructuring and renaming of traditional Rengma-inhabited areas is perceived by the Rengma Nagas as a deliberate act that aimed at diluting the historical and territorial identity of the Rengma.

The Fate of Rengma Heritage Sites:

It is seen that the traditional monuments of the Rengma Nagas in Karbi Anglong have been seriously neglected and destroyed that aimed at erasing the historical presence of the Rengma Naga community in the region. It is witnessed that some Karbi miscreants have damaged important cultural sites like traditional monuments, graveyards, moidams (burial tombs) and even the memorial moidam of Late General Keyhang Rengma Phukan at Keyhang Richo (Kalapahar) in the district. Even though these places are important for historical and cultural perspective, the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and the Archeological department of state government and central government have not taken any proper action to protect or repair them. It is said that the RNPC have submitted a number of Memorandum of Understanding to draw the attention of the government, but there is no positive response till date regarding the issue.

***Spatial Politics and Territorial Claims:***

The spatially contested politics and ethnic conflict between Karbi and Rengma community in Karbi Anglong is the most critical issue rooted in competing territorial claims, ethnic identity assertion and political movements like the Pan-Naga and Hamprek Kanthik demands. It has been observed that the overlapping claims over the land historically belonging to Rengma Nagas by the NSCN-IM and KPLT and the lack of official recognition for the Rengma Naga have intensified ethnic polarization, culminating in violent conflict, displacement and long-standing mistrust between the two communities. Furthermore, in response to repeated attacks by KPLT militants, the Rengma Naga Hills Protection Force (RNHPF) was formed in 2012 to protect Rengma-inhabited areas and their communities. This spatially contested politics triggered an ethnic conflict between the Karbi and Rengma communities in 2013 in the region. During the conflict, approximately 3,000 Karbi and Rengma people were displaced, six Rengma Naga villages were burn down, five Rengma women were killed by KPLT militants and three KPLT militants were also killed in retaliation by the RNHPF. In this context, the then Director-General of Police in Assam, G.M. Srivastava, described the clashes as a *“fallout of attempts by the KPLT to establish control over traditional Rengma Naga areas, alongside efforts by the insurgent National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN-IM) to assert dominance in Assam’s two hill districts Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao as part of their claim over Naga-inhabited territories.”*

On this issue, the United Naga Tribes Association on Border Areas (UNTABA) stated that when the British declared the Rengma Naga inhabited the areas now under the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Territorial Council fall entirely within the original Naga Hills District which includes reserve forests such as Nambor, Daigurung, Kaliani, Mikir, Diphu, Rengma, Daldai, Dhansiri, Langting Mupa and Lumding were later transferred from the Naga Hills District to the then Nagaon and Sibsagar districts of Assam. The President, Mr Hukavi Yeputhomi and General Secretary, Mr Imsong Pongen of the United Naga Tribes Association on Border Areas (UNTABA) strongly asserted that *“No political settlement will prove fruitful if it does not honour or is not based on historical facts particularly in the case of the present Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong areas of Assam, where the original settlers are the Rengmas, Zeme and Rongmei Nagas,”* the statement said.

Cultural Erosion and fight for its Survival:

In the context of Rengma Nagas of Assam, the cultural erosion includes the loss of language, traditions and rituals which are witnessed as major threat to the identity of the Rengmas in Karbi Anglong. The Rengma Naga Cultural Society’s president Mr Khenga Resho Rengma stated that *“we*



need adequate institutional support for the preservation and promotion of our cultural heritage, because we the Rengma community faces serious challenges in maintaining our distinct identity due lack of government initiatives, sufficient fund, cultural programs or educational efforts to document and protect Rengma traditions. He said that we receive six lakh rupees per anum from the autonomlus council which is not sufficient to preserve our cultural heritage.”

It has been observed that there is an absence of dedicated government schemes or policies, insufficient funding for festivals, documentation and transmission of traditional knowledge, no formal education about Rengma language, history and customs which ultimately led the younger generation to become disconnected from their traditional heritage. In this regard, the repsondetns have expressed that *“the negligence attitude and lack of support from the autonomous council and state government of Assam has further deepen our sense of being overlooked or marginalized within broader state development or cultural frameworks.”*

However, it is seen that the Rengma Naga Peoples’ Council, Rengma Naga Cultural Society, Rengma Naga Students’ Union have strongly demanded to formally recognize the cultural and linguistic identity in policy and administrative frameworks, establishment of Cultural Resource Centers or Museums in Karbi Anglong to archive and promote indigenous knowledge, oral histories, dances, rituals and crafts, introduction of Rengma Language and Culture in School Curriculum in areas inhabited by Rengma students and promote bilingual education with state support etc. In this regard, most of the respondents urged that coordinated approach involving government policy reform, local institutional support, codifying and implementation of Rengma Customary Law, educational engagement and digital innovation can only effectively help in solving these issues and empower the Rengma Nagas of Assam to preserve unique cultural heritage, language and tradtion as well.

Lack of Infrastructural Development:

It has been observed that the daily lives of the Rengma Nagas are severely impacted by due to poor infrastructure and lack of basic services. On this matter, Mr David Rengma, ex-President of RNPC said that *“many of our villages are located in remote areas and still with poor road and bridge connectivity, no access to electricity and inadequate or non-existent healthcare facilities, agirucltural infrastructure etc. For him this has not only affected their quality of life but has also widened the gap between them and more developed regions, further contributing to their socio-economic marginalization.”* The present President of the RNPC, Mr Kenilo Rengma also stated that *“Rengma Naga-inhabited areas remain underdeveloped and in a very poor condition for long years. In 2014 only, some of the Rengma Naga*



villages are provided with electricity connectivity, but some villages like Rechangarl, Choshentongri, Tseguchangri, Borpong and Tarapung are not yet connected. He further added that no steps have been taken by either the Autonomous Council or the Government of Assam to address this issue of no revenue Rengma Naga villages of Karbi Anglong.”

In this regard, poor agriculture infrastructure is also major issues of Rengma Nagas in the district. On this matter Mr Kanti J. Renmga, a resident of Chokihola, expressed that *“90% Rengma Naga people in the district are depend on agriculture to eke out their livelihood. He also said that the agriculture development has been badly affected in the last several years due to global warming, insect infestation, inaction and ignorance of the concern department of the autonomous council and state government. Although our lands are fertile and have good agricultural and horticultural potential, but there is a lack of access to market, the absence of a Minimum Support Price (MSP) system, essential facilities such as modern farming equipment, quality seeds, agricultural credit or loans, fertilizers etc. This lack of support has greatly hampered not only the agricultural growth and sustainability but also the overall economic development of the people in the region.”*

As a result of political marginalization, cultural erosion, economic neglect and social discrimination, the Rengma Nagas of Karbi Anglong are living under a strong sense of alienation, fear and insecurity. According to the respondents, the dominance of larger tribal groups in politics and administration has made the Rengma Nagas to feel politically weak and socially excluded, despite being an aboriginal tribe in the region. Because of all these problems, there is now a rising demand among the Rengma Nagas for separate recognition or a protected administrative structure under constitutional provision. It is seen that under the banner of the Rengma Naga Mouza Darbar, the Rengma tribe has been demanding the creation of a Rengma Naga Autonomous District Council since 1951. Later on, in 1984, the organization was renamed the Rengma Naga People’s Conference and in 1998, the Rengma Naga People’s Conference was renamed the Rengma Naga Peoples’ Council (RNPC).

Demand and Aspirations of Rengma Nagas of Assam:

The Rengma Naga of Assam, being an indigenous tribe with a distinct cultural and historical identity, has long been striving for recognition, rights and equitable development. Their key demands and aspirations are as mentioned below.

It is observed that the **creation of Rengma Naga Hills Autonomous Council/Regional Council** is long standing demand of Rengma Nagas of Assam. In Paragraph 2 of sixth Schedule to the Constitution



of India, clearly states that if there are different schedule tribes in an autonomous District, the Governor may by public Notification, divide the area or areas inhabited by them and create a Regional Autonomous Council. Accordingly, they demand to declare and constitute the entire area of the erstwhile Rengma Hills by reconstituting the West Rengma Mouza, East Rengma Mouza and Naga Rengma Mouza as Rengma Hills Autonomous District Council/ Regional Council.

Another most important demand is atleast **one MAC Nomination seat** out of four seats should be reserved exclusively for Rengma Nagas who are aboriginal and minority schedule tribe in Karbi Anglong. They strongly demand for special developmental package for infrastructural development. Their demands are for road construction and bridges at Ridongu, Kalia, Nambor and Phancherop rivers. It has been observed that there is no single bridge along the routes leading to the Rengma villages and other neighboring Karbi tribe villages in district, to have more medical facilities at least a functioning 20 bedded Primary Health Care Center along with an Ambulance service each at Karenga Phancherop and Khirang Village. It is seen that still, there is not a single primary health center and the region is prone to Malaria, yellow fever and various other diseases etc.

The RNPC strongly demand for up-gradation of Phancherop Medium English School to High school and up-gradation of Jongpha Primary school to Medium English School and immediate renovation and up gradation of school buildings, construction of Teacher's quarter and play ground. The most important demand of Rengma Naga community is to immediate exclusion of the Rengma Hills regions from the purview of the MoS signed by the Union government, Assam Government and United Peoples' Democratic Solodairty (UPDS) group of Karbi militant's organization at New Delhi in the year 2005. Immediate change of the name of Nilip Development Block at Chokihola and deletion of Karbi word Nilip from the naming of the block and rename as Chokihola Development Block. The Reengma Naga community has put strong demand for declaration of the Rengma Naga monument site of Keyhang Rincho as heritage site and protection under the monuments act. It is alleged that this historical monument was break down by some miscreants during Rengma-Karbi ethnic conflict in 2013.

They also put demand for construction of customary law court building in all Rengma Naga areas. A customary law reflects the traditional practices, beliefs, norms and social values of the Rengma Naga. In the face of increasing modernization and assimilation, the pressures from dominant cultures, the enforcing customary law can help to preserve unique cultural identity, reinforces traditional institutions like the village council and upholds rituals, festivals, inheritance systems and dispute resolution mechanisms. Demanding special package of Rs 10 crores to rehabilitees the victimized in the communal



riots on 27th December, 2013 in which a burning of hundreds of houses and killings of innocent children, women and men members by a large group of Karbi miscreants.

It is observed that these demands are rooted in historical grievances, cultural preservation, socio-economic upliftment and political recognition of the community. It is essential to ensure justice and dignity for the Rengma Nagas which is a matter of Government's democratic accountability and equitable development.

Policy Implications:

The Rengma Nagas of Assam, particularly those inhabiting in Karbil Anglong, should be granted a Regional Council as per constitutional provisions as stated in the paragraph two of the sixth schedule of the constitution of India. It can be asserted that the establishing of a Regional Council would ensure inclusive governance, equal rights and fair political representation for the tribe in the region. It would also play a crucial role in preserving their unique cultural and linguistic identity, while promoting the socio-economic development of the region. Furthermore, such a council would empower the Rengma Nagas to make decisions on matters directly affecting their lives, thereby strengthening the grassroots democracy and also fostering a sense of belonging and autonomy.

From the perspective of multicultural rights, the recognition and protection of the Rengma Naga's distinct historical, linguistic and cultural identity in Assam is both constitutionally and legally justified. In a multicultural society, every community must have the freedom and institutional support to maintain its unique way of life without fear of marginalization or forced assimilation into dominant cultures.

The historical records indicate that Rengma Nagas are inhabited in their own ancestral lands since time immemorial, practicing shifting cultivation and depending on the forest to eke out their livelihood. So, the Government should immediately recognize the non-revenue Rengma Naga villages under Schedule V and Article 244 of the constitution of India which mandates the government for the protection of tribal land and the rights of forest dwellers. Furthermore, the Forest Rights Act, 2006 empower the forest-dependent Scheduled Tribes to claim individual and community rights over the forest land their traditionally occupied for more than 75 years. So, failure to implement these provisions in the case of the Rengma Nagas constitutes a violation of their basic human rights and a denial of constitutional justice.

The proposed tiger reserve covering 502 square kilometers in Karbi Anglong should be halted immediately due to its severe impact on the lives of indigeneous people including Rengma Naga and



other tribal groups in the region who have inhabited in these forests for generation to generation. This would lead to the displacement of these forest-dwelling communities, breaching their constitutionally guaranteed rights under the Forest Rights Act (2006). In this regard, a balance approach like community led conservation model must be adopted by the government which can protect both biodiversity and uphold tribal rights in the region.

To address the threat of the cultural erosion and linguistic crisis of the Rengma Nagas of Assam, the government should take multi-pronged and inclusive approach like introduce of Rengma Naga language syllabus schools, particularly in Rengma inhabited areas under the multilingual education policy, documentation and preservation of the Rengma Naga language through dictionaries, textbooks and digital archives, construction of museums to preserve and promote indigenous arts, oral traditions, rituals etc. and provide local medical content e.g. radio, TV and community radio licenses to all the tribals including the Rengma Naga's organizations to spreading awareness and cultural education.

The government should declare the Rengma Naga monument sites, graveyards, burial tombs including Keyhang Rincho in Kalapahar in the district as heritage site. These should be protected under an ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958.

The government has a constitutional obligation to ensure equitable development for all citizens of India, particularly for Scheduled Tribes and marginalized groups in the society. Investing in the development of Rengma-inhabited areas providing all weather roads, functional bridges and well equipped health centres are essential for inclusive growth and national integration. The government must adopt a targeted and inclusive approach to ensure that the development reaches every section of the society, in the true spirit of "*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas,*" while respecting the cultural identity and aspirations of the Rengma Naga community of Assam.

Conclusion:

The above discussion on the socio-political and cultural issues faced by the Rengma Nagas of Assam reflects the broader dynamics of ethnic politics in the state. It is seen that their demands from Regional Council under the Sixth Schedule to the recognition of non-revenue villages and the protection of ancestral lands, the Rengma Naga's aspirations implies the wider struggle of tribal communities in India seeking autonomy, dignity and cultural survival within a democratic framework. It can be argued that recognizing and supporting the Rengma Nagas is crucial for strengthening grassroots democracy, cultural diversity and social equity in state of Assam. However, it is observed that despite the legitimacy



of their long standing demands and aspirations, the response of the government has often been slow, inconsistent or inadequate in most of the times. It is seen that the Rengma Naga issues have become entangled in spatial and political contestations between different groups, particularly between the NSCN (IM) which seeks to integrate Naga-inhabited areas under its vision of “Greater Nagalim” and the Karbi militant group like Karbi National Liberation Front (KNLF) which claims territorial and political rights over erstwhile Rengma Naga Hills. These overlapping territorial claims have created a sensitive and fragile situation which often sidelining the actual issues and aspirations of the indigenous Rengma Naga community of Assam.

It is very crucial to resolve these issues faced by the community in their ancestral lands, as failure to address the issues may lead to further alienation, raising ethnic tensions and identity crisis among the community. Therefore, the government must adopt a well-balanced, impartial and inclusive approach that recognizes the historical rights, identity and constitutional entitlements of the Rengma Nagas of Assam with ensuring peace and coexistence among all communities in the region. In this regard, the constructive dialogue with all stakeholders, protection of indigenous land rights, political representation through mechanisms like Regional Councils under the Sixth Schedule and socio-economic development are essential policy measures to bring a lasting resolution. Last but not least, it can be argued that a sensitive and inclusive approach will only address the Rengma Naga issue and also contribute to strengthening the ethnic harmony, regional stability and national integration.

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