



Politics of Ethnic Identity with Special Reference to the Naga Communities of Assam

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ABSTRACT

The politics of ethnic identity is not an uncommon phenomenon in a multi ethnic state like Assam. It has often intensified ethnic based protest, movement and conflicts. The identity politics has also prompted state interventions through various institutional arrangements i.e. autonomous state, districts and councils and developmental policies on ethnic lines. Several ethnic groups of Assam are still struggling for recognition, rights and development as enjoyed by others. Like other indigenous community, the Naga communities are also aboriginal tribe of Assam. The inhabited areas were divided into various administrative zones since colonial period. However, many Naga tribes particularly living in Assam has been remained at margins, facing challenges of recognition, representations and cultural preservation and their rights are identity is in fragile and contested conditions. Against this backdrop, the present papers traces the historical presence and identity of the community, analyzes the factors of their identity crisis and understand the role of community organizations which negotiates their survival and identity in the socio-political realm of Assam. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. The Primary data was gathered through ethnographic observation, focused group discussions and in-depth interviews with community members. Secondary data was sourced from books, academic journals, pamphlets



and newspapers. The study offers a critical understanding of the challenges faced by micro-ethnic groups in Assam and contributes to the broader discourse on identity politics and conflict resolution.

Introduction

The question of identity has been a central concern in the socio-political discourse of India's Northeast states including Assam. Since, Assam is a melting plot of different ethnic groups, the politics of Assam has often been marked by the politics ethnic identity. In Assam, various ethnic groups have repeatedly demanded autonomous states, autonomous districts and councils on ethnic lines as a means to safeguard their cultural and political rights. It is observed that these aspirations are largely emerged due to chauvinistic attitude of the majority groups and marginalization, fear of losing cultural and linguistic identities, unequal development and lack of political representation. To some extent, such ethnic aspirations often intensified conflicts, protest movements and sometimes violent agitations leading to chaotic situations in the region. In the context of Assam, both the state and central government has adopted both institutional arrangement and developmental packages for those ethnic groups. So far, the government has recognized three districts or region under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution such Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) by encompassing four districts such as Chirang, Baksa, Udalguri and Kokrajhar, the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (DHAC). Furthermore, several ethnic groups such as the Mishing, Rabha Hasong, Tiwa, Deori, Thengal Kachari, Koch-Rajbongshi etc. have been accommodated autonomous councils by the government under statutory provision.

It has been found that each and every ethnic group asserting their ethnic based rights and demanding recognition and representations in the socio-political realm of Assam. As a result, the politics of ethnic identity become important aspects in the politics of Assam. Like various indigenous communities, the Naga people have historically asserted their ethnic, cultural and political distinctiveness since colonial period. Consequently, they have been given statehood bifurcating Assam in 1961 with special constitutional protection under article 371 (A). The term "Naga" is a generic that encompasses a diverse group of ethnically and linguistically distinct tribes who have historically inhabited the India's north-eastern states, particularly the states of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh as well as the Sagaing and Kachin regions of Myanmar Burma. According to the Scholar S.R. Tohring (2010) and the Naga Hoho's White Paper's report (2002) lists total 66 Naga tribes whereas Kibangwar Jamir lists 67 tribes. In Assam, there are 10 Naga tribes such as Ao, Wancho, Konyak, Nokte, Rengma, Tangsa,



Sema, Rongmei, Zeme, Lotha who are residing in 12 districts of Assam such as Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Charaideo, Sivsagarh, Jorhat, Karbi Anglong, Hojai, Dima Hasao, Cachar and Hailakandi with a population of nearly 1.5. lakh.

It has been found that in Assam, the Naga community is relatively small population scattered in different districts existing at margins of both mainstream Assamese society and the larger pan-Naga identity movement. The dual marginality within Assam and the broader Naga political discourse has largely impacted on their struggles for recognition, rights and socio-economic development. The present study has made an attempt to understand the historical presence and identity of the Naga community analyze the challenges and prospects associated in asserting ethnic identity and understand the processes and strategies of identity negotiation adopted by the community in Assam.

Historical Presence and Identity of Naga community in Assam:

It is evident that the Naga people were living independently in pre-colonial time. Subsequently, they were brought under the control British rule losing their autonomy. The colonial rulers have categorized different tribes as common “Naga” by seeing their common characteristics in terms of socio-cultural practices. Later on, the Naga tribe widely recognized which paved the way for the emergence of Naga nationalism. The formation of Naga club in 1918, Naga National Council (NNC) led initiative role in creating Naga ethnic consciousness and common identity formation. It is argued that the Naga inhabited areas were split into different administrative zones such as Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Assam in northeastern states and Sagaing and Kachin regions of Myanmar Burma which ultimately weakened their unity, integrity and solidarity and challenged towards their common aspirations. It has been observed that the Naga communities of Assam have their strong historical roots, but they are deprived of rights, recognition, representation and development as compared to other Naga tribes living in other parts. The details of the Naga tribes of Assam are as shown below.

TableNo1.

Details Population, inhabited districts villages and households of the Naga tribes in Assam:

Sl. No	Tribe	Inhabited District	Total Villages	Total Population
1	Konyak	Sibsagar	3	Above 2500
2	Nokte	Charaideo & Dibrugarh	3	Above 800
3	Ao	Jorhat,Hojai	6	Above1500



4	Rongmei	Hailkandi, Karimganj, Cachar	50	Above 30000
5	Rengma	Karbi Anglong	22	Approximate 25000
6	Zeme	Dima Hasao	102	Approximate 35000
7	Sema	Tinsukia	10	Above 5000
8	Tangsa	Tinsukia	34	Approximate 20000
9	Wancho	Charaideo & Dibrugarh	3	Above 1500

(Source: field study)

These Naga tribes have strong historical roots in Assam. Like other tribal communities of Assam, they are aboriginal tribe living in their own ancestral lands since time immemorial. In case of *Konyak* Nagas are living in three villages namely Monaiting, Tingya or Chingang or Haipuali and Namthai Naga gaon nunder Sivsagarh district of Assam. According to one tradition, their ancestors migrated from Mount *Yenyudang*, located to the south of the present *Konyak* territory. Another tradition suggests that they came from the Brahmaputra Valley, moving along the *Dikhu* River into the hill regions. The people of *Wakching* village believe that their forefathers came from a mountain beyond the Brahmaputra, known in their tradition as the “mountain beyond the great water.” On their journey, they crossed the Brahmaputra Valley and followed the *Dikhu* River up to the present village of *Chongwe*. Later, due to a lack of fertile land, they moved to the current locations of *Wakching* and *Wanching* villages and probably in other plains areas.

In this connection, Dr. Umakanta Konyak, a resident of Chingang Naga Gaon under Sibsagarh district of Assam, stated that “*there are various reasons behind the dispersed of the hill-dwelling Konyak Nagas into various parts including plain areas of Assam. This migration was likely driven by the search for better livelihood opportunities in the plains. According to our folk narratives, when our ancestors first settled in these areas, there were no other people living these areas and when their forefathers settled there, they had to face many challenges from wild animals and dense forests. They cleared the forests, built homes and began practicing jhum cultivation to sustain their livelihood.*” Another tradition also argued that the settlement of the *Konyak* Nagas in Assam can be dated back to the time of Queen Watlong’s marriage to Ahom King Gadadhar Singha when a large number of companions accompanied Queen Watlong during her journey from her native land to Ahom Kingdom. However, following the death of Queen Watlong, an internal conflicts and rebellions began to arise within the kingdom. Consequently, some of her companions returned to their original homeland, while others chose to settle



permanently in different parts of present-day Sivasagar district. These areas include Ligiripukhuri, Naga Gaon, Chingangh, Tingya, Namthai, Monaiting, Sontok, Gargaon and Naginimara. Another reason is that in the 17th century, the head of Mairamara Satra, Sri Sri Janardan Dev met and interacted with the Konyak Nagas during his journey to preach and spread the philosophy of Ek Saran Naam Dharma (shelter in one supreme name of God). During this time, some young Konyak Nagas were taken to Mairamara by Guru Janardan to help in constructing a Hari Mandir (temple) using cane and bamboo materials. Initially, these Konyak youths were allowed to reside near the historic Fulseng Tank area. However, impressing by their dedication and service, Guru Janardan granted them permission to settle there permanently in Sontok areas, now Sontok tea estate in Sivasgarh district of Assam. Over time, most of them have accepted the ideology of Neo-Vaishnavism as preached by the Mairamara Satra.

The Wancho Naga tribe also settled Deopani Naga Gaon and Baregaon Naga Gaon in the district, while the Goriabam and Paniduria in the Dibrugahr district of Assam since time immemorial. It is stated that in earlier times, the hilly Naga chiefs used to collect *khud* or kind of royal tax from the inhabitants of the plains, asserting it as part of their territorial areas. When the hilly Naga chiefs from Rusa, Runu, Banferia or Chopsa came down to the plains to collect taxes, they used to stay at the residences of the local chiefs in Deopani Naga Gaon, Silonia Naga and Bargaon Naga Gaon, now fall under the Charaideo district of Assam. This practice was extended up to the railway track, which was regarded as the boundary landmark between the hills and the plains people. The hilly Naga chiefs' collected three main types of royal taxes were as shown below

This royal tax, known as *raja-bheti*, was traditionally collected by the Naga chiefs from the plains people during two special occasions i.e. *Pongwen* and *Khamdak* ceremonies. The former one was a form of community feast organized by the chiefs or the royal family, usually held when the people were seen to be prosperous. The Chief of the village was expected to host such a ceremony at least three times in his lifetime. The second ceremony is *Khamdak* which derives its name from "*Kham*" meaning log drum, a traditional musical instrument made from large logs of wood. On both of these occasions, the royal family collected *raja-bheti* from the plains people, typically in the form of a cow or goat. However, such taxation system was abolished by the colonial rulers and started interfering internal affairs of the local governance system. But, interestingly on this matter, Mr. Wanglat Wangham, Chief of *Banferia*, also added that even today, the *Jaboka* and *Kanubari* tea estates give five quintals of tea and salt every year to the local Naga leaders as a symbolic gesture and showing respect for old ties and traditional land agreements hilly Naga and plains people.



In the light of historical background of Nokte Naga living in the Dihing Kinar Naga Gaon (under Naharkatia, Dibrugarh), Mr. Kangwang Nokte stated that in 17th century, Tiraps' king Lotha Khunbao who accepted Sriram Aata as his Guru of Bareghar Satra situated at Merbil of Sasoni. It is said that in the year 1717, Sriram Aata and chief of Nocte Khunbao met each other for the first time in the Sasoni Bareghar Satra and Naga chief accepted Vaishnavism and conferred the title of Naga Narottam, thereby bridging the gap between hill and plains people. It has been found that the present-day, Nocte Naga community living in Dibrugarh and Charaideo districts of Assam are predominantly *Vaishnavite* followers. It is also stated that their ancestors migrated from the Namsang to their present places around in 1814 on various grounds in search of availability of resources, suitable land and water for agricultural activities, better hunting ground etc.

It has been found that the historical presence of the Rengma Nagas in Assam is also very strong and well established. Historically, it is evident that during the Burmese attacked Assam in the year 1816, 1819 and 1821 and the Kingdom of Ahom came under the control of Burmese from 1821 to 1825. During these invasions, thousands of Assamese arrested and made them their slaves. The king of Ahom Chandra Kanta Singha, sought for the help from the chief of the Rengmas to fight against the Burmese. Accordingly, the Chief of Renma keyhan extended all kinds of assistance and fought alongside the Ahom kings against the British. In recognition of his heroic display and rendering gallantry services, Keyhan Rengma was conferred upon the "title of Phukan" by the Ahom king Purandar Singha. During colonial time, the Rengma Hills was officially recognized in 1841. However, 1951 the Rengma Hill area was later merged with Karbi Anglong without the proper consent of the Rengma people, leading to long-standing grievances regarding their political and cultural rights.

The Sema Naga are primarily settled in 7 villages in Margherita and Sadiya Saikhowghat (Kopatoli) under Tinsukia district of Assam. In this context, **Mr Kasheto Sema** (Present Gaon Pradhan of Longtong village) said that the Sema Nagas were brought by the British Empire and employed in different task like clearing thick forest areas, mining coal and construction of the historic still well road as well as used them for wars. Among of them, some went back to their native village and some brave Sema Nagas lived and established the Longtong village in 1904. Later on, they were scattered in Saliki, Lalpahar, Paharpur, Tinkupathar, Balijan and Kopatoli. They cleaned the jungle areas for the purpose of settlement and married Tangsa Naga Women.

According to historical record, initially they Sema Nagas were served as political corps under British Empire and engaged in establishing Ledo brick Kiln, oil drilling activities in Digboi, clearing



thick jungles, historic still well road construction etc. In the year 1890s, the Ledo brick kiln was established in 1890 and had Nagas engaged as employees. The Manager of the Assam Oil Company on 27th April 1900 has commended the progress made by the Nagas in the development of oil industry in Assam. Furthermore, during the time of Anglo-Abor war in 1911, hundreds of Sumi Nagas among other Naga tribes were engaged by the British authority. In this war the Sumi Nagas fought fearlessly using their traditional *daos* and spears. Five Naga carrier corps were recruited and were basically involved in advance road clearance work. In 1900s the Nagas were employed in different jobs and company by the British. Gradually they were settled down and most of the Nagas who were employed were young and unmarried, they started families with local women, majority with Tangsa Nagas tribe and settled down permanently.

The Rongmei Naga are primarily settled in three different parts of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. In Assam they are inhabited in Silchar, Sonai and Lakhipur west of Silchar sub-division of the Cachar district and Hailakandi. There are 40 villages with around 25,000 population permanently inhabited in the different parts of the Barak valley. According to historical records, the British came into contact with Nagas in Cachar in 1762. During that time, the General Harry Verelst led five companies of infantry and the British force for the purpose of entering into Manipur through the Manipur-Silchar route via Baskandi to assist Manipur Raja against Burmese. The force reached the Khaspur (near Udharband- a Rongmei settlement area) and stayed there for a year.

The Manipuri Raja Gandhir Singh (1826-34) attacked and occupied Chandrapur in 1827. He penetration into west Cachar and compelled the Naga tribes to pay tribute and services. In 1833, a treaty was signed between British Commissioner F.J. Grant and Raja Gumbheer Singh of Manipur, in which the term “Naga” was explicitly mentioned in Articles 3 and 5. This is one of the earliest official references acknowledging the presence of Naga communities in the region. The Census Report of 1881 recorded the population of Cachar including 5,645 Rongmei Naga.

It is believed that before dispersal, all Naga tribes lived together at Makhel, in present-day Manipur. The Zeme Nagas moved south to a deep gorge called Ramting Kabin, then to Chawang Phungning, and eventually reached Makuilongdi. Later, one group migrated westward from the Barak River. This group split into two: one followed the range between the Barak and Jiri rivers, while the other moved further west to Longmang, now known as Haflong in Assam’s Dima Hasao district. Mr. Kirein Newme, General Secretary of the Zeme Council (Assam) expressed that the Zeme are a proud people created by God, with a rich dialect and ample land in legendary places like Dzukou Valley, Mount Pauna



and Ntangki Forest. He noted that the Zeme lived in a compact area until the 16-point agreement between the Government of India and the Naga People's Convention (NPC). With the creation of Nagaland and Manipur from Assam in 1961 and 1972 respectively, the Zeme were politically divided across three states Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland, but continue to remain united traditionally. In Assam, presently, the Zeme Naga community is settled in 102 villages in Dima Hasao district of Assam.

The Ao Nagas are living in Jorhat and Hojai district of Assam. There is only one Ao Naga village in Hojai and four villages in Jorhat district such as Morogial, Mariani and Nakachari and Jorhat and fewer populations also permanently inhabit in various parts of the Sibsagahr, Dehmaji and Karbing Anglong districts of Assam. During the time of Ahom reign in Assam, some parts of the lands were assigned to the Nagas which is so called Naga Khat as a symbol of gratitude of helping hand by the Naga during the time of their worst situation. There are some important gate or *duars* running the under the control of the Ao Nagas. The hilly Ao Nagas used to come to plains and started their dwelling at different point times. There was also some important market like points in Sibsagar, Amguri and Nakachari etc. where the Ao Nagas and the plains people used to meet and exchange their goods what is so called barter system. In this regard, the Debrabara Nakachari (now under Jorhat district) was one of the most popular places. With the passage of time, gradually the Ao people started to construct their houses permanently for their convenience to stay in Nakachari. It is said that during the early 20th century, the Naga-chari or Nakachari areas was surrounded by the thick forest and the population was very less as compared to today. Approximately it was around 100 households inhabited by some Ao nagas, Muslim, Biharis, Bengales, adivasis and ahom communities.

Eventually with increasing the number of Ao nagas populations, they had newly set up villages and settled there permanently. The following persons i.e. Imlichiba Jamir (Mopongchukit village), Ariyongdang Ao (Changdong nok), Imkongnokcha Ao (Mangmetong), Aosadang Jamir (Sungratsu) and Rongpangmendang were considered first settler of Naga-chari or Nakachari. It is also noted that the Ao Nagas used to collect the taxes from these areas from both Nagas and non-Nagas living in Nakachari and its nearby areas. So, the term Nakachari comes from "Naga-Chari" as calimed by the Ao's of Nakachari village. Here the Naga was referred to Ao and "Chari" means collection of something in Ao language. It is also said that during that time, the Ao Nagas used to collect the taxes from Nakachari and its nearby area. So, the nomenclature of the village 'Nakachari comes from the Naga-Chari. According to other perspective, the term Nakachari is meant for newly inhabited place of Kachari people. Later on, the taxation was banned after introducing the land revenue system by the British government.

***The Nagas in Ahom Administration: Military Service, Literary Enrichment and Clan Integration:***

The history of Naga-Ahom relations began with conflict over territory and salt wells, but gradually it was evolved into peaceful diplomacy and strategy. The Ahoms were never able to fully subjugate the Nagas, so, they fostered amicable ties with them by granting land (Khats), accepting tribute and allowing trade rights. Over time, they became allies offering refuge to each other, intermarrying, and even sharing military service.

During the time of Ahom rule many Naga people were appointed in prominent **administrative positions** such as Borpatra Gohain, Borphukan and Phukan etc. Some of these important administrative assignments are as mentioned below. In the reign of Pratap Singha (1603–1641), a Banfera Naga origin Neog Borphukan, also known as Bagchuwal Haladhithenga was appointed “**Borphukan**”. He was killed in battle against the Mughals at Amaraguri near Kamakhya. The second son of Neog Borphukan was Chengmun who also appointed as Borphukan of Kaliabor during the rule of Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-1663). He lived east of Bahgarh High School, near the Dilli River in the Betbari mouza of Sivasagar district. He constructed a tank which is still known today as Sikon Sariohoh Pukhuri. A noted historian Shihabuddin Khalish noted that Chengmun’s mansion featured “an extremely elegant and fresh garden around a pure, sweet tank,” describing it as “a pleasant spot-a heart-refreshing and pure abode.” He also observed that, due to swampy conditions, houses were built on wooden pillars rather than directly on the surface of the ground.

The second son of Neog Borphukan was Khamun Naobociha Phukan, popularly known as Raja Sasur or ather-in-law of the king. His two daughters namely Kunkumi and Rukunmi were married by King Jayadhwaj Singh. It is said that during the reign of Ahom, total 27 capable persons were conferred with a title “**Rajmantri**” that considered as one of the highest administrative portfolios. This portfolio was created during the time of Supimpha and Khunlung Khampeng Buragohain was the first person to confer with that title. The second son of Neog Borphukan was also appointed in that highest official portfolio during the time of Jaydhwaj Singha. His two daughters namely Kunkumi and Rukunmi were married by King Jayadhwaj Singh. He was one of the signatory of the “**Ghilajharighat treaty**” with the Mughals on January 23, 1663.

It is well known that the “**Borpatragohain**” is one of the highest portfolios in Ahom administration. It was created by King Suhungmung Dihingia and conferred upon Koncheng. He born and brought up in Naga Hills. It is claimed that one day Naga Prince came to the Ahom palace. At that time, one of the wives of King Supimpha was attracted to Naga Prince or Khunbao. The King then sent



the queen with him and she was already pregnant at the time. Later, she gave birth to boy who was named Koncheng. One day when Koncheng came to the Ahom palace regarding a taxation related matter, the King Suhungmung succeeded to Supimpha came to know in details that Koncheng was his blood relation. He then created the post of Borpatragohain and appointed Koncheng to that position. The position was initially held by Royal kin, but eventually extended to capable non-Ahom families like Laku Borpatragohain from Moran during Pratap Singha (1603-1641), Kalugoya Natar's Harinath Borpatragoain during Swargadeo Sivasingha (1714-1744), **Banchangia Naga's** Tema Borpatragohain during Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769) etc.

It is also evident that Naga warriors were regularly recruited into the Ahom army, recognized for their bravery, skill in combat and loyalty. They often served in border-guarding duties and as frontline troops in conflicts with external powers including the Burmese, Mughals. During Burmese envisions 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.

It is also witnessed that the Nagas played a significant role not only in administration and military affairs, but also contributed to the enrichment of literature during the Ahom rule. During the reign of Jaydwaj Sangha, under the patronage of Raja Sahur, Poet Rammisra translated parts of the Mahabharata, notably the *Bhishma Parva* from Sanskrit into Assamese and the son of Raja Sahur who is Banfera Naga origin, Bhadrasen also took initiative to translate *Hitupradekh* from Sankrit to Assamese. These works marked a significant contribution towards the enrichment of Assamese literature during that time. The historical records indicates that during the time of Ahom reign, many Naga people were integrated into Ahom society by taking clan titles such as Naga Pator, Borpatra Gohain, Japarjal Chjetia or Bhar-Dhara Chetia, Naga Chetia, Bansengia Pator, Haldi Boria Chetia, Borphukan, Tangsu Handique, Hatimuria Phukan etc.

The Status of Ethnic Identity of Naga Community in Assam:

It has been observed that the Naga communities of Assam are dispersed in 12 districts of Assam relatively smaller population as compared to other communities. Despite being an aboriginal tribe of



Assam, their ethnic identity status is in extremely critical condition. Their demands for recognition, rights, representation and development are not specifically covered under the policy schemes of the government. There are some challenges towards strong ethnic assertion of Naga community in Assam as mentioned below.

Tribe and Region Specific Aspirations and Demands:

It is also noticed that each tribes and region specifically have their different aspiration and demands in Assam. In case of the Zeme and Rongmei Naga community from Dima Hasao and Barak valley has common aspiration what was propagated by the Rani Gaidinliu for reunification of the Zeliangrong Naga tribe fractured into three states such as Assam, Nagaland and Manipur under a single administrative zone. It has been noticed that that in these areas, the pan Naga movement and Zeliangrong peoples' movements' have high impact because of the ethnic composition, geographical proximity, historical affiliations etc. On while, the Zeme Naga are under Dima Hasao Autonomous Council as recognized under Six Schedule of the constitution of India. Since, they are second highest populated tribe in the region with approximately more than 35,000 populations; their influence in the autonomous council is very significant. Atleast three or four Member of Autonomous Council (MAC) often elected among the Zeme Naga community in the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (DHAC).

It has been observed that the Rongmei Naga community from Barak valley have repeatedly demanded to the government to resolve the issues of land rights and recognition of four non revenue or forest villages and recognition as permanent tribe of the respective districts of Assam where they lived since time immemorial. They have also demand to recognize their language, festival and traditional faith with adequate funding for preservation. On the other hand, the Rengma Naga community living in eastern part of the Karbi Anglong district have also their longstanding demand to provide Regional Autonomous Council under the para 2 of the sixth schedule of the constitution of India. Furthermore, under the aegis of Rengma Naga Peoples' Council (RNPC) have put strong demand to both State and Central Government to sanction the regional council as per constitutional provision. But so far the government has not responded positively towards their aspiration and demand.

The Naga communities especially Sema and Tangsa Naga are historically settled in Tirap Tribal Belt area under the Margherita co-district, Tinsukia. The Tirap Tribal Belt areas are primarily inhabited by the Singpho, Tai-Phake, Sema, Tangsa and small portion of Mishing and other tribal groups. There has been a longstanding demand for Tirap Tribal Autonomous Council. It has been observed that these all tribal groups including the Sema and Tangsa Naga have actively involved in the process of



demanding autonomous council. They have submitted memorandum and strongly raised their voices through protest, movement and rally from time to time. However, so far there has been no positive response from the government towards their demand. On the other hand, it has been observed that the Naga communities such as Wancho, Konyak, Nokte and Ao community living in the Charaideo, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh and Jorhat districts of Assam have also been facing identity crisis, as their population are relatively very smaller as compared to other ethnic groups, influence of dominant cultures, socio-economic backwardness, insignificant political influence etc.

Dispersed settlement and small population size:

This is one of the challenging factors for strong ethnic assertion of Naga communities in Assam. Unlike in Nagaland, Manipur or parts of Arunachal Pradesh, the Naga people are living in different parts of Assam such as Charaideo, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Karbi Anglong, Dima Hasao and parts of Barak Valley. The population of Nagas in each district is relatively smaller than other groups and not territorially compact has obstructed and weakened the possibility of forming a strong and united political front in Assam like other majority tribes of the state.

The limited political representation:

It may be noted that there is lack of adequate political representation of Naga communities in Assam. So far, there is no elected Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) and Member of Parliament (MP) from the Naga communities of Assam. There are only three Executive Member (EM) from Zeme Naga community have been elected in 2023 and one nominated Executive Member from Rengma Naga Community has been appointed in 2021 to the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (DHAC) and Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) respectively. Moreover, there is only one elected Zila Parishad Member (ZPM) from the Wancho Naga community in the Dibrugarh Zila Parishad in the last tenure of 2020-2025. In the last Assam Panchayat Election 2025, only one Panchayat President, three Anchalik Panchayat Member and five Ward Members have been elected from the Naga communities in their respective districts. Because of this issue, they doest have much influence state's policy making process and losses of negotiating power with state mechanism.

Socio-economic backwardness:

It has been observed that the socio-economic marginalization is seen a major challenge towards the collective ethnic assertion of Naga people in state. It has been seen that many Naga villages in Assam are still underdeveloped, lacking proper roads and bridges, electricity connection, poor healthcare facilities,



educational institutions etc. In the field of socio-economic achievements i.e. job, educational and others, the Nagas are relatively lower than other communities in Assam. It is found that the issue of socio-economic backwardness has compelled them to focus more on livelihood issues than the political assertion.

Pan Naga territorial integration demand and border dispute:

It is noticed that the pan Naga territorial integration demand and border dispute often create alienation, mistrust, developmental ignorance and identity crisis or the question of belongingness for the aboriginal Naga communities of Assam. It is noticed that many people in Assam assume the indigenous Naga people or villages as outsiders or belonging to Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. It is seen that the issue of border disputes between Assam-Nagaland, Assam-Arunachal Pradesh, Assam-Manipur often create a kind of clashes, mistrust and violence. In such situation, the indigenous Naga tribes of Assam are often targeted between Assamese, Ahom, Bengalese and other tribal communities. Such situation ultimately leads to alienation and insecurity feeling and weaken their recognition and strength of their ethnic assertion in the state of Assam.

Assimilation pressure with dominant groups:

It is observed that the Naga communities of Assam have been facing the issues of assimilation pressure with dominant groups in their respective areas. It is because of the close contact with larger ethnic groups such as Assamese, Ahoms, Bengalese, Tea Tribes and other groups, the Naga population have experienced linguistic, cultural and religious assimilation. This factor has also diluted ethnic consciousness and weakens the intensity of ethnic assertion in the state.

Lack of Unified Voice and Organization:

The Naga communities of Assam have been lacked of strong unified voice and organizations to raise their aspirations and demands. However, the All Assam Naga Welfare Society (AANWS) was came into being in 2021 and actively working for mobilizing people, preserving cultural practices and demanding for political rights for indigenous Naga communities of Assam. It has also been noticed that the All Assam Naga Welfare Society (AANWS) has been taking collaborative efforts in association with all Naga tribe specific organization has introduced a new dimension in Naga ethnic assertion in Assam. Its main aim is to safeguard the collective interests of the Naga communities living in Assam since time immemorial by raising a unified voice, articulating shared interest and pursuing common goals and visions for socio-political recognition and development. So far, AANWS have raised very pertinent



issues and challenges faced by the Naga communities of Assam. The organization has raised voice against the issue of land rights, recognition for non-revenue villages, eviction drive and encroachment of Naga inhabited areas in non-cadastral villages, government projects that environmentally, socially and economically impacted on traditional Naga inhabited areas etc. However, the success of the AANWS will depend on strengthening the internal unity among different Naga communities through reconciliation and consensus-building, effective engagement with state and central governments as well as using democratic and peaceful means to secure rights and recognition.

Policy Implications:

- The first and foremost challenge towards strong ethnic assertion of Naga community in Assam is the lack of unified aspirations and demands. So, at first all indigenous Naga tribe of Assam should come forward together under one umbrella organization and with common visions and aspirations. Without unified voice, it is not possible for relatively smaller populated and dispersed tribe like Naga community in Assam. The unified stand and voice can be able to influence in state's decision making process and enhance their political bargaining power.
- Since, the Naga communities are aboriginal and indigenous tribe of Assam, they should be given equal rights and freedom to represent and development in socio-political landscape of Assam. The longstanding demand for regional council by the Rengma Naga is considerable within the framework of the Indian constitution. Like other ethnic tribe of Assam, they should also be accommodated with separate institutional arrangement and developmental packages as well.
- The ten Naga tribes living in Assam especially those Naga people historically living beyond Sixth Schedule areas should be recognized as permanent Schedule Tribe in the respective districts and given privileges not only for economic and employment opportunities, but also for political reservation and representation.
- The indigenous Naga people living in the forest land should be provided land rights as per Forest Right Act, 2006. All the Naga non-revenue villages should be recognized and infrastructural development including road and bridges, educational institutes, health facilities, electricity and telecommunication connectivity should be built at earliest possible. There are many Naga villages having lack of such basic facilities in Assam.
- The government and other stakeholders should take special efforts for those Naga tribes whose socio-cultural and linguistic identities are in critical condition with adequate funding. Their language and festivals needs to be recognized as introduced as a medium of instruction in primary level education.



- The government should preserved and recognize the Customary Laws of Naga communities, as it is the foundation of socio-cultural life of Naga community. As this is recognized under 371 (A) of the constitution of India for the Nagas of Nagaland, should be given same privileges for those Naga communities who are historically living in Assam too.
- The government should provide institutional arrangement like satellite or development council or welfare boards with special packages for the overall development of the indigenous Naga tribes of Assam.
- Since the socio-economic development of indigenous Naga tribes of Assam is relatively backward, special reservations should be given in terms of availing seats in educational institutes and employment opportunities under state government of Assam.

Conclusion:

From above discussion, it is understood that the Naga communities are aboriginal and indigenous tribes residing in their ancestral lands since time immemorial. Despite being an indigenous tribe of Assam, their rights, aspirations and demand has not been positively resolved in the way they sought. They are at the margins due to relatively small population in the region, lack of collective voice, lack of unity, integrity and solidarity among the tribes, socio-economic backwardness and lack of adequate political representation. In multicultural state like Assam, the issue of ethnicity is very complicated and intensely impact in the politics of Assam. The government has adopted positive measures to address the ethnic based issues and problems through negotiation, providing institutional and development arrangements. In case of Naga communities of Assam too, the government can consider their ethnic identity issues with constitutional and democratic perspective and resolve the demands within the domain of the constitution. It can be expected that if the Naga communities of Assam move forwards together with common vision and aspiration, then they could be able to influence in the socio-political realm of Assam.

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