

ABSTRACT

DEMAND FOR DIMARAJI: A STUDY OF THE MOVEMENT FOR SEPARATE STATE

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS SUBMITTED TO ASSAM
UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY IN THE DEPTT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

By

Bidhan Barman

Ph. D. Registration No: Ph.D/1027/2009, Dated. 27-10-2009



DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
JADUNATH SARKAR SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
ASSAM UNIVERSITY
SILCHAR-788011, INDIA

2015

Demand for Dimaraji: A Study of the Movement for Separate State

The demands for autonomy and statehood by different ethnic groups of Northeast India for maintaining their distinct identities have been a living phenomenon in the politics of the region in particular and of the country in general. They have their own language, dialect, culture, customs, tradition, historical background and so on. And they are not prepared to merge their culture completely with the national mainstream and want to maintain their distinct identity. As a means for maintaining their identity, they have been demanding for separate states or administrative arrangement on the basis of their respective ethnicity. More importantly, some sections of these groups have been carrying on an underground movement demanding a sovereign independent state outside Indian union. A movement of this kind naturally involves the question of integration of this region with the rest of the country.

The identity movement of various ethnic groups has been articulated through religion, language, culture, region, caste and race. This problem is very much acute in Assam. The different groups inhabiting this state have been launching movement either for the creation of separate or autonomous state on the basis of their ethnic identities or for special constitutional safeguards of their respective identities. Though at the beginning, they started their assertion with non-political issues such as the development of their language and culture, the uneven economic development gave it a political direction in the subsequent period. As a result, they have become assertive of their political right and started movement for adequate share of political power in order to maintain their distinct identities. The present study is an attempt to understand one such movement, the movement for Dimaraji.

Statement of the Problem :

Assam has been the meeting place of different races. At different period of history it has been a refuge for many people belonging to the diverse stocks of human race such as Austrics, Aryans, Dravidians,

Mongoloid and Tibeto – Burman. They carried with them different languages, cultures, traditions, religions and so on. Consequently, there were a large number of ethnic groups residing in Assam. But the process of ethnic assimilation remained incomplete. This was so because the policy pursued by the king of kamrupa could neither succeed in bringing more areas under cultivation nor could convert the tribal socio-economic structure of the country into a feudal one. The process of conversion did not operate in Assam and therefore, the tribals were not incorporated within the fold of Brahminical Hinduism nor in the plough based system of production.

The advent of Ahoms in the early thirteenth century brought about significant changes in the socio-political scenario of Assam. Before the advent of Ahom, the state power patronised Brahminism. The Ahoms conquered Assam on the basis of their tribal solidarity and in the state policy they retained most of their tribal traits. Even after seven hundred years of state formation, the Ahom could not shed off its semi tribal legacy in the sphere of administration, social organisation as well as economy.

The Ahom rule was followed by the British colonial rule. The territorial boundary of Assam got extended during the colonial rule through the inclusion of hill areas and the districts of Sylhet and Goalpara to Assam. Though the British included the hill areas to Assam, they followed a policy of non-interference towards the tribes of the hills. Between 1874 and 1934, the tribal population in the region were administered under a succession of extra ordinary provisions that segregated them into categories called “non-regulated”, “backward”, or “excluded areas”. The Inner Line Regulation of 1873 prohibited access to these areas to all outsiders except those obtained special permission from the government. This regulation was extended to most of hill areas and thus created a frontier within a frontier, accentuating the political and cultural schism between the tribal areas and the plains. The overall result was that the region which was a mass of heterogeneous people before the advent of British rule retained basically the same character.

There was not much change in the situation after independence. The official Language Bill of 1961 was perceived by the tribal groups as a barrier to their advancement and as an obstacle to get jobs in government offices. Further, it was apprehended that the domination of Assamese would adversely affect the future of their language and culture. Soon after the passing of the official Language Bill, there was acceleration of the politics of identity based on ethnicity resulting in the process of disintegration of the old Assam of British days. Nagaland was made a separate state in 1963. The movement in 1972 for making Assamese the medium of instruction at the college level in the state further gave a fillip to this process, and as such, Meghalaya and Mizoram became separate from Assam in 1972 and 1986 respectively. The demand for separate autonomous states in present Assam follows from this trend.

The imposition of Assamese language, made the tribals suspicious about the hidden motive of the dominant section of the Assamese. Inspired by the identity consciousness of the Assamese, they have also become conscious of their distinct identity, started reviving their language and projecting it as their symbol of identity to assert their rights through political mobilization. Thus it appears that the cultural and political movements for asserting Assamese identity led by the relatively advanced section of the Assamese has given birth to the movements for ethnic assertion in Assam. It may be noted that the Medium movement, 1972 and the Assam movement 1979-85, further struck the identity consciousness among the ethnic groups.

Whatever might be the degree of assertion, the emerging middle class- the youths and the student unions- of the ethnic groups appear to have been able to mobilize the people of their respective communities. They began to develop a sense of deprivation from what they call, 'legitimate share of political power'. The educated middle class of these groups started realizing that without political power they could not solve their problems.

Thus the bargaining for a 'Legitimate' share of political power appeared very important to them to solve their problems. Therefore, the increasing political

mobilization has been aimed at over-coming their cultural problems and economic backwardness and achieving adequate political power and autonomy within the system. Indeed, adequate share of political power, they believe, is very important for the maintenance of cultural identity and all round development of their respective communities. At the same time, it appears to them that the maintenance of distinct identity is essential to bargain with the ruling elite for 'adequate share' in the decision making process. The case of the Dimasas is not an exception.

Objectives:

The present study is addressed to understand:

- i) the genesis and nature of the movement;
- ii) the support-base of the movement; and
- iii) the impact of the movement on the relations between different ethnic groups residing in the districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao (erstwhile N.C. Hills district).

Review of Literature:

There are a number of scholarly works on Dimasas and on autonomy movement or movement for separate state in North East India. A number of works have been reviewed and the important ones are:-

Sanjib Baruah's *India Against Itself-Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (2011), J.B. Bhattacharjee's *Cachar Under British Rule in North East India* (1977), Paul R Brass's *Ethnicity and Nationalism-Theory and Comparison* (1991), S.K. Barpujari's *History of the Dimasas* (1997), S.K. Chaube's *Hill Politics in North India* (1999), S. Chatterjee's *A Socio Economic History of South Assam* (2000), D. Datta's *Cachar District Records*, (2007), P.S. Datta's *Autonomy Movements in Assam* (1993), M. Deka's *Students Movements in Assam* (1996), L.S. Gassah's *Autonomous District Council* (1997), H.C. Kalita's *Regional Politics: The Role of Asom Gana Parishad* (2011), Sajal Nag's *Nationalism, Separatism and*

Secessionism, (2001) R. Pamecha's Elite in a Tribal Society, (1985), Girin Phukon's Politics of Regionalism in Northeast India, (1996) R.N. Prasad's Autonomy Movements in Mizoram (1997), B. Datta Ray's Tribal Identity and Tension in North-East India (1989), B. Singh's Autonomy Movements and Federal India (2002).

But most of the works on Dimasas gives a historical account of the Dimasas and the works on autonomy movement are the works on other ethnic groups. Many of these works analyse the process of internal colonialism as a breeding ground of such movements. In fact, most authors viewed that ethnic identity issue is being overplayed by the elites so as to capture maximum power and economic benefits. The demands for autonomy are only a means to achieve a greater share of power in the administrative machinery. To what extent are these true in case of the movement for a separate state of Dimaraji? This is not easy to answer, for there is hardly any work. Herein lies the significance of present study which seeks to understand the genesis of the movement, social bases of the demand, courses and consequences of the movement for a separate state of 'Dimaraji'.

Hypotheses:

The study is conducted with the hypotheses that:

- i) the movement for Dimaraji is rooted in the politics of expediency;
- ii) the movement is organized and led by the middle class; and
- iii) the movement resulted in the intensification of conflict between different ethnic groups residing in the two hill districts of Assam, namely, the districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao. (erstwhile N.C. Hills district).

Theoretical Framework:

The autonomy movements in independent India in general and Northeast India in particular may be looked at from two broad angles-

1. *Sub-Nationalism, and*

2. *Internal Colonialism*

Sub-Nationalism

After independence, various cultural and linguistic groups began to reassert themselves and raised the demand for autonomy or statehood or in some cases secession from India. The agitations and movements of such groups to recognize their respective vernaculars and to break away from big nationalities may be termed as sub-national in character.

Internal Colonialism

The term 'internal colonialism' has come to be used in recent years by social scientists in explaining the 'colonial type' situation within the geographical boundaries of a country. Thus, if a region or part of India is continuously neglected and deprived of the facilities not doing justice to the requirements of the region or area and the contribution made by the area is not properly counted then such type of a situation may be referred to as 'internal colonialism'. This type of situation compels the people of the area to organize themselves and raise the demand for self-rule or autonomy for their democratic existence.

The Dimaraji movement can be explained both from the perspectives of sub-nationalism and internal colonialism.

Sources of Data and Methodology:

The required information for the study was collected from books, memoranda, pamphlets and other archival records both official and non – official. Besides, some persons having knowledge of the subject were also interviewed. The method of historical analysis was employed to test the hypothesis.

Organisation of Thesis: The thesis is organised into five chapters

Chapter –I Introduction

It deals with structure of the present study comprising of the title, statement of the problem, objectives, review of literature, hypothesis, theoretical framework, and the methodology adopted in conducting the present study.

Chapter-II Demand for Dimaraji: Nature and Genesis

This chapter examines how exclusionary and segmented policy pursued by the colonial leadership resulted in making the tribal group of North East India including the Dimasas to consider themselves as a separate group. The separatist feeling was further perpetuated by the exploitative cultural, economic, political and administrative policies pursued towards the tribal during the post- colonial period. This resulted in making them conscious of identity of their own other than the Indian identity. So long as an educated middle class was not developed among the tribal in general and Dimasas in particular, there was protest but not specific demand for separate state. Once an educated middle class developed in Dimasa community and expanded in its size, they demanded their due share in power. Failing to have their due share, they initiated a process of constructing an identity of their own and started mobilizing public support for that identity in order to strengthen their bargaining position vis-à-vis the dominant group. It also explains that in case of the Dimasas there is a further problem of being threatened to loose their identity because of being called by different names in different areas in Assam.

Chapter – III Social base of the Demand

In this chapter attempt is made to examine the class of people who are spearheading the movement. It examines whether the common people were aware of and consciously supporting the movement or they supported Dimaraji

movement without being well aware of the programmes and goals of the movement.

What seems to have happened in North East India is that the tribal belt, which were neglected for a long period came to become aware of their position with the development of an educated middle class among the tribal groups. The emerging tribal middle class felt a very tough competition from the plains people in their struggle for power. Facing the competition from the plains as well as from other tribal groups, the educated middle class found it easier to mobilize the people in the name of language, culture and economic backwardness to rally behind them. This has also happened in case of the Dimasas. Until 70's decade, the Dimasa aspiration could have been fulfilled by the District Council which accommodated the aspiration of the traditional group. But the new groups that emerged in 1970's onward could not be accommodated in the District Council and they were also not happy with it. They required a greater share of power and for this they raised the slogan for Dimaraji. The demand for Dimaraji is mainly a demand of the newly educated class with which mass people do not have any direct contact nor their opinion has been sought. Thus, the demand for Dimaraji is mainly the demand of newly educated middle class.

Chapter-IV Courses and Consequences

This chapter examines the different phases and consequences of the movement. The violent movement of 'Dimaraji' of Dimasas' perception resulted in making other ethnic groups, the Zeme Nagas, the Hmars, Nepalis living in the district of North Cachar Hills suspicious. They apprehended that if the DHD succeed in getting its demand for 'Dimaraji', fulfilled, they would be marginalized and would come under Dimasa domination. Consequently, they opposed the demand. Their opposition strained the relationship between the Dimasas on the one hand, and the Hmars and the Zeme Nagas on the other. This strained relationship ultimately resulted in ethnic conflict in the districts of North Cachar Hills, and in some areas of Cachar District.

Chapter-V Conclusion

In this chapter, the major findings of the present study are summarised. Besides, the limitations of this study are reported and the suggestions for further research are also made.

Major Findings

The major findings of present study is that the identity assertion of various ethnic groups has been articulated through language, culture, region, religion, caste and race. This problem is very much acute in Assam. The different groups inhabiting this state have been pressing either for the creation of separate or autonomous state on the basis of their cultural identities or for special constitutional safeguards of their respective identities. At the beginning, they started their assertion with non-political issues such as the development of their language and culture. The unresolved economic apprehensions gave it a political direction in the subsequent period. In the subsequent period they became assertive of their political right and started pleading for adequate share of political power in order to maintain their respective identities. Dimasa Kachari is one of them. Now the Dimasas have been demanding the creation of a separate state 'Dimaraji' for Dimasas within India.

The Dimasas was one of the ruling tribe in Northeast India found them scattered in different districts of the state of Assam in the post-independence period. They were not in a position either numerically or otherwise to influence the course of politics in the state. Like many other tribal groups and linguistic minorities living in the state, the Dimasas were deeply disturbed by the aggressive cultural policy pursued by the Assamese middle class after coming to control the state power after independence. The controversial language bill of 1960 providing for making Assamese as the sole official language in the state of Assam was taken by the Dimasas along with other tribal groups a move to establish permanent monopoly of power in the state for Assamese. Consequently, the Dimasas like other tribal groups opposed the bill. They were party to the formation of All Party Hill Leaders Conference and to the demand for a separate state for the Hill

areas of Assam. But while on the eve of the reorganisation of Assam the Mikirs (now Karbis) and the Dimasas of N.C. Hills and Mikir Hills (now Karbi Anglong) were given the option to decide whether to join the Autonomous State of Meghalaya or to remain in Assam, they decided for the latter partly for the assurance given by the government that all of their needs for development would be taken care of and partly because of the apprehension that they would be subjected to Khasi-Jaintia-Garo domination in Meghalaya. But the expectation generated by the government assurance was belied, for not taking any effective steps except transferring more subject to the District Councils of North Cachar Hills (Dima Hasao) and Mikir Hills (Karbi Anglong).

Further the decision of the academic council of Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University to make Assamese as the only medium of instruction at the college level in 1972 was taken by Dimasas along with other tribal groups and linguistic minorities as a step towards ensuring Assamese domination over the non-Assamese. This resulted in making the Dimasas to assert their identity. A number of socio-cultural organisations came into being aiming at the promotion of Dimasa culture as well as to reconstruct the past so as to constitute a distinct Dimasa identity.

An examination of the Dimasa movement reveals that the presence of integrated and localized networks that existed within the community were of some help in influencing mobilization and recruitment of non-combatants for political action. Informal societal networks presumably served as important facilitators for movement participation. More precisely, community-based allegiances in the Dimasa society served as the basic infrastructure for collective actions where common grievances and strategies of resistance and protest networks were constructed and coordinated by activist organizations during the agitation. It has been found that people joined the movement activities (demonstrations, public rallies and meetings) in huge numbers, mostly because they were tied to each other through pre-existing community affiliations at the most local level, in the villages and urban areas. As a result group members were subjected to a mix of persuasion

(neighbours, friends, leaders), fear of social sanctions, genuine political preferences and sympathy for the activist organizations.

During the initial phase of mobilization from 1970 to early 1990s, protesters relied more on petition campaigns and other peaceful methods. Protest techniques, however changed after 1991 when the Karbis and the Dimasas, who had been fighting for an autonomous unit from a unified platform departed from each other because of opposing ethno-political ideologies. Their divergence from a joint venture signaled a ragged relationship between the leaders of these two groups and the rise of radical ethno-nationalism. The period witnessed a switch in the demands of these two groups, from the formation of an autonomous district to the creation of separate states for the Dimasas and the Karbis.

The study reveals that after 1990, the new educated middle class Dimasa youth adopted the constitutional path to fulfill their demands. Under the banner of the All Dimasa Students' Union (ADSU) they launched the movement for a separate state 'Dimaraji'. The ADSU to fulfill their demand of a separate state i.e. 'Dimaraji' tried to get support of common Dimasa people. Leaders believed that without the support of common people, the 'Dimaraji' movement could not be a successful movement. For ensuring the support of common Dimasa people, the ADSU leaders tried to create consciousness among the common men and women. The activists invoked the concepts of homeland for the Dimasas based on their settlement history and long duration of inhabitation in and around the region of Dima Hasao District (former North Cachar Hills). The organization called for the protection of distinct Dimasa identity through its platform and sought to garner popular support for their cause.

The Dimasa Leaders have adopted different methods at different phases of the movement. At the initial stage the movement was democratic and peaceful. The educated middle class Dimasa youths expressed their grievances through meetings, processions, demonstration etc. They published leaflets, booklets etc. to organize public opinion in their favour. Their representatives met the State Chief Minister,

the Prime Minister, and the Home Minister of the Union Government and submitted memoranda to them.

In addition to the passive methods, the Dimasa leaders in the second phase of their movement resorted to active resistance method. In this phase the movement started with the demand for a separate autonomous state 'Dimaraji'. The cultural and economic movements by this time got transformed into a political movement. The Dimasa leaders resorted to strike, bandh, rasta-roko, rail-roko, mass hunger strike and mass rally etc. As the movement gathered momentum the period of strike, bandh etc. were gradually extended from 12 hours to 48 hours. For instance, the All Dimasa Students' Union (ADSU) called for a 36 hour Dimaraji bandh on 6th and 7th November 2007, demanding steps to fulfil the demands of Dimasa community. The Joint Action Committee of the Dimaraji Movement called a 36 hour Dimaraji bandh on 18th and 19th January 2011 for the demand of separate state.

The movement remained non violent until the formation of Dimasa National Security Force (DNSF) and Dima Haram Daogah (DHD) in early nineties. The emergence of these militant outfits was partly because of the non-responsive attitude of the government and partly because of the politics of expediency as prevailing in the country. The emergence of these militant groups added a new dimension to both the nature and content of the 'Dimaraji State' movement. The Dima Haram Daogah (Nunisa group) and the Dima Haram Daogah (Jewel Group) or Black Widow adopted violent methods from the very beginning of their birth. At first, they procured sophisticated arms, extorted money from the business community and terrorized the people. They overran the police camp, snatched arms and ammunition from them, ambushed the patrol party, blew up trains and bridges.

But the violent movement for 'Dimaraji' of Dimasas' perception resulted in making other ethnic groups, especially the Hmars and the Zeme Nagas living in the district of Dima Hasao (North Cachar Hills) suspicious. They apprehended that if the DHD succeed in getting its demand for 'Dimaraji', fulfilled, they would be marginalised and would come under Dimasa domination. Consequently, they

opposed the demand. Their opposition strained the relationship between the Dimasas on the one hand, and the Hmars and the Karbis on the other. This strained relationship ultimately resulted in ethnic conflict in the districts of North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong and in some areas of Cachar District.

Though the protagonist claims that the aim of the movement is to ensure the development of all section of Dimasa community, there is reason to doubt whether the common Dimasa people will be benefited if the goal of Dimaraji comes true. Most of the common Dimasa peoples are not educated and they do not have much idea about the aims and objectives of the movement. Besides, the movement also lacks an action plan. The mass people supported the movement without knowing the programmes and goals of the movement. The people supported the movement just to be a part of the flow. Leaders of the movement used common Dimasas emotion and sentiment as an instrument to get their support for the movement for separate state i.e. 'Dimaraji'

The common people of Dimasa community like, working class, farmers and peasantry remain passive or inert unless they are affected by ethnic conflict or ethnic cleansing operations. The demand for Dimaraji is mainly a demand of the educated middle class with which mass people do not have any direct contact nor their opinion has been sought. The demand for Dimaraji State, if fulfilled will hardly make the life of ordinary Dimasa people much better. The inbuilt tribal background will not go to the benefit of ordinary Dimasa people. They are uneducated and impoverished. It will give rise to a new power elite.

As far as settlement of the movement is concerned the government has taken an initiative to solve the problems of Dimasas. The first step was a ceasefire agreement in the 1st January 2003. After the ceasefire agreement a series of talks held between Government of India, Government of Assam and Dima Haram Daogah (DHD). At last, on 8th October, 2012 a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) signed by the representatives of the Government of India, Government of Assam and the two groups of Dima Haram Daogah (DHD), DHD- Dilip Nunisa group and

DHD- Jewel Garlosa group at New Delhi. It is now to be seen how things develop after the signature of the MoS between different parties.

Suggestions for further research

The emergence of militant group such as Dima Halam Daogah (DHD), DHD (Nunisa) and DHD (Jewel) demanding the creation of ‘Dimaraji’ a state for the Dimasas not only change the nature of politics being pursued in the two hill district of Dima Hasao (N.C. Hills) and Karbi Anglong, but also strained the relationship between the ethnic groups of the Dimasas and the Hmars, the Dimasas and the Zeme Nagas, the Dimasas and the Karbis. Given the limitation of time and resources at the disposal of the researcher, this aspect could not be thoroughly investigated.

In view of the limitation of the present study, it would be worthwhile to undertake a study to ascertain the impact of the emergence of insurgent groups on the demand for Dimaraji in particular and on the politics of the Karbi Anglong and the Dima Hasao districts in general.