

# Ethnic Politics in Assam: Conflict and Accommodation

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**Abstract-** The paper analyses movements of different small ethnic groups belonging to both tribal and non-tribal communities in the state of Assam and attempts to understand why tension arose in the first place and remains today. This article further focuses to understand why ethnic groups engaged in bitter relationship and it explores the intricacies and possibilities of a solution to the problem. Examining the role of the state in asserting and confronting such tensions between the competing communities becomes another objective of the paper.

Ethnic conflict is shown to be a consequence of a lingering identity problem, aggravated by language and homeland disputes based on their complex historical relations, as well as equivocal responses of the state. It is argued that continued manipulation of historical events and ethnic demonstration of both tribal and non-tribal communities and policies of the state towards ethnic groups in Assam intensified ethnic tensions in the state.

**Index Terms-** Identity, politics, conflict, recognition, tribal, non-tribal

## I. INTRODUCTION

The trends of ethnic mobilization have changed in post-Cold War politics which is characterized by re-emergence of the inherent tension between 'state' – as a political corporation exercising sovereign political authority over a defined 'geographical territory'- and 'nation', a community of people who identify themselves as sharing a common feature (Richard Mansbach and Edward Rhodes, 2007). In the contemporary world, ethnic political mobilization is seen mainly as a response to the structure and operation of the economy, particularly the economic competition among mobilized ethnic contenders (Hannan, 1979). This economic competition takes place largely in the political arena due to the subordination of the economy to the polity (Bell, 1975). The power of this new force, to determine the shape and extent of ethnic mobilization within a society lies in the processes and policies of the state and how it responds in the context of minority communities is a matter to inquire further. The paper analyses movements of different small ethnic groups belonging to both tribal and non-tribal communities in the state of Assam and attempts to understand why tension arose in the first place and remains today. Examining the role of the state in asserting and confronting such tensions between the competing communities becomes another objective of the paper. This brings in identity politics in the picture which dominates contemporary socio-political discourse in Northeast India. Ethnic assertion, revivalism, and quest for a separate space are the major postulates around which identity struggle revolves. Most resistant and resurgent idioms are centred on the issue of language, which is linked with ethnic identity and its inhabitation. Again, this can

be linked to the reorganization of states on the basis of language<sup>1</sup> in India after independence in general and Assam in particular. States were carved out around the identity of major Indian languages and most of the states in India are identified with one or the other language.<sup>2</sup> Thus, policies related to language, as an instrument of nation-building, institutionalize ethnic diversity, politicize linguistic divisions and render them permanent. The most powerful impact is that of multiple official languages. It is to say that such a policy institutionalizes and legitimizes linguistic conflict and thus maintains and perpetuates it. For instance, conflict over the making of Assamese or Bengali as the official language in Assam.<sup>3</sup>

## Identity Politics and Ethnic Issues in Northeast India

It has been argued that issues relating to identity politics emerged most vividly in the twentieth century as a product of collapse of the modern grand narratives, rather than any novelty of diversity in our age.<sup>4</sup> It mostly relates to changing economic and political conditions. The manner in which modern nation-states try to construct common national identities creates a congenial environment for identity politics. Thus, through the process of nation-building, they (the majority) try to construct national identities, which lead to assimilation rather than accommodation of diverse socio-cultural identities into mainstream politics.

The homogenization of Indian national identity after independence marked the beginning of identity politics. The working of the Indian state reveals how the elements of Hindu identity, the most powerful and pervasive, received the widest favour and support from government's nodal agencies and institutions in the name of promotion of Indian cultural identity,

<sup>1</sup> The linguistic reorganization of regional boundaries has been a major instrument for protecting and nurturing linguistic diversity and the creation of linguistic identity based units, each with political rights to govern itself within a region. Its language became the official language of that state and the medium of instruction, public examination, communication and media networks. As a consequence the regional majority language grew and flourished (Gurpreet Mahajan, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Thus, West Bengal is the homeland for the Bengalis, Maharashtra for the Marathas, Tamil Nadu for the Tamils, and Kerala for the Malayalees; and so on.

<sup>3</sup> Assam is a multi-lingual state but in 1960, the Government of Assam declared Assamese as the sole official language. The people of Cachar launched a movement of protest against the language policy of the state and to put it down, the Assam Government opened fire on non-violent Satyagrahis on 19<sup>th</sup> May, 1961. As a result one girl and ten boys were killed. The Cachar Jilla Sangram Parishad and the Bhasa Andolan Samiti launched a non-violent movement demanding Bengali as the second official language of the state. 'Three language' formula called "Shastri Formula" was evolved by Lal Bahadur Shastri by which "Assam Official Language Act" was amended so as to make Bengali the official language in Barak Valley. Fresh tension mounted in the valley as a SEBA circular (SEBA/AB/ Syllabus/11/85-86-1 dated 28.2.86) imposed Assamese language in the Valley.

<sup>4</sup> Engin and Patricia Wood, 1999: 57-58.

whereas, other cultural identities were either marginalized or pushed towards the periphery of mainstream politics. This situation generated a congenial environment for politics of identity in India. During the colonial period, the colonial masters initiated a process of recasting Indian social identities. In the same way, after independence, Indian leadership tried to recast them. However, in case of the former, such recasting occurred within largely autonomous cultural settings and colonial initiatives were by and large successful in creating political categories out of local identifications and affiliations. For the latter, the process of recasting social identities through the misconceived process of nation-building has proven counter-productive (Baljit, 2014). As a result, a number of anti-state forces can now be seen in many states viz., Punjab, South Indian states and Assam, among others.

The reorganization of states on the basis of language was a major step towards accommodating different identities into the political mainstream of the country. Even after reorganization and creation of many new states, expressions of multi-layered identities took the form of native, even secessionist movements. Such politics of identity has given rise to new regional movements, parties and forces (SajalBasu, 1992). While reorganizing states on the basis of language, states like Punjab and Assam faced a number of problems. It is worth mentioning, that the purpose of this whole exercise was to construct a collective identity and its opposition from indigenous minority groups.

Though the process of identity construction had started much before independence, the materialization and political involvement could be seen only after India's inception as an independent nation-state. Quite similar to the task of nation-building with special attention to incorporation of minority cultures, languages and religions, the Indian state also guaranteed cultural, religious and linguistic freedoms by incorporating provisions like the Fundamental Rights, the Directive Principles of State Policy, etc. India's practice of affirmative action or reservations for the underprivileged communities has contributed to both a growing sense of participation and empowerment (Sukumar Muralidharan, 2004). However, the politics of reservation has also resulted in the process of formation and sharpening of identities in the public domain (Baljit, 2006).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the politics of identity had become more pervasive and eventually replaced the politics of ideas which had hitherto dominated Indian political space. The Indian brand of secularism and Hindi as a language were used as a mechanism to construct national identity but this was contested from many parts of the country; mainly, South India (Mahajan, 2005). However, at present, identities are formed on the basis of gender, ethnicity, caste, religion, class, etc. It was in the 1980s that the questions of identity and ethnicity took the centre stage in Indian politics. The two most significant political movements that brought identity and ethnicity to the forefront were in Assam and Punjab. A separatist movement in the border region of Kashmir and the rise of the pan-Indian Hindutva identity also followed soon after (Surinder, 2001).

The 'Assam problem' (Baruah, 1999) relates to the movement against illegal migrants. This was reflected first by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) which later clashed violently with the state. The tension in Assam was focused

around two interrelated issues, the influx of Bengali speaking immigrants and the inability of the centre to accommodate the regional patriotism of Assamese speakers within the state. Baruah (1999) contends that the Indian state failed to resolve the Assam problem after the largely non-implemented Peace Accord of 1985 because it had conceptualized the conflict mainly as a 'law and order' or 'military problem'. In contrast, he offers another way to conceptualize the conflict by applying the theoretical lens of 'contentious politics' (Doug, Tarrow, and Tilly, 1996). According to this view, the emergence of violent protest should not necessarily be seen as illegitimate but rather as the outgrowth of political demands that have not been resolved through non-violent means. Baruah (1999) argues that a lasting solution to the Assam problem will inevitably have to involve the acceptance of Assamese regional patriotism as being a legitimate political construction. Moreover, it will mean abandonment of the rigid idea of 'pan-India', which views the unity of India as being un-debatable.

According to the estimate made by K.S. Singh (1996), Northeast India has 382 culturally and regionally distinct communities of various sizes at various stages of development. The leaders of such communities have begun to identify the values and interests which appeared to be universal to their respective communities. The articulation of such interest has led to much tension because such interests of a community invariably come in conflict with interests of other communities. The movements of various communities either asserting a new identity or preserving and protecting their ethnic identity from assimilation are the most significant aspects of the contemporary socio-political realities of Northeast India. The movements launched by the Assamese, the Bengalis, the Nagas, the Kukis, the Khasis, the Garo, the Mizos, the Bodos, the Karbis, the Kok Boroks and the Bishnupriyas among others are significant. Many smaller groups with somewhat blurred cultural markers are now also beginning to assert their identities, some of which are even busily intervening in separate identities. At times, such assertions emerged as a result of political strategy for national and state-level elections. For instance, the Assamiya-Bengali and the Bodo-Non Bodo conflicts in the Bodo inhabited areas of Assam have a close relationship with the politics of domination and autonomy.

The movements mentioned above emerged as a result of resistance adopted by the smaller linguistic and cultural identities by initiating autonomy movements against the assimilating approach of the majority community. Besides, policies like 'co-operative federalism' and 'cultural federalism', which promised to protect cultural and linguistic minorities, also encouraged small groups to promote ethnic mobilization. For instance, the Naga-Kuki conflict and Kuki-Paite clashes in Manipur; Bodo-Non Bodo conflict in Bodo dominated areas of Assam, anti-Chakma movements in Arunachal Pradesh; anti-outsider movements in Meghalaya; Tripuri Tribal-Bengali settlers conflict in Tripura are the major issues being faced by the Indian north-eastern states (Sumitra Priyadarshini, 2006).

Though, it is often difficult to trace the origins of ethnic conflicts, especially those occurring amongst various tribal communities (and also between the Hill People and the Plains People) in the north-eastern states, it can be argued that the destruction of the peaceful co-existence that had historically

existed between these groups started well before independence and geared up in the post-independence era particularly in the last three-four decades. Perhaps, this is because the British colonial administration and ethnic categorization has continued to have important ramifications in the post-independence ethnic relationships in the region, highlighting certain unique features of ethnic conflict and identity assertions. Group rights are claimed not simply on the basis of their being a distinct ethnic community with common social practices and cultural traditions including a common language (Anthony D. Smith, 1986). Identities have also been constructed on the basis of some vague shared goals such as “freedom from mistreatment” by the larger community or “safeguarding common interests” vis-à-vis other groups and these have been contributed to the foundation of a ‘nation’<sup>5</sup>. This departs from the traditional conception of a ‘nation’ as a population that simply shares a common culture, language, and ethnicity and that shows strong historical continuity.<sup>6</sup> However, this has been partially effective. Smaller groups have been oriented towards and mobilized to pursue these goals. In the case of the Naga identity formation in Manipur, one particular method is of projecting a common enemy to consolidate otherwise scattered groups, thereby forging a new common identity based on anti-Meetei sentiments. The propagation of this political standpoint is encouraged by referring to the past which Bhagat (2003) spells as “ill doings of the (Hinduized) Meeteis to the Hill tribes.” In the case of Assam, issues are not exactly comparable to that of the Nagas and the Kukis in Manipur. In Assam, ethnic mobilizations are mostly connected with demands for autonomy, ethnic participation in political affairs of the state by sharing administrative institutions, more specifically getting the ST status and inclusion in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. However, before going into a deeper analysis of emerging ethnic tensions in Assam, an understanding of historical background of the erstwhile Assam is quite significant for a clearer picture of the fragmented society in the present-day Assam.

The idea of a nation-province<sup>7</sup> for the ethnic Assamese<sup>8</sup> is basically an unrealizable goal within the present political boundary of Assam, primarily due to the fact that these two boundaries, viz., ethnic and political, do not coincide. Besides, the ethnic boundary of Assam not only includes the ethnic

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<sup>5</sup> The term ‘Nation’ employed here is also synonymous with nationality or nationalism which is developed as a reaction against the domination by majority. It is mostly used by the people who organise movements to overthrow or prevent the action of the state authority or majority group. As for instance, Naga Nationalism, Meetei nationalism.

<sup>6</sup> If one conceptualizes the idea of a nation around the theory enunciated by scholars like Montserrat Guibernau, there is no problem when “shared goals” is made a foundational element of a nation. Nonetheless, when the so-called shared goals are imposed upon smaller ethnic communities who otherwise have a different cultural background, including language, and settle in non-contiguous areas with separate aspirations, many issues emerge. These issues are likely to be more complicated owing to the continuing movements for identity assertion, formation, and expansion led by select elites and leaders. See Montserrat Guibernau, “Anthony D. Smith on Nations and National Identity: A Critical Assessment,” *Nations and Nationalism* 10(1/2): 125–41 (2004).

<sup>7</sup> A province only for the Assamese

<sup>8</sup> Assamese people do not include Bodo, Miri and Michings; they are believed to be the earliest known inhabitants of Assam. The Assamese identity is formed by people migrated from Central India in 13<sup>th</sup> & 14<sup>th</sup> century (P.C. Dutta and B.C. Pradhan 2006).

Assamese but also the Dimasas of North Cachar Hills, the Karbis of Karbi Anglong, the Bengalis of Barak valley, the Bodos, the Koches, the Miris, the Chutias, the Kacharis, the Deoris, the Rabhas, the Lalungs, the Morans, the Meeteis, the Bishnupriyas and other indigenous populations and Tea tribes in the Brahmaputra Valley (Hussain, 1993). Thus, historically evolved geographic and demographic structures in Assam are not in conformity with the claim of making Assam a nation-province for the ethnic Assamese. While members of a multi-ethnic state like Assam have multiple identities, i.e., one can simultaneously be a Bodo, an Assamese and a Christian, adoption of a singular identity and an attempt to magnify it only leads to inter-group conflicts and identity disintegration. Identity politics in Assam has many facets rooted in the remote as well as the recent social history of the state.

### Managing Ethnic Conflict and State Response

One may refer to the methods of ‘*accommodationist management*’<sup>9</sup>, ‘*polarizing management*’<sup>10</sup> and ‘*stimulate management*’<sup>11</sup> adopted in India since its inception in order to maintain the country’s unity and integration. In the case of Assam, those who did not want to be identified as Assamese slowly developed an aspiration to separate and hence, have started the struggle for separate identities, resisting cultural assimilation or forced erasure of ethnic affiliations by the majority groups. Its basis lays in two-way politicization of the elements of ethnicity and the role of the state along with the elements of deprivation and domination. The dominant group possesses a tendency to brand all group aspirations and demands as anti-national or secessionist without going into their merits or demerits. The smaller groups face the situation of identity crisis on the eve of forced assimilation in the name of accommodation and integration (Pranami, 2007).

The rise of desire for self-expression and separate identities from those of the dominant groups in Assam is also caused by the policy of recognition and representation. The state policy of recognition of traditional institutions and identities; and representation of the ethnic groups in the decision-making bodies can nourish stronger sentiments and emotions of ethnicity among other groups (Pranami, 2007). Recognition of cultural values that characterize ‘identity’ of a community is a key to success, and an essential component of democracy. With respect to identity formation and recognition, Charles Taylor derived the idea of dialogical construction of identity from Hegel. Taylor says “the importance of recognition is now universally recognized in one

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<sup>9</sup> It prevents ethnic consciousness from switching to intense and destructive to national unity and democratic process. This is the way in which the term is most commonly used. The main device used by accommodationists like Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri and P.V Narasimha Rao is political bargaining, which implies a substantial sharing of power and resources with people at regional and sub-regional levels.

<sup>10</sup> It intensifies ethnic consciousness to the point where ‘ethnic transformation’ occurs. The main practitioners of this strategy are the forces of the Hindu right. They seek to dilute the content of the diverse traditions within the Hindu population in order to fix the attentions of Hindus on a minimalist common set of symbols and issues which will unite them against minorities. They intend to govern in a more centralizing, homogenizing manner than the accommodationists.

<sup>11</sup> It adopts ethnic awareness for a short-term political advantage.

form or another; on an intimate plane, we are all aware how identity can be formed and or malformed in our contact with significant others. On the social plane, we have a continuing politics of recognition. Both have been shaped by the growing ideal of authenticity, and recognition plays an essential role in the culture that has arisen around it". Besides, recent studies pointed out that economic, educational and employment facilities, along with the discriminatory policies of the centre<sup>12</sup> and political aspirations of the group leaders fuelled the intensity of the emergence of identity movement. As for instance, with the approval of Bodo Accord, small groups like Tiwa, Rabha, Mishing, Deori, Thengal Kachari, Sonowal Kachari, etc. started demands for more autonomy and rights.

The recent state response to accommodate ethnic mobilization of smaller groups has been enumerated in the table below:

**Table 1: Institutional Arrangement for Ethnic Minorities in Assam**

Sl. No.	Nature of Autonomy	Status
1	Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council	Sixth Schedule
2	Dima Hasao District Autonomous Council	--do--
3	Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC)	--do--

Source: Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, Government of India

**Table 2: Institutional Arrangement to Ethnic Movements in Assam**

Sl. No.	Nature of Autonomy	Status
1	Tiwa Autonomous Council at Marigaon	Legislative Act
2	Rabha Autonomous Council at Goalpara	--do--
3	Mishing Autonomous Council at Dhemaji	--do--
4	Deori Autonomous Council at Lakhimpur	--do--
5	Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council at Titabor	--do--
6	Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council at Dibrugarh	--do--

Source: Department of Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes, Government of Assam, 2014

**Table 3: Institutions for Non-Tribal Ethnic Communities in Assam**

Sl. No.	Nature of Autonomy	Status
1	Tai Ahoms Development Council	Legislative Act

<sup>12</sup> Language policy and nation-building project, etc.

2	Muttoks Development Council	--do--
3	Morans Development Council	--do--
4	Koch-Rajbangshis Development Council	--do--
5	Chutiyas Development Council	--do--
6	Gorkhas Development Council	--do--
7	Adivasis Development Council	--do--
8	Sema Development Council	--do--
9	Tangsha Development Council	--do--
10	Mon Tai Linguistic (Tai Fakey, Tai Khamiang, Tai Khamiang, Tai Turung, Tai Khamti, Tai Aiton)	--do--
11	Bishnupriya Manipuri Development Council	--do--
12	Manipuri Development Council	--do--
13	Mech Kachari Development Council	--do--
14	General Caste Development Council	--do--
15	Maimal Development Council	--do--
16	Saraniya Kachari Development Council	--do--
17	Moriya Development Council	--do--
18	Nath-Jogi Development Council	--do--

Source: Department of Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes, Government of Assam, 2014.

Table 1 shows the three autonomous councils, namely- the *Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council*, the *Dima Hasao District Autonomous Council*, and the *Bodoland Territorial Council* (BTC) set up in order to bring the tribal people into mainstream national politics and also for their welfare. Hence, a number of provisions were incorporated in the Constitution. For example, Article 244(2) of the Constitution of India provides for a Sixth Schedule for bringing about development of tribes of the Northeast only because it was assumed that these tribes have some special problems of their own. The idea behind the Sixth Schedule was to provide the tribal people with a simple administrative system of their own, so that they could safeguard their customs and traditions; and, to provide them maximum autonomy within the framework of the state in the management of their affairs (Jayanta, 2011).

Currently, there are ten Autonomous Councils, functioning in four states of Northeast India. Among them, three are working in present-day Assam. These are the *Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council* (KAAC) at Karbi Anglong; the *North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council* (NCHAC) at Dima Hasao; and the *Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts* (BTAD) in the three Bodo inhabited Districts of Kokrajhar, Udalguri and Chirang. After working for more than six decades, the tribal problems have not been resolved and are continuing, sometimes taking dangerous forms. Perhaps, in Assam, ethnic conflict will continue as long as the various communities do not have the rights and resources necessary to affirm their cultures and secure their survival (Gosselink, 1994). With respect to failure of the present-day system to assure this, Jayanta (2011) condemns basically to the manipulation of the Autonomous Councils from the top of an extremely centralized power structure, which artificially impresses the formation, expansion or dissolution of different types of autonomous structures and depends on the wishes of the upper-most layers of the power hierarchy.

Apart from the autonomous councils mandated in the Sixth Schedule, six other statutory autonomous councils were constituted in Assam after prolonged agitations by small ethnic communities, as illustrated in Table 2. These non-Sixth Schedule Autonomous Councils are the *Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council*, the *Mising Autonomous Council*, the *Deori Autonomous Council*, the *Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council* and the *Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council*. Territorializing the autonomous council always poses tensions among the ethnic groups competing for the possession of central positions in the autonomous areas. Instead of difference-blind universalism, differentiated citizenship develops the sense of collective belongingness and equal respect for the "other". At the same time, a number of rights could be ensured and established, viz., special representation rights, multicultural rights, self-government or rights to self-determination, etc.<sup>13</sup> Thus, conflicts related to Bodo-Non Bodo, Karbi-Dimasa in Assam and Kuki-Naga in Manipur are the few examples which relate to politics of territorializing the autonomous councils.

On the other hand, de-territorializing autonomous councils will pave the way to constitute a number of other autonomous councils for the indigenous ethnic communities which is also highlighted in Table 3. All the above three tables differ in their nature of autonomy and the laws that protect the autonomy. The first two tables, viz. Table 1 and Table 2 are of similar nature which is protected by the Constitution of India under the Six Schedule and the latter is constituted by an act of the State Legislature of Assam.<sup>14</sup> Both types of autonomous councils are more or less similar in formation but differ in the measure of autonomy viz. absolute, relative and limited. The first two are meant for the tribes only but the third does not make any distinctions.

In another step to accommodate competing minorities, the Government of Assam has formed Non-territorial Development Councils for certain ethnic groups in 2010<sup>15</sup> and some others in 2013 respectively. The setting-up of these development councils for ethnic communities was done to provide maximum participation by the people of various backward ethnic communities within the framework of the Constitution of India for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement of the people belonging to those communities in the State.

## II. CONCLUSION

The primary task of the governments in newly independent nation-states, and in some cases newly created states, becomes national integration or state-building (Brass, 1990). This process invariably involves two concurrent tasks: first, extending the writ of central political institutions and rules of governance into the peripheral regions of these countries, and second, attempting to build a sense of common national identity and loyalty around specific cultural and iconic symbols preferred by the central state. Needless to say, these processes often caused friction, sometimes potentially violent, between the state and the various ethnic groups, all of which differ in their degree of objective internal cohesion and levels of subjective political self-consciousness (Idem, 1979). The homogenization of the Indian national identity in the post-independence period has resulted in the emergence of identity politics in India.

In the case of Assam, it can be seen from two main perspectives. First, a resistant step undertaken by militant revolutionaries against state mechanism for homogenization of identity, as in case of the Bodo, Dimasa, Karbi movements and second, as a reaction of incentives provided in the name of distinct community or indigenous people (in case of Koch Rajbongshi, Tai Ahom, Chutia, Maran, Matak and Adivasi). In both the cases, the state plays significant roles in the formation of concrete boundaries among the small communities in Assam. In this case, the political strategy as adopted by the then political leaders of Assam is significant. In this regard, one may refer to a number of methods adopted by the state since its inception in India; among them '*accommodationist management*', '*polarizing management*' and '*stimulate management*' which the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi adopted as a short term political goal. Indira Gandhi encouraged resentment among the Muslims in Assam at one point and, at another; her son did so to win his party support from anti-Muslim Hindus in Uttar Pradesh. Indira Gandhi also secretly encouraged Sikh extremism in Punjab in order to split the Sikh opposition to her Congress Party there. But when the extremists became too strong, she risked a ghastly conflict (which duly followed) by sending the army into the Golden Temple, an act which was aimed at gaining support from Hindus across northern India.

In Assam, the most disturbing task before the political leaders lies in the growing Muslim population which becomes a factor for the political parties to compete for their votes and they promise to implement the Assam Accord and protect the rights of the indigenous people at the same time. Balancing the interest of both sides further deepens the conflict in the state, resulting in frequent bloodshed in recent decades.

Thus, politicization of the elements of ethnicity and the role of the state, along with deprivation and domination of small communities becomes the source of ethnic tension in the state. Moreover, the tendency of the state as well as the projection of the dominant group to brand all the aspirations and demands of ethnic minority communities as anti-national or secessionist without going into the merits or demerits intensifies the potency of conflict in the state.

<sup>13</sup> For more details see Krishna Sharma, Jayanta (2011) *An Alternative Formulation for Autonomous Councils in Assam*, Economic & Political Weekly, August 27, 2011 Vol XLVI No 35.

<sup>14</sup> The Indian Constitution also contains a safeguard that empowers the President of the Indian republic to appoint a special officer whose responsibility it is "to investigate all matters relating to the safeguards provided for linguistic minorities."<sup>177</sup> This enables the central government to intervene to prevent linguistic minorities from actual or potential discrimination. If these constitutional methods fail to resolve the problem, then Assam's legislature could consider other ways to grant greater privileges to linguistic minorities (Robert G. Gosselink, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Namely the Ahoms, Matakas, Morans, Koch-Rajbongshis, Chutiyas, Adivasis and Gorkhas, vide order no. TAD/BC/531/2010/136.

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