

Chapter 14

Making a Case for the Formation of Regional Councils Within Sixth Schedule Areas

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This chapter discusses the provisions in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution for the formation of autonomous regions and regional councils in districts with multiple scheduled tribes, and stresses on the formation of such regional councils for smaller tribes within the district or territorial area. In the formation of district councils and regional councils in the erstwhile hill areas of Assam, minority groups within the Sixth Schedule districts were neglected. In recent decades, some such groups have been found to be engaged in militant activities. It is argued here that the formation of regional councils for such minority tribes within the district or territorial area can be 'a conflict management device' and a path towards peace and development in the north-eastern region.

On 23 January 2019, the Union Cabinet of India decided to increase the financial and executive powers of autonomous councils in the North East (NE) region, which are formed under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, by approving a constitutional amendment. Through the amendment of Article 280 and the Sixth Schedule

of the Constitution,¹ it seeks to 'significantly improve the financial resources and powers of the autonomous districts councils in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura, fulfilling long-standing aspirations of the tribal population in these Northeastern States'. The Union Cabinet also intends to devolve financial resources to the councils, which will end their dependency 'on grants from Central Ministries and the State governments for specific projects', and 'will substantially enhance the funds available to these local government institutions for undertaking development works in these tribal areas' (*The Hindu*, 2019).

The demand for direct funding of the district councils was long-standing, particularly that from Mizoram, as funds to autonomous councils are under the control of the state government. Indeed, it was overdue since the 73rd and 74th amendments of the Constitution in 1992, which devolved powers and functions to the panchayats and urban local bodies, respectively. The Direct Funding Demand Committee of Mizoram 'want to be re-christened as autonomous territorial councils, want powers to decide on more subjects and want all centrally-sponsored schemes to be directly sanctioned and released by concerned ministries' (*The Telegraph*, 2012). On 6 February 2019, the Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Amendment) Bill, 2019, was introduced in the Rajya Sabha, with the aim of 'enhancing autonomy of the existing Autonomous Councils, renaming the Councils and increasing the number of seats in the concerned Councils'. The bill was later referred to the standing committee for further examination. The bill, if passed, will rename the autonomous councils as autonomous territorial councils and increase their powers. The North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council will be renamed as Dima Hasao Autonomous Territorial Council. However, the Lai, Chakma and Mara autonomous councils in Mizoram were excluded from the renaming of the councils. There will not only be an increase in the number of seats in the councils but also a provision for the reservation of at least two seats for women.

¹ There were several attempts to amend the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution to enhance the provisions since 2005, during the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance administration.

The bill, through this amendment, also intends to enable the Finance Commission to review the financial position of the district councils, including the village councils and municipal councils, and 'to recommend' to the governor 'measures needed to augment the Consolidated Fund of the States to supplement resources of the Sixth Schedule Autonomous Councils, Village Councils and Municipal Councils'. This will 'provide separate funds for the Autonomous District Councils in Sixth Schedule areas which results in inadequate socio-economic infrastructure in the Autonomous District Council areas' so as to supplement resources. However, this again falls short of the 'direct funding' that is being demanded. The amendment bill also provides for the establishment of 'Village Councils for a village or a group of villages in the rural areas and the Municipal Councils for an urban area or an agglomeration of such urban areas of the district'.

One of the interesting features of this amendment bill is the nomination of a specific number of not only women but also members of 'unrepresented tribes' in the council by the governor. Currently, there is no such provision to ensure the nomination of unrepresented tribes as members of the autonomous district councils (ADCs). It is purely at the governor's discretion whom to nominate. At a time when there are plans to increase the powers of and number of members in the councils, the Government of Meghalaya has not only opted out of the provision for elected village and municipal councils and reservation of one-third seats for women in this proposed amendment for the time being, but it is also attempting to remove the word 'unrepresented tribes' from the proposed amendment to the Sixth Schedule. This was decided on 26 September 2019 by a subcommittee constituted by the state government to recommend to the standing committee of Parliament (*The Hindu*, 2019, September 28). Leaders of the five 'unrepresented tribes' in Meghalaya, namely Hajong, Koch, Rabha, Bodo and Mann, express their concern over the development. They feel: 'It is sad the minority tribes have run into tribal majoritarianism. We have virtually been made non-indigenous and unwanted in our own homeland'. Apart from these five 'unrepresented tribes', there are several other smaller unrepresented tribes, such as the Biate, Hmar, Synteng, Mikir, Naga and Kuki tribes.

The proposed amendment to the Sixth Schedule is long due, but it is still short of the expectations of minority tribes in such districts or territorial areas. They are not only the most neglected in policy, but even the institutions that were created to serve their interests are denied to them.

This chapter is divided into four parts. The second part briefly discusses the genesis of the Sixth Schedule and the demand for autonomous councils in other parts of India, including Manipur and Tripura. The third part looks into the history of how smaller groups within the then-Lushai Hills district of Assam demanded smaller councils for the Pawis and Lakhers. The fourth part deals with the politics of recognition in the north-eastern region and examines whether the creation of regional councils can accommodate ethnic diversity.

GOVERNING NORTH-EAST INDIA: ORIGIN OF AUTONOMOUS COUNCILS

In NE India, the so-called indigenous or 'non-state people' had been governed differently since the advent of the British colonial rule in Assam province.² When the British were about to leave, a secret plan for a crown colony was conceived for the hill areas of NE India, and for the tribal areas of Burma, by the colonial officers who were at one point of time posted in the North East Frontier.³ Such proposed scheme was not realized, perhaps due to the haste in which the British had to leave India. However, the statement of the Cabinet Mission on 16 May 1946 reflected the need for special attention to be given to the excluded tribal areas by the Constituent Assembly of India.

² The term 'non-state people' is widely used today to denote upland people in NE India and Southeast Asia who had different forms of governance other than the 'state system'. For details on this, see Scott (2009).

³ Such plans were "'A Note on the Future of the Present Excluded, Partially Excluded and Tribal Areas of Assam', written by Robert N Reid; 'A Note on the Future of the Hill Tribes of Assam and the Adjoining Hills in a Self-governing India' by James P Mills; 'The Future Government of the Assam Tribal Peoples' by Andrew G. Clow; and 'Some Notes on a Policy for the Hill Tribes of Assam' by Philip Adams. These plans are compiled together by Syiemlich (2014).

Constituent Assembly and Autonomous Councils

An advisory sub-committee on North-East Frontier Tribal Areas and Assam Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas was set up by the Constituent Assembly of India under the chairmanship of Gopinath Bordoloi 'for the purpose of enquiring into the tribal situation in Assam' (Constituent Assembly Of India Debates, 1949) and preparing schemes for the administration of the North-eastern tribal areas. After an extensive tour to different hill districts of the then-composite state of Assam, the sub-committee submitted its report to the Constituent Assembly, and it was placed for debate on 6 September 1949. While 'the Sub-committee thought that the best way to satisfy these people is to give them a certain measure of self-government so that they may develop themselves according to their own genius and culture',⁴ those who opposed the sub-committee's view 'want to assimilate the tribal people' into the mainstream.

Rev. J. J. M. Nichols Roy, a member of the sub-committee, stated: 'The village councils in the autonomous districts and the District Councils will enable the hills people to rule themselves in their own way and to develop themselves according to their own methods'. During the debate, Gopinath Bordoloi stressed on how

some of these areas were war zones. During the war, the then rulers and officers developed in the minds of these tribal people a sense of separation and isolation and gave them assurances that at the end of the war they will be independent States managing their affairs in their own way. They were led to believe that the entire hill areas would be constituted into a province and put under some irresponsible Governor.

Supporting the sub-committee's view, Dr B. R. Ambedkar, Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution, stated: 'I agree that we have been creating Regional and District Councils to some extent on the lines which were adopted by the United States for the purpose of the Red Indians'.

⁴ Constituent Assembly Debate, Vol. IX, No. 26, dated 6 September 1949, p. 1023.

The assimilationists were filled with the overriding concerns of 'irredentism', 'secessionism' and the tribespeople not learning Indian culture. Lakshminarayan Sahu from Orissa expressed these views:

The regional councils we propose to set up for them, will, in my view, neither benefit these people nor us; for these people have got an organisation for each tribe, which is like our panchayat. They hold their Panchayat in every village. Their customs differ from village to village. The regional councils set up there would make uniform laws and these are likely to cause any number of difficulties among the various villages. In view of this, I would say that the powers vested in us, the Centre and the States should be kept intact. For a moment let us consider the likely consequences if we delegated these powers to these councils. The result would be that these people would develop on their own lines without in any way being connected with you.

To ward off the fear of assimilationists, Ambedkar explained: 'However, what I was saying was that the Regional Councils have been given certain autonomy for certain purposes and at the same time they have been bound together in the life of the province and in the life of the country as a whole'. Despite such concerns, the recommendations of the Bordoloi Sub-Committee was accepted by the Constituent Assembly with slight amendments. Thus, 'Provisions as to the Administration of Tribal Areas' were made in Articles 244(2) and 275(1) under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. In a nutshell, 'The scheme was conceived with a view to building up autonomous administrations in these areas so that the tribal people may continue to follow their traditional way of life with such changes as they themselves may like to introduce' (Agnihotri, 1994, p. 83).

The formation of ADCs in the NE under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution is considered to be a milestone in providing tribal autonomy in India. It provides for the tribespeople of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura to be 'administered as autonomous groups' through 'self-governing institutions of their own'. Tillin (2006, p. 56) considers 'the varieties of special status' in some of the NE states as 'the closest India comes to de jure asymmetrical federalism'. Looking into the wide array of provisions for autonomy

under the Sixth Schedule, Hidayatulla, former Chief Justice of India, described it as a 'Constitution within a Constitution'. Article 244(2) of the Constitution provides that the Sixth Schedule shall apply to the administration of the tribal areas in Assam and the states carved out of it, along with the tribal areas of Tripura. In other words, such areas would be governed not by other relevant provisions of the Constitution which apply to the other constituent states of the Union of India but by the provisions contained in the Sixth Schedule.⁵ A cursory glance at the Sixth Schedule reveals that it provides limited powers, barely enough for the tribespeople to govern themselves in the traditional mode. The schedule limits itself to the day-to-day life in the village and an overriding concern since the colonial period, of the exploitation by moneylenders and traders. L. S. Gassah (2013, p. 4) said that the Constitution makers, while recognizing 'the necessity of a separate political and administrative structure for the hill Tribal Areas of the erstwhile province of Assam', were guided by three major considerations while enacting the Sixth Schedule:

- (i) the necessity to maintain the distinct customs and socio-economic and political culture of the tribal people of the region and to ensure autonomy of the tribal people and to present their identities;
- (ii) the necessity to prevent their economic and social exploitation by the more advanced neighbouring people of the plains;
- (iii) to allow the tribal people to develop and administer themselves according to their own genius.

Aspiring 'Autonomous Councils'

Within the NE, there were demands from Manipur since 1978 and from Tripura in the 1980s to extend the provisions of the Sixth Schedule to the tribal areas of both the states. In Manipur and Tripura, district councils came into being after the Parliament of India passed the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Act, 1971, and the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council Act in 1979. However,

⁵ *Edwingson v. State of Assam*, A.I.R. 1966 S.C. 12.

the provisions of the Sixth Schedule were not given to Manipur and Tripura. Due to persistent demands, the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council was brought under the Sixth Schedule on 1 April 1985. In Manipur, the demand for the Sixth Schedule intensified in the late 1980s when all the six district councils were suspended by tribal bodies in 1987. However, the demands by the hill tribespeople of Manipur were ignored. In protest against such apathy towards the tribespeople, elections to the ADCs were not held for 20 years, from 1991 till 2009. During this time, the central government sent three reminders to the Manipur government for the inclusion of the hills in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution (*Imphal Free Press*, 2015).⁶ The Manipur government insisted on the extension of the provisions of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India with 'local amendments and adjustments'.

There is a demand for autonomous councils even outside NE, mainly from the former excluded and partially excluded areas during the British rule. Indeed, since the beginning in the late 1980s, 'autonomous councils have been used as an institutional device to accommodate cultural pluralism outside of Assam' (Sonntag, 1999, p. 423). Despite such growing demands for autonomous councils outside Assam, in reality, the ADCs are far from achieving full autonomy, particularly in the hills of Manipur (see Haokip, 2017; Suan, 2007). The functioning of the autonomous councils is far from satisfactory, mainly laden with undue and inordinate interference from the state governments and financial irregularities. The functioning of ADCs is out of the scope of discussion of this chapter, but it also needs attention. More research and timely necessary rectification is very much needed.

As of today, the Sixth Schedule, pertaining to the 'Provisions as to the Administration of Tribal Areas in the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram', in paragraph 20, specifies three districts of Assam, three districts of Meghalaya, one district of Tripura and three districts of Mizoram as 'Tribal Areas', being territories administered by autonomous councils and ADCs. As noted by Singh (2007, p. 154),

⁶ For details on demand for the Sixth Schedule in Manipur, see Kom (2010).

'The para omits any mention of regional councils, reference to which recurs in the Sixth Schedule, commencing with para 1'.

REGIONAL COUNCILS IN RETROSPECT

When the Bordoloi Sub-Committee visited the then-Lushai Hills on 18 April 1947 and 19 April 1947, different organizations' representatives and individuals appearing before the subcommittee submitted various memoranda that reflected the views of their communities. Most of the Mizo (Lushai) representatives demanded a 'Home Rule', where 'the internal affairs of the Lushai Hills should be in the hands of the Mizo people' (Zahluna, 2010, p. 1237). In Southern Lushai Hills, the Lakher chiefs submitted a memorandum several times to the Bordoloi Sub-Committee for the creation of a regional council for the Lakher people. Until the Constitution was adopted and India became a republic on 26 January 1949, identity politics was played by the dominant Mizo leaders and the Pawi and Lakher leaders.

The Mizo leaders, who were mainly Lushais, were spearheading a Mizo movement under the banner of the Mizo Union, with Lushai (Duhlain) as the common language of this generic identity. The initial politics of the Mizo Union was rejecting the imposed colonial identity—Kuki and Chin—and uniting all clans and tribes of such groups of people as 'Mizo', meaning people from the hills. However, the Pawis and Lakhers saw this as attempts at assimilation and imposition of an identity by a dominant group. They were reluctant to be a part of it, even though they recognized them as 'brothers' with a linguistic and cultural affinity. When the demand for a separate council for the Southern Lushai Hills came up, the leaders of the Mizo Union and United Mizo Freedom Organisation attempted to persuade the leaders Z. Hengmang and Vako 'not to proceed with their demand for the sake of Mizo integrity'. However, they 'were firm in their determination, not to retreat but to achieve their political goal' (Doungel, 2005). To articulate their demand, the two leaders went to Lunglei for the possibility of the formation of a political party. Consultations were held with other leaders of the Pawis and Lakhers, and thereafter, a circular was issued to all villages of the Pawi-Lakher region urging

villages to send three representatives each for an assembly to be held on 25 October 1949 at Lawngtlai. During this meeting, a political party called the Pawi-Lakher Tribal Union (PLTU) was formed, in which Z. Hengmang was elected as the president. The PLTU vigorously pursued its demand for the creation of a regional council for the Pawis and the Lakhers. Z. Hengmang and Vako were also said to have taken advantage of the visit of Nari Rustumji, an Indian Civil Service (ICS) officer and Advisor to the Governor of Assam, to Lushai Hills in 1949. The duo 'submitted a memorandum to him asking for a Regional Council and said that if their demand was not fulfilled, they would abstain from all meetings of Advisory Council' (Doungel, 2005).

Consequent upon such demands, the subcommittee recommended a provision for the creation of a regional council.⁷ The subcommittee reiterated that the regional council should be created for the smaller tribes other than the major ones in an autonomous district, if the tribes so desired. The provision was recommended because there were a number of tribes with a distinct culture and civilization of their own (Prasad & Agarwal, 1991). The Sixth Schedule, under sub-paragraph (2) of paragraph 1, provided that 'If there are different Scheduled Tribes in an autonomous district, the Governor may, by public notification, divide the area or areas inhabited by them into autonomous regions', and, under sub-paragraph (2) of paragraph 2, provided that '[t]here shall be a separate Regional Council for each area constituted an autonomous region'. Accordingly, the Government of Assam enacted the Assam (Constitution of District Councils) Rules, 1951, and the Pawi-Lakher (Constitution of the Regional Council) Rules, 1952, for the conduct of business of these councils. The first election to the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council (PLRC) was held in January 1953.

The PLRC was established to meet the political demands of the Pawis (Lai) and the Lakhers (Mara), who occupied the southern fringe of the Lushai Hills. The Pawis and Lakhers are culturally and linguistically related, and they were known as Shendoo by the British. With the upgradation of the Lushai Hills to the union territory of

⁷ R. T. Zachono, a prominent Mara politician of Mizoram, cited in R. Hmingthanzuala (2002, p. 85).

Mizoram, the Mizo District Council was abolished. The PLRC was upgraded to a district council. Since then, no regional council has ever been created under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION: REGIONAL COUNCIL AS ACCOMMODATING DIVERSITY

Since the early days of Indian independence, the north-eastern region has been unsettled by different political problems, of which many persist even today, albeit in smaller measures. The aspirations of major tribes for autonomy were accommodated with the creation of new states out of Assam. When the state of Nagaland was formed in 1963, the Naga tribes' 'minority status changed to majority' in the new state. With this, 'the need for protection may be regarded as having largely disappeared, the concerned state being deemed capable of looking after the interests of the resident ST communities'. Hence, it is largely viewed 'that the autonomous councils have outlived their utility' (Singh, 2007, p. 161), and thus they were abolished. The non-Nagas in the state, that is, the Kacharis, Garos and Kukis, became the new minority tribes-people. Similarly, other hill districts of Assam gained statehood, such as Meghalaya in 1972 and Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. In Meghalaya, despite the attainment of statehood, the three district councils continued, while in Arunachal Pradesh the Fifth Schedule was adopted and the *panchayati* system of local governance is followed. In Mizoram, the Mizo Hills District Council was abolished, and the PLRC was not only upgraded to a district council but also trifurcated into three councils for the Lais, Maras and Chakmas after Mizo Hills became a union territory. Since then, no such regional council has been formed under the Sixth Schedule. Even the basis on which the regional council was formulated seems to be largely forgotten, despite that smaller minority groups within such new states and the existing autonomous councils can adequately be accommodated through relevant provisions.

It is a fact that smaller or microscopic minority groups were largely ignored within the north-eastern states. The aspiration for smaller provisions of autonomy, such as regional councils and district councils,

was even opposed by the larger groups. In his oft-quoted lines, Charles Taylor (1994, p. 25) said:

...identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (Taylor, 1994, p. 40)

In Canada, the aboriginals 'demand for native self-government'. In NE India, the demand for some measure of autonomy is a 'politics of recognition' in the form of granting a certain form of self-rule.

Currently, the only known group demanding a regional council is the Kuki National Assembly of Karbi Anglong district of Assam. Various Kuki militants operating in the Kuki areas of Karbi Anglong are demanding political autonomy and endorsing the demand for a Kuki Regional Council.⁸ In Dima Hasao district of Assam, there is a current negotiation to accommodate the Hmar militants' demand for a regional council for Hmars within the North Cachar Autonomous District Council. In the state of Mizoram, the Brus, Paites and Hmars are demanding some form of political autonomy within the state. Currently, the Mizoram government is holding negotiations with the Hmar militant group HPC(D) [Hmar People's Convention (Democratic)]. The creation of such autonomous regions will be the solution for the nagging political demands for autonomy of minority groups within the state.

THE CASE FOR REGIONAL COUNCILS

In NE India, minority ethnic groups are not only aplenty but the languages of many of them are also listed in *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. Some of these groups are not only interspersed in

⁸ For details of the demand for Kuki Regional Council in Karbi Anglong, Assam, see Touthang (2013).

different districts within states but also present in multiple states of the region. To illustrate the precarious nature of their existence, the case of Komrems in Manipur and Biates in Meghalaya and Assam are discussed.

Komrem is the nomenclature of a community 'consisting of the six kindred ethnic groups constitutionally categorized as Aimol, Kom, Kharam, Chiru, Purum and Koireng', who are 'a third lived reality that goes beyond the colonial binary constructs strengthened and propagated by ethno-exclusivist ideologies and armed groups' in the state of Manipur (Akhup, 2012, pp. 6, 8). According to the 2011 Census of India, the population of these tribes were: Aimol—3,643, Kom—15,467, Kharam—1,000, Chiru—5,487, Purum—503 and Koireng—1,056, with a total population of 27,156 persons. There were attempts by leaders of these small tribes to bring them together under the banner Komrem Union, NE India. However, the association was not much successful, as dissenters within soon emerged, reducing the union to a paper tiger. The kindred Komrem tribes are scattered all over the state of Manipur but mainly settled in the districts of Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, Tengnoupal, Senapati and Chandel, and even in the valley districts of Bishenpur and Thoubaland Kakching. Their small population coupled with their inability to come together under one platform, and worst, their resistance as it may appear, to join either of the bigger groups—the Kuki or Naga, has made them more vulnerable and invisible. Akhup (2012, p. 9) laments:

It is an issue of grave concern that the status of "invisibility" of culturally indigenous tribes who are numerically fewer in number, are often "notionally non-existent" within the realm of the consciousness of both state and dominant ethnic groups. A democratic system that facilitates, provides and promote a responsive public space for a respectful articulation of voices of the "invisibles" within the public sphere is imperative.

The Biates also share a similar lived experience as a minority group like the Komrems. In Meghalaya, they mainly live in East Jaintia Hills and are included in the list of Any Kuki Tribes, which numbered 14,275 in the 2011 census, in which they constitute the majority among these tribes. In Assam, they are mainly concentrated in the North Cachar Hills and again are included in the list of Any Kuki

Tribes, which recorded a population of 33,399 persons in 2011. As per the Assam government task force on tribes, their population is around 3,000. The Joshua Project estimated the Biate population in NE India to be around 16,000 (Joshua Project, 2020). In 2017, the Meghalaya government attempted to delete certain STs from the existing list of STs in the state as part of an effort to regulate alienation of indigenous land. This led to an agitation of the indigenous minorities living in the state. The unobtrusiveness of the Biate tribe in the state, along with that of some other tribes, might be the cause of such a move by the government of Meghalaya (Haokip, 2014, pp. 309–310). They are unable to exert their identity openly due to the fear of being tormented and subdued and even having their properties (both movable and immovable) seized by the majority community. Indeed, such incidents have occurred a couple of times in the recent past (Haokip, 2013, p. 90).

As per the lived experiences of these two microscopic minority groups, besides being linguistically endangered, they continually face sociopolitical exclusion, as they are not able to exert their presence as a distinct ethnic group out of several compulsions. Apart from their low population, their dispersion, not only among different districts but also beyond state boundaries, has made them even more invisible. Taking a cue from the formation of the Chakma Autonomous District Council in Mizoram, which is based not on a compact territorial district but on the ethnic population of the Chakmas in the state, regional councils can be formulated for microscopic minorities in NE India.

REGIONAL COUNCILS THAT NEED TO BE FORMED

As found from the Lai Autonomous District Council, minority tribes in this district council area, namely, Bawm, Pang, Tlanglau, Mara, Bru and Chakma, are not appointed at all in the nominated posts of the member of the district council (Doungel, 2018, p. 55). This clearly shows the flaw in the current system, in which unrepresented groups can still be unrepresented in the nominated posts of the district/territorial Council. One way to ensure a smaller and minimal form of self-governance of such groups of people is to form regional councils

for them and ensure a representation in the district council from such regional councils.

In 2010, the Government of Assam renamed the conflict-ridden North Cachar Hills as Dima Hasao district, an ethnicized name after the Dimasa tribe. This provoked other smaller ethnic groups in the district to join hands in protest at a time when the memories of the three ethnic conflicts that were fought by smaller tribes against the Dimasas were still fresh—the conflicts of Dimasa–Hmar (2003), Dimasa–Karbi (2005) and Dimasa–Zeme Naga (2009). Considering the diversity of the district and keeping the ethnic equation in mind, regional councils for the Nagas, Hmars and Kukis can be formed for these hills. In Karbi Anglong District, the Government of Assam is holding a dialogue with several armed groups of the Kukis for a regional council.

Despite being outside the purview of the Sixth Schedule, Manipur is in dire need of regional councils, due to the presence of numerous small ethnic groups in the state. For instance, as indicated earlier, the Koms need a regional council along the lines of the Chakma Autonomous District Council, which is not based on a compact geographical area but on ethnicity. In Mizoram, groups such as Hmar, Paite and Bru (Reang) are demanding some forms of autonomy within the state. The Brus and Hmars had taken to arms for such demands but currently are in negotiations with the state government. Similarly, in Nagaland, the non-Naga indigenous tribes, such as the Kacharis, Garos, Kukis and Karbis, can be brought under the Sixth Schedule for their self-governance.

CONCLUSION

When the Sixth Schedule was first enacted as a framework of governance for the tribal areas in the NE, it was primarily concerned with indigenous people's control over land and forest and acted as a mechanism to protect such resources from outsiders. Coupled with this was the recognition of the indigenous people's social practices and customary laws. It was the minimal form of self-governance in 'protecting the customary lives of the tribes'. Nevertheless, many of the provisions under the Sixth Schedule 'had remained only on paper' (*The Indian Express*, 2018). In recent years, the tribespeople have been

demanding not only greater control over their simple, customary life but also enhancement in their autonomy and higher empowerment.

In NE India, there are several smaller ethnic groups that are often not taken into account due to their inherently limited political clout. In the case of Meghalaya, the only existing representative mechanism of smaller ethnic groups in the District Councils are sought to be removed. Sadly, the major tribes who were once fighting for some form of autonomy are now unwilling to grant even minuscule power to smaller tribes for their self-governance.

The need for formation of regional councils for microscopic groups in the NE region is urgent and requires immediate attention. These councils can provide an institutional platform and a means of countering the fear of losing identity in the midst of aggressive constructivist identities much prevalent in the region. The granting of regional councils need not necessarily stem from a strong agitational demand or even an armed movement. It has to be established as per the need of minority groups existing in the former districts of Assam. As much as the major tribes needed a protective mechanism of self-rule in the composite Assam, microscopic minority groups need much more to continue existing and maintain their culture and identity.

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