

Original Article

Recognition for Identity Politics and Autonomy Movement in Karbi Anglong District

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Abstract

The autonomy or separatist movement in India was reflected before the pre-independence period. Pragmatically, recognition and preservation of culture, language, religion, land rights, and political identity are the contributing factors that promote the autonomy movement in the Northeastern part of India. Regarding the oldest indigenous groups of Assam, the Karbis are socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged. In order to protect and secure their land rights and culture, they wholeheartedly organised a separate state movement under Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution in 1985. Illegal influx of migration, alienation of land by the middle class or non-tribal business people, extreme poverty and unemployment, and the failure of the district council promote to accelerate burning issues in the contemporary political scenario in the district. After prolonging the efforts of struggle and sacrifice of the many civilians, political parties and the militant groups, the state governments of Assam and the central government have affirmatively assured the granting of greater autonomy powers to district councils, except for autonomous states under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The key findings of the study indicate that [1] the Autonomous District Council has been upgraded to a Territorial Council instead of an Autonomous State, and entrusted with 40 departments for all round development and progress in the future [2] in pursuance of greater political participation, the number of members of MLA seats has been increased from 4 to 5 in the district, [3] ended the persistence of long decades of insurgency issue and established for peaceful democratic pathways.

Keywords: Identity politics, Autonomy movement, Karbi Anglong, Ethnic conflict, Sixth Schedule, Assam

Introduction

Identity politics refers to a particular group or organisation shaping and promoting a distinct identity in terms of race, culture, religion, gender, ethnicity and other different characteristics. According to Heyes and Cressida, identity politics refers to activism engaged in by status-based social movements organised around categories such as gender, racial/ethnicity, and sexuality in contrast to class-based movements (Bernstein & Taylor, 2022). Identity politics refers to people who share a common racial, religious, ethnic, social, or cultural identity and try to form exclusive political alliances rather than participating in traditional large party politics or promoting their own interests (Roy & Sinha, 2022).

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Identity politics is a particularly slippery political concept (Holtug, Nils, 2025). In broader terms, identity politics refers to political and social movements driven by the shared experiences and concerns of particular social groups based on race, gender, sexuality, disability, religion, or other defining characteristics. Pragmatically, it's interpreting that injustice, deprivation and crisis promote issues of identity recognition on the global platform. Generally, marginalisation and discrimination of participation in the political landscape are inherent contributing factors of identity politics. For instance, the black civil rights movement of African America initiated their identity movement in 1960. James Tully argued that minorities seek different forms of public recognition, representation and protection of their languages, cultures, ethnicities and religion (Ball & Bellamy, 2008). These movements addressed the rights, recognition, and inclusion of marginalised communities within political and institutional frameworks. In the context of India, the complexity of intersectional multiculturalism renders to accelerate promoting factors for the movement of separatism, secessionist, insurgency, autonomy, religion, and language identity within the union of India. Regarding the imbalanced distribution of equality, justice and rights embedded in the ethnic sentiment of the tribal peoples of Northeast India. Moreover, persistent threats of ancestral land and cultural assimilation depicted to their erosion of unique identity. Apparently, unfair distribution of seats or members and portfolios in political participation has done injustice, marginalising and discriminating. Therefore, recognised as a minority, they started to action in an extreme way and the civil movement means to achieve their recognition, inclusion and legal protection in the political institutional landscape.

Objectives of the study:

1. To examine the genesis of the Karbi Movement for Autonomous State.
2. To analyze the contributing factors of autonomy movement for separate state.

Research Methodology:

To exploring the scientific study about this study research paper focused on both of the primary and secondary sources. The primary data are collected from questionnaires, interviews, observations; filed study etc. and the secondary data are collected from various sources like relevant books, peer reviewed journals, Articles,

government official websites, thesis, magazines, newspapers and web sources.

Discussion:

As per the observation, there are three waves of autonomy movement that have been categorised in Karbi Anglong district. They are given below:

First wave of Autonomy Movement (1960 to 1995): Headed by A.S.D.C

Advocating for the right to self-determination and a separate state of the tribal peoples of Northeast India was initiated before the pre-independence period. To protect the tribal cultural identity and socio-economic development, the Constitution of India adopted a separate administrative system named the district council, which was inserted under the Sixth Schedule. Despite, the language policy of the Assam government considered Assamese the official language in Assam, which was passed in 1960. This reflected the emerging trends of the autonomy movement and recognition of identity politics in the hill areas. In order to protect and preserve the tribal cultural identity, a regionalism-based political organisation named the All-Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) was formed at Tura in 1960. Pragmatically, this political organisation was inspired to initiate an autonomy movement in Karbi Anglong District. Ultimately, Meghalaya Autonomous State was formed in 1969 within Assam including three districts: Khasi hills, Garo hills and Jaintia Hills. However, the two remaining district councils, Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills, opted whether to join Meghalaya or Assam. The government of Assam designated Assamese as an official language, making it mandatory for recruitment in government services according to the S.E.B.A circular in 1986. This decision, however, threatened the unique culture, traditions, and language of the Karbi, a major hill tribe of Assam. In response, several organisations, including the Karbi Students' Association, the Autonomous State Demand Committee (A.S.D.C), the Karbi Cultural Society, Karbi Adorbar, KAASDCOM, CASDC, KANCHASDCOM, Karbi Riso Nimso Asong, Karbi Lammet Amei, Adivashi Council, Kuki National Assembly, Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Youth Association, Karbi Anglong Tribal Youth Organisation, Dimasa Daradusani Dal, Karbi Anglong Kuki Students Organisation, Khong Pu Thau Jathao (Tai speaking Khao) and Karbi Riso Adorbar initiated an autonomous state movement on May 17, 1986. The movement aims to oppose the autocratic role of Congress (I), denounce the communal politics of BJP, and eliminate the chauvinistic Assam Gana Parishad (A.G.P). However, over time, the M.O.U. was signed

between the student organizations, political parties, Autonomous State Demand Committee, Karbi Students Association, Dimasa Students Union of Karbi Anglong District, and both the state and central governments in 1995 to ensure their demands. As per the agreement, the Karbi Anglong District Council was upgraded to an autonomous council and entrusted with 30 departments for greater administrative and socio-economic development in the district.

Second wave of Autonomy Movement (1995 to 2012): Stewardship by Militant Groups

The militant groups of Karbi have contributed a crucial role in the movement for a separate state from Assam within the union of India. The main goal of the think tank is to gain recognition for self-rule with a defined territory and for emancipation from the oppressive and exploitative nature of the state government. To strengthen the statehood movement, the Karbi National Volunteer (KNV) was formed in 1994 under the leadership of Pradip Terang and Harsing Timung. Simultaneously, to protect the Karbi tribe, the Karbi People's Force (KPF) was formed on 12 September 1994. Due to the deprivation of socio-economic and political rights of the Karbis, the new insurgency group was named United Peoples Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) on March 22, 1999. The ultimate aim is to implement a full-fledged separate state, or "Hemphrek Kangthim," within the Union of India. Moreover, the creation of a new separate state of Jharkhand from Bihar and Chhattisgarh from Madhya Pradesh in 2000 has reinforced the wave of autonomy movements. However, the government of Assam and the central government were responsive to their demand, and a ceasefire agreement was signed on May 23, 2002. Ultimately, they signed the MoS in New Delhi on November 25, 2011, and the KAAC was upgraded to a Territorial Council, entrusting 40 departments. Despite the UPDS (anti-talk) faction, they were renamed the Karbi Longri & North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF), which was formed on May 16, 2004. As per the state government response, they laid down arms in a ceremony in February 2010 at KASA Stadium, Diphu. Although there was dissatisfaction with the above-signed agreement, the new militant group named Karbi Peoples Liberation Tigers (KPLT) was formed on 8 January 2011. To achieve peace and development in the future, some militant leaders who were cease-fired participated and were elected as members of KAAC, M.P., through democratic pathways.

Third wave of Autonomy Movement (2013 onwards): Student's Revolution Period

Meanwhile, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and Congress Working Committee agreed to the proposal of the Telangana separate state bill on 31st July 2013. In this connection, the KSA, AIKNA, KRA, NSUI, KSYC, KUYA, AISA, RYA, KFA, and KAIYA, along with the students of Diphu Government College and thousands of protesters, stormed the autonomous council headquarters and went on the rampage, vandalizing government offices and destroying property worth several crores of rupees. The protesters set several government vehicles on fire. Some of the protesters threw stones at the residences of the MP, MLA, and members of the autonomous council. They shouted a slogan like, "Open your mouth, no autonomous state, no rest," and started to use a burning effigy of MP Biresing Ingti, HAD Minister Khorsing Ingti, and Joyram Engleng, CEM of KAAC. In order to implement Article 244(A) of the Indian constitution, on 3 August 2013, the new social organization named the Joint Action Committee for Autonomous State was formed to discuss the issues of Karbi. They initiated tripartite talks in New Delhi on September 2, 2013. Despite its great efforts, ideological conflict, and political benefits, many of the members of JACAS were diffracted and last failed the movement.

Accelerate contributing factors of the Karbi movement for an Autonomous State:

1. Historical or son of soil factor: Before the pre-independence period of India, all the hill tribes of Northeast had their own separate kingdom. Despite the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the entire Hills Kingdom was amalgamated within Assam by the British government. For instance, Assam's plains in 1826, Cachar plains in 1830, Khasi hills in 1833, Jaintia hills in 1835, the Karbi hills in 1838, North Cachar hills in 1854, Naga hills in 1866-1904, Garo hills in 1872-73, and Mizoram (Lushai hills) in 1890. Revealing the historical factors promotes recognition for ethnic identity and separate state movements among the youths of Karbi Anglong District.

2. Issue of language policy: To protect and preserve the Assamese language over the entire state, the legislative assembly passed the Assam Official Language Bill on 10 October 1960. This bill considers "Assamese" as the official language in all offices and educational institutions. Apart from these, on 28 February 1986, the Secondary Board of Assam published a circular under which the Assamese language was made compulsory. In fact, linguistic chauvinism by the Assamese people

reflects the emerging trends of the Karbis movement for separate state and identity politics.

3. Socio-economic backwardness: Massive issues of unemployment and poverty have promoted the emerging causes of the autonomy movement. Imbalance resource distribution, lack of good quality of educational institutions, industrialisation development, negligence of the state government, corruption, and insufficient leadership skills of the members of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, which leads to poverty and unemployment issues among the youth of the Karbi Anglong district. According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-2021) report, the poverty ratio of the Karbi Anglong district was 16.20% with an intensity rate of 42.5%.

4. Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution: To protect and develop the tribal peoples' identity and socio-economic development, the Meghalaya Autonomous State was formed under the Sixth Schedule of Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution in 1969. As per this scheme, both the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts opted for joining it. In spite of the appeasement policy by the Assam government and the religious issues among the Karbis and Dimasas of both districts, they were refraining from amalgamation with the Meghalaya Autonomous State. Ultimately, in 1972, as per the Assam Reorganisation Act, Meghalaya became a full-fledged state, which bifurcated from Assam.

5. Educational Policy by the Assam Government: Introducing the S.E.B.A. circular, notified in 1986, Assamese should be the medium of instruction over all institutions of education in Assam. After the declaration by the Assam government, the student organization in the Karbi Anglong district initiated strong opposition against it and proclaimed that English should be the medium of instruction in the hill districts. Moreover, at the undergraduate level, they want to affiliate with Assam University. Furthermore, there is no implementation of separate central universities, engineering colleges, science colleges, IITs, or other technology institutions in the district.

6. Failure of the local government of K.A.A.C: To protect and develop their identity and greater administration, the KAAC was incorporated under the sixth schedule of the constitution of India. Despite it, inefficient leadership, lack of pre-planning skills for planning resources, lack of cooperation with the state government and central government, and lack of providing capacity building on self-employability skills and training for the youths deeply rooted the crucial causes of underdevelopment.

7. Inter-state boundary dispute: The persistence of prolonged boundary disputes and negligence by both the KAAC government and the Assam government contributes to an autonomy movement. Recently, the governments of Assam and Meghalaya adopted a give-and-take policy for the boundary resolutions in 2021. As per the agreement, Block-I and Block-II areas include Psier, Khatkhasla, Mokro, Samatan, Mokilum, Umkhirmi, Wanpung, Khanduli, Tapata and Nongjirong of West Karbi Anglong District, which would be transferred to the Meghalaya state. As a result, several civil organisations of Karbis, like KSA, KNCA, APHLC, and ASDC, strongly opposed it.

8. Illegal influx of Immigration and Internal migration: Immigration and internal migration issues have drastically threatened the indigenous land and culture and promoted community disputes. The immigration issue impacted mostly the Bangladeshi Hindus, Bengalis, and Muslims. At present, the Rongkut area's Block I and Block II are the dominant Hindu Bangladeshis in the Karbi Anglong District. Recently, three individual persons were exiled from the Karbi Anglong district by the Foreigners' Tribunal under the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950 in 2026. On the other hand, internal migration is mostly from North India, like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and West Bengal. As a result of illegal encroachment on Professional Grazing Reserve (PGR) and Village Grazing Reserve (VGR) land, non-tribal land ownership tensions flared in the Karbi Anglong district. As per the 2011 census, Karbi speakers are 43.9%, Bengali 13.0%, Hindi 3.70%, Bhojpuri 2.17%, Sadri 1.90%, Nepali 2.17%, Assamese 9.03%, and others 10.3%.

9. Electoral roll politics: As per the sixth schedule of paragraph 2 of sub-paragraph 7 and paragraph 20, it has been indicated that the designated scheduled tribe is entitled to voting rights. In spite of the district council, participation is allowed and entitled to all citizens of India. Logically, it is emphasised that the non-tribal groups will dominate the council if they are permitted to participate in decision-making. Therefore, the various civil organisations of the Karbis, like K.S.A. (24+ organisations) and the All-Party Hill Leaders Conference, led by John Ingti Kathar, demanded that immediate exclusion the list of illegal non-tribal voters from the electoral roll. They also strongly argued that inclusion of illegal non-tribal voters threatens to indigenous culture, land, and property rights in the future.

10. Hegemony of state government: Politically, the state government indirectly controlled the K.A.A.C. after the defunct ASDC government in 2000. They were limited in terms of executive, legislative, and

financial powers. The autonomy powers of KAAC were declined; regularization of all the posts will be recommended by the state government through the staff inspection unit (SIU). Moreover, all the schemes like DRDA, NITI Ayog funds, and MoU funds funded by the central government for the district council are deposited under the accounts of the chief secretariat of the state government. That's why the KAAC is regarded as a puppet council.

11. Job recruitment policy: The government of Assam has transferred the KAAC to exercise autonomous administration as per the provisions of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India. In the selection process of the council's job recruitment and other opportunities preference for their kinship. Emphasising for nepotism based has deprived the merit and talented youths in the district. Moreover, recruitment and appointment process of job under the state government in the sixth schedule areas districts, the council has no autonomy powers to decide as per their mechanism.

12. Land alienation by the corporate sector: To build up rapid industrial development purposes in Karbi Anglong district the KAAC authority have signed with different corporate sectors, including land allotment around 18,000 bighas across Lahorijan, Khatkhathi and Longkathar blocks to the Assam Power Generation Corporation Limited for proposed 1000 MW solar project, 4,000 acres of land to Reliance Industries Limited for Integrated Compressed Bio-Gas Project, 6,000 acres land to Adani Group for solar project, and Patanjali Ayurved Limited for biogas and agro industrial to Godrej industries manufacturing facilities. Feeling threatens to displacement and destruction on indigenous ancestral land that amplify movement for self-determination rights and identity with their own pattern.

13. Marginalisation in political and representation: Disparity in political participation especially numbers of member like, MLA and MP both in Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha in the Parliament also reflects the emerging issues of autonomy movement in the district. The present MoU of the militancy groups of UPDS and KLNLF demanding two seats for MP, and inclusion of members in the NEC from Karbi Anglong district.

14. Rampant corruption: Regarding accelerates socio-economic development and progress, different schemes and funds of both state government and central government were sanction to the KAAC. Although, substantial issues of poverty and unemployment could not be eradicate due to some middle class, civil servant bureaucrats and members of the district council corrupted in the name of socio-economic development.

15. Digital media: Digital media promote a crucial role in a democratic nation. Expansion of digital media tolls such as Mobile phone including facebook, instagram, telegram, yotube, television channel, podcast and other technologies contributed significance role of the karbi's autonomy movement for separate state.

Outcomes of the study:

1. Fragmentation ideology and selfish leadership:

Looking at the current situation reveals that the struggle for political power and prioritising self-interest are the promoting factors of fragmentation among the various civil, political and non-political groups of Karbi Anglong district. For instance, CPI (M-L), under the leadership of Dr. Jayanta Rongpi formed the District Council government in 2000, which faction from the regionally based ethnic political party named Autonomous State Demand Committee (A.S.D.C). At the same time, the student's wings are also split and support in different parties like, Karbi Student's Association (K.S.A) of CPI (M-L), K.S.A of A.S.D.C, K.S.A of Congress (I), and K.S.A of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

2. Expansion of administrative framework:

Addressing to greater administrative, the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (K.A.A.C) upgraded to be named Karbi Anglong Autonomous Territorial Council (K.A.A.T.C) as per the different agreement signed between the United Peoples Democratic Solidarity (U.P.D.S), Karbi Longri and North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (K.L.N.L.F) and the state government of Assam and the central government of India in 2010 and 2011. As per 125th Constitutional Amendment bill on the Sixth Schedule in 2019, entrusted 40 departments and the members of the council shall be 44 members are directly elected, and 6 members are nominated by the Governor of Assam. Moreover, the Assam delimitation of 2023 by the Election Commission of India has provided 4 to 5 members of MLA constituency seats for the district.

3. Corruption and financial mismanagement:

In order for rapid socio-economic and infrastructural development, state and central government schemes like, NITI Ayog, State Owned Priority Development (SOPDs), MPLADs, MDoNER, Four Line construction and other welfare schemes and funds are released to the council. In spite of it effort, mismanagement of funds by some middle class, bureaucrats and members of the autonomous councils promote to poverty and unemployment issue. For instance, it has witnessed the political parties of CMI (M-L) and A.S.D.C fractioned in 2000, compensation of land demarcated by the

NHAI in 2021, and the split of congress (I) parties in 2016.

4. Restored in peace and ended the insurgency issue: After laying down the arms of the militant groups of U.P.D.S in 2003, K.L.N.L.F in 2010, and K.P.L.T in 2021, it established peace and political stability in the district. Furthermore, different Memorandums of Understanding and Settlement of 2010 and 2011 witnessed the end of long decades of insurgency issues. Currently, the central government of India has withdrawn the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958 in Karbi Anglong District for the prevention of internal disturbance.

5. Ethnic community tension: In pursuance of political benefits and vote bank politics that versatile challenging factors among the tribal groups and non-tribal groups in the future. For instance, ST (H) quotas for Bodos as per the Bodo Accord in 2020, reservation seats for two Kuki Communities in the K.A.A.C as per the MoS of Kuki/Hmar accord 2026, and an increase in representative members of non-tribal communities in the K.A.A.C. These issues may lead to community conflict and geographical separation in the future.

6. Kinship politics system: This kind of politics is based on a family-centric or hereditary rule process. All the facilities and opportunities are focused on their kith and kin in terms of job, political leadership, engaged in workforce of contract, supply, and other beneficiaries' schemes.

7. Over dominance of the state government: Existence of the present autonomous district councils like Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council under the sixth schedule indirectly controlled by the state government especially in terms of legislative, executive and financial powers. In this regard it is called "Puppet Council".

8. Lack of self-employability and entrepreneurship skills knowledge: the youths of Karbis are unaware on self-employability skills to shaping and promoting in society. Moreover, lack of mentorship guidance in various skills development schemes launched by the central government like, PMKVY, PMMY, RSETSNAPS, PM-DAKSH Yojana, and DAY-NULM. Ignoring the knowledge of digital marketing, trading, short term course of diploma, tailoring, nursery, farming, weaving, and depends only on the council's job that leads to extreme rate of poverty issue in society.

Concluding observation:

The movement for a separate state or separatism was an unresolved political phenomenon in India. It has disseminated to the fragile roots of nation-building. Analysing from a grass root, Inequality distribution of justice, rights,

and inclusion, as well as excluding from different opportunities render to advocating for identity politics and self-administration. In a democratic government process, it was based on an egalitarian society where everyone has equal rights and freedom. Highlighting social justice and security for the tribal community, the constitution of India assigned the Ministry of tribal Affairs and Scheduled Tribes Commission as a monitoring agency. Promoting to human resource development, some higher educational institutions, like Diphu Medical College, B. Ed College, Government Model College at Deithor and Amri, Assam University Diphu Campus, Nursing College, ITI, Sainik School were established. In pursuance of smooth functioning for greater administrative the Karbi Anglong district was divided into two districts named East Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong District in 2016. Currently, it is restored in peace and adopting democratic values and principles through the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

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