

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Identity Politics: An Insight into the Dima Hasao District of Assam, India

Loilungthianglimi Nampui

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India

Abstract:

Modern states are heterogeneous in nature as there exists a number of ethnic groups. India is no exception as it is the adobe of diverse groups of people. For protecting their identities different ethnic groups in the Country have been struggling for special Constitutional safeguard to protect and develop their respective identities and some for creating separate political entities on the basis of their ethno-cultural or ethno-linguistic identities. The present day politics has been characterized by search for distinct identity by various ethnic groups even in India's North East. The objective of the study is to unearth the growth of Identity Politics in Dima Hasao (former N.C. Hills) district.

Keywords: Ethnic, identity, movements, dima hasao

1. Introduction

North East India the home land of numerous ethnic groups, has been witnessing many social movements since the beginning of the present century. The region of North East is regarded as a movement prone area of the Country because of the prevailing social movement taking place in many parts of the region. The region also shares the history of migration of various groups of people at different point of time. Different ethnic groups have been claiming for Constitution safeguards. The constitution makes paid due attention to ensure proper safeguards to the tribal population also providing provisions for socio-economic and cultural development irrespective of their ethnic communities. But the measures provided by the Constitution failed to address the grievances of the people. Moreover, because of its geographical isolation the region enjoyed the least attention by the Central authority and experienced a sense of negligence on their part. This adversely helped the ethnic groups in maintaining their social satisfaction and resulted in identity movements by various ethnic groups in the region who adopted both constitutional and violent means to achieve their goals.

In the context of Assam, a considerable part of Assam was declared backward areas under the Government of India Act 1919. But from 1937, under the Government of India Act 1935, certain tribal areas of Assam were termed as 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' areas, placing them outside the purview of the provincial administration and bringing them directly under the Governor of Assam. As a result the tribal of the hill district distanced themselves from the plainsmen and develop a special kind of identity that has remained crucial for subsequent political development in the region. Many ethnic groups became conscious of the position and gradually launched movement based on ethnic identity demanding state within the Indian Union or Autonomous District within the State.

The disintegration of the state of Assam and the birth of Nagaland in 1963 encouraged and paved the way for many hill tribes to march ahead with the same demand. They started reviving their own languages and advocating their rights in their historical homeland through political mobilization and agitation. Due to economic and political frustration it led to the demand for separate and autonomous state increased resulting in the separation of Meghalaya and Mizoram from Assam in 1972 and 1986 respectively.

2. Dima Hasao a Backdrop

Dima Hasao district, formally called North Cachar Hills district is an administrative district in the state of Assam in North East India. It is a land nestled in myths and mysteries folklore and legends of the past. As per the record of 2011 census, it is the least populous district of Assam. It shelters a population of 213,539 people with schedule caste and schedule tribe population of 131,788 in the district. The total population living in the rural areas in the district is 152,302 and gender wise literacy rate of male and female in the district is 80.56 and 65.10 respectively. About 71% of the major population live in rural areas in the district (census 2011).

The district headquarter is located at Haflong. Dima Hasao district occupies an area of 4,888 square kilometres. It is the third largest district of Assam after Karbi Anglong and Sonitpur district. Dima Hasao is surrounded by East of Karbi Anglong district and Nagaland on the North East, Manipur on East, Nogaon on North, West of Karbi Anglong on North West, Meghalaya on West and Cachar district on South. The main constituents of the hilly tribes living in the district are the Dimasas, the Zeme Nagas, the Hmars, the Kukis, the Biates, the Karbis, the Khasis, the Hrangkhols, the Vaipheis, the Khelmas, the Lushais and the Rongmeis. Besides, a sizeable number of other non-tribals like Bengali, Assamese, Nepali, Manipuri, Deswali and others have also chosen Dima Hasao as their abode.

Perhaps nowhere in India, such a spectrum of people representing a number of district ethnic groups reside within so small a geographical periphery like N.C. Hills (now Dima Hasao). The different tribes speak in their respective dialect but have adopted a common link language called as "Haflong Hindi" with peculiar overtones of phonetics for communicating among themselves.

3. Identity Politics in Dima Hasao District

The identity movement of the ethnic groups cannot be studied in isolation. In studying the autonomy movement of different ethnic groups it is required to study the various movements launched by the hill people in different parts of the North Eastern region. The Inner Line Regulation of 1873 prohibited the political and cultural separation between the tribal areas and the plains and the regulation prohibited access to these areas except those who obtain special permission from the government. The policy of segregation in the form of Autonomous Council and villages deprived the people from various developmental activities which were monopolised by the elites. The impositions of Official Language bill of 1960 disturbed the hill tribes as it was an obstacle for them to get jobs in government offices. Many of the youths developed a sense of deprivation and realized that only legitimate share of political power could solve their problem.

The hill people including the hill tribes of Dima Hasao continued their struggle to achieve their political objectives spearheaded by new political party – the Eastern India Tribal Union (E.I.T.U). The party swap the polls in 1957 general election on the basis of Hills State demand. The declaration of Assamese as official language, big brotherly attitude, the negligence of the development process in the hill district resulted in the demand for separate hill state. The discontentment raised the demand for ethnic representation by communities like Ahoms, Kacharis, Khasis and the Nagas. (Das, 2008). The resignation of Captain Williamson Sangma and his EITU associates led to the formation of All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC). This marks the significant period of the rise of identity politics in the district. The political leaders in the district of N. C. Hills (now Dima Hasao) joined the APHLC in the joined ventured of a separate state for hill people.

4. Identity Politics and the Dimasas

The problem of the Hill people in Assam including N. C. Hills was not merely economic but primarily political and it requires not only economic but a political solution. The movement started by the majority Dimasas in the district for an Autonomous state reflected their economic and political frustration. The problem of identity crisis is another factor responsible for the rise of identity movement among them. They wanted a political solution which would give them requisite dignity and status. The development of Assamese culture, customs, identity, language and the total neglect of the interest of the Hill people aroused identity consciousness among the hill people including the Dimasa tribe. The tribal communities in the district have remained socially, culturally, economically and politically exploited and are the most oppressed groups. The Dimasas became conscious of their distinct identity and started reviving their own languages and advocating their rights in their historical homeland through political mobilization and agitation.

The Dimasa tribe mainly inhabit the North Cachar Hills (now Dima Hasao) district. They are also found regions of Barak Valley, Karbi Anglong and Nogaon in Assam and also in Dhansiri in Nagaland. The Dimasas living in the plain areas have become small and isolated group in the midst of various larger ethno-cultural of Assam and consequently they are exposed non-tribal cultures. Many youths felt that, the tribe was in a state of losing their cultural identity, realizing the situation the educated section felt the need of organizing a movement to protect the identity of the Dimasas. An organization called Nikhil Hiramba Barman Samiti was formed in order to make the Dimasa people aware of their traditional culture which includes Barmans of Cachar district also. The Samiti also raised the demand for reorganization of areas of North East India inhabited largely by Dimasa tribe into a single political administrative unit.

The implementation of Assam Official Language Act, 1960 made them suspicious about the motives of the relatively advanced high caste. The Hill people of North Cachar Hills including the Dimasas faced great hardship as they have no working knowledge of Assamese. The people having no working knowledge of Assamese were deprived of getting jobs in Assam. Moreover, the backward people of the district cannot compete with the advance plains people of Assam in competition of services. Most of the developmental activities were monopolised by the elites. This deeply discharged the educated youths in the society. The introduction of Assamese as the medium of instruction in collegiate education by the Academic Council of Guwahati University and Dibrugarh University added to their disappointment. The decision of the Academic Council of Guwahati and Dibrugarh University (1972) created a lot of resentment among the non Assamese people. A sense of frustration started when they compared the development of the district and the community with that of the state of Nagaland and Mizoram who were segregated from the state of Assam. They also felt that only through separate autonomous state could fulfil their political aspirations and would enjoy large share of National Resources for their development for their development. The Dimasas considered themselves lagging behind in all spheres of development. Therefore, they demanded separation from Assam not only for the fear of losing their identity but also to bring development in their homeland within sovereign India like Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya. The frustrated educated youths having no other way out they took to arms for the demand of a separate autonomous state, Dimaraji for the Dimasas.

North Cachar Hill Leaders Conference and the Mikirs (presently called Karbis) submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister in 1973 explaining their grievances about the persuasion of the Central Government to remain in Assam and all the promises were belied. They also expressed their grievances about the misuse of central grants and expressed their fear of being Assamised under the Assamese leadership to fulfil their political aspiration and to enjoy larger share of national resources for their development. The Dimasas opted to go out of Assam. The Dimasas, whose land and kingdom flourished everywhere in the North East region started

looking for ways and means to regain their lost strength and glory by uniting together various tribes under the Dimasas under one political umbrella. The Dimasas became politically restive since 1972.

The demand for statehood by the Dimasas can be traced to the formation of autonomous state committee in 1986. Initially the Dimasa people of N.C. Hills (now Dima Hasao) jointly demanded the creation of an Autonomous State under Article 244 (A) of the constitution of India with the Karbis of Karbi Anglong. But in the Year 1991 the Dimasas students under All Dimasas Student Union (ADSU) demanded for the creation of a separate full-fledged state "Dimarajii" by incorporating all the territories that were included in the ancient Dimasa Kachari Kingdom. A joint memorandum was submitted by All Dimasa Students Union (ADSU) and Dima Raji Revival Demand Committee. (DRDC) to Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri. P. V. Narasimha Rao in the year 1996 demanding a separate homeland for the Dimasas. (Memorandum 1996, pg. 4) They believed that this will enable them to enjoy all constitutional rights and privileges and also bring about all round developments for the Dimasas.

All Dimasa Students Union demonstrated dharnas, organised rally, road blockade, observed bandh etc. to fulfil their demands. The Dimasas adopted both constitutional path and militant path to fulfil their demand. The formation of Dimasa National Security Force (surrendered in 1994) and Dima Haram Daogah in early 90s added a new dimension to the Dimaraji movement of the Dimasas. The desire for better autonomy resulted in the quest for separate states as a separate identity by the Dimasa community in N. C. Hills. The region as a whole lacks behind in many fields of social, economic, education and political development. An organisation Dima Haram Daogah (DHD) purporting to represent the Dimasas in their quest to create Dima land or Dimaraji in Assam and Nagaland was started. It is a descendent of Dimasa National Security Force (DNSF).

The identity consciousness among the Dimasas grew with the formation of these outfits which was said to be formed for the cause of their people. With the support of many youths into the group the outfit grew in force. The demand for Dimaraji by the DHD was intended to create a Dimasa State comprising of N. C. Hills, Karbi Anglong and Cachar and part of the district of Nagaon in Assam including part of Dimapur in Nagaland. But within a short time, differences developed among the DHD cadres centering mainly around the techniques to be followed to pursue the demand. The disagreement between the groups further broke the DHD outfit into DHD (J) known Black Widow which was led by Jewel Gorlosa and DHD (Nunisa faction) by Dilip Nunisa.

Peace agreement was sign between DHD and Central Government in 2003 and abjured violence till date. The objective of DHD led by Dilip Nunisa (DHD N) was to include parts of Cachar, Karbi Anglong and Nagaon District in Assam and section of Dimapur district in Nagaland. But the DHD (J) declared objectives was to create Dimaraji for the Dimasa people in Dima Hasao District only. This conflict of objectives led to the split of the DHD faction. DHD (J) strongly affirmed their demand for a separate Dimaraji as the ultimate aspiration of all Dimasas. The concern for protecting their identity and the reprisal of their grievances through ethnic conflict between the Dimasa with other ethnic groups within the district became a serious concern in the region.

Problems of economic growth, the central role of articulating hopes and fear of the Dimasa people have pushed them towards radicalisation and insurgency. The DHD started pursuing its demand for separate homeland by taking up arms. Unexpected incidences in the district were witnessed in ethnic cleansing between Dimasas and non – Dimasa groups i.e. conflict between the Dimasas and Hmar community in 2003 Karbi –Dimasa conflict in 2005 and Dimasa – Naga conflict in 2009. This ethnic clashes resulted in the loss of both man and material. Incalculable miseries were inflicted upon the common people during its struggle for Autonomous State for its people. The 22 year long militant struggle of the DHD was brought to a satisfactory culmination and a memorandum of settlement was signed between the two DHD out fits and the union government in New Delhi on 8th October 2012 to create Dima Hasao Autonomous Territorial Council in the Dima Hasao District (former North Cachar Hills district). As a result it has been agreed to initiate time bound steps to bring about greater devolution of power to the grass roots in Dima Hasao while ensuring increased capacity building for developmental activities at all levels.

5. Identity Politics and non-Dimasas

The movement started by the Dimasas brought insecurity among the other tribes residing in the district of N. C. Hills now Dima Hasao regarding their identity and political future. As the outcome was severe assertion in terms of ethnicity Dima Hasao (former N. C. Hills) district like other plural societies has multi ethnic and multi-cultural characteristics which pose a great challenge in the articulation of public interest in the region. The major consequence faced by the ethnic minorities during the conflict with the Dimasas of Dima Hasao (former N. C. Hills) district of Assam in 2003, 2005 and 2009 brought out the structure of minority and majority relationship whereby the minority are discriminated and oppressed. The demand for land and the exclusivities including the demand for Dimaraji of Dima Hasao Raji and the long standing political scheme in changing the district nomenclature of N. C. Hills to the present name of the district in 2002 and the revival of Dima Haram Daogah (DHD) raised the discontentment of the non Dimasas in the district.

The district witnessed the most destructive incident during these conflicts. Magnitude of persecution, suffering and loss of materials were experienced during the conflict. Ethnic conflicts between the Dimasas and other ethnic groups led to serious consequences. It brought economic crisis in the land and the people witnessed breakdown of law and order which brought insecurity among the non-Dimasa groups. There was an alarming increase in the migration of people and also of the displaced people. The worst victims during the ethnic conflicts were women, children, old aged people and the disables. Socio economic biases, long standing histories of conflict amongst themselves explain the outbreak of identity movement among the minority communities. The attack upon the minority non-Dimasa on the basis of ethnic background resulted in the strong feeling of resentment which ultimately gave shape to the development of strong bond among them.

Ethnic conflict has created a dimension of ethnic unrest in the region with less chance of drastic change in the near future and as such security has become an issue of concern for the ethnic minorities in the district. The worst political consequences of ethnic conflict

were analysed with the change of district's nomenclature of North Cachar Hills district to Dima Hasao (meaning: The land of the Dimasa) in 2011. This affected broad economic and political reform which added more to the grievances of the non-Dimasa minorities. Deprivation in the political administration also added to the discontentment of the minority tribes. At the formation of District Autonomous Council in 1952, the first CEM was C H Khotlang, a Hmar tribe's men of all tribes in the council was ensured through a 'gentlemen agreement'. However such agreement could not prove fruitful and the continued disproportionate representation from the late 1950s onwards created much resentment amongst the non-Dimasa communities. Initially, the indigenous tribal group and the Dimasas equally shared the representation of the Council however over the period of time the Dimasas became more politically prevalent. The increase in the political dominance of the Dimasas in North Cachar Hills created an anomalous situation.

Sl. No.	Years	Dimasas	Non-Dimasas	Total number of seats.
1	1952	6	6	12
2	1957-62	7	5	12
3	1969-73	13	7	20
4	1980	15	7	22
5	1987	14	8	22
6	1996-2001	15	8	23
7	2007	17	11	28

Table 1

Source: Memorandum submitted to the Chief Minister of Assam 18th September 2009

The renaming of the district also brought in a new era of unrest and injustice to the other ethnic groups in the region. The people showed little support for the existing political institution and IPF formed by the ethnic minorities demanded more redistribution by virtue of their deprived economic circumstances. They feel segregated from accessing their democratic rights and considered being marginalized with the change of the district nomenclature. The renaming of the district came amid protest and strives opposition from the non-Dimasa ethnic groups. They took out protest rallies seeking immediate bifurcation of N. C. Hills District (now Dima Hasao) and in protest against the biased decision of the government of Assam to rename the district as Dima Hasao District. Gross violation of Human Rights was experienced by the ethnic minorities. The assassination of Lt. J. T. Roia, the president of Biata Devanpui (Biata Apex Body) infuriated the ethnic minorities and compelled them to take extreme steps of boycotting Assembly election in the district. Violation of human rights was meted out by Choto Nianglo, Guilung Village, Luichirang Village in 2009, Tunje village in 2010 etc. which created great resentment among the ethnic minorities.

The ethnic minorities demanded the bifurcation of the district both for Dimasas and non-Dimasas. They demanded that no corrupt and biased politician should be allowed to take part in any government decision making process. They also demanded the government to take serious and concrete steps to prevent the re-occurrence of ethnic conflict and unleash a reign of terror by the Dimasa outfit in future. To install peace and harmony in the district and also protect and safeguard the indigenous rights, culture, custom and traditions. Economic under development coupled with social unrest and insecurity fuelled by mistrust among different ethnic groups has led to the assertion of primordial identities. This took the form of ethnic tensions by the outbreak of violence leading to ethnic conflicts and polarization in the otherwise peaceful district of Dima Hasao (former N. C. Hills) district. This was further compounded by the changing of the districts nomenclature and the bifurcation movements of the minority non Dimasa groups headed by Indigenous Peoples Forum (IPF).

Indigenous Peoples Forum was formed on 15th May, 2008 to promote and to champion minority non-Dimasa tribe of the district of Dima Hasao. This forum was particularly for redressing the grievances of the minority people in the district. The IPF demanded the bifurcation of N. C. Hills district (now Dima Hasao) into two autonomous council within the framework of the constitution under Art. 244 (2) and Art. 275 (1) to the Constitution of India. It aims to resort to democratic and peaceful means of voicing the concerns and highlighting the demands of the minority non- Dimasas in the district. To strengthen the organization under its umbrella various organizations like Indigenous Students Forum (ISF), Indigenous Women's Forum (IWF), and Indigenous Village Chiefs Forum (IVCF) has been formed. The issue of bifurcation in the district called many bandhs, rallies etc. which hampered the normal life of the people in the district.

Various memorandums were submitted to the Primes Minister of India Hon'ble Shri. P. V. Narasimha Rao, Union Minister, Shri P. Chidambaram, Chief Minister of Assam, Shri Tarun Gogoi and His Excellency the Governor of Assam Shri Syed Sibtey Razi. It is noteworthy that through the Governor's notification, a Cabinet sub-committee (Group of Ministers) was setup in recognition to the demand and aspiration of the non-Dimasa communities living in N. C. Hills (now Dima Hasao). The committee visited Haflong on 23rd February, 2009 and met the apex bodies of different tribal communities and held discussion on the demand for the change of nomenclature of N. C. Hills district. Memorandums were submitted by three main non-Dimasa tribes i.e. (1) Zeme council, (2) Kuki Inpi, (3) Hmars People Union and articulated their views on the issue. Jadikhe Naisho Hoshom, the Dimasa apex body also submitted a memorandum seeking change in nomenclature of the district from N. C. Hills District to Dima Hasao Raji.

Recommendation of the Group of Minister's Committee (GoMC): The committee recommended for the change of nomenclature proposed to be Dima Hasao district instead of Dima Hsao Raji. It also recommended the introduction of Dimasa language as vernacular in primary school of Dimasa inhabited villages. It also recommended that no change of any nomenclature for name of any kind will be taken up in future by the council within the district. In the backdrop of the proposal and recommendation submitted by the GoMs Committee, the Zeme Students' Union, Hmar Students' Associations, Karbi Students' Association, Kuki Students'

Organization, Vaiphei Zilai Pol, Biaste Students' Association and Jainatia Youth Federation has submitted a joint memorandum and sought the intervention of the Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram into the matter.

For a long time different ethnic group coexisted in relatively peaceful manner but ethnic tension emerged with the discontentment of the ethnic minorities after the revival of Dima Halam Daogah. The attempt of changing the name of district nomenclature against the wishes of minority member was taken as a clear violation of the fundamental rights of the minority group which shook the basic democratic structure of Indian Constitution. The issue of bifurcation continued with continued bandhs and indefinite curfews. The minorities non-dimahas in the district realize that the central figure of the ethnic minorities can be best improved in education and employment by increasing the political power.

To strengthen their group identity and improve their condition and achieved economic well-being, they have to choose the route of politics consequently. But the matter was not taken into serious account this compelled the minority non-Dimasa to take the step of coming into the public domain by forming a political party by the name of Indigenous Peoples Party (IPP). The IPP which was formed to redress the problems of ethnic minorities and this was a clear proof of the political aspirations and political unrest among the ethnic minorities. The delays by the government and indifferent attitude towards it demand for bifurcation has made the IPF doubt the sincerity of the government in its approached towards addressing the democratic and rightful demands of the IPF, whereby compelling the Indigenous People's Forum (non-Dimasa) communities of N. C. Hills (now Dima Hasao) to take the extreme steps of boycotting the Assembly election of Assam in the demand area under the 16 Haflong (ST) Assembly Constituency.

The demand of IPF continued through various memorandums which finally led to the constitution of Task Force who were entrusted to examine the recommendation of the Group of Ministers Committee (GoMC) regarding safeguard for separate district for minority non-Dimasa communities and the issues raised by IPF. The Task Force after taking note of the recommendation of the GoMC visited Haflong on 2nd September, 2010. The Task Force received memorandum both from JNH and the IPF Organization. The Task Force after having heard the various group during the visit to Haflong decided to examine and determine the issue which lies at the core of the problem. But the formation Task force did not give any substantial result.

The Task Force took note of the development that have taken place in case of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and felt that the issue of development should be given precedence over the issue of renaming the district. Having accepted the need for speeding up the development in the Hill area, the Task Force felt that the demand for setting up two separate independent Autonomous Councils should be considered by the Government as a measure to solve the development issues faced by the Dimasas and non-Dimasas group of people in the district. They also recommended the matter to be referred to a commission to study the issue involved and be discussed and considered at appropriate political level. Talks were held with the Government on the issue, and submitted various memorandums but the problem still remain in its original form.

6. Conclusion

The study on the identity movements in the district suggest that the all the ethnic groups want security of their land and natural resources, their culture and language, whether it is the question of political autonomy or cultural identity. The ethnic groups including Dimasas and non-Dimasas have claimed to have a number of grievances in political social and economic grounds and these are said to be the results of long neglect of ethnic groups in the district by the government despite their repeated demands for various development in various fields. Socialisation and aspirations of the people of Dima Hasao (former N. C. Hills) district for value and objectives resulted in politics of identity. The region of North East India as a whole surfeited in contemporary assertive idioms of different ethnic groups for autonomous territories under the Indian Union has become a pervasive phenomenon.

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