Assam has been the focal point of agitations and movements in the last four decades. The various ethnic groups comprising the Bodos, the Mising, the Tiwas, the Rabhas, the Karbi are not only in agitation but more or less have taken recourse to violence and defiance. They are the indigenous inhabitants and an overwhelming majority of them labour under socio-economic disabilities. By and large, all of them allege that they are exploited by the Assamese people and the Govt. has also attempted to hoodwink them which resulted in their identities being staked. But at the same time, it is needless to mention that the Central and the State Govts. have taken various measures and schemes, from time to time – for their protection and upliftment, besides the constitutional guarantees.

Assam in the North East of India, blended with hills and plains, has as many as 23 scheduled tribes having distinctive cultures, languages etc. with various stages of development. As per 1971 census, the total ST population of Assam was 10.99 p.c. of the total population and in 1991 it increased to 12.82 p.c. The SC and ST (Amendment) Act, 1976, specifies 14 tribes in the two autonomous hills districts and 12 in the plains districts of Assam as scheduled tribes. These tribes belong to Mongoloid racial stock and speak Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman family of languages. Their socio-cultural lives are tribal in nature which is mainly agrarian.
Initially, British who annexed Assam in 1826, followed a conciliatory policy in general towards the Hills Tribes. There was minimum interference with the powers and functions of the chiefs, village organisations etc. But despite this, the Hills Tribes fought against foreign rule. Therefore, the British administration adopted a policy of active interference in the tribal areas. Another important aspect of the British policy was to keep the Hills Tribes separate from the plains. The role of Missionaries also helped the administration in this respect. For the tribals living in the plains same administrative arrangement was made as that of the plains.

We also briefly discussed the socio-economic conditions of the tribals during the British Period. The British Govt. practically did nothing for their socio-economic and cultural development barring some administrative arrangements. As a result the tribesmen organised themselves to fulfil their demands and got reservation of seats in the provincial legislature.

We have also examined the constitutional position of the tribals and the various measures that the State Govts. have initiated to protect their interest after independence. Accordingly, some special provisions are made in the Constitution for protection of socio-cultural identities and...
for reservation of seats in the Assembly and House of the People and in Govt. posts and services. For the administration of Hills areas in Assam, separate provisions are made in the 6th schedule with District and Regional Councils.

To protect the interest of the plains tribals the Govt. of Assam, in 1947, by an amendment to the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886, added Chapter X by which belts and blocks were constituted in compact areas inhabited by the tribals. Further amendments are effected to plug the loopholes of the said chapter. The problem of land in the hills areas is dealt with by the district council which also restricts transfer of land by legislation. Besides, trading and money-lending in the hills areas by non-tribals have been regulated by District Council legislations.

Over and above, a Sub-plan for Plains Tribals has been drawn up since the 5th Five Year Plan with various development schemes and strategies. A separate allocation has been made for Tribal Sub-plan from the state plan and from central assistance. Since 1966-67 a separate plan for the hills areas has been formulated with strategies and separate allocation.

A huge administrative machinery with two separate departments - "Department of Plains Tribes and Backward Classes" and "Hills Areas Deptment" down to the sub-divisional
level have been functioning to implement the various development schemes and protective measures meant for the tribes men.

Our analysis of the implementation and evaluation of the schemes including measures with regard to land, money-lending and trading shows that these have not been implemented effectively. Even the machineries have been constituted politically. This study reveals that the plans tribals are denied the elaborate constitutional protections contained in the 6th scheduled to the Constitution. Instead, they are provided with protections contained in the provisions of the tribal belts and blocks. It is clearly shown in the study that even those nominal rules governing the possession and transfer of land in the tribal areas have not been observed. The result has been large scale alienation of land culminating in their indebtedness. It is seen that large scale encroachment in Govt. Waste lands, reserved lands including unauthorised purchase or lease even on Patta land has taken place. Again, the study shows that the very Govt. has violated the act for setting up various development projects. The evicted people are either not compensated or poorly compensated by the Govt. itself.

One needs to recall that the widespread tribal unrest in Assam has been fuelled mainly by acute landlessness and
consequent destitution of the tribal peasantry. While the tribal leadership held the Assamese political leaders and bureaucrats squarely responsible for land pauperism of the tribals, the problem has much earlier origin. There can be no doubt, whatsoever, that the problem like much else in our country today, is an imperialist or colonial legacy. The new land system and monetised economy introduced by the British deprived many tribal peasants of their land. The large scale immigration encouraged and endorsed by the British rules created much bitterness and fear among the tribal population of the state. No doubt, the successive Govts. and official dom have not been seriously concerned with the pligut of the tribals. Yet the reason is not so much the supposed anti-tribal outlook of Assamese officials. There are instances of transfer of land from tribal to tribal also. Such forces can be checked only if the economic condition of the tribal peasant is improved. Also, awareness of laws prohibiting transfer and land alienation to non-tribals must be raised among them though, belatedly has grown up among some tribals. Unless this problem is tackled seriously, all tribal development schemes related to land would not be successful. Attempts to frame a land law on the basis of "Land for the tiller", if not possible, a law for the tribals similar to the Maharastra Restoration of Land to Scheduled Tribals, Act 1974 could be considered. This will bring about the much needed confidence among the tribal farmers, by ensuring land rights to the tribals a systematic
land related schemes should be undertaken.

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Our study has revealed that in the two hills districts also unauthorised transfer of land has taken place; though the disposal of land is under the control of the District Council whose composition is overwhelmingly tribal. Similarly, the District Council Regulations regarding money-lending and trading have been violated. The reasons are by and large, same to the Plains Tribals with the exception of migratory custom of the Hills Tribals.

Another important point emerges from our study is that the functioning of the District Council is far from satisfactory. It is seen that there is dearth of competent and trained personal for manning the administration secondly, we have also found that the power of the District Council is in the hands of a few families, which is used for their benefit. Thirdly, there exists large scale corruptions among the officials of the District Council and also a nexus between them and the money lenders, traders and the tribal elites. Fourthly, one needs to recall the shabby manner in which the two District Councils have been treated by the Assam Govt. in matter of dissolution or suspending elections for long periods. Successive District Councils had also been equally responsible for the concerted attempts by all concerned to sabotage the 6th schedule provisions. This might sound queer but the fact
remains that the councillors had always played second fiddle to the ruling party at Dispur and connive at latter's sabotage. Thus, it is seen that the insincerity to operate the 6th schedule was born of the total lack of political will on all sides. However, enthusiasm and sincerity has been developed after eighties with the movement for a separate autonomous state under the leadership of ASDC and KSA. It is due to the present leadership, a tripartite agreement is concluded on April 1, 1995, whereby 40 departments have been entrusted to the District Councils including enactment of Budget and direct access to the Planning Commission. The present Executive Committee of the Karbi Anglong District Council is very alive to the situation in respect of traditional rights of the communities. To stop migratory character of the people and also to stop wanton destruction of hill forests by constant Jhumming, the District Council authority has established several model villages in the plains flat land after proper reclamation.

It is therefore, revealed that the various development schemes including the protective measures have benefitted a small section of tribal people, mainly of the emerging middle class. This becomes all the more evident because of the illiteracy and lack of interest of the people which make it difficult for them to understand the various
schemes meant for them. Apart from, bureaucratic technicalities and delays make it difficult for them to reap the fruits of various measures like loans etc. Above all, the state administration is also responsible for failures of the development programmes. Most of the schemes are defective and their implementation suffers from inefficiency and corruption. It is surprising to observe that the administration is interested only in disbursing the grants and sub-sidies but not at all in examining the fruitfulness of the grants. Or want of supervision and follow-up action many of the schemes totally failed involving huge wastage of money. The various grants have become an easy prey of corruption for unscrupulous tribal as well as non-tribal people. It is high time to ascertain the effectiveness of the various development schemes instead of alleging by the tribal leaders and expedite their proper implementation.

For reasons more than one, the tribesmen feel humiliated and this simmering discontent has organised them politically and socio-culturally.

An attempt is, therefore, made to study the articulation of various demands by the various tribal organisations. Notably the demands of these organisations were basically socio-cultural and economic before eig is barring the erstwhile PTCA which demanded a separate
administrative unit in the form of union territory namely 'Udayachal'.

Our study has shown that only some short term demands are fulfilled. Most of their important economic and political demands remained largely unfulfilled. It is clearly seen that the Govt. has shown apathetic attitude towards the problems and played the pet game of dilly dallying. It is, therefore, during 1980's various ethnic groups have organised themselves politically and become restive for autonomy in the form of separate state or district and by and large, has gained ground with mass participation. The demand for a separate 'Bodo Land' state is raised with vigour and assertiveness by the ABSU and the BPAC among the Plains Tribals. The demand for a separate autonomous state under Article 244(A) has gained momentum under the leadership of ASDC and KSA in the hills districts. Others ethnic groups like Rabhas, Tiwas, Misings have demanded autonomous district.

It would not be out of place to recall here that the demand for autonomy has become a major issue and pertinent problem in India. This demand stem from the sentiments which the people have towards a region, community to which they belong. It implies the expression of distinctiveness in respect of race, culture or language, it is also a concern to protect and preserve one's identity.
The demand of the Bodos has been conceded by creating 'Bodoland Autonomous Council' awarding 2570 villages covering 5186 sq. K.M. in the North Bank of Brahmaputra, though their demand was for to include 3085 villages. The total population of the area is 2,37,445 out of which 38 p.c. are plains tribes. The council is entrusted with 38 development departments with executive powers. But the initial euphoria is over as it has failed to fulfil the hopes and aspirations of the Bodos. Hence the leadership has reiterated its demand for a separate state for adequate protection of land, checking economic exploitation of the tribals and prevention of political domination. Significantly, the Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, in his recent visit to North East, has categorically ruled out the demand. The Chief Minister of Assam Mr. Mahanta has also expressed the hopes that they would give up their demand for a separate state and called upon the Bodo people to come forward and be equal partners in the progress and development of the state.

The Rabhas under the banner of Rabha Hasong Demand Committee, All Rabha National Council, All Rabha Students' Union, besides articulating the socio-cultural protective demands, have, of late, demand autonomy in the form of separate district. They have been granted autonomy with 823 Rabha inhabited villages of South Kamrup and Goalpara with a
population of 6 Lakhs. The Autonomous Council has been entrusted with development departments to execute but legislative and financial power is given.

Similarly, a memorandum of settlement was signed between the leaders of the Lalung District Demand Committee by which Tiwas (Lalungs) are given autonomy with 144 villages and 28 blocks of Kamrup, Morigaon and Nagaon Districts.

The demand of the Mising people to have autonomy under the banner of Takam Mising Porin Kcbang, Mising Mimang Kcbang and Mising Autonomous Demand Committee, has been conceded by an accord with Mising Autonomous Demand Committee Comprising 3.15 Lakhs Mising population of North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Jorhat and Golaghat Districts.

The eight year old Karbi Movement for autonomous state culminated with the signing of the agreement among the agitators, the Union Govt. and Assam Govt. in New Delhi on 1st April, 1995 by which more autonomy has been granted with 34 development departments including preparation of budget, access to Planning Commission etc. to the District Councils.

Thus, it appears, that the problems of the Tribesmen are going to be solved according to their needs.
aspirations and the Chief Minister, Late Hiteswar Saikia stakes claim that the Govt. has succeeded in saving the state from further disintegration by granting autonomy to the various tribes. The people of Assam have also desired that the tribesmen should remain within Assam while atoning for much of the alienation and neglect of them in the past.

But one cannot run away from certain facts that stare us in the face. Because the type of autonomy granted and the method of settlement have not satisfied the greater sections of the leaders. Again, the Govt. has not taken the organisations having more popular support into the negotiation tables but has created accommodating leaderships with whom accords are signed. Consequently, a major rift has taken place within the agitators. Another pertinent point which should exercise in the minds of the people of the state is the fact that, several non-tribal organisations, of late, have started raising demands which go against the spirit of the agreements.

It has come to our observation that the movement of the tribesmen are not of equal spate and momentum mainly due to uneven political consciousness and organisational strenth among the various ethnic groups and become peaceful, violent and combination of both. The movements of the Bodos and Karbis are more energetic and assertive while that of the others do
not reach that degree. Secondly, the tribesmen are not united under a single platform to redress their grievances. Instead, they have organised tribe-wise which delayed their fulfilment. Thirdly, the leadership is dominated by middle class. The new emerging middle class has taken the reins of leadership to wrest power. Therefore, it does not extricate the vestiges of vacillation, opportunism and power loving. Naturally, the leadership is divided - one accepting the call of the Govt. and the other opposing it. The Bodo Leadership has experienced division since the days of PTCA.

Fourthly, the tribal leaders have kept the non-tribal people out of abmit of their agitations. They openly allege the Assamese people in particular for their present state of undevelopment. Obviously, doubts and apprehensions arise among the non-tribals as to their rights and identities. Fifthly, the Bodo movement from very beginning is of Chauvinist nature and since 1987 it is influenced by Assam movement by and large. It is a painful truth that the movement has reached the point of intolerance and violence. They are at the threshold of civil war waged by their bete noire - the Bodo security force and the Bodoland Tiger Force, escalating ethnic conflicts, factional Killings, Kidnapping etc. The common Bodo people today only want peace as they are not bothered about any separate region. The other Plains Tribes
are also chauvinist in their outlooks but they have shown toleration so far and assured the protection of rights and identities of the non-tribals within their areas. While the Karbi movement has passed through constitutional method with tolerance and largely non-violence. The leadership has shown the democratic spirit of tolerance in tackling with rest of the people though they are influenced by christian missionaray. It is due to the fact that they are guided by leftist ideology and free from meanness. It is for this also the leadership is not divided and remained assertive and united.

The plethora of demands articulated by the tribal organisations veering round the demand for autonomy admittedly reasonable no doubt. That the tribesmen are underdeveloped socially, culturally and economically they are alienated from their lands, that they are deprived of their protective measures and share of political power is a painful truth. So the demands relating to these cannot be wished away and must be conceded. But the demand for autonomy in the form of separate state or district, though reasonable from democratic point of view seems to be practice by not feasible in all the cases. Though the leaders of the other groups have sustained it and agitated for its fulfilment. Upon Barhma, the then president of the ABSU in an interview
said that separate state would bring power to the Bodos where they would be able to solve their problems. The present leadership is also hopeful about that and holds the similar view. To them autonomy or self government is the only way to protect the identities of each ethnic groups. On the other hand, there are some tribal leaders who are not so enthusiastic to autonomy. Mr. Birosen Doley, ex-president of PTCA, held the view in an interview that creation of separate state is not possible. Sonadhar Patar, ex-secretary of Janata Dal, Assam, has expressed his concern about the boundary and demographic set up of the proposed Mising Land. He is of the view that separation cannot fulfil the aspirations of the tribal people (Interview by Harendra Dev Goswami, Agradoot, Sept '13, 1992). However, the demand for autonomy has come to the fore and cannot be ignored now. The democra-minded section of non-tribal people have also realised the necessity of autonomy. Dr. Amalendu Guha, on the problems of "Nation and ethnic groups" said - "For its solution, democratic decentralisation , in the true sense, to the root (panchayat level) should be made and the ethnic groups must be given more autonomy". (Sree Mayee, 1-15 September, 1991 Assamese fortnightly magazine) Sri Nabakanta Baruah holds the view that the concern of the Tribesmen for their own identity is a welcome step. Their first concern should be to ensure the development of their own ethnic culture. He has
emphasised on cultural unity and not opposed to separate land. Mr. Gauri Sankar Bhattacharjya holds the view that power has to be arranged in such a manner that every single section of the society will have its own area of self-government and self-determination. Then those villages where the Bodos, the Misings or the Karbis or any other section reside will have the major share of power (Interview by Nilutpal Gogoi, under the caption - perceptions on the Bodo Movement, The Sentinel, July 18, 1992).

Autonomy or self-government is a democratic right. Each nation or nationality must have equal rights and status. There should not be any privilege for one nation or any one language, not the slightest degree of oppression or injustice in respect of a national minority. All these are possible in a truly democratic society. But autonomy is misconceived in the milieu of a highly centralised central authority. This misconceived move will inevitably have the pernicious effect of accentuating and perpetuating the casteist, ethnic and communal divisions. The autonomy which has been granted to the ethnic groups is also misconceived. Firstly, there is no specific boundary of the councils except the Bodoland Autonomous Councils. The demographic set-up is a major bottleneck of the problem. The ethnic groups are not concentrated in a definite area due to mobility and partial
assimilation. Even the Bodos are not majority in the BAC area. As per 1991 census, Scheduled Tribes population in Kokrajhar 28 p.c., Darrang 16.8 p.c., Nalbari 12.4 p.c., Bongaigaon 12. p.c. Sonitpur 9.4 p.c., Barpeta 9.3 p.c. and in Kamrup 5.1 p.c. only. One of the reasons of ethnic violence at Kokrajhar is also that. The tribals are concentrated in some villages only. Secondly, the rights and identities of the non-tribals and tribals of other ethnic groups is also another pertinent question to be reckoned with. Their interests must be protected. Otherwise there would be apprehensions among them as to their identities as has been seen in the BAC area. The Koch-Rajbhangsis having a considerable population have been demanding recognition as scheduled tribes. The santhals and other non-tribals too are also living there. There is no adequate and clear provision in the BAC Act, though a reference of protection of their rights is there. In case of other district councils granted to ethnic groups the problem is same. Thirdly, there is also a great number of the immigrants who have encroached the lands of the tribals, forests etc. causing a disruption in the demographic set-up. This problem has to be solved legally. Fourthly, the autonomous councils have not been entrusted with adequate legislative and financial powers. They have been endowed with executive power of some development departments. It is a fragile
type of autonomy as they have to look for financial grants from the Government. Only that entity is truly autonomous which has the productive potential to ensure its fiscal autonomy. Lastly, interim executive councils have been constituted by the Government and no election is held. Obviously, the councils are consisted of blue-eyed of the Ruling Party.

It is also apprehended that the tribals would not be benefited by autonomy. Dr. Hiren Gohain holds the view that there should be a second chamber to consider seriously and sincerely the problems of the tribals and to suggest measures to the Government. Had there been industrial exploration and development, all groups could have been benefitted and would have resulted in the formation of a greater Assamese society and the problems would not have been complicated. (Dr. Hiren Gohain - Ganatrantar Nabajiwan, Janaki Prakashan, Guwahati-1, 1994). The Threeemen Expert Committee headed by Dr. Bhupindra Singh also suggested constitution of state level legislative council enlarging the strength for representation of the tribals proportionately. In addition to this, one may also suggest to extend the provisions of the 6th schedule to the plains tribes also. At the same time, it is also seen that the creation of new state have usually benefitted the neo-elite while the commoners have languished as before.

Whatever may be fact, the pro-accord leaders of the ethnic groups have expressed their satisfaction in the output. Most of them are of the opinion that they have got something out of their long \"agitation. Premising Brahma, EX-chief Executive Councillor of the BAC said \"The Government has offered us a fruit, we should see how it tastes. If it is sweet we should take it, if it sour throw it away\".
The problem faced by the tribesmen has been in essence the problem faced by all less developed communities, when they are living with comparatively advanced groups of people under a common political system. There is a feeling that they are economically exploited and politically deprived of by the Assamese people. There is no doubt that the elite among the caste Hindus is larger, better equipped, better trained than this tribal elites, of late, the tribal elites have been emerging in strength and numbers. And the conflict, therefore, has essentially been between these elites which manifested in the demand for a distinct political identity for every agitating ethnic group. They have developed the idea that the ethnic groups in the erstwhile composite state of Assam have not only retained their socio-cultural identities but have also enjoyed their right to distinct political identities. What is, therefore, required is an understanding and appreciation of the problems of the tribals by the policy makers and those who are in charge of their implementation. This is necessary so that the tribal people could consider them as protector as well as liberator. The need for this approach was emphasised by Jawaharlal Nehru who said - "The problem of the tribal areas is to make the people feel that they have perfect freedom to live their own lives and to develop according to their wishes and genius. India to them signifies not only a protecting force but a liberating one. Any conception that India is ruling them and they are ruled on that customs and habits with which they are unfamiliar are
going to be imposed on them will alienate them". The irony is that this attitude is still lacking and the result is what we have experienced today.

Thus, the growth of political consciousness and political agitation among the ethnic groups are based on their dismal socio-cultural, political and economic conditions. After independence the tribal life in North East India has been changed thereby bringing about political awareness among them. Christianity has emerged as a strong factor of modernisation and has given the tribals a sense of identity. Spread of education, and emergence of new and educated middle class among the tribals have contributed in developing a sense of consolidating tribal identity. The rising tribal aspirations are expressed through cultural identity crisis based on economic scarcity. The tribal problem though apparently political in nature, agrarian issue and economic aspirations give a new dimension to the movement.

However, the problem of these backward ethnic groups is essentially problem of the backwardness of the country. One may suggest that the best antidote against ethnic problem is the constituting of a democratic, egalitarian and socialist political order that provides just and effective guarantees to them. The state should have the will and power to enact and implement such guarantees.
It would be wishful thinking to expect this in a mass ridden society dominated by the rich and vested classes never considering the vital question of recognition to nationalities and sub-nationalities and their vital interest and self-interest with reasonable autonomy. It is, therefore, necessary to bring about a change of the existing socio-economic system through united efforts.