CHAPTER - VI
CONCLUSION

Identity is not inherent. It is not a fixed or determined structure. It is rather open and fluid. The concept of identity is constructed through close interaction between the individual and the society. As a social construct, every type of identity undergoes changes as changes take place in societies, cultures, technology and political system thereby acquiring its own style, organisation, substance and legitimacy over time and space.¹

In general, identity is defined with the help of similarities as well as differences. Similarities lay stress on the ‘self’ of identity whereas the differences focus on the ‘others’ of identity. This concept helps to distinguish one group from the other and stratifies the society. To have an identity, a thing must have features that, both are relevant and enduring.². Actually, these relevant features build the notion of identity. Generally, culture has emerged as the most relevant feature in the construction of sameness and differences with the ‘others’. Charles Taylor³ argues that identities are constructed in a continuing dialogue and struggle with significant ‘others’. In a wider and diverse social space, this dialogical model of identity formation also necessitates a continuous

³ Taylor, C. Cited in no. 2, p84
reinforcement of the same to be acknowledged and respected socially. The problem of identity arises only when the relevant features of an identity are believed to be under threat. If nothing is ever lost, there would not have been the problem of identity dominating the political scenario.

Individual identity becomes collective or group identity when solidarities are organised for collective action as well as decision. This process usually takes place in time context and its coherence and intensity depends on the culmination of overlapping symbols of assimilation and inclusion, essential in the formation of group consciousness.\(^4\) Consciousness for race, language, religion and ethnicity again is a multidimensional in nature.

As such, an individual or a group may have more than one identity. The value-based interests of the individuals or group plays a decisive role in deciding which identity will take the foreground over the other identities at a certain point of time. A group may transform its identity in order to suit its requirements. As such, an ethnic group may have loyalty towards the nation with varied degrees despite having loyalty towards its own group identity.\(^5\) It should not however be forgotten that the nation does not lose its significance merely for organisation of groups on ethnic lines. The whole development process in the society is the result of interaction between the state and the ethnic groups. In this

\(^4\) Hasan, Zoya et al., The State, Political Process and Identity, SAGE, New Delhi, 1989, p.25

process the ethnic group fulfils their aspirations along which they change the intensity of the identity both in terms of nation and ethnicity.

A sense of identity means a sense of being at ease with oneself and it also means at the same time, a sense of affinity with a community’s sense of at one with its future as well as history or mythology\(^6\). There is no doubt that identity is basic to both individual and collective life and is formed in a process of interaction and relationship with ‘others’ in a multi-cultural context. The only reason of its assertion in the political sphere is to secure a group’s social as well as material domination.

Politics of identity in India is deeply connected with democracy and development. In post-independent India, the ongoing process of modernization and development nurtured the growth of ethnic identification and cohesion. But in a multiethnic society like ours, the ethnic groups vary in size from highly localised castes and tribal groups to large linguistic and religious groups. No single group is clearly dominant. Here too, the boundaries between the groups are not fixed.\(^7\) Therefore, the ethnic variations and regional imbalances very often overlap. Under such conditions, the attainment of hegemonic position becomes the express aim of the groups who use identity as an organising principle and a tool by which they attempt to assimilate and then alienate rival competitor groups. It is indicative of articulation of identity for social dominance

\(^6\) Erikson, E., Dimension of New Identity, New Delhi, 1975, p.27

\(^7\) Brass, P., Language, Religion and Politics in North India, Vikas, New Delhi, 1974, p.46.
and to exert moral and material dominance via its influence. Since most of the identity assertions are sub-national or regional, ‘victimization’ of specific groups by the Central Government figures an important aspect of their self-assertion as a movement. In other cases, where the antagonism is against the State Government, similar delegations are brought against the State.

The effect of globalization has, of late, encouraged the proliferation of identities on a large scale in a country’s politics. Improved means of communication and globalization have tremendously changed the self perception of local, sub-regional and regional social identities. Globalization has exposed them to the forces of market and finances which, in turn, have invigorated and refashioned their cultural identities. There, the issue of cultural identity assumes significance in the process of globalization. Globalization impacts the social, cultural and economic life in different societies. Its patterns differ from one society to another due to difference of historicity and their initial conditions which characterise their society and culture.\(^8\)

India has been culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse and ethnically plural country since prehistoric period\(^9\). The question of self-determination originating from such diversity and other historical, political, economic and regional consequences has been facilitating ethnic uprising in India since pre-independence. Growing ethnic unrest in different parts of India

\(^8\) Singh, Y., Cultural Change in India : Identity and Globalization, New Delhi, Rawat, 2000, p.73.
has posed serious threats to Indian nation building process and national integration. Such development during the British rule may be regarded to have deep consequences over the architects of Indian constitution in incorporating the provisions of Fifth and Sixth schedules in the constitution. The Fifth schedule provides limited democratic platform to protect the interest of the smaller tribal groups through the formation of ‘Tribe Advisory Councils’ which is concerned with welfare and social advancement of the communities. The council does not enjoy executive, legislative or judicial power in administering justice within the schedule areas. The legislative power is vested with the Governor, and the council has the duty to advise him on his desire. The sixth schedule contains details provisions for ‘Autonomous District Council’ and ‘Regional Council’ in districts dominate by the tribal people providing territorial autonomy to the areas under its jurisdiction. These councils, under the Sixth Schedule, enjoy legislative and executive powers on various vital areas.\textsuperscript{10}

Under the provision of Sixth Schedule, the Government of India has been forming autonomous councils since 1952 in the form of ‘Autonomous District Council’ and ‘Regional Council’ as constitutional device to deal with ethnic problems.\textsuperscript{11} As a result of this initiative, a number of Autonomous Councils have been formed in different states of India which can be shown in the following table.


\textsuperscript{11} Chaube, 1973, p.105.
Table 6.1: Existing Autonomous Councils of India under the Sixth Schedule (Benedikter, 2009, p.184)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Autonomous Council</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Year of constitution</th>
<th>Ethnic composition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Cachar Hill District Council</td>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Dimasa, Kuki, Hmar &amp; Zemei Tribes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaintia Hill District Council</td>
<td>Meghalaya</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Pnar, Jaintia and Khasi Tribes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khasi Hill District Council</td>
<td>Meghalaya</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Khasi Tribes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council</td>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Karbi Tribes &amp; SC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garo Hill District Council</td>
<td>Meghalaya</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Garo, Rabha, &amp; Hajong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tripura Tribal Area Autonomous District Council</td>
<td>Tripura</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>ST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chakma Autonomous District Council</td>
<td>Mizoram</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Chakma Tribes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lai Autonomous District Council</td>
<td>Mizoram</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Lai Tribes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Besides these, the Government of Assam has formed a few autonomous councils to address aspirations of some smaller tribal communities of the state which do not fulfil the criteria of Sixth and Fifth Schedule. Such autonomous councils like the Mising Autonomous Council, Tiwa Autonomous Council and Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council are formed in 1995\(^\text{12}\) and the Sonowal Kachari Autonomous Council, Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council and the Deuri Autonomous Council are formed in 2005\(^\text{13}\). Many of these are partly exclusive and partly inclusive and neither territorial nor non-territorial completely. Complexity of such nature has made many councils of Assam as unconstitutional and malfunctional. In fact, the issue of autonomy is contested in

\(^{12}\) Hazarika, 2005 pp. 78-110

\(^{13}\) Sarmah, 2010, pp.80
Assam. Moreover, these autonomous councils failed to stop emerging ethnic unrest and creation of such councils is seemed to have provoked further ethnic clashes in different parts of Assam.

The state is regarded as the “legitimate power-structure of a given society.” Therefore, being the legitimate power structure, it is expected that, state should come forward to resolve the conflicts produced by the sub-systems within a political system or should redress the grievances of various sub systems. With regards to India, in the post independence period, the Indian state was committed to the process of nation building. The basic principles adopted for such purpose was ‘unity in diversity’. Therefore, the state tried to accommodate all distinct social groups within its ambit. However, the state did not hesitate to emerge as a “Coercive apparatus” if the situation demands so. Since independence, two strict rules have been followed in all dealings with dissident domestic ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural groups’ demands.\(^\text{14}\)

Firstly, the state will not entertain and that any group which takes up a secessionist stance will, while it is weak, be ignored and treated as illegitimate, but, should it develop significant strength be smashed, with armed force if necessary.\(^\text{15}\)

Secondly, there was prohibition against the concession of demands for any form of political recognition of a religious community. Muslims, Sikhs and

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\(^\text{14}\) Brass, 1999 :3

\(^\text{15}\) Paul. R. Brass (1999). The Politics of India since Independence
other religions minorities are free to preserve their own personal law, to practice their religion as they see fit, to seek protection for their language and culture, but not to demand either a separate electorate or any form or proportional representation in elected or appointed government bodies.

Thus, in the initial years, the Indian state was strictly committed towards the maintenance of unity and integrity of the nation and therefore it did not allow any social group to develop much of strength, which can cause a challenge towards the unity, integrity and sovereignty of the nation. The state, therefore, did not hesitate to use its “coercive force” to attain the objective.

The Sixth Schedule of the constitution (From article 244 (2) and 275 (i)) has mentioned a separate administrative arrangement for the hill tribes of North East. Accordingly, an administrative area can be created by the Governor for the administration of the hill areas. Such an administrative unit is known as a District Council. District Council, thus, is an autonomous body which has the authority to administer the tribal areas. Regarding the creation of District Council, the Sixth Schedule has mentioned that the Governor can create District Councils in the areas, which are mentioned in Part-I,II, II A and III.

It is also mentioned that if there are different Scheduled Tribes in an Autonomous District, the Governor may, by public notification decide the area or areas inhabited by them in to autonomous region. It has also been mentioned that the Governor may by public notification –
(a) Include any area in any of the Parts of the said table.

(b) Exclude any area of the said table

(c) Create a new Autonomous District

(d) Increase the area of any Autonomous District.

(e) Diminish the area of any Autonomous District.

(f) Unite two or more Autonomous Districts or parts thereof so as to form one autonomous district

(g) Define the boundaries of any autonomous district.

Thus, the Governor has sole authority to create the District Council.

On the other hand, the Autonomous Council is a body, which is created to provide certain autonomy to the tribals who have started their movement for autonomy. The practice of Autonomous Council came into existence in 1992 when the Bodoland Autonomous Council Act was passed in accordance with the Memorandum of Settlement signed by the Bodo leaders, State Government and Honourable Minister of State, Ministry of Home Affairs, Rajesh Pilot. Following the pattern of the Bodos similar autonomy was given to the Rabhas, Mishings and Tiwas in 1995 and to the Deouris and Sonowal Kachari’s in 2005. There were two basic reasons behind the creation of Autonomous Council, one is mentioned in the preamble of the Autonomous Council Act of the respective tribal community. Thus, one objective behind the creation of Autonomous Council was to provide satellite autonomy to the respective tribes for their social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement.
The second objective behind the creation of the Autonomous Council was to manage the conflicting situation, but not to resolve the conflict, that was created by the concerned tribal communities through their demands for autonomy. It was the management of conflict because the provision of Autonomous Council could able to satisfy only some sections of tribals but not of all sections. Therefore, the dissented section of tribal leaders considered the Autonomous Council as an appeasement policy and therefore, although, it was expected that the provision of Autonomous Council will bring some solution to the tribal politics of Assam, yet because of such inherent loopholes in the Autonomous Council itself that the tribal politics becomes more and more dominant than it was earlier.

It would not be an exaggeration to mention here that during and after 1980, the various tribal Organisations like ABSU, BPAC, Mishing Action Committee, All Mishing Student Union, Rabha Hasong Demand Committee, All Tiwa Student Union etc., by and large, have made political demands for creation of autonomous districts for each ethnic group.

As regards to the two hills districts- Karbi Anglong and North Cachar, there are organisations for articulating the demands of the Hills Tribes. The oldest organisation which is actively associated with the Karbi people is the Karbi-A-Durbar formed in 1946 at a conference in Kothalguri. But differences arose among the leaders of this organisation on some issues. As a result of this rift among the leaders a new organisation called Karibi-A-Riso-Darbar was
formed in the year 1964. The leaders of this organisation claimed it as a socio-cultural organisation which opposed the demand for Roman script and separate state.\textsuperscript{16}

Besides, the Karbi Peoples Conference under the leadership of Samsing Hanche has been articulating the demands of the Karbi people in the 1980’s and participated in the election of the District Council.

The RHAC consists of 30 elected members, out of which 4 will be nominated by the Government. The village council consists of 10 elected members of which 5 will be from the Rabha community. The village council shall have executive powers in respect of executive of development schemes on 29 subjects and the Apex Council shall have on 34 subjects. The State Government shall provide funds from TSP (Tribal Sub-Plan) and other resources to the Apex Council. The Council consists of Rani area of Kamrup district to Joyramkuchi of Goalpara district with a population of over 6 Lakhs. The Govt of Assam shall constitute an interim Council till the election is held. The Government and the Council shall ensure protection to the rights and interests of the non-tribals and tribals other than Rabhas living in the Council area.\textsuperscript{17}

The other ethnic groups of the Plain Tribes are small in population and they are more or less assimilated with Assamese culture. Therefore, they have no separate organisation of their own. However, attempts have been made by some

\textsuperscript{16} Souvenir- All Assam Tribal Sangha, 20\textsuperscript{th} Session p.29

\textsuperscript{17} The Sentinel-March 11,1995
to preserve their identities. The Sonowal Kachari Students Union, The All Assam Sonowal Kachari Kalyan Sangha represent such a venture. The Barmans of Kachar are by and large associated with All Assam Tribal Sangha.

The Hills Tribes living in plains and the Plains Tribes living in the Hills have been demanding to schedule them as Scheduled Tribes. The Government of Assam, by an order on December 24, 1982, declared that these tribes would get economic benefits enjoyed by the scheduled Tribes.  

Thus, it is seen that most of the ethnic groups have become restive for autonomy. The movement for autonomy has gradually achieved mass participation. The Bodo movement has turned violent although the others continue to be non-violent. However, the demand for autonomy has been meted out at long last. Barring the Bodoland Autonomous Council which has a boundary, the others do not have a specific boundary. The Autonomous Councils have not been given Legislative and Financial powers. The way by which settlements are made is also not acceptable to the large sections of the agitators, because they have not been invited to the negotiation table. They, therefore, vehemently opposed the constitution of the Autonomous Districts. Of course the then Chief Minister Late Hiteswar Saikia stakes claim that the Government has succeeded in saving the state from disintegration for a second time by granting autonomy to the various tribes. However, he refuted the feasibility of autonomy to Deuris, Hajongs and Barmans etc, due to their lesser population. He also

18 Souvenir-All Assam Tribal Sangha, 24th Session, 1985
suggested that a legislative council could be constituted with representatives from all the ethnic groups.

But the point is, if the council has to look for financial grants, then its so-called autonomy may become fragile 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 ethnic and communal divisions. What is called for is greater political representation to all ethnic groups, so that separatist urges would have no reasons to get consolidated.

Assam has been the centre stage of agitations and movements in the last five decades. The various ethnic groups comprising the Mishing, Rabha, Tiwa, Karbis and Bodos are not only in agitation but more or less have taken recourse to violence and defiance. All these tribes are the indigenous inhabitants and an overwhelming majority of them labour under acute socio-economic liabilities. By and large, all of them allege that they are exploited by the Assamese people and the Government has also attempted to hoodwink them which resulted in their identities being at stake. But at the same time, it is worthwhile to mention that the Central and the State Governments have taken various measures and developmental schemes from time to time for their protection and upliftment, besides the constitutional safeguards.

Assam comprises of and is surrounded by both plains and hills and has as many as 23 scheduled tribes having their distinctive cultures, language etc. with various stages of development. As per census of 1971, the total ST population of
Assam was 10.99 percent of the total population of Assam and it increased to 12.82 percent in 1991 census. The Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste (Amendment) Act 1976, specifies 14 tribes in the two Autonomous Hills Districts and 9 in the Plains Districts of Assam as Scheduled Tribes. The tribes belong to Mongoloid racial stock and speak Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman family of language. The socio-cultural lives are tribal in nature which is mainly agrarian.

Initially, the Britishers who annexed Assam in 1826, followed a conciliatory policy in general towards the hills tribes. There is minimum interference with the powers and functions of the chiefs, village organisations etc. But despite all these, the hills tribes fought against foreign rule. As a result of this, the British administration adopted a policy of active interference in the tribal areas. Another aspect of the British policy was to keep the hills tribes separate from the plains. The role played by the Christian Missionaries also helped the British administration in this respect. For the tribal people living in the plains, same administrative arrangement was made as that of the plains.

The British Government practically did nothing for the socio-economic and cultural development of the Tribals, barring some administrative arrangement. As a result of this, the tribal people started to organise themselves gradually to full fill their demands and got reservation of seats in the provincial legislative.
After independence, the State Governments have initiated various measures to protect the interest of the tribals. Accordingly, some special provisions are made in the constitution for protection of socio-cultural identities and for reservation of seats in Assembly and the House of the People and in other Government posts and services. For the administration of the Hill areas in Assam, separate provisions are made in the Sixth Schedule with District and Regional Councils.

To protect the interest of Plain Tribals, the Government of Assam in the year 1947, by an amendment to the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations, 1886 added a new chapter (Chapter X). In this chapter there is a provision for creation of Tribal Belts and Tribal Blocks in the compact areas inhabited by the tribals.

Further amendments are made to remove the loopholes of this new chapter. The problems of the land in the Hill areas are dealt with by the District Council which also restricts transfer of land through legislation. Besides trading and money lending in the Hill areas by the non-tribals have been regulated by the District Council legislation.

Besides all these measures, a sub-plan for plains tribals has been drawn up since the fifth 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 the central assistance. Since 1966-67, a separate plan for the Hill areas has been formulated through various strategies and separate allocation.
A huge administrative set up with two separate departments, namely, the “Department of Plains Tribes and Backward Classes” and “Hills Areas Department” down to the sub-divisional level have been functioning in order to implement the various development schemes and protective measures meant for the tribal people.

Wide spread 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 equally responsible for land pauperism of the tribal people there can be no doubt whatever that these problems are mainly an imperialist or colonial legacy. The new land system and the monetised economy introduced by the British Government deprived many tribal people of their land. The large-scale immigration encouraged and endorsed by the British rulers created much bitterness and fear among the tribal people of the state. There is no doubt that the successive Governments and officialdom have not been seriously concerned with the plight of the tribals. Yet the reason is the supposed anti-tribal outlook of Assamese officials. There are various instances of transfer of land from tribal people to tribal people also. Such forces can be checked only if the economic condition of the tribal peasant is improved. Also, awareness of the laws prohibiting transfer and land alienation to non-tribals must be raised among them, though belatedly, has grown up among some tribals. Unless these
problems are tackled seriously, all the tribal development schemes related to land would not be successful.

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 numbers of Rabha inhabited villages of Goalpara and Kamrup (Southern part) with a population of over six lakhs. The Autonomous Council has been entrusted with development departments to execute but no legislative and financial power is provided to them.

The autonomy movements by the tribals in Assam are not the product of a single factor. It is rather an outcome of various other factors. Some of the factors are social which is related with the indifferent attitude of upper caste Assamese people towards the tribals. Some of them are economic which include the overall economic backwardness of the tribals. Some of the factors such as the emergence of middle class, emergence of different political organisation etc. are some political factors. After all, the autonomy movement combines different factors: social, economic, political cultural etc. The following is an attempt being made to highlight some of the factors of autonomy movements by the tribals in Assam.

- **Historical Factors**: Historical factors provides a subtle basis for the tribals of Assam to exert their pressure for autonomy. Historically the
tribals are the earliest community to migrate to their part of the land. Therefore, the tribals regarded themselves as the Aborigines of Assam and the other communities have no right to prevent the tribals from getting autonomy. Such a justification was reflected in the letter written to English daily “The Sentinel” in 1991 by an NDFB cadre, Lakhi Basumatary, who questioned the ULFA’s legitimacy to demand for independent Assam. Basumatary was of opinion that the ULFA has no right to demand for independent state. For him, the Assamese people have “illegally conquered” Assam and therefore they do not have any right to exploit the tribal people. Mr. Basumatary’s justification no doubt, emanates from the history of migration of different races. Other tribals also think that they are the “Son of the Soil” and therefore they must have the right to demand for autonomy.

- **Inhabitant Factor**: Inhabitant pattern of the tribal people also contribute towards the emergence of Autonomy movement among the tribals of Assam. A particular tribe, whether the Bodo, Tiwa, Rabha, Mishing or such other tribal is concentrated into a particular area. Such concentration of a particular tribe into a particular area helped the tribal people to articulate their grievances among themselves. Thus, the inhabitant pattern of the tribal communities of Assam provided them with an opportunity to mobilise the people for autonomy movement. If the tribal people would have scattered, instead of concentration then it would have been difficult
for them to mobilise the people of a particular community. Therefore, while exploring the factors of Autonomy movement one should not leave the inhabitant factor.

- **Demonstrative Factor** :- Regarding the emergence of Autonomy movement of Assam, the demonstrative factors plays a very significant role. The movement for Autonomy, infact, is a politics of “role model”. It means when the tribal community starts their movement for autonomy, they are being inspired by other such movements for autonomy. Therefore, there is a vast similarity regarding the demands, strategy and organisations of different Autonomy movement. If for the Bodos, the Assam Movement is the “Reference Movement”, then the Bodos become relying point for other plain tribes. Therefore, once a movement for autonomy is succeeded or the demands forwarded by the movement is fulfilled, then, other movement also inspired by or rather straight forward similar demanded for fulfilment. That is why all the tribal movement demands for Autonomy under Sixth Schedule of the constitution.

- **Sixth Schedule of the Constitution** : The Sixth Schedule of the constitution of India is also responsible for the emergence of different tribal Autonomy movement. During the time of framing of the constitution the Sixth Schedule of the constitution was framed to provide autonomy for the tribes of North-East. Sri Gopinath Bordoloi, the first Prime Minister of Assam, was the champion of tribal autonomy under the
Sixth Schedule of the constitution. But the plain tribes were not included under the provision of the Sixth Schedule. Therefore, in the post independence period, the plain tribes started to demand autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution. Such demand was, for the first time, raised by the Bodos and later on by the other plain tribes of Assam like Tiwas, Rabhas, Mishings etc.

- **Emergence of a pretty middle class in the tribal societies :-** The tribal people are generally educationally and economically backward people. Therefore, it took time to the tribals to develop themselves educationally and economically. Gradually a section of the tribal people started to educate themselves. They developed discontentment over the backwardness of their own community. Therefore, they felt an urgent necessity of a mass movement for the upliftment of their own community. They also realised that unless and until the tribals are provided with greater autonomy within a separate political arrangement, it would be difficult to upgrade the tribal people. This section of the people came to contact with leaders of different movement, came to know about the political action, strategy for movement, and way of public mobilization and become the leaders of the movement. Thus, a vigorous movement for autonomy came into existence.

- **Role of different Tribal Organisations :-** The plain tribes of Assam had their common political platform even in the pre-independence period. The
formation of Plains Tribal League raised the voices of the plain tribes particularly, regarding the protection of tribal land. However, the Plain Tribal League was not much concerned with the question of tribal autonomy. Therefore, another socio-cultural organisation- Tribal Sangha was formed in 1954. The question of tribal autonomy did not get much importance in the Tribal Sangha. It was, therefore, with the formation of Plains Tribal Council that the plains tribes developed their political assertion for separate statehood. Gradually almost all plain tribes have formed their separate political organisation and started the movement for autonomy.

- **Economic Factor** :- Economically the tribal people are the poor people. Agriculture still a primary sector for the tribals. But there is no such remarkable effort on the part of the Government to improve the agricultural sector. Lack of proper market mechanism, lack of proper and improved communication and transport system, slow process of modernisation of the method of cultivation etc. are some major problems with the agriculture sector of Assam. As a result the agriculture based tribal people could not develop themselves. Mentioning about the seriousness of economic conditions of the tribal people, ABSU in its justification for “why separate state” has mentioned- “Tribals are suffering from serious economic crisis. Although the percentage of people below poverty line in national level is either 48% or 50%, the percentage
of tribal people below poverty line shall not be less than 10%.” As a result, the mode of living of tribal people is also below standard and due to this serious economic crisis, the education of tribal students has also been badly effected.

- **Land problem :-** Alienation of tribal land is another problem which developed a frustration among the tribals. As the tribal societies are agriculture based, therefore protection of tribal land is important for the tribals. But very significantly the Government not only failed to protect the tribal land from the encroachment of the non-tribals but Government itself allotted the tribal lands for the purpose of development.

  However, a substantive measure was taken to protect the tribal lands in 1947 by legislating the “Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886”. Under which provisions were made to create tribal Belts and Blocks to protect tribal land. Accordingly, various Tribal Belts and Blocks were created to protect the tribal land.

  Although all these Belts and Blocks are there, yet, encroachment of non-tribals takes place into these belts & blocks. In most cases the non-tribal people, by taking the advantage of economic weakness, try to buy the lands of tribal people in the protected areas. After all deprivation of the tribal people from their protected lands has created discontentment among them and therefore protection of tribal land become one of the important issues of autonomy movement.
- **Assamese Chauvinism** :- Chauvinistic attitude of mainstream Assamese people is also responsible for the emergence of different Autonomy movements. As it was observed in ABSU’s justification for “why separate state” that the “Assamese people have never accepted the tribals as a part and parcel of Assamese community and society in real sense, though they give a motivated slogan of ‘Greater Assamese Nationality’.” Interestingly, because of the chauvinistic attitude of the Assamese people some of the plain tribes, who otherwise have been assimilated with Assamese culture adopted Assamese language, demanded for revitalization of their own culture, customs, traditions, language etc.

The Assamese chauvinism was first reflected in two successive language movements, namely, Official Language Movement (1960) and Language Movement for Medium of Instruction (1972). Both the movement created an apprehension regarding the intension of the Assamese people towards the linguistic minorities in general and the tribals in particular. The Assam Official Language Act, infact, paved the way for disintegration of the hill tribes. Similarly, declaration of Assamese as a medium of instruction obstructed the tribal students who have done their matriculation in their respective language from receiving college education. Apart from these, on 28 February 1986, the Secondary Education Board of Assam published a circular under which Assamese language was made as compulsory third language in Assamese medium schools.
Apart from such linguistic chauvinism, the Assamese people, particularly the upper caste Hindus look down upon towards the tribals in their day-to-day social relations. So, the Assamese do not think the tribals as part of greater Assamese society and if the Assamese people try to establish their hegemony than there should not be any wrong with the tribals to demand for separate political arrangement or to launch a movement for autonomy.

- **Consciousness of Identity and self-determination** :- The plain tribes of Assam have their own culture, own tradition, own language and their own distinct way of celebration which altogether gives them a distinct identity. But under the process of assimilation some of the plain tribes gradually adopted Assamese culture, Language etc. This trend, however, did not continued for ever. Rather a reverse trend has started when most of the tribals become conscious about their distinct identity. They began to think that their identity would be submerged if they do not become conscious about their own identity. Thus, the consciousness for identity has started among the tribals and they started movement for the protection of their identity. Protection of their identity infact, become of the subtle justification of the Autonomy movement of the tribals.

The Political philosophy of self-determination also induced the tribals to start autonomy movement. The issue of self-determination, infact, is a global issue. Not only in Assam but also in different parts of the globe the movement of self-determination is going on. The UN Meet of Indigenous people is the global
forum for the movement of self-determination for the indigenous people. Some of tribal leaders from Assam, particularly the Bodo leaders attended in the world Indigenous Peoples Meet, and were greatly influenced by the ideology of self-determination. Therefore, they demanded for the self-determination of the tribal people of Assam.

- **Sense of Relative Deprivation**: The sense of relative deprivation among the tribals also induced them to start autonomy movement. The tribals of Assam feel that they are being deprived of in the field of economic, educational, cultural, job opportunity and politics. They are not equal with the advanced Assamese people and therefore, to get rid of such deprivation there is need for autonomy for the tribals. This is how the sense of relative deprivation contributed towards the emergence of Autonomy movements in Assam.

**Tribal Politics, Autonomy Movement and State**

The state is regarded as the “legitimate power-structure of a given society.” Therefore, being the legitimate power structure, it is expected that, state should come forward to resolve the conflict produced by the sub-systems within a political system or should redress the grievances of various sub-systems. With regards to India, in the post-independence period the Indian state was committed to the process of nation building. The basic principle adopted for such purpose was “Unity in diversity.” Therefore, the state tried to accommodate all distinct social groups within its ambit. However, the state did
not hesitate to emerge as a ‘coercive apparatus’ if the situation demands so. Since independence, therefore, two strict rules have been followed in all dealings with dissident domestic ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural groups’ demands.¹⁹

Firstly, the state will not entertain and that any group which takes up a secessionist stance will, while it is weak, be ignored and treated as illegitimate, but, should it develop significant strength, be smashed, with armed force if necessary.

Secondly, there was prohibition against the concession of demands for any form of Political recognition of a religions community.

Muslims, Sikhs and other religious minorities are free to presence their own personal law, to practice their religion as they see fit, to seek protection for their language and culture, but not to demand either a separate electorate or any form of proportional representation in elected or government bodies.

Thus, in the initial years, the Indian state was strictly committed towards the maintenance of unity and integrity of the nation and therefore it did not allow any social group to develop much of strength, which can pause a challenge towards the unity, integrity and sovereignty of the country. The state, therefore, did not hesitate to use its ‘Coercive Force’ to attain the objective.

¹⁹ Paul. R. Brass (1999), The Politics in India since Independence.p.3
However, with the passage of time the state started to realise the failure of the coercive approach. Because, inspite of state repression, the movement by different groups at different parts of the country continued to exist. Therefore, the state liberalised its approach towards such social groups. The liberalization of the state attitude reflected in the form of reorganisation of states and decentralisation of financial relation through which the federating units were given greater financial autonomy as it was realised that uneven economic development is the basic cause behind the assertions of such social groups. The state at the same time, however, continued its coercive approach too. Parallel continuity of coercive as well as liberal policy by the state is regarded as “Stick and Carrot” policy.

The state’s attitude towards the autonomy movements of Northeast was also the same. In the post independent period it seemed that the all-Indian leaders were not much concerned about the emerging tribal assertion except Nehru. The whole issue was therefore, regarded as law and order problem. However, when the secessionist movement used to consolidate, the Indian state machinery used its coercive approach. But coercive approach of the Indian state did not yield any lasting solution. As a result the Indian state adopted its liberal policy by creating separate states.

While discussing about the attitude of the state, an attention is needed to pay on the role of state at periphery level. That is the attitude of Assam Government. In the post-colonial period, the Assam Government dominated by the mainstream Assamese leaders. Therefore, instead of looking the tribal questions genuinely, the Assamese leaders, by dint of their dominance in the
State Government, tried to establish their hegemony over the other minorities. Reflection of such attitude of the Assam Government reflected in the official language Act. Thus, Assam Government became a platform to show the chauvinism of the Assamese speaking people. Even some of the Assamese leaders were not in favour towards the tribal autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution and debated against tribal autonomy in the Constituent Assembly Debate. The Assamese chauvinism later on, led to the creation of separate statehood for the tribals. The state’s reluctance towards the tribal question also reflected in the case of the plain tribes. Because the state did not show any grave concern over the demands of the plains tribals it was only in 1993 that the Bodoland Autonomous Council was created. But the creation of BAC was not a lasting solution towards the Bodo problem. Case was the same with other tribals like Tiwas, Rabhas and Mishings when they were provided with Autonomous Councils in 1995 what they call as “puppet Autonomy.” The creation of Bodoland and Territorial Council (BTC) seems that the Government both at the central as well as state level are realizing the grievances of plains tribes. However, nothing can be predicted right at the moment. Because along with the assertion of other tribals, one group of Bodo, that is NDFB still continues to exist. Therefore, what should be the future step of the state, that it should try to understand the tribal problems genuinely and at the same time solution should be find out which must be beyond “management of the situation.”