



The Notion And Praxis Of Autonomy: A Case Study Of The Dima Hasao Autonomous Council

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Abstract

Autonomy has been a central instrument through which the Indian state has sought to manage ethnic diversity and political claims in the Northeast. Institutionalized primarily through the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, autonomy is envisaged as a mechanism for self-rule, cultural protection, and participatory governance for tribal communities. This paper examines the gap between the notion of autonomy and its praxis through a case study of the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (DHAC) erstwhile North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council in Assam. Drawing on historical analysis, constitutional provisions, and secondary literature, the paper argues that autonomy in Dima Hasao operates as a negotiated and constrained form of governance rather than substantive self-rule. While DHAC provides symbolic recognition and limited administrative powers, its functioning is shaped by financial dependence, bureaucratic control, internal political hierarchies, and security imperatives. The paper concludes that autonomy in Dima Hasao reflects broader contradictions within India's subnational governance framework, where decentralization coexists with strong centralized oversight.

Keywords: Autonomy, Sixth Schedule, Dima Hasao, Northeast India, Governance, Ethnic Politics

Introduction

Autonomy has emerged as a key governance strategy in multi-ethnic postcolonial states, particularly in contexts marked by historical marginalization and political contestation. The conceptualization of autonomy within the Indian constitutional framework represents a sophisticated attempt to reconcile the imperatives of national integration with the preservation of distinct ethnic identities, particularly in the socio-politically complex landscape of Northeast India. In India's Northeast, autonomy has been institutionalized through special constitutional provisions, most notably the Sixth Schedule, which provides for Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in tribal-dominated areas. These councils are intended to ensure self-governance, preserve customary practices, and facilitate development sensitive to local needs.

Dima Hasao district in Assam represents a significant site for examining the promises and limitations of autonomy. Formerly known as North Cachar Hills, the region was designated as an "Excluded Area" during British colonial rule. It was later incorporated into the Sixth Schedule framework. The establishment of the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC) now renamed Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (DHAC) was meant to address long-standing demands for political autonomy by the Dimasa and other tribal communities of the district. However, despite decades of institutional autonomy, the region continues to experience governance deficits, development challenges, and political instability. This paper explores the disjunction between the constitutional imagination of autonomy and its everyday practice in Dima Hasao. By analyzing autonomy as both an idea and a lived institutional process, the paper seeks to contribute to broader debates on decentralization, ethnic governance, and state power in Northeast India.

Theoretical Foundations and the Notion of Autonomy

The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, often described as a "miniature constitution" or a "constitution within a constitution," serves as the primary legal instrument for this purpose (Singh, 2022, p. 17). At its core, the Sixth Schedule facilitates a unique form of decentralized governance, granting tribal communities legislative, executive, and judicial powers over their traditional territories (Singh, 2022, p. 52). The Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (DHAC), formerly the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC) provides a compelling case study for analyzing the tension between the theoretical "notion" of autonomy and its actual "praxis." Established in 1952, the council has evolved from a nascent administrative unit into a site of intense ethno-political contestation, financial instability, and shifting administrative paradigms (Comptroller and Auditor General [CAG], 2024, p. 1; Borthakur, 2018, p. 54).

The notion of autonomy in the context of India's tribal peripheries is rooted in a historical shift from colonial exclusion to post-colonial accommodation. During the British colonial era, the hill areas of Assam were governed under a policy of isolation, categorized as "Backward Tracts" and later as "Excluded Areas" and "Partially Excluded Areas" under the Government of India Act of 1935. This policy of "exclusion" was intended to protect tribal populations from the economic and cultural encroachment of the plains-dwellers, but it also institutionalized a sense of separateness that would define post-independence aspirations for self-determination (Singh, 2022, p. 17). The tribes in these regions were largely allowed to govern themselves through traditional customary systems, while the colonial state focused on limited objectives such as taxation and infrastructure for resource extraction.

Following India's independence, the Constituent Assembly sought a middle path between total integration (assimilation) and continued isolation. The Northeast Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Subcommittee, chaired by Gopinath Bordoloi, was instrumental in drafting the Sixth Schedule (Singh, 2022, p. 17). The Bordoloi Committee recognized that the tribal communities in the Northeast hills possessed distinct social structures and fears regarding land alienation and cultural erosion (Singh, 2022, p. 17). Consequently, the "notion" of autonomy was codified as a system of shared sovereignty, where tribal areas remained within the state of Assam but enjoyed significant self-rule through Autonomous District Councils (ADCs).

TABLE I

Tabular Description of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution

Constitutional Feature	Provision and Reference	Functional Intent
Article 244(2)	Governance of Tribal Areas in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram	Provides the constitutional basis for the Sixth Schedule.
Article 275(1)	Grants-in-aid from the Union to the States	Ensures financial support for developmental administration in tribal districts.
Paragraph 3	Legislative Powers of the Council	Empowerment to make laws on land, forests, and customs.
Paragraph 6	Executive Powers	Authority to manage schools, markets, and fisheries.
Paragraph 8	Fiscal Powers	Power to levy taxes and collect land revenue.

In the case of the Dima Hasao district, the notion of autonomy has been perpetually re-negotiated through the lens of ethnic sub-nationalism. Unlike "homeland state autonomy," which characterizes states like Nagaland or Mizoram, the Dima Hasao model is one of "decentralized autonomy," where power is negotiated across three levels: Federal, State, and sub-State (Hausing, 2022, p. 122). This creates a complex praxis where the council must balance its constitutional mandates with the political pressures of both the state government and the ethnic aspirations of the varied tribal communities therein (Hausing, 2022, p. 122).

Historical Evolution: From Exclusion to Empowerment

The North Cachar Hills Autonomous District Council was formally inaugurated on April 29, 1952, under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule. The district itself has a deep historical legacy, having been part of the ancient Dimasa or Kachari Kingdom and inhabited by diverse tribes including the Dimasa, Zeme Naga, Hmar, Kuki, and Karbi (NCHAC.in, 2023). During the early post-independence period, these tribes made representations to the Bordoloi Committee, seeking safeguards for their distinct ethnic and linguistic identities (NCHAC.in, 2023; Satp.org, n.d.).

The administrative history of the region is marked by significant nomenclature changes that reflect shifting political identities. Originally part of the "United Mikir and North Cachar Hills" district, the area was bifurcated in 1951, leading to the creation of separate councils for the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills regions. In 1995, following a Memorandum of Understanding between the government and regional leaders, the council was renamed the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC), reflecting a broader devolution of powers (CAG, 2024, p. 1; Satp.org, n.d.). The most significant identity shift occurred on March 30, 2010, when the council renamed the district "Dima Hasao," an act that affirmed Dimasa identity but also triggered deep-seated anxieties among the non-Dimasa tribal population (CAG, 2024, p. 1).

TABLE II

Administrative Milestone of Dima Hasao District

Date / Period	Administrative Milestone	Contextual Catalyst
1936	Excluded & Partially Excluded Areas Order	Colonial policy of isolating tribal tracts.
1949	Adoption of the Sixth Schedule	Result of Bordoloi Sub-committee recommendations.
April 29, 1952	Constitution of North Cachar Hills District Council (NCHAC.in, 2023).	Formal start of autonomous tribal governance.
September 13, 1995	Renamed as N.C. Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC) (NCHAC.in, 2023).	Post-MOU enhancement of legislative powers.
March 30, 2010	District renamed Dima Hasao (NCHAC.in, 2023).	Assertion of Dimasa ethnic identity.
October 8, 2012	MoS with DHD Factions (Lok Sabha, 2014, p. 1).	Tripartite peace accord to end insurgency.

The evolution of the NCHAC into the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council demonstrates the "praxis" of utilizing constitutional provisions to validate ethnic claims to territory. While the Sixth Schedule was designed to protect "tribals" in general, the naming of the district "Dima Hasao" signaled a transition toward an ethnic-exclusive homeland narrative, a move that the Indigenous People's Forum (IPF) and other non-Dimasa tribal groups in the district have contested as a betrayal of the multi-ethnic spirit of the 1952 council (Assam Times, 2012; Times of India, 2025).

Administrative Structure and the Dual Vertical of Praxis

The administrative architecture of the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council is a sophisticated system that blends democratic representative structures with a permanent civil service vertical. The council comprises 30 members, of whom 28 are elected via the "first past the post" (FPTP) system and 2 are nominated by the Governor of Assam (CAG, 2024, p. 1; NCHAC.in, 2023). This representative body functions as a regional legislature, convening at the NCHAC Secretariat in Haflong to enact laws and oversee the executive branch (NCHAC.in, 2023).

The executive power is vested in an Executive Committee headed by the Chief Executive Member (CEM), who holds a rank equivalent to a state cabinet minister (NCHAC.in, 2023). The CEM is assisted by several Executive Members (EMs) who oversee various departments, mimicking the structure of a state cabinet (NCHAC.in, 2023). However, the actual praxis of governance is managed through a "dual vertical" of permanent executive staff. One vertical, headed by the Principal Secretary (Normal), deals with the council's "inherent" functions, subjects specifically listed in Paragraph 3 of the Sixth Schedule (NCHAC.in, 2023; CAG, 2024, p. 2). The second vertical, led by the Principal Secretary (Transferable), manages the

"entrusted" functions which are the departments such as Education, Health, and Public Works that have been transferred from the State of Assam to the Council (NCHAC.in, 2023; CAG, 2024, p. 2).

TABLE III

Administrative Structure of the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council

Administrative Vertical	Leadership	Scope of Authority
Normal (Inherent)	Principal Secretary (Normal) (NCHAC.in, 2023).	Land, Forests, Customs, Local Markets, Tolls.
Transferable (Entrusted)	Principal Secretary (Transferable) (NCHAC.in, 2023; CAG, 2024, p. 2).	Education, Health, Agriculture, PWD, Social Welfare.
Line Departments	Departmental Secretaries (CAG, 2024, p. 2).	Implementation of state and council schemes.
Judicial	District/Regional Council Courts	Administration of justice under customary law.

The Principal Secretary (Transferable) is typically an IAS or ACS officer deputed by the state government, creating a direct link, often a point of friction between the council's political leadership and the state's administrative oversight (NCHAC.in, 2023; CAG, 2024, p. 2). This "praxis of dualism" is central to the Dima Hasao experience. While the council enjoys legislative autonomy over land and customs, its reliance on state-deputed officers for broader developmental functions often curtails its operational freedom (Singh, 2022, p. 106).

Legislative and Judicial Praxis: Protecting Customs and Land

The legislative empowerment of the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council is grounded in Paragraph 3(1) of the Sixth Schedule, which allows it to make laws on subjects ranging from land allotment and forest management to the regulation of 'Jhum' (shifting) cultivation. These powers are intended to preserve the tribal way of life and prevent the alienation of community-held land (Hausing, 2022, p. 122; Meghalaya Monitor, 2023). In practice, the council has used these powers to navigate the complex intersection of traditional practices and modern developmental needs. For example, while the council can make laws for land administration, it has adopted the "Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886," which creates a paradoxical situation where state-level regulations often override traditional community ownership models (Meghalaya Monitor, 2023).

Judicially, the council represents a significant departure from the standard Indian legal framework. Under Paragraph 4 of the Sixth Schedule, the council is empowered to constitute village courts and district council courts for the trial of suits and cases between members of Scheduled Tribes. These courts decide cases according to the customary laws of the tribes, providing a forum for justice that is culturally relevant and accessible. The praxis of this judicial autonomy is, however, limited to civil and minor criminal matters; cases involving serious offenses (punishable by death or imprisonment for over five years) remain under the jurisdiction of the standard Indian judicial system and the High Court.

TABLE IV

Legislative Powers and Limitations of the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council

Legislative Domain	Specific Powers and Constraints
Land Management	Authority over allotment, occupation, and use of land; subject to Governor's assent
Forestry	Management of unclassed state forests; cannot override Reserved Forest laws (CAG, 2024, p. 2)
Customary Law	Laws regarding marriage, divorce, and property inheritance.
Village Governance	Regulation of village committees and local administration.

The requirement for the Governor's assent for all council laws acts as a critical oversight mechanism, ensuring that autonomous legislation remains within the constitutional boundaries of the Republic of India. This "praxis of oversight" has been a point of contention for regional political elites, who argue that it allows the state government to stifle genuine tribal self-rule (Singh, 2022, p. 163).

Fiscal Autonomy: The Crisis of Revenue and Management

The "notion" of fiscal autonomy for the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council is explicitly detailed in Paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Sixth Schedule. The council is authorized to levy taxes on lands and buildings, professions, trades, vehicles, and even on the entry of goods into local markets for sale. Furthermore, it is entitled to a share of royalties from licenses or leases granted for the extraction of minerals within its jurisdiction (CAG, 2024, p. 2). However, the "praxis" of fiscal management in Dima Hasao has been characterized by chronic dependency on state grants and systemic administrative failures, as meticulously documented by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG).

According to the CAG report for the 2016-17 fiscal year, the council's internal control mechanisms were found to be dangerously weak (CAG, 2024, p. 1). A primary issue is the lack of a proper internal audit wing, which leaves the council's multi-crore transactions unmonitored and vulnerable to fraud (CAG, 2024, p. 1). The audit revealed that actual revenue receipts between 2012-13 and 2016-17 were consistently between 28% and 51% of the council's own budget estimates, indicating a radical disconnect between financial planning and actual capacity (CAG, 2024, p. 1).

The praxis of revenue collection is further hindered by "ad-hoc management" of resources. The CAG noted that revenues from stamp and registration fees were understated, and significant funds from NITI Aayog and the Fifth Assam State Finance Commission were omitted from annual accounts entirely (CAG, 2024, p. 1). This suggests that while the "notion" of fiscal autonomy exists, the council lacks the professionalized accounting systems required to exercise it effectively.

The Security-Governance Nexus: The '1000-Crore Scam'

The most profound failure in the praxis of autonomy in the Dima Hasao district was the emergence of the "1000-crore scam" between 2006 and 2009. This case study demonstrates the dark side of decentralized governance in a conflict zone, where development funds are siphoned off to finance ethnic insurgency (The Wire Staff, 2017; India Today NE, 2023). The National Investigation Agency (NIA) found that crores of rupees meant for social welfare schemes, education, and infrastructure were diverted into the coffers of the Dima Halam Daogah (Jewel faction), or DHD-J, to purchase weapons and "wage war against the state" (The Wire Staff, 2017; India Today NE, 2023).

The investigation revealed a deep-seated conspiracy involving politicians, contractors, and government officials. A former Chief Executive Member of the council was arrested in 2009 for his alleged links to the militant outfit (The Wire Staff, 2017). In 2017, a special NIA court awarded life imprisonment to the CEM along with militant leaders-turned-politicians Jewel Garlosa and Niranjan Hojai (The Wire Staff, 2017; New Indian Express, 2017). The subsequent acquittal of these leaders in 2023 by the Gauhati High Court on the grounds that the investigation was "not up to the mark" does not erase the systemic vulnerability revealed by the scam (India Today NE, 2023).

Ethnic Sub-nationalism and the Conflict of Inclusion

The "notion" of autonomy in Dima Hasao is increasingly defined by the tension between the majority Dimasa tribe and a constellation of smaller tribal groups. According to electoral data, the Dimasa constitute roughly 35% of the population, yet they have historically dominated the council's political landscape (Assam Times, 2012). This has led to the emergence of the Indigenous People's Forum (IPF), representing tribes such as the Hmar, Zeme Naga, Kuki, and Karbi, who argue that the council has become a tool for "Dimasa domination" (Times of India, 2025).

The renaming of the district to "Dima Hasao" in 2010 was a watershed moment in this ethnic conflict. Non-Dimasa tribal groups viewed the name change as an exclusionary act that erased the collective identity of the "North Cachar Hills" in favor of a single community's heritage (Times of India, 2025). The IPF has since intensified its demand for the bifurcation of the district and the creation of a separate autonomous council for the non-Dimasa tribes (Assam Today, 2023; Times of India, 2025).

TABLE V

Bifurcation Demand and Context in Dima Hasao

Ethnic Demographic Context	Observation / Data Point
Dimasa Population	Approximately 35% of the electorate
Non-Dimasa Tribes	Hmar, Zeme Naga, Karbi, Kuki, Biate, etc.
IPF Grievance	Dimasa representation in the council increased from 6 to 15, while others grew from 6 to 8
Bifurcation Demand	Creation of a separate council for non-Dimasa "oppressed" tribes

The 2012 Memorandum of Settlement and Territorial Restructuring

In response to the DHD insurgency and the demands for a separate "Dimaraji" state, the Government of India and the Government of Assam signed a tripartite Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) with both factions of the DHD on October 8, 2012 (Lok Sabha, 2014, p. 1; Eastern Panorama, 2012). A central feature of the 2012 MoS was the agreement to rename the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council as the "Dima Hasao Autonomous Territorial Council" (DHATC) (Lok Sabha, 2014, p. 1; Eastern Panorama, 2012). The term "Territorial Council" implies a more robust form of autonomy with enhanced legislative and executive powers (Singh, 2022, p. 17).

TABLE VI

MoS 2012: Clauses and Status

MoS 2012 Key Clauses	Implementation Status / Significance
Renaming to DHATC	Adopted in official nomenclature; Sixth Schedule amendment pending
Village Councils	Clause 6.6: Deepening democracy at the grass-roots level
Additional Subjects	Transfer of more departments along with legislative powers
Ethnic Safeguards	Heritage sites of non-Dimasa tribes to be preserved and maintained (Eastern Panorama, 2012).

The Future of Autonomy: Article 244A and the "Autonomous State" Demand

The persistent dissatisfaction with the "praxis" of the Sixth Schedule has led to a renewed demand for the implementation of Article 244A of the Indian Constitution (India Today NE, 2025; Sentinel Digital Desk, 2025). Inserted by the 22nd Amendment in 1969, Article 244A empowers Parliament to create an "autonomous state" within the state of Assam. The "notion" of an autonomous state would allow for the establishment of a separate legislature and a Council of Ministers, granting the region control over critical subjects such as law and order, powers currently held by the Assam state government (India Today NE, 2025; Sentinel Digital Desk, 2025).

TABLE VII

Article 244A Demand and Status

Demand for Article 244A (2025 Status)	Key Arguments and Actions
Protest at Jantar Mantar	July 2025: Coalition of KADHASDCOM and others demand immediate implementation (India Today NE, 2025).
Scope of Power	Control over Law and Order and direct financial management (Sentinel Digital Desk, 2025).
Poll Promise	Implementation has become a core poll promise in the Dipu (formerly Autonomous District ST) Lok Sabha constituency, in the NCHAC, KAAC elections

Conclusion

The Dima Hasao Autonomous Council serves as a profound case study in the complexities of granting territorial autonomy in a pluralistic and conflict-prone region. The theoretical "notion" of the Sixth Schedule has frequently collided with a "praxis" characterized by financial mismanagement, ethnic polarization, and administrative duality. Ultimately, the future efficacy of the council depends on a radical reform of its financial management systems and a more inclusive approach to multi-ethnic power-sharing that transcends ethnocentric homeland politics.

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