



Ethnic Identity and Political Mobilization: The Autonomous State Movement in Karbi Anglong District of Assam

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Abstract: The autonomous state movement in Karbi Anglong represents a significant example of the relationship between ethnic identity and democratic participation in Northeast India. The movement emerged from the historical, cultural, and political distinctiveness of the Karbi people, who have long sought greater autonomy and constitutional safeguards within the Indian Union. It reflects demands for self-governance, preservation of indigenous identity, equitable socio-economic development, and meaningful political representation. Over the decades, various political organisations, student bodies, and civil society groups have mobilised public support for the creation of an autonomous state under Article 244(A) of the Constitution of India. Through democratic means such as public meetings, peaceful protests, submission of memoranda, negotiations with the government, and participation in electoral politics, the movement has articulated collective aspirations while remaining largely within the constitutional framework. At the same time, the movement highlights the limitations of existing administrative arrangements under the Sixth Schedule in addressing local grievances, developmental imbalances, and aspirations for greater decision-making powers. It also demonstrates how ethnic identity can become a basis for political mobilisation and democratic engagement in a plural society. This paper examines the historical background, phases of mobilisation, leadership patterns, and political significance of the autonomous state movement in Karbi Anglong. It argues that the movement is not merely a demand for territorial reorganisation, but a broader struggle for recognition, participation, dignity, and justice.

Keywords: *Ethnic Identity, Democratic Participation, Autonomous State, Sixth Schedule, Self-Governance.*

Introduction:

The question of ethnic identity and the rise of sub-national feelings have played a major role in shaping the political development of Northeast India since independence. Ethnic identity refers to the shared cultural, linguistic, religious, and ancestral characteristics that distinguish one group from another. It creates a sense of belonging among people through common traditions, customs, language, and historical experiences. Unlike race, which is linked mainly with biological features, ethnicity is rooted in social and cultural identity. Sub-national movements arise when a particular ethnic or regional group seeks greater autonomy, recognition, or political rights within a larger nation-state. Such movements usually emerge when communities feel neglected, marginalized, or threatened by dominant political and cultural forces. These movements may demand cultural protection, regional autonomy, or even separate statehood. In many cases, they are driven by the fear that the identity of smaller communities may disappear under the influence of larger and more powerful groups. Northeast India is one of the most ethnically diverse regions of the country, inhabited by more than 200 ethnic groups and tribes. The region includes the states of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh,

Tripura, and Sikkim. Many communities of the region strongly feel the need to preserve their unique identities, languages, customs, and traditions. As a result, the region has witnessed several ethnic and sub-national movements demanding autonomy and self-governance. The formation of states like Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh from the erstwhile Assam was largely influenced by such ethnic assertions. Karbi Anglong, one of the hill districts of Assam, has also experienced the growth of ethnic identity consciousness and sub-national movements. The district, predominantly inhabited by the Karbi tribe, has witnessed continuous demands for greater autonomy and separate statehood. These movements mainly emerged

This paper attempts to examine the rise of ethnic identity among the Karbis and analyze the major autonomy and statehood movements in Karbi Anglong. It also discusses the role of different political organizations, the causes behind these movements, and their impact on the politics and society of the district.

Objectives of the Study:

The present study aims to examine the relationship between ethnic identity and political mobilization in the context of the Autonomous State Movement in Karbi Anglong, Assam. The specific objectives are:-

- i. To analyse the historical background and evolution of the Autonomous State Movement in Karbi Anglong.
- ii. To examine the role of ethnic identity in shaping political consciousness among the Karbi people.
- iii. To study the nature and forms of political mobilisation within the movement, including organizations, leadership, and strategies.
- iv. To assess the role of democratic institutions and state responses in influencing the trajectory of the movement.

Methodology of the Study:

The study is primarily qualitative and descriptive in nature, focusing on understanding political processes, identity formation, and mobilization dynamics.

Research Design:

The research follows a case study approach focusing on Karbi Anglong district, allowing an in-depth analysis of ethnic politics and autonomy movements.

Data Collection:

The study is based on secondary sources, including:-

- i. Books and scholarly articles on ethnic movements in Northeast India
- ii. Government reports and policy documents related to Karbi Anglong autonomy
- iii. Reports from commissions, committees, and autonomous council records
- iv. Newspaper articles and media reports covering the movement
- v. Academic journals focusing on political science, sociology, and Northeast studies .

Data Analysis:

The collected data will be analysed using qualitative content analysis, focusing on identifying key themes such as ethnic identity formation, political mobilization strategies, and state-movement interactions.

Historical Background of Karbi Anglong:

The present Karbi Anglong district was formerly known as the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills District. It was formed on 17 November 1951 after a prolonged movement led by the Karbi Adarbar, an important socio-political organization of the Karbi people. Later, separate District Councils were established for the Karbi and Dimasa areas under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The North Cachar Hills District Council came into existence on 29 April 1952, while the Mikir Hills District Council was formed on 23 June 1952. Both councils were inaugurated by Bishnuram Medhi, the then Chief Minister of Assam. In 1970, the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills District was divided into two districts—Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills. Subsequently, the Mikir Hills district was renamed Karbi

Anglong district on 14 October 1976 through a government notification. Soon after the formation of the district, demands for autonomy and separate statehood began to emerge. Although such demands had occasionally been raised since the formation of the State Reorganization Commission in 1953, they gained momentum after the passing of the Assam Official Language Act of 1960. The Act declared Assamese as the official language of the Assam Valley districts, creating fear among the hill tribes about possible domination by the Assamese-speaking population. The Karbis feared political marginalization, cultural assimilation, and loss of identity within greater Assamese society. At the same time, many leaders felt that the District Council lacked adequate powers to protect the interests of the tribal communities. These concerns led to the rise of several autonomy and statehood movements in Karbi Anglong.

Ethnic Identity and Democratic Participation:

Karbi Anglong is one of the most ethnically diverse regions of Northeast India. Apart from the Karbis, communities such as the Dimasas, Kukis, Rengma Nagas, and others also inhabit the district. Among them, the Karbis have consistently asserted their ethnic identity and demanded greater autonomy under Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution or a separate state within the Indian Union. The issue of ethnic identity has strongly influenced democratic participation in the district. Political parties, student organizations, and social groups have used democratic means such as elections, protests, bandhs, memorandums, rallies, and public meetings to press for autonomy and statehood. These movements reflect the aspirations of the Karbi people to preserve their language, culture, traditions, and political rights. The Karbis believed that the existing administrative arrangements were insufficient to safeguard their identity and developmental interests. They also feared demographic pressure and the process of "Assamisation," which they felt threatened their distinct cultural existence. Therefore, the demand for autonomy became closely linked with ethnic consciousness and democratic political mobilization.

Ethnic Identity Question and Autonomy Movements in Karbi Anglong:

The Autonomous State Movement in Karbi Anglong is an important example of ethnic identity and democratic participation in Northeast India. The Karbi people, along with other tribal communities, demanded greater political autonomy to protect their language, culture, traditions, and economic interests. They felt neglected by the government and believed that development in the region was inadequate. The movement was mainly based on the demand for an Autonomous State under Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution. Some of the Major autonomy movements launched in Karbi Anglong from time to time are as follows:

1. APHLC and the Hill State Movement:

The All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) was formed in 1960 following the passing of the Assam Official Language Act. The Act created insecurity among the hill tribes of Assam and encouraged them to demand a separate hill state. The APHLC united leaders from different hill districts of Assam, including Karbi Anglong. Several prominent Karbi leaders such as Raidang Ingti, David Long Enghee, John Ingti Kathar, and Moniram Langneh joined the movement. The organization sought the creation of a separate hill state for the tribal areas of Assam. The APHLC participated in elections in Karbi Anglong but failed to gain significant electoral success. Despite this, the movement played an important role in spreading political awareness among the Karbi people. The movement ultimately led to the creation of Meghalaya as an autonomous state in 1970. Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills were given the option to join Meghalaya, but the Karbi Anglong District Council chose to maintain the status quo. One major reason for the limited support for the movement in Karbi Anglong was the fear among many Karbis of domination by Christian tribes in the proposed hill state. Although the APHLC movement did not achieve statehood for Karbi Anglong, it laid the foundation for future autonomy movements in the district.

2. All Party People's Conference (APPC) led Movement:

During the late 1970s, a new generation of Karbi leaders emerged in district politics. In 1978, the Janata Party formed the government in the Karbi Anglong District Council, replacing the long-standing influence of the Karbi Adarbar. Out of power, the Karbi Adarbar revived the issue of separate statehood to regain political support. In August 1978, leaders from Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills met at Diphu Club and resolved to launch a movement for a separate state comprising the two hill districts. As a result, the All Party People's Conference (APPC) was formed with Gobinda Chandra Langthasa as

President and Dorsing Terang as Vice-President. The organization included leaders from various political parties and district councils. However, the APPC movement failed to gain much momentum due to internal lack of coordination and the emergence of other organizations demanding similar objectives. Nevertheless, the movement kept alive the issue of autonomy and statehood in regional politics.

3. Separate State Demand Committee (SSDC)led Movement:

Following the imposition of President's Rule in Assam in 1979, leaders in Karbi Anglong once again intensified the separate state demand. In July 1980, a meeting was held under the leadership of Khorsing Bey and Barelong Terang, which resulted in the formation of the Separate State Demand Committee (SSDC). The SSDC launched campaigns, public meetings, and signature drives to mobilize support for a separate state. The Karbi Students' Association (KSA) extended strong support to the movement. Many Members of District Council (MDCs) also supported the demand. Although the District Council could not officially pass a resolution due to constitutional limitations, the SSDC movement succeeded in highlighting the widespread public support for statehood.

4. Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) led Movement:

The formation of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) in 1986 marked a turning point in the autonomy movement of Karbi Anglong. The organization was formed by a new generation of educated and politically conscious Karbi youth and leaders. The ASDC, in collaboration with the Karbi Students' Association, launched a massive democratic movement demanding an autonomous state under Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution. The organization organized bandhs, rallies, memorandums, and mass protests throughout the district. Leaders such as Dr. Jayanta Rongpi, Elwin Teron, Bharat Kumar Timung, and Dipendra Rongpi played major roles in the movement. The ASDC delegation met Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and submitted memorandums demanding autonomy. Unlike earlier movements, the ASDC actively participated in electoral politics. In the 1989 District Council elections, the party won an absolute majority and formed the government in the Karbi Anglong District Council. The movement achieved a major success when the Karbi Anglong District Council was upgraded to the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) after the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 1995. Later, the Assam Government transferred 30 departments to the KAAC, increasing its administrative powers. The ASDC movement demonstrated how democratic participation could be effectively used to advance ethnic aspirations and regional autonomy.

5. KAASDCOM and KANCHASDCOM led Movements:

Another important organization was the Karbi Anglong Autonomous State Demand Committee (KAASDCOM), formed in 1986 by leaders who were not included in the ASDC leadership. The organization launched parallel movements demanding an autonomous state. Later, KAASDCOM merged with the Central Autonomous State Demand Committee (CASDC) to form the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills Autonomous State Demand Committee (KANCHASDCOM). The KANCHASDCOM demanded an autonomous state comprising both Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The organization organized demonstrations, memorandums, and public movements, although it did not directly participate in electoral politics. The rivalry between ASDC and KANCHASDCOM sometimes created political tensions and violence in the hill districts. However, both organizations contributed significantly to keeping the autonomy issue alive.

8. J.I. Kathar led Autonomy Movement:

In the present phase of the Autonomous State Movement in Karbi Anglong, renewed political expression has been largely shaped by John Ingti Kathar, a retired Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, who currently leads the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) in the region. Drawing on the historical legacy of the original APHLC, the party has re-established itself in Karbi Anglong as a political platform supporting the long-standing demand for the creation of an autonomous state under Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution. Under Kathar's leadership, the APHLC has helped revive the autonomy demand through democratic and institutional means, including participation in elections, public meetings, submission of memoranda to government authorities, and engagement with civil society groups. The party has also tried to bring together tribal political voices by focusing on key issues such as ethnic identity, land rights, and development gaps in the hill districts of Assam. This phase of the movement shows a clear shift toward constitutional and electoral methods in pursuing autonomy, which reflects the continuing importance of ethnic politics in Karbi Anglong. Recent political activities, including participation in the 2026 Assam Assembly elections and organized protests against state policies in the hill areas, show the party's effort to keep the autonomy issue active through democratic institutions. This also indicates a shift from earlier protest-based or movement-based approaches toward a more

organized electoral and constitutional form of politics. Although the movement continues to face challenges such as political division, different tribal interests, and limited response from state institutions, it remains an important symbol and political expression of ethnic aspirations in Karbi Anglong. In recent years, it has also become more popular among the youth of the region, many of whom see the APHLC-led movement as a strong platform for negotiating with the government for an autonomous state. This growing youth support has further increased the movement's visibility and importance in society. The movement is therefore likely to continue focusing on constitutional methods and electoral participation rather than non-institutional forms of protest, showing a changing pattern of ethnic politics in the region. However, in the face of alleged use of money and pressure tactics by opposing groups aiming to weaken its support base, the future direction of the movement remains uncertain and will depend on how effectively it deals with these internal and external challenges in the coming years.

Causes of the Rise of Autonomous State Movements in Karbi Anglong :

Several factors contributed to the rise of ethnic identity and sub-national movements in Karbi Anglong. In brief, the main factors include fear of cultural assimilation, particularly arising from the language policy of the AGP government in 1986, which was perceived as a threat to tribal identity and was one of the major causes of the movement in Karbi Anglong. Other important factors include alleged political marginalization, inadequate powers of the Autonomous Council, and economic underdevelopment in the district, which created widespread dissatisfaction among the people. The influence of other hill movements in North-East India also encouraged similar demands for autonomy and identity assertion. In addition to these, several other significant factors strengthened the movement. These include historical neglect by the state administration, leading to a sense of long-term exclusion from mainstream development. Unemployment and lack of industrial growth further deepened frustration among the educated youth, who felt deprived of opportunities. The failure of governance and weak implementation of welfare schemes also contributed to growing resentment against the state. Moreover, the rise of ethnic consciousness and identity politics among the Karbi people played a crucial role in mobilizing support for autonomy demands. The spread of political awareness through student and tribal organizations, such as local youth and student unions, further intensified collective identity formation. Finally, inter-ethnic tensions and concerns over land rights and migration added to fears of demographic imbalance, strengthening the demand for greater self-governance. Together, these political, economic, and socio-cultural factors shaped the course of ethnic identity formation and sub-national movements in Karbi Anglong.

Impact of the Movements:

The sub-national movements had a major impact on the political and social life of Karbi Anglong. First, they increased political awareness and democratic participation among the people. Tribal communities became more politically organized and conscious of their rights. Further, the movements led to institutional reforms such as the strengthening of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council. Additional administrative powers were transferred to local institutions. These movements shaped electoral politics in the district. Political parties often used the issue of autonomy to gain public support. However, the movements also created political instability and factionalism. Rivalries between organizations weakened the overall movement at different times. In some cases, leaders shifted political affiliations for personal or political benefits, reducing public trust. Despite these challenges, the autonomy movements succeeded in making ethnic identity and self-governance central issues in the politics of Karbi Anglong.

Conclusion:

The study of "Ethnic Identity and Democratic Participation: The Autonomous State Movement in Karbi Anglong" clearly shows that ethnic identity has been one of the most important forces behind the rise of sub-national movements in the district. The Karbi people, with their distinct cultural and historical identity, have continuously demanded greater autonomy and political recognition. The movements in Karbi Anglong were driven by fears of political domination, cultural assimilation, economic neglect, and inadequate autonomy under existing constitutional arrangements. Organizations such as the APHLC, APPC, SSDC, ASDC, and KANCHASDCOM and J.I Kathar led APHLC played major roles in mobilizing the people and articulating their demands. Among these organizations, the ASDC emerged as the most successful in combining democratic participation with ethnic aspirations. Through electoral politics and mass mobilization, it achieved important gains such as the strengthening of the Karbi

Anglong Autonomous Council. The autonomy and statehood movements have significantly influenced the democratic process in the district. They increased political participation, promoted ethnic consciousness, and shaped the political identity of the Karbi people. At the same time, factionalism, leadership conflicts, and political opportunism sometimes weakened the movements. Even today, the question of autonomy and ethnic identity remains central to the politics of Karbi Anglong. The continuing demands for greater self-governance show that the aspirations of the Karbi people for cultural protection, political recognition, and regional development remain unresolved. Therefore, the study of Karbi Anglong provides an important understanding of the relationship between ethnicity, democracy, and sub-nationalism in Northeast India.

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