



Munich Personal RePEc Archive

## **Reconsidering Ethnic-Based-Autonomy Movements in Meghalaya: An Analysis**

Singha, Komol and Nayak, Purusottam

Sikkim University, North Eastern Hill University

2 June 2015

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/64745/>

MPRA Paper No. 64745, posted 03 Jun 2015 09:18 UTC

# Reconsidering Ethnic-based Autonomy Movements in Meghalaya: An Analysis

---

**Komol Singha**

Department of Economics  
Sikkim University, Gangtok  
Email: ksingha@cus.ac.in

and

**Purusottam Nayak**

Department of Economics  
North-Eastern Hills University, Shillong  
Email: nehu\_pnyak@yahoo.co.in

## ABSTRACT

*To the unfamiliar, communities living in Meghalaya appear to be homogenous ones. In reality, however, they are socially, politically and culturally not only heterogeneous but are also defined by distinct tribal and clan markers. Three major tribes, namely, the Khasi, the Garo, and the Jaintia dominate the State. Each of them had their own kingdoms until they were brought under the British colonial administration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, after independence, these tribes and their territories were merged with undivided Assam, and then carved out as a full-fledged state of Meghalaya in 1972. Soon after attaining statehood, tensions cropped up between the indigenous communities and migrants mainly over the issue of economic opportunity. However, these days, it has slowly shifted towards the internal feuds among the indigenous tribes and separate demand for States within the State. With this background, the paper attempts to analyse the causes and consequences of autonomy demands asserted by different communities/tribes within the state.*

**Key Words:** Autonomy, Conflict, Garo, Identity, Khasi, Meghalaya

## 1. Introduction

‘Meghalaya’ meaning the ‘abode of clouds’ is one of the sister States of India’s North Eastern Region (NER hereafter)<sup>1</sup>, dominated mainly by three major tribes– the Khasi, the Garo, and the Jaintia. Each of them had their own kingdoms until they were annexed by the British administration one after another in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Das, 2007), Khasi Hills in 1833, Jaintia Hills in 1835 and Garo Hills in 1872–73 (Haokip, 2013). Consequently, after the independence of the country, these tribes and their territories were merged with undivided Assam in 1835. Within no time, following the discontent among the people over the Assamese administration, the three autonomous district councils (Khasi, Garo and Jaintia ADCs) were carved out as a full-fledged State of Meghalaya in 1972 from Assam. Other smaller tribes, claimed to be the aboriginals of the State like the Kochs, the Hajongs, the Rabhas, the Mikirs, etc., have also been living for years along with the above three major tribes. In terms of demographic equation, as per population Census 2011, the Khasis constitute the largest community with 45 per cent of the State’s population, followed by the

Garos with 32.5 per cent, and the remaining 22.5 per cent composed of different communities, including the Jaintia, the Bengali, the Assamese, the Nepali/Gurkha and the Hindi speaking population. Geographically, the State covers a total area of 22,429 sq. km., and is surrounded by Assam in the east and north; and in the west and south by Bangladesh. Of the State's total geographical area, about 37 per cent is covered by forest, which is notable for its biodiversity. Much of the forest area of the State is privately managed. The State government controls only the areas declared as reserved forest, which is about 4 per cent of the total area.

To the unfamiliar, communities living in Meghalaya appear to be homogenous ones. In reality, however, they are socially, politically and culturally not only heterogeneous but are also defined by the distinct tribal and clan markers. Though the major communities, especially the Khasis and the Jaintias speak a similar language, they all have their own dialects, different from one another. Particularly, the Garos do speak a very different language and have different customs than any other communities in the State. Despite the Khasi and the Garo being the principal languages, English is used as an official language in the State. Exceptionally, they (tribes of Meghalaya) follow *matrilineal system*<sup>2</sup>.

Soon after attaining Statehood in 1972, tensions cropped up between the indigenous communities (locals/natives) and the migrants (outsiders), mainly over the issue of economic opportunities. Major business establishments and job markets came to be dominated by the migrants. Consequently, the State witnessed three major riots between the indigenous communities and migrants. With the introduction of State policies to protect native communities (especially through the inner line permit, land holding policy, trade licensing policy, job reservation, protection of indigenous identity, etc.), the very tensions subsided in the 2000s. However, it has now slowly shifted to the indigenous tribes. Following a perceived development disparity, different indigenous ethnic schisms have developed in the State. On the other hand, community leaders and politicians often use the ethnic card primarily for economic and political benefits (Baruah, 1989), and in the process, alliance and re-alliance of different ethnic communities have also intensified. This very process of grouping communities on ethnic lines caused internal feuds, and consequently led to the movements for greater autonomy within the State. With this background, using secondary data, historical antecedents and observed facts, the present paper attempts to analyse the processes, causes and consequences of autonomy demands asserted by different tribes within the State in the recent past.

## 2. Ethnicity and State Formation

In Meghalaya, the term 'Khasi' is used in a generic sense and encompasses five sub-tribes— the Khasi, Jaintia, Bhoi, Lyngngams and the War. They are mainly found in the four districts of east Meghalaya, namely— East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, Ri-Bhoi and Jaintia Hills districts. The Jaintias are also known as 'Pnars' and settled in eastern part of the State. The Khasis who occupy the State's northern lowlands and the foothills are generally called the 'Bhoi', those settled in the southern hill tracts are termed as 'Wars', and the 'Lyngams' tribe inhabit the north-western part. All the five sub-tribes are believed to have descended from the *Ki-Hynniew-Trep*<sup>3</sup> and also known by the generic name— the Khasi–Pnars or simply 'Khasi' or '*Hynniewtrep*'. On the western part of the State, the four Garo Hills is predominantly inhabited by the Garos. The Garos belong to the *Bodo* family of the Tibeto-Burman race, believed to have migrated from Tibet (present Autonomous Region of China). The Garos are also known as the *Achiks* and the land they occupy is termed as the *Achik* land (Census of India, 2011).

In 1960, the All Party Hills Leaders' Conference (APHLC) of the then undivided Assam was formed. With the growth of tacit assertion of Assamese ethnic identity, discontent and antagonistic reaction among the tribal leaders against the ruling Assamese community escalated. As a result, the Meghalaya State was created on 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1972, following a concerted effort made by the combined tribal leadership of the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias under the flagship of the APHLC party (Upadhyaya, Upadhyaya & Yadav, 2013). The people of North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills of Assam who were living closely with the Khasis and Garos decided not to join the new State— Meghalaya, albeit an option was given to them (Hussain, 1987; The Assam Tribune, 2013; Gohain, 2014).

Historically, under the Government of India Act 1935, the hill areas of the then undivided Assam was grouped into two categories— (1) the Lushai (Mizo) and North Cachar Hills (NC Hills) which were classified as 'excluded areas'; (2) the united Khasi and Jaintia hills districts with partial exception of Shillong town, which was the capital of Assam at that time, the Garo hills, Naga hills (present Nagaland) and Mikir (Karbi) hills of present Assam were classified as 'partially excluded areas'. The government of Assam had no jurisdiction over the excluded areas, which were administered under the special power of the Governor. After the independence, the Constitution of India accepted broadly the spirit of the Government of India Act 1935, by providing each hill district an Autonomous District

Council with a fairly large autonomous power under the Sixth Schedule (Hussain, 1987). This led to the then hill districts of Assam, namely the Naga Hills, the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills, and the Lushai Hills for the creation of new states, one after another. In this process, in 1972, the united Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills formed the Meghalaya State.

### **3. Movement against Outsiders**

Before Meghalaya attained Statehood, the Assamese community developed substantial holdings in Shillong (present State capital), which was also the capital of the then British Assam. The Assamese people, mainly the Bengali Assamese, hailed from Upper Assam and the Bengalis of Bangladesh (mainly the Hindus, after communal riots in Bangladesh) got employment opportunities in major government sectors and controlled business establishments. The steady rise of non-local migrants, mainly the Bengalis from Bangladesh, the Nepalese from Nepal and the Hindi speaking communities from the other parts of the country resulted in loss of economic opportunities for the indigenous communities. These migrants continued to dominate business establishments, labour force and other employment opportunities until recently. As a result, the State witnessed three ethnic riots between the indigenous communities and the migrant non-tribal communities. The first riot took place in 1979 when the Bengalis were identified as the principal adversaries, followed by the conflict with the Nepalese who were viewed as the new adversaries in 1987 and then the clashes with the Biharis (from Bihar) and Marwaris (from Rajasthan) in 1992 (Haokip, 2013). In the 1980s, the Bengalis remained the prime target of the ethnic violence. As a result of which, in the early 1980s, approximately 25,000 to 35,000 Bengalis permanently left Meghalaya. In 1981, there were 119,571 Bengalis living in Meghalaya, estimated at 8.13 per cent of the State's population. Ten years later, in 1991, it got reduced to 5.97 per cent of population (Baruah, 2004; Phukan, 2013).

Further, with the predicated cultural superiority of two tribal communities– the Khasis and the Garos over the non-tribal population, and politically motivated ethno-centrism led to the commission of many dreadful acts against non-tribal population of Meghalaya. This trend was more conspicuous in the Khasi Hills where the Khasis took a dominant political position in the newly created State. This led them to challenge the hitherto ascendancy of the non-tribal population (especially the Bengali speaking) who were often branded as 'Bangladeshis', nationals of Bangladesh (Upadhyaya, *et al.*, 2013). Of the various causes of conflicts, economic disparity emerged as the most prominent one in the post-statehood

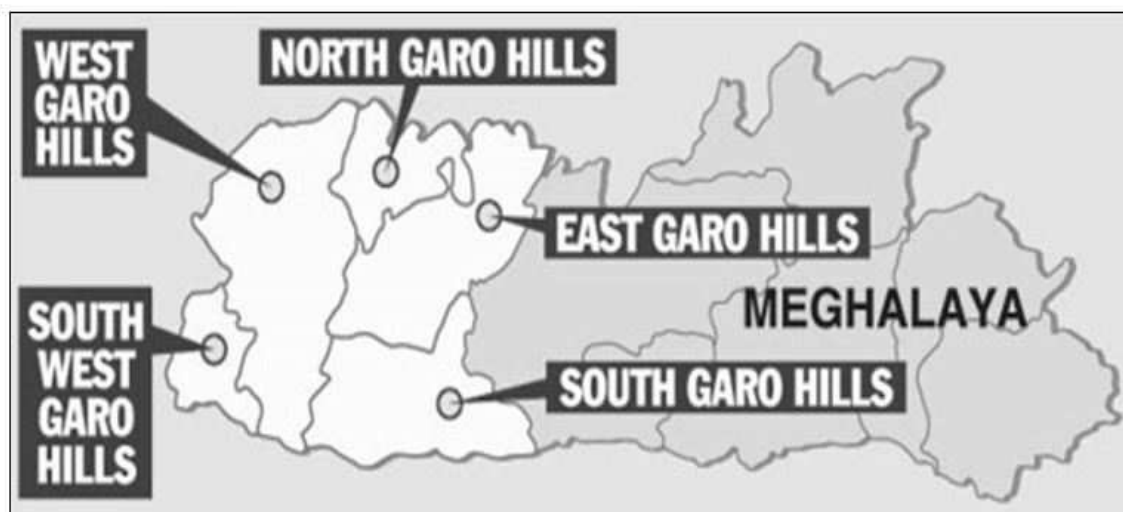
period of Meghalaya. The State's community-based agrarian economy lost much of its verve as a result of the unchecked privatisation of the community land, while the decline of agrarian resources made it extremely difficult for the members of the tribal population to maintain their livelihoods (Ibid, 2013).

#### **4. Internal Feud and Autonomy Movement**

Most of the modern ethnic conflict models say that the perceived deprivation of economic and political opportunities of the smaller communities by the larger communities, and the fear of loss of ethnic identity of these smaller communities primarily caused internal feuds in the society (Irobi, 2005; Singha, 2012). Following the perceived loss of economic opportunities in the hands of outsiders, Meghalaya witnessed first insurgent activities in the early 1980s with the birth of the *Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council* (HALC), representing all indigenous communities of Khasi-Jaintia and Garo, to fight against the outsiders/Dkhars (Rammohan, 2007). In the 1990s, following the growth of internal squabbles, especially between Khasis and Garos, HALC was bifurcated into two groups—the *Achik Liberation Matgrik Army* (ALMA) in the Garo Hills, and the *Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council* (HNLC) in the Khasi Hills (Upadhyaya, *et al.*, 2013; Rahman, 2011). Later on, the AMLA was replaced by the Achik National Volunteers Council (ANVC). When the HNLC aimed at converting Meghalaya “as a province exclusively for the Khasi tribe and tried to free it from ‘domination’ by the Garo tribe”, the ANVC purportedly tried to carve out a homeland called ‘Achik Land’ exclusively for the Garos in Garo Hills.

As understood, the HNLC is a product of 1992, bifurcated from the HALC, the first militant tribal outfit in Meghalaya. An important objective of the HNLC is to transform Meghalaya as a province exclusively for the Khasi tribe. The second objective is to fight against the presence of ‘outsiders’, as they feel that the Khasi youths are deprived off the fruits of development in the State. The HNLC was proscribed on November 16, 2000, and signed a ceasefire agreement with the Government of India (GoI) on July 23, 2004. The ANVC, which was formed in December 1995, aimed to carve out a homeland called ‘Achik Land’ in the areas of Garo Hills. The proposed ‘Achik Land’ comprises the present districts of Garo Hills in Meghalaya and a large chunk of Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam, where a large number of Garos are living<sup>4</sup>.

**Fig. 1: Separate State Demand Sought by the Garos in Meghalaya**



Source: The Telegraph (August 2, 2013)

The Garos living in the western part of the State claimed that their region continues to remain ‘backward’ and there has been economic ‘disparity’ ever since the State was carved out of Assam in 1972. The situation in this area is all the more disconcerting for its inhabitants as compared to those in the relatively developed region of the Khasi Hills. The Garo Hills’ meagre infrastructure and essential services, scanty health and education facilities, and poor connectivity to the rest of Meghalaya accentuated the sense of relative deprivation in the State (Upadhyaya, *et al.*, 2013). This perceived deprivation, disparity and exclusivity led to the demand for a separate State exclusively for the Garos, comprising five Garo hills districts reflected in Figure 1, by carving out from the Khasis. In this context, the Garo National Council (GNC) legislator Clifford R. Marak officially put up this issue in the 60 Member Meghalaya Legislative Assembly on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2014 (The Hindu, 2014a). Former parliamentarian and speaker of Lok Sabha, Mr. P.A. Sangma justified the demand for ‘Garo Land’, citing the reason for development disparity in the State (Haokip, 2013). However, their claim was rejected by the ruling Congress-led Meghalaya United Alliance (UMA) government, stating that further division of the State would crop up more constraints on the resources and increase social and economic vulnerability (News, 2014). On the other side, the proscribed HNLC has not only been working for the Khasi Land exclusively, but also striving to drive out the outsiders from the Khasi and the Jaintia regions, especially those in the disputed border areas of the State (Understanding Meghalaya, 2010).

People’s Liberation Front of Meghalaya (PLF-M) is a relatively new terrorist group, backed by the Garos and operating in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya. The outfit has been re-

christened as the Achik National Council (ANC). Most of the ALMA terrorists surrendered in 1994, but a few formed the ANVC in 1995. The PLF-M consists of some of the “surrendered rebels” of the erstwhile ALMA who returned underground after their rehabilitation scheme failed. The main objective of the PLF-M has been to achieve faster economic development of the Garo Hills, as well as better educational opportunities for the Garo tribes. Of course, the ultimate demand of the group is for a separate State for the Garos. In this regard, in March 2001, Chengku Momin, the Minister for Information and Publicity of the PLF-M had warned all the non-Garos, not to contest the State Assembly and district council elections that was held in 2003<sup>5</sup>.

Mushrooming militant groups in the State has become a cause of concern. Fractional groups have added oil to the fire, and no two groups have meeting ground. Within Garo community, the ANVC differs from the other Garo separatist organisations. The Garo National Council (GNC) aims for a Garo State comprising present districts of the Garo hills, while, the ANVC demands the present districts of the Garo Hills in Meghalaya and large chunks of Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam (Understanding Meghalaya, 2010). When the ANVC and its splinter group, ANVC-B are officially under ceasefire with the GoI, the United Achik Liberation Army (UALA) and the Achik National Liberation Army (ANLA) formed in October 2013, and are active in the interior areas of the Garo Hills and its adjoining areas of Assam and the West Khasi Hills. The Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) was subsequently formed in 2009, under the leadership of a former Deputy Superintendent of Police of Meghalaya, P.R. Sangma alias Champion R. Sangma, after deserting the Police Force. Mr. Sohan D. Shira, former ANVC ‘area commander’ for the East Garo Hills is the ‘Commander-in-Chief’ of the outfit (GNLA). The cadre base of the outfit is mainly formed by deserters from ANVC, Liberation of Achik Elite Force (LAEF) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). Since its formation, the GNLA has been involved in killing, abduction, extortion, bomb blasts and attacks on Security Forces (SFs). The law and order situation in the Garo-dominated areas has deteriorated after the outfit was formed<sup>6</sup>. Meanwhile, ANVC suffered a further split in mid-November 2013 when seven of its members deserted the designated camp where they had been living since the truce and formed a new outfit, adding to the murky scene (Das, 2013).

To be very precise, the cause of disagreement between the Khasis and the Garos is mainly because of the perceived uneven distribution of economic and political powers, especially



the implementation of the 1971 Reservation Bill<sup>7</sup>. The hegemony of the Khasis was felt during 2005 when the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBSE), which had its head office in Tura (in West Garo Hills), agreed to reorganise itself in Shillong (Khasi area) along the lines demanded by the Khasi Students' Union (KSU). Undoubtedly, these episodes shaped the embittered situation between the Khasis and the Garos, which further led to violence. The subsequent massive outcries have been caused due to demand of the Garos for a separate State (Upadhyaya, *et al.*, 2013). The demonstrations and agitations were intensified in the State by the Garo Hills State Movement Committee (GHSMC), a conglomeration of various pressure groups and political groups of the Garo community. Their ultimate demand is that the GoI should consider creation of two separate States—one each for Garos and Khasi-Jaintia based on linguistic lines as envisaged in the States Reorganisation Act, 1956. The Garo National Council (GNC) and the Garo Students' Union (GSU) are demanding a separate State for the Garos on linguistic lines, while the Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) is demanding a Khasi-Jaintia State. These differences among them in terms of their demands have further caused unrest in Meghalaya in 2000s.

## **5. Discussion of the Study**

Since the mid-1990s, following the concerted efforts made by the Government and the community leaders, there has been a considerable improvement in the ethnic relations between the tribes and migrants in the State. After getting assurance from the Chief Minister, E.K Mawlong, various fierce movements especially the Khasi Students' Union, against the outsiders had been withdrawn in September 2001. The demand includes removal of the Nagas, Mizos and Kukis from the official list of indigenous tribes of Meghalaya. According to Srikanth (2005), the largest and the most influential community, the Khasis, who were vehemently agitating against the outsiders, are now becoming more matured and consequently, the State of Meghalaya today is definitely not what it was in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Literally, the State of Meghalaya is not comparable to some other states of NER like—Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram, in terms of historical, social, political and demographic equation. Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya was a British outpost and later the capital of undivided Assam which included almost all the hill States of present NER (e.g. Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya). As a result, Shillong (the East Khasi Hills district) or Meghalaya in general had received a sizeable non-tribal population before the Statehood was conferred.

The major portions of the Khasi region (including Jaintias and Ri-Bhoi) in its eastern and northern boundary share border with Assam's four districts– Kamrup, Karbi-Anglong, N.C. Hills and Cachar. Similarly, the Garo Hills districts share border with Assam's Goalpara and Dhubri districts. Besides, the State shares almost 450 km long porous border along its southern and western boundary with Bangladesh. Therefore, the people of Meghalaya cannot just isolate themselves from the history and pretend to write on a clean slate that they are the lone indigenous community in the State (Mukhim, 2013). Violence against the outsiders or migrants cannot solve the predicaments that they perceive. The indigenous communities become outsider when they move out of their respective homes. If outsiders are to be targeted, the same may be expected when they move out of the state (Meghalaya). One should consider the limitations of the others and respect other communities' difficulties (Singha, 2012). In this context, seeing the new ethnic movements in Meghalaya, Mukhim (2013) further raised few questions– “[w]hen we need a good doctor, do we check his tribe, caste, class or do we repose our faith on his expertise and his credentials? The same is the case with a good teacher or lawyer. So, if we are inter-dependent then is it not fair to share a slice of the cake with those who strive to build Meghalaya as much as the tribes of Meghalaya do?”

Although the relation between the tribes (indigenous communities) and non-tribes (migrants from outside) improved in 2000s, ethnic tensions in Meghalaya shifted to the so called indigenous tribes, causing internal conflicts in the recent past (Haokip, 2013). In reality, the internal squabble was an accumulated effect, started right after the Statehood period (Upadhyaya, *et al.*, 2013). Following a perceived deprivation, the Khasis demanded revision of 1971 Reservation Bill. At the same time, Garos felt marginalised by the majority Khasis. For instances, KSU demanded 50 per cent of government jobs for Khasi-Jaintias combined, Jaintia Students' Union (JSU) demanded that all the three major indigenous groups, the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias should get 30 per cent each and the remaining 10 per cent should be given to other communities (Srikanth, 2005). But the key questions rose in this context are– who is being relatively deprived-off and by whom? Which district or tribe is deprived-off?

To begin with, Table 1 depicts district-wise literacy rate, density of population and decadal population growth rate, while Table 2 shows the percentage change in Below Poverty Line<sup>8</sup> (BPL) families in different districts over the years. Considering a lesser growth rate of population and higher literacy rate as better development indicators, East Khasi Hill being

an administrative district and having within it the State Capital, Shillong, it performed well in both aspects. While the other districts, whether the Garo Hills or Khasi Hills were found to be performing more or less the same. Of course, the percentage change in rural BPL households in Khasi districts have improved considerably well vis-a-vis the Garo hills over the years from 1990s to 2000s. In terms of annual average sectoral growth rates across the districts (Table 3), as expected, the East Khasi Hills district registered higher growth in all the three sectors– primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. Ri-Bhoi district (Khasi region) also performed equally well. South Garo Hills district performed slightly better than that of any other Garo hills districts in this regard, but lesser than that of the Khasi Hills districts.

While referring to the physical infrastructure (Table 4), barring West Khasi hills district, the rest of the Khasi districts performed much better as compared to the State average in terms of percentage of villages connected by *pucca* road and electricity connection in 1991 and 2001 respectively. Ironically, in totality, the socio-economic indices depicted in Table 5 (using F. Bourignon index),<sup>9</sup> consisting of economic, health, education and Human Development Index (HDI) highlighted a different picture. Overall, the socio-economic indices of the South Garo Hills district reveals relatively better performances bypassing East Khasi hills district, which was considered to be the most developed district in the State. These findings convoluted to draw a conclusion that the Garo region is deprived of socio-economic indicators. Conversely, one cannot infer either that the Khasi region is better off in every socio-economic indicator.

In reality, the fiasco over the transfer of MBSE office from Tura to Shillong (as argued by Haokip, 2013) was not the genesis of ethnic divide between Khasi and Garo in Meghalaya. Economic and political factors have more influence on this. As analysed above, one can argue that the Garos belong to the Bodo family, who are concentrated in the present Assam and spearheading separatist movement for their homeland in Assam. At the same time, a sizable number of Garo populations are also found in Assam. The GNC is fighting for the portion of the Garo dominated areas (Garo hill districts) of the present Meghalaya, while the ANVC is quite optimistic and ambitious to incorporate Garo hill districts of Meghalaya and some of the adjoining districts of the present Assam. Even the State Ministers (e.g. Social Welfare Minister Ms. D.C. Marak) support and involve with the outfit (The Hindu, 2014b). They do not want to be dictated by the Khasis. On the other hand, the Khasis want to enjoy their privilege of dominance and do not want to sacrifice their legacy of movement against the outsiders in the hands of any other community, especially the Garos.

Secondly, had *the Karbis* and *the Mikirs* of the present Assam joined Meghalaya at the time when they were given a chance to be part of the State in 1972, there could have been a different situation. If the demand for a separate State of the Garos or the Khasis is considered, one can easily expect another demand or re-alignment of the present State boundary by amalgamating other smaller communities like, the Kochs, the Hajongs, the Rabhas, the Mikirs, etc. who have been living for years along with the three major tribes in Meghalaya. Having thought of these consequences, in response to the Garos' demand for a separate State raised by GNC legislator C.R. Marak in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, the Deputy Chief Minister in-charge Mr. R.C. Laloo replied that "there was economic disparity among the people of the State and also overall economic condition of the people of the State especially in rural areas. It is our duty to take necessary steps to ameliorate the economic hardship of our people and bring about all round economic improvement in the State and not to divide it" (The Hindu, 2014a).

Third, the identity assertion of the Rabhas has given rise to ethnic conflict between the Rabhas and non-Rabhas (especially Garos) within Rabha Hasong areas in Assam and east Garo hills in Meghalaya in December 2010 and January 2011. The problem started when the Rabha Hasong demand area included 416 villages inhabited by Garo people which also formed a part of the proposed area demanded by GNC as a separate Garo Autonomous Council in Assam. At the same time, the ANVC is fighting for amalgamation of the present districts of the Garo Hills in Meghalaya and a large chunk of Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam. In reality, the Rabhas are recognised as Scheduled Caste category in Goalpara district of Assam but not in the contiguous East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. The East Garo Hills district has its own Autonomous District Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. But because the Rabhas are not a Scheduled Tribe community in Meghalaya, they never had their representation in the elected district council. For quite some time, the Rabhas had been agitating in the Garo Hills in Meghalaya for gaining Scheduled Tribe status, but the Garos opposed to it. Therefore, the Rabhas resorted to call for road blockade in certain parts of Assam (Goalpara and Kamrup districts) that links between the two areas of Meghalaya– the Garo Hills and Khasi Hills. If one has to travel from Tura, the headquarters of Garo Hills to Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya situated in Kashi Hills, one has to go through Assam via Goalpara and Guwahati (Kamrup district)<sup>10</sup>.

Last, but not the least, the larger issue that hardly any scholar has exposed is ‘the exploitation of the indigenous tribes by their respective elite sections’. Most of the community lands have been grabbed by the elite land grabbers, coal baron for their vested interests. Very systematically, in the pretext of tribal land ownership, the elite sections of the community (who include coal barons, politicians, bureaucrats, policemen and even surrendered militants) with the tacit support of the village headmen converting the common forest land into individual lands and using them. As a consequence of which the poor villagers are becoming landless, their livelihoods are curtailed, environment is devastated and rivers are polluted. In this context, Mohrmen (2014) opined that unlike in the other States in the country, the problem in Meghalaya is not because of the outsiders, but the threat is from the rich tribal elites who are themselves members of the community. For instances, these same people who under the pretext of tribal rights to land ownership (a customary practice), have violated another tradition of protecting and preserving nature which the tribal call their mother.

## **6. Concluding Remarks**

As we have discussed above, though Meghalaya is relatively better off in terms of conflict and violence situation than its NER counterparts, one cannot completely ignore the tensions that have escalated in the post-statehood periods. In addition, the State has experienced a series of communal riots between the outsiders and insiders since the late 1970s. However, in the recent past, the ethnic tension which was heightened between the tribes (indigenous groups) and non-tribes (migrants) have now slowly shifted towards the indigenous tribes in 2000s. This ultimately has led to the demand for creation of separate States, both by the Khasis and the Garos for their own. Perceived economic and political discrimination among the major communities, especially the Khasis and Garos has caused tensions between them. The Khasis are blaming the Garos and vice-versa. How the ethnic tension which was directed against the outsiders got shifted towards inter and intra tribe conflict and the issues of rationality of their internal autonomy movements have been the bone of contentions in the present paper.

Following a united struggle of the three dominant indigenous communities, namely, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos, the Meghalaya State came into existence in 1972. Even in the post-statehood period, the movements against the outsiders were made in unison by all the indigenous tribes of the State. Shillong was developed as an educational centre,

added the North-Eastern Hill University in the post-statehood, led to growth of higher education in the State at the fast pace. The anxiety about the employment among the educated youth started when the employment opportunity growth in the State was proportionately lower than that of the higher education and the existing employment, business establishments had already been occupied by the outsiders. This was the major cause of conflicts between the outsiders and the tribes in 1980s, exacerbated in 1990s and witnessed three riots against the outsiders. As discussed above, after getting assurance from the then Chief Minister, the aggressive movements led by the KSU subsided and taken more matured steps. Their demands starting from reservation policy to monitoring of trade licences to the outsiders, from tribal land holding issue to driving out outsiders. Slowly, the KSU formed political party and the leader, Paul Lyngdoh joined the then Chief Minister D.D. Lapang's cabinet as Minister of sports and youth affairs in 2003. Interestingly, Lyngdoh himself found it difficult to deliver demands that was initiated by him. Still, the Khasis being the majority community, especially in the Shillong, the KSU played a decisive role in the State politics, influencing the government and the political parties. Their hegemonic role had in fact shrunk the democratic space for the rise of other organisations within the State. This exclusivity led to internal squabble, slowly shifted to internecine struggle against each other within the State. Against the Khasi hegemony, in the Garo Hills, the Garos called for a bandh and protested against the Khasis (Srikanth, 2005). Other smaller tribes have also followed Garos and the organisations have slowly been divided broadly into two, on the ethnic line— Khasi-Jaintia united and Garo. Further, the Garos' demand for Garo Land was heavily opposed by the Rabhas and they also want their basic rights as their fellow members get in Assam across the State.

As the bone of contention between the communities in the State has been identified as the economic and political one, the demand for separate States for their own cannot be the panacea for infighting situation. If one thinks and analyses logically, there is no guarantee that the Garos will not demand for the integration of the Garos of Meghalaya with the Garos living in Assam or even with the *Bodo* community of Assam in the near future (as the Garo is a Bodo family), and also the GNLA cadres consisting of Bodo militant splinters of Assam. On the other, there is also no guarantee that the Jaintias will not fight for their identity or separation from Khasis in the near future, as they are also a major constituent group in the larger Khasi ethnic identity. The same holds good for the communities like, the *Bhois*, the *Wars* or any other sub-tribes of the larger Khasi ethnic or linguistic group. As we

have seen the riots between Rabhas and Garos in 2010 and 2011, one can expect Rabhas' share in Garo hills.

Therefore, instrumentalist way of politicising and polarising communities by their elite leaders for economic or personal vote stunt opportunities would only aggravate the present crisis of Meghalaya. Rather, the State should strive to further uplift her economy with due emphasis on equitable distribution of resources and fruits of development. Otherwise, the ethnic conflict will definitely ransom and slow down development initiatives in the State. The more we stress on the conglomeration ethnic-based identity, the sharper will be the contours for conflict in the society. Meghalaya being a State of multi-tribes and communities, one should learn to live in coexistence and accommodative spirit. As the two major warring communities of the State— the Khasi and the Garos are ethnically heterogeneous, linguistically different and geographically isolated, there seems to be locked in bitter internecine struggles against each other. Therefore, inter community relation can be improved by improving inter-district connectivity particularly the road networks between the two geographically isolated towns, Tura and Shillong (main towns of Garo and Khasi hills respectively). Otherwise, it makes very limited interaction between the two major communities (Khasi and Garo) in Meghalaya and consequently develops distrust among them.

**Acknowledgement:** This paper is an abridged version of the paper presented in the National Convention at GIDR, Ahmadabad on February 11, 2015.

## References

- Baruah, A.K. (2004): Ethnic conflicts and traditional self-governing institutions: A study of Laitumkhrah Dorbar. Working Paper No. 39, Crisis States Programme, LSE, London: Development Research Centre.
- Baruah, S. (1989): Indigenous peoples, cultural survival and minority policy in Northeast India. *Cultural Survival Quarterly*. [Retrieved from <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/india/indigenous-peoples-cultural-survival-and-minority-pol>]
- Census of India (2011): *Meghalaya Census of India* [Retrieved from [http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data\\_files/meghalaya/2.%20highlights.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/meghalaya/2.%20highlights.pdf)]
- Das, D. (2007): Cultural politics, identity crisis and private capitalism in coal mines of Meghalaya, Northeast India. Case study No. 16, Artisanal and small-scale mining in Asia-pacific portal [Retrieved [http://asmasiapacific.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/ASMAP-CS16\\_Debojyoti.pdf](http://asmasiapacific.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/ASMAP-CS16_Debojyoti.pdf)]
- Das, R.P. (2013): Assam and Meghalaya: Threats of violence in Garo heartland. Article No. 4192, November 26, Guwahati: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies.
- Gohain, H. (2014): A note on recent ethnic violence in Assam. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49(13): 19-22.

- Govt. of Meghalaya (2006): *Meghalaya Hand Book 2006*, Planning Department, Shillong: Government of Meghalaya.
- Haokip, T. (2013): Inter-ethnic relations in Meghalaya. *Asian Ethnicity*, DOI: 10.1080/14631369.2013.853545.
- Hussain, M. (1987): Tribal movement for autonomous state in Assam. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 22(32): 1329-1332.
- Irobi, E.G. (2005): Ethnic conflict management in Africa: A comparative case study of Nigeria and South Africa. [Retrieved from <http://www.beyondintractability.org/casestudy/irobi-ethnic>]
- Govt. of Meghalaya (2008): *Meghalaya Human Development Report 2008*, Planning Department, Shillong: Government of Meghalaya.
- Mohrmen, H.H. (2014): Land ownership and the survival of the community, Shillong: The Shillong Times, 10 November 2014 [<http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2014/11/10/land-ownership-and-the-survival-of-the-community/>]
- Mukhim, P. (2013): Non-tribals in Meghalaya– Non-citizens or half citizens? Shillong: *The Shillong Times*, Friday, March 22.
- Nayak, P. & Ray, S. (2010): Inter-district disparities in Meghalaya: A human development approach, In Nayak, P. (ed.), *Growth and human development in North East India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp.201-216.
- News (2014): Meghalaya assembly rejects resolution creation of Garoland, 18<sup>th</sup> March [<http://news.webindia123.com/news/articles/India/20140318/2359275.html>]
- Phukan, M.D. (2013): Ethnicity, conflict and population displacement in Northeast India. *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(2): 91-101.
- Rahman, M.Z. (2011): North-east India– Protracted conflicts and protracted peace processes. In Chandran, D.S. and Chari, P.R. (eds.): *Armed conflict in South Asia 2010– Growing left-wing extremism and religious violence*, New Delhi: Routledge, pp. 123-151.
- Rammohan, E.N. (2007): The insurgent North-east. In Kumar, B.B. (Ed.), *Problems of ethnicity in the North-east India*, Delhi: Astha Bharati, pp. 58-80.
- Saxena, N.C. (2002): Rural poverty in Meghalaya– Its nature, dimensions and possible options. [Retrieved <http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/articles/ncsxn/ncsax3.htm>]
- Singha, K. (2012): Identity, contestation and development in North East India: A study of Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. *Journal of Community Positive Practices*, 12 (3):403-424.
- Srikanth, H. (2005): Prospects of liberal democracy in Meghalaya: A study of civil society's response to KSU-led agitation. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(36):3985-3993.
- The Assam Tribune (2013): New forum to espouse separate state demand, Guwahati: *The Assam Tribune*, Thursday, September 5.
- The Hindu (2014a): Meghalaya assembly rejects resolution creation of Garo-land, March 18, 2014 [<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/meghalaya-assembly-rejects-resolution-for-garoland/article5800694.ece>]
- (2014b): Meghalaya minister charge-sheeted for taking help of militant outfit. Wednesday, November 5, *The Hindu*, Kolkata, p.2.
- Understanding Meghalaya (2010): *Understanding Meghalaya, July 5, 2010* [Retrieved from <http://dharma-yuddham.blogspot.in/2010/07/understanding-meghalaya.html>]
- Upadhyaya, A. S.; Upadhyaya, P. and Yadav, A.K. (2013): Interrogating peace in Meghalaya. Core Policy Brief No. 03, *Cultures of Governance and Conflict Resolution in Europe and India*, Oslo: Peace Research Institute.



### Annexure Tables

**Table 1: District-wise Literacy and Population Growth Rate (in %)**

Districts	Literacy Rate		Population Growth Rate		Density of Population
	2001	2011	1991-01	2001-11	
East Garo Hills	62	76	33	26	122
West Garo Hills	51	68	29	27	173
South Garo Hills	64	72	31	29	77
Jaintia Hills	53	63	36	31	103
Ri-Bhoi	55	77	51	34	109
East Khasi Hills	75	85	23	25	292
West Khasi Hills	66	79	34	30	73
<b>Meghalaya</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>132</b>

Source: Census (2011 provisional); Govt. of Meghalaya (2008); Govt. of Meghalaya (2006)

**Table 2: District-wise Rural BPL Households in Meghalaya (in %)**

Districts	1991	1998	2002
East Garo Hills	68.5	34.2	55.9
West Garo Hills	66.2	63	53.7
South Garo Hills	–	70.6	45.3
Jaintia Hills	56.1	44.2	39.5
Ri-Bhoi	–	41.8	49.9
East Khasi Hills	33.2	55.2	46.7
West Khasi Hills	29.2	64.9	47.7
<b>Meghalaya</b>	<b>48.9</b>	<b>54.5</b>	<b>48.9</b>

Source: Saxena (2002)

**Table 3: District-wise Sectoral Average Annual Gr. Rate (1999-00 to 2007-08) at 1999-00 Constant Prices**

Sector	Agriculture	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	NSDP
Jaintia Hills	2.65	7.32	8.98	5.68	6.97
East Khasi Hills	10.37	10.09	12.05	6.86	8.07
West Khasi Hills	4.64	5.49	7.53	4.76	5.51
Ri-Bhoi	6.41	6.35	27.03	6.36	9.25
East Garo Hills	1.71	2.21	19.15	5.07	5.8
West Garo Hills	4.11	4.23	10.69	6.18	6.1
South Garo Hills	6.91	8.15	11.61	5.17	7.51
<b>Meghalaya</b>	<b>5.52</b>	<b>6.53</b>	<b>12.42</b>	<b>6.27</b>	<b>7.19</b>

Source: Govt. of Meghalaya (2008)

**Table 4: District-wise Road and Electricity Connectivity**

Districts	% of Village Connected by Pucca Road (in 1991)	% of Electrified Villages (in 2001)
East Garo Hills	12.7	33.22
West Garo Hills	12.7	36.49
South Garo Hills	10.1	19.66
Jaintia Hills	27.1	62.31
Ri-Bhoi	19.3	66.11
East Khasi Hills	26.2	74.13
West Khasi Hills	11.9	35.28
<b>Meghalaya</b>	<b>16.4</b>	<b>44.93</b>

Source: Govt. of Meghalaya (2008)

**Table 5: District-wise Bourguignon\* Socio-economic Indices (In order of Rank)**

Districts	Economic	Education	Health	HDI
East Garo Hills	5	3	5	5
West Garo Hills	4	2	7	3
South Garo Hills	1	1	3	1
Jaintia Hills	7	7	1	6
Ri-Bhoi	3	4	4	4
East Khasi Hills	2	6	2	2
West Khasi Hills	6	5	6	7

Source: Nayak and Ray (2010)

\*Bourguignon Index is an inequality index, measured as:

$$S(X) = \left( \sum_{k=1}^K w_k x_{ik}^{\alpha} \right)^{1/\beta}$$

where  $\alpha$  is related to the degree of aversion of the society with respect to inequality and the degree of substitution is normally set to be  $\beta \leq 1$ .

### End Note:

1 India's NER consists of seven states- Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Later on, the state of Sikkim joined in the region's fabric in 2002. At present, including Sikkim, NER consists of eight states.

2 A matrilineal society is a society in which lineage, birthright and social classification are traced through the mother's ancestry. A key detail of the society is the favoritism of daughters over sons. This is related to the idea that the mother's familial line determines position within society, rather than the father's.

3 'Ki-Hynniew-Trep' refers to 'Seven Huts' or 'Seven Families', the first settlers on earth according to their (Khasis) legend.

4 This section is excerpted from Understanding Meghalaya (2010).

5 Excerpted from SATP: [[http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/meghalaya/terrorist\\_outfits/plf\\_m.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/meghalaya/terrorist_outfits/plf_m.htm)]

6 Retrieved from SATP: [[http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/Meghalaya/terrorist\\_outfits/GNLA.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/Meghalaya/terrorist_outfits/GNLA.htm)]

7 The 1971 Reservation Bill specified quotas of 40% for the Khasi and the Jaintia, 50% for the Garo, and 10% for the minorities in government jobs and educational institutions.

8 Below Poverty Line (BPL) is an economic benchmark and poverty threshold used by the government of India to indicate economic disadvantage and to identify individuals and households in need of government assistance and aid. According to Dandekar and Rath Committee, "an average calorie norm of 2,250 calories per capita per day for both rural and urban areas", are defined as the poverty line.

9 Please Refer to Nayak and Ray (2010).

10 This section is heavily excerpted from [<http://www.claws.in/1082/the-rabha-garo-conundrum-jaikhlong-basumatry.html>]