

State and Identity Movements: A Study of Chutias in Assam

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requirement for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Political Science**

By

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CERTIFICATE

Certified that the Dissertation entitled “**STATE AND IDENTITY MOVEMENTS: A STUDY OF CHUTIAS IN ASSAM**” submitted by Mr. Ridip Khanikar in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY in Political Science** is a bonafide research work. This work has not been submitted previously for any other degree of this or any other university. It is further certified that candidate has complied with all formality as per requirement of Assam University. I recommend the Dissertation be placed before examiners for consideration of award of degree of master of philosophy of the university.

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DECLARATION

This Dissertation entitled “**STATE AND IDENTITY MOVEMENTS: A STUDY OF CHUTIAS IN ASSAM**” submitted for the possible award of Master of Philosophy in Political Science of the Assam University, Silchar has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other university and is my original work.

(Ridip Khanikar)
Assam University, Silchar

Dedicated

To

MY Mother and Brother

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CONTENTS

	Page No
Certificate	
Declaration	
Dedication	
Acknowledgement	
List of Tables	
List of Abbreviations	
Chapter- I: Introduction	1-
• Introduction	
• Statement of the Problem	
• Conceptual Framework	
• Theoretical Framework	
• Review of Literature	
• Objectives	
• Research Questions	
• Methodology	
▪ Study Area	
▪ Data Collection	
▪ Respondents of the study	
▪ Data Analysis	
▪ Delimitation of the Study	
• Chapterization	
Chapter- II: Politics Of Identities And The Indian State: An Analysis	
• Introduction	
• Politics of Identities and the Indian State	
• The Issues of Ethno-cultural Identity Proliferation: A Post-colonial Scene of Assam	
Chapter-III: Chutias Identity Construction and Assertions: History and Development	
• Introduction:	
• Tracing the Roots of the Chutias Identity Construction and Development:	
▪ During the Ahom Regime: (the Pre- Colonial Phase):	
▪ Chutias Ethnic Assertions in British Regime, 1826-1947: (the Colonial Phase):	
❖ Social-cultural Status of the Chutias in British Census Reports:	
❖ Educational status of the Chutias: Basis of Present Identity Assertion:	
❖ Economic Status of the Chutias:	
▪ The End Comment: The Post-Colonial Context:	

Chapter IV: Group Mobilization and Dynamics of Chutias Identity Assertion: Response of the State

- Introduction:
- Brief Profiles of the Chutia Ethnic Organizations
 - All Chutia Caste Conference, Assam:
 - All Assam Chutia Student Union:
 - All Assam Chutia Caste Women Conference:
 - All Assam Chutia Caste Youth Conference:
- Towards Articulation of Chutias Ethnic Identity: A Chronological Order
 - The First Phase: Socio-Cultural Assertions of the Chutias (1925-1935):
 - The Second Phase: Assortment of Socio-Economic and Political Assertions (1935-1979):
 - The Third Phase: Politico- cultural Assertion of the Chutias (1980s onwards):
 - Schedule Tribe Status: The Constitutional Arrangement:
 - Who are STs?
 - What is Sixth Schedule?
 - The Constitutional Criteria followed for specification of a community as Scheduled Tribe:
 - Modalities for deciding claims for inclusion in or exclusion from the lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes:
 - Constitutional Criteria and the Chutias Demand For ST Status
 - Facebook and the 'Chutia' Identity:
 - Constitution of Chutia Development Council and Response of the Chutia Organizations
 - End Comment:

Chapter- V: Data Analysis and Interpretations

Chapter- VI: Conclusion (Major Findings and Recommendations)

Bibliography:

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AACSU -	All Assam Chutia Student Union
AACCYC -	All Assam Chutia Caste Youth Conference:
AADSU -	All Assam Dimasa Student Union
AAGSP -	All Assam Gana Sangram Parishod
AAHSU -	All Assam Hajong Student Union
AAKSU -	All Assam Karbi Student Union
AAMKJP -	All Assam Mech Kachari Juba Porishad
AAMTSU -	All Assam Man Tai Student Union
AASKSU -	All Assam Saraniya Kachari Student Union
AASKSU -	All Assam Sonowal Kachari Student Union
AASU -	All Assam Student Union
AAPTL -	All Assam Plains Tribal League
AATKSU-	All Assam Thengal Kachari Student Union
AATS-	All Assam Tribal Sangha
AATSU -	All Assam Tiwa Student Union
ABSU -	All Bodo Student Union
ACCCA -	All Chutia Caste Conference, Assam
ACCWC -	All Assam Chutia Caste Women Conference
ACSC -	Assam Civil Service Commission
ARSU -	All Rabha Student Union
ASS -	Assam Sahitya Shabha
ATL -	Assam Tribal League
BAC -	Bodo Autonomous Council
BBS -	Britiyal Bonia Sangha
BSS -	Bodo Shahitya Sabha
BTC -	Bodoland Territorial Council
CDC -	Chutia Development Council
CM -	Chief Minister
IAS -	Indian Administrative Service

IFS -	Indian Foreign Service
INC -	Indian National Congress
IPS -	Indian Police Service
LPG -	Liberalization Privatization and Globalization
MLA -	Member of Legislative Assembly
MOBC -	More Other Backward Community
MSS -	Mising Sahitya Sabha
NCST-	National Commission for Scheduled Tribes
NDA-	National Democratic Alliance
NEI -	North East India
NEITPF -	North East Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Forum
OBC -	Other Backward Community
PM -	Prime Minister
PTCA -	Plains Tribal Council of Assam
RGI-	Registrar General of India
SAAA -	Sodou Asom Ahom Association
SC -	Scheduled Caste
ST -	Scheduled Tribes
TMPK -	Takam Missing Porim Kabang
TSF -	Tribal Student Federation
UPA-	United Progressive Alliance
UT-	Union Territory

LIST OF TABLES

Table No No	Name of Tables	Page
Table-1.01:	Distribution of Respondents in Sampling	
Table-3:01	Economic Condition of the Chutias in British Administration	
Table-5.01:	Distribution of Respondents' Opinion Regarding the Causes Responsible for the Chutias Identity Movement	
Table 5.02:	Distribution of Respondents' Opinion Regarding the Demands Raised by the Chutia Civil Society Organizations	
Table 5.03:	Distribution of Respondents' Assessment regarding the role of Chutia Civil Society Organizations in Mobilizing the Community	
Table-5.04:	Distribution of Respondents' Opinion Regarding State Government's Response towards the Chutia Movement	
Table 5.05:	Distribution of Respondents' Opinion Regarding Working of the CDC	
Table-5.06:	Distribution of Respondents' Opinion Regarding Solution of the Chutias Identity Problem	

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Introduction:

The ongoing demands for Schedule Tribe or ST (hereafter) recognition of the six non-tribal groups¹ of Assam have accentuated a new dimension of identity politics in the state. In fact, their assertions for ST status have not only influenced the gamut of state politics of Assam but also marked a paradigm shift of the discourse of identity politics from tribals to the non-tribals. The present study deals with this new dimension of identity politics with special focus on the longstanding identity movement of the Chutia community of Assam.

Statement of the Problem:

The Chutias are an aboriginal ethnic group of Assam (Acharyya 1992, 222; Baruah: 1993). In the Deori-Chutia language (dialect) the meaning of the word 'Chutia' is - *chu/soo* means 'gentle', '*ti*' means 'high' and '*ya*' means 'land': 'gentleman living in the high land' (Baruah: 2012, 807). Racially the Chutias, majority of who live in the Brahmaputra Valley are of mongoloid origin. Their original language which is still spoken by the Deories, who had been their priestly class, is closely akin to Bodo group (Baruah: 1993, 31). In many official records² of the British India Government, they were classed with the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley like the Rabhas, Kacharis, Mikirs and Lalungs. According to E.T. Dalton³, their original habitation was in the hills up the river Suvansiri in the present Arunachal Pradesh. Later on they crossed the river,

¹ Ahom, Chutia, Koch Rajbongshi, Moran, Motak and Tea-Tribes

² Report on the Census of Assam, 1881, pp. 75-76; Report on the Census of Assam, 1891, vol. I, Shillong, 1992, p. 233, WW Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam Reprint 1975, p. 34; B C Allen, Assam District Gazetters, vol. VII, Lakhimpur, Calcutta 1905, p. 19, Cited here from K Baruah ed (2012). *Oitihakhik Bibortanat Asomor Chutia Janagosthi*. Gohpur, Kiran Prakash, p. 647

³ E T Dalton, Notes on the Chutias of Upper Assam. Cited here from K Baruah ed (2012). *Ibid.*, p. 647

proceeded towards the east and established them at Sadiya. They founded a kingdom centering on Sadiya in the early part of the 12th century, which covered the major parts of the present districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar and Lakhimpur and a part of Arunachal Pradesh. A place called Kundil near Sadiya still bears the archeological remains of their capital (Baruah: 1993). At present Chutias are mostly concentrated in the region of upper Assam mainly in Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Nagoan of the south bank and in Lakhimpur, Sonitpur and Dhemaaji districts of the north bank of the Brahmaputra. According to a report prepared by Ismail Husain and Purna Bora⁴, there are many Chutia villages in other districts of Assam including Cachar of Barak valley⁵, Meghalaya⁶, Tripura⁷ and Bangladesh⁸.

As found in the written histories, Birpal was the founder king of the Chutia kingdom existed in-between 1189 to 1524 A.D. Ratnadhaj pal, who is said to have been born with the grace of Lord Kubera, established the powerful Chutia kingdom at Sadiya. Thus, from 1189 to 1524 A.D. 17 kings had been ascended the throne of the Chutia kingdom (Baruah and Nath: 2007, 45; Acharyya: Ibid). When the Ahoms came to Assam, the Chutias were the most powerful tribe in the eastern Assam and the formers therefore avoided to clash with the later. About three hundred years later, taking the advantage of some internal disorder in the Chutia kingdom, the Ahom king Suhungmung Dihingia (1497-1539 A.D.) defeated the Chutias and annexed them with their

⁴ Cited here from D. Sarma (2006). *Chutia Hokolor Atmo Porichitir Songramor Ek Sotika*. Jorhat, Akolobya Prokashon, p.42

⁵ Borgul, Vitorgul, Tarapur, Koijajani, Chaligram, Sudorsonpur, Konapur, Naturbondh, Gumra, Adorkona, Borthom, Borgul, Alkharagul, Majergul, Kacharigoan, Ghilajian, Anglabajar, Elam, Mobakdoma and Darakapur

⁶ Rongamati, Echamati, and Banhtola

⁷ Kanchan and Koylachal

⁸ Ghunirban, Borigoan, Japlung, Lakorpar, Borbhag, Soilachol, Bogai, Turung, Bijoyporua Kanaiaig, Borhom, Hijpur, Barpuji, Hatpuli, Borhompur, Jibonpur, Koijam, Batorbhag and Kunepar

kingdom (1523 A.D.). Suhungmung disbanded the Chutia nobility and established them at different places with a view to prevent their rebellion in future (Baruah: 1993).

However, the fall of Chutias from the then political hegemony in upper Assam greatly impaired their items of aristocracy as well as their natural growth of population, as the emigrant intermarried with the people amongst whom they were settled. Many of them were assimilated and converted to other ethnic folds. It is for this reason that some people among the neighboring hill tribes like Nagas, Khasi Jayantiyas, Misings etc used to claimed their affinity with the Chutias and they identified themselves as Naga Chutia, Mising Chutia and Khasi Chutia. So, looking at their interfused identities, the British ruler divided them in 1881 into four cultural groups namely–i) Hindu Chutia, ii) Deori Chutia, iii) Borahi Chutia, and iv) Ahom Chutia (Baruah: *ibid*; Baruah & Nath: 2007, 229). This division however, does not hold relevance in recent times because all Chutias now introduce themselves simply as Chutia and all those who had interfused with others identified themselves with respective tribes and communities. The Borahis as a result are now almost extinct. The Deoris on the other hand have already included in the Plain Scheduled Tribal List of Assam. Furthermore, it is noteworthy here that up to 1921 population census in British India, Chutias were recorded as tribes of plain Assam. It was only in the 1931 census, they were omitted from the list of tribes (Baruah: 1993). This was mainly due to the reason that they preferred introducing themselves as caste-Hindus to that of the tribe. Because the social status of the caste Hindus was then superior to that of a tribal identity as a tribal did not carry any benefit or privilege. On the other hand Deoris, the priestly section of the Chutias, were referred as tribes, because they retained the animistic cult, practices and original language.

The growing consciousness for reviving as well as preserving their linguistic originality has revealed an important dimension of Chutias identity assertion. In fact, language is the basic component of an ethno-cultural identity. It is noteworthy that like the many other groups, Chutias also lost their original language in due course of time. In the report of 1921 population Census, it was narrated that ‘the Chutia language appears to be have been the only language in existence at the period of the advent of Ahoms to Assam’.⁹ As G. R. Grierson coated, “the Chutia indeed, may fairly claim to be the original language of upper Assam”.¹⁰ W. B. Brown wrote, “The people are generally called Deoris simply the language is more popularly known as Chutia”.¹¹ However, the Deori-Chutia language is a sub-branch of the greater *Chin-Tibbeto Language* family.¹² Thus, there is a close relationship among the languages of Tiwa (Lalung), Deori and Kachari which signify that they are originated of the same linguistic fold (Bodo).¹³ Of course, at present nobody of the Chutias speaks the existing Deori dialects. But, effort has been continuing for reviving their original Deori-Chutia language. For that *Deori-Chutia Chu Lebaku* (Deori-Chutia language development Committee) is formed and has been actively engaging with the task. Besides language, the community has lost many other socio-cultural traits in due course of time and assimilated to the larger Assamese culture. This assimilation is not a problem for the Chutias at present. Notwithstanding, staying amid the larger Assamese identity the Chutias seek to revive, preserve and develop their ethno-cultural traits. For that they have organized and

⁹ 1921 Census Report, Cited here from S L Boruah & D Nath (edt.), *Ibid.*, p 498

¹⁰ G R Grierson, ‘Tibet- Burman Family-Chutia’. Cited here from K Boruah Edt. (2012). *Ibid.*, p. 737-745

¹¹ W. B. Brown, (1895). An Outline Grammer of the Deori Chutia Language Spoken in Upper Assam. Cited here from K Boruah Edt. (2012). *Ibid.*, p. 428

¹² W. B. Brown, (1895).op cit. ; S.K., Chatterjee, “*Kirata-Jana-Kriti*”, 1974, P. 22-25. These references are cited here from S L Boruah & D Nath Edt.(2007). *Ibid*, p.

¹³ *Ibid.*,

observed their cultural events, customs and traditions at regular intervals. Hence, the process of remaking of identity is revealed in the whole issue of Chutias identity assertion.

Like culture, economic conditions of a group also have mattered a lot in losing or reviving its ethno-cultural identity consciousness. Chutias are essentially agriculturalists and like other ethnic groups of Assam they also produce numbers of paddy in their fields. In comparison to other advanced non-tribal groups of Assam, as the Chutia ethnic leaders claimed, their economic conditions are much deplored. If there is any community wise economic census in Assam, it will bring to light their poverty and hardship. Accordingly, only a few sections of them are industrialist, businessman and government service holder. Unemployment is highly visible among the educated youth of the community. In the field of education also, the community cannot forward hand in hand with the other advanced non-tribal groups of the state. The persons holding top offices from the community are few and far between (Baruah: 1993, 31).

Furthermore, as argued by the Chutia ethnic leaders, their community is politically less representative in comparison to other communities of the state. They are proportionally unrepresentative in the state legislature as well as parliament. Their population represents a major portion of the total population of the state. In contrast, their representation in the Assam Legislative Assembly is very less. Their representation in the state cabinet as well as parliament is also hardly visible. The Chutia ethnic leaders also argued that their race is considered one of the major dynastic races in the history of medieval Assam along with the Kachari, Koch and Ahoms. Nonetheless, till today no one from the Chutia community became the Chief Minister of Assam whereas the state has witnessed many Chief Ministers who are belonged to the other three

dynastic races. For instance, Hiteswar Saikia and Tarun Gogoi from the Ahoms, Bisnuram Medhi from the Koch Rajbongshi and Jogendra Hazarika from the Kacharis ruled the state as Chief Minister (Sarmah: 2007, 513). Hence, to enjoy their relative chair in the state politics and to revive their ethno-cultural heritages, Chutias have been asserting for politico-economic reservations. Under the circumstances, as the community leaders claimed, their inclusion in the list of More Other Backward Classes (MOBC) is very insufficient to improve their overall backward condition. Therefore, the community has been demanding ST status under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution.¹⁴

Historically, Chutias identity movement traces back to the history of their first ethnic organization, the *Assam Chutia Sanmilan*, later renamed as *All Chutia Caste Conference, Assam (in 1976) or ACCCA, (hereafter)* which came into exist in 1925. Thus, since the beginning of their organized lives the community has been raising diverse demands to the state. The State also has been responding their demands with different measures. For instance, looking at their untouchable social status and backward economic conditions, the British Simon Commission (1928-1935) proposed to enlist the Chutias in the list of depressed caste groups (today SC) of Assam. But the ACCCA vehemently opposed it and demanded for retaining their existing caste Hindu status. In support of their demand, the ACCCA leadership argued that “*since ancient time the Chutias are known as a ruling race of Assam, so their inclusion along with the SCs has not only neglected their rich dynastic past but also degraded their social status*” (Chutia, 1989: 33). In accordance to their demand, the British rulers retained the Chutias in the list of caste Hindu groups of Assam. Through it, the Chutias deserved to upward their social status in the caste

¹⁴ Memorandum to Prime Minister of India on Scheduling, 1980. Cited here from K Baruah Edt. (2012). *Ibid.*, p.949 & 967

ridden social hierarchy of the Assamese society. But this was not materialized. Instead, for the first time they identified themselves as untouchables in their history of social lives. They were not treated equal by the upper caste people of the state. In their words *“inter-marriage and inter-dining are still prohibited with others of the caste Hindus though politically the Chutias are calculated to be a part of the so called caste Hindu Groups.... The Chutias are long suffering these silent miseries without any redress and encouragement from the Government and sympathy from the advanced brothers and leaders of the Caste Hindus.... Not only the Govt. is indifferent but their other Caste Hindu brothers in power are also taking no notice of the sad lot of Chutias and are not raising a voice on their behalf. Their condition is far worse thus of the depressed classes or the tribals whom we generally think to be the most undeveloped and most backward...”*¹⁵ In such circumstances, the Chutia leaders reassessed their identity orientation and demanded a separate political existence and political rights as an ethnic minority in statutory form in the new constitutional machinery to be set up in India in 1946.¹⁶ But this demand of the Chutias was not accepted. Subsequently, the Chutias joined ‘Assam Tribal League’ or ATL (hereafter) in 1946 with the hope that the membership would help them in entering in the proposed ST list in independent India (Boruah, 2007).

Besides them, the community has made diverse demands to the state in post independence period. They demanded Other Backward Classes (OBC) status in 1953 and More Other Backward Classes (MOBC) status in 1969 respectively. Both demands were granted to the community. In the late 70s of the last century, the Chutia leadership drastically shifted their

¹⁵ Memorandum on the Demands of the Chutias of Assam as a Backward Minority, 1946, cited here from D. Sarmah (2007) Ibid., p. 533

¹⁶ Ibid.

identity orientation from caste Hindu to tribal status. And since then they have been demanding ST status under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution. It is noteworthy here that apart from the ST status demand, the Chutia ethnic organizations have been raising many other socio-economic and political demands. These demands include demand for Sadhani Setu, declaration of Sadhani Divas as state official holiday (7th Bohag), building Sadhani Bhavan/ statue in every Chutia inhabited district, preservation of Chutias' historical monuments, reservations of jobs in Govt. departments, reservations of seats in the educational institutions, proportional representation of the Chutias in the State Cabinet, reservation of constituencies for the Chutias etc. But like the ST status demand, these demands of the community are also still remained unfulfilled.

It is noteworthy that the issue of non-tribals' identity assertion in Assam has been a newly added discourse which was hardly studied. The Chutias assertion has reiterated many issues including indignity and assertion for revival of culture which were usually analyzed in the context of the tribals. This is a research gap. The response of the state towards the Chutias assertion is another important issue that needs to be studied. Thus, the present study "State and Identity Movements: A Study of Chutias in Assam" is important as it is likely to deal with the issues of Chutias' identity politics in Assam.

Conceptual Framework:

Ethnicity:

Ethnicity, as a term, has its recorded history which is not even a century old. It was registered in the Oxford English Dictionary in the year 1953. The meanings were assigned as "the essence of

an ethnic group” or “the quality of belonging to an ethnic community or group” (Hutchinson and Smith 1996:4). Ethnicity is a form of group allegiance. It denotes a kind of personal identification involving a set of symbols or traits such as shared cultural heritage, ancestry, origin history, homeland, language or dialect, religion, rituals, dressing style and physical appearance which serve as the basis for this identification. According to Paul R Brass, any group of people dissimilar from other people in terms of objective cultural criteria (language or dialect, distinctive dress or diet or customs, religion or race) and containing within its membership, either in principle or in practice, the elements for complete division of labour and of reproduction forms an ethnic category. It creates internal cohesion and differentiates from other groups (Brass 1991: 19). In the present study, the term ethnicity or ethnic group is used to mean any social group which consciously shares some aspects of a common culture and is defined primarily by descent. It includes only those people who are long time occupant of a particular place and claim for a moral right to rule themselves. In that sense, considering Chutias in Assam as an ethnic group the present study deals with the identity claims/demands of the community emerged out of the crisis of their ethnic traits.

Identity Politics:

Identity politics is the politics in which people engage when they mobilize on the basis of, and when they define their experiences, their political problems, and their aims in terms of the convenience of identity-groups. Historically, identity politics grew out of the experience of identity-based oppression: the experience of inequalities in resources and opportunities that people encountered as members of particular identity groups (Hayward and Watson, 2010). As

defined by Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy¹⁷, identity politics refers to the political attitudes or positions that focus on the concerns of social groups identified mainly on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Identity politics begins with the process of identity formation of certain sections of the society who consider them to be oppressed and marginalized. Such construction of self-identity may originate on the basis race, gender or an ethnic consciousness of a group. However, mere sense of belonging to certain identity does not crystallize into a movement. It leads to a movement only when the symbols of identities (e.g. language, race or ethnicity) are utilized by elites to mobilize group sentiments (Brass, 1991: 15). Identity movements may be of various kinds. Identity movements may be of various kinds. It may be of feminist, racial, linguistic, religious, ethnic or of some other kind like LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) identity movements. Among different forms of identity politics, politics of identity based on ethnicity is one of most serious kind. Throughout the world, people of different ethnic groups are asserting for their rights which resulted in conflicts and violence. The issues of Balkans in Europe, Hutus and Tutsis in Africa, Tamils in Srilanka, Chakmas in Bangladesh, Muhajirs in Pakistan and Moros in Philippines are some of the examples of identity politics emanating from ethnicity. The identity movement of Chutias in Assam is also one of such kind. Thus, in this study, the term identity politics will be used to mean the political claims and demands made by the Chutias to secure and preserve their distinct ethnic identity.

Theoretical Framework:

From the above analysis it becomes clear that Chutias identity movement is purely an ethnicity based movement. However, with regard to ethnicity and identity, a large number of theoretical

¹⁷ Heyes, Cressida. Identity politics. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab) Stanford University. Retrieved 2012-11-11

approaches have been developed over the years which may be grouped into three schools of thoughts namely Primordialist, Instrumentalist and Constructionist.

To primordialist, ethnicity first is an ascribed identity or assigned status, something inherited from one's ancestors. For instance, if any one's ancestors are Indian then he/she is also Indian because he/she inherits physical and cultural characteristics from his forebears. Secondly, as an important corollary of ascribed identity, ethnic boundaries, which demarcate who is a member of an ethnic group and who is not, are fixed or immutable. Ethnicity is static. If he/she was born Indian, he/she will be forever Indian and can't change his/ her membership to any other groups. Finally, common ancestry determines ethnicity. In other words, people belong to an ethnic group because members of that group all share common biological and cultural origins (Yang: 2000, 42; Chandra: 2012; 3).

In contrast, to constructionist school, ethnicity is a socially constructed identity, something that is created. Ethnicity is not 'given' but is social and political constructions. It is creation of elites who draw upon, distort and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as for themselves. Second, as an extension of constructed identity, ethnic boundaries are flexible or changeable. Ethnicity is dynamic. Finally ethnic affiliation or identification is determined or constructed by society. Ethnicity is a reaction to changing social environments (Yang: Ibid, 44; Chandra: Ibid, 5, Brass: 1991, 8)

In contrast to the primordialists, the instrumentalists school treat ethnicity as a social, political and cultural resource for different interests and status groups. One version focuses on elite competitions for resources and suggests that the manipulation of symbols is vital for gaining the support of the masses and achieving political goals (Hutchinson & Smith: Ibid, 8). In short, ethnicity is an instrument or strategic tool for gaining resources. Another version examines elite strategies of maximizing preference in terms of individual rational choices in given situations (Ibid, 9). According to this theoretical framework, people became ethnic and remain ethnic when their ethnicity yields significant returns to them. In other words ethnicity exists and persists because it is useful. The functional advantage of ethnicity is range from the moral and material support provided by ethnic networks to political gains made through ethnic block voting. (Yang: ibid, 46).

In case of Chutias, the above mentioned two approaches namely primordialist and instrumentalist bear relevance. Chutias have been asserting long to preserve their distinct identity which is rooted in their history, customs and traditions. Their feeling of distinctiveness and sense of respect for their culture is very high. Therefore, the fear of losing their indigenous/aboriginal group rights at their own land in particular, responsible for the rise of identity consciousness among Chutias. Similarly, their aboriginal group identity was also being instrumentalized by their political elites for their political gains. Hence, both primordial as well as instrumental approaches are adopted as theoretical base in the present study.

Review of Literature

Followings are the literature reviewed for the present study to identify the research gaps-

1. Literatures on India and South Asia:

“Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison” (Paul Brass 1991) examines ethnic and national identity, ethnic conflicts, and secessionist movements across cultures, focusing mainly on India and the former Soviet Union. Brass theoretical formulation is based on two distinct premises, viz., 1) ethnicity and nationalism are not 'givens' but are social and political constructions and 2) ethnicity and nationalism are modern phenomena created by the activities of the modern centralizing state. To Brass, ethnic identities in multiethnic societies are always in a state of flux. Conflicts are triggered by struggle for control between elites over resource. The elites exploit the emotions and sentiments of the ethnic groups in order to gain their political, economic and social benefits. Competition among the elites for socioeconomic and political mileage precipitates ethnic identity consciousness and ethnic conflicts. The cultural norms, values, customs and practices of the ethnic groups are the instruments for the elites to compete for political power and economic advantages. The centralizing nature of the state further complicates the situation in a multi ethnic society and increases the possibilities of conflicts. With regard to conflict resolution, Brass advocates negotiation and accommodation and keeping the system open while trying to decentralize the overly centralized states.

“State, Nation and Ethnicity in Contemporary South Asia” (Ishtiaq Ahmed 1996) is an exhaustive review of literature on state, nationalism and ethnicity; it provides detailed information on nation-state projects in the four major South Asian states (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) and it highlights common attitudinal patterns among the policies and strategies pursued by the regimes and ethno-nationalists. The author considers democratic norms and processes to be prerequisites for any harmonious polity. Ahmed argues that unilateralism of the state or society leads to further marginalization which, in a South Asian context, becomes

volatile largely because of external involvement. Competition or fears of peripheralization among diverse ethno-religious minorities have been underwriting ethnic activism in South Asia. If handled through negotiations, consensus or wider socio-economic integration, this ethnic activism may lose its strength as has been the case with Tamil nationalism in India or the movements for 'Pushtunistan' and ' Greater Baluchistan' in Pakistan. In contrast, as Ahmed suggests, the mismanagement of the economy in Bengal and the disregard for Bengali sentiments converted existing cultural nationalism in to a fully-fledged separatist movement. It is generally the state that sets the rules for dealing with pluralism in South Asia and which turns brutal when threatened, as has been witnessed in the Indian Punjab, Kashmir, Jaffna and Karachi

Politics of Identities: Global, South Asian and Indian Perspective (The Indian Journal of Political Science, 67(2), 2006) attempts to deal with politics of identities at the different level such as global, regional and national. The culture has emerged as a major factor in the politics at global, national and local level. Inherent in the idea of culture is the issue of identity, which has given birth to the politics of identity politics. This world is neither monocultural nor identical unit, rather, it is a multicultural landscape. But the emerging global order has developed the hegemonic and unitary tendencies; therefore, the politics of identities is the natural outcome. Like global society, the nation-states are also having multicultural societies but they have been trying to build the unitary nations, which resulted into the political discourse that is dominated by the politics of identities and pluralism.

Questioning Borders: Social Movements, Political Parties and the Creation of New states in India (Pacific Affairs, 84(1), 67-87, 2011) analyzes how demands for political autonomy or

statehood within the federal system have been used as a frame for social movement mobilization in India. Significantly, every political mobilization for newer statehood in India has been advocated as for good governance and better representation by its leaders. Tillin however, disagrees with the said understanding of autonomy movements prevailing in India. Referring to the newly born states like Jharkhand in terms of better political representation and good governance, Tillin states that the state has displayed greater political instability than possibly any Indian states since granting statehood. In fact, good governance is still a far cry in many other Indian states which are even born for the same. This article also draws attention to the processes which have brought borders into question, drawing social movements and political parties into alignment about the idea of creating new states. It ultimately looks at why the creation of states as a result of such processes may not lead to more substantive forms of political and economic citizenship on the part of marginalized communities.

“Asymmetric Federalism and the Question of Democratic Justice in Northeast India” (India Review, 13(2), 2014) examines the normative and empirical issues surrounding asymmetric federalism- of giving differential constitutional powers and status to specific units of the federation- in northeast India with a particular focus on the special status enjoys by Nagaland under Article 371A of India’s Constitution. The basic argument bears the article is that this form of asymmetric federal feature of Indian federation is one of the most important causes of ethnic uprisings in north east India. It generates similar demands from other mobilized groups at one point. On the other, the article explores how much this asymmetric federal feature is implemented in practice. Under this constitutional provision, Nagaland Legislative Assembly (NLA) can, by pass a resolution, make inapplicable any law passed by Indian Parliament

pertaining to their religious and social practices, ownership and transfer of land and resources etc. But in practice, the NLA has not been enjoying this power. It becomes clear in 2013 as the Indian Govt. considered unconstitutional the Government of Nagaland's attempt to regulate and develop petroleum and natural gas in the State. Thus as Housing argues, this form of constitutional provision has not only made the entire federal arrangement asymmetric but also raised questions about democratic use of such rights.

Thus, the literatures surveyed above have identified unilateralism, fear of peripheralization, asymmetric federalism and political instrumentalism of the elites as responsible factors for growth of identity politics in the states of south Asia in general and India in particular. But none of the literature discusses about the economic and cultural factors of identity politics.

II. Literature on North East India and Assam:

Roots of Ethnic Conflict: Nationality Question in North- East India, (Sajal Nag 1990) attempts to understand the complexity on the emerging nature of ethnic conflict vis-a-vis the development of Assamese nationality in Assam. In order to understand the emergence of ethnic conflict during the colonial period, Nag goes into the various dimensions of the historical evolution of Assamese society. Theoretically, the nation/nationality formation begins in Indian history during the colonial period as a consequence of certain economic changes brought about by alien rule. The groups with developed languages ('big nationalities') who came into contact with British rulers first, flourished at the cost of less advanced groups or the 'small nationalities'. The 'big nationalities' spread their social and economic domination by controlling the employment sector. In reaction, the smaller nationalities mobilized themselves primarily to break the domination of big nationalities and reinstate their own language and culture in their rightful place. It is in this

framework that Nag analyses the emergence of the Assamese identity movement ('small nationality') as a reaction to the domination of Bengalis ('big nationality'). In Nag's theoretical framework, before colonial rule, the Assamese were ethnic group in the process of gradual evolution into a nationality. This natural process was disrupted by colonial rule which brought a less developed nationality in contact with an advanced nationality which eventually led to an ethnic conflict between the two.

“The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity” (Monirul Hussain 1995) discusses about the infamous Assam movement which began in 1979 and came to an end in 1985. The author argues that the movement was more an instigation of Assamese elites than an anti foreigner and identity crisis movement. Though the movement pointed out the continuous flow of illegal migrants as the cause of identity crisis of the Assamese people, the reality was not so. The migrants had also distinct contribution in building up the economy of the state and flourishing a composite culture in the state. But the ideologues of the movement i.e. the Assamese elites, have distorted the reality to suit their self interests. Very successfully, they mixed their class interests with the interest of the Assamese nationality. Moreover, as it was an anti foreigner movement yet the movement leaders had targeted only the Bengali Muslim infiltrators rather than the Bengali Hindus as well as other Bihari and Nepali migrants. The movement ended with an Accord but not a single foreigner can detect and expelled till date. Therefore it is said that instead of giving birth to a new ruling class, the movement gave nothing to the state.

“India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality” (Sanjib Baruah 1999) depicts the ongoing problems of insurgency and sub nationalism in Assam. It investigates the political and

economic history of Assam since the time it became the part of British India. The region witnessed the tension between pan- Indianism and Assamese sub nationalism since the early days of Indian nationalism. It is argued that the incidents of insurgency, human rights abuses by government security forces and insurgents, ethnic violence, and a steady decline of the economy are largely the outcome of the strong centralizing tendency of the Indian federation. However, a more decentralized federal structure may help to manage and solve such sub national conflicts in a more efficient way.

“Assam: A Colonial Hinterland” (Economic and Political Weekly, 15(32), 1998) argues that there has been a systematic exploitation of the rich resources of Assam, before 1947 by the colonial rulers and since then by the Indian State and Indian capitalists who have continued the colonial tradition. It details some of the features of this exploitation in the extractive industries of oil, tea, jute and forest products. A common charge leveled against the current movement in Assam on the foreigners' issue is that it is diverting the attention of the masses from the basic problem of economic underdevelopment. The author argues that, on the contrary, the movement has highlighted these fundamental causes of economic underdevelopment. Indeed, a positive outcome of the current agitation, according to the author, is the growing awareness of the colonial pattern of the exploitation of Assam's natural resources among the masses of the Assamese people, Only a realization of the colonial pattern of exploitation of Assam's resources can help one to understand the more fundamental causes behind the wide and sustained participation of both rural and urban masses in the current movement in the state.

“Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to Nation State in Assam and Nagaland” (Udayan Misra 2000) argues the extremist autonomy movements in northeast India as manifestation of ‘anti-Indian’ psyche of the once glorious nationalities of the region. Referring to the cases of Nagaland and Assam, he argues that the extremist groups such as the NSCN and ULFA, have challenged the so called Indian rule over their homelands and criticized the later as colonial in character and action. As the author argues, the exploitative as well as step motherly attitude of the mainland India has been pushing the small nationalities towards periphery. Therefore, the fear of peripheralization has given birth to large scale ethnic unrests (extremist and moderate) in Nagaland and Assam.

“Ethnicization of Politics in Northeast India” (Girin Phukan 2003) asserts that the politics of northeast has been highly ethnicised because of awakening of ethno-cultural consciousness and assertion of ethnic identities. The ethnic groups inhabiting this region have been pressing either for the creation of separate states on basis of their ethnic identities or for special constitutional safeguards of their respective identities. Thus ethnic issues have decisively influenced the political agenda of all the north eastern states. Phukan also argues that modernization increases the level of competition for jobs and other economic resources among the ethnic groups. Moreover, denials of basic human rights, discriminatory economic policy, illegal immigration, economic backwardness etc are seemed to be responsible for ethnic conflicts in the region

“Students’ Politics in Assam” (Monuj Phukan 2005) is about the role of All Tai Ahom Students’ Union (ATASU) formed on 14th July, 1988. The purpose of the Union was to represent the hopes and aspirations of the people of the Tai Ahom Community and to ensure their socio-

economic development. It also aimed at the preservation of the historical monuments, sculptures and traditions of the Tai community. In such venture, ATASU was successful to certain extent. At present, ATASU's focus is directed towards including the Tai Ahom language as an optional subject in the educational institutions of Assam and also ensuring tribal status to Tai Ahom Community.

“Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India” (Sanjib Baruah 2005) explores the political meaning and significance of prolonged low intensity conflicts in Northeast India. It's true that India, in many of its disturbed regions has resorted to state directed violence in securing its boundaries. The crisis in Kashmir is well known. What is less often recognized is that New Delhi has been active for over fifty years in creating the conditions for what Sanjib Baruah calls 'durable disorder' in the northeast of the country. New Delhi continues to use military and counterinsurgency tactics to fight more than one hundred militias in the region. Subsequently, lives are lost, oppositional figures are executed in encounters with paramilitaries and human rights are compressed underfoot. Examining how the peoples of the northeast have suffered terribly at the hands of militaristic Indian state (a state that sought to nationalize space), Baruah looks to road building and market-led economic growth as solution to the problems of a land-locked region. The author also argues that if peace and development are to be brought to the region, India's policy will have to be reoriented and linked to a new foreign policy towards Southeast Asia.

“Chutia Hokolor Atmo Poricitir Songramor Ek Sotika” (Debabrat Sarma 2006) gives a detail explanation about the construction and development of Chutias identity consciousness in

chronology way. So the basic argument raised by the author in the book is that the ongoing identity assertion of the Chutias has been a collective demand emanating from their history of politico-economic deprivations as well as social injustice experienced in both Ahom and British colonial regime in the state of Assam. As a result, the aboriginal Chutias have lost their ethno-cultural traits, language, custom and traditions. And at present the educated youth of the community has identified themselves marginalized in the politico-economic domain of the state. Hence, as argued by the author, the present collective mobilization of the Chutias is nothing but to revive and promote their ethno-cultural distinct nesses in the state so that they can enjoy their aboriginal rights.

“Conflicting Nations in Northeast India” (Economic & Political Weekly 40(21), 2004) examines the ethnic movements in northeast India. According to the article the tribes inhabiting the hills of northeast don’t consider themselves part of the mainstream India, as there is a remarkable difference in the culture and the lifestyle of the two. In fact, they feel colonized as they no longer control over their land and forests. Moreover, the constitutional laws have largely replaced their customary laws. Under such circumstances the ethnicity based autonomy movements are on rise in the northeast. He also discusses how the inter-state migration has led to the growth of nativism and subsequent displacement of the people perceived as outsiders or foreigners by the locals or the natives. He draws distinction between ethnic movement and nativism on the ground that the latter is anti-migrant in nature while the former may not essentially be so.

The Margins Strike Back: echoes of sovereignty and the Indian state (Indian International Centre Quarterly, 32 (2/3), 2005) brings the centre periphery/margins syndrome while dealing with the northeast sub-national questions. In his words, discovering themselves as 'periphery' or 'margins', the northeastern ethnic nationalities have repeatedly questioned the centralized authority of the Indian state on issues relating to uneven development raised, and the very idea of the 'mainstream' being re-defined by the former. The struggle of Nagas for '*Naga way of Life*', and of ULFA's for '*Swadhin Asom*' are the two examples (that are yet to be resolved) through which the author tries to examine the strike of the margins of northeast. According to the author, redefining the federal structure of India in its true sense of the term could have provided solutions to the debate between the margins versus the centre.

“Religion, Nostalgia, and Memory: Making an Ancient and Recent Tai-Ahom Identity in Assam and Thailand” (The Journal of Asian Studies, 65(1), 2006) argues that the gradual socio-economic backwardness and de-rooting from earlier political privileges during colonial and post colonial periods had led to construct the larger imagined identity such as Tai-Ahom. By examining the connections between identity and memory, Saikia explores the emergence of a new community known as Tai-Ahom in the heterogeneously fluid northeastern Indian state of Assam. The basic focus the paper is on the community's struggle to unravel the past; particularly their attempts to memorialize a new history that is represented as authentically and uniquely Tai-Ahom. The paper also examines the Tai-Ahoms' often competing and contradictory claims of seeking legitimation from the national government of India while looking beyond to Thailand as the foundation of their historical ancestry.

“A Question of Identity: Adivasi Militancy in Assam” (Economic & Political Weekly, 13-16) narrates the brutal public assault on Adivasi demonstrators took place in Guwahati on November, 2007. Referring to the incident, the author highlighted the history how the British had lured them in lakhs from Chotanagpur, Bengal presidency, even Andhra, and forced them into a terrible state of servitude marked by low wages, restriction on free movement, denial of right to education and near total absence of medical care. Following independence, they were left to the tender mercies of the garden management. Only a handful of them had got away from this vast prison-house and their education and integration into mainstream society have left them isolated from their compatriots. Subsequently, the All Assam Adivasi Students’ Association along with Assam Tea Tribal Students’ Association has been agitating for years demanding recognition of tea tribals and adivasis as scheduled tribes. The state governments of Assam periodically promise to gift them the status of ST, but apparently fail to muster political will to fulfill that demand. So as argued by Gohain, somehow the failure of the State instrument to provide incentive and relief to the vast majority has not sunk into their consciousness, under leadership of the educated minority movement for gaining the ST status has developed into a militant phase, particularly after the persecution by Bodos who were bent on being the only scheduled tribe in the Bodo Territorial Autonomous District. And now there is an armed group calling itself the Adivasi Cobra Force or Black Widow vowing to pay the price of autonomy in blood, presumably of others

“Ethnic Mobilization and Violence in Northeast India” (Pahi Saikia 2011) analyses three tribal ethnic movements of Assam namely the Bodo, Dimasa and Mising and their strategies to highlight their respective ethnic demands. Contextualizing it, Saikia explains the complex

relationship between the tribals and the dominant Assamese community in the state. It is argued that the lack of communication and respect on the part of the Assamese community towards tribal groups is the root cause of the struggle for new identities by different groups, such as the Bodos, Dimasas and Misings in the state. Furthermore, Saikia argues that the asymmetrical cultural and political power between the Assamese and the tribals has marginalized the later. However, although their identity consciousness emerged out of a similar circumstance, yet the nature, strength and sustain of these three ethnic identity movements differ from each other. Bodos have got engaged in a sustained and high intensity movement which is largely violent in nature; the Dimasas have adopted a middle path of violence and non-violence, while the Misings are pursuing the goals of autonomy through less violent methods. These differences in the nature and objectives of the movements were due to the varying degrees of expectations, geographical location and leadership quality.

The literatures reviewed above have identified diverse factors and causes responsible for the growth of ethnic identity movements in the north east India in general and Assam in particular. Majority studies reviewed above emphasized on middle class politics, centripetal federal set up of India, colonial pattern of economic exploitation over the region by the mainland India and the trend of ethnic homogenization of the majority ethnic groups as causes of identity politics in northeast India. A few studies focused on economic marginalization of the small ethnic groups as important cause of ethnic uprising in the region. But no study has been done exclusively to understand the ethnicity based identity movement of the Chutias and role played by their civil society organizations. In this context the present study bears significance.

Objectives:

- i) To examine the assertion of Chutia identity in Assam.
- ii) To discuss the role played by different Chutia ethnic organizations in molding Chutia identity.
- iii) To look at the role played by the state in addressing the demands of Chutias.

Research Questions:

- i) Which factors/causes have led the Chutias to assert their ethnic identity?
- ii) What roles have been playing by the Chutia ethnic organizations in molding their group identity?
- iii) What approaches have developed by the state to deal with the identity issues of the ethnic groups like the Chutias of Assam?

Methodology:**A. Study Area:**

The study was conducted in Golaghat and Lakhimpur District of Assam. The ethnic composition of the Chutias is comparatively larger in Golaghat and Lakhimpur than any other district of Assam. This was the main reason behind purposively selection of these two districts as study area for the present study. The Golaghat district consists of 8 development blocks namely Podumoni, Bokakhat, Dergoan, Sarupathar, Kathalguri, Gamariguri, Morongi and Kakodonga. Among them, samples of the study were selected mainly from Sarupathar, Bokakhat and Podumoni development blocks because the ethnic composition of the Chutias is comparatively majority there. Similarly, the district of Lakhimpur consists of 9 development blocks namely Narayanpur, Bihpuria, Karunabari, Nawboicha, Telahi, Lakhimpur, Boginodi, Ghilamara and

Dhakuakhana. Among them, the field survey was mainly conducted in Bihpuria, Ghilamara and Dhakuakhana blocks as the Chutias are comparatively majority there.

B. Data Collection:

The study was based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected through questionnaire (both structured and unstructured) from a number of groups of respondent. The group of respondents were such as the members of the Chutia ethnic organizations (All Chutia Caste Conference Assam, All Assam Chutia Caste Women Conference, All Assam Chutia Caste Youth Conference and All Assam Chutia Student Union), Chutia MLAs, members of the Chutia Development Council and Common Citizens (both Chutia and non-Chutia). The secondary data were collected from different relevant books (i.e. community history and other books on the community), research articles, news paper reports, journals, periodicals, memorandums and pamphlets. Apart from it, the published proceedings of different annual conferences of the Chutia civil society organizations were widely consulted to understand the issues and dynamics of their identity movement. For the collection of data from secondary sources libraries of Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Gauhati University, Gauhati, Tai Ahom Study Centre, Moran, Jatiyo Bhavan, Jorhat had been visited in addition to the Central library of Assam University, Silchar. Extensive use of Internet materials including e-journals had also been made.

C. Respondents of the study:

Population of the Chutias settled in Assam as a whole constitute the universe of the study. However, using the method of purposive sampling a sample of 132 was selected from the abovementioned groups of respondent. The technique of purposive sampling was used in the

study because only a selected section of population was considered to have a comprehensive knowledge about the identity problem of the Chutias. Sampling design of the study was as the following table-

Table- 1:01: Distribution of Respondents in Sampling

Respondents	Sample
Chutia Ethnic Organizations (ACCCA, AACSU, AACCCWC, AACYC)	16
Chutia MLAs and Members of Chutia Development Council (CDC)	16
Common Chutia Citizens	50
Common Non Chutia Citizens	50
Total	132

Out of total 132 respondents, 4 from each were drawn from the Chutia ethnic organizations. The existing President, Secretary and two members (i.e. one Adviser and one general member) from each organization were selected and thereby making the total of 16 from four ethnic organizations. From the Chutia MLAs and CDC, 16 (3 from MLAs and 13 from CDC) respondents were selected. Besides them, 50 Chutia (25 from Lakhimpur and 25 from Golaghat) and 50 non-Chutia citizens (25 from Lakhimpur and 25 from Golaghat) were selected making the total of 100 from them.

D. Data Analysis:

The collected primary data were classified and put up in tables. And on the basis of the tables, data were analyzed and interpreted objective wise through both qualitatively and quantitatively. Along with primary data, the secondary data were also used for analyzing the objectives proposed.

E. Delimitation of the Study:

Though the study is about Chutias identity movement in Assam yet, due to short period of time the data collection of the study was conducted only in two districts of the state. It is noteworthy that the populations of the Chutias are scattered in all over Assam. Besides, the ethnic composition of the Chutias is comparatively larger in Golaghat and Lakhimpur than any other district of Assam. Hence, the area of the study was confined in these two districts.

Chapterization:

Chapter I- Introduction

Chapter II- Politics of Identities and the Indian State: An Analysis

Chapter III- Chutias Identity Construction and Assertions: History and Development

Chapter IV- Group Mobilization and Dynamics of Chutias Identity Assertion: Response of the
State

Chapter V- Data Analysis and Interpretations

Chapter VI- Conclusion (Major Findings and Recommendations)

CHAPTER II

POLITICS OF IDENTITIES AND THE INDIAN STATE: AN ANALYSIS

Introduction:

Since the British departure, the Indian state has been facing diverse ethnicity based identity movements. T. K. Oommen identifies five forms of identity movements in India where ethnicity plays important roles. For instance, (a) the demand for a distinct homeland, either a sovereign state e.g. the demand for Khalistan by a section of the Sikhs, demand for Swadhin Asom by ULFA in Assam or a political-administrative unit within the Indian state e.g. Gorkhaland for Nepalis, Bodoland for Bodos in Assam; (b) the demand for expulsion of 'outsiders' when the entire state is engulfed by migrants from other states or neighboring countries e.g. as in Assam and Tripura; (c) the demand for the expulsion of foreigners belonging to other folk regions within the state e.g. the Chotanagpur tribal demand to expel fellow Biharis of the plains or from other states i.e. Bengalis or Marwaris; (d) the demand to expel those who do not belong to the same cultural region although they are from the same state e.g. the demand for the expulsion of Andhras from Telangana region; and (e) the demand to expel migrants from other linguistic states who come to work and reside in metropolitan centers e.g. mobilization against Tamils in Bombay and Bangalore (Oommen, 2002: 138-9). Besides these, there is another form of ethnicity based identity movement that the Indian state has been facing now is the demand for ST status under the concerned provision of the Indian constitution. In other sense, many ethnic groups including the six non tribal ethnic groups¹⁸ of Assam have been demanding ST status under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution. As per the record of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India, there are total 242 proposals pending for inclusion in, exclusion from and

¹⁸ Ahoms, Chutias, Koch, Moran, Motak and Tea Tribes

other modifications in the list of Scheduled Tribes of the State/UT in India. Among the proposals, 9 proposals were sent by the State Government of Assam at various times pending at different stages of the process.¹⁹ In this context, politics of identity based on ethnicity has become a phenomenon of national importance in India. In response to those ethnic assertions, attempts are being made by states to resolve the crisis by granting some safeguards and autonomy to the dissent groups. But such moves of the government have failed to address the spur of ethnicity. Rather, it is growing very rapidly with every passing day. States with multi-cultural societies like India is so much affected by the problem of ethnicity that the process of national integration and socio-economic development are jeopardized to certain extent.

However, as already mentioned, India is a multiethnic state with large political boundary. Hundreds of different ethno-cultural groups live in India with their ethno-cultural distinctness which really makes the country multi-cultural. In the backdrop of this multicultural fabric, the makers of Indian constitution had adopted many suitable ideas like federalism, religious secularism, constitutional democracy and distributive justice to suit with its given diversities. In fact, the idea of federalism was adopted to assuage communal, ethnic, and cultural sectarianism. For Jalal (1995), federalism in India, which he termed as “ethnofederalism” was less a choice than a necessity in post-colonial India given the vast size and diversity and history of repeated colonization. However, federalism was enshrined in the Indian constitution in the form of a written constitution, a dual polity, a division of legislative and executive powers between the centre and the state, an independent judiciary and supremacy of the constitution and elected roles (Basu, 1999). A range of formal institutions such as states and national legislatures, National Finance Commissions, Planning Commissions, National Development Council, inter-state

¹⁹ The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Second Amendment) Bill, 2011, Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment (2011 - 2012), Twenty - Third report, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India

council and numerous other inter-state coordinating bodies further embodied the federal political structure in the Indian constitution. The special provisions for affirmative action in favor of historically disadvantaged groups, a variety of personal laws, and the decision to desist from imposing a uniform civil code, protection of cultural and educational rights of the linguistic and religious minorities, secular citizenship defined by civic and universalistic criteria, all were among the significant constitutional measures, legislative enactment, and government policies indicating the constitutional/legal recognition of four different categories-religion, language, religion and caste (Kumar, 2005: 94). The parliamentary form of government adopted in the country is believed to be the most suitable instrument for the realization of these goals since it embodies all the features that are considered to be the sine qua non of a just and democratic society such as, universal adult franchise, public accountability, an impartial and independent judiciary and the rule of law (Nongbri, 2001).

Furthermore, the Constitution of India has made extensive provisions in favor of tribes, officially designated as 'Scheduled Tribes' (vide Article 342), to facilitate their access to public resources and effective participation in the system of governance. Many of these provisions are in the nature of positive discriminations. Recognizing that the rights of the disadvantaged section of the society cannot be bartered away in the name of equality, the Indian Constitution attaches special clauses to enable the state to take remedial steps so that the depressed communities can come up to the threshold of the general population. Notably, tribes constitute a distinct political and socio-cultural identity in India. Article 244 provides for special arrangements for the administration of the tribal areas in the form of the Fifth and the Sixth Schedule. The Fifth Schedule applies to the administration and control of tribal areas in any state other than the state of Assam, Meghalaya,

Mizoram and Tripura and the Sixth Schedule covers the administration of tribal areas in these four north eastern states.

Politics of Identities and the Indian State:

India is the largest working parliamentary democracy in the world, but not free from the politics of identity. Immediately after the British departure, the Indian state experienced the construction and proliferation of different ethno-cultural identities. As mentioned above, keeping the idea of probable emergence of peripheral identities in mind, the makers of Indian constitution built up the post-colonial framework of Indian polity. They provided India with a federal system to assimilate the diverse identities in the politics and the political mainstream as well. The idea was to provide autonomy to diverse identities and also to ensure their participation in the larger Indian identity, which would be plural in nature and federal in character. Notwithstanding, in the 1950s the demand for state reorganization stood as challenge to the continuation of the initial administrative organization of the country. Initially the country was divided into administrative units to A, B, and C Categories. This was found unsatisfactory and hence another category D was added. But the people of some states believed that this division contradicts the principle of equal rights guaranteed to all citizens by the constitution. The problem of administrative reorganization was further complicated by the growing demand for formation of states on the basis of linguistic political pressure for establishing linguistic states. For instance, in the Telegu area communists set up the slogan 'Andhra for Telegus'. Similarly, Marathi speaking people wanted a separate state. Gujarat is claimed a separate state for themselves. Sikhs demanded a state for the Sikhs. Thus, in order to meet the demands of public, the Indian states were reorganized on the basis of language. In other words, the government of India felt that the best way of reorganizing state was on the basis of language. And in 1956 the reorganization of states

on language basis was developed as a major approach to accommodate the different identities into the political mainstream of the country (Brass: Ibid). Accordingly in 1953, the States Reorganization Commission was established, which eventually led to the enactment of the States Reorganization Act of 1956. Under this Act, 14 states and 5 Union Territories were set up. Subsequent reorganizations and creation of more new states essentially followed the basic principle that major ethno-linguistic groups ought to have their separate states within the Indian Union.²⁰ But the states reorganization of the 1950s did not put a stop to demands for the creation of new states based on notions of ethno-linguistic and regional identity. For example, in 1960, mainly due to the agitations of Marathi and Gujarati speaking populations of the state of Bombay, the Bombay Reorganization Act was passed and the linguistic states of Maharashtra and Gujarat were created. Similarly, in 1966, the Hindi-speaking state of Haryana was created by dividing the Punjab. In the northeast, the Indian government finally tried to bring the Naga insurgency to a close by accepting the Nagas demand for a separate state; hence, in 1962, three districts of Assam were detached to create the new state of Nagaland. In the early 1970s, three further new states- Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura- were created in the northeast. The demands for new states, however, did not stop there. In West Bengal, the Gorkhas of Darjeeling and the Rajbanshis of Cooch Behar have for long agitated for the creation of a separate Gorkhaland and Kamtapur. In Assam, the Bodos have made a similar demand. The Telengana agitation in Andhra Pradesh, the movement to create Vidharbha in Maharashtra, and the demand for a separate state of Jammu are all cases with relatively long histories of political agitation. In the last decade of the 20th century, a few of these movements succeeded in their quest for separate statehood when the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in New Delhi authorized

²⁰ For details see Rajat Ganguli's "Identity politics and Statehood Movements in India", available in <http://cfsindia.org.in>

the break-up of Madhya Pradesh to create Chhattisgarh, Bihar to create Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh to create Uttarakhand. Just in 2014, the demand for Telangana state was acceded by the UPA Government (2009-2014).

However, among the many reasons of large scale emergence of statehood movement in India two reasons were considered very much instrumental. First reason was the decline of the Congress party in the late 1960s as a dominant party both in terms of ideology and organization.²¹ Secondly, the increased level of the electoral participation of the peripheral social groups along with the economic empowerment of the neo-rich intermediate peasant caste paved the way for the growth of regional parties as well as national parties with a concentrated regional base, a process aptly described as the ‘federalization of the party system’ (Saha, 1999: 21). Moreover, that new approach of reorganizing the Indian states on linguistic basis had left some states of the Union like Assam and Punjab unorganized, which later provided the fertile ground to politics of identities and accentuated the issue of identity politics in the country.

Similarly, the national language problems of the country stood as to be a real threat of the balkanization of the country in the aftermath of partition. These problems included the official

²¹ Although India adopted a multi-party system, for the first two decades after independence the Congress hold over Indian politics was almost total. But from the mid-1960s onwards, India gradually witnessed the growth of regional parties and some were able to challenge the Congress in state elections by tapping into ethno-linguistic, religious and regional sentiments. The Congress, under Indira Gandhi’s leadership, increasingly resorted to undemocratic, illegal and draconian measures to retain its monopoly over political power at the centre and in several states. This creeping authoritarianism, which criminalized the Indian polity, politicized the bureaucracy and security agencies and rode roughshod over opponents of the Congress party, eventually resulted in a suspension of democracy in 1975 with the declaration of the Emergency. Forced by popular pressure to withdraw the Emergency and hold national elections in 1977, the Congress party lost power for the first time at the centre against an opposition consisting of a coalition of smaller national and regional parties. Over the next three decades, the phenomenal rise of regional parties and leaders, the gradual weakening of the Congress both politically and organizationally, the emergence of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the formation of weak coalition governments at the centre have collectively contributed a great deal to the outbreak and spread of ethnic conflict in India. For details see Rajat Ganguli’s (Ibid).

language issue, demands for the linguistic organization of the provinces and the status of minority language within the reorganized states (Brass, 1990: 157). However, most of the language problems during Nehru period, some of which became at times bitter and violent, were ultimately resolved through pluralistic solutions. According to this approach, the central government and the national leadership of the Congress party sought to avoid direct confrontations with the movement leaders and adopted instead arbitrating and mediating roles wherever possible. But in post-Nehru period as mentioned above, the centralizing drive of the Indian national leadership especially of Mrs. Indira Gandhi left the pluralistic approach of solution. Instead, they had adopted manipulative and interventionist strategies in state politics which have contributed to the intensity of many conflicts during the 70s of the last century. In other sense, the overemphasis on the centralist character of the congress eroded the ability of the state-level leaders to effectively articulate regional sentiments and aspirations within the party, unlike during the Nehru when the regional leaders enjoyed autonomy within the organization (Kumar, *ibid*: 102). In the 60s of the last century, the debate over national language had sensitized the regional linguistic groups in India. The Constitution of India also contemplated the provision regarding the language policy. In fact, the national official language controversy came to the forefront at first during the time of the constitution making. The debates of the Constituent Assembly reveal that there was a substantial amount of consensus on two basic points: (1) at some stage, the English language should be displaced from its pre-eminent position; and (2) its place should be taken by Hindi. The major bone of contention, however, was regarding the time-limit within which this process should be culminated. There were many difficulties in the way of adopting Hindi as national official language immediately. It was not so well developed as to replace English as the language of the administration and so it needed time to develop properly;

the country's intelligentsia felt a genuine difficulty in taking to Hindi at once, accustomed as it was to thinking and speaking in the English language for a long time; the non-Hindi-speaking people apprehended that adoption of Hindi would give to the Hindi-speaking people an edge over them in the administration and the Central services. The Constituent Assembly resolved this demand for retention of English for a transitional period by granting to Hindi the status of official language of the country, but postponing the final implementation of it for fifteen years. In the meantime, English would continue to be official language of the union and inter provincial communication, the major regional languages would continue to be used permanently in their own provinces and would also be recognized as national languages through their inclusion into the Eight Schedule of the Constitution (Brass, 1990, 162-64). In 1963, the Parliament passed the Official Language Act, which came close to satisfying most representatives of the Hindi and non-Hindi speaking regions. Under the terms of the Act, Hindi was indeed to become the sole official language of the country in 1965, but English was to be continued as an 'associate additional official language' (Ibid, 163). Similarly, regarding the status of minority language within the reorganized states, the central Government has introduced the Three-Language Formula under in consultation with the states. The formula was enunciated in the 1968 National Policy Resolution. It provides that children in the Hindi speaking states are to be taught three languages, namely Hindi, English and one of the local languages. The children in non-Hindi-speaking states are to be taught the local language, English and Hindi. The formula was formulated in response to demands from non-Hindi speaking states such as Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Assam and mainly Tamil Nadu.

The approach of positive discrimination was another effective one that the Indian state had developed for addressing the caste based identity claims during the first decade of independence.

Under this approach, some reservation policies were introduced for the lower and backward castes and classes of the nation. Of course, the constitution itself introduced the principle of positive discrimination and allowed the government to grant certain privileges, such as reservation of a certain percentage of government jobs, seats in educational institutions for upliftment of the socially and educationally backward classes, SCs and STs of the nation (Dutt, 2010). However, it is notable here that the approach of positive discrimination through reservation policies has resulted into the process of formation and sharpening the identities in the public domain of India. In 1955 the Indian Parliament passed the Untouchability (Offences) Act, which prescribed the punishment for this offence. Thus, it appears that the process of construction of the Dalit identity was set in motion at the beginning period of the post-independence identity politics in India. Various provisions have been incorporated in the constitution to deal with the Dalit questions as well as affirmative action accordingly. While some of these provisions have been part of the constitution right from its inception, many more were added later. Though the direct impact of these provisions has been limited, they have played an important role in making the Dalits aware of their rights. Movements for the Dalit identity are not simply about politicization of caste. These mobilizations are a multi-faceted, multi-layered and multi-pronged phenomenon. India's practice of affirmative action or reservations for the underprivileged has contributed to both a growing sense of participation and empowerment. On the other hand, these constitutional approaches have triggered sub-caste identity consciousness in the country. The reservation for the Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes has formed and sharpened the identities in the Indian politics since the 1950s. (Sing, 2006; Muralidhar, 2004). The formation of Other Backward Categories (OBCs) has remained another significant dimension of caste based identity politics in India. The implementation of

Mandal Commission recommendations on caste based reservation for OBCs in the 1990 and widespread mobilization both for and against it brought the question of caste to the forefront of Indian politics (Sing: 2006).

The idea of socialism and secularism were another two constitutional approaches followed by the Indian state to address the diverse identity movements in India. Among the many, the main purpose of these approaches was to construct a universal Indian national identity. Both ideas were not incorporated in the original constitution of India. They were included in the constitution through 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976. The idea of socialism was regarded as suitable for maintaining equitable development of the societies irrespective of their socio-cultural backgrounds. Through it, effort was also made to develop the Indian society on the socialistic patterns. The state was made powerful to control national economy of the country as well as to ensure equitable distribution of the benefits of development. Thus it was hoped that proper implementation of this idea would stop centrifugal tendencies of the sub-nationalities of the nation. In a similar context, the idea of secularism was incorporated by considering it as the best guarantee to ensure religious plurality of the Indian diversity. Though the idea was introduced to ensure religious plurality but in reality it resulted into the hegemonization of Hindu identity and thereby sharpened tensions among religious minorities such as Islam, Jain, Buddhism which ultimately culminated into the religion based identity politics.

However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the politics of identities had become more sharpened in India and it replaced the existing politics of ideas. Two most significant political movements brought the questions of ethnicity based identity into centre-stage of Indian politics. One was the

infamous Assam Movement²² (1979-85) that took place in the north-east state of Assam and the Khalistan movement²³ (1970-1990) of the Sikhs in Punjab. Subsequently, both the movements brought the issue of ethnicity into the politics of identity in India rather than the religion and caste. Moreover, the questions of 'Assamese' and 'Sikh' identity as projected by their respective moderate and extremist supporters had sensitized many less articulated ethno-national identity movements of India in the following years. For instance, secessionist movements of the ULFA's, separate statehood movement of the Karbis, Dimasas and Bodos as well as various tribal autonomy movements in Assam and north east India etc.

The assertion of gender identity in the public domain is the other aspect of the identity politics in India. The articulation of women identity in the Indian politics can be traced back to 1920s when women's organizations such as the Indian Women Association and the All India Women's Conference came into existence to spread education among women. However, these organizations were the offshoots of the social reform movements but women's participation in the freedom struggle indicated the formation of women identity in the public domain (Sing, 2006). Later on women took active part in the movements and campaigns against rising prices, movements for land rights and peasants. Their participation resulted into the transformation of

²² The Assam movement was ostensibly an upsurge of the "people of Assam" against the foreigner, citizens against the non-citizens; indigenous against the foreigners. The native Assamese speakers, who started the movement, were supported throughout the Brahmaputra valley by tribes like the Bodo, Tiwa, Mising, Rabha etc. The various section of the population irrespective of their affiliations responded to the call and actively participated in the movement to drive out the illegal immigrants.

²³ The Khalistan movement is a political Sikh nationalist movement that wants to create an independent state for Sikh people, inside the current North Western Republic of India such a state existed in Punjab from 1709 to 1849. It was called the Sikh Empire. The new state created would be called Khalistan in the modern territories of East Punjab and Himachal Pradesh would be Chandigarh or possibly Amritsar.

movement from within. The contemporary women's movements²⁴ under the different women organizations of the country have been sharpening women's identity consciousness in Indian politics. The recruitment base of women's movement cut across the boundaries of caste, class and communities (Singh, 2001: 268). Now the focus has shifted from welfare of women to women empowerment. The thirty-three percent (33%) reservation for women in the local bodies is classic case in point. However, the reservation for women in the parliament and state legislative assemblies is yet to be materialized. The issue at the core of women's movements is the articulation and assertion of women identity in the Indian politics.

Summing up, the Indian state has been following three major approaches since independence for addressing its diverse identity movements. The first approach was the politics of homogenization started at the beginning of 1950s. Through it, the local identities were subordinated to the larger national identity which was treated by and large unitary in nature. Means, in this phase Indian politics was dominated by the desire for the larger national identity but at the same time the effort was also made to accommodate the local identities into the former. But unfortunately instead of calming down the local identities, it had sharpened them into an infinite manner. The second approach was the politics of ideas through which two basic ideas were introduced in Indian constitution- socialism and secularism. Through it, effort was made to develop the Indian society on the socialistic patterns. The secular Indian state was made powerful in an unprecedented magnitude by the name of rapid extension of socialist development policies. But even this could not sustain for long time and the uniform national identity came into clash with the regional identities when the latter surfaced in the public domain during the second phase,

²⁴ These women's movements are generally identity-oriented mobilizations seeking equality and social justice in the gender biased public domain. They are inclusivists in the sense that they attempt to expand their social base by networking and bringing women together to struggle for common gender issues.

which was started after the conduct of the fourth general elections. As a result, approximately half of Indian states came under the rule of regional parties which were advocating the cause of regional socio-cultural identities. They started competing with the national identity in the domain of politics. The third phase began in 1980. In this phase, the politics of ideas has totally replaced by the politics of identities. Democratic society and the development process set in motion a decentralizing tendency in politics, in spite of unification attempts by the state.

As it is appeared in the above analysis, the process of assimilation of local socio-cultural identities into the national identity of India resulted into the politics of identities. In this process, India has identified its national identity with the identity of majority community and its language, which has forced the other socio-cultural identities to contest the former in the public domain. In post-colonial phase, India started with the politics of ideas but ultimately landed into the politics of identities. Actually the Indian State could not translate the politics of ideas into reality. At theoretical level Indian state stressed upon the politics of ideas but at the operational level it pursued the politics of majority identity and tried to identify the Indian identity with the identity of majority community.

The Issues of Ethno-cultural Identity Proliferation: A Post-colonial Scene of Assam

The urges of different ethno-cultural groups for maintaining their distinct identities have been a living phenomenon in the politics of northeast India in general and Assam in particular. The ethnic groups of the region have their own lingo-cultural identity with different historical background, which they consider as identity symbols are not ready to merge completely with the mainstream national identity (Phukan, 2003: 1). As a means of maintaining their ethnic distinctness, the ethnic groups which represent both Tribal and non-Tribal communities have

been struggling long either for special constitutional safeguard or for the creation of separate political entities within and outside of India on the basis of their lingo-cultural identities. In fact, emergence and growth of ethnicity based identity movement in the region has been manifested through ethno-political mobilization and movements. Many factors have been identified by many as responsible for ethno-cultural assertions in the region rooted in its colonial and post colonial history. However, tribal loyalties, language, social discriminations on the basis of sharing of political power and economic opportunities have been utilized for ethnic mobilizations. More importantly ethnicity has been harness as an ideology as well as a device to squeeze greater share of power. Modernization increases the level of competition for jobs and other economic resources among the ethnic groups. Moreover, denials of basic human rights, discriminatory economic policy, illegal immigration, economic backwardness etc are seemed to be responsible for ethnic conflicts in the region (Ibid).

However, the relentless efforts made towards homogenization and realization of the goal of making Assam a nation-province during the 1950s and 1960s had resulted in unmanageable discontent among various groups, which ultimately led to the reorganization of Assam in 1972 along ethnic lines (Das, 2001). It is often argued that both the external security threats to India's north east arising out of the consequences of cold war rivalry and internal insecurity arising out of imposition of the linguistic identity of the ethnic Assamese in post colonial multi-ethnic Assam had intensified the inter-ethnic rivalries to such an extent that reorganization of the province had been considered to be the best option by the Indian state (Ibid). Naga Hills were taken out much earlier in 1963 to form the province of Nagaland and under the 1972 reorganization plan, Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills were taken out to form Meghalaya and Lushai

Hills were made the province of Mizoram. Thus the post colonial territorial gain was lost in post-reorganized Assam.

After partition, Assam was left with 23 tribes, comprising of 14 hill tribes of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills; and nine plain tribes inhabiting the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley. Seeing development in the hills, some tribes became conscious to develop their sub-regions. Some tribes who had earlier launched movements rushed to renew their agitations (Das, 2009). For instance, the Bodo leadership in 1967 formed a political party called the Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA). Since its formation, the PTCA has categorically demanded a union territory for the Bodos and other Plains tribals of the region called Udayachal. The ABSU was formed in February 1967 with the raising of a demand for a separate state for the Bodos. Initially the students and the party worked in tandem, but as the PTCA could not fulfill the aspiration of the Bodos for a separate state during the reorganization process, the ABSU withdrew its support in 1979 (Jacob, 1994). Similarly, the Tai- Ahoms renewed their demand of making the undivided Lakhimpur and Sivasagar district as one federating unit of India by reorganizing the state of Assam under the banner of Ujani Asom Rajya Parishad (Lahan, 2001: 101). The Karbis, have been conscious about their minority status vis-à-vis the majority- Assamese. Notwithstanding the gradual incorporation of the Karbis into the Assamese society, culturally and linguistically, the cultural incorporation was never conceded. What is more the kinship based tribal political system, territorial affiliation (Mikir hills), survival of Karbi folksongs and fable of their distinct origin, tribal mortuary rituals, and tribal costumes which survive in vibrant manner helped the Karbis to put forward their autonomy demand. Seeing ever growing demands of the minority tribes the state government had granted ST status to some of the plains tribes, such as the Mising, Rabha and Tiwa (Das, 2009).

The 1980s decade of the last century witnessed a mass movement in Assam led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the Asom Gana Songram Parishod (AGSP) for the detection and eviction of foreign nationals from the state and the granting of greater autonomy. The movement ended after the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, and the subsequent elections that enabled the erstwhile AASU leaders to form the new Asom Gana Parishod (AGP) government in Assam in 1986 raised the hopes of the remaining tribals and non tribal communities for the fulfillment of their longstanding demands. However, as the post-Accord enthusiasm waned, the tribals began to perceive the new government's stance toward them as not much different from that of earlier ones (Jacob, 1994). With the birth of the AGP after the six years long Assam Movement, the tribal groups of the state especially the Bodos, Karbis and Dimasas had come in consensus for resolving their problems. But the failure of the AGP in fulfilling their political commitment given to the tribals in particular ignited the ethnic sentiments of the tribals.

Subsequently, the Bodos started to revitalize their identity movement. As dissatisfaction spread among the youth, the All Bodo Student Union (ABSU) took over the leadership of the Bodos and launched a movement for greater autonomy on March 2, 1987, with the demand for creating of a full-fledged state outside of Assam, to be called as Bodoland. The two strategically located Bodo-inhabited districts- Kokrajhar and Darrang-became the nerve centers of the militant struggle. They made three basic demands: (1) Creation of a separate state called "Bodo land" on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, (2) Creation of a district council in the tribal dominated contiguous areas of south bank, (3) Inclusion of Bodo- Kacharies of Karbi Anglong in the sixth schedule of the Constitution (Dash, 1989; Jacob, 1994). In response, efforts to solve the Bodo issue continued up to 1993, which ultimately resulted in the Bodo Accord, signed at Guwahati on

February 20, formally ending the six-year Bodoland agitation (Ibid.). Unfortunately, the accord failed due to several reasons leading to a revival of the Bodoland state movement. Extremist groups started to control the movement by the name of Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), formed in June 1996. Of course, the process of talks between the central government and the BLT started after the outfit declared a unilateral cease-fire in June 1999; following a series of negotiations a ceasefire agreement was signed with the centre in March 2000. The outfit gave up its demand for separate state as the central government assured to fulfill its demands with an arrangement under the sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution by creating an autonomous self-governing body, the BTC. Thus, within a duration of three years, a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed on February 10, 2003 in New Delhi to that effect (Singh: 2004). But the problem of the Bodos has not been resolved. Still they are continuing their movement in both- democratic and extremist ways.

Similarly, the Karbis and Dimasas had revitalized their earlier demands of separate hilly statehood. They demanded for creating Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts a full-fledged state by curving out from the existing state of Assam. In 1986, their statehood demands led the formation of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC). The ASDC spearheaded a strong mass movement demanding an autonomous state under Article 244 (A) of the Constitution. That culminated in the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on April 1, 1995 between the Assam Government and the leaders of the ASDC (Mangattuthazhe, 2008: 11). The signing of the MoU led to an up gradation of the councils of Karbi Anglong and NC Hills with enhanced powers under the provisions of Sixth Schedule. But that has not stopped the demand for an autonomous state. The leaders who signed the MoU fifteen years ago are disillusioned with the councils that are in place in the hill districts. So they demand the creation

of an autonomous state comprising the geographical areas of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The ASDC demand was unanimously passed in both the tribal councils (Ibid). Besides these peaceful assertions, both the tribal groups took resort to violence and still both process, extremism as well as peace process has been continuing in both districts.

The demand for the creation of a Rabha homeland is also an important autonomy movement emerged in post- Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) period in Assam. As mentioned above, the BTC provides a territorial and political unit to the Bodos of Assam under the Sixth Schedule through an amendment of the Constitution in February 2003. (The provisions of the Sixth Schedule were, before the amendment, applicable only to hill tribes.) Since then, there has been seen revival and upsurge of many autonomy assertions among other plains tribal communities such as the Mishing, Rabha and Tiwa, who already have ‘Autonomous Councils’, but are demanding to secure their up gradation, with a clear political content, as ‘Territorial Councils’ under the Sixth Schedule of Indian constitution (Probhakar, 2004).

Thus as the above discussion reveals, the identity issues of the tribal ethnic groups has been highly prominence in the politics of the state. The causes responsible to their identity crisis have already discussed above. However, the tribals’ identity assertion in Assam can be clubbed under two situations visible in India’s national context. One is the demand for separate statehood within the Indian territory and second one is the demand for autonomy. Besides the tribals’ identity assertions, the politics of the state has been largely influencing by the identity consciousness of the non-tribal ethnic groups.²⁵ They are asserting for ST status under Sixth Schedule of Indian constitution. However, responding their assertions the state governments of Assam have sent numbers of proposal to the concerned authority of the Union government. As

²⁵ Ahom, Chutia, Koch Rajbongshi, Moran, Motak and Tea-Tribes

per the records of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India, the proposal sent by the Assam Government is pending at the office of the Registrar General in India or RGI. The RGI Office sent back the proposal to the State Government of Assam for further justification of the representativeness of the five constitutional criteria among the six non-tribal groups. Recently as media reported, the NDA Government of the Union has decided to amend the constructional criteria to make sure the entre of six ethnic groups of Assam into the list of Sixth Schedule.²⁶ Thus, it clearly indicates the growing importance of the non-tribals identity issues in the state politics of Assam.

²⁶ Asomiya Protidin, June 4, 2015

CHAPTER III

CHUTIAS IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND ASSERTIONS: HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

Introduction:

This chapter attempts to analyze the historical causes/factors responsible for the Chutias identity movement in post colonial Assam. In fact, the movement for ethnic identity of the Chutias has not been a new phenomenon. Rather it has a long historical background. In short, the modern history of the Chutias identity assertion traces back to the mid 20s of the last century. But in unorganized and rudimentary form, the identity assertion of the Chutias began in the pre- British period of Assam when the state was ruled by the Ahoms. Therefore, the chapter divides the history of Chutias identity assertion into three different historical phases namely- the Pre-Colonial (1523-1826), the Colonial (1826-1947) and the Post- Colonial Phase (1947-2014).

In terms of the ethnicity of the movement holders, the identity movements in post-colonial Assam can be clubbed under two broad categories- tribal identity movements and the non- tribal identity movements. The tribal identity movements refer to all collective movements of the hills and plains tribal groups of the state for protection of their distinct ethno-cultural traits. Their movements started first in the third decade of the last century and became instrumental after the enactment of the controversial 'Assam State Official Language Bill' in 1960. It is pertinent to mention here that in post 1960s, the tribal identity movements developed to such an extent that the Assam state had to dissolve into four new states namely the Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. But the ethnic reorganization of Assam could not accomplish many tribal demands of the region which have resulted later into extremist movements. The cases of

the separate statehood movement of the Karbis, Dimasas and Bodos in Assam bear testimonials in this regard. On the other hand, the non-tribals identity movements refer to movements spearheading by the six non tribal groups of Assam. They are namely the Ahoms, Chutias, Koch-Rajbongshi, Moran, Motak and Tea-Tribes the ST status demand of the six ethnic groups of Assam. ST status under sixth schedule of Indian Constitution is the main demand of them. However, among them the case of the Chutias draws lots of attention of the people as well as academicians of the state.

The Chutias are an aboriginal group of Assam (Acharyya, 1992: 222; Baruah, 1993). They have been demanding for protection of their ethno-cultural identity for about a century. Thus, the issues of Chutias identity assertion have added many new dimensions to the discourse of the identity politics in Assam. Unlike the tribals, the Chutias have demanded neither separate statehood nor territorial autonomy. Their assertion is for constitutional recognition to their ethnic identities.

Tracing the Roots of Chutias Identity Construction and Development:

During the Ahom Regime: (the Pre- Colonial Phase)

Historically, the ethnic assertion of the Chutia community of Assam was started first during the rule of Ahoms in Assam (Nath, 2007: 178). As mentioned earlier (Chapter I), the Chutias have a dynastic history. Birpal was the founder king of the Chutia kingdom existed in-between 1189 to 1524 A.D. Ratnadhaj pal, who is said to have been born with the grace of Lord Kubera, established the powerful Chutia kingdom at Sadiya. Thus, from 1189 to 1524 A.D. 17 kings had been ascended the throne of the Chutia kingdom (Baruah and Nath: 2007, 45; Acharyya: Ibid). When the Ahoms came to Assam, the Chutias were the most powerful tribe in the eastern Assam

and the formers therefore avoided to clash with the later. About three hundred years later, taking the advantage of some internal disorder in the Chutia kingdom, the Ahom king Suhungmung Dihingia (1497-1539 A.D.) defeated the Chutias and annexed them with their kingdom (1523 A.D.). Suhungmung disbanded the Chutia nobility and established them at different places with a view to prevent their rebellion in future (Baruah: 1993). A new officer of state, known as the '*Sadiya Khowa Gohain*' was created by the Ahom ruler to rule over Sadiya. In order to strengthen his position, twelve chiefs of villages and three hundred Ahoms of the *Gharphalia clan* along with their families were shifted from Garhgaon to Sadiya and another contingent of the same clan were settled on the banks of the Dihing River. The Royal families along with the administrative personals of the defeated Chutias were deported to Pakariguri for the administrative convenience of the Ahoms, while a number of Brahmans and blacksmiths and other artisans were taken from Sadiya to the Ahom capital (Gait, 1981: 44).

After losing their kingdom in the hands of Ahoms, a large numbers of people of the Chutias fled to the neighboring mountain ranges of the frontiers in order to escape themselves from the atrocities of the former. In fact, the Ahom invasion brought end of the Chutias age of freedom and dignity and began a new age of subordination. During and post- invasion period, the Ahoms had taken many callous policies to repress the Chutias. Their populations were scattered and deported into different places of the Ahom kingdom. The aristocratic as well as administrative personnel of the erstwhile Chutia dynasty were kept distant from the general masses. Furthermore, the youth of the Chutias were forcefully used in various hazardous tasks. Subsequently, these all cruelty of the Ahom rulers gave birth to a rebellious sentiment amongst the patriotic youth of the Chutias.

According to written history, the Chutias started their revolt against the Ahoms first in 1527. But they were soon reduced to submission. Dihingia Gohain, an Ahom Administrator in Sadiya lost his life during the disturbance (Acharyya, 2012: 621-627; Nath, 2007: 172). The pain of losing their beloved kingdom and the patriotism to get back the same was the main cause of the first revolt of the Chutias. Significantly, the intensity of the revolt was so sudden and brawny that the rebels easily could capture (although for a few days only) the fort of the *Sadiya Khowa Gohain*, the Ahom administrator in Sadiya. Indeed, this was the beginning of Chutias identity resurrections during the Ahom regime. Moreover, the 1527 revolt of the Chutias was not only a strike against the Ahoms; simultaneously it marked the beginning of the age of identity resurrection of the subordinated groups in the state of Assam (Nath, *Ibid.* 178).

In 1529, the Chutias again revolted against the invader Ahoms and killed two Ahom administrators in Sadiya. As it is written in history, like the first revolt, the second revolt of the Chutias was also a strong revenge against the atrocities of the invader Ahoms (Acharyya, *Ibid.*; Nath, *Ibid.*: 179). The neighboring mountain ranges of Sadiya were the military bases of the Chutia rebels. The second rebellion of the Chutias was argued as outcome of three causes- first, after invading the Chutia kingdom, the Ahom rulers curtailed of all aristocratic privileges of the former Chutia administrators. As a result, they had to flee and to take shelter in the neighboring mountain region and forests. That forms of suffering were quite intolerable for the former aristocratic people of the Chutias in particular and for the whole community in general, which later culminated into violent revolts.²⁷ Secondly, the Ahom invasion questioned about the

²⁷ Ahom Buranji, pp. 62-64; Dr Lakshmi Devi's Ahom-Chutia Relations, pp. 692-716, cited here from K. Baruah ed. (2012) *Oitihakhik Bibortanot Asomor Chutia Janagusthi*. Gohpur, Kiron Prakash

sustainability of the ethno- cultural traits and heritages of the Chutias. It is noteworthy that the Chutias were very much rich in ethno-cultural traits, rituals, and traditions which later contributed a lot to the growth of the larger Assamese culture. Thirdly, the Chutias revolt was a protest against the large scale violation of their human rights in the Ahom kingdom.²⁸

Thus, the history of Ahom domination over the Chutias was full of suppression of the former over the later at one end and counter rebellion of the later against the former on the other. In fact in the long history of Ahom domination, the rebellious Chutias had been continued their rebellious activities against the former. As noted in the written history, from 1527 to 1826 Chutias had been revolted more than eight times against the Ahoms (Devi, 2012: 692-716; Nath, 2007: 172-180). Among them, two rebellious resurrections of the Chutias are considered significant. The first one was the 1673s mass revolt which took place at Taikaphi village of present Namrup and the second one was the infamous Muwamoriya Revolution of 1769.

The 1673s mass revolt was known as the longest revolt made by the Chutia rebels against the Ahoms rulers. The revolt was started at Taikaphi village of present Namrup in upper Assam. It was started by a migrant section of the Chutias and later helped by the frontier hill tribes of Sadiya. Moreover, this was the first rebellion of the Chutias which was led by their common people. Before 1673, their general masses were hardly involved with their identity resurrection. However, the exploitative economic policies of the Ahom rulers made the common masses of the village agitated. Secondly, the farmers were the main architects of the rebellion. Unlike their earlier revolts, the 1673 revolt was a mass protest by not paying taxes to the Ahom king and through it the villagers negated the administrative jurisdiction of the Ahoms over them. For

²⁸ Ibid.,

them, the Ahoms did not have right to impose taxes over them.²⁹ Thus, it signifies that although the Ahoms conquered the Chutia kingdom long years back, yet their rulers had to face numbers of confrontations in establishing their administrative control over it.

Secondly, almost in the half of the six years dynastic history of the Ahoms, the biggest challenge that the Ahom rulers had ever faced was the “*Muwamariya Revolution*”, led by a few deprived sections of people in the Ahom kingdom (Nath, 2007: 190). As noted earlier, the infamous “*Muwamariya Rebellion*” was started in 1769. As in the words of noted historian Dr. D. Nath,

“it is interesting that the dominant force in the Muwamariya civil war were the most deprived communities -the Marans, Mataks, Kacharis, Kaivartas, the Chutias and a section of the Ahoms. The Muwamariya civil revolt made it clear that the ethnic bonds were far stronger among the masses that the extent of assimilation forced upon them by the state or the neo-vaishnava movement. For, during this revolt, besides the Morans who initiated it, the Kaivartas under Harihar tried to establish their own identity, the Kachari and the Chutias were motivated by similar objective to join the rebellion. The impact of this great event is still there in the socio-political life of the state” (Nath, 2001: 60).

Thus, the Muwamariya revolution was a collective force of the defeated and exploited groups against the dominant Ahom dynasty. The Moran, Borahi and the Chutias were fighting for losing their kingdom, the Kaivartas were for social insult and subjugation and while other tribes were for unlawful invasion by the Ahoms in their respective kingdoms (Sarmah, 2006).

²⁹ Ahom Buranji, pp. 229-230; Dr Lakshmi Devi’s Ahom-Chutia Relations, pp. 692-716, cited here from K. Baruah ed. (2012) *Oitihakhik Bibortanot Asomor Chutia Janagusthi*. Gohpur, Kiron Prakash

Summing up, in the long history of Ahom domination, the Chutias had tried many times to liberate their Sadiya state. But they were not succeeded. However, the above analysis regarding the identity assertion of the Chutias in the Ahom regime reveals many things. First, the Chutias assertions were violent in nature. They failed to establish control over any parts of their lost Sadiya state. Secondly, numerically also only a few sections of the Chutias were involved in their rebellious assertions although all Chutias were for freedom. Practically they could never organize their community masses at any particular place of the state. Furthermore, their revolts were confined only in the frontier areas of the Sadiya. They were failed to expand their liberation movement beyond frontier regions of Sadiya. Similarly, the Chutias revolts were confined within their ruling as well as aristocratic classes. Fourthly, the Chutia rebels were not well organized and well planned to fight against the strong Ahoms soldiers. So, the Ahom rulers could easily suppress the unplanned revolts of the unorganized Chutias.

However, despite failure the rebellious movements of the Chutias in the Ahom regime had significance. Among the others, the most important significance of their movement was that it made alive the sense of community feeling among the scattered population of the Chutias. As a result, the Chutias are uniting today with their ethno-cultural traits.

Chutias Ethnic Assertions in British Colonial Regime, 1826-1947: (the Colonial Phase)

By the Treaty of Yandaboo,³⁰ the state of Assam was annexed with the British-Indian-Empire. Along with the state, the people of the then state of Assam were also got a new national identity as Indian. It's true that the historic annexation of Assam with India made tremendous impact on the state of identity movements of many small nationalities including the Chutias in the state.

³⁰ The Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826 was signed between the Man King and the Britishers in Yandaboo through which the former had surrendered to the later and gave their conquered states of northeast to the Britishers.

During the Ahom regime, they were mobilizing against the Ahom rulers. But when the British came to the land, the Ahom kingdom lost its sovereignty and consequently the non-Ahom nationalities including the Chutias became ambiguous about the goal of their ethnic mobilizations. In fact, the subsequent results of the situation led the Chutias to be stopped their rebellious mobilizations against the state. In that way, in the post- Ahom period the Chutias did not make any identity demand in true sense of the term. The community was remained silent for about a century (1826-1925). Many factors can be argued as responsible for the situation. Among the others, the *politics of cultural refinement* made once by the Ahom rulers and continued later by the Britishers was considered significant on this regard. The politics of cultural refinement is also known as the politics of sanskritization through which the small cultural groups are assimilated with the dominant culture of the state. Marriage and caste conversion are the two important ways of the process of caste assimilation. However, it was only in the mid 20s of the last century, the Chutias started their organized lives and constituted their first ethnic organization the *Assam Chutia Conference*. Later it was renamed (1976) as the *All Chutia Caste Conference, Assam* or ACCCA shortly. Since its inception, the ACCCA has been raising diverse demands in pursuance of their community interests. In contrast to the rebellious mobilizations of the Chutias in the Ahom regime, the ACCCA has followed purely democratic ways for raising their ethnic demands in the British colonial regime.

The Census Reports published in time to time by the colonial Britishers were nothing but instruments of creating social divisions in society (Sarmah, 2007: 504). It is noteworthy here that during the British rule, the Indians including the Assamese were very much caste conscious. The British colonial rulers well understood it. So, they usually prepared the census reports on caste basis. Accordingly, the data regarding the socio-economic conditions of the castes were stated

caste wise. They did not left to state the minimum differences among the castes as regard their socio-economic conditions and through it they tried to divide the people on caste lines. Interestingly, up to 1931, the colonial rulers prepared the census reports of Assam on that way which had created havoc inter-caste tensions in Assam. Many castes especially the backward and deprived ones were started to mobilize their community masses against the upper castes. They assumed that they were backward because of the discriminatory social norms of the upper caste groups. In other words, the caste based British census which they prepared to sustain inter-caste differences had indirectly encouraged the deprived and backward ethnic groups to be conscious ethnically. Just after the publication of the 1891 census report, two ethnic organizations came into born in Assam. They were namely the 'Sadou Asom Ahom Sabha' or SAAS formed in 1893 and the 'Britiyal Baniya Sabha' or BBS, 1893. In one point of view, these two organizations marked the beginning of the age of organized ethnic assertions in the modern history of Assam.

Socio-cultural Status of the Chutias in British Census Reports:

As mentioned above, the British Census Reports on Assam were nothing but caste character at all and they used these reports to increase inter-caste tensions amongst the castes. For instance, in the 1881 British India population census, the Chutias were categorized as an untouchable group of Assam which made severe impact on the socio-economic and political development of the community later (Sarmah, Ibid: 506). Again in the 1891 population census, the Chutias were categorized as a backward caste along with the Ahoms. The impact of this categorization of the Chutias was revealed in the succeeding census. Because of their lower caste status, many populations of the Chutias left their caste identity and converted secretly into relatively upper caste groups. But this story was come into focus after the publication of the 1901 population census report. The 1901 Population Census reported first about the unnatural decrease of

population of the Chutias. The report mentioned data wise that in 1881 the total population of the Chutias was 59,163 and in 1891 it became 87,691. But suddenly in 1901, their population was decreased to 85,829 (Sarmah, Ibid: 506). Unfortunately, except giving a tactful comment the Britishers did not mentioned anything about the unnatural decrease of the Chutia populations in the report. They just reported that, *there has been little change except in Nowgaon, where Chutias like the rest of the population have suffered badly* (Ibid).

Thus as the above analysis revealed, transfer of powers from the Ahoms to the Britishers did not bring any noticeable changes to the social status of the Chutias in Assam. They were remained backward socially. Brahmanism, which believed of caste hierarchy, was being encouraged by the Britishers. The influence of Brahmanism was also apparent among the Chutias. As a result, the Chutias got sub-divided into different mutually hatred social groups such as the Hindu Chutia, Deori Chutia, Borahi Chutia, Ahom Chutia, Miri Chutia and Other Chutia (Baruah, 1993). Among them, the Hindu and the Ahom Chutias were fully hinduized factions of the Chutias and both considered themselves different from the other non-Hindu Chutias. Under this principle, the Hindu Chutias social position was higher than the Chutia factions. That was the first socio-religious stratification among the Chutias in their history of social lives. It is often regretted by the present Chutia leaders that during the British rule, the community had not only lost their social status. Along with it they also lost their ethnic solidarity. And as a result, the succeeding generations of the community have had to make many efforts to revive their lost ethnic solidarity and status.

Educational conditions of the Chutias in the British colonial regime:

Education is the backbone of socio-economic development of a community. Development of a nation is indirectly meant the educational development of its people. In terms of educational development, the Chutias were one of the backward groups during the British rule in Assam. According to the report of the 1901 British India population census, the literacy rate of the Chutias during that time was 2.39%. Here the percentage of the female was only 0.03%. On the other hand, 0.47% male population of the Chutias knew an English alphabet where as the percentage of the female counterpart was 0% (Sarmah, Ibid: 508). This was just an example of the backward educational conditions of the Chutias. Their conditions remained same in the succeeding decades also.

Many factors were responsible for backward educational conditions of the Chutias during the colonial rule in Assam. Among the others, the contemporary caste ridden social structure and social mal-practices of the Chutias were mainly responsible on that regard. Besides, the habit of using intoxicated items like opium, homemade wine etc. were made their people ignorant about the importance of the British introduced education system in the country. Many modern historians have accused that the Britishers used these intoxicated items as instruments to stop intellectual development of the backward people and provoked them to be made these items habitual (Chutia, 1984: 407). And that forms of bad habits of the community had not only made them backward intellectually but also physically.

Secondly, the Chutias were generally living in remote and interior villages and the less accessible conditions of their villages was also an important reason of educational backwardness of the community in British Assam (Ibid). According to 1921 census, only .19 percent of the

Chutia population of above 5 years knew English language in 1000 population which was very low in comparison to other advanced castes of Assam. In 1911 census, the percentage increased to 0.94% (Chutia, Ibid: 409). In the words of a noted historian of the state Dr. S.L. Baruah,

“In the field of education, the Chutia people are very much backward. It is noted in the report of the Census of India, 1901 that the position of the Chutia community in society is low one and education has made little progress among them. In the absence of proper survey the percentage of literacy can't be ascertained” (Baruah, 1993).

However, this sort of backward educational conditions of the Chutias made quite disappointed their educated youth later.

Economic Status of the Chutias:

As it's found in history, the medieval Chutia kingdom was rich in natural resources and thus their people were self-sufficient economically. They had developed a strong agro-based economy in Sadiya (J. Chutia, Ibid: 398). Militarily also, the medieval Chutia kingdom was very powerful and established its supremacy over the neighbor states of the region. They conquered many neighboring states of Sadiya and thus enriched their national treasury.

Moreover, the medieval Chutia kingdom had a name in inter-state trade and commerce in the region. As the written histories stated, Sadiya was the main business hub of upper Assam in the medieval period (Baruah, 2007: 144). There was an international trade road connecting Tibet, China and Myanmar to Sadiya and thus Sadiya was known as a place for inter-state market of the hilly and plains people of the region (K. Baruah, 2012: 46-47). During the rule of King Ratnadhjpal (1210-1250), the road also extended to connect the Kamatapur kingdom of the

Koch Rajbonshis. Besides of road connection, water ways were also highly being used in inter-state trade and commerce during the period of medieval Chutia kingdom (Saikia, 2005: 57-58). But after the Ahom's invasion to their Kingdom, the process of demolition of their rich agro-commerce based economy was started. Their villages were destroyed by the invader Ahoms. Peoples were scattered and deported into different places of the big Ahom kingdom. Besides, heavy agricultural taxes were imposed over the defeated Chutias. As a result, the Chutias lost their economic self-sufficiency. Furthermore, the invader Ahoms employed the Chutia youths in many hazardous works. Their former aristocratic peoples including the royal family were segregated from their general masses. Besides, to control the possible revolt of the Chutias, a selected section of the Chutias were recruited in various administrative post of Ahom administration such as the phukan, borphukan, bhorali, boruah and borboruah (Chutia, 2007: 404-405).

After British took over the rule of Assam, the economic conditions of the Chutias were expected to be improved. But the expectations of the Chutias were not materialized. Rather their conditions remain backward in contrast to the other ethnic groups of the state. The following tables shows the comparative economic conditions of the various ethnic groups of Assam in the first decade of the 20th century-

Table No. 3.01: Economic conditions of the Chutias in British Administration

Caste	Govt. Officers	Medical Jobs	Ad vocates	Professor, teacher and school inspectors
Ahom	No	No	No	282
Chutia	No	No	No	100
Baidya	20	280	84	130
Brahman	24	840	142	1248
Kalita	No	142	No	428
Kayastha	46	1248	428	1172

Source: 1911 British India Census³¹

³¹ Cited here from S L Baruah & D Nath (edt.) *Ibid.*, p. 410

From the above table it is revealed that although the Chutias represented a major portion of the Assamese population, yet up to the first decade of the 20th century they were remain unrepresentative in the higher official jobs of the state. It was often argued that the British rulers preferred upper caste people while recruiting in government jobs. As a result, the upper caste people were developed day by day and their representations in the government services were increased. The negative result of such undemocratic policies of the colonial Britishers was well noticed in the economic development of the backward castes including the Chutias of Assam.

The English language was an important reason of economic backwardness of the community during the period (Chutia: 2007: 408). In convenience of their administration, the colonial rulers had adopted English language as the official language in India. Hence, to get a government job, the aspirant had to know English. But the Chutia people didn't understand the importance of English language and thus debarred themselves from learning the same. As a result, they failed to grip the educational and economic benefits available in British administration in Assam (Ibid).

Looking at the poor, backward economic conditions of the community, the renowned historians of Assam Dr. S.L. Boruah once commented that,

“Persons holding top offices from the Chutia community are few and far between. It is to be noted that there is no a single officer of IAS or IPS cadre from amongst them even till date. Persons having higher education are very few. For instance, there are only three teachers of this community in the Dibrugarh University and only one in the Gauhati University. Industrialists are hardly to be found” (Boruah, 1993: 31)

Its fact that it was because of their backward economic conditions the Chutias could not reap the educational benefits in the British regime in Assam. Similarly, it was because of their backward educational conditions, the Chutias remained unconscious about their relative share of development in the state. The uncontrolled influx of illegal and legal migrants in to the state had made adverse impact on the socio-economic development of the indigenous groups including the Chutias (Phukan, 2004: 30). The Britishers appointed many Bengali educated people in various government jobs of the state especially in teaching, medical, and clerical departments for their own administrative convenience. Along with this middle class Bengali people, many other people were also come to the state for doing business and thus they started to settle in different corners of the state permanently. Besides of them, the Britishers were also imported many manual laborers from outside of Assam to work in tea industry, coal mining, oil industry, rail way, post office and in other constructing areas of the state. Thus, in course of time, these imported laborers had become a part of the greater Assamese society and increased competitions for jobs in the state (Ibid, 32). So, this form of anti-local policies of the Britishers had given birth to a sense of relative deprivation among the educated youth of the aboriginal groups of Assam. As a result the state has been facing diverse ethnic identity movement in post-independence period.

End Comment: The Post-Colonial Context of Chutias Identity Assertions

Thus in the above discussion, a modest attempt is made to analyze the hypotheses that the present identity assertion of the Chutias is not a recent phenomenon. Rather, the modern identity assertion of the Chutias is originated of the deprivation made towards them in the Ahom as well as British colonial regime. Economic development is the backbone of all round development of an ethnic group. The economic conditions determine the state of development of the other super

structural aspects of a community such as politics, religion, education, ethics and culture. The backward economic conditions of the Chutias had made adverse impact on their politico-cultural and educational development in colonial rule in Assam. Furthermore, due to their lower caste status a large section of the Chutias had hidden their ethnic identity and converted themselves to other relatively advanced castes. As a result, gradually the community became minority and lost their ethno-cultural heritages.

However, in the mid 20s of the last century, the educated youth of the community became aware ethnically. They realized the necessity of being organized ethnically to protect their ethnic identity. To accomplish it, the community has been demanding ST status under sixth schedule of Indian constitutions since the 80s of the last century.

CHAPTER IV
GROUP MOBILIZATION AND DYNAMICS OF CHUTIAS IDENTITY
ASSERTION: RESPONSE OF THE STATE

Introduction:

As mentioned in the previous chapter (Chapter III), the modern history of Chutias' identity assertion started in the mid 20s of the 20th century. In the mid of the decade, the educated people of the community started urging their scattered population to be united for reviving their ethno-cultural heritages. As a result, *Assam Chutia Conference*, the first ethnic organization of the community came into existence in 1925. However, the *Assam Chutia Conference* is followed later by three other ethnic organizations of the community. They are namely -i) All Assam Chutia Caste Women Conference, 1946 ii) All Assam Chutia Caste Youth Conference, 1969 and iii) All Assam Chutia Student Union, 2005. Their brief profiles are as the following-

Brief Profiles of the Chutia Ethnic Organizations:

All Chutia Caste Conference, Assam:

The "*Assam Chutia Conference*", later renamed (1976) as "*All Chutia Caste Conference, Assam, (ACCCA)*" was the first ethnic organization of the Chutias, born in 1925. Bhramor Ch. Saikia was the key person associated with the formation of the organization. The ACCCA, as the parent ethnic organization of the community has been raising many issues for protection and promotion of their ethno-cultural heritages as well as collective rights since its inception.

All Assam Chutia Student Union:

The “*All Assam Chutia Student Union, (AACSU)*” is actively working for development of their community students in particular and the community in general. Up to 2005, AACSU was known as ‘All Chutia Caste Youth- Student Conference, Assam’. Moreover, the organization was very much dependent on ACCCA for its activities. But in 2005, AACSU dissolved the collaboration with their youth section and drafted an independent constitution. At present AACSU is an independent organization of the Chutias and is not bound to take any prior consent of the ACCCA for its activities. Besides, as a student organization AACSU has maintained a close relation with the All Assam Student Union (AASU).

All Assam Chutia Caste Women Conference:

The *All Assam Chutia Caste Women Conference or AACCCWC* came into existence in 1946. It represents the issues and problems related to the women of the community. Unlike the AACSU, the AACCCWC is dependent on the ACCCA for its activities.

All Assam Chutia Caste Youth Conference:

The *All Assam Chutia Caste Youth Conference or AACCCYC* is another important ethnic organization of the community born in 1969. But in 2005 as mentioned above, the organization was divided into two and the student section created a new organization called AACSU. However, like the other three organizations, AACCCYC is also actively working for protection of the relative interest of the Chutias.

Towards Articulation of Chutias Ethnic Identity: A Chronological Order

Articulation as well as assertion of ethnicity of different groups for maintaining their distinct identities have been a common phenomenon in the present day politics of northeast India in general and Assam in particular. The various ethnic groups in Assam have been demanding either for separate statehood or for autonomy, or for ST status under certain provision of the constitution. Many ethnic groups have achieved their demands through movement and set example for the aspirant groups.

The Chutias in Assam is also an ancient ethnic group who have been asserting for diverse socio-economic and political rights for about a century. To accomplish their demands, the Chutia ethnic organizations have been playing a vital role. Hence, to understand the nature, demands and dynamics of Chutias identity movement, a chronological analysis of the movement is important.

The First Phase: Socio-Cultural Demands of the Chutias (1925-1935):

The first phase of Chutias' identity assertion began with the formation of their first ethnic organization and ended with the change of organizational structure as well as orientation of the same. During the period, the ACCCA was mainly concerned about the factors responsible for socio-cultural backwardness of the community. Therefore, it is observed that the issues of assertion of the Chutias during the first phase were fully apolitical as well as non-economic in nature.

However, the first conference of the ACCCA was held in 1925 in Golaghat, Assam. The conference was presided over by a well known novelist of the state, Rajani Kant Bordoloi. Ethnically he was not belonged to the Chutia community. Bhramar Ch. Saikia was the organizing

secretary of the conference.³² The participants of the conference expressed their concern about the gradual demise of Chutias' rich ethno-cultural heritages. The educated elite of the Chutias urged their fellow masses to be organized under the banner of the ACCCA to revive their glorious cultural heritages. Accordingly, the participants emphasized on building up as well as strengthening organizational foundation of the ACCCA state wide so that they could spread a sense of unity and solidarity among the people of the community. Summary of the proposals of the first conferences of the ACCCA were as the following-

Proposals of the First Conference of the ACCCA, 1925:

- Proposed to educate their children at least up to the primary level.
- Proposed to open sub-branches of the ACCCA in different corners of the state.
- Proposed to establish a community treasury and
- Proposed to make aware their rural masses about the bad effect of wine and such other intoxicated habits.³³

Proposals of the Second Conference of the ACCCA, 1927:

The second conference of ACCCA was held at Roha in Nogaon district of Assam. A renowned Assamese writer, Nilamoni Phukan presided over the meeting. Ethnically he was also not belonged to the community. However, the main proposals taken in the conference were-

- Appealed the people of the community including those who were living outside of the Brahmaputra Valley to be remained Assamese.
- Warned the leaders of other ethnic groups of the state not to make any anti-Chutia comment at any stage of their ethnic assertions.

³² *Presidential Speech of the First Conference of the Assam Chutia Sanmilian, 1925*

³³ *Ibid.*,

- Proposed to set up an inter-caste co-ordination committee among the backward castes of the state for establishing coordination among them.³⁴

Proposals of the Third Conference of the ACCCA, 1929:

The third conference of the ACCCA was held in Jorhat, Assam. Golap Ch. Baruah was the president of the conference. He was the third consecutive non-Chutia president of the ACCCA.

Proposals of the conference were -

- Proposed to quit foreign cloth and goods in response to the appeal of the leaders of the ongoing freedom movement of India.
- Proposed to request the Governor of Assam for giving preferences in appointing eligible candidates of the Chutias in various government jobs.
- Proposed to take measures to inform the rural masses of the community about the bad effects of the intoxicated habits.³⁵

Proposals of the Fourth Conference of the ACCCA, 1930:

The fourth conference of the ACCCA was held at Banmukh, Sivasagar in 1930. Sarbeswar Sarmah Kotoki was the president of the fourth conference of the ACCCA. The proposals of the conference were -

- Proposed to oppose the inclusion of the Deories in the list of the STs in 1931 British population census in Assam. Rather they proposed to appeal to include them along with the Chutias in the list of caste Hindu groups.

³⁴ *Presidential Speech of the Second Conference of the Assam Chutia Sanmilian, 1927*

³⁵ *Presidential Speech of the Third Conference of the Assam Chutia Sanmilian, 1929*

Proposals of the Fifth Conference of the ACCCA, 1935:

The fifth conference of the ACCCA was held at Charing in Sivasagar district of Assam. Raibahadur Brindaban Ch. Goswami was the president of the conference. He was the fifth consecutive non-Chutia president of the ACCCA. Proposals of the meeting were-

- Proposed to request the Governor General of India to establish University and High court in Assam.
- Expressed satisfaction with the publication of '*Dainik Batari*' and '*Raij*', the two daily Assamese news papers in Assam.
- Proposed to welcome and encourage the people who are interested in discovering historical documents and monuments of the ancient Chutia kingdom.
- Proposed to pressurize the British Indian Government to provide scholarships to the Chutia students.³⁶

After reviewing the proposals of the first five conferences of the ACCCA, it is revealed that building up an organizational network to connect each and every person of the scattered community was the major concern of the Chutia ethnic leadership during their first phase of Identity assertion. On that regard, the ACCCA proposed to make a population census of their people so that they could reach each and every house of their lost community. They hoped that the proposed census would develop a sense of ethnic solidarity among the scattered people of the community.

The above analysis also reveals that during the first phase of ethnic assertion the Chutia leadership maintained cordial relations with the British Indian Government. Sometimes it was

³⁶ *Presidential Speech of the Fifth Conference, Assam Chutia Sanmilian, 1935*

seen that the British India government was highly being appreciated by the ACCCA leadership. For instance, in the first conference of ACCCA, the Chutia leadership expressed their happiness with the liberal democratic policies and administration of the British Government. In their words, *“in such liberal policies of the Britishers, which nation can’t develop them and remain uneducated is shameless”*.³⁷ Through this sort of appreciation, the community expected to get privileges (economic and educational) in the British administration in Assam. Moreover besides the Britishers, the Chutias had maintained good relations with the then upper caste groups of Assam. It is noteworthy that during that time the upper caste groups played a dominant role in Assamese society. Educationally they were advanced. Economically they were opulent. They enjoyed the maximum administrative powers of the British rule in Assam. So it was indirectly imperative for the Chutias to be attached the upper caste people with their ethnic movement. But they didn’t need much time to understand the real colonial attitude of the Britishers and the castism of the upper caste Brahmins of Assam (Sarmah, 2006: 68).

However, many contemporary socio-political factors influenced the movement of the Chutias during the first phase. Among the others, the influence of the Indian National Congress (INC) was the most notable one. When the Chutias started their identity movement, the whole nation deserved freedom under the leadership of INC. Hence, like the other groups of the state the Chutias were also attached with the freedom movement of the nation. Moreover, the ethnic leaders of the community were also the leaders of the INC at their locality. Freedom of India was therefore, the main goal of all including the Chutias in India. The Chutia leadership clearly

³⁷ Presidential Speech of the First conference, Assam Chutia Sanmilian, 1925

understood that only in an independent India they could maintain their ethnic identity. So, they appealed their common masses to be loyal to the INC.³⁸

The '*Asom Sahitya Sabha*', (ASS) was another influential organization to the leadership of the ACCCA. The ASS has been the biggest literary organization in the state since its inception (1917). It has been working for building up a composite Assamese identity with the given lingo-cultural diversity of the state. Lingo-culturally, the Chutias are an integral part of the Assamese nationality. They have contributed a lot to the development of the composite Assamese society and culture. So, as a mainstream Assamese group, the Chutias were bound to follow the biggest literary organization of the state. Thus, it appears that the Chutias identity movement had moved along with some dictates of the ASS. It is pertinent to mention that it was either because of the politics of the Ahoms or of the atrocities of the invader Burmese, many Chutia people had to fled to different places of the then India such as Barak valley, (the south-western side of the present Assam state), Sylhet district of present Bangladesh, Meghalaya and Nagaland (Hussain, 2007: 270-271). In such circumstances, the ASS appealed to the ACCCA leadership to take every possible measure to retain the lingo-cultural identities of the migrated Chutias (Ibid.).

The ambiguousness of Chutia leadership as regard their racial identity was an important dimension of Chutias' identity assertion during 30s of the last century. Whether their racial identity is Mongoloid or Aryan or which one of the two identities would be beneficial for the community consisted of the major part of their ambiguity. It was true that at the very beginning of their identity construction, some leaders of the community intended to identify themselves as Aryan. Even up to the fifth conference of the ACCCA (1935), their leadership intended to

³⁸ Presidential Speech of the third conference, Assam Chutia Sanmilan, 1929

consider themselves as Aryan and thereby deserved higher social status in the existing caste ridden social structure of the state. Hence in 1935, when the poor, illiterate, scattered Chutias enlisted in the list of Schedule Caste (SC) of Assam following the suggestion of British Simon Commission (1927), the ACCCA vehemently opposed it and demanded for retaining their existing caste Hindu status. In support of their demand, the ACCCA leadership argued that *“since ancient time the Chutias are known as a ruling race of Assam, so their inclusion along with the SCs has not only neglected their rich dynastic past but also degraded their social status”* (Chutia, 1989: 33). Interestingly, during that time the Chutias not only tried to preserve their caste Hindu identity but also pressurized the Deories to be followed them. Notably, the Deories were the priestly class of the Chutias, were enlisted in the list of the STs proposed by the British Simon Commission during their visit to Assam. As the ACCCA leadership argued, Deories are not separate from the Chutias. Both are belonged to the same ethnic origin. Therefore, the Deories should not enlist in the proposed list of the STs of Assam. In contrast, the opinions of the Deori leaders were quite critical to the Chutias. As a quick response, Bhimbor Deori, the prominent leader of the Deories (he was also a member of the ACCCA) left his membership of the ACCCA to express his disappointment (Ibid, 33). Subsequently, the Deories were enlisted in the list of the Plains Tribal groups of Assam and now they are enjoying its privileges. And the Chutias were enlisted in the list of the caste Hindu groups according to their wish.

The Second Phase: Assortment of Socio-Economic and Political Demands (1935-1979)

The second phase of Chutias identity assertion began with the sixth conference of the ACCCA which was held at Bengenakhowa, Golaghat in 1938. The Bengenakhowa conference of the ACCCA was significant from various points of view. In other sense, the Bengenakhowa

conference brought drastic changes to the organized movement of the Chutias and gave it a new direction. Two causes were instrumental on this regard. The first cause was the continued non-responsive policy of the British administration in Assam towards the demands of the community. And secondly, the unchanged caste Hindu social hierarchy in where Chutias were continuously being treated as untouchables.

Interestingly up to the sixth conference of the ACCCA, the presidents were selected from the renowned personalities of the Assamese society and unfortunately all of them were non-Chutia ethnically. Undoubtedly the Chutia leadership did it for two purposes- 1) to expose their liberal as well as non-parochial attitude associated with the identity movement and 2) for giving right directions to their movement. Thus, all five presidents of first five conferences of the ACCCA were belonged to the upper cast Brahmins. And in brief, it was the most important cause of retaining caste Hindu identity by the Chutias during their first phase of identity assertion. However, since the sixth conference of the ACCCA, the presidents were started to select from the ethnic Chutias. Purnananda Chutia was the first Chutia president of the ACCCA and it remained a permanent decision for the succeeding conferences. Secondly, the secretary of the ACCCA was also changed which had been occupied by Bhramor Ch. Saikia, the founder of the ACCCA for five consecutive conferences (Chutia, 1984).

As noted above, along with the organizational structure, the new ethnic leadership of the Chutias started to assess their existing identity demands. They questioned the relevancy of retaining their caste Hindu orientation. In spite of their long involvement with the caste Hindu groups and practices, their social status had not improved. Instead, for the first time they identified themselves as untouchables in their history of social lives. They were not treated equal by the

upper caste people of the state. Their dissatisfactions were apparent in the memorandum submitted in 1946 in where they maintained that,

“Inter-marriage and inter-dining are still prohibited with others of the caste Hindus though politically the Chutias are calculated to be a part of the so called caste Hindu Groups.... The Chutias are long suffering these silent miseries without any redress and encouragement from the Government and sympathy from the advanced brothers and leaders of the Caste Hindus.... Not only the Govt. is indifferent but their other Caste Hindu brothers in power are also taking no notice of the sad lot of Chutias and are not raising a voice on their behalf. Their condition is far worse thus of the depressed classes or the tribals whom we generally think to be the most undeveloped and most backward...”³⁹

In such circumstances, the Chutia leaders reassessed their identity orientation and demanded a separate political existence and political rights as an ethnic minority in statutory form in the new constitutional machinery to be set up in India in 1946.⁴⁰ But this demand of the Chutias was not considered by the constituent assembly of India.

Significantly, in 1946, the Chutia intended to be recognized themselves as tribal. On this regard however, the Chutias were influenced by the *Assam Tribal League* (ATL) which was born in 1946. ATL was an umbrella ethnic organization of the aboriginal groups of Assam constituted for raising their politico-economic demands. Membership of the ATL was therefore open for all aboriginal groups of Assam. As an aboriginal group, the Chutias joined ‘Assam Tribal League’ or ATL (hereafter) in 1946 with the hope that the membership would help them in entering in the

³⁹ Memorandum on the Demands of the Chutias of Assam as a Backward Minority, 1946, cited here from D. Sarmah (2007) *Ibid.*, p. 533

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

proposed ST list in independent India. However, that was the historic shift of Chutias identity movement from the caste Hindu to tribal status (Khanikar, 1989).

Besides the above mentioned demands, the ACCCA raised many other politico-economic demands during their second phase of identity assertion. Accordingly, in the 7th conference of the ACCCA held at Moranhat in 1946, they demanded for “*reservation of posts in the Government Administration (i.e. at least two seats for the Chutias in the state civil services), local boards and municipality of Assam for the Chutias exclusively.*”⁴¹ Moreover, they demanded for reservation of educational seats for the Chutia students in the technical institutions of Assam like *Bari white Medical School*. As demanded by the Chutia leadership, the percentage of reservation should not be less than 10% of the total in the abovementioned cases.⁴² In 1946, ACCCA constituted a committee consisting of three members on this regard. In the same year, the committee submitted a memorandum as regard scholarship to the then Prime Minister of Assam and to the concerned department of the state government. As mentioned in the memorandum, their studentship demands included - 20 for primary level, 18 for M. E., 5 for metric, 3 for post-metric, 2 for post graduate, and 1 for each doctor, mining, agriculture, sericulture, veterinary, engineering etc.⁴³

In 1953, the “*Central Undeveloped Community Investigation Commission*” also known as ‘*Kaka Saheb Kalalkar Commission*’ visited Assam. The ACCCA submitted a memorandum to the commission as regard inclusion of the community into the OBC list (Boruah: 2007, 556). The memorandum was submitted along with the words that “*in Assam the Chutia community is the most undeveloped and backward race. Though the Chutias are kept along with the Caste Hindus*

⁴¹ Proposals Accepted in the Moran Conference of the ACCCA, 1946. Cited here from K. Boruah (2007). Ibid, 555-556

⁴² Ibid.,

⁴³ Ibid.,

by the government, but untouchability, inter marriage, inter-dining are still prohibited with others of the Caste Hindus."⁴⁴ The response of the state government was very positive towards their demand. It had reasons. The growing democratic assertions of the Chutias and continuous non-responsive policies of the state government in response had already made the community quite dissatisfied. Simultaneously, the political environment of the state was not congenial due to separatist movements of the hill tribe groups. Chutias ethno-political assertions along with the other non tribal groups also increased pressures on the government side. Thus, these all situations indirectly compelled state government to consider Chutias OBC demand.

However, the OBC status did not bring any specific change in the politico-economic lives of the Chutias in Assam. It was because their inability to compete with the other comparatively developed groups of the category. As a result, the ACCCA leadership revised their existing demands and started to claim 'More Other Backward Classes' (MOBC) status (a list of groups having more backward and poor economic records). In 1969, ACCCA submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam, Bimala Prasad Chaliha (1957-1970) on this regard.⁴⁵ The demands of the memorandum were, "*....to declare the Chutias as most backward community, the areas which are majority in population by the inhabitants of the Chutias should be selected...free education to the Chutia students.. reservation of seats both in the technical and medical education*"⁴⁶. But their MOBC status demand did not get positive response from the Chaliha led state government of Assam. Again in 1971, another memorandum was submitted to the Chief Minister of Assam by reiterating the demands that they included in the earlier memorandum. In response however, the Mahendra Mohan Choudhuri led Government of Assam (1970-1972)

⁴⁴ Memorandum Submitted to the "Undeveloped Community Investigation Committee", 1953, P-5

⁴⁵ Memorandum on the Demands of Chutias of as a most backward and unrepresented community, Amguri, 1969

⁴⁶ Ibid.,

enlisted the community in the list of MOBCs in 1971(Sarmah, 2007: 534). But unlike the other groups of the list, Chutias were declared MOBC only in educational aspects. As a result, shifting from OBC to MOBC category did not bring any benefit to the community. The MOBCs are not given any extra politico-economic reservations from the OBCs. These result made the Chutia leadership quite dissatisfied which indirectly compelled them to re-assess their identity demands.

In the mid 70s of the last century, the identity movement of the Chutias got a new direction. A section of the Chutias argued for re-directing their identity movement towards tribal recognition which the community demanded in 1946. Of course, there were some ideological contrasts among the leaders of the community as regard their proposed tribal status demand. A section of them opposed to be tribal as the status of the later was considered lower. In other sense the tribals were treated untouchable by the caste Hindu groups of the state. Even the tribals had not been given equal opportunity of development in the society. However, their ideological differences on regard tribal identity became evident in an executive meeting of the ACCCA held at Komarbandha, Golaghat in 1974. A few members of the ACCCA argued for tribal recognition under the constitutional provision of the country.⁴⁷ But unfortunately, a group of leaders under the leadership of Mohanram Saikia, (son of Bhramar Ch. Saikia, the founder of the ACCCA) had advocated against tribal recognition (Bora, 1999). According to them, a nation should try to climb upward not downward.⁴⁸ It is noteworthy here that though their arguments were quite contradictory to each other yet nobody had strong hold on their positions. For instance, those leaders who opposed to be tribal because of their lower social status, at the same time they were quite unhappy with the benefits as OBC and MOBC respectively. On the other hand, the group of leaders who were in favor of tribal recognition was anxious about the lower social status to be

⁴⁷ Presidential Speech in the annual conference of the ACCSU, Pirakota, 1968

⁴⁸ Ibid.,

getting after tribal recognition. Despite these sorts of intra-organizational differences, the ethnic leadership of the Chutias came to a consensus for directing their identity movement towards tribal recognition. In other sense, they assumed that unless their ethnic identity gets constitutional protection they would remain marginalized in the existing caste Hindu dominated Assamese society. Their apprehension was clearly revealed in the presidential speech of the 20th conference of the ACCCA in where Guluk Ch. Borah maintained that,

*“We wish to evaporate the existing lower social status, but because of the unequal attitude of the higher castes it is not possible. So, we have to increase our coordination and solidarity with our brother ethnic groups such as the Deuris, Miris, Moran and Mattaks, Choudangs etc. and are trying to go hand with hand in duty.”*⁴⁹

In fact, this was an indirect indication of the Chutia leadership about their dissatisfaction with the backward caste social status. Immediately after the conference, the ACCCA invited an urgent executive meeting on the matter at Kamarbondha, Golaghat in 1979 where they formally decided to demand ST status under the sixth schedule of Indian constitution (Boruah, *ibid*: 558).

Accepting the proposal formally, the then president of the ACCCA Kukheswar Boruah and the secretary Mukta Bharali met the ‘*Surbhajan Committee*’ constituted by the then Janata party led central government in 1979 in Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh. They submitted a memorandum to the committee on regard their tribal status demand (*Ibid*). Again in 1980, ACCCA submitted another memorandum to the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi in New Delhi (Sarmah: *Ibid*, 536). The memorandum basically raised the following two demands - 1) *Making available to the Chutias all the constitutional privileges granted to the schedule tribes in*

⁴⁹ Guluck Ch. Bora, “*Presidential Address*”, 20th Conference of ACCCA, North Lakhimpur, 1979

consideration of the most backwardness of the Chutias in all respect of the socio-economic life.

2) *The inclusion of the Chutias in the plains tribes list of Assam in consideration of the fact the Chutias were and are of the same origin as that of the plains tribes of Assam and other adjoining states of northeast India.*⁵⁰

The Third Phase: (From 1980s onwards):

In this phase, the Chutias raised numbers of politico-economic demands to the state. Accordingly, they have sought constitutional protection to their ethnic identity under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution. Indeed, the ST status is basically an economic demand of the Chutias which is intimately linked with their socio-political demands. If the Chutias are recognized as ST, then it will create politico-economic reservations. Besides, it will provide space for preservation and promotion of their socio-cultural traits.

However, in the third phase of their identity assertion, the Chutias have not only asserted for politico-economic reservations but also demanded protection of their socio-cultural traits. It is noteworthy here that since 1927 onwards, the ACCCA have been offering stimulating awards to the Chutia students who have achieved excellent results in various competitive examinations. On the same way, the ACCCA has been offering awards to the Chutia people who have achieved special achievement in any fields of society. Thus, in its 21st conference held in 1982, at Kekuri Bebejia of Lakhimpur district, the ACCCA awarded Dr. Swarnalata Boruah (renowned historian of the state), Dr. Prawan Ch. Saikia (anthropologist) and Dr. Ramprasad Deori (Physician) for their achievement of prestigious Ph. D. degree. They were all the then teachers of Dibrugarh University (Boruah, Ibid: 560). Similarly, the ACCCA introduced two other prestigious awards by the name of their two historic heroes *Ratmadhaj Pal* and *Sati Sadhani* respectively.

⁵⁰ Memorandum to Prime Minister of India on Scheduling, 1980

Accordingly, both awards were decided to give to the people of the community who would have special contribution towards the development of the Assamese society. Thus, in the 29th conference of the ACCCA, held at Titabar, Jorhat in 2002, the '*Ratnadhaj Pal Award*' was awarded to Dr. Numal Ch. Bora, the eminent neurologist and the founder of the famous GNRC Hospital, Guwahati. On the same way, the prestigious '*Sadhani Award*' was given to Dr. Jayanti Chutia, a renowned scientist of India (Ibid.). Thus, through it ACCCA has been trying to draw attention of their well known personalities as well as general masses towards their movements which the former used to consider as mass base of their movement.

Some other aspects of the Chutias' socio-cultural assertions during the phase were namely the publication of different magazines, souvenirs of the annual conferences of the Chutia ethnic organizations, formation of the '*Kundil Anusandhan Somittee*' (Kindil Inquire Committee, a body of intellectuals to compile a written history of the Chutias), and self- population census etc. Among them, the published agenda and proposals of annual conferences of the ACCCA from 1925 onwards, published souvenirs of annual conferences of the ACCCA from 1947 onwards, the Journal '*Kundil*' published by ACCCA from 1993 onwards have contributed a lot to the Chutias identity movement (Chutia, 2000).

Compilation of a written history in 2007 was itself a significant advancement as regard Chutias socio-cultural assertion. The written community history is an important source of identity assertion in India's northeast. The case of the Chutias in Assam is not exceptional of it. In 1985, the ACCCA constituted the '*History Compilation Committee*', to shoulder the task of writing a full ethnic history of the Chutias (Chutia, 2000). It is notable here that the tradition of writing history in Assam was started only after the Tai-Ahoms came to the land. Thus, up to 2007

Chutias didn't have a full written history. However, the effort made through the '*History Compilation Committee*' was failed because of shortage of money and moral courage of the ACCCA leadership. Again in 2004, the ACCCA came forward with a new vision and selected two renowned historians of the state Dr. Swarnalata Boruah and Dr. Dambarudhar Nath, as editors for the proposed endeavor. And in 2007 they successfully published a full written history of the community (Baruah, Ibid.)

Maintaining the ethno-cultural traits as well as developing community attachment to them is another important dimension of Chutias socio-cultural assertions. Since 1948, the Chutias have been observing the *Shadhani Divas* (7th Bohag in Assamese) annually (Sarmah, Ibid.). In 1993, ACCCA formed the '*Centre for Cultural Development of the Chutias*' (Boruah, Ibid.). The objectives of the *Centre* were- (i) to keep pressurize the state government for taking steps to protect and preserve the historical monuments of the ancient Chutia kingdom, (ii) to revive the cultural symbols, heritages of the Chutias and (iii) to work for development of a cultural network among the people of the community. Furthermore, the Chutias had been demanding a land and funds to build a *Sadhani Bhavan*, in Guahati for long decades. Responding the demand, the state government of Assam provided a land at Patharquary, near Dispur for the proposed *Sadhani Bhavan*.

Thus, the Chutia ethnic organizations have been demanding state governments for protection of their ethno-cultural identity. In fact, they are amongst the first few groups of the state who realized the need of organized life for protection of their ethnic identity. In their long period of identity assertion, no organization of the community has followed any undemocratic strategy such as insurgency for accomplishing its demands. Unlike the tribals, they have demanded for

neither separate statehood nor territorial autonomy. Rather their assertion is for ST status under the sixth schedule of Indian constitution. However, apart from the ST status demand, the Chutia ethnic organizations have been raising many other socio-economic and political demands. These demands include demand for Sadhani Setu, declaration of Sadhani Divas as state official holiday (7th Bohag), building Sadhani Bhavan/ statue in every Chutia inhabited district, preservation of Chutias' historical monuments, reservations of jobs in Govt. departments, reservations of seats in the educational institutions, proportional representation of the Chutias in the State Cabinet, reservation of constituencies for the Chutias, separate reservations for the MOBCs, appointment of the Chutia people as executive member in the different Chutia inhabited tribal autonomous councils of the state etc. But like the ST status demand, these demands of the community are also still remained unfulfilled.

Schedule Tribe Status: The Constitutional Arrangement

Demand for ST status under the Sixth Schedule of Indian constitution has been a major concerning issue in the state politics of Assam. The Hill tribal groups of the region have already advanced in materializing this status. The demands of the plains tribal groups are also no longer lacking behind so far as their political assertions are concerned. But a few plains ethnic groups of the state both tribal and non-tribal are still remained outside of the Sixth Schedule of Indian constitution although they have been demanding it for long decades. Among them, Chutias are a strong aspirant group of ST status in Assam.

Who are STs?

The Constitution of India enjoins on the State a special responsibility for the protection and development of Scheduled Tribes. Clause (25) of article 366 of the Constitution defines,

“Scheduled Tribes means such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this Constitution”.⁵¹

What is Sixth Schedule?

The constitution of India has provided a constitutional arrangement in the sixth schedule as provisions as to the Administration of Tribal Areas in the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. The Sixth Schedule is entirely focused at protection of tribal areas and interests, by allowing self-governance through constitutional institutions at the district or regional level. These institutions are entrusted with the twin task of protecting tribal cultures and customs and undertaking development tasks.⁵² Although the Sixth Schedule primarily evolved to protect the customary tribal traditions and cultures of the colonial *excluded* areas, the ideology of local self-governance spreads across the whole North East. The original Sixth Schedule areas created in 1952 underwent a drastic reorganization in 1971; some areas were put under newly created states such as Mizoram and Meghalaya which were carved out of the composite Assam.⁵³ At present the Schedule applies in four states only- it almost fully covers Meghalaya and partly the states of Assam, Tripura and Mizoram. Areas and states not covered by Sixth Schedule provisions- Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Manipur- also have laws respecting the autonomy of traditional ways of self-governance and protecting from outside interference.⁵⁴ Therefore, although the region did not develop as fast as other parts of the country, yet to a large extent it is

⁵¹ The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Second Amendment) Bill, 2011, Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment (2011 - 2012), Twenty-Third report, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India

⁵² North East India: Status of Governance in the Sixth Schedule Areas, <http://socialissuesindia.wordpress.com>

⁵³ Ibid.,

⁵⁴ Ibid.,

hoped that the communities could preserve their lands and tribal traditions under the safety of this constitutional provisions.

The Sixth Schedule empowers the autonomous district councils to make laws and regulation on matters relating to customs and traditions of the tribal people, land tenure system, water resources, forest and forest management, marriage, divorce and succession of the chiefs and headman etc. The district councils have the power to regulate money lending and trading system of the tribals. The councils are also empowered to make laws relating to the establishment of town committees and village committees including village and town police. All such laws however, are subject to the approval of the state governor. The Sixth Schedule thus provides a compact mechanism of self-governance to the tribal people so that they can preserve their distinct culture and identity.

The Constitutional Criteria followed for specification of a community as Scheduled Tribe

- are:**
- a) Indications of primitive traits;
 - (b) Distinctive culture;
 - (c) Geographical isolation;
 - (d) Shyness of contact with the community at large; and
 - (e) Backwardness⁵⁵

These criteria are not spelt out in the Constitution but have become well established and accepted. The Scheduled Tribes are notified by the Presidential Order under Clause (1) of the article 342 of the Constitution, which is as follows:-

“342. Scheduled Tribes:

⁵⁵ The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Second Amendment) Bill, 2011, Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment (2011 - 2012), Twenty - Third report, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India

(1) The President may with respect to any State or Union territory, and where it is a State, after consultation with the Governor thereof, by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to that State or Union territory, as the case may be.

(2) Parliament may by law include in or exclude from the list of Scheduled Tribes specified in a notification issued under clause (1) any tribe or tribal community or part of or group within any tribe or tribal community, but save as aforesaid a notification issued under the said clause shall not be varied by any subsequent notification.”⁵⁶

Modalities for deciding claims for inclusion in or exclusion from the lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes:

The first specification of Scheduled Tribes in relation to a particular State or Union Territory is by a notified Order of the President, after consultation with the State Government or Union Territory concerned. Any subsequent inclusion in or exclusion from and other modifications in the list of Scheduled Tribes can be made only through an Act of Parliament. On 15th June 1999 (further amended on 25.6.2002) Government has approved modalities for deciding claims for inclusion in, exclusion from and other modifications in the Orders specifying the lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Annexure-II). According to these modalities, the concerned State Government forwards its proposal to the Central Government along with its recommendation and justification. The proposals received from State Government are sent to the Registrar General of India (RGI). The RGI, if satisfied with the recommendation of the State Government, recommends the proposal to the Central Government. Thereafter, Central

⁵⁶ Ibid

Government refers the proposal to the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) for their recommendation. After the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes recommends it, the matter is processed for the decision of the Cabinet. According to the above procedure only those cases that have been agreed to by the concerned State Government/UT Administration, the Registrar General of India as well as National Commission for Scheduled Tribes are considered for bringing forward an amending legislation. After the matter is decided by the Cabinet, a Bill is introduced in Parliament to achieve the objective. In case a proposal is not supported by the RGI, it is referred back to the State Government for reviewing or further justifying their recommendation in the light of the observations of the RGI. In such cases, where the RGI does not agree to the point of view of the State Government/UT Administration on a second reference, the Government of India may consider for rejection of the proposal. Those cases with which the State Governments and the RGI are in agreement, but which the commission (NCST) has not supported, would be rejected at the level of Minister for Tribal Affairs.⁵⁷

Constitutional Criteria and the Chutias Demand For ST Status:

The demands for ST status of the six non tribal groups in Assam have revealed an interesting debate in this context. The debate is basically centering on two basic questions. First, are the six asserting groups representing the five constitutional criteria or how far the constitutional criteria are relevant in the present day context? Secondly, how many of the existing ST groups of India/Assam are strictly representing the constitutional criteria or if not, then how they are eligible for enjoying the status?

⁵⁷ The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Second Amendment) Bill, 2011, Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment (2011 - 2012), Twenty - Third report, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India

It's true that nobody of the six asserting groups including the Chutias has been representing the constitutional criteria in true sense of the criterias. For instance, Chutias have lost many of their primitive ethnic traits- language, customs and traditions etc in long years back. Modernization and development of science and communication has brought many changes in everybody's life including the existing tribals of the country. From that angle, criteria like geographical isolation, shyness of contact etc have little relevance for recognizing any group as ST in present day context of the country. Moreover, as argued by the leaders of the six ST status asserting groups, the constitutional criteria were formulated in the context of 50s decade of the last century. Hence, to suit with the changing situation they have demanded for constitutional amendment on regard to the constitutional modalities. However, as per the records available in the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India, there are total 242 proposals pending for inclusion in, exclusion from and other modifications in the list of Scheduled Tribes of the State/UT. Among the proposals, Assam has 9 proposals pending at different stages of the process. Accordingly, the proposal sent by the Government of Assam is pending at the office of RGI. On 7.12.2005, the RGI Office sent back the proposal to the State Government of Assam for further justification of the representativeness of the five constitutional criterias among the six non-tribal groups. Again on August 2013, by setting at rest all speculations over granting Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to six communities, Dr. Manmohan Sing led UPA Government (2009-2014) rejected the proposal sent by the same congress party led State Government (2001-continue) of Assam. As media reported, the proposal was unrepresentative of the five constitutional criteria.⁵⁸ Thus including it, the Registrar General of India has rejected the Assam Governments' proposals on the matter as many as eight times till date⁵⁹ which appears two things. First, the state governments of Assam

⁵⁸ The Assam Tribune, August 23, 2013

⁵⁹ The Times of India, Guwahati, Jul 6, 2013

have had not taken the matter seriously as it is expected by the asserting groups. Rather they have considered the ST issue as a political means for pursuing their party political interests. Secondly, the union governments are also indifferent towards the demands of the six communities of Assam including the Chutias. Instead, their task is confined in accusing the state governments for not sending proper information about the groups.

However, according to the constitutional procedure as mentioned above, the responsibility of sending proposal with required information for recognizing an ethnic group as ST is fall under state government's jurisdiction. Moreover, the concerned state government has to look after the constitutional feasibility of the demands. In that sense, the state governments of Assam have not taken the ST demand of six ethnic groups of Assam with required seriousness. On the other hand, they have made numbers of commitment on granting ST status to them. For instance, in the last state assembly election held in 2011, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee placed the issue of ST recognition in its election manifesto.⁶⁰ It was coated with the words that "the Congress party has taken up the matter with the central Government with all seriousness for grant of Schedule Tribe status. The party is steadfast in its commitment that all efforts would be made for grant of ST status to these six communities. The Congress Government, had in 2002 itself moved to the Prime Minister demanding the grant of Scheduled Caste status for these six communities. But although the then BJP led Government at the Centre granted ST status to 142 communities, these 6 six communities were neglected. The Assam Government has again forwarded the demand with adequate justification to the Government of India. The Registrar General raised some issues and the Government of India has referred the matter to State Government for comments. The Congress Government is looking into the matter seriously and

⁶⁰ Election manifesto, Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, 2011

taking all necessary measures for a favourable outcome. .”⁶¹ But after coming into power, the situation of ST recognition to the groups has not changed. The party even could not provide the required information to the RGI for considering the ST demands of the six non-tribal groups of Assam.

On the other hand, the response of the Union Governments is also unclear. Like the state governments, the union governments are also showing their interests in granting ST status to the communities. As mentioned above, the former UPA Government (2005-05, 2009-14) assured the leaders of the six asserting groups on the matter. But after completion of their ten years rule in the centre, the issue remains unresolved. The success story of the BJP in the last parliamentary election in Assam was also partially aligned with the ST issue. In fact, the BJP picked up the ST issue and declared it as an important commitment during their election campaign in the state. They addressed numbers of election rallies by criticizing the Congress party, UPA Government and the state government of Assam for their failure in fulfilling the ST demands of the groups. With this commitment, the NDA Government has already passed fifteen months in the centre. But the matter is still unresolved.

It’s also fact that nobody of the six asserting groups has been representing the constitutional criteria in strict sense of the terms. Rather they have had lost many of their traits suitable to the constitutional criteria in due course of time. Though the groups including the Chutias have been trying to revive their lost ethno-cultural traits yet these are not enough to justify their ST demand. As a result, the RGI has rejected their claims for many times. Therefore, amendment of the constitution as regard the criteria is the only possible solution of their longstanding ST demand. Interestingly as media reported, the NDA Government of the Union recently has

⁶¹ Ibid

decided to amend the constructional criteria to make sure the entire of six ethnic groups of Assam into the list of Sixth Schedule.⁶² They have fixed a six month time framework for completing all required legal formalities for the amendment. At moment it is undoubtedly a positive response of the Union Government towards the longstanding demand of the six asserting groups of Assam. This assurance reads a new message for the community. If the Union Government takes step in accordance to their assurance, then the matter of granting ST status to the Chutias would not be a problem for long.

Facebook and the ‘Chutia’ Identity:

The *Chutia* identity vs. facebook is another important aspect of Chutias identity movement. Comparatively this is the latest issue of Chutias identity mobilizations. Just three years back i.e. on March, 2012, it became a sensitive issue when facebook, blocked many accounts of Assam especially whose titles were written as “Chutia”. The facebook authority in India believed these accounts fake and fabricated since the word “*sutiya*” in Hindi language means derogatory meaning.⁶³ In response, the Chutia civil society organizations especially the AACSU organized protest rallies against the facebook authority in India statewide. Along with these demonstrations, they demanded unconditional public apology from the concerned facebook authority in India with full reinstatement of their blocked accounts. In fact, their demonstrations against the social networking site had united the entire community living inside and outside of the state. Their collective protest also meant that their movement is going beyond of single ST status, which something more about social recognition of their ethnic “Chutia” identity in the entire country vis a vis the cyber world.

⁶² Asomiya Protidin, June 4, 2015

⁶³The Times of India, March 10, 2012

Constitution of the Chutia Development Council and Response of the Chutia Ethnic Organizations:

On December 10, 2007 the Assam Government floated a concept of Development Council for six tribes of the state. Addressing a press conference, Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi declared there would be six development councils for the six tribes- Moran, Mattock, Adivasi, Tai-Ahom, Koch Rajbongshi and Chutia.⁶⁴ And accordingly the Chutia Development Council or CDC (hereafter) was constituted on 12.11.2010 for formulation and finalization of Development Council for providing maximum participation of community within the framework of constitution of India for Socio-Economic, Educational, cultural and ethnic advancement of the people of the community in the state of Assam.⁶⁵ The State Government has provided funds for the Development Councils as grants in aid from the state plan or non-plan provisions in proportion to their population to meet the expenses of its Secretariat and also to undertake development programmes.⁶⁶

However, as per the recommendation of the Cabinet sub-committee constituted for examining and work out the details for creation of separate Development Councils, the councils would consist of not more than 15 members, out of which one would be chairman and one would be deputy chairman. Out of the 15 members of the councils, 2 would be the Government officials and 13 would be selected. The Chairman and the Deputy Chairman would be selected by the members of Councils amongst the non official members. No persons occupying constitutional and statutory position would be eligible for election to council as member. A member might be re-elected as members but not more than two terms at a stretch. The head quarter of the development councils would be at capital headquarters of the state. The Development Councils

⁶⁴ <http://news.oneindia.in/2007/12/10/assam-floats-new-council-in-interest-of-six-tribes-1197286587.html>

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

would have authority to utilize the services of the Sub-Divisional Welfare Officers to implement their development programmes and carry out their functions.⁶⁷ Thus, under these guidelines, the development councils including the CDC have been working in Assam.

In contrast however, the Chutia ethnic organizations were very much critical to the formation of the CDC. They criticized the state government's politics of ethnic appeasement made through the formation of the CDC and apprehended that constitution of CDC would indirectly submerge their ST status demand. Nevertheless, in October 2010, CDC came into existence. Interestingly, just after the formation of the CDC, the Chutia leadership divided into two opposite groups. One group supported and welcomed CDC, while the other continued criticizing the undemocratic constitution of the CDC. The favored group rejected the arguments of the opposed group by arguing that the constitution of CDC would never impede the ongoing demands of the community. For them, they are still asserting for their original ethno-political and economic demands. CDC is just a temporary response of the State Government on this regard. On the other hand, the opposed group argued that the CDC is not a positive response of the state government (2006-2011) towards the demands of the community. Rather through it the state government is trying to appease the poor people of the community at one end and divides the leaders of the community into two groups for pursuing their party political gains on the other. Hence, as they accused bringing division among the leaders of the community on political line was the only remaining option for the state government to stop the anti government propaganda of the

⁶⁷ Report of the Cabinet Committee on Creation of Development Councils for Adivasi (Tea Tribes & Ex Tea Tribes), Tai Ahom, Moran, Motak, Koch Rajbongshi and Chutia Communities. Dept of WPT&BC, Govt. of Assam (NO. TAD/BC/531/2010/136)

opposed group of the CDC.⁶⁸ In spite of this sort of internal contradictions, CDC came into existence in 2010 and has been working with its entrusted goals.

However, it is pertinent to mention here that the Development Councils are non-statutory in status. They are not constituted under any law passed by the Assam Legislative Assembly. Rather constituted on the basis of the recommendation of a cabinet subcommittee of the Government of Assam. Till date, 23 development councils⁶⁹ are constituted in Assam. Among them the CDC is an important one constituted with the first six development councils of the state. Among the others, the issues like unconstitutional status as well as undemocratic formation of the CDC created havoc contentions among the ethnic leaders of the Chutias. It is notable here that the members including the chairman of the CDC are not elected rather selected by the State government from its own party supporters. So the Chutia ethnic organizations vehemently opposed the CDC. Their oppositions reflected their apprehensions about the probable effect of politicization of the ethnic issues of the community. Of course, Chutias were the not single group that opposed the concept of Development Council. The ethnic organizations of the other five asserting groups opposed the formation of Development Council. Their opposition is based on two arguments- first, the state government has not taken their ST status demand with priority. And secondly, the unconstitutional development councils are not representing the actual demands of the communities. In response to the criticism of the six ethnic groups including the Chutias, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee promised some action plans in 2011. That included i) a separate department to be arranged to administer the development councils smoothly,

⁶⁸ Asomiya Protidin, August, 11, 2011

⁶⁹ Chutia, Mattak, Moran, Tai-Ahom, Koch-Rajbangshi, Adivasi, Sarania Kachari, Bisnupriya Manipuri, Gorkha, Maria, Amri Karbi, Nath-Yogi, Manipuri, Mech Kachari, Barak Valley Hill Tribes and General Caste communities and one for Tai Phake, Tai Turung, Tai Khamiang, Tai Aiton, Tai Khamti, Singpho, Tangsha & Sema communities.

ii) the development councils would be empowered to develop as full-fledged councils for the development of the various communities, iii) development of the various communities would be achieved by sufficient funding of these development councils, iv) steps would be taken for the development and preservation of language, culture, art, music and literature of these communities, v) equal rights and development for tribal and non tribal people residing in these areas will be safeguarded.⁷⁰ With these commitments, the Congress party came to power in Assam in 2011. And there is less than six months to fulfill their third consecutive term in rule in the state. But many of their commitments remained unfulfilled. For instances, they have not arranged any separate department to administer the development councils in the state till date. The promise of empowering the development councils as full-fledged councils remains unrealized. There is news of insufficient funds as well as non allotment of funds to the development councils.⁷¹ Furthermore, in 2014 the state government promised to hold election of the development councils which is still a far cry.⁷²

Conclusion:

So far the history of changing socio-political circumstances of the state is concerned, the Chutias have been made numbers of shift as regard their identity demands. For instances, up to 1921 British India Census, Chutias were enlisted as a plains tribal group of Assam. It was only in 1931 census, they were omitted from the list of tribes (Boruah: 1993). The main reason of their omission was their ethnic leadership who preferred to introduce themselves as caste-Hindus instead of tribes. It is notable here that the social status and prestige of the caste Hindu groups which mattered during that time, were higher than the tribals. Moreover, the tribal status did not

⁷⁰ Election Manifesto, Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, 2011

⁷¹ Asomiya Pratidin, 18 March, 2015

⁷² The Telegraph, July 20 , 2014

carry any benefits or privileges. Therefore, instead of tribal status they pleaded for caste Hindu status. As analyzed above, besides the caste factor there was another important factor which influenced the ACCCA leadership to be remained caste Hindu during their first phase of identity assertion. And that was the influence of the then upper caste Presidents of the Assam Chutia Sanmilan. However, looking at their untouchable social status as well as backward economic conditions, the British Simon Commission (1927) proposed to enlist the Chutias into the list of depressed caste groups (today SC) of Assam (Chutia, 1989: 33). Materializing the proposal of the British Simon Commission, the Chutias were enlisted in the SC list of Assam in 1935 (Chutia, *ibid.*). But the ACCCA vehemently opposed it and demanded for retaining their existing caste Hindu status. Through it, the Chutias deserved to upward their social status in the caste ridden social hierarchy of the Assamese society. But in practice, the caste Hindu orientation of the then ACCCA leadership could not improve the social status of the Chutias. Instead, the Chutias were continuously being treated as untouchables by the Upper caste groups of Assam. Therefore, on the eve of independence (1946), the community demanded a separate political existence and political rights as an ethnic minority in statutory form in the new constitutional machinery to be set up in India in 1946.⁷³

In post-independence period i.e. in 1953 Chutias demanded Other Backward Classes (OBC) and More Other Backward Classes (MOBC) status in 1969 respectively. In response to their demand, the government of Assam declared the community first OBC and then MOBC status. As argued by the Chutia ethnic organizations, the OBC status did not bring any specific change in the politico-economic conditions of the Chutias in Assam. It was because of their incapability to compete with the other comparatively developed groups of the category. As a result, they revised

⁷³ Memorandum on the Demands of the Chutias of Assam as a Backward Minority, 1946, cited here from D. Sarmah (2007) *Ibid.*, p. 533

their existing demands and claimed MOBC status (a list of groups having more backward and poor economic records). Recognizing their MOBC demand the Government of Assam enlisted the community in the list of MOBCs in 1972. But in reality, their shifting from OBC to the list of MOBCs did not bring any extra benefits. The MOBCs are not given any extra politico-economic reservations than the OBCs. Their opportunities are remained similar to the OBCs. So this result made the Chutia leaders quite dissatisfied and compelled them to re-assess their identity demands.

Thus, in the late 70s of the 20th century, the community demanded tribal status under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution. Justifying their ST status demand they argued that *“we wish to evaporate the existing lower social status, but because of the unequal attitude of the higher castes it is not possible. So, we have to increase our coordination and solidarity with our brother ethnic groups such as the Deories, Miris, Moran and Mattaks, Choudangs etc. and are trying to go hand with hand in duty”*.⁷⁴ However, the newly articulated tribal status demand of the Chutias claim two basic developments - 1) Making available to the Chutias all the constitutional privileges granted to the schedule tribes in consideration of the most backwardness of the Chutias in all respect of the socio-economic life. 2) The inclusion of the Chutias in the plains tribes list of Assam in consideration of the fact the Chutias were and are of the same origin as that of the plains tribes of Assam and other adjoining states of northeast India.

⁷⁴ Bora, G., *“Presidential Address”* in 20th Conference of the ACCCA, North Lakhimpur, 1979

CHAPTER V DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

In this Chapter data were analyzed and interpreted and the results of the study were discussed in details. Data were analyzed on the basis of the following objectives:

- **To examine the causes/ factors of identity assertion of Chutias in Assam.**
- **To discuss the role played by different Chutia ethnic organizations in molding Chutia identity.**
- **To look at the role played by the state in addressing the demands of Chutias.**

In order to understand **the factors/ causes of Chutias identity assertion**, the respondents were asked to find out the causes responsible for acceleration of Chutias identity consciousness in the state. In response to the question, as shown in the below **Table-5.01**, the respondents gave varying responses. A good numbers of respondents i.e. 16% of the general Chutia citizens identified cultural identity crisis as one of the prime causes of Chutias identity movement which was followed by 14% of non Chutia citizens and 12.5% of political representatives of the Chutias. While 31.25% of political representatives of the Chutias and 20% of each Chutia and non-Chutia respondents considered economic backwardness as important factor responsible for the same. Similarly, 14% each of Chutia and non-Chutia respondent and 12.5% of political representatives of the Chutias argued political un-representativeness as important cause. 14% of non-Chutia and 10% of Chutia citizens considered non-responsive attitude of the state government towards the demands of the community as an important factor that fuelled identity consciousness of the later. 14% of non-Chutia and 10% of Chutia citizens considered it as the political instruments of the political leaders of the community as well as others to serve their

personal political interests. On the other hand, 16% of non-Chutia respondents also argued it as influence of contemporary trend of politicization of ethnicity in the state in particular which was followed by 10% of Chutia citizens and 6.25% of political representatives of the Chutias. However, majority 16 out of 16 respondents of Chutia ethnic organizations considered all of the above mentioned factors (i.e. cultural, economic, political, non-responsive policies of the state government) as responsible for the Chutias identity movement which was followed by 40% of Chutia citizens, 18.75% of political representatives of the Chutias and 10% of non-Chutia respondents. According to them, Chutias identity assertion is the outcome of a combination of the abovementioned factors.

Table-5.01: Distribution of Respondents' opinion regarding the Causes Responsible for the Chutias Identity Movement

Causes Responsible for Chutias Identity Movement	NO OF RESPONDENTS FROM SEGMENTS				Total
	CEO	PRC	GC (Chutia)	GC(non-Chutia)	Percentage
Cultural (fear of losing ethno-cultural traits and heritages)		2 (12.5 %)	8 (16 %)	7(14%)	17 (22.44)
Economic (poor, backward)		5 (31.25%)	10 (20%)	10 (20%)	25 (33)
Political (relatively unrepresentative in the ALA, State Cabinet and Parliament)		2 (12.5 %)	7 (14%)	7 (14%)	16 (21.12)
Creation of the political elites		Nil	5 (10%)	6 (12%)	11(14.52)
Non-responsive policies of the existing state government		3 (18.75 %)	5 (10%)	7 (14%)	15 (19.8)
Influence of contemporary trend of politicization of ethnicity		1 (6.25%)	5 (10%)	8 (16 %)	14 (18.48)
All of the above	16 (100 %)	3 (18.75%)	20 (40%)	5 (10%)	44 (58.08)
Total	16 (100%)	16(100%)	50 (100%)	50 (100%)	132 (100)

CEO-Chutia Ethnic Organizations, **PRC**- Political Representatives of the Chutias, **GC**-General Citizens

Creation of the political elites: The identity consciousness of the Chutias is hardly primordial but largely instrumental of their political leaders.

Non-responsive policies of the state government: The policies taken by the existing State government have not represented the actual demands of the Chutias. Rather trying to dissect their demands with some supplementary measures. For instance, Chutias have been demanding ST status along with many other ethno-cultural demands like Sati Sadhani Setu, declaration of Sadhani Divos as state official holiday etc for decades. But they are still unfulfilled.

Influence of contemporary trend of politicization of ethnicity: Ethnicity has been politicizing in the state of Assam. Every ethnic group tends to see themselves as political force to bend state in favor of their demands. Government also uses the state for their party political gains.

Source-Based on the field work by the researcher

The difference of opinion of the respondents as regards the causes of the movement is perhaps due to the multiplicity of causes as well as dimensions of Chutias identity movement. It means that their assertion is not originated of a single cause. Rather many causes simultaneously influenced Chutias identity movement. They have lost their cultural identity. Economically their condition is hardly comparable with the other advanced non-tribal groups of the state. Politically also they are in a less advantageous position in the state. So these factors collectively led the community to be conscious. The contemporary trend of ethnicization of politics also has influenced the Chutias a lot to be conscious ethnically. Therefore, viewing the intensity of the causes, the respondents gave their opinions.

In response to the question about the **demands put forwarded by the Chutia ethnic organizations**, as shown in the below **Table 5.02**, the responses of the respondents were very from one to another. In response to the question a vast majority i.e. 50% of non-Chutia citizens supported the cultural demands raised by the Chutia ethnic organizations while in case of Chutia citizens it was 20%. 28% of Chutia citizens and 10% of non-Chutia citizens supported the economic demands of the Chutia ethnic organizations where as 18% of Chutia citizens and a small 6% of non-Chutia citizen supported the political demands as important for the community. On the other hand, 16 out of 16 respondents of political representatives of the Chutias opined for all aforementioned demands such as cultural, economic and political raised by the Chutia ethnic organizations are as equally important to be fulfilled for larger good of the community which was supported by 34% of each Chutia and non-Chutia citizens.

Table 5.02: Distribution of Respondents' Opinion regarding the demands raised by the Chutia Civil society Organizations

Demands	NO OF RESPONDENTS FROM SEGMENTS				Total
	CEO	PRC	GC (Chutia)	GC(non-Chutia)	Percentage
Cultural Demands			10 (20%)	25 (50%)	35 (30.17)
Economic Demands			14 (28%)	5 (10%)	19 (16.37)
Political Demands			9 (18%)	3 (6%)	12 (10.34)
All of the above		16 (100%)	17 (34 %)	17 (34 %)	50 (43.10)
Total		16 (100%)	50 (100%)	50 (100%)	116

Indicators of Cultural Demands- Sadhani Setu, declaration of Sadhani Divos as state official holiday, building Sadhani Bhavan and preservation of Chutias historical monuments

Indicators of Economic Demands- Reservations of jobs in Govt. departments, educational institutions and reservations of seats in educational institutions

Indicators of Political Demands- ST status, proportional representation in the State Cabinet, reservation of constituency for the Chutias

Source-Based on the field work by the researcher

The variation of opinion of the respondents as regards the demands of the Chutias may be because of multidimensional character of the movement. So, accomplishment of anyone of the demands that are mentioned in the above table couldn't satisfy the other demands of the community. Thus, as the total percentage of the table showed, majority respondents supported all the cultural, economic and political demands raised by the Chutia ethnic organizations.

To understand the response about the **role of Chutia ethnic organizations in spearheading their identity movement** a question was put to the respondents. In response to the question, as shown in the below **Table 5.03**, 62% of Chutia citizens said the role played by the Chutia ethnic organizations in mobilizing the community as positive which was followed by 52% of non Chutia and 43.75% of Chutia citizens. In contrast, 25% of political representatives of Chutias opined their role as negative and a handful of respondent constituting 10% of each Chutia and non-Chutia citizens were followed it. Interestingly, 38% of non-Chutia respondents considered their role as partially positive (neither fully positive nor negative) which was followed by 31.25% of political representatives of Chutias and 28% of Chutia citizens.

Table 5.03: Distribution of Respondents' Assessment regarding the role of Chutia Ethnic Organizations in mobilizing the community

Role of CCSO	NO OF RESPONDENTS FROM SEGMENTS				Total
	CEO	PRC	GC (Chutia)	GC(non-Chutia)	Percentage
Positive		7 (43.75%)	31(62%)	26 (52%)	64 (55.17)
Partially Positive		5 (31.25%)	14 (28%)	19(38%)	38 (32.76)
Negative		4 (25%)	5 (10%)	5 (10%)	14 (12.06)
Total		16 (100%)	50 (100%)	50 (100%)	116

Negative: CEOs have failed to accomplish their prime ethnic demands.

Positive: CEOs have been successfully raising their ethnic demands and have compelled state to consider their demands.

Partially Positive: CEOs have neither failed nor succeed full in accomplishing their prime demands. It means in some demands they succeed to bring public notice as well as of government while in some demands they failed.

Source-Based on the field work by the researcher

The variation in the opinion of the respondents as regards the role of Chutia ethnic organizations may be due to the mixed results of their movement. Though the organizations have successfully raised their ethnic demands, yet many of them are still unfulfilled. For instance, their proposals for Sati Sadhani Setu, Sadhani Divas and recognition of ST status etc are still not unfulfilled. In contrasts, some of their demands such as building of Sadhani Bhavon are accepted by the state government and releasing funds through CDC. On regard to their ST demand, the state government has been taking many policies. Of course, it's also true that their identity movement has produced a class of new political leaders who use to use the former for building up their personal political career. Following the opinions of a major section of respondent, the movement was partially successful also. As result of the movement, their ST demand is now under consideration of the Union government. It was also the result of the movement that Chutia Development Council was constituted in 2010.

In regards to the question **about the nature of state's response towards the identity assertions of the Chutias**, as shown in the table below **Table- 5.04**, a vast majority i.e. 81.25% of Chutia organizations opined the response of the state governments towards the movement as negative

which was followed by 32% of Chutia citizens, 24% of non-Chutia citizens and a small 6.25% of political leaders of Chutias. In contrast, 50% of political representatives of Chutias considered state's response as positive which was followed by 38% of non-Chutia citizens and 22% of the Chutia citizens. However, 46% of the respondents of Chutia citizens gave a mixed opinion and said state government's response as partially positive (neither fully positive nor negative) depending upon circumstances and it was followed by 43.75% of political representatives of Chutias, 38% of non-Chutia citizens and 18.75% of the Chutia organizations. Respondents who considered state's response as negative towards the Chutias movement mentioned about the non-responsive policies of the state governments since beginning of their movement and politicization of their ethnic issues for their party political gains.

Table-5.04: Distribution of Respondents' Opinion regarding State Government's Response towards the Chutia Movement

State Response	NO OF RESPONDENTS FROM SEGMENTS				Total
	CEO	PRC	GC (Chutia)	GC(non-Chutia)	Percentage
Positive	Nil	8 (50%)	11 (22%)	19 (38%)	38 (28.78%)
Partially Positive	3 (18.75%)	7 (43.75%)	23 (46%)	19 (38%)	52 (39.39%)
Negative	13 (81.25%)	1 (6.25%)	16 (32%)	12 (24%)	42 (31.81%)
Total	16 (100%)	16 (100%)	50 (100%)	50 (100%)	132 (100%)

Negative: State has not responded the peaceful demands of the Chutias. Rather state has been politicizing their demands for its party political interests.

Positive: State has been responding the ethnic demands of the Chutias positively and has taken many policies to solve their identity problems.

Partially Positive: State response to the ethnic demands of the Chutias is neither fully positive nor negative so far. Means, if the state wants to solve the problem by some measures at one point, on the other it seeks to sustain the problem for long so that politics continues.

Source-Based on the field work by the researcher

The variation of opinion of the respondents as regard state government's response as showed in the above table may be due to differences of political as well as ideological backgrounds of the respondents. Hence, their opinions are diverse from party to party. As the total percentage of opinion showed in the table, majority of the respondents considered the role of state government

as partially positive. Many demands of the community have already fulfilled by the state government and many are under considerations.

Formation and working of the Chutia Development Councils or CDC has been an issue of great concern among the Chutias. In response to the question **regarding working of the Chutia Development Councils or CDC** as shown in the **table 5.05** below the respondents made varying responses. 32% of non Chutia citizens opined the functions of CDC as positive while in case of Chutia citizens it was 30%. In contrast, a vast majority i.e. 87.5% respondents belonged to the Chutia organizations considered the performance of CDC as negative and it was followed by 22% of Chutia citizens and 18% of non Chutia citizens respectively. On the other hand, 50% of non-Chutia citizens opined the working of CDC as partially positive which means neither fully positive nor negative and 48% of Chutia citizens and 12.5% respondents of Chutia organizations accepted it.

Table 5.05: Distribution of Respondents' Opinion regarding Working of the CDC

Working of the CDC	NO OF RESPONDENTS FROM SEGMENTS				Total
	CEO	PRC	GC (Chutia)	GC(non-Chutia)	Percentage
Positive	Nil		15 (30%)	16 (32%)	31 (26.72)
Partially Positive	2 (12.5%)		24 (48%)	25 (50%)	51 (43.96)
Negative	14 (87.5%)		11 (22%)	9 (18%)	34 (29.31)
Total	16 (100%)		50 (100%)	50 (100%)	116

Negative: CDC has failed to perform the functions in proper manner that are entrusted upon it.

Positive: CDC has been working positively and is successful in providing maximum participation of community within the framework of constitution of India for socio-economic, educational, cultural and ethnic advancement of the people of the community in the state of Assam.

Partially Positive: the functions of CDC can assess as neither positive nor negative. If one point it brings hope of development, at the same time the partisan political attitude as well as corrupt practices of its members prevent it to be functioned well.

Source-Based on the field work by the researcher

As the above table showed, the opinions of respondents are varied as regard working of the CDC. It may be because of the fact that respondents are belonged to different categories and political ideologies. On the other hand, performances of the members of CDC are not assessable

under a single scale. If some members are properly distributing the development funds of CDC, but some are misusing. Subsequently, majority of the respondents gave a mixed assessment of the working of CDC as partially positive.

In response to the question **regarding solutions of identity problems** of the Chutias, as shown in the table below **Table- 5.06**, 16 out of 16 respondents of each category- Chutia organizations and political representatives of Chutias, 50% of Chutia citizens and 12% of non-Chutia citizens considered granting ST status, economic development, protection and preservation of cultural heritages and proportional representation in the state politics as equally important. While 20% of non-Chutia respondents opined for granting ST status to the Chutias is an important step for bringing solution to the Chutias identity problem while in case of the Chutia citizens it was 14%. Similarly, 32% of non-Chutia respondents suggested overall economic development of the communities as a solution of Chutias identity problem and it was supported by 12% of Chutia citizens. 22% of non-Chutia respondents and 12% of Chutia citizens also expressed their opinion in favor of protection and preservation of Chutias cultural heritages. 14% non-Chutia respondent opined for giving proportional representation in the state politics to solve the problem which was also supported by 12% Chutia citizens.

Table-5.06: Distribution of Respondents' Opinion Regarding Solution of the Chutias Identity Problem

Possible Solutions of the Identity Problem of the Chutia community	NO OF RESPONDENTS FROM SEGMENTS				Total
	CEO	PRC	GC (Chutia)	GC(non-Chutia)	Percentage
Granting ST status to the Chutias			7 (14%)	10 (20%)	17 (12.87)
Economic development of the community			6 (12%)	16 (32%)	22 (16.66)
Protection and preservation of Chutias cultural heritages			6 (12%)	11 (22%)	17 (12.87)
Proportional representation in the state politics			6 (12%)	7 (14%)	13 (9.84)
All of the above	16 (100%)	16 (100%)	25 (50%)	6 (12%)	63 (47.72)
Total	16 (100%)	16 (100%)	50 (100%)	50 (100%)	132 (100)

Source-Based on the field work by the researcher

Thus, it may be said that the solution of the Chutias identity problem does not lie in any single factor. Different issues are required to be resolved in order to bring a permanent solution to their problem. Of them, granting ST status, economic development, protection and preservation of cultural heritages and proportional representation in the state politics are most remarkable.

On the basis of the above data the following conclusion can be drawn-

Causes/ Factors of Identity Assertion of Chutias in Assam:

From the study it is revealed that the identity assertion of the Chutias has neither developed on a single cause nor within a short span of period. Rather, numbers of socio-economic and political factors made the Chutias conscious about their identity.

Chutias movement is purely an ethnicity based identity movement grown up of its comparatively backward politico-economic conditions. Of course, unlike the tribes (especially the Bodos, Karbis, Dimasas), their assertion is against none ethnic groups of the state. Moreover, their identity assertion is neither for granting autonomy nor for separate statehood. Unlike the many tribal identity movements of the state, the Chutias have been demanding for constitutional recognition to their aboriginal ethnic identity, purely on democratic ways so that they can protect and enjoy their ethnic group rights in the state.

Despite being one of the aboriginal ethnic groups of the state, Chutias have felt that they have enjoyed a little share of development in comparison to other advanced ethnic groups in the state. Politically the group is still proportionally unrepresentative in the state cabinet as well as ALA. For instance, in the last three consecutive ALA including the existing one (i.e. 2001-2006, 2006-2011, 2011-2016) only 2 MLAs were elected from the community. In contrast to them, many

other tribal and non tribal communities of the state have 3 to 15 MLAs in the ALA. For instance, in the existing ALA, Mishings have 3, Bodos 12, Ahoms 12, and Tea Tribes have 6 MLAs respectively. Similarly, all of these communities have representatives in the state cabinet also. But the Chutias representation in the state cabinet is zero. Now there is one Cabinet Minister as representative of the Chutias in the existing State cabinet. But the minister is not belonged to the community by birth. Hence, the Chutia are demanding for giving the cabinet ministry to the elected MLAs of the community.

In terms of socio-cultural aspect, Chutias have already lost many of their ethno-cultural traits distinct from the others in due course of time and mingled with the larger Assamese identity. So, the fear of losing their remaining ethno-cultural traits and heritages in the plural socio-political structure of the state has led them to be conscious. Of course, it is a common factor of many ethnic identity movements in the north east India. As an aboriginal group of the state, Chutias have distinct culture and traditions which contribute a lot to the larger Assamese culture. As mentioned in the previous chapters they had a tribal language which is now speaking by the Deori tribe (Deoris are the priestly clan of the Chutias and the language is popularly known as Deori-Chutia language). Besides it, Chutias have distinct cultural dresses, food habits, house patterns and many other customs and traditions, which they realized to be protected as soon as possible. Otherwise, like their language, these cultural traits also may extinct once.

Moreover, the spread of modern education, continuous non-responsive policies of the state governments towards their demands and the influence of contemporary trend of politicization of ethnicity in the state have made Chutias identity consciousness deeper day by day.

Role Played by the Chutia Ethnic Organizations in Molding their Identity Consciousness:

The Chutia ethnic organizations have been raising diverse demands to the state and adopting numbers of strategy to pressurize the state. As noted earlier, initially they pleaded for free studentship, reservation of jobs in government services, reservation of seats in local bodies as well as in ALA in order to ensure politico-economic development of the community. In other sense, with the growing process of democratization in the colonial British administration, the Chutia ethnic leaders aspired for adequate share in the decision making process of the province. But in later period, they realized that development of the Chutias was largely dependent on the extent of political powers that they could enjoy in the state. For that, they pleaded for minority status with a joint electoral system so that they would have proportional representatives in the provincial legislature of Assam. But their demand was not conceded.

In post-independence period, the Chutias have become more concerned about the demands like recognition of their linguistic identity (i.e. *Deori-Chutia language* as their original language), demand for OBC, MOBC and later ST status respectively. However, mobilization of a community largely depends upon the extent of consciousness about their lingo-cultural traits. The Chutia organizations also tried to move on that track. Moreover, it appears to the Chutia leadership that unless they are capable of maintaining their distinct lingo-cultural traits, their movement for constitutional protection of their group identity is never succeeded.

Inequality in a society breeds enormous dissatisfactions among its people. Inequality can be examined from different aspects of public life such as inequality in distribution of economic benefits, inequality in political power sharing, and inequality in showing respect to cultural identities of small nationalities etc. The question of inequality becomes more sensitive when the

ethnic groups examine it on the basis of their relative gains. The case of Chutias identity demands echoed a similar logic. In other sense, the demands of the Chutia organizations largely reflected the dissatisfaction of their people with the existing unequal distribution of socio-political and economic benefits of the state. As mentioned above in proportion to their population they are politically unrepresentative. Educationally they are backward. Culturally, they lost many of their original traits. So this reality has developed a feeling of relative deprivation among the people of the community. It may therefore be observed that the identity consciousness of the Chutias is more than the result of the threat to their cultural traits. The feeling of relative deprivation from their due shares of development in the state equally sensitized the Chutias ethnically. Hence, demanding for constitutional recognition to their ethnic identity under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution began to be viewed as a means for solution of their identity problems. Notably, since the late 70s of the last century, the Chutias have been demanding ST status under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution.

However, in comparison to other ethnic organizations of the state such as ABSU, AAKRASU, AATASU, ASDC, TMPK etc, the Chutia ethnic organizations are less influential to the politics of the state. Two basic reasons can be argued on this regard. First is the weak support base of the Chutia ethnic organizations and secondly, the population of the Chutias are scattered. Nobody of the Chutia ethnic organizations has its strong support base of their populations as the aforesaid ethnic organizations have. The various annual conferences of the Chutia organizations have revealed that only a small section of population of the community is associated with their organizations. Furthermore, except Golaghat and Mahmara constituency (State Assembly), the Chutias do not have absolute majority in any other constituency of the state. Their population are scattered in all constituencies of the upper Assam such as Dhakuakhana, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur,

Bihpuria, Amguri, Tinsukia and so on. And because of the non-majority ethnic composition, the Chutias could not hold the political power in these constituencies. It is fact that the political powers in Assam have been allocated in accordance to the numbers of population of the communities. In that sense, the majority ethnic groups are enjoying more power than the others. For instances, the Ahoms are majority in Upper Assam. Bodos are majority in BTAD. Mishings are majority in Dhemaji, Jonai and Dhakuakhana. Koch Rajbongshis are majority in Bongaigoan and Goalpara. Similarly, the Tea Tribes have a strong political hold in the districts of Upper Assam as well as Tezpur districts in the north. So, accordingly these groups are enjoying the political powers.

Moreover, many other reasons made the Chutia ethnic organizations incapable to be influential in the politics of the state-

i. Organizational Weakness: Representatives of the Chutia ethnic organizations are not selected geographically. As a result, their assertions are confined in particular 2-3 districts of upper Assam and remain unknown to many Chutia inhabited areas of the state. Without public involvement no movement can success.

ii. Members are politically affiliated to different political parties and hence their opinions are differs from government to government and party to party.

iii. Majority leaders of the Chutia civil society organizations have taken the later as pillars of building their personal political career. For instance, before coming into direct politics of the state, all the existing as well as ex MLAs and members of the CDC were leaders of the Chutia ethnic organizations. But after being elected the Chutia MLAs are hardly seen to raise their voices for ST recognition to the Community in the ALA as well as in state cabinet. Besides it, the other cultural demands such as *Sati Sadhoni Setu* are still remained unfulfilled. Like the

MLAs, majority of the existing CDC members were also ex-leaders of the Chutia ethnic organizations. But unfortunately, after being selected as members of CDC they have forgotten their earlier commitments and responsibility towards the development of the community.

Secondly, it is well known to all that at present the Chutias have been demanding ST status under the sixth schedule of Indian constitution. They have understood that if the community is granted ST status under sixth schedule of Indian constitution then many other cultural and economic demands can automatically be realized. However, originally the Chutia organizations demanded ST status separately. But in 2003 the community came to a consensus with five other asserting groups of the state (they were also demanding ST status separately) and make it a collective demand of the six. Unfortunately, except some political bargains with the state, the *Soy Janagusthiyo Aikya Mancha* has failed to bring any light towards the fulfillment of their ST demand till date. In fact, the *Mancha* is also not above internal problems-

i. Mutual Distrust in the Soy Janagusthiyo Aikya Mancha: Its notable here that the *Soy Janagusthiyo Aikya Mancha* was constituted to increase pressure on State and Central Government for granting them ST status. So apart from the ST issue, the collaboration does not have any use in other issues. Every group of the six has their separate politico-cultural and economic agenda as well as demands. And even in some demands their positions are conflicting. For instance, there is contradiction between the Chutias and Ahoms in naming the 4th bridge over the river Brahmaputra. It was started first in 2004 when the Chutia organizations suddenly observed *Lachit Divos* by demanding Lachit Borphukan⁷⁵ as originally belonged to the Chutia

⁷⁵ Lachit Borphukan was the historic hero of the infamous Saraighat War of 1672, who fought very bravely against the powerful Mughals and defeated them. Although the controversy over Lachit Divos came into focus in 2004 only, yet it was not a new demand of the Chutias. Rather the community has been claiming Lachit Borphukan as Chutia by birth since publication of their first magazine *Vramor* (1947). (Dr. D. Sarmah: 2006. *Chutia Hokolor Atmoporicitir Ek Sotika*. p. 83-84)

community. In contrast, the ethnic leaders of the Ahoms named the bridge after their historic king *Chukafa*. As a result, the whole issue became sentimental and increased mutual distrust between the two groups. It is just an example. In many other areas such as jobs and politics they have inter-ethnic competitions.

As media reported, all ethnic organizations of the six ethnic groups opposed the concept of Development Council which was innovated by the state government of Assam in 2010. They collectively accused the Congress party led state government (2006-2011) for not taking their ST status demand with priority. Subsequently, all ethnic groups threatened to oppose the party on the forthcoming legislative assembly election of the state which was to be held in 2011. But as the State legislative Assembly election came closer, some ethnic organizations of the Mancha specially the ATASU and AKRASU started to play their double standard politics. Before the election both organizations were continuously addressing many public meetings against the ruling congress party of the state. But just on the eve of election they suddenly stopped their anti congress campaign without informing the other four ethnic groups of the collaboration.⁷⁶ This is another example of mutual betrayal as well as unfastened co-operations among the six asserting ethnic groups of the state.

ii. Opposition of the All Assam Tribal Sangha (AATS): The careful opposition of the AATS, the state's apex tribal body to the ST demands of six ethnic groups has brought the issue into a new debate. The AATS oppositions are centered on two arguments- i) they have sought peaceful solution of the ST issue of Assam, but at the same time they need certainty of protection of politico-economic, cultural and educational rights of 14 tribal groups of the plains. ii) They have feared that granting ST status to more groups in Assam will jeopardize the interests and

⁷⁶ Asomiya Protidin, March, 6, 2011

political rights of the existing tribal population in the state. And it will jeopardize more when some already advanced groups will have granted ST status.

Indeed, the AATS' opposition has made severe impacts on the ST movement of six non tribal groups of Assam. Analyzing the direct impact of the AATS' stand, two points can be argued- i) they help the state to continue its decades old politics on the issue. The ST issue has become an important source of politics for the political parties as well as ethnic leaders in the state and ii) their opposition helps the state to throw the issue into the public court of the state. In other words, it encourages the state to be turned the issue into a matter of conflict between the plains tribes and non-tribes (six) of the state. The state cannot grant ST status to the six communities because the existing plains tribes are opposing it. Moreover, the AATS opposition has loosened the ethnic collaboration of the six asserting groups. The AATS is quite critical to the ST status demand of three particular groups of the six rather than opposing of all. For instance, they have directly opposed the demand of the Adivasis and criticized the AASU for backing the demand. As they advocated, the tea tribes (Adivasis included) are not aborigines of Assam. They were migrated from areas like Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa and Chhattisgarh to the state of Assam.⁷⁷ They also opposed the ST demands of the Koch Rajbongsis and Ahoms as both are already advanced and dominant communities in the state of Assam.⁷⁸ In contrast, they have not directly opposed the demands of other three asserting communities namely the Chutia, Moran and Motaks of the Moncha. It might be because of their non-dominated positions in the state politics of Assam. Subsequently, when the Adivasi, Koch Rajbongshi and Ahoms challenged the AATS opposition

⁷⁷ Amar Asom, 12 July, 2014

⁷⁸ Asamiya Protidin, 12 July, 2014

as baseless, the Chutia, Moran and Motaks were played a neutral role.⁷⁹ Thus, it increased mutual distrust and loosened the strength of the *Soy Janagusthiyo Aikya Mancha*.

Response of the State towards the Demands of the Chutia Community:

The role of state in responding as well as resolving identity problems of the Chutias bears a significant dimension of the study. In terms of response however, the state governments of Assam have been taking different policies since independence of the country.

Immediately after independence, the Chutias did not make any specific ethnic demand. But during that period, the Assam state had to face numbers of secessionist movements from diverse ethnic groups of the then Assam. Among the others, the Nagas movement for separate sovereign statehood was the most prominent one and it was followed by the Mizos extremist secessionist movement. However, unlike them the non-tribal groups of Assam including the Chutias did not make any identity demands. But it does not mean it that the non-tribal ethnic groups did not have any question regarding their politico-economic conditions and cultural identity.

The Other Backward Caste (OBC) status was the first demand of the Chutias in post-independence Assam. Demanding their inclusion into the list of OBCs, the ACCCA submitted a memorandum to the central “*Undeveloped Community Investigation Commission*” also known as ‘*Kaka Saheb Kalalkar Commission*’ in 1953. The memorandum was submitted with the words that “*in Assam the Chutia community is the most undeveloped and backward race. Though the Chutias are kept along with the Caste Hindus by the government, but untouchability, inter marriage, inter-dining are still prohibited with others of the Caste Hindus.*”⁸⁰ In response, the

⁷⁹ Amar Asom, 14 July, 2014

⁸⁰ Memorandum Submitted to the “Undeveloped Community Investigation Committee”, 1953, P-5

state government of Assam enlisted the Chutias into the list of OBCs in the later part of 60s of the last century.

However, inclusion into the list of OBC did not bring any specific change in the politico-economic lives of the Chutias in Assam. It was because their inability to compete with the other comparatively developed groups of the category. As a result, the ACCCA leadership revised their existing demands and claimed 'More Other Backward Castes' (MOBC) status (a list of groups having more backward and poor economic records). In 1969, ACCCA submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam, Bimala Prasad Chaliha (1957-1970) on this regard.⁸¹ The demands of the memorandum were, "*....to declare the Chutias as most backward community, the areas which are majority in population by the inhabitants of the Chutias should be selected...free education to the Chutia students.. reservation of seats both in the technical and medical education*"⁸². But their MOBC status demand did not get positive response from the Chaliha led state government of Assam. Again in 1971, another memorandum was submitted to the Chief Minister of Assam. In that memorandum they just reiterated the demands that were included in the earlier memorandum. In response however, the Mahendra Mohan Choudhuri led Government of Assam (1970-1972) enlisted the community into the MOBC list in 1971(Sarmah, 2007: 534). But unlike the other groups of the list, Chutias were declared MOBC only in educational aspects. As a result, shifting from OBC to MOBC status did not bring any positive benefit to the community. The MOBCs are not given any extra politico-economic reservations from the OBCs. These results made Chutia leadership quite dissatisfied with their movement which indirectly compelled them to re-assess their identity demands. Thus, in the late 70s of the

⁸¹ Memorandum on the Demands of Chutias of as a most backward and unrepresented community, Amguri, 1969

⁸² Ibid.,

20th century, their ethnic leadership of the Chutias has been demanding ST status under the sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution.

In response to their ST status demand, as assessed by the interviewed Chutia ethnic leaders, the state governments of Assam have been taking some half hearted policies. As a result, their demand is still remained unfulfilled. It is noteworthy here that apart from the ST status demand, the Chutia ethnic organizations have been raising many other socio-economic and political demands. These demands include demand for Sadhani Setu, declaration of Sadhani Divas as state official holiday (7th Bohag), building Sadhani Bhavan/ statue in every Chutia inhabited district, preservation of Chutias' historical monuments, reservations of jobs in Govt. departments, reservations of seats in the educational institutions, proportional representation of the Chutias in the State Cabinet, reservation of constituencies for the Chutias etc. But like the ST status demand, these demands of the community are also still remained unfulfilled.

However, it's true that the state governments of Assam have been sending numbers of proposal on granting ST status to the concerned authority of India. The power of the state government is limited in this regard. For granting ST status, the initial proposal comes from the state government. Then it is examined by the Registrar-General and Census Commissioner, the Tribal Welfare Ministry and the National Scheduled Tribes Commission. The final call is taken by the Tribal Welfare Ministry, which will have to draft an amendment bill to include the communities in the ST list.

Looking at the importance of the issue, the United Front Government issued an ordinance including the six communities of Assam in the ST list in 1996. The Bill to this effect was introduced in the Lok Sabha during that period, but because of opposition from various tribal

members including Jayanta Rongpi, the then Speaker P.A. Sangma set up a Parliamentary Select Committee under the chairmanship of MP Amar Rai Pradhan to go into the issue. The Parliamentary Select Committee in its report recommended that not only the Koch Rajbongshi community, status of other communities including the Chutia, Motak, Moran and Tai Ahom be rescheduled. It suggested that the entire OBC and MOBC list be upgraded to the Scheduled List.⁸³ But it has not come into practice. As argued by the ethnic organizations of the six ethnic groups, it is just an example how both the Union and State Governments are playing with their ethnic emotions.

As media reported, the Registrar General of India has rejected Assam Governments' proposal as many as eight times till date.⁸⁴ The main argument of rejection of their proposals is the non-fulfillment of the required five constitutional criteria namely *indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness*.⁸⁵ Subsequently, the issue is now become politically sensitive. In fact, giving ST status to six communities has been a demand of the pro-talk faction of ULFA, which raised the issue during peace talks with the Centre in 2013 and later it was supported by the Chief Minister of Assam.⁸⁶ Furthermore, Assam legislators across political lines joined hands on 10 November, 2014 to press Union home minister Rajnath Singh to recognize six communities of the state as Scheduled Tribes. A 12-member delegation, led by Speaker Pranab Gogoi, called on Singh at North Block and submitted a memorandum seeking ST status for the Koch-Rajbongshi, Tai Ahom, Moran, Mattock, Chutia and tea tribe communities, whose demand has been rejected for

⁸³ The Assam Tribune, August 23, 2013

⁸⁴ The Times of India, Guwahati, Jul 6, 2013

⁸⁵ According to the constitution of India, to recognize any group as ST, the group must fulfill the five criteria namely indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness.

⁸⁶ The Times of India, Guwahati, Jul 6, 2013

years because they do not “fulfill certain criteria”.⁸⁷ The objective behind this is keeping illegally settled Bangladeshi immigrants at bay as ST status will ensure land rights for the tribes, prevent alienation of land and ensure greater number of reserved seats for the communities in the Assam assembly. Recognition of these communities as Scheduled Tribes is imperative not only for these groups but also for the entire state.⁸⁸

On December 10, 2007 the Assam Government floated a new concept of Development Council for six tribes of the state. Addressing a press conference, Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi informed there would be six development councils for the six tribes- Moran, Mattock, Adivasi, Tai-Ahom, Koch Rajbongshi and Chutia.⁸⁹ To examine and work out the details for creation of separate Development Councils for six ethnic groups of the state, the state government constituted a Cabinet Sub-committee vide notification No TAD/BC/491/2007/8 dated 4th February with the chairmanship of P. Majhi, the then Minister of Planning & Development.⁹⁰ After studying the matter the Cabinet Sub-committee suggested the State Government to constitute separate Development Councils for six asserting non-tribal communities of the state including the Chutias. On the basis of that recommendation, the *Chutia Development Council* or CDC (hereafter) was constituted on 12.11.2010 *for formulation and finalization of Development Council for providing maximum participation of community within the framework of constitution of India for Socio-Economic, Educational, cultural and ethnic advancement of the people of the community in the state of Assam.*⁹¹ However, it is pertinent to mention here that the Development

⁸⁷ The Telegraph, Calcutta, November 11, 2014

⁸⁸ The Economics Times, June 26, 2014

⁸⁹ <http://news.oneindia.in/2007/12/10/assam-floats-new-council-in-interest-of-six-tribes-1197286587.html>

⁹⁰ Report of the Cabinet Committee on Creation of Development Councils for Adivasi (Tea Tribes & Ex Tea Tribes), Tai Ahom, Moran, Motak, Koch Rajbongshi and Chutia Communities. Dept of WPT&BC, Govt. of Assam (NO. TAD/BC/531/2010/136)

⁹¹ Ibid.

Councils are non-statutory in status. They are not constituted under any law passed by the Assam Legislative Assembly. Rather constituted on the basis of the recommendation of a cabinet subcommittee of the Government of Assam. Among the others, the issues like unconstitutional status as well as undemocratic formation of the CDC created havoc contentions among the ethnic leaders of the Chutias. It is notable here that the members including the chairman of the CDC are not elected rather selected by the State government from its own party supporters. So the Chutia ethnic organizations vehemently opposed the CDC. Their oppositions reflected their apprehensions about the probable effect of politicization of the ethnic issues of the community.

Examining its status, functions and suitability, the approach of development council of the state government of Assam can be assessed as the continuation of its existing political game on the ethnic questions. Appeasement of the people for gaining electoral support was the primary goal behind the politics of development Councils. It became apparent when the six ethnic groups including the Chutias had decided to oppose the vote bank politics of the state government made through the institution of development councils.⁹² They accused the Congress led state government (2006-2011) for not taking their ST demand with priority. Subsequently, they collectively threatened the state government to oppose on the forthcoming legislative assembly election of the state that was to be held in 2011. But when the congress party published its election manifesto and gave priority to the ST demand of the six non-tribal groups, they withdrew their proposed anti-congress campaign in election.⁹³

In August 2013, by setting at rest all speculations over granting ST status to six communities of the State, Dr. Monmohan Sing led UPA Government (2009-2014) again rejected the ST demand

⁹² Asomiya Protidin, August 11, 2010

⁹³ Asomiya Protidin, August 11, 2011

of six non-tribal groups of Assam including the Chutias. As media reported, the proposal sent by the same congress party led State Government (2011-continue) of Assam could not fulfill the constitutional criteria for identifying them as STs.⁹⁴ As the news spread, the ethnic organizations of the Chutias along with the others came out and sat on street. They made public rallies, declared *bondh*, criticized the state government as anti-indigenous. Subsequently, they criticized the state government for neglecting their longstanding demands. The six non-tribal groups threatened to play anti-congress role in the 16th Lok Shabha election of the nation which was to be held in June, 2014. As a result, the then Union Minister of Tribal Affairs of the erstwhile UPA Government (2009-2014) V. Kishore Chandra Deo had compelled to give his personal assurance to review the ST status demand of the six non-tribal groups with larger interest. Besides it, Deo also assured the agitating organizations to take all possible measures regarding their ST status demand, if he would get proper information from the Government of Assam.⁹⁵

However, just after the 16th general election of the country held in 2014, the ST issue of six non-tribal groups of the state took a new shape. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), following its election manifesto, has taken initiative to consider the tribal demands of six ethnic groups of Assam. The newly elected Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi has ordered the concerned Ministry of his Government to fulfill all required formalities for granting ST status to these six ethnic groups of Assam.⁹⁶ Subsequently, responding the matter quickly, the tribal groups of Assam have expressed their careful opposition.⁹⁷ The tribal groups under the banner of *All Asom Tribal Sangha* (AATS) invited protest meetings at different locations of the state. As the news published, on 1st July, 2014, the *Asom Tribal Sangha* and Tribal Youth League convened a joint

⁹⁴ The Assam Tribune, August 23, 2013

⁹⁵ The Sentinel, September 27, 2013.

⁹⁶ Amar Asom, June 30, 2014

⁹⁷ Asomiya Pratidin, July 1, 2014

meeting of the tribal groups of Assam in Guahati. Almost all tribal organization of the state namely ABSU, TMPK, ARSU, ATSU, AASKSU, AAMKJP, AAKSU, AADSU, AAMTSU, ASTKSU, AASKSU and AAHSU attended the meeting. The tribal leaders thoroughly discussed the ST demands of the six ethnic groups of the state and its consequences. Attending a press conference after the meeting, the General Secretary of the AATS, Aditya Khaklari told that they have sought peaceful solution of the longstanding ST demands of the six groups. At the same time, they have sought protection of politico-economic, cultural and educational rights of 14 existing tribal groups of the plains. In that context they have demanded to clarify the policy of the new Union Government regarding ST arrangement of six ethnic groups before the AATS.⁹⁸ Moreover, continuing their oppositions to the decision of Modi Government, AATS organized a protest meeting at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on 12 July, 2014.⁹⁹ Thus, their oppositions have brought the entire issue into a new debate and the matter is still unresolved.

⁹⁸ Asomiya Pratidin, July 2, 2014

⁹⁹ Asomiya Protidin, July 12, 2014

CHAPTER VI CONCLUSION

The present study ‘**State and Identity Movements: A study of Chutias of Assam**’ is an attempt to understand the ethnic identity movement of the Chutias in Assam. To understand the same, an empirical investigation was made. A sample of adequate size was drawn from the members of different groups of respondents including the non Chutias citizens who have knowledge over the problem. Besides, the secondary sources were also consulted widely to understand the causes/factors responsible for Chutias identity movements, role of the Chutia ethnic organizations and the response of the state towards the identity movements of the Chutias. The objective wise findings of the study have been presented below. However, before coming to the major findings, a short introduction about the chapters would make more sense about the study.

The introductory chapter (**Chapter-1**) gives a detailed outline of the research plan including the statement of the problem that signifies the importance and relevance of the present study. A conceptual framework of the Study has been evolved to elaborate the meaning of the key concepts like ‘identity politics’, and ‘ethnicity’ and the meaning that has been attached to them for the purpose of the present study. The chapter also includes a systematic and elaborate review of relevant literature, objectives of the Study and research questions. Besides, the methodology of the Study that explains the size of the sample, technique of sampling etc is also discussed in this chapter along with Chapterization.

Chapter II is divided into three sections. The first section of the chapter deals with the constitutional provision and ideas adopted for dealing with the given socio-cultural diversities in the country. The section II deals with the approaches that the Indian state (i.e. governments) has

been following so far in addressing the ethnic identity politics since independence. The last section of the chapter exclusively deals with the issues of ethnic identity assertions in Assam with a view to understand the ethno-political background of emergence of the identity consciousness of small groups like the Chutias.

The **Chapter III** attempts to identify the historical causes/factors responsible for the Chutias identity movement in post colonial Assam. In fact, the movement for ethnic identity of the Chutias has not been a new phenomenon. Rather it has a long historical background. In short, the modern history of the Chutias identity assertion traces back to the mid 20s of the last century. But in unorganized and rudimentary form, the history of their identity assertion traces back to the pre- British period of Assam when the state was ruled by the Ahoms. Therefore, the chapter divides the history of Chutias identity assertion into three different phases namely- the Pre-Colonial (1523-1826), the Colonial (1826-1947) and the Post- Colonial Phase (1947-2014).

The **Chapter IV** deals with the issues and demands raised by the Chutia ethnic organizations at different phases of their identity deliberations with the state. Along with it the chapter widely analyses the responses of the state towards the ethnic demands of the Chutias. The chapter concludes by exploring the major shifts as regard their identity direction that the Chutia ethnic leadership made during their long history of identity movements.

In the **Chapter V**, the primary data were systematically arranged and put up in tables. On the basis of the tables, data are analyzed and interpreted objective wise through both qualitatively and quantitatively. Along with primary data, the secondary data were also used for analyzing the objectives proposed.

The Chapter VI tries to conclude the study by summarizing the findings of the study. The major findings of the study are-

1. From the study, it is revealed that Chutias identity movement is a part of the larger ethnic identity movement in the state of Assam. Many ethnic groups in Assam have been asserting on different ways for protection of their ethnic identities. Chutias are also amongst them. But unlike the tribes (especially the Bodos, Karbis, Dimasas), their assertion is against none ethnic groups of the state. Moreover, their identity assertion is neither for granting autonomy nor for separate statehood. Rather, Chutias assertion is for constitutional recognition to their ethnic identity, continued purely on democratic ways so that they can protect and enjoy their ethnic group rights amid the larger Assamese identity. In fact, their fragile cultural identity, backward economic conditions and less advantageous positions in the contemporary state politics have made them conscious ethnically.

2. The movement for ethnic identity of the Chutia community of Assam has not been a new phenomenon. Rather it has a long historical background. The modern history of Chutias identity assertion traces back to the third decade (1925) of 20th century when they formed their first ethnic organization. But in unorganized and rudimentary form, their history of identity assertion brings back to the pre- British period of Assam when the state was ruled by the Ahoms. Therefore, the entire history of Chutias identity assertion can be divided into three historical phases namely- the Pre- Colonial (1523-1826), Colonial (1826-1947) and Post- Colonial Phase (1947-2014).

3. The prolonged economic backwardness followed by illiteracy, political unconsciousness, orthodox social practices, and social injustice experienced in the caste ridden social hierarchy of

Assamese society during colonial period have intensified a sense of relative deprivation among the Chutias. Besides, the gross negligence of the state governments towards development of the backward communities including the Chutias during post colonial period is also equally accountable on this regard. However, the summery of opinion of the respondents of the study regarding causes of Chutias identity awareness is as following-

- A good numbers of respondents i.e. 16% from the general Chutia citizens identified cultural identity crisis as one of the prime causes of Chutias identity movement which was followed by 14% of non Chutia citizens and 12.5% of political representatives of the Chutias.
- 31.25% of political representatives of the Chutias and 20% of each Chutia and non-Chutia respondents considered economic backwardness as important factor responsible for the same.
- 14% each of Chutia and non-Chutia respondents and 12.5% of political representatives of the Chutias argued political un-representativeness as important cause.
- 14% of non-Chutia and 10% of Chutia citizens considered non-responsive attitude of the state government towards the demands of the community as an important factor that fuelled identity consciousness of the later.
- 14% of non-Chutia and 10% of Chutia citizens considered it as the political instruments of the political leaders of the community as well as others to serve their personal political interests.
- 16% of non-Chutia respondents also argued it as influence of contemporary trend of politicization of ethnicity in the state in particular which was followed by 10% of Chutia citizens and 6.25% of political representatives of the Chutias.

- majority 16 (100%) out of 16 respondents of Chutia organizations considered all of the above mentioned factors (i.e. cultural, economic, political, non-responsive policies of the state government) as responsible for the Chutias identity movement which was followed by 40% of Chutia citizens, 18.75% of political representatives of the Chutias and 10% of non-Chutia respondents. According to them, Chutias identity assertion is the outcome of a combination of the abovementioned factors.

4. The study also reveals that the modern history of Chutias identity assertion started along with the beginning of their organized lives (1925). During the period, the educated people of the community started to urge their scattered people to be united for building up a feeling of Chutia solidarity which was considered essential for bargaining with the state. And thus in 1925, the *All Chutia Caste Conference, Assam (ACCCA)*, the first ethnic organization of the community came into existence. Through the organization, the Chutia ethnic leadership attempted to build up an organizational network to connect their people living in different places of the state. However, later on the ACCCA was followed by three other ethnic organizations whose main objective was to raise voices for their relative ethnic interests in the state. They are namely - a) All Assam Chutia Caste Women Conference, 1946, b) All Assam Chutia Caste Youth Conference, 1969, c) All Assam Chutia Student Union, 2005. These organizations have made diverse cultural, economic, and political demands to the state which were assessed by the respondents of the study as following-

- 50% of non-Chutia citizens supported the cultural demands raised by the Chutia ethnic organizations while in case of Chutia citizens it was 20%.
- 28% of Chutia citizens and 10% of non-Chutia citizens supported the economic demands of the Chutia ethnic organizations.

- 18% of Chutia citizens and a small 6% of non-Chutia citizen supported the political demands as important for the community.
- 16 out of 16 respondents of political representatives of the Chutias opined for all aforementioned demands such as cultural, economic and political raised by the Chutia ethnic organizations are as equally important to be fulfilled for larger good of the community which was supported by 34% of each Chutia and non-Chutia citizens.

As regard the role of Chutia ethnic organizations-

- 62% of Chutia citizens opined the role played by the Chutia organizations in mobilizing the community as positive which was followed by 52% of non Chutia as well as 43.75% of Chutia citizens.
- 25% of political representatives of Chutias considered their role as negative and it was followed by a small 10% respondent of each Chutia and non-Chutia citizens.
- 38% of non-Chutia respondents opined their role as partially positive (neither fully positive nor negative) which was followed by 31.25% of political representatives of Chutias and 28% of Chutia citizens.

5. So far the history of changing socio-political circumstances in the state is concerned; the Chutia ethnic leadership has made numbers of shift as regard their demands till date. Since 1881 to 1921, the official recognition to the Chutias was *plains tribe* (today ST plains) of Assam. But during that time the leadership of the community did not accept that officially given tribal status. Instead of that they pleaded for continuation of their existing caste Hindu identity. Again in 1935, looking at their untouchable socio-cultural as well as backward economic conditions, the British Simon Commission proposed to enlist Chutias in the list of *depressed caste groups* (today

SC) of Assam. That time also the Chutia leadership rejected the proposal, because the social status of the SCs was very low during that time. On the eve of independence (1946), the community sought a separate political existence and political rights as a *minority group* in the new constitutional machinery to be set up. In post- independence period, Chutias demanded *Other Backward Caste (OBC)* in 1953 and *More Other Backward Caste (MOBC)* status in 1969 respectively. In the mid 80s of the last century, the Chutia leadership advocated for directing their ethnic assertion towards *tribal identity* instead of OBC and MOBC status. And in 1979, in the 20th conference of the ACCCA they finally shifted their identity orientation from caste Hindu to tribal (ST) one. In response to their demands the state has been taking many policies which were assessed by the respondents as following-

- A vast majority i.e. 81.25% of Chutia organizations considered the response of the state governments towards their movement as negative which was followed by 32% of Chutia citizens, 24% of non-Chutia citizens and a small 6.25% of political leaders of Chutias.
- 50% of political representatives of Chutias considered state response towards their identity demands as positive which was followed by 38% of non-Chutia citizens and 22% of the Chutia citizens.
- 46% of the respondents of Chutia citizens gave a mixed opinion and said state government's response as partially positive (neither fully positive nor negative) depending upon circumstances and it was followed by 43.75% of political representatives of Chutias, 38% of non-Chutia citizens and 18.75% of the Chutia organizations. Respondents who opined state response as negative towards the Chutias movement mentioned about the non-responsive policies of the state government since beginning of their movement and politicization of their ethnic issues for their party political gains.

As regard the working of Chutia Development Council (CDC)

- 32% of non Chutia citizens opined the functions of CDC as positive, while in case of Chutia citizens it was 30%.
- A vast majority i.e. 87.5% respondents belonged to the Chutia organizations considered the performance of CDC as negative and it was followed by 22% of Chutia citizens and 18% of non Chutia citizens.
- 50% of non-Chutia citizens considered the working of CDC as partially positive which means neither fully positive nor negative and 48% of Chutia citizens and 12.5% respondents of Chutia organizations accepted it.

6. Though not spelt out in the Constitution but have followed five well established and accepted criteria for specification of a community as ST in India. They are namely- a) indications of primitive traits, (b) distinctive culture, (c) geographical isolation, (d) shyness of contact with the community at large and (e) backwardness. And so far media report is concerned, it is because of non-fulfillment of these five constitutional criteria the Registrar General of India has rejected Assam Government's proposal as many as eight times till date. It's true that nobody of the six asserting groups including the Chutias has been representing the constitutional criteria in true sense of the terms. For instance, Chutias have lost many of their primitive ethnic traits- language, customs and traditions etc in long years back. Modernization and development of science and communication has brought many changes in everybody's life including the existing tribals of the country. From that angle, criteria like geographical isolation, shyness of contact etc have little relevant for recognizing any group as ST in present day context of the country. Moreover as argued by the leaders of the six asserting groups, the constitutional criteria were prepared in the

context of 50s decade of the last century. Hence, to suit with the changing situation they have demanded for constitutional amendment on regard to the constitutional modalities.

7. The ST issue of the Chutias along with the other five asserting groups has become politically sensitive when the ULFA and Assam legislators openly supported it. The pro-talk faction of ULFA, which raised the issue during peace talks with the Centre in 2013 and later it was supported by the Chief Minister of Assam. Furthermore, Assam legislators across political lines joined hands on 10 November, 2014 to press Union Home Minister, Rajnath Singh to recognize six communities of the state as Scheduled Tribes. A 12-member delegation, led by Speaker Pranab Gogoi, called on Singh at North Block and submitted a memorandum seeking ST status for the Koch-Rajbongshi, Tai Ahom, Moran, Mattock, Chutia and tea tribe communities, whose demand has been rejected for years because they do not “fulfill certain criteria”. The objective behind this is that the ST status will ensure land rights for the tribes, prevent alienation of land and ensure greater number of reserved seats for the communities in the Assam assembly.

8. The careful opposition of the *All Assam Tribal Sangha* (AATS), the state's apex tribal body to the ST demands of six ethnic groups has brought the issue into a new debate. However, their oppositions are centered on two arguments- i) they have sought peaceful solution of the ST issue of Assam, but at the same time they need certainty of protection of politico-economic, cultural and educational rights of 14 existing tribal groups of the plains. ii) They have feared that granting ST status to more groups in Assam will jeopardize the interests and political rights of the existing tribal population in the state. And it will jeopardize more when some already advanced groups will have granted ST status. Hence, how the Chutia ethnic leadership will

convince the AATS leadership as well what policy the state and union government will follow to resolve the conflict is a matter of great concern in this regard.

9. As regard solution of identity problems of the Chutias of Assam-

- 16 out of 16 respondents of each category- Chutia organizations and political representatives of Chutias, 50% of Chutia citizens and 12% of non-Chutia citizens considered granting ST status, economic development, protection and preservation of cultural heritages and proportional representation in the state politics as equally important for solution of Chutias identity problem.
- 20% of non-Chutia respondents opined for granting ST status to the Chutias is an important step for bringing solution to the Chutias identity problem while in case of the Chutia citizens it was 14%.
- 32% of non-Chutia respondents suggested overall economic development of the communities as a solution of Chutias identity problem and it was supported by 12% of Chutia citizens.
- 22% of non-Chutia respondents and 12% of Chutia citizens also expressed their opinion in favor of protection and preservation of Chutias cultural heritages.
- 14% non-Chutia respondent opined for giving proportional representation in the state politics to solve the problem which was also supported by 12% Chutia citizens.

Recommendations:

The whole analysis about Chutias identity assertion makes it clear that their identity problem is one of the major concerning issues of the present state of Assam. The Government of Assam has to find out durable solution of their identity problem with major priority. Monirul Hussain (1987)

by generalizing the identity problem of northeast once remarked that “our present socio-economic structure and the path of development that we have adopted after independence has sharpened not only the caste, religious, linguistic and ethnic distinctions, it has also increased regional disparities and the feeling of deprivation, negligence and insecurity among various ethnic-tribal groups. Liberation of tribals from oppression, exploitation, underdevelopment and dependency depends fundamentally on a radical transformation of our socioeconomic structure which at present permits inequality, exploitation and oppression”. Similarly, the causes of Chutias identity movement as the above analysis establishes is also rooted in such oppressed, unequal and discriminatory socio-economic and political structure of the state. Since independence Chutias have been raising diverse demands to the state. The State Governments in response have given them OBC and MOBC status respectively. But these measures could not represent the actual demands of the indigenous Chutias. Moreover, in 2010 the state government of Assam constituted a Development Council (CDC) for spearheading the process of development of the community. But the issue of Chutias identity problems has not been resolved so far.

Therefore, looking at the difficulties in resolving Chutias identity problem on the way that the state governments of Assam have been following so far, we propose here a few alternative policies. Development and good governance are the important prerequisites in this context. Equitable distribution of development funds to every development blocks and strict monitoring over implementation of the funds is the primary condition of equal development of the region as well as people of the state. Accountability and transparency of government policies and funds have to be maintained strictly.

There should be assurance of preservation and development of ethno-cultural heritages of every indigenous group in the state. Fear of losing ethnic distinctness is one of the main causes of identity assertions in Assam. Therefore protection and recognition of ethnic identities of the Chutias through constitutional means is the demand of the situation. Large scale influx of illegal migrants in to the state has already created havoc tensions among the indigenous groups of the state. Hence, granting ST status under sixth schedule of Indian constitution to them is considered as the best guarantee to secure their indigenous rights and control over land and politics of the state.

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