
UNIT 6 AUTONOMY MOVEMENTS*

Structure

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the meaning of autonomy in a federal structure;
- Analyse the reasons for the autonomy movements;
- Explain provisions in Indian constitution about autonomy in Indian federal structure, and
- Discuss examples of autonomy movements in India

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Autonomy movements are collective action of people in a region or across regions seeking rearrangement of relations among federal units – central, state and local governments in a country in such a way that the people involved in such action enjoy autonomy of their region to manage their affairs. The autonomy is sought in multiple spheres of identity – cultural, ethnic, economic, political, etc. It is needed to legislate on these issues relating to the regions demanding autonomy or execute decisions on them. The notion of autonomy in a federal structure has multiple meanings: creation of a separate state out of one or more states within the Union of India or rearrangement of federal relations within an existing state of the Union of India giving autonomy a region. Autonomy is often confused with self-determination. Although self-determination and autonomy are sometimes used interchangeably, in Indian context they convey different meanings. Self-determination often refers to establishment of a sovereign out of the existing sovereign state. It is also known as cessation in which one region in a country wants to secede and become a sovereign state. Indian constitution does not approve establishment of a sovereign state out the sovereign state. The movement in a region of a state for rearrangement of federal relations between

the region and the state is called autonomy movement. Such autonomy is demanded by creating and administrative device such as regional, district or territorial councils.

Movement for creation of separate state of one or more states in known statehood movement. You will read about it in unit 8. The movement which seeks to establish sovereign state out of Indian republic and see involvement of people and violence are known as insurgencies. You will read about them in 7. In this unit, you will read about the autonomy movements in this unit.

6.2 CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS AND AUTONOMY

India is a federal polity which has 28 states and 11 Union Territories (after J&K was converted into two Union Territories). Each of these states consists of regions which have diverse social, linguistic and cultural groups, and unequal levels of development. As India follows a federal system, enactment of laws regarding relationships between the states and Union of India are regulated according to the provisions of the Constitution. There are three lists of subjects which fall in jurisdiction of the states and Union of India separately known as State List and Union List, and jointly as Concurrent List. These provisions are meant to address the grievances of people in a region if they are not satisfied with the arrangement of powers relations within the existing boundaries of the states. The VI Schedule (Article 244) has provisions for creating autonomous bodies – autonomous district, regional or territorial councils in four states of northeast India. These states are Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Article 371, which ranges from Article 371-A to Article 371-J provides special provisions for Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, Sikkim, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh in northeast India, and for Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Goa and Karnataka in other regions of the country. This Article is aimed at providing special grant to the backward regions for their development, at protecting their culture and customary laws. The device Inner Line Permit (ILP) exists to protect culture and economy of people in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Tripura. Under this device, an Indian citizen who is not a resident of these states, can enter them only after getting permission of the central government, known as ILP. There is a demand for introduction of the ILP in states like Meghalaya and Manipur. There are also provisions in the constitution for changing the boundaries of the states, creation of new states and giving autonomy to the regions within the states. As you will read in unit 8, according to Art. 3 of the Constitution new states can be created in Indian Union. The 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendments provide for subjects which fall under the jurisdiction of the rural and urban local governance respectively.

6.3 FEATURES OF AUTONOMY MOVEMENTS

Although the aim of autonomy movements is to get power relations between the regions within a state restructured without coming out of its jurisdiction, it has not been the first demand of all autonomy movements. Some autonomy movements started with the goal to have a separate state carved out of one or more states but in the course of the movement their demand scaled down to

getting autonomy within the existing state. In the case of Meghalaya, the movement started with the goal to have a separate state carved out of Assam but the supporters of separate statehood accepted the status of a state within the state in 1970-72. Like the demands in the statehood movements and insurgencies, the autonomy movements have following features:

- 1) These are raised in the areas where people feel discriminated by the more resourceful regions in economic, social, cultural or political aspects.
- 2) These demands are generally raised by articulate sections of the society – middle classes, students, civil society organizations, political parties.
- 3) The supporters of autonomy demands generally allege that their region has become “internal colony” of the developed regions; their natural resources are exploited by outsiders and they are not paid back royalty or allowances in equal proportions of usage of their resources.
- 4) Their region is not given adequate representation in political institutions in the state, and decisions about them are taken by the governments without their involvement.
- 5) Their language and culture are not given due recognition and in several cases the dominant language is imposed on them.
- 6) The autonomy movements have some political context.

While these are the commonest factors which cause the autonomy movements in India, their impact may vary from case to case.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.
 ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

1) What do you mean by autonomy movements?

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2) What are the features of autonomy movements?

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6.4 EXAMPLES OF AUTONOMY MOVEMENTS

You will read below various examples of cases of autonomy movements: demand for separate state was converted into granting an autonomous state (Meghalaya); movement in which the demand for Bodoland which was scaled down to acceptance of autonomy within the state of Assam; Karbis and Dimasas Kacharis who initially wanted separate state of Poorvanchal within Assam accepted autonomy within the state.

6.4.1 “State Within the State” and Autonomy: Meghalaya

The case of Meghalaya is an example where a demand was made for creation of a hill state out of Assam, but instead of a separate state an autonomous state was created within Assam – “a state within the state” which existed during 1970-72. Although the demand for a separate state of Meghalaya – in the tribal-dominated Jaintia, Khasi and Garo hills, which formed parts of Assam then, became more strident in the 1960s, it started getting raised in the 1950s. These were among the regions which were governed by the VI Schedule areas in Assam. The people in the VI Schedule areas were not satisfied with its provisions. They argued that it did not adequately safeguard their interests and the people in the plains of Assam did not treat them properly. Besides, the resolution of the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha to make Assamese as the official language of all in Assam, which then included non-Assamese speaking hill and plain areas also incensed them. In this context, the Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Garo Hills District Council, Williamson Sangma convened a meeting of the CEMs of all district councils on 16 and 17 January 1954. The meeting was attended by CEMs of Lushai, North Cachar, Garo and the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District Councils, the CEM of the Mikir Hills District Council could not attend the meeting. The meeting discussed two points: formation of a separate Hills state; and Amendment of the VI Schedule because “it confers no real autonomy”. Sangma emphasized that there was no alternative to the new Hill state. However, the CEM of the Mizo District Council argued that demand for a new state could be advanced only after the demand for autonomy was made and rejected. The suggestions of the meeting were sent to several members of parliament seeking amendment to the Sixth Schedule. This meeting was followed by an Assam Hills Tribal Leaders’ Conference at a Tura from 6-8 October 1954. The meeting was attended by 46 delegates (except those from Mizo hills). The conference unanimously called for “a separate state for the autonomous districts of Assam” and decided to send memorandum to the State Reorganization Commission (SRC). The SRC rejected the demand on the ground that the agitation for separate state was confined to the Jaintia, Khasi, Garo hills, excluding other areas of Assam. Pataskar Commission rejected the proposal for a separate state. Instead of a separate state, an autonomous state, which came to be known as Meghalaya was created on April 1, 1970 within the state of Assam. It was created following the passage of 22nd Amendment [the Meghalaya Amendment Act 55 of 1969] (following passage of the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Bill, 1969 by the both Houses of Parliament. The autonomous state had three-tier system of power distribution. The Executive power was vested with the Governor of Assam who was aided and advised by the Council of Ministers in Meghalaya as an autonomous state within Assam; legislative assembly was created with membership open to all

Indians in Meghalaya with exception of Shillong where all seats in (autonomous districts) were reserved for Scheduled Tribes; and the Governor was empowered to nominate three persons to the legislative assembly from minority communities who in his opinion were not adequately represented. The Governor of Assam was empowered to constitute village courts and courts of appeal with jurisdiction over tribals and tribals. Several state subjects were transferred from Assam to Meghalaya excluding public order, armed police, railway police, industry and sale tax. The Assam and Meghalaya legislatures were given concurrent jurisdiction of agriculture, forest, transport, communication and waterways. The distribution of power between Meghalaya and Assam faced challenges. In 1972, Meghalaya became a separate state.

6.4.2 From Separate State to Autonomy: Bodo Movement

The Bodos, the plain tribes of Assam, have been clamouring for autonomy for several years. The Bodo Autonomy movement has passed through two phases: One, from the late 1960s to 1979; and two, the post-AASU movement (1979-85), i.e. from 1985 onwards. The notion of Bodo autonomy has vacillated between demand for creation of a separate state to be carved out of the state of Assam and a region enjoying autonomy within the state. The demand for a separate state of Bodoland was the main demand in the initial years of the Bodo movement. The first phase of Bodo movement began in 1967 for creation of new state of Uadyanchal. Establishment of Nagaland state in 1963 became the immediate context of demands for creation of Bodoland like the demands for the states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh out of Assam in the 1960s. Even though, among the regions inhabited by the hill tribes in Assam, in 1972, Meghalaya became a separate state and Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram became Union territories, and in 1963, Nagaland had already become a separate state, Bodoland demand did not pick up further momentum.

The next phase of Bodo autonomy movement started in 1987, after the Assam Accord of 1985 was signed. The movement became more consistent and strident in this phase. Like several other smaller indigenous communities, the Bodos also had participated in the anti-foreigner movement led by the AASU (All Assam Students Union) movement. But after the signing of the Assam Accord, they felt that their cultural autonomy and political rights were not recognised by the dominant groups in Assam. The Bodos developed a feeling that they were not fairly treated in the Assam Accord, even though they had participated in the Assam movement (1979-85). They felt that Clause 6 of the Assam Accord was against their cultural and economic interests. In the perception of the Bodos, this clause would submerge the Bodo identity into the high caste identity of Assamese. Sanjib Baruah in the book *India Against Itself*, has a chapter “We Are Bodos, Not Assamese”: Contesting a Subnational Narrative” which underlines the attempts by Bodos to prove this distinct identity. In order to showcase distinctness of their identity, the All India Bodo Student Union prepared a 92-point charter which was used in campaign for a Bodo homeland. Sanjib Baruah classifies these demands into three categories: cultural and linguistic, about economic opportunities and development, and residual demands. The distinct culture of Bodos was symbolized by their language (Bodo), dress, food, culture, etc. which was different from those of the Assamese.

From the 1993, the focus of Bodo movement affecting districts such as Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Udalgarh shifted from a Bodo homeland to acceptance autonomy for Bodos within the state of Assam. Dilution of homeland was reflected in the provisions of Bodo Accords signed between Bodos and governments in 1993, 2003 and 2020. However, a faction of the Bodos still wanted creation of the state of Bodoland. In the light of the first Bodo Accord of 1993, Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) was created covering Bodo-dominated districts. It, however, did not define territorial jurisdiction of BAC. Due to failure to identify territorial jurisdiction of BAC, election to it could not be held. And by 1996, the Bodos returned to demand of Bodo homeland. The council was derecognised by two militant factions – the Bodoland Army and Bodoland Liberation Force (BLTF). They called the council as “stooge of Dispur”. The second Bodo Accord or 2003 created Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). The BTC’s jurisdiction extended over 3082 villages and it was given power to legislate over 40 subjects. It provided for an Executive Council consisting of maximum 12 Executive Members including a chief and a deputy chief. It also provided for adequate representation of the non-tribals. The third Bodo Accord was signed in January 2020 between Union Home Ministry, the state government and Bodo groups. Some of its important features were as follows. Apart from the central and state governments, the signatories to this accord also included some militant groups which did not sign earlier accords. Bodo Territorial Area District (BTAD) will be replaced by Bodo Territorial Region (BTR). A commission headed by a retired judge will be set up to work out mechanism for inclusion into BTR of villages which have majority of tribals and are contiguous to the present Bodo Council. Similarly, villages which currently have non-tribal population located in Bodo Council but are contiguous to non-Sixth Schedule Areas (meaning areas outside the council jurisdiction) will be excluded from the BTR. The BTR will have more legislative, executive, financial and administrative powers. The accord provided for autonomy within Assam, side-lining the issue of separate state or Union Territory). An amount of Rs. 250 crore per annum by the state for a period of three years for development of areas under the BTR, and centre will contribute an equal amount for the same period. The seats in the BTR will be increased to 60 from 40.

6.4.3 The Context of Bodoland Movement: The ULFA

Apart from Bodos’ reservations about the clause VI of the Assam Accord, another reason for the Bodoland movement from 1985 was the demand by the high caste dominated ULFA for a sovereign state of Assam, which included the areas inhabited by the plain tribes such as Bodos. The ULFA sought to establish a sovereign state, as it had existed in the form of Ahom kingdom before its sovereignty was compromised by annexing the Ahom kingdom with British India. It differed with the AASU. For it, all inhabitants of Assam who believe in and respected Assamese culture and land were Assamese irrespective of the ethnicity and place of origin. But for the AASU, Bangladeshis who came after December 31, 1971 were foreigners, who needed to be expelled from Assam. The ULFA became got strong foothold in Assam during the Congress government headed by Hiteswar Sekia which was formed following Congress victory in 1983 assembly election. Its activities peaked during the first regime of the AGP (1986-90). The ULFA took resource to violence, extortion, kidnapping, etc. They had formed

parallel government and collected taxes from businessmen and others. ULFA complained that Assam had become colony of India: its natural resources were used for development of other regions, the state government in Assam was not paid adequately by the centre royalty for extraction of natural resources such oil and natural, the state was discriminated in industrial investment. The Hiteswar Sekia government offered amnesty in 1993 to those ULFA members who surrendered. They came to be known as Surrendered ULFA or SULFA. The state government as well as the central governments used coercion on the ULFA members, as they also indulged in extortion. The government targeted them with the policies known as “Operation Bajrang” and “Operation Rhino”.

6.4.4 Karbis’ and Dimasa Kacharis’ Autonomy Movement

Two tribes of Assam – Karbi in Karbi Anlong and Dimasa Cacharis in North Cachar hill districts of Assam have also been demanding carving out of an autonomous state withing the existing state of Assam from these two districts. Earlier, these two tribes did not participate in the Assam movement (1979-1985). Nor did they support the demand for the hills states, which later resulted in the formation of Meghalaya state out of Assam. An autonomous state had existed earlier as the state of Meghalaya within Assam between 1970-1972 before Meghalaya became a separate state. Since the 1960s, two hill districts of Karbi Anglong and North Kachar hills have been complaining of limitations of Autonomous district councils created under the Sixth Schedule. In fact, autonomous district council in Karbi Anglong district is one of the oldest councils which is in existence since 1951. Two of the oldest autonomous district councils - Nagaland and Mizoram became separate states in 1963 and 1987. The demand of the Karibis and Dimasa Kacharis started after the formation AGP government, at the same time when the second phase of the Bodo movement became more strident and regular. The mobilization for the demand is spearheaded by an organization known as ASDC (Autonomous State Demand Committee). The reasons for their agitation lay in the Assam Accord of 1985 like those of the Bodos. According to Monirul Hussain, the declined of the Congress and the left and the victory of the AGP in 1987 assembly election left the Karbis and Dimasa Kacharis with a feeling of neglect. Earlier, they had some representation in these parties. The feeling of neglect resulted in their demand for a state within the state. Demand of the Karbis is a demand for elevation of an administrative unit from Autonomous Council to a state within a state govern them. The Karbis enjoy autonomy under Karbi Anlong Autonomous Council which has 26 seats.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

1) Why was Meghalaya known as “state within state” in 1971-1972?

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2) What were main aspects of Bodo Accord of 2020?

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3) Discuss the features of Karbi-Dimasa Kachari Autonomy movement.

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6.5 LET US SUM UP

Autonomy movements are collective mobilization of people in a region or across regions with the aim of getting autonomy to their region for managing their economic, social and cultural, and political affairs. Such autonomy is sought by re-arranging the relations between federal units – between a state and regions aspiring the autonomy, in a such way that the regions get autonomy without moving out of the jurisdiction of the parent state. The regions which demand autonomy do not always demand it as their priority. In several instances, their priority is either to get separate state out of the existing state, but in the course of the progression of the movement the demand for creation of new state is dropped and achieving autonomy while existing in the parent state becomes priority. The major examples of autonomy movements in India include Bodoland movement, and Karbis’ Dimasa Kacharis’ and movement. Formation of Meghalaya as an autonomous state within the state of Assam (1971-72), “state within the state” was a unique example in India. Although the people of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills had demanded a separate state to be carved out of Assam, the central government granted them an autonomous state, not a separate state. However, in 1972, the autonomous state was elevated to the status of a separate state of Meghalaya. Autonomy movements are generally initiated and led by articulate sections in the regions seeking autonomy. The reasons for the demands lie in the grievances which people in the regions have against their government or dominant regions. They allege the latter discriminate against them in economic, cultural, social and political aspects. Achievement of autonomy of their regions can end the discrimination and result in their development.

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6.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Autonomy movements are collective actions of people in an area or across areas within a state which seek autonomy of the region while remaining within the jurisdiction of the state in which they are located. Autonomy of the region is supposed to provide autonomy to the inhabitants of the region to participate in decision-making on the issues concerning the region.
- 2) The autonomy movements have following features. They are raised in the areas which feel discriminated by the other regions or by the government in economic, social, cultural or political aspects. The demands are generally raised by articulate sections of the society.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) From 1970-1972 Meghalaya was known as “state within the state” because it did not exist as a full-fledged state then but a state enjoying certain powers within the state of Assam. It enjoyed the status of an autonomous state, the executive power of which vested with the Governor of Assam. And he was aided and advised by the Council of Ministers in Meghalaya as an autonomous state within Assam. The autonomous state of Meghalaya had power to enact on subjects excluding public order, armed police, railway police, industry and sale tax. The legislatures of Meghalaya and Assam had concurrent jurisdiction on agriculture, forest, transport, communication and waterways.

- 2) The some of the important aspects of the Bodo accord of 2020 were as follows. Unlike the earlier two Bodo accords of 1993 and 2003, the 2020 Bodo accord included all Bodo groups as signatories to the accord along with the Government of India and the Government of Assam. It created Bodo Territorial Region (BTR) in place of the Bodo Territorial Areas District (BTAD) which was set up by the preceding accord of 2003. The signatories made a joint commitment to end violence and seek progress and development of the BTR. The Accord suggested more legislative, executive, financial and administrative powers to the BTR, inclusion of the Bodo-dominated villages situated in the non-Sixth Schedule area in the BTR and exclusion of the non-Bodo dominated villages from the Bodo dominated villages, increase in the BTR's seats to 60 from 40. It was made mandatory for Assam government to earmark an amount of Rs. 250 crore per annum for a period of three years for development of areas under the BTR and for the centre to contribute equal amount.
- 3) Two tribes in the hill districts of Assam Karbi Anglong and North Kachar Hills, Karbis and Dimasa Kacharis demand creation of an autonomous state while remaining under the jurisdiction of the state of Assam. The demand arose after the formation AGP government in 1987.



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