

KARBI IDENTITY POLITICS IN ASSAM: ETHNICITY, TERRITORY AND AUTONOMY

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1. Introduction

Assam occupies a distinctive position in the political and cultural history of Northeast India because of its extraordinary ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. The region has witnessed several movements based on language, ethnicity, territory, migration, indigeneity and political autonomy. These movements have challenged the assumption that political identity is necessarily organised around a single Assamese or Indian national identity. Instead, different communities have sought recognition of their distinctive histories, cultures, languages and political interests.

Among these movements, the politics of the Karbi people is particularly significant. The Karbis, historically referred to in colonial literature as Mikir, constitute one of the important indigenous tribal communities of Assam. Their political mobilisation has developed around questions of cultural identity, land, territorial protection, political representation, development and self-governance. The establishment of the Karbi Anglong District Council under the Sixth Schedule in 1952 provided an institutional framework for tribal self-administration. However, the existence of an autonomous council did not eliminate demands for greater political autonomy. The subsequent history of Karbi politics demonstrates a continuing negotiation between constitutional autonomy and aspirations for a more extensive form of self-government.

The Karbi case is especially important because identity politics here has never been exclusively cultural. Questions of identity have been closely connected with territory. The idea of a distinct Karbi homeland has been linked to the protection of land, customary institutions, political authority and cultural continuity. Consequently, Karbi identity politics can be understood as a process through which cultural identity is transformed into a political claim concerning territory and governance.

The Sixth Schedule was designed to provide institutional protection and self-governance for tribal communities in designated areas. Article 244(2) and the Sixth Schedule provide for autonomous administration in specified tribal areas. The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council is one such institution. Yet the history of Karbi politics demonstrates that constitutional autonomy can itself become a starting point for further demands when communities perceive existing arrangements as inadequate.

This paper therefore examines the central question: How have ethnicity, territory and autonomy interacted in the development of Karbi identity politics in Assam?

2. Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the study are:

- To examine the historical emergence of Karbi political identity in Assam.
- To analyse the relationship between Karbi ethnicity and political mobilisation.
- To examine the significance of territory in the construction of Karbi identity politics.
- To study the role of the Sixth Schedule and the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council in accommodating Karbi political aspirations.

- To analyse the emergence and development of the demand for an Autonomous State under Article 244(A).

3. Research Questions

- The study addresses the following research questions:
- How did modern Karbi political identity emerge in Assam?
- What role has ethnicity played in Karbi political mobilisation?
- Why has territory become central to Karbi identity politics?
- To what extent has the Sixth Schedule addressed Karbi political aspirations?

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, historical and interdisciplinary methodology. The research is primarily based on secondary sources, including:

- Constitutional provisions;
- Government documents;
- Reports of the Government of Assam;
- Ministry of Home Affairs documents;
- Reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General;
- Scholarly books and journal articles;
- Studies on ethnicity and autonomy in Northeast India;
- Research on the Sixth Schedule;
- Documents relating to the Karbi peace agreements.

The study uses historical analysis to trace the development of Karbi political consciousness and political-sociological analysis to understand the relationship between ethnicity, territory and political mobilisation.

Theoretical insights are drawn from scholarship on ethnicity, ethnic boundaries, imagined communities, nationalism, identity and multicultural accommodation. Fredrik Barth's understanding of ethnic boundaries is particularly useful because it shifts attention from ethnicity as a fixed cultural substance to the social processes through which communities define themselves in relation to others.

The study also employs the concept of territorial autonomy to understand the relationship between political identity and geographical space.

5. Literature Review

The study of Karbi identity politics in Assam is situated within the wider scholarship on ethnicity, indigenous identity, territoriality, autonomy, governance and the politics of recognition in Northeast India. Existing literature demonstrates that ethnic politics in the region cannot be reduced to cultural assertion alone. Rather, identity is closely connected with territory, land, political representation, institutional autonomy, development and the question of self-governance. The literature on Karbi Anglong has developed through several overlapping strands: theoretical studies of ethnic identity and boundaries; historical studies of Karbi political mobilisation; scholarship on the Sixth Schedule and autonomous governance; studies of land, development and gender; and more recent research on peace agreements, traditional institutions and contemporary forms of political recognition.

Stuart Hall's (1990) conception of cultural identity further strengthens this perspective by understanding identity as a historical and continually constructed process. Identity is therefore not merely inherited; it is produced through representation, historical memory, difference and political experience. Applied to the Karbi case, this approach suggests that contemporary Karbi political identity has been shaped not only by language, customary practices and collective memory but also by student organisations, political movements, autonomous institutions, electoral politics and struggles over territory.

These theoretical approaches are particularly relevant because the Karbi movement has involved a transformation of cultural identity into political claims. The literature suggests that identity becomes politically consequential when it is connected with questions of recognition, territory and institutional power. Sanjib Baruah's scholarship remains important for locating Karbi identity politics within the larger political history of Assam and Northeast India. In *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (1999), Baruah examines the complex relationship between nationality, ethnicity, state formation and political mobilisation in Assam. His later work, *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast* (2020), expands the discussion to questions of nationalism, territoriality, state formation and political belonging in the Northeast. Partha Pratim Baruah and Bikash Deka's study, "Shifting Paradigm: Politics of Transition in Karbi Anglong," examines the changing character of political mobilisation in Karbi Anglong. Their analysis identifies socio-cultural identity, control over resources and political emancipation as important concerns underlying Karbi self-determination politics. They also trace the movement from democratic student mobilisation towards militant politics and subsequent political transitions. This study is important because it demonstrates that Karbi identity politics has not followed a single political trajectory; rather, its forms of mobilisation have changed according to changing political circumstances.

Ujjal Bathari's work on the Karbi-Dimasa autonomy movement is particularly significant because it situates ethnic mobilisation within the complex diversity of Northeast India. His analysis demonstrates that autonomy movements cannot be understood simply as demands for administrative decentralisation; they are also connected with competing claims to homeland, political recognition and control over resources.

This question has received renewed attention in recent scholarship. Harakanta Payeng (2024), in "Hills, Homeland, and Identity: The Karbi Struggle for Recognition in Assam's Political Landscape," examines the relationship between Karbi identity, homeland, recognition and development. Payeng traces the evolution of Karbi political mobilisation from the creation of the KAAC to continuing demands for greater autonomy and statehood. The study particularly emphasises the relationship between uneven development, insurgency, inter-ethnic relations and political aspirations.

Payeng's contribution is important because it places the Karbi demand for autonomy within the broader conceptual framework of recognition and self-determination. However, the present study goes further by systematically examining the three interconnected dimensions of **ethnicity, territory and autonomy** rather than treating them as separate components of the Karbi movement.

The Sixth Schedule constitutes one of the most important institutional contexts for understanding Karbi identity politics. The establishment of the Karbi Anglong District Council in the early post-independence period provided a constitutional framework for tribal self-administration. However, the existence of an autonomous institution did not end demands for greater political authority.

Recent scholarship has examined the functioning of the Sixth Schedule specifically in relation to Karbi Anglong. Uddip Jyoti Gogoi and Durlav Borah (2023), in their study "Functioning of Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution: A Study of Karbi Autonomous Council," analyse the functioning of the constitutional framework through the case of the KAAC. Using qualitative research and thematic analysis, they examine the relationship between Sixth Schedule provisions and the functioning of the autonomous council.

Their study is significant because it directs attention towards the institutional dimension of autonomy. The present study builds upon this institutional approach but broadens the analytical focus by asking why the constitutional provision for autonomy has continued to coexist with demands for greater autonomy.

The distinction between **constitutional autonomy and effective autonomy** is particularly important here. Constitutional recognition provides legally defined powers, but the actual effectiveness of autonomy depends upon financial resources, administrative capacity, political authority and the relationship between the autonomous council and the state government. Thus, the existence of the KAAC alone cannot be treated as

evidence that the underlying political aspirations of the Karbi community have been completely accommodated.

Recent scholarship has expanded the study of Karbi politics beyond conventional questions of ethnicity and autonomy by examining land, labour and gender. Meenal Tula and Upasana Goswami's (2023) study, "Making it Work: Women, Land and Labour in West Karbi Anglong, Assam," examines the effects of changing economic relations on women's access to land and labour. Their research considers the interaction among community, state and market within a Sixth Schedule context and explores changing forms of social inequality and mobility.

The importance of this work lies in its demonstration that territorial politics has consequences at the everyday social level. Land is not simply a political resource claimed by ethnic organisations; it is also connected with livelihood, inheritance, labour, gender relations and community belonging.

This perspective helps broaden the understanding of Karbi identity politics. Questions of land and territory cannot be separated from the social and economic structures through which people experience belonging. The present study therefore treats territory not merely as a geographical boundary but as a political, economic and cultural space.

Another important development in recent scholarship concerns the relationship between traditional Karbi institutions and modern autonomous governance. Silu Das and Chuchengfa Gogoi (2025) examine the transition from tribal chieftainship to autonomous council governance in West Karbi Anglong. Their study argues that traditional and modern institutions continue to coexist, with the KAAC drawing upon traditional institutions in matters involving customary law while simultaneously supporting traditional structures.

This study is particularly significant because it complicates the conventional binary between "traditional" and "modern" governance. Instead, it suggests a form of institutional interaction in which customary authority and constitutional democracy operate alongside one another.

For the present research, this scholarship is useful in demonstrating that autonomy is not simply a constitutional arrangement. It also involves the preservation and institutional expression of customary authority. Karbi political identity is therefore reproduced through governance institutions as well as through cultural practices.

The relationship between autonomy and development has also received increasing scholarly attention. Jasodhara Borthakur's chapter "Tribal Development and Political Autonomy in Karbi Anglong, Assam," published in *Development and the Tribal Question in India*, examines the structural relationship between **land, autonomy and development** in Karbi Anglong. The chapter places Karbi Anglong within the broader history of Sixth Schedule governance and examines autonomy as a framework through which questions of tribal development can be understood.

Borthakur's contribution is particularly relevant to the present study because it demonstrates that political autonomy cannot be examined independently of material development. Claims for self-government frequently involve expectations concerning education, infrastructure, employment, land and resource control.

Similarly, recent work by Pallathadka, Deb Roy and Chowdhury (2025) examines Karbi Anglong through the themes of indigenous governance, cultural revitalisation and development. Their study approaches the KAAC region as a case of indigenous governance and explores how autonomous institutional structures intersect with cultural preservation and development.

These studies demonstrate a movement in the literature from a narrow understanding of autonomy as an administrative question towards a broader understanding involving development, cultural preservation and indigenous governance.

The 2021 Karbi Anglong Memorandum of Settlement represents a significant development in the contemporary history of Karbi politics. The agreement between the Government of India, the Government of

Assam and representatives of Karbi armed groups sought to address longstanding political and security concerns. The Ministry of Home Affairs records the agreement of 4 September 2021 and identifies development and rehabilitation measures associated with the settlement.

Recent scholarship and policy analysis have begun to examine the significance and limitations of such peace agreements. Pushpita Das (2024), in an analysis of the Bodo, Karbi and Dimasa peace agreements, argues that the agreements sought to increase the powers of autonomous councils while protecting ethnic identity and promoting development. At the same time, the analysis identifies continuing concerns regarding the representation of smaller tribes and non-tribal communities within autonomous council areas.

This observation is particularly important for the present study because territorial autonomy exists within a multi-ethnic political space. A demand made in the name of one ethnic community may have implications for other communities residing in the same territory. Consequently, the study of Karbi autonomy must consider both **ethnic recognition and inter-community accommodation**.

6. Theoretical Framework

6.1 Identity as a Political Construction

Identity is not merely an inherited cultural characteristic. It can also become a political resource through which communities articulate collective interests. Stuart Hall's influential understanding of cultural identity emphasises that identity is continually produced through history, representation and difference.

This perspective is useful in understanding Karbi identity. Karbi identity has been shaped by language, customs, traditional institutions, historical memories and geographical associations, but it has also been reconstructed through modern political organisations, student movements, electoral politics and demands for autonomy.

Thus, Karbi identity should not be treated as a completely static or homogeneous category. It has evolved through interactions between traditional institutions and modern political structures.

6.2 Ethnic Boundaries

Fredrik Barth's theory of ethnic boundaries provides another useful analytical framework. Barth argues that ethnic groups are maintained through social boundaries and interaction rather than simply through the possession of particular cultural characteristics.

This framework is relevant to Assam because ethnic communities frequently define political identity through relationships with neighbouring communities and institutions. Karbi identity has consequently developed not only through internal cultural practices but also through political negotiations involving the Assamese state, other tribal communities and different ethnic organisations.

6.3 Territory and Identity

Territory is particularly important in ethnic politics because geographical space can become associated with collective memory, cultural practices and political rights.

For the Karbis, Karbi Anglong represents more than an administrative unit. It is also a political and cultural space around which claims concerning land, autonomy, development and self-governance have been articulated.

Recent scholarship similarly identifies the relationship between land, autonomy and development as central to understanding Karbi Anglong.

6.4 Autonomy and Multicultural Accommodation

The Indian constitutional system has attempted to accommodate ethnic diversity through differentiated institutional arrangements. The Sixth Schedule represents one of the most significant examples of this approach.

Autonomous councils are intended to allow tribal communities a degree of legislative, executive, judicial and administrative authority while remaining within the constitutional framework of the state. The Karbi Anglong case therefore provides an important example of the possibilities and limitations of institutional autonomy.

7. Historical Background of the Karbis

The Karbis are one of the major tribal communities of Assam's hill areas. Their historical experience is closely associated with the hill region that came to be known as the Mikir Hills and subsequently Karbi Anglong.

The emergence of organised Karbi political consciousness predates Indian independence. According to the history provided by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, the Karbi Adurbar, established in 1940, played an important role in articulating political and cultural concerns of the Karbi community. Leaders submitted memoranda concerning the political identity of Karbi people during the colonial period.

The emergence of such organisations is significant because it demonstrates that Karbi identity politics was not created exclusively after independence. Rather, colonial administrative arrangements, ethnic classification and modern political organisation contributed to the emergence of a new form of collective political consciousness.

The transition from traditional community organisation to modern political institutions transformed the nature of Karbi political identity. Traditional institutions continued to influence community life, while modern organisations increasingly articulated demands through memoranda, elections, political parties, student organisations and later mass movements.

8. The Sixth Schedule and the Institutionalisation of Autonomy

One of the most important stages in the history of Karbi identity politics was the introduction of the Sixth Schedule.

The Karbi Anglong District Council was established in 1952 under Article 244(2) and the Sixth Schedule. It was designed to provide a degree of self-government in the tribal hill region.

The Sixth Schedule provides autonomous councils with powers concerning matters including land, forests, village administration, customary practices and other areas specified by the Constitution. The present constitutional framework recognises the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council as a Sixth Schedule institution.

The institutional significance of the Council was considerable. It recognised that uniform administration might not adequately address the cultural and political circumstances of tribal communities.

However, constitutional recognition did not eliminate political dissatisfaction. Scholars have observed that the Karbi and Dimas autonomy movements repeatedly questioned the adequacy of existing arrangements under the Sixth Schedule.

This reveals an important paradox:

Autonomy can simultaneously resolve and generate identity politics.

By recognising a community's distinctive identity, an autonomous institution may strengthen political consciousness. Once political consciousness becomes institutionalised, communities may begin to ask whether the existing degree of autonomy is sufficient.

9. From Autonomy to the Demand for an Autonomous State

The question of autonomy became particularly important after the reorganisation of Assam and the creation of Meghalaya.

The hill areas of undivided Assam were deeply involved in the political developments that eventually produced Meghalaya in 1972. Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, however, remained within Assam. Article 244(A), inserted into the Constitution in the context of the reorganisation of Assam's hill areas, provided a constitutional mechanism for creating an autonomous state within Assam.

The provision became an important reference point in subsequent Karbi politics.

The continued demand for greater autonomy reflected dissatisfaction with the perceived limitations of the existing District Council structure. The argument was that constitutional recognition of autonomy had not necessarily produced sufficient political, administrative and financial authority.

The Autonomous State Demand Committee emerged as an important political organisation in this context. Research on Northeast India indicates that the movement for an autonomous state acquired an organised form during the 1980s and sought implementation of Article 244(A).

The movement therefore represented a transition:

Cultural identity → political consciousness → territorial claim → demand for institutional autonomy → demand for autonomous statehood.

This trajectory illustrates how ethnic identity can become increasingly territorialised through political mobilisation.

10. The Autonomous State Demand Committee and Democratic Mobilisation

The ASDC is particularly significant because it demonstrated that ethnic autonomy movements need not initially operate through armed struggle.

The movement sought political mobilisation through democratic institutions, electoral participation, public meetings and popular organisations. Scholarship on the movement describes its early mobilisation as broadly based and connected to the political aspirations of the hill population.

The importance of the ASDC lies in its attempt to transform the question of autonomy from a narrowly ethnic demand into a broader political question concerning governance, development and representation.

However, the movement subsequently experienced internal divisions, and parts of the broader autonomy movement entered an increasingly militant phase. This transformed the political landscape of Karbi Anglong.

The transition from democratic mobilisation to armed politics demonstrates the complexity of identity movements. When constitutional institutions are perceived as insufficient, political actors may disagree about whether demands should continue through electoral and constitutional channels or through more confrontational forms of mobilisation.

11. Ethnicity and the Politics of Territory

The relationship between ethnicity and territory constitutes the core of Karbi identity politics.

The political significance of Karbi Anglong derives partly from the belief that territorial autonomy can protect:

- Customary land practices;
- Cultural traditions;
- Language;
- Political representation;
- Community institutions;
- Access to resources;
- Indigenous interests.

The issue of land is particularly important. Research on Karbi Anglong demonstrates that multiple authorities—including state institutions, traditional authorities and insurgent actors—have historically been involved in regulating land and public authority.

This produces what may be described as overlapping sovereignties.

The modern state claims constitutional authority; the Autonomous Council exercises institutional authority; traditional institutions continue to exercise customary authority; and political organisations have historically attempted to influence territorial and political processes.

Consequently, the politics of Karbi Anglong cannot be reduced to a simple conflict between the state and an ethnic community. It involves multiple layers of authority.

12. Traditional Institutions and Modern Governance

Another important dimension of Karbi identity politics is the relationship between traditional institutions and modern democratic institutions.

Recent scholarship on West Karbi Anglong shows that traditional Karbi institutions continue to coexist with the modern autonomous council. The study argues that the KAAC may rely upon traditional institutions in matters involving customary law, while the Council also supports the preservation of traditional institutions. This coexistence demonstrates that modern political autonomy does not necessarily imply the disappearance of traditional authority.

Instead, Karbi governance may be understood as a form of institutional pluralism in which:

Traditional authority + democratic institutions + constitutional autonomy
operate simultaneously.

This has important implications for the study of indigenous politics. Political identity is not simply preserved through cultural festivals or symbolic practices; it is also reproduced through institutions of governance.

13. Development and Identity Politics

Economic development is another major dimension of Karbi identity politics.

The autonomy movement has historically connected political self-government with development. Demands for autonomy have frequently included concerns about infrastructure, education, employment, roads, healthcare and control over local resources.

Recent scholarship on Karbi Anglong emphasises the structural relationship between land, autonomy and development.

This relationship is important because identity movements are rarely motivated by cultural concerns alone. Political identity often becomes stronger when communities perceive economic inequalities or administrative marginalisation.

Therefore, the politics of Karbi identity can be understood through three interconnected demands:

- Recognition – recognition of Karbi identity and culture;
- Redistribution – equitable access to development and resources;
- Representation – greater political control over institutions affecting Karbi society.

These three dimensions make identity politics simultaneously cultural, economic and political.

14. Armed Movements and the Transformation of Karbi Politics

The limitations perceived in existing political institutions contributed to the emergence of armed organisations in Karbi Anglong.

The Karbi-Dimasa autonomy movements eventually witnessed militant mobilisation and ethnic conflict. Scholarly research describes this transition as an important transformation in the autonomy movement, particularly where demands for constitutional autonomy increasingly interacted with claims for exclusive ethnic homelands.

This phase had several consequences.

- First, identity politics became increasingly securitised.
- Second, ethnic identity became more closely associated with territorial control.
- Third, relations between different ethnic communities were affected.
- Fourth, the political meaning of autonomy changed from administrative decentralisation toward questions of security, sovereignty and territorial control.

This period therefore demonstrates the risks involved when institutional mechanisms for accommodating identity claims are perceived as inadequate or when political competition becomes territorialised.

15. The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and Greater Autonomy

The political developments of the 1990s led to an important expansion of the autonomy framework.

Following the 1995 constitutional amendment, the Karbi Anglong District Council was renamed the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council. The institutional arrangement was accompanied by additional responsibilities and departments.

The Sixth Schedule provides the institutional basis for the Council, including legislative and administrative powers in specified areas. The Council consists of elected and nominated members, with the constitutional framework providing for representation and autonomous administration.

The enlargement of the Council's powers represented an attempt to respond institutionally to longstanding political demands.

However, the persistence of autonomy demands demonstrates that the question was not simply whether an autonomous institution existed, but how much effective power that institution possessed.

This distinction between formal autonomy and effective autonomy is crucial. Formal autonomy concerns powers granted in law. Effective autonomy concerns the capacity to exercise those powers meaningfully through adequate finances, administrative institutions, personnel and political authority.

16. The 2021 Karbi Anglong Agreement

A major development in the contemporary history of Karbi identity politics was the Karbi Anglong Memorandum of Settlement signed on 4 September 2021 between the Government of India, the Government of Assam and representatives of several Karbi armed groups.

The agreement sought to address longstanding political and security issues in Karbi Anglong.

According to the Government of India, the settlement included:

- Greater devolution of autonomy to the KAAC;
- Protection of Karbi identity, language and culture;
- Focused development of the Council area;
- Rehabilitation of armed cadres;
- Creation of a Karbi Welfare Council for Karbis living outside the KAAC area;
- Augmentation of the Council's financial resources;
- Additional legislative, executive, administrative and financial powers.

The agreement is important because it represents a shift from conflict-oriented politics toward institutional negotiation. It also recognises an important geographical reality: not all Karbis live within the territorial jurisdiction of the KAAC. This is politically significant because territorial autonomy creates a distinction between members of an ethnic community who live inside and outside an autonomous territory. The agreement therefore attempted to address both dimensions through the KAAC and a proposed welfare mechanism for Karbis outside its territory.

17. Identity Beyond Territory

The question of Karbis living outside Karbi Anglong raises a broader theoretical problem. If ethnic identity is not geographically confined, territorial autonomy alone cannot fully address identity concerns. A Karbi individual living outside KAAC territory may retain:

- Karbi language;
- Cultural traditions;
- Customary practices;

- Community networks;
- Ethnic consciousness.

Yet that person may not necessarily enjoy the same institutional framework available within the autonomous area. The 2021 settlement acknowledged this issue through its provision concerning a Karbi Welfare Council for Karbi people outside the KAAC area. This development suggests a movement from territorial autonomy toward a combination of territorial and non-territorial forms of ethnic accommodation. This is an important area for future research.

18. The Karbi Welfare Council and the Expansion of Identity Governance

The issue of Karbis outside the KAAC area has continued to influence institutional developments. In 2025, a bill concerning a Karbi Welfare Autonomous Council was proposed in Assam, explicitly referring to the commitment contained in the 2021 settlement to establish an institution for Karbi people living outside the KAAC area. This development demonstrates that Karbi identity politics is not limited to the geographical boundaries of Karbi Anglong. It also illustrates an emerging model: Territorial autonomy for populations concentrated in a particular area plus institutional support for dispersed members of the same community. Such arrangements may provide an alternative to the assumption that ethnic identity can only be protected through territorial statehood.

19. Identity Politics and Other Communities

A serious study of Karbi identity politics must also recognise the multi-ethnic character of Karbi Anglong. Karbi Anglong is not inhabited exclusively by Karbis. Different tribal and non-tribal communities have historically lived in the region. Consequently, a political demand articulated in the name of one ethnic group may generate questions concerning the political rights and representation of others. This creates a fundamental tension:

How can ethnic autonomy protect a historically marginalised community without producing political exclusion of other communities? The question is especially important because scholarship on Northeast India has shown that autonomy movements can sometimes become increasingly territorial and ethnic, producing tensions between competing claims to homeland and belonging. Therefore, the future of Karbi autonomy depends not only upon strengthening Karbi identity but also upon developing mechanisms of inter-ethnic accommodation.

20. The Politics of Recognition and Representation

The Karbi movement can be understood through the broader concept of the politics of recognition. Recognition involves more than symbolic acknowledgement. It includes:

- Recognition of collective identity;
- Representation in political institutions;
- Recognition of customary practices;
- Protection of land rights;
- Cultural and linguistic preservation;
- Participation in decision-making;
- Equitable development.

The Sixth Schedule provides an institutional mechanism for several of these objectives. Yet the continued evolution of Karbi politics demonstrates that communities may demand deeper forms of recognition when they perceive existing arrangements as insufficient. The Karbi case thus demonstrates that political recognition is not a one-time achievement. It is an ongoing process of negotiation between community organisations and the state.

20. The Constitutional Paradox of Autonomy

The Karbi case reveals an important paradox within India's federal structure. On one hand, constitutional autonomy provides a mechanism through which ethnic communities can preserve distinctive institutions and exercise local self-government.

On the other hand, the very existence of limited autonomy may generate expectations for more extensive autonomy. This can be represented as:

Recognition → Institutionalisation → Political Empowerment → New Expectations → Further Autonomy Demands

The history of Karbi politics broadly illustrates this pattern.

The Sixth Schedule provided institutional recognition in 1952. Subsequent political mobilisation demanded greater autonomy. Article 244(A) became an important constitutional reference point. The 1995 constitutional changes expanded the Council. Armed movements later challenged the adequacy of existing arrangements. The 2021 settlement again expanded the autonomy framework.

Thus, autonomy has evolved through continuous negotiation rather than through a single constitutional settlement.

21. Identity Politics, Federalism and Indian Democracy

The Karbi case has significance beyond Assam. India's federal system has developed several mechanisms for managing ethnic diversity, including:

- State reorganisation;
- Autonomous councils;
- Special constitutional provisions;
- Territorial autonomy;
- Language recognition;
- Affirmative political representation;
- Negotiated peace settlements.

Karbi Anglong demonstrates how these mechanisms operate in practice.

The case also illustrates the flexibility of Indian federalism. Political demands need not always culminate in the creation of a separate state. Autonomous councils, constitutional provisions and negotiated settlements can create intermediate forms of political accommodation. At the same time, the effectiveness of these arrangements depends upon institutional capacity, financial resources, democratic accountability and relations between different levels of government.

22. Contemporary Challenges

Several challenges remain important for understanding contemporary Karbi identity politics.

22.1 Effective Autonomy

The existence of constitutional powers does not automatically guarantee their effective exercise. Questions concerning finances, administrative control and implementation remain important.

22.2 Land and Natural Resources

Land remains central to indigenous identity and political autonomy. Conflicts concerning land use, forests, development projects and resource extraction can directly affect perceptions of political security.

22.3 Development

Political autonomy and economic development are closely connected. Infrastructure, education, healthcare and employment remain important dimensions of political legitimacy.

22.4 Representation of Non-Karbi Communities

A multi-ethnic autonomous region requires institutional mechanisms that protect the political and cultural interests of all communities.

22.5 Traditional and Modern Institutions

The coexistence of customary institutions and democratic constitutional institutions raises questions concerning authority, gender, law, representation and accountability.

22.6 Identity Beyond Territorial Boundaries

Karbis living outside the autonomous area raise the question of whether ethnic identity should be protected exclusively through territorial institutions.

23. Major Findings

The study produces several major findings.

- First, Karbi identity is both cultural and political.
- Second, territory is central to Karbi political identity.
- Third, the Sixth Schedule has played a fundamental role.
- Fourth, constitutional autonomy did not eliminate political mobilisation.
- Fifth, Article 244(A) became a major political symbol.
- Sixth, Karbi politics has included both democratic and militant phases.
- Seventh, the 2021 settlement represents another stage of institutional accommodation.
- Eighth, identity politics cannot be separated from development.

24. Conclusion

Karbi identity politics in Assam represents a complex interaction of ethnicity, territory, political recognition and autonomy. Its historical development demonstrates that ethnic identity becomes politically significant when it is connected with institutions, territory and collective claims to power.

The establishment of the Sixth Schedule and the Karbi Anglong District Council constituted an important constitutional response to the political distinctiveness of the hill communities. However, the subsequent history of Karbi mobilisation shows that institutional recognition did not eliminate demands for greater autonomy. Instead, it created a political framework within which further claims could be articulated.

The demand for an autonomous state under Article 244(A), the emergence of democratic movements, the subsequent militant phase and the expansion of the KAAC all represent different stages in the continuing negotiation of Karbi political identity.

The 2021 Karbi Anglong Agreement marks another important phase in this process. Its provisions concerning greater autonomy, cultural protection, development and Karbi populations outside the KAAC area indicate an attempt to address the multidimensional nature of Karbi identity politics.

The Karbi experience also demonstrates that ethnic autonomy cannot be examined exclusively from the perspective of the dominant ethnic group. Karbi Anglong is a multi-community region, and sustainable autonomy requires mechanisms that combine collective recognition with democratic inclusion.

Ultimately, the Karbi question is not simply a question of whether a particular community should receive more or less autonomy. It is a broader question concerning how a diverse democratic federation can accommodate distinct identities while maintaining political inclusion, territorial coexistence and constitutional governance.

The Karbi case therefore provides an important framework for understanding the larger politics of Northeast India: identity creates political consciousness; political consciousness generates claims for recognition;

recognition is institutionalised through autonomy; and autonomy itself remains subject to continuous negotiation.

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