ECONOMICS, ETHNICITY AND AUTONOMY MOVEMENT IN MEGHALAYA: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract: *To the unfamiliar, two major ethnic communities − the Khasi and the Garo, living in Meghalaya appear to be homogenous ones. In reality, however, they are the heterogeneous groups socially, politically and culturally, defined by distinct tribal and clan markers. Each one of them ruled their own kingdoms until they were brought under the British rule in the 19ᵗʰ Century. Consequently, their territories merged with the undivided Assam, and lately, carved out as a full-fledged State of Meghalaya in 1972. Soon after attaining Statehood, tensions cropped up between the indigenous communities and migrants mainly control over economic opportunities. However, these days, the goal post has slowly shifted towards the internal feuds among the indigenous tribes and finally, started ethnicity-based autonomy movements within the State. With this background, the paper attempts to analyse rationale and practicability of autonomy demands asserted by different ethnic groups.*

Keywords: *Autonomy, Ethnic Conflict, Economy, the Garo, the Khasi, Meghalaya*

Introduction

'Meghalaya' meaning the 'above of clouds' is one of the sister States of India's North Eastern Region (NER hereafter),[3] inhabited mainly by the two major ethnic communities (tribes/groups)– the *Khasi* and the *Garo,* besides many other smaller groups. Most of these tribes had ruled their own kingdoms until they were annexed by the British, one after another in the 19ᵗʰ Century (Das, 2007), e.g., the *Khasi* Hills in 1833, the *Jaintia* Hills in 1835 and the *Garo* Hills in 1872–73 (Haokip, 2013). In the post-independence period, as legacy of British indirect administration, these contiguous hills were given a fairly autonomy under the undivided Assam as Autonomous District

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

Councils (ADCs). Within no time, following discontent over the Assamese administration and perceived deprivation of the plain people, these ADCs were carved out as a full-fledged State of Meghalaya in 1972.

Demographically, as per India's population Census 2011, the *Khasis* constitute 45 per cent of the State's population, followed by the *Garos* with 32.5 per cent, and the remaining 22.5 per cent composed of different communities like the *Jaintia*, the *Bengali*, the *Assamese*, the *Nepali/Gurkha* and the *Hindi* speaking population. The State covers a total area of 22,429 sq. km surrounded by Assam in the east and north; and in the west and south by Bangladesh. Of the total, about 37 per cent of area is covered by forest, owned mostly by the community.

To the unfamiliar, communities living in Meghalaya appear to be homogenous ones. In reality, however, they are very much heterogeneous groups socially, politically and culturally, defined by a distinct tribal and clan markers. Though the communities especially the *Khasis* and the *Jaintias* speak quite a similar language, they all speak their own dialects, different from each another; while the *Garos* speak a very different language and follow a custom different from any other communities in the State. Besides the *Khasi* and the *Garo* being the principal languages, English is used as official language. Uncommonly, the tribes of Meghalaya adopt matrilineal system.

During the colonial periods, even after the Statehood in 1972, besides the Bengalis (both Muslim and Hindu) from East Bengal (present Bangladesh), many migrants mainly the Bengalis from Assam, Nepalis (both from Nepal and mainland India) and Hindi speaking communities of mainland India migrated to Meghalaya. Slowly, the major business establishments and job markets came to be dominated by them. This trend was not welcomed by the first generation educated leaders of indigenous communities in Meghalaya. Consequently, the State witnessed three major riots between them (insiders) and migrants (outsiders). With the introduction of the state's protective policies, especially the land holding policy, trade licensing policy, job and educational reservation policy, etc., the very tensions subsided in the 2000s. Nevertheless, the conflict which was perpetuated between the insiders and the outsiders has now slowly shifted towards the internal feud among the indigenous tribes, primarily due to perceived economic deprivation by one another. Different ethnic schisms slowly developed, and the leaders and politicians played a major role in polarising different groups for their personal benefits (Baruah, 1989). In this process, in 2000s, alliance and re-alliance of ethnic communities intensified, caused infighting, and finally led to the movements for greater autonomy. With these backgrounds, using secondary data, historical antecedents and observed facts, the present paper attempts to analyse the processes and trends of ethnic conflicts in the State. Secondly, it analyses how and why has the goal post slowly shifted towards the internal feuds and ethnicity-based autonomy movements within the State? Further, rationale and practicability of the autonomy movements asserted by different ethnic groups within the State have also been discussed.

Theoretical Background

While conceptualising internal conflict, in the modern parlance, construction of ethnic identities for a specific political purpose has been identified as a primary factor (Fearon and Laitin, 2000). Therefore, in the 1990s, most of the armed conflicts in the world were internal (around 68 per cent), mainly ethnically driven (Savage, 2005). Similarly, according to Weir (2012), ethnic conflict and autonomy movements are driven either by the relationship between economic factors (greed and grievance) or active manipulation of ethnic identities by the leaders for personal gains. Generally, in a geographically defined area where minorities are compactly settled, the creation of a separate State is preferred and territorial autonomy becomes a chief issue of conflict, albeit it is not a solution to the problem (Khorshidi, Fee and Soltani, 2010; Blagojevic, 2004; Cornell, 2002). While, in a multi-ethnic society, leaders of minority ethnic communities want accommodation of their demands in terms of jobs, economy, security, development and so on. When these do not materialise and are turned down by the dominant group(s), insurgency takes root, fuels ethno-nationalism, at the least, demands greater autonomy (Singh, 2011). These ethnicity-based autonomy movements of these smaller communities have become the most powerful bargaining chips to throw at the government when all attempts have failed (Yenning, 2013). However, such demands are less feasible and the state is generally reluctant to accede it. Primarily the state grants territorial autonomy to a minority group which means taking the first step towards eventual secession from the Union (Cornell, 2002).

Yet, according to Johnson (2010), ethnic conflicts are likely to recur in two conditions − (i) a homeland State (or elements within) seeks to "protect" its kin minority on the other side (s) of the boundary and (ii) when state becomes weak which creates several opportunities for violence to erupt. Jonson further elaborated that the terms and conditions used to demarcate separate territories into distinct States might resolve some key problems that bedevil the peace-building process, but unlikely to produce long term peace unless − (i) separate the warring ethnic groups demographically and (ii) maintain a balance of power between the post-war States. In the case of NER, including Meghalaya, according to Weiner (1989), weak modern political institutions and their inability to deal with the local religious pressures, linguistic differences and unequal power and resource-sharing led to ethnic conflicts. While, in the post-independence period, language, not the religion coupled with regional and tribal identity proved to be the most powerful instrument for political recognition as an ethno-national identity (Mohapatra, 2012). While trying to manage these conflicts, state has made considerable efforts, using tactics, ranging from coercive measures to negotiations and political dialogues to economic packages (Lacina, 2009; Inoue, 2005). Unfortunately, none of these measures has been able to address the internal conflict, rather complicated the situation in the region (Motiram and Sarma, 2014; Ravi, 2012; Madhab, 1999).

Ethnicity and State Formation

In Meghalaya, the '*Khasi*' is used as a generic term and it encompasses five sub-tribes–the *Khasi*, the *Jaintia*, the *Bhoi*, the *Lyngngam* and the *War*. They are mainly found in the four districts of eastern Meghalaya, namely– East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, Ri-

Bhoi and Jaintia Hills districts (Please refer Figure 1). The Jaintias are also known as 'the *Pnars*', settled in the eastern part of the State. The sub-tribe of Khasis who occupied the State's northern lowlands and the foothills are generally called '*the Bhoi*', and those who settled in the southern hill tracts are termed as '*the Wars*', while '*the Lyngams*' inhabit in the north-western part of the State. All the five sub-tribes are believed to have descended from the *Ki-Hynniew-Trep[1]* and are known by the generic name– the *Khasi–Pnars* or simply '*Khasi*' or '*Hynniewtrep*'. On the western part of the State, the four Garo hills – East Garo Hills, West Garo Hills, South Garo Hills and North Garo Hills, are predominantly inhabited by the *Garo* groups (Please refer Figure 1). They belong to the *Bodo* family of the Tibeto-Burman race, settled in Garo hills after being ousted from the *Koch* territory of Cooch Behar (presently in West Bengal) (Sangma, 2008). The Garos are also known as the *Achiks* and the land they occupy is termed as the *Achik land* (Census of India, 2011).

During the colonial period under the Government of India 1935, the hill areas of the then undivided Assam were grouped into two– Excluded Areas (EA) and Partially Excluded Areas (PEA). The former (EA) encompasses the *Lushai (Mizo)* Hills (present Mizoram), the *Naga* hills (present Nagaland) and North Cachar Hills (NC Hills), while the latter (PEA) envelops the united *Khasi* and *Jaintia* hills districts with partial exception of Shillong town, which was the capital of Assam at that time, the *Garo* hills and the *Mikir (Karbi)* hills of present Assam (Nongbri, 2014; Prasad, 2004). In terms of administration, the government of Assam had no direct control over the EA, administered by the British Governor (Inoue, 2005; Hussain, 1987). Expenditure incurred in it was also not voted by the provincial legislature as no representative from these hill districts was included. Even, no federal or provincial legislation was extended to these districts automatically (Prasad, 2004). While the PEA were given some representations in the provincial assembly through nominated members and given partial responsibility for their own governance. Nevertheless, the lineage of these categories can be traced back to the Queen's Proclamation in 1858 on cultural non-interference in general and to the Eastern Bengal Regulations 1873 and subsequent colonial legislations in particular. After the independence, they were given special administrative facilities, by providing each hill district an Autonomous District Council (ADC) with a fairly large autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution (Hausing, 2014; Hussain, 1987). Consequently, the united Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills ADCs came into existence in 1952 (Gassah, 1998 as cited in Kumar, 2008).

Following the assertion of Assamese identity, these tribal leaders felt deprived off their rights and raised voice against the ruling Assamese. Consequently, in the early 1960s, the All Party Hills Leaders' Conference (APHLC) of the then undivided Assam was formed (Sarma, 2014). The Meghalaya State was created on 21st January, 1972, following a concerted effort made by the combined tribal leadership of the *Khasis*, the *Garos* and the *Jaintias* under the flagship of the APHLC party (Upadhyaya, Upadhyaya and Yadav, 2013). The people of North Cachar Hills (Dimasa) and Mikir Hills (Karbi) who were living closely with the *Khasis* and *Garos* decided not to join the new State–

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

Meghalaya, albeit an option was given to them (Hussain, 1987; The Assam Tribune, 2013; Gohain, 2014).

Movement against the Outsiders

As mentioned above, in the pre-statehood period, the Assamese community developed a substantial holding in Shillong (present capital of Meghalaya) which was also the capital of the then British Assam. Bengalis, the first generation migrants from Assam and Bangladesh (mainly the Hindu Bengalis, after communal riots in Bangladesh) got employment opportunities in major government sectors. It was followed by the Hindi speaking people (especially the Biharis and Marwaris) and the Nepalese (both from India and Nepal). They slowly started controlling business establishments (Sharma, 2012; Lamare, 2012), and the steady rise of these non-locals resulted in loss of economic opportunities for the local communities. They continued to dominate business establishments, labour force and other employment opportunities. This trend caused an ever increasing insecurity of future of the educated youths of the indigenous tribes. As a result of which, the State witnessed three ethnic riots between the indigenous groups and the migrants (non-tribal/nonlocal/outsider). The first riot took place in 1979 when the Bengalis were identified as the principal adversaries, followed by the conflict with the Nepalese who were viewed as the new adversaries in 1987 and then the clashes with the Hindi speaking groups (Biharis and Marwaris) in 1992 (Haokip, 2013). Consequently, in the early 1980s, approximately 25,000 to 35,000 Bengalis permanently left Meghalaya. In 1981, there were 119,571 Bengalis living in Meghalaya, estimated at 8.13 per cent of the State's population had reduced to 5.97 per cent in 1991 (Baruah, 2004; Phukan, 2013).

On the other side, in the mining areas, since 1993, Nepalese have been dominating the workforce with around 61 per cent, followed by Bengalis with 35 per cent from Assam and the rest 4 per cent by the Bengalis from the West Bengal. Of course, local labourers do not like this nature of work or mining works (Lamare, 2012). In this process, the natural resources have slowly been transferred to non-locals. Despite the Sixth Schedule which is supposed to prevent non-locals from owning land in mining areas, the major portion of these lands have now been leased out to the outsiders (McDuie-Ra, 2008). The same holds true for the forest resources as well in the State. The nexus between local tribal leaders and the non-tribal exploiters from outside has made the forest resources a capitalistic business undertaking where local people have little or no say (Karlsson, 2004). The community land has been privatised in collusion with the local institutions, *dorbars*. Despite forest being traditionally owned by the community, people are no longer benefiting from it (Kumar, 2008), especially in the Khasi areas, and to quote the lines of McDuie-Ra (2008):

> The major change in the Khasi Hills is an increased shift from common land, *ri-raid*, to private land, *ri-kynthi*, jeopardising access for those who do not own land and increasing the power and influence of those who do. As a result a new class of land owners, many of them from urban areas, are becoming increasingly wealthy and powerful with close links to the *dorbars* (village councils) and district

councils, and a growing class of landless agricultural labourers and urban migrants are living ever more precarious lives.

The situation is not different in the Garo hills and the other parts of the State. In this context, to understand how the local land is transferred to the outsiders, we can quote the words of Karlsson (2004):

> If we stay in Garo Hills, the rather typical story of the timber trade is that an outside merchants (from Assam, West Bengal or more distant places) with the help of a local contractor approach a headman (the *Nokma*) or a private landowner, and often for a rather nominal fee manage to secure the right to cut all the trees in a particular area (this could be in terms of a long-term lease agreement). The local timber contractor would then hire local labourers to cut the trees and also arrange with transportations down to the plains, from where the outside merchant takes over.

As a result of which, slowly, a colonial-like relationship developed between the locals and outsiders, in which the natural resources is said to be exploited by the latter, and hardly, a few locals get benefitted from it. This nexus between local elites and outsiders led to officiate the extraction of the resources (Karlsson, 2004). Consequently, to prevent exploitive activities of these outsiders, some local social organisations came up. With the rise of these organisations, especially the students' organisations like the Khasi Students' Union (KSU), led to the commission of many dreadful acts against non-tribal population, e.g., challenged the hitherto ascendancy of the Bengali speaking people who were often branded as *Bangladeshi nationals* of Bangladesh (Upadhyaya, *et al.*, 2013). The trend was more conspicuous in the *Khasi* hills where the *Khasis* took a dominant political position in the newly created State. In 2000, the KSU launched *Ksan rngiew* movement. Though it was not a public agitation, an instrument to rejuvenate and awake the Khasi people against the outsiders were initiated (Haokip, 2009). As claimed by the KSU, the State's community-based agrarian economy lost much of its verve as a result of the unchecked privatisation of the community land, while the decline of agrarian resources made it extremely difficult for the members of the tribal population to maintain their livelihoods (Upadhyaya, *et al.*, 2013). In reality, besides numerous issues, like education, employment and cultural protection, the basic myopic protectionist vision caused panic for the outsiders in the State (Sirnate, 2009). However, in 2000s, the goal post slowly shifted towards the internal feuds among the indigenous tribes. Concerned with the land issue, state government set up a committee in August 2009 under the chairmanship of Deputy Chief Minister to assess and suggest ways to regulate any further alienation of indigenous land. Altogether eight civil society organisations, including the KSU and the Federation of Khasi Jaintia Garo People (FKJGP) were part of the committee (Haokip, 2009).

Insurgency, Internal Feuds and Autonomy Movements

Initially, following a perceived loss of economic opportunities in the hands of outsiders, Meghalaya witnessed the first ever insurgency movement in the early 1980s with the birth of the *Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council* (HALC), representing all indigenous communities of *Khasi-Jaintia* and *Garo*, to fight against the outsiders or *Dkhars*

(Rammohan, 2007). In the 1990s, following growth of internal squabbles, especially between the *Khasis* and the *Garos*, the HALC split into two groups– the *Achik Liberation Matgrik Army* (ALMA) of the *Garos* in *Garo* Hills and the *Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council* (HNLC) of the *Khasis* in *Khasi* Hills (Upadhyaya, *et al.*, 2013; Rahman, 2011). Later on, in 1995, the AMLA was renamed as the *Achik National Volunteers Council* (ANVC). When the HNLC aimed at converting Meghalaya as a province exclusively for the *Khasis,* fighting against the 'outsiders' including the *Garos*, the ANVC purportedly tried to carve out a homeland called '*Achik Land*' exclusively for the *Garos* in Garo Hills, free from the Khasi domination.

The Shillong being the capital city, dominated by the Khasis, their movement for controlling the economy, polity and land became easier. The *Khasi* ethnic movement intensified in 2000s. Their hegemonic role had shrunk the democratic space for the other organisations within the State (Srikanth, 2005). As understood, the HNLC, after bifurcating from the erstwhile HALC, is now pushing economic and political agendas of the Khasis alone in the State. The Khasis felt that their youths are deprived of the fruits of development in the State. Besides the movement for "Khasi land", they too started a movement for driving out the outsiders from the Khasi-Jaintia regions (Understanding Meghalaya, 2010). The outfit (HALC) was proscribed on November 16, 2000, and signed a ceasefire agreement with the Government of India on July 23, 2004. At the same time, the Garos also felt deprived of their rights by the Khasis, and became adversary of the Khasi tribe. Consequently, the ANVC intensified movement for a homeland called 'Achik Land' in Garo Hills and it comprises of the present districts of Garo Hills in Meghalaya and a large chunk of Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam, where a large number of Garos have settled[1]. Understandably, these two warring groups − Khasis and Garos, supported by their respective insurgent groups are at loggerheads with each other, blaming each other for exploitation and economic deprivation. Practically, the Garo hills are landlocked and isolated from the Khasi areas, especially the capital city Shillong and its adjoining areas of the *Jaintias*. Limited road connectivity between the districts has been the major cause of concern.

The Garos living in the western part of the State claimed that their region continued to remain 'backward' and there has been economic 'disparity' ever since the State was carved out of the then undivided Assam in 1972. They further claimed that the Garo Hills' meagre infrastructure and essential services, scanty health and education facilities and poor connectivity accentuated the sense of relative deprivation (Upadhyaya, *et al.,* 2013). Consequently, it led to the demand for a separate State exclusively for the Garos, comprising of five Garo hills districts reflected in <u>Figure 1</u>, by carving out from the Khasis. In this context, the Garo National Council (GNC) legislator Clifford R. Marak officially put up this issue in the 60 member Meghalaya Legislative Assembly on 18th March 2014 (The Hindu, 2014a). Former speaker of Lok Sabha and Garo leader, P.A. Sangma justified the demand for 'Garo-land', citing the reason for development disparity in the State (Haokip, 2013). However, their claim was rejected by the then ruling Congress-led Meghalaya United Alliance (UMA) government stating that further

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[1] This section is excerpted from Understanding Meghalaya (2010).

division of the State would crop up more constraints on the resources and increase social and economic vulnerability (News, 2014).

Figure 1: Separate State Demand Sought by the Garos in Meghalaya

Source: The Telegraph (August 2, 2013)

With frustration of their failure and their internal squabble, most of the ALMA terrorists surrendered in 1994 and formed the People's Liberation Front of Meghalaya (PLF-M) in 2000, after the state's rehabilitation scheme failed. Their main objectives have been to achieve faster economic development of the Garo Hills, as well as better educational opportunities for the Garo tribes, besides a separate State for the Garos. In this regard, in March 2001, Chengku Momin, the Minister for Information and Publicity of the PLF-M had warned all the non-Garos, not to contest the State assembly and district council elections, held in 2003. In 2009, the Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) was formed under the leadership of a former Deputy Superintendent of Police of Meghalaya, P.R. Sangma alias Champion R. Sangma, after deserting the State Police Force. The cadre-base of the outfit was mainly formed by the deserters from ANVC, the Liberation of Achik Elite Force (LAEF) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). Since its formation, the GNLA has been involved in killing, abduction, extortion, bomb blasts and attacks on Security Forces (SFs). Consequently, the law and order situation in the Garo-dominated areas has deteriorated after the outfit was formed[1].

In this manner, since the 1990s, number of militant groups, fielded by different ethnic groups, especially the Garos and the Khasis have emerged, and intensified in 2000s. Fractional conflicts have added oil to the fire and no two groups have got common objective. Within Garo community, the ANVC differed from the other Garo separatist

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[1] Retrieved from SATP: [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/Meghalaya/terrorist_outfits/GNLA.htm]

organisations. The GNC, aimed for a Garo State, comprising present districts of the Garo hills, while, the ANVC demanded the present districts of the Garo Hills in Meghalaya and a large chunk of Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam (Understanding Meghalaya, 2010). When the ANVC and its splinter group, ANVC-B are officially under ceasefire with the Government of India, the United Achik Liberation Army (UALA) and the Achik National Liberation Army (ANLA) formed recently, in October 2013, are active in the interior areas of the Garo Hills and its adjoining areas of Assam and the West Khasi Hills (Das, 2013). Besides, in December 2010 and January 2011, the *Rabha* identity assertion has given rise to ethnic conflict between the Rabhas and the Garos in the East Garo Hills and the bordering areas of Assam where the Rabha Hasong group dominates.

While tracing the causes of present escalated tension between the communities − the Khasis and the Garos, leaving the Garos-Rabhas tussle aside, the implementation of the 1971 Reservation Bill[1] was figured out as one of the prime factors (Bang, 2008). The KSU now demands that the reservation policy be revised as per 2001 population census and the Khasis being a dominate group, the Khasi-Garo reservation should be at 60:30 ratios (Sangma, 2008). On the other, in 2005, the Garos felt extraneous in the State when the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBSE), which had its head office in Tura (in West Garo Hills), agreed to reorganise itself in Shillong (Khasi area) along the lines demanded by the KSU (Haokip, 2013). Undoubtedly, these episodes added an embittered situation between the Khasis and the Garos, which further turned into violence. The agitations were further intensified by the Garo Hills State Movement Committee (GHSMC), a conglomeration of various pressure and political groups of the community. Their ultimate demand is that the Government of India should consider creation of two separate States − one each for Garos and Khasi-Jaintia, based on linguistic lines as envisaged in the States Re-organisation Act, 1956. In nutshell, the Garo National Council (GNC) and the Garo Students' Union (GSU) are also demanding a separate State for the Garos on linguistic lines, while the Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) is demanding a Khasi-Jaintia State. In the 2000s, it led to intensification of internal feuds in Meghalaya.

Result and Discussion of the Study

Since the late 1990s, after getting assurance from the then Chief Minister, E.K. Mawlong, various fierce movements, especially by the KSU, against the outsiders has withdrawn in September 2001. Besides, the movements included the removal of the Nagas, Mizos and Kukis from the official list of indigenous tribes of Meghalaya (Haokip, 2013). Though Srikanth (2005) believed that the largest and the most influential community, the Khasis who were vehemently agitating against the outsiders are now becoming more matured and getting better than the situations in the 1980s and early 1990s, the situation has reached to a complicated one. The ethnic relation between indigenous tribes and migrant communities has improved significantly in 2000s, but

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[1] The 1971 Reservation Bill specified quotas of 40% for the Khasi and the Jaintia, 40% for the Garos, and 20% for the minorities in government jobs and educational institutions (Please refer: Bang, 2008; Sangma, 2008).

ethnic tensions among the indigenous tribes have increased significantly in the recent past (Haokip, 2013). This has been enthused primarily by the local elites through politicians-contractors-bureaucrats nexus (Nongbri, 2003 as quoted by Karlsson, 2004). The role of the state, however, has reduced merely to distributing centrally allocated development funds to different agencies, *dorbars*, and loyal civil societies (McDuie-Ra, 2008).

On the practicality side, when one looks closely, the State of Meghalaya is not comparable with other sister States of NER like Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram in terms of its historical, socio-political and demographic equations. Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya was a British outpost and later the capital of the then undivided Assam. As a result, Shillong (the East Khasi Hills district) or Meghalaya in general had received a sizeable non-tribal population before the Statehood was conferred. Besides, the major portions of the Khasi region (including Jaintias and Ri-Bhoi) in its eastern and northern boundary shares border with Assam's four districts– Kamrup, Karbi-Anglong, N.C. Hills and Cachar. Similarly, in the western and north-western part, the Garo Hills districts share border with Bangladesh and Assam's districts of Goalpara and Dhubri. In the State, besides the Khasi and Garo, the communities of Rabha, Jaintia, Mikir, Karbi, Koch etc., have been living for generations. Therefore, in this context, Mukhim (2013) commented that the people of Meghalaya cannot just isolate themselves from the history and pretend to write on a clean slate that they are the lone indigenous community in the State. Seeing the new ethnic movements, Mukhim further raised few questions– "[w]hen we need a good doctor, do we check his tribe, caste, class or do we repose our faith on his expertise and his credentials? The same is the case with a good teacher or lawyer. So, if we are inter-dependent then is it not fair to share a slice of the cake with those who strive to build Meghalaya as much as the tribes of Meghalaya do?"

As of the internal feud, Khasi ethno-nationalist organisations blamed that the Garos had been given an undue advantage by the state, in employment, education and other development issues. On the other, the Garo civil organisations made a similar claim and initiated a strong movement in pursuit of a separate 'Garo-land' has grown (Malngiang, 2002 as cited by McDuie-Ra, 2008). The tug of war between these two groups has intensified in 2000s, over the perceived deprivation by one another. The fiasco over the transfer of MBSE office from Tura (West Garo hill) to Shillong (the Khasi dominated area) has been blamed as recent divide between the Khasi and the Garo in Meghalaya (Haokip, 2013). The Garos do not want to be dictated by the Khasis. On the other hand, the Khasis want to enjoy their privileges of dominance and do not want to sacrifice their legacy of movement against the outsiders in the hands of any other community, especially the Garos. One of the Khasis' constituent groups, the Jaintias, led by the Jaintia Students' Union (JSU) demanded all the three major indigenous groups − the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias be given 30 per cent each of the reservation policy and the remaining 10 per cent be left to other communities (Srikanth, 2005). But the key questions arose in this context are– who is being relatively deprived of and by whom? Which district or tribe is deprived of? To comprehend the allegations made on each other, one needs to do some number exercises.

Table 1 depicts district-wise literacy rate, density of population and decadal population growth rate, while Table 2 shows the percentage change in Below Poverty Line[1] (BPL) over the years. Considering a lesser growth rate of population and higher literacy rate as better development indicators, being an administrative district and State capital (Shillong) East Khasi hills performed well in these aspects. While the other districts, (whether the Garo Hills or Khasi Hills) were found to be performing more or less the same. Of course, the percentage change in rural BPL households in Khasi districts has improved considerably well vis-a-vis the Garo hills over the years from 1990s to 2000s. In terms of annual average sectoral growth rates across the districts (Table 3), as expected, the East Khasi Hills district registered a higher growth in all the three sectors– primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. The Ri-Bhoi district (the Khasi region) also performed equally well. The South Garo Hills district performed slightly better than that of any other Garo hills districts in this regard, but lesser than that of the Khasi Hills districts. While referring to the physical infrastructure index (Table 4), barring the West Khasi hill district, rest of the Khasi districts performed much better than the State average in terms of percentage of villages connected by *pucca* road and electricity connection in 1991 and 2001 respectively. Ironically, the socioeconomic indices as measured by Nayak and Ray (2010) depicted in Table 5, consisting of economic, health, education and Human Development Index (HDI) highlighted a different picture. For instances, overall socioeconomic indices of the South Garo Hills district revealed relatively a better performance, bypassing the East Khasi hills district which is considered to be the most developed district in the State. These findings convoluted to draw a conclusion that which region is deprived of. Conversely, one cannot infer whether the Khasis are better off in every socioeconomic indicator or the Garos. This caused to the movement for the internal autonomies of different groups. If the demand for a separate State of the Garos or the Khasis is considered, one can easily expect another demand or re-drawing of the present State boundary by amalgamating other smaller communities like, the Kochs, the Hajongs, the Rabhas, the Dimasa, the Mikirs, etc. who have been living for years along with the three major tribes in Meghalaya. Having thought these consequences, in response to the Garos' demand for a separate State raised by the GNC legislator C.R. Marak in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, the Deputy Chief Minister in-charge R.C. Laloo replied that "there was economic disparity among the people of the State and also overall economic condition of the people of the State especially in rural areas. It is our duty to take necessary steps to ameliorate the economic hardship of our people and bring about all round economic improvement in the State and not to divide it" (The Hindu, 2014a). Had *the Karbis* (Mikir/Karbi hills) and *the Dimasa* (Dima Hasao/NC hills) of the present Assam joined the new State of Meghalaya at the time when they were given a chance in 1972, there could have been a different situation of the ethnic relation.

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

As of the Rabha-Garo conflict, the problem started when the Rabha demanded 416 villages inhabited by the Garos which also formed a part of the proposed area demanded by the GNC as a separate Garo Autonomous Council in Assam. At the same time, the ANVC is fighting for amalgamation of the present districts of the Garo hills in Meghalaya and a large chunk of Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam to form a new Garo land. In reality, the Rabhas are recognised as Scheduled Tribes (STs) category in Goalpara district of Assam and enjoy separate benefit under the "Development Council" given for the community, but the same is not given in the contiguous East Garo hills district of Meghalaya. The East Garo hills district has its own ADC under the Sixth Schedule. But the Rabha group is not categorised as ST in Meghalaya, and so, no representative of this group is elected in the ADC in Garo hills. For a quite some time, the Rabhas had been agitating in the Garo hills for ST status, but the Garos opposed to it. Therefore, the Rabhas resorted to call for road blockade in certain parts of Assam (Goalpara and Kamrup districts) that links the Garo hills with the other parts of Meghalaya. Practically, if one has to travel from Tura, headquarters of Garo hills to Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, one has to go through Assam's Goalpara and Guwahati (Kamrup) districts. This made the *Rabha* community and its insurgent group − the Rabha Jatiya Mukti Bahini (RJMB) better bargaining power[1]. Consequently, the Garos' demand for "Garo Land" was heavily opposed by the Rabhas and they are demanding their basic rights as their fellow members enjoy certain economic autonomy (Development Council) in Assam.

Still, the larger issue that hardly any scholar attempted is − how have these ethnic movements shifted towards internal feuds? Most of the community lands in the State have been grabbed by the elite land grabbers, coal baron for their vested interests. It is understood that the tribal lands cannot be easily transferred to outsiders without the hands of the tribal elites or local institutions like the *dorbars*. Very systematically, in the pretext of tribal land ownership, the elite sections of the community (include coal barons, politicians, bureaucrats, policemen and even surrendered militants) with the tacit support of the village headmen converted the common forest land into individual lands and given to industrialists. Consequently, the poor villagers are becoming landless, their livelihoods are curtailed, environment is devastated and rivers are polluted. In this context, Mohrmen (2014) opined that unlike in the other States, the problem in Meghalaya is not because of the outsiders, but the threat is from the rich tribal elites who are themselves members of the community. The influential student body, KSU who had earlier opposed timber trade now supported to drop the forest cover area from 40 per cent at the time of State's independence to 18 per cent in 1996 (Karlsson, 2004). Therefore, apprehension and infighting problems of the ethnic groups cannot be understood without taking into account the role of the Indian state in creating conditions for such intra and inter group conflicts. Politics and state functionaries have been polarised on ethnic line, and the community members are being used by their elites. Besides, one cannot easily ignore the control of the outside businessmen over the resources of the State which have created much tension. But, this cannot be solved by simply targeting them of being outsiders. Civil societies like, the

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

non-governmental organisations, social activists and women groups have also been hijacked on the ethnic lines. Following the politicisation of the civil organisations, the ethnicity-based movements have intensified. The KSU formed political party and the leader, Paul Lyngdoh joined the then Chief Minister D.D. Lapang's cabinet as minister of sports and youth affairs in 2003. Interestingly, Lyngdoh himself found it difficult to deliver demands that he had initiated for. Still, the Khasis being the majority community, especially in the Shillong, the KSU played a decisive role in the State politics, influencing the government and the political parties. Against the Khasis, in the Garo hills, the Garos too called for different bandhs and protests for creation of Garo land, exclusively for them.

Concluding Remarks

Meghalaya has experienced a series of communal riots between the outsiders and insiders since the late 1970s. However, in 2000s, the goal post has slowly shifted towards the indigenous tribes, emerged different ethnicity-based autonomy movements. Shillong was developed as an educational hub, added the North-Eastern Hill University in the post-statehood, led to growth of higher education in the State at the fast pace. The anxiety about the employment among the educated youth started when the employment opportunity growth in the State was proportionately lower than that of the growth of higher education, and the existing employment, business establishments had already been occupied by the outsiders. This was the major cause of conflicts between the outsiders and the insiders in 1980s, exacerbated in 1990s and witnessed three riots against the former.

Though perceived economic and political deprivation has been attributed as major factor for ethnic group infighting in 2000s, autonomy movements may not be the panacea for the unrest in Meghalaya. The inter district, intra district economic disparity and inter and intra ethnic deprivation within the State was not clearly evident from the figures provided in the annexures. Whatever the deprivation or exploitation debated in the State was made by their own people or the leaders of their own groups. The Khasis are blaming the Garos and vice-versa, for their perceived economic and political deprivation. If one thinks and analyses logically, there is no guarantee that the Garos will not demand for the integration of the Garos of Meghalaya with the Garos living in Assam or even with the *Bodo* community of Assam in the near future (as the Garo is a Bodo family and the GNLA cadres consisting of Bodo militant splinters of Assam). On the other side too, there is no guarantee that the Jaintias will not fight for their identity or separation from the Khasis in the near future (e.g., The JSU opposed KSU's reservation demand and the Jaintias also enjoy ADC status as Khasi enjoys). The same holds good for the communities like the *Bhois*, the *Wars* or any other sub-tribes of the larger Khasi identity/group. As we have seen the riots between the *Rabhas* and the *Garos* in 2010 and 2011, one cannot easily ignore the Rabhas' movement in Meghalaya, especially in Garo hills. Basic rights of the Garos in Assam and the Rabhas in Assam should be given. Merely politicising and polarising ethnic communities by their elite leaders for economic or personal vote stunt opportunities would only escalate the present crisis of Meghalaya. Rather, all the communities should work in unison for development of the State, physical infrastructure especially the road connectivity with

the support of the state/government. Inter community relation may be improved by linking inter-district road connectivity particularly the road networks between the two geographically isolated regions, the Garo hills, especially Tura and the Khasi hills, mainly Shillong. Otherwise, it makes very limited interaction between the two major communities (Khasi and Garo) and consequently develops distrust among them. Community leaders should be educated first, and of course, the role of Indian state should concentrate more on the physical infrastructural development, especially the road network, not on polarisation of ethnic groups for election stunt. If at all the ethnicity-based autonomy demand is expected, differences among the different organisations within the same ethnic group should be resolved first, and using ethnic card by the ethnic leaders for their personal gain should be avoided.

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Tables

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

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

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

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

Districts	1991	1998	2002
East Garo Hills	68.5	34.2	55.9
West Garo Hills	66.2	63.0	53.7
South Garo Hills	–	70.6	45.3
Jaintia Hills	56.1	44.2	39.5
Ri-Bhoi	–	41.8	49.9
East Khasi Hills	33.2	55.2	46.7
West Khasi Hills	29.2	64.9	47.7
Meghalaya	**48.9**	**54.5**	**48.9**

Source: Saxena (2002)

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

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

Source: Govt. of Meghalaya (2008)

Table 4: District-wise Road and Electricity Connectivity

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

Source: Govt. of Meghalaya (2008)

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

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

Source: Nayak and Ray (2010)

*Bourguignon Index is an inequality index, measured as:

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

where α is related to the degree of aversion of the society with respect to inequality and the degree of substitution is normally set to be β ≤ 1.