

National Conference on

**Political autonomy and democratic governance**

Sponsored by

North Eastern Council  
Government of India

To be held at  
Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research  
Jamia Millia Islamia  
New Delhi 110 025

28-29 (Wed. & Thu.), August 2019

The organizing committee invites extended abstract (summary of the paper) of 500 words on or before June 30, 2019, which may be submitted to [msingh1@jmi.ac.in](mailto:msingh1@jmi.ac.in)/[debojeetbora@gmail.com](mailto:debojeetbora@gmail.com)

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## Concept Note

National Conference on

# **Political autonomy and democratic governance**

Despite the creation of several new states and territorially defined autonomous councils in undivided Assam, different communities in Northeast India continue to demand new states and autonomous councils. This is because most of them are under the impression that an adequate share of political power is a necessary condition for retaining their cultural identity and more so for development.

When the independence of India was approaching, several communities were apprehensive of remaining with India and hence expressed their keenness to remain independent. The matter was discussed by a committee appointed by the Constituent Assembly in February 1947. The issue raised by the said committee was deliberated and finally decided to include a provision for the administration of the hills of Assam known as the Sixth Schedule. It provides for the formation of an autonomous district with self-governing council 'with the twin task of protecting the tribal culture and customs and undertake development tasks for them'. The council shall exercise limited authority to an area which can be further subdivided into territorial constituencies. Another committee was entrusted to study the situation of the plain tribes of Assam.

At the time of its inception in 1952, the Sixth Schedule was meant for the hill tribes of Assam only (the plain tribes were not included). Four district councils were constituted in 1952, but not in the Naga Hills.

It was soon followed by the reorganization of the internal boundary of the country into 14 states and six union territories. The perception of what was in the best interests of national security was also prone to change over time. In 1960, barely four years after the reorganization, the state of Bombay was bifurcated into Maharashtra and Gujarat. At the time of the reorganization, it was believed that Assam, Manipur and Tripura should not be divided. But the pressures from various communities saw Assam being divided several times. In 1963, the Naga Hills became the state of Nagaland carved out of Assam in response to the separatist insurgency. Assam was further divided to create the states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. In neighbouring Tripura, an autonomous region comprising of about two-thirds of its land was constituted.

Subsequently, it was brought under the Sixth Schedule with the primary aim of redressing the grievances responsible for the insurgency.

Since the latter part of the 1960s, the Bodos also started the struggle for the official recognition of their language and script for the purpose of education. Once it got recognised as an associate official language, the movement for a separate state started, which was ultimately suspended after the signing of an agreement in 1993 with the central and the state governments to constitute an autonomous region within Assam. It promised to offer limited home rule powers to the autonomous region granted by the state government. However, the experiment failed leading to the revival of another statehood movement which was spearheaded by an insurgent group. In 2003, the movement came to an end as the insurgent leadership signed an agreement with the government for the purpose of granting limited political autonomy by constituting an autonomous region under the Sixth Schedule. The region is now technically known as the Bodoland Territorial Areas District comprising of four contiguous districts. It is governed by the Bodoland Territorial Council. Subsequently, the former insurgent leaders became active in local electoral politics. Thus, altogether six districts of Assam together constitute the Sixth Schedule areas. Perhaps to prevent further reorganization of Assam, six more autonomous councils had been constituted by separate legislation of the state legislature.

In 1972, the Mizo hills district became a union territory along with three district councils of the Lai, Mara and Chakma. Further, the entire Meghalaya, except Shillong municipality limits, constitute the Sixth Schedule area. Today, there are 'tribal areas' in the predominantly tribal states of Mizoram and Meghalaya.

Further, in the name of granting home rule powers to the hill areas of Manipur, the hill areas are divided also into six autonomous districts each having a district council which were constituted in 1972. Like other councils elsewhere, each council has limited executive and financial powers. The first elections were held in 1973 followed the second elections held in 2010. These councils want more autonomy under the Sixth Schedule.

It has been commonly argued that there is always a conflict between the district council and the state government. We are aware that the district council cannot function smoothly without the cooperation of the state government, failing to do so, the latter can always act as a spoiler. The district councils wanted powers over additional subjects and direct funding from the Centre. Most of the councils have been campaigning for separate states. It may not be out of context to note that stipulation of the district councils has largely been interpreted by different communities as an *ad hoc* arrangement between district councils and statehood. And they have come to believe that the district councils could be *negotiated* for the statehood in the times to come. They have the impression that an adequate share of political power is a necessary condition for retaining their cultural identity and, more so, for their all-round development.

There is a need for evaluation of the functioning of the autonomy arrangement to sort out challenges in its implementation. In order to do so the Centre for North East Studies and Policy

Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi intends to hold a two-day long conference of the academics, officials, activists, students and others to share their views on the issue of such autonomy arrangement.

The primary purpose is to encourage an informed debate on how to ensure better democratic governance to the citizens. The conference intends to look at the challenges within the government institutions, and people's expectations. It thus aims at providing a platform for cross-fertilization and exchange of ideas and recommendations for the future.

We hope that the outcome of the conference will help develop accurate and reliable information and provide the policy-makers and officials with information that will allow them to implement a more effective programme. It thus hopes to bridge the knowledge deficit that exists in our understanding of issues and challenges before the autonomous councils in the Northeast. With this in mind, the proposed conference intends to focus on the following areas or sub-themes:

- Plains and Hills during the colonialism
- Self-governance through traditional institutions
- Issues and challenges before the autonomous councils
- Case studies of autonomous councils
- Electoral politics in autonomous regions
- Leadership in governance
- Autonomy and democratic governance
- Natural and cultural resource management and challenges of development

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A panel of four members shall evaluate all the submitted abstracts. Only the shortlisted abstracts will be contacted to develop original papers for possible inclusion in an edited book.