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Sixth Schedule and Tribal of North East India

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ABSTRACT

Equality is not merely providing equal right to all but also to ensure that the weak and the underprivileged section of the society become capable of enjoying the equal rights. The special provisions may be directed either to improve the socio-economic conditions of the weak and underprivileged so that they come to a level wherefrom thy can equally compete with others or to protect the weak from being exploited socially, culturally and economically. What is intended in this paper is to have an insight of the provision of the Sixth Schedule and its consequences on the tribal of the north east India. Such an attempt needs to be initiated with an understanding of the north east.

KEYWORDS: Sixth Schedule, Tribal, District Council

Constitutional Provision of the Sixth Schedule and Tribal of North East India

Democracy demands equality. Equality is not merely providing equal right to all but also to ensure that the weak and the underprivileged section of the society become capable of enjoying the equal rights. The special provisions may be directed either to improve the socio-economic conditions of the weak and underprivileged so that they come to a level wherefrom thy can equally compete with others or to protect the weak from being exploited socially, culturally and economically. What is intended in this paper is to have an insight of the provision of the Sixth Schedule and its consequences on the tribal of the north east India. Such an attempt needs to be initiated with an understanding of the north east.

The territory referred to as the North East India has a unique geographic and ethno political character. The region is made up of seven provinces – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura – with a total population of 38 million. The region is situated in the eastern part of India and is connected with the rest of India through a narrow corridor via Siliguri. About three quarters of the region is covered by hilly terrain and one quarter is made up of the four plain areas of Assam's Brahmaputra and Barak Valley, Tripura plains land and Manipur plateau. Those in the thinly populated hill areas are the people commonly called 'tribal', and in the plains and plateau are mainly the 'non-tribal people who comprise more than eighty percent of the total population.

The British annexation resulted in making north east a part of India. The tribal areas in the region were administered under a number of extra ordinary provisions that segregated them into categories called 'non-regulated', 'backward', or 'excluded areas'. They initiated a policy of what was called' Inner Line Regulation' prohibiting the access to the areas beyond the 'line' to the outsiders without obtaining special permission from the government. The avowed purpose of this policy of non interference was to protect the hill people from being exploited by the people of the plains. But in reality, they followed such policy, for the hill areas were not considered profitable by them. This policy of isolating the hill from the plains resulted in excluding the tribal belts from the patterns of administration prevailed in the rest of the country. The policy continued and the Government of India Act 1935 categorized the tribal areas of the north east into three, namely, Excluded Areas Partially Excluded Areas, and Frontier Areas. Thus, the administrative insulation contributed to the backwardness of the tribal areas of NE region.

For protecting the interest as well as for winning the confidence of the tribal of north east India, the government in the post independent period followed the policy of giving autonomy to the tribal of the north east to shape their lives as they desire. The Constitution makers also recognized the necessity of a separate political and administrative arrangement for the tribal of the hill areas of NE India.

.In pursuance of the Cabinet Mission proposal for an Advisory Committee on the Rights of Citizens, Minorities and Tribal and excluded Areas, the Constituent Assembly set up a Committee. This Committee appointed a sub-committee known as the North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Committee which visited the tribal areas. It recommended for providing the tribal people with a separate administrative arrangement of their own to provide them maximum autonomy in the management of their tribal affairs. In acceptance of the recommendations of the sub-committee, the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India was adopted. The Sixth Schedule provided for the constitution of Autonomous District Councils in certain hill districts of the then composite state of Assam.

District Council

The Autonomous District Councils in certain hill districts of the then composite Assam were introduced in 1952, and in 1953 Regional Councils were introduced in the then Lushai Hills as per the provisions of the Sixth Schedule.

The District Council could thus not be said to have been conceived as an organization for promoting participatory process for formulation and execution of socio economic matters relating to the tribe's everyday life and development plans. It was meant only to provide autonomy to the districts, which were inhabited by fairly homogeneous tribal groups. But in course of time it lost its earlier administrative initiative in matters of social transformation. Inadequacy of financial resources and administrative expertise were the major constraints in the proper functioning of the District Councils. An interesting aspect of the working of the District Councils is the effect inter-party rivalries have on their relationship with the state governments on the one hand, and with the traditional tribal chiefs, on the other.

Further, the design and content of Sixth Schedule have failed to inspire the expected process of democratization in the tribal society of north east India. Despite the promises in the initial years, the Sixth Schedule in its operation for almost six decades did not succeed in bringing about any noticeable change in the tribal society of the north east India.

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