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Navigating Governance in Karbi Anglong District of Assam in India's North East: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract:

Governance in the North Eastern Region of India is characterised by distinct constitutional arrangements that are designed to accommodate ethnic diversity, protect indigenous interests, and facilitate decentralised administration. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution represents an important institutional mechanism in this regard, providing autonomous administrative arrangements for specific tribal areas. Karbi Anglong in Assam offers an important case for examining the opportunities and limitations of such constitutional autonomy. The Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), established under the Sixth Schedule was envisaged as an institution of self-governance through which the aspirations of the region's indigenous population could be addressed within the broader framework of Indian Federalism. However, the actual functioning of autonomous governance has been shaped by complex relationships between the Council, the Government of Assam and the Union Government. This paper, therefore, examines the institutional framework of governance in Karbi Anglong with emphasis on the relationship between constitutional autonomy and its practical implementation.

Keywords: Sixth Schedule, Governance, Indigenous, Autonomy, Decentralisation

Introduction

Governance in the North-Eastern Region of India has developed within a distinctive historical and political context shaped by ethnic diversity, demands for political autonomy, questions of indigenous identity and the complex relationship between the region and the Indian State. The region's geographic location, historical experiences and socio-cultural diversity have necessitated institutional arrangements that differ in several aspects from the conventional administrative structures found elsewhere in the country. In particular, the political demands of various indigenous communities have contributed to the evolution of constitutional mechanisms intended to accommodate regional aspirations while maintaining the territorial and political integrity of the Indian Union. One of the most significant constitutional responses to these demands is the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Envisaged as a mechanism for protecting the interests of tribal populations in specified areas of North-East India, it provides for the establishment of Autonomous District Councils with legislative, executive, judicial and financial powers over specified subjects. The objective of which is to provide a degree of self-government to tribal communities while integrating autonomous areas within the larger constitutional administrative framework of the country.

Karbi Anglong in Assam represents an important example of this institutional arrangement. The Karbi Anglong District Council was established on 23rd June, 1952 under Article 244(2) of the Sixth Schedule (Chaube, 1999). Subsequently, following the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in April 1995 between

representatives of the district, the State and Central Governments, the institution was renamed the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), with additional powers and responsibilities. The Council was intended to provide a representative institutional framework for addressing the political, administrative, economic and developmental aspirations of the region. The establishment of the KAAC marked an important development in the institutional history of autonomous governance in Assam. It provided a constitutional platform through which regional interests could be represented and local development priorities could be addressed. However, the existence of an autonomous council does not necessarily imply complete administrative or financial independence. The KAAC operates within a broader governance structure involving the Government of Assam and the Union Government. Its legislative and executive functions, financial arrangements and administrative responsibilities are consequently influenced by the constitutional division of powers and the nature of its relationship with higher levels of Government raising an important question concerning the nature and effectiveness of autonomy in the region as to what extent the constitutional framework translates into meaningful administrative and political self-governance (Datta & Sen, 2020; Choudhury, 2014). While the Sixth Schedule provides institutional recognition and a degree of decision-making authority, the actual exercise of these powers depends on financial resources, administrative capacity, political relations and institutional accountability. Against this background, the present paper examines the dynamics of Governance in Karbi Anglong by analysing the institutional framework of the KAAC, its relationship with the State and Central Governments, and the major challenges affecting the functioning of autonomous administration. It further explores the prospects for strengthening governance through greater constitutional autonomy, fiscal empowerment, administrative reforms and inclusive development.

Objectives and Methodology

The study seeks to examine the constitutional and institutional framework of governance in Karbi Anglong under the Sixth Schedule, analyse the powers and administrative responsibilities of the KAAC, identify the challenges affecting autonomous governance, and explore the prospects for strengthening institutional autonomy and accountability.

The paper adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach, based primarily on secondary sources, including constitutional provisions, government documents, Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reports and relevant literature on decentralisation, federalism and autonomous governance in North-East India. A descriptive and analytical method is employed to understand the institutional arrangements and their practical limitations. The paper is conceptual in nature and does not claim to present primary fieldwork findings.

Theoretical Framework: Decentralisation and Asymmetrical Federalism

The study draws upon the perspectives of decentralisation and asymmetrical federalism to understand the institutional arrangements governing Karbi Anglong. Decentralisation refers to the distribution or transfer of administrative, political and financial authority from higher levels of government to lower or territorially defined institutions (Rondinelli,1981; Conyers, 1986). The Sixth Schedule represents a distinctive form of decentralised governance because it constitutionally recognises autonomous councils and grants them specified legislative, executive and financial powers. However, decentralisation becomes meaningful only when the transfer of responsibilities is accompanied by adequate financial and administrative resources. The distinction between the formal allocation of powers and the actual capacity to exercise them is therefore important in evaluating the functioning of the KAAC. Asymmetrical federalism, on the other hand, refers to a constitutional arrangement in which different constituent units or regions enjoy varying degrees of autonomy and institutional powers. In India, the Sixth Schedule represents an important expression of this arrangement by recognising the distinctive requirements of tribal areas in the North-East. The KAAC consequently occupies a special position within the federal structure, possessing constitutionally recognised powers while remaining connected to the administrative framework of the state and Union governments. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for examining the gap between the constitutional provision of autonomy and its actual implementation in Karbi Anglong.

Constitutional and Institutional Framework of Governance in Karbi Anglong

The Sixth Schedule derives its constitutional foundation from Articles 244(2) and 275(1) of the Indian Constitution. It provides for the administration of specified tribal areas through Autonomous District and Regional Councils. Under Paragraph 3, District Councils possess legislative powers over designated subjects, including land, forests other than reserved forests, shifting cultivation, village administration, inheritance and certain social matters. Paragraph 6 provides for the establishment and management of educational institutions, dispensaries, markets, roads and other public facilities, while Paragraph 8 provides specified taxation and revenue-raising powers. The KAAC functions as the principal autonomous administrative institution in the Karbi Anglong region. Presently, it consists of 30 members, including 26 elected representatives and four nominated members, under the applicable constitutional and legal provisions. Its political and administrative leadership is exercised through the Chief Executive Member and the Executive Committee. The Council performs legislative, executive and developmental functions within the framework of the Sixth Schedule (Gogoi & Borah, 2023). Its responsibilities extend to specified areas such as education, agriculture, infrastructure, public health, social welfare and local development. It also exercises responsibilities relating to the administration of designated local resources. An important dimension of autonomous governance is the relationship between the KAAC and the Government of Assam. Although the Council possesses constitutionally recognised powers, it functions within the broader administrative structure of the state. The distinction between inherent and entrusted functions is particularly relevant. Inherent functions arise directly from the Sixth Schedule, whereas entrusted functions are assigned by the state government under the relevant provisions. The CAG (2018) observed that the Assam government had entrusted the KAAC with additional responsibilities in areas including agriculture, animal husbandry, cottage industries, fisheries, social welfare and forests. However, the funding and administrative arrangements associated with these functions remained connected to the state government. This creates a relationship of institutional interdependence in which the Council exercises administrative responsibilities while depending on higher levels of government for certain financial and administrative requirements. Therefore, the distinction between formal constitutional authority and practical administrative autonomy becomes central to understanding governance in the region.

Results & Discussion

Major Challenges of Governance in Karbi Anglong

Despite the constitutional recognition of autonomous governance, the functioning of the KAAC is influenced by several structural, institutional and developmental challenges. These limitations reveal the gap between the objectives of constitutional autonomy and the realities of its implementation.

Financial Dependency and Limited Fiscal Autonomy

Financial autonomy is essential for the effective functioning of autonomous institutions. Although the Sixth Schedule provides certain taxation and revenue-raising powers, the KAAC depends substantially on grants and financial transfers from the state and central governments. Such dependence restricts the Council's ability to independently determine developmental priorities and implement programmes (Datta & Sen, 2020). The CAG's audit report covering 2011–12 to 2015–16 recorded revenue receipts of ₹310.88 crore against expenditure of ₹455.75 crore under the District Fund, resulting in a revenue deficit of ₹144.87 crore. It also identified an underutilisation of ₹462.19 crore from funds received for entrusted functions (CAG, 2018). These findings indicate weaknesses in financial planning, expenditure management and institutional capacity. Therefore, strengthening fiscal autonomy requires both adequate resource allocation and improvements in the Council's capacity to manage public finances.

Administrative Constraints and Bureaucratic Dependency

The effective exercise of autonomy requires adequate control over the administrative machinery responsible for implementing policies. However, the relationship between the KAAC and the state government can create

difficulties where responsibilities are transferred without corresponding authority over personnel, recruitment and departmental functioning. Delays in administrative approvals, inadequate technical expertise and coordination problems affect the implementation of developmental programmes. The dependence on state-level administrative arrangements also restrict the Council's ability to respond promptly to local requirements. Strengthening administrative autonomy therefore requires a clearer distribution of responsibilities, adequate staffing and greater institutional capacity to implement policies independently within the Council's constitutional jurisdiction.

Overlapping Jurisdictions and Coordination Problems

The governance structure in Karbi Anglong involves the interaction of the KAAC, the Assam government and various central government institutions. Their responsibilities intersect in areas such as education, infrastructure, healthcare, environmental management and resource administration. Where institutional responsibilities are not clearly defined, administrative delays, duplication of functions and accountability gaps may arise. Effective coordination between different levels of government is therefore necessary to ensure that constitutional autonomy contributes to administrative efficiency rather than institutional fragmentation.

Political Competition and Institutional Accountability

The functioning of autonomous governance is also influenced by electoral competition, political leadership and relations between the Council and the state government. Changes in political leadership affects administrative priorities and the continuity of developmental programmes. Equally important is the issue of institutional accountability. The CAG's audit findings have highlighted shortcomings in financial management, record-keeping and expenditure monitoring within the KAAC (CAG, 2018; CAG, 2024). Such deficiencies undermine public confidence in autonomous administration. Therefore, greater transparency, regular audits and effective grievance-redress mechanisms are essential for strengthening democratic accountability.

Developmental Inequalities and Service Delivery

The effectiveness of autonomous governance must ultimately be assessed through its contribution to socio-economic development. Inadequate infrastructure, uneven access to healthcare and education, limited employment opportunities and connectivity problems continue to require administrative attention. The geographical characteristics of the region, particularly its hilly terrain and dispersed settlements, create additional difficulties in delivering public services. Although the KAAC has responsibilities in several developmental sectors, the implementation of programmes depends on adequate funding, administrative expertise and institutional coordination. The challenge is to ensure that constitutional autonomy produces tangible improvements in the everyday lives of the population.

Prospects for Strengthening Governance in Karbi Anglong

Strengthening governance in Karbi Anglong requires reforms that address the financial, administrative and institutional limitations of autonomous administration. First, financial empowerment is essential. The KAAC requires predictable financial transfers, improved revenue mobilisation and better budgetary planning. Timely release of funds and transparent expenditure management would enable the Council to discharge its responsibilities more effectively. Second, administrative reforms and capacity building are necessary to improve institutional performance. Adequate staffing, technical expertise, professional training and greater clarity in departmental responsibilities would strengthen the Council's ability to implement developmental programmes. Third, institutional coordination between the KAAC, the Government of Assam and the Union Government should be improved. Regular consultations and clearly defined administrative responsibilities can reduce jurisdictional conflicts and facilitate effective policy implementation. Fourth, democratic accountability and transparency must become central to autonomous administration. Regular financial audits, public disclosure of expenditure, social audits and accessible grievance-redress mechanisms can improve public trust and ensure that elected representatives remain answerable to citizens. And finally, inclusive and

sustainable development should remain a major priority. Greater attention to rural infrastructure, education, healthcare, employment generation, agricultural development and connectivity would help address regional inequalities. Development planning should be based on local requirements and supported by effective monitoring mechanisms. These measures would help strengthen the KAAC not merely as a constitutionally recognised institution but as an effective administrative body capable of translating regional priorities into developmental outcomes.

Autonomy in Theory and Practice

The experience of governance in Karbi Anglong reveals an important distinction between institutional autonomy and substantive autonomy. Institutional autonomy refers to the formal recognition of a governing body with constitutionally defined powers and responsibilities. Substantive autonomy, however, concerns the actual capacity of that institution to exercise authority, mobilise resources, formulate policies and implement decisions effectively. The establishment of the KAAC represents a significant institutional achievement in the evolution of autonomous governance in Assam. However, its functioning demonstrates that constitutional recognition alone cannot guarantee effective self-governance. Financial dependency, administrative constraints and overlapping jurisdictions may restrict the practical exercise of autonomous powers. This does not necessarily indicate the failure of the Sixth Schedule. Rather, it highlights the need for continuous institutional strengthening and effective implementation of its provisions. Asymmetrical federalism creates space for differentiated governance, but its success depends on the capacity of autonomous institutions to translate constitutional provisions into meaningful outcomes. The central challenge for Karbi Anglong is therefore to move beyond the formal recognition of autonomy towards its substantive realisation. This requires adequate resources, administrative capacity, institutional accountability and constructive relations between different levels of government.

Conclusion

Governance in Karbi Anglong reflects the opportunities and limitations of India's experiment with asymmetrical federalism. The Sixth Schedule provides a distinctive constitutional framework for autonomous administration, while the KAAC serves as the principal institutional mechanism through which regional political and developmental aspirations are addressed. Nevertheless, the functioning of autonomous governance is influenced by several structural challenges, including financial dependency, administrative constraints, overlapping jurisdictions, political competition, weaknesses in institutional accountability and uneven developmental outcomes. These challenges indicate that constitutional recognition alone is insufficient to ensure effective self-governance. The experience of Karbi Anglong also raises a broader question concerning the functioning of autonomous institutions in India's federal structure as to whether the constitutional provision of autonomy is accompanied by the institutional capacity and resources necessary for its effective exercise. Addressing this question, therefore, requires a shift from understanding autonomy merely as an institutional arrangement towards recognising it as an ongoing process of democratic and administrative empowerment. The success of autonomous governance in Karbi Anglong will ultimately depend on the extent to which constitutional guarantees are translated into effective administration, accountable institutions and tangible developmental outcomes.

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