

Governing Autonomy as Exception: The Sixth Schedule and India's Tribal Frontier

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Abstract— The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution is commonly understood as a framework of autonomy intended to protect the political, cultural, and land rights of tribal populations in Northeast India. This article argues that, in practice, the Sixth Schedule has functioned less as a mechanism of genuine self-rule and more as a mode of governing political exception. Tracing its genealogy from colonial frontier administration to its contemporary operation through Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), the article shows how autonomy has been consistently subordinated to state sovereignty, developmental priorities, and security concerns. Drawing on recent developments—including the proposed 125th Constitutional Amendment Bill, indigenous mobilisation in Tripura, demands for Sixth Schedule status in Assam, Ladakh, and recurring Assam–Meghalaya border conflicts—the article demonstrates how constitutional autonomy often serves to manage dissent and render conflict administratively legible rather than resolve underlying political contradictions. The persistence of these tensions raises critical questions about the limits of autonomy within India's constitutional framework and the possibilities for more substantive forms of democratic self-rule in the country's frontier regions.

Keywords— Sixth Schedule; Autonomy; Northeast India; Frontier Governance; Tribal Politics

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution has returned to the centre of political debate. Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) across Northeast India have jointly lobbied for the passage of the 125th Constitutional Amendment Bill; indigenous movements in Tripura have questioned the adequacy of existing autonomous arrangements; protesters in Assam, Ladakh have demanded inclusion under the Sixth Schedule; and recurring inter-state border disputes, particularly between Assam and Meghalaya, have exposed the fragility of territorial governance in scheduled areas. Together, these developments suggest that constitutional autonomy in northeast India's tribal regions is under renewed strain.

Yet, much of the public and policy discourse continues to treat the Sixth Schedule as either a success story of minority protection or as an administrative problem requiring institutional reform.

Such perspectives obscure a more fundamental issue: autonomy under the Sixth Schedule has historically been designed not to enable substantive self-rule, but to manage political difference in strategically sensitive frontier regions (Baruah, 2005; Baruah, 2020). This article argues that the Sixth Schedule operates as a form of governing political exception, one that recognises indigenous difference while circumscribing it within tight constitutional, administrative, and developmental limits.

To develop this argument, the article draws on the concept of governmentality to examine how power operates through the Sixth Schedule across different historical moments. Rather than offering a purely theoretical account, the article uses governmentality as an analytical lens to connect colonial frontier administration, postcolonial state-making, and contemporary reforms. It proceeds in five sections: the first outlines the colonial genealogy of autonomy in the Northeast; the second examines the institutional structure and limits of ADC governance; the third analyses the political significance of the 125th Constitutional Amendment Bill; the fourth explores indigenous resistance and counter-mobilisation through selected case studies; and the final section reflects on the implications of governing autonomy as exception for democratic polities in India.

II. COLONIAL GENEALOGIES OF AUTONOMY AND THE FRONTIER

The governance of Northeast India did not begin with the framing of the Constitution. Colonial administrators confronted persistent resistance in the hill regions by adopting strategies of indirect rule and territorial differentiation. Through legal instruments such as the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874 and the creation of Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas, the colonial state limited administrative penetration while retaining sovereign authority over frontier spaces (Ray, 2019; Baruah, 2020). These arrangements transformed diverse communities into the administratively legible category of “hill tribes,” marking them as both culturally distinct and politically exceptional.

This model of interrupted sovereignty served multiple purposes. It reduced the costs of direct administration, preserved frontier regions as strategic buffers, and justified discretionary rule in the name of protection (Guyot-Réchar, 2013). Importantly, colonial governance framed autonomy not as political self-determination but as a technique for managing difference (Sharma & Jaya, 2021). The postcolonial state inherited this logic even as it sought to recast it in constitutional form.

III. CONSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY AND THE LIMITS OF SELF-RULE

The Sixth Schedule, introduced on the recommendations of the Bordoloi Sub-Committee, sought to replace colonial exclusion with constitutional autonomy (Sharma & Jaya, 2021). Autonomous District Councils were empowered to legislate on land, forests, customary law, and local governance (Ministry of External Affairs, n.d.). In principle, these provisions promised a measure of self-rule tailored to the social and cultural practices of tribal communities.

In practice, however, ADC autonomy has remained structurally constrained. Council legislation requires gubernatorial assent, and central or state laws prevail in cases of inconsistency. Financial dependence on state and central governments further limits independent decision-making. These constraints reveal a persistent imbalance between autonomy and sovereignty, with the Governor functioning as the key authority ensuring alignment with broader state objectives. As a result, autonomy often becomes procedural rather than substantive, generating periodic political mobilisation without altering underlying power relations.

As of 2024, there are autonomous councils across the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. The table below outlines the distribution and basic composition of the ADCs under the current constitutional framework:

TABLE 1
BASIC COMPOSITION OF ADCS IN NORTHEAST INDIA

State	Autonomous District Council	Members	Status/Context
Assam	Bodoland Territorial Council	46 (40 elected, 6 nominated)	Exception to the 30-member rule; covers 39 subjects
Assam	North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council	30 (28 elected, 2 nominated)	Governs Dima Hasao District
Assam	Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council	30 (26 elected, 4 nominated)	Site of significant 2024–2025 grazing land disputes
Meghalaya	Garo Hills Autonomous District Council	30	Governs the predominantly Garo region
Meghalaya	Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council	30	Key participant in 2025 Assam-Meghalaya border talks
Meghalaya	Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council	30	Significant for customary law codification
Mizoram	Chakma Autonomous District Council	30	Minority protection within the Mizo-majority state
Mizoram	Lai Autonomous District Council	30	Based on the ethnic identity of the Lai people
Mizoram	Mara Autonomous District Council	30	Covers the Siaha district in southern Mizoram
Tripura	Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council	30 (28 elected, 2 nominated)	Covers 68% of Tripura's territory; center of Tipra Motha movement (Debbarma & Haokip, 2023).

IV. REFORMING AUTONOMY: THE 125TH CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT BILL

The proposed 125th Constitutional Amendment Bill represents the most significant recent attempt to reform the Sixth Schedule. By enhancing financial devolution, establishing State Finance Commissions, and introducing elected village and municipal councils under ADCs, the Bill promises to strengthen local governance (PRS Legislative Research, n.d.). However, it can be argued that these reforms also signal a shift toward greater administrative standardisation and fiscal oversight.

The proposed amendment aims to increase the financial and administrative powers of the ADCs by establishing State Finance Commissions in the four Sixth Schedule states (Northeast Live Digital Desk, 2024); Bhagat-Ganguly & Kumar, 2024). This move represents a shift toward fiscal governmentality, where the state seeks to govern the ADCs through the management of budgets and the "scientific" allocation of resources.

Furthermore, the Bill proposes the creation of Village and Municipal Councils under the ADCs (Northeast Live Digital Desk, 2024). This represents a deepening of disciplinary power, bringing the state's administrative "gaze" into the most granular levels of tribal society. By establishing formal election protocols under a State Election Commission, the Bill seeks to standardize tribal "conduct" and align it with the national democratic norm (Bhagat-Ganguly & Kumar, 2024).

Rather than fundamentally altering the balance of power, the Bill risks deepening state control through new regulatory mechanisms. Electoral supervision, budgetary rationalisation, and planning protocols extend the administrative gaze into increasingly local spaces. While framed as empowerment, these measures may further erode customary authority and reinforce a model of autonomy that prioritises governability over self-rule.

TABLE 2
PROPOSED REFORMS OF THE 125TH CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

Proposed Reform	Institutional Mechanism	Objective in
State Finance Commission	Articles 243-I and 243-Y equivalent.	Ensuring "good governance" through predictable fund devolution (Bhagat-Ganguly & Kumar, 2024).
Village/Municipal Councils	Devolution of powers over land reform and planning.	Producing administrative "readability" (Baruah, 2005; PRS Legislative Research, n.d.).
State Election Commission	Oversight of local elections.	Normalizing electoral "conduct" (Baruah, 2005).

As of mid-2024, the Union Government has committed to forming a committee headed by the Minister of State for Home Affairs to resolve the issues delaying the Bill's passage (Northeast Live Digital Desk, 2024).

V. RESISTANCE, COUNTER-MOBILISATION, AND THE QUESTION OF EXCEPTION

The structural limits of Sixth Schedule autonomy become most visible during moments of indigenous resistance, when constitutional arrangements are tested by claims that exceed the administrative logic of autonomy.



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In Tripura, the emergence of the Tipra Motha Party and its demand for Greater Tipraland articulate long-standing indigenous grievances rooted in demographic marginalisation, land alienation, and political displacement following decades of migration and state-led development interventions. While the Sixth Schedule formally guarantees self-governance through autonomous district councils, it has proven inadequate in addressing deeper questions of territorial control, historical injustice, and collective political recognition for the Tipra people. The 2024 Tripura Peace Accord illustrates how such movements are often managed through negotiated settlements that prioritise political stability over substantive transformation. Rather than reconfiguring power relations or expanding meaningful fiscal and legislative autonomy, the accord largely reiterates existing constitutional frameworks, offering symbolic recognition and incremental administrative concessions (Government of India, 2024). This vindicates the aforementioned broader pattern in India's governance of the Northeast, where autonomy functions as a technology of conflict management, absorbing resistance through dialogue and accommodation while leaving underlying structures of inequality intact. Consequently, moments of indigenous mobilisation are treated as exceptions requiring containment, reinforcing the state's authority while narrowing the horizon of genuinely transformative self-rule.

Similarly, demands for Sixth Schedule status in Ladakh reveal how frontier governmentality is being extended into new ecological and geopolitical contexts. Following the reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019 and the creation of the Union Territory of Ladakh, local political mobilisations which is now being spearheaded by Sonam Wangchuk have increasingly articulated autonomy claims around environmental protection, land rights, and indigenous stewardship. These demands reflect anxieties over unregulated development, militarisation, and demographic change in a fragile high-altitude ecology, where land and resources are central to both livelihoods and cultural survival (Umdor & Vanlalhrualaitluanga, 2023). In this context, autonomy is framed not merely as a political arrangement but as a mechanism for safeguarding ecological commons and community-based governance systems against extractive and externally driven development models (Karlsson, 2011). However, the central government's continued reluctance to extend Sixth Schedule protections to Ladakh underscores the selective and strategic deployment of exceptional autonomy within India's constitutional framework.

While Sixth Schedule arrangements have historically been justified as safeguards for tribal populations in frontier regions, their application remains uneven and contingent upon broader security, geopolitical, and developmental imperatives (Hausing, 2018). Ladakh's strategic location along contested international borders renders it a space where sovereignty and national security concerns frequently override demands for devolved governance. As a result, autonomy claims are deferred or diluted, revealing how the "exception" operates not as a universal principle of protection but as a flexible tool of state control- granted, withheld, or reshaped in accordance with shifting political priorities (Baruah, 2020).

Demands for Sixth Schedule status by the Rabha community in Assam further illuminate the uneven geography of autonomy and the hierarchical application of constitutional protections. The Rabhas, a Scheduled Tribe population concentrated mainly in Goalpara and Kamrup districts, have long mobilised around questions of land alienation, cultural marginalisation, and political underrepresentation. The establishment of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) in 1995 under a state-specific legislative framework was initially projected as a mechanism of self-governance. However, its limited legislative, fiscal, and administrative powers have rendered it largely dependent on the state government, falling short of the substantive autonomy envisioned under the Sixth Schedule. Rabha mobilisation for Sixth Schedule inclusion reflects a broader critique of differential citizenship within Assam, where some tribal groups enjoy constitutionally entrenched autonomy while others remain governed through weaker, ad hoc institutional arrangements (The Sentinel Assam, 2026). Community organisations and student bodies have consistently argued that the absence of Sixth Schedule protections has accelerated land dispossession, facilitated encroachment by non-tribal populations, and undermined customary governance practices (Baruah, 2020). In this sense, the Rabha demand is not merely for administrative restructuring but for parity of recognition and protection within the constitutional order. The state's reluctance to extend Sixth Schedule status to Rabha Hasong underscores the selective logic through which autonomy is granted. Concerns over territorial fragmentation, inter-ethnic contestation, and administrative manageability are frequently invoked to defer constitutional inclusion. Yet such reasoning reveals how autonomy operates as an exception rather than a right, carefully calibrated to manage political risk rather than to address historical and structural inequalities.

As with Tripura and Ladakh, the Rabha case demonstrates how demands for deeper autonomy are absorbed, delayed, or diluted through intermediate institutional forms, reinforcing a graduated regime of self-rule that privileges stability over transformative decentralisation.

On the other hand, districts already governed under the Sixth Schedule, such as Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong in Assam, have increasingly articulated demands for full-fledged statehood, revealing the paradoxes embedded within constitutional autonomy. Despite enjoying enhanced legislative and administrative powers through autonomous district councils, these regions continue to experience chronic underdevelopment, fiscal dependence, and bureaucratic intervention by the state government (Naiding, 2021). In Dima Hasao, movements for Dimaraji statehood have repeatedly emerged from perceptions that Sixth Schedule autonomy offers only limited self-rule while leaving critical domains such as finance, infrastructure, and resource governance firmly under state control (Baruah, 2020; Hausing, 2018). Similarly, in Karbi Anglong, long-standing demands for Karbi Anglong statehood reflect frustrations with the constrained authority of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), which operates within a tightly regulated administrative framework that restricts meaningful political and economic decision-making. These statehood demands underscore how Sixth Schedule autonomy, rather than resolving questions of self-determination, often reconfigures them at a lower administrative scale. While the Sixth Schedule was intended as a protective mechanism for tribal self-governance, its implementation has produced a layered system of authority in which elected councils remain subordinate to state and central bureaucracies. As a result, autonomy functions less as an endpoint and more as an interim arrangement, one that manages aspirations without fully addressing claims to territorial sovereignty and political recognition. The push for statehood in Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong thus exposes the limits of “exceptional” autonomy, demonstrating how even constitutionally protected spaces can become sites of renewed mobilisation when institutional arrangements fail to deliver substantive control over development, land, and governance (Baruah, 2020).

Recurring Assam–Meghalaya border conflicts further expose the spatial contradictions and limits of autonomy in Northeast India.

Disputes over grazing reserves, forest lands, and village boundaries, most visibly in areas such as Mukroh, Langpih, and Block I and II are deeply rooted in colonial land regimes and the cartographic practices of late colonial and early post-independence boundary-making. These borders, often drawn without regard to customary land use, seasonal grazing patterns, or overlapping claims of authority, continue to structure contemporary conflicts. Despite the presence of autonomous institutions under the Sixth Schedule in Meghalaya and partial autonomy arrangements in adjoining areas of Assam, constitutional frameworks have proven inadequate in resolving these everyday territorial disputes, which are embedded in lived histories of mobility, livelihood, and belonging. As of March 2022, Chief Ministers of Assam and Meghalaya signed a historic agreement in New Delhi, facilitated by the Union Home Minister, to settle differences over six out of twelve contested areas along their shared boundary. The government characterized this as a milestone toward a “dispute-free Northeast,” noting that approximately 70 % of the interstate border had become dispute-free following the agreement, which aimed at enhancing peace, stability, and development in the region (Press Information Bureau, 2022).

When viewed alongside demands for Sixth Schedule status in Rabha Hasong and Ladakh, as well as statehood movements in Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong, the Assam–Meghalaya conflicts reveal a recurring pattern: autonomy is territorially fragmented and unevenly applied, producing new fault lines even as it claims to manage difference. While Sixth Schedule councils are empowered to govern land and forest resources within their jurisdictions, their authority stops at administrative boundaries that remain contested on the ground. As a result, communities experience autonomy not as protection but as uncertainty, where overlapping legal regimes and competing state claims intensify insecurity rather than resolve it (Hausing, 2018).

These conflicts also illustrate how autonomy operates within a broader regime of frontier governmentality, where disputes are periodically managed through ad hoc negotiations, peace committees, and temporary ceasefires rather than through structural rethinking of territorial governance. Much like the Peace Accord in Tripura or the constrained autonomy offered to the Rabhas, border disputes are stabilised through technocratic and security-oriented interventions that prioritise order over justice.

In this sense, the Assam–Meghalaya borderlands function as spaces of permanent exception, where constitutional protections coexist with recurrent violence and administrative ambiguity. Together, these cases underscore how autonomy in Northeast India remains a contingent and spatially uneven project—capable of containing dissent and managing conflict, yet persistently unable to reconcile constitutional territoriality with lived claims to land, identity, and self-rule (Baruah, 2020).

VI. CONCLUSION

The Sixth Schedule occupies an ambiguous position within India's constitutional framework. While it symbolises a commitment to recognising indigenous difference, it also functions as a mechanism for governing political exception. By rendering conflict manageable rather than resolved, the Schedule integrates frontier regions into the state while preserving the primacy of sovereign authority.

This article has argued that autonomy under the Sixth Schedule has been shaped less by the pursuit of self-rule than by the imperatives of state-making, development, and security. Addressing the persistent tensions in India's tribal regions will require moving beyond the colonial grammar of exception toward more substantive forms of political and economic self-determination. Without such a shift, constitutional autonomy is likely to remain an instrument of governance rather than a foundation for democratic pluralism.

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