

STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMY: THE CASE OF RABHA TRIBE IN ASSAM

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Introduction

The term "tribe" is derived from the Latin word *tribua*, originally meant a political unit, and was later used to refer to social groups defined by the territory they occupied. Although there is no consensus on the definition of a tribe in anthropology, tribes are generally considered to be social groups "...bound together by kin and duty and associated with a particular territory. Members of a tribe share the social cohesion associated with the family, together with the sense of political autonomy of a nation" (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, 769).¹

W.J. Perry defines tribes as a group speaking a common dialect and inhabiting a common territory (Pathi 1984, p. 22). Bogardus defines tribes as a tribal group based on the need for protection, on ties of blood relationships and on the strength of a common religion (Sinha 1965, p.45). D.N. Majumdar defines a tribe as a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name members of which occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe certain taboos regarding marriage, profession or occupation and have developed a well assigned system of reciprocity and

¹For more discussion on the definition of the term "tribe", see "Introduction: Discourses on Tribals in India." Shodhganga, [shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/25901/9/09_chapter 1.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/25901/9/09_chapter%201.pdf)

mutuality of obligation (Srinivas 1977). According to G.S. Ghurye, purest of tribal groups resisting accumulation or absorption, possess certain features which can be considered as common features if possessed by all tribal groups.² They are as follows:

- ♦ They live away from civilised world in most inaccessible parts of both forests and hills
- ♦ They belong either to one of three stocks - Negrito, Austroloid or Mongoloid
- ♦ They speak same tribal dialect
- ♦ They possess a primitive religion known as Animism in which worship of ghosts or spirit is the most important element
- ♦ They follow primitive occupation such as gleaning, hunting and gathering of forest produce
- ♦ They are largely carnivorous or flesh or meat eaters
- ♦ They live either naked or semi-naked, using tree bark and leave for clothing
- ♦ They have nomadic habit and love for drink and dance (Ghurye 1963, p. 15-38)

According to Andre Beteille, defining a tribe is difficult and the definition should be based on empirical characteristic of a particular mode of human grouping found in different parts of the world, irrespective of condition of time and place. Conceptually, a tribe can be defined as an ideal state, a self-contained unit which constitutes a society in itself. A tribe is a society which has a common government and shares a common territory. Therefore, ecological and political criteria are not sufficient to define tribe as a society (Thaper 1996, p. 37). When the British began to write on Indian society, the term 'tribe' was used in general parlance in more than one sense: in reference to a group of people claiming descent from a common ancestor, and in reference to a group living in a primitive or barbarous condition (Xaxa, pp. 1519-1524). Therefore, it can be said that the word 'tribe' is a colonial construction. Today the word "tribe" stands for numerous and varied communities scattered all over the globe, variously called "aboriginal people"

²Ghurye, G.S. *The Scheduled Tribes*. Ghurye, 1963, pp. 15-38

or "indigenous people" in the discourse of the United Nations and Human Rights.³ The system has developed a modern understanding of this term based on the following:

- ◆ Self- identification as indigenous people at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member
- ◆ Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies
- ◆ Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources
- ◆ Distinct social, economic or political systems
- ◆ Distinct language, culture and beliefs
- ◆ Form non-dominant groups of society
- ◆ Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive people and communities⁴

Fulfilling most of the conditions of the above mentioned definitions of the term 'tribe', the Rabhas are one of the nine Schedule Tribes in the plain districts of Assam, and they are divided into several societal units with distinct cultural boundaries. Different scholars expressed different views regarding the ethnic individuality of the Rabha tribe, its original place of abode and the relationship with other tribal groups (Das, 1962).⁵ Basumatary states that the Rabhas are one of the indigenous tribes of Assam. Their concentration is found throughout the state of Assam besides its adjoining States like West Bengal, Meghalaya and in a few areas of Bangladesh.⁶ The Rabhas belong to the Indo-mongoloid group of people and their population is also scattered to Nepal, Bhutan and China with a varied identity. A. Playfair

³"Introduction: Discourses on Tribals in India." *Shodhganga*, shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/25901/9/09_chapter 1.pdf.

⁴Considering the diversity of "indigenous people" which in the Asian context is understood to refer to distinct cultural groups, such as "Adivasis", "tribal people", "hill tribes" or "scheduled tribes; an official definition of "indigenous" has not been adopted by any United Nations system body. "Who are Indigenous Peoples?" *United Nations Forum on Indigenous Issues*, www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf, Accessed 05 April 2018.

⁵For details, see "The Rabhas: An Ethnographic Profile." *Shodhganga*, shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/66470/9/09_chapter%203.pdf, Accessed 05 April 2018.

⁶Basumatary, Phukan. *The Rabha Tribe of North East India, Bengal and Bangladesh*. New Delhi, Mittal Publication, 2010, p. 1

(1909) also has pointed out some linguistic and cultural similarities between the Rabhas and Garos.⁷ Edward Tuite Dalton noticed "The Rabhas and the Hajongs of the Goalpara district are also branches of the Kachari race and connected with the Garos."⁸ But after interacting with the people of Rabha community during my field work, I observed that the people from the Rabha community do not consider themselves an offshoot of Kachari tribe.

The Rabhas of Assam are influenced by different cultural and linguistic communities to a large extent. As a result of adaptation of cultural and linguistic elements from other communities and repudiation of their own identity, majority of the Rabhas have converted to Hinduism. However, some of them are in the process of mobilization to survive and preserve their inherent culture and language.⁹

In 1980s i.e. after the formation of ARSU¹⁰ and work done by organisations like ARNC¹¹ and ARWC¹², awareness about the preservation of their language, culture and identity, spread among the Rabhas. After 1980, hardly any conversion took place among the Rabhas as different organisations worked towards recognising their tribal identity. The political movement of Rabhas started in two phases. *Firstly*, in 1993 for the demand of autonomy in the Rabha dominated areas of Kamrup, Goalpara, Darrang, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Nalbari, Sonitpur, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nowgaon, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Karbi Anglong, Demari and reservation of five seats for Rabhas in the Bodoland Autonomous Council.¹³ *Secondly*, in 2003 for demand of upgradation of Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. This movement is still going

⁷Mandal, Bipul and Roy, Manadeb. "The Rabha and Their Social Movement (1925-1950): A Case Study of North Bengal." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Volume 10, No.03, 2013, pp. 05-08, www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol10-issue3/B01030508.pdf,

⁸Mandal and Roy, 5

⁹Basumatary, 1

¹⁰All Rabha Student Union

¹¹All Rabha National Council

¹²All Rabha Women Council

¹³Demands made under the Memorandum submitted to the Honourable Chief Minister of Assam on 10 November 1993

on as the Autonomous Council has not been recognised under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution till date.

In this context, the research paper focuses on the historical background of the Rabha tribe and its political movement for recognition and autonomy within the state of Assam. The study deals with the ongoing movement of demand of Sixth Schedule by the Rabha community and addresses the question whether the Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council should be upgraded under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. The paper also analyses the pros and cons of the implementation of Sixth Schedule in the Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council area in comparison with the implementation of the Sixth Schedule to the Bodoland Autonomous Council.

The study is both doctrinal as well as empirical and adopts the interview method to achieve the objectives of the research work. The data has been collected from both primary as well secondary sources. Due to paucity of time, the field study is restricted to few villages namely Hathisila, Matia, Majerburi, Gojapara, Sarapara, Lalabori, Duhikata, Harimura of Goalpara district in Assam and Manikganj, Jonglapara, Thapamorandi, Rakhundab of North Garo Hills district in Meghalaya.

The Rabhas: A Historical Background

The total tribal population in Assam is 38, 84,371, according to the 2011 census, the share being 12.4% of the total state's population. Amongst 23 tribal communities in the state, the Rabhas constitute the fourth dominant Plain Tribes of Assam, after the Bodos, Miris and the Mikirs.¹⁴ The Rabha tribe is divided into 10 sub-groups namely Rongdani, Maitori, Pati, Dahori, Koch/Kocha, Totla, Bitilia, Hana, Songa and Madahi. Madahi sub-group wants a separate tribal identity and claims that they are separate from the Rabha tribe. These sub-groups are classified on the basis of work performed in the BaikhoPuja. For example, Rongdani group used to do sitting

¹⁴"Witch-craft and witch-hunting perspectives: The Rabha community of Assam." *Shodhganga*, shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/152219/2/11%20chapter%204.pdf, Accessed 8 April 2018.

arrangements, Maitori were rice (Mai) distributors and Pati used to arrange leaves or *Patta* for the feast in Baikho *Puja*.¹⁵

Divergent views have been expressed by different scholars regarding the origin and relationship of this ethnic group with others. Dr B.M. Das, a reputed anthropologist said that Tibetan region is the origin place of the Rabhas from where they migrated to the Garo hills areas; now distributed in the plains of Assam. He also pointed out some linguistic and cultural affinities between Garos and Rabhas. According to Lt. Col. Wadel, Rabhas are a branch of the Kacharis and have become almost Hindu although the process of conversion was less intense than that of the Koches. Dr. Grierson is of the opinion that Rabha was a Hindu name of the Kacharis. But E.A. Gait on the other hand, identified them as a distinct tribe and said that they were also known as Totias and Datiyal Kacharis. In this regard S. Endle seemed to have supported Gait by saying that the Rabhas of Darrang used to call themselves sometimes as Totias and Datiyal Kacharis. Dr. B.M. Das said that it seems probable that Mongoloid people came in successive wave from the north and north-eastern region. They have partly or wholly absorbed the Autochthonous-Australoid and later on formed various tribes like the Rabha, the Garo etc.¹⁶ It is an established fact that Rabha community belongs to the Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group.

There are many mythological stories related to the origin of the Rabha tribe. One of the stories is that the term Rabha has been thought to have been originated from the term Raba, which means 'to bring'. In the mythological context, the Rabhas were brought from Rankrang (the Heaven) by their Rishi Bai (their Supreme God), and the former were shown all the fertile lands on the Earth and were advised by the latter to settle there and take up agriculture and crop production as a means of occupation. The Rishi Devta is also believed to have taught the art of wine-making to the Rabhas and His consort Rantuk/ GharGosani, taught the

¹⁵Rabha, Tarun Chandra. Personal Interview. 12 April 2018

¹⁶"Historical Background of Scheduled Tribes of Assam." *Shodhganga*, shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/114324/10/10_chapter%202.pdf, Accessed 8 April 2018.

art of spinning of thread, weaving, cloth designing and the art of cooking to the Rabha community.¹⁷

According to Jibeswar Koch, "It is an admissible fact that the generic name 'Rabha' is mixed with mystery of fact and legend, which is still prevalent among the people. The principal male deity Lord 'Risi' brought (in Rabha, 'rabatna') the people from 'Rangkrang ' (the heaven, broadly Tibet) to the land, and that is why, they became 'Rabha' in course of time. The legend actuates the migratory trace of the people from the Sino-Tibetan tract. The other legend says that the name 'Rabha' or 'Raba-ha' was given by their kith and kin, the Garos, and in turn, the Rabhas call the Garos as 'Mutang' while another legend narrates that Raja Dodan brought these people (in Rabha, 'rabatana')." ¹⁸ It is considered that the name 'Rabha' was given to them by the 'others'. They were earlier known as the 'Raba' but with the changing times 'Raba' turned into 'Rabha' (Rabha 1999). The name Rabha is considered to be a given name to the community (Karlsson 2000, p. 25). So, it has been crystal clear that today's 'Rabha' is a new accretion from its typical 'Raba' or 'Rab-ha' (Raba-ha) which is still prevalent among the native and monolingual people.¹⁹ Hodgson had also gone to the extent of describing about the Rabha that "Rabha constitute a major segment of the Bodo linguistic group, who belong to the Mongoloid stock" and have Hindu influence in their practices. Rabha is also considered a subcategory of the Garo tribe (Rabha 1999).²⁰ Also, earlier there was uncertainty whether Kocha is Rabha. Hamilton in 1810 stated that Kocha and Rabha are same and they worship Rishi Bai. Also, Dr.Revuti Mohan Saha has stated that Rabha is Kocha and Kocha is Rabha. ²¹

In Shahnameh by Hakim Abul-Qasim Firdawsi Tusi and also in Baharistan-i-Ghaibi, it has been stated that Sankaldeep (Koch) was the Rabha

¹⁷See note 14

¹⁸Koch, Jibeswar. *Rabha Dialects: A Linguistic Study*. Phd. Thesis, Faculty of Arts, University of Guwahati, 2014

¹⁹Koch, 2014

²⁰Goswami, Alimpana. *Performance, Politics and Autonomy: An Ethnography of Rabha Identity in Contemporary Assam*. M.Phil. Dissertation, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati, 2015

²¹Rangkho, Kushadhwaj. Personal Interview. 12 April 2018

king in the 4th century. He used to rule the present states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and Lucknavati (Present Lucknow) was his capital (This is stated in the Journal of the U.P. Historical Society, Lucknow).²² It is evident that the Rabha Raja Parsuram ruled over in the south Goalpara in the first decades of seventeenth century with the capital at Sambul, Sambhul or Sambhor (Solmari near Goalpara town), extending from the Brahmaputra on the north to the Rongdon River in the Garo Hills border on the south, and from Rongjuli on the east to Fulbari on the west.²³ Thus, in south Goalpara and south Kamrup district the indigenous Rabha people were the master till this region was annexed to British India under the Treaty of Yandaboo.²⁴ The Pati Rabhas has been residing in and around Dudhnoi and Dhupdhara areas of Goalpara district. Religious conversion among the Pati Rabhas of the areas started sometime in 1933 and continued until the 1950s. Ambuk, Salpara, Chekowary, Ambari, Madang are villages situated in and around Dhupdhara are inhabited by Pati Rabhas. A large number of the Rabhas of those villages converted to Rajbanshi before the independence of India. They abandoned their Rabha titles and accepted the titles such as Ray, Das, Sarania. They have not only abandoned their Rabha titles but also all the customary laws in regard to the various social activities, such as, marriage, birth and death rites. Since their conversion to Rajbanshi they have been performing all the socio-religious activities according to Hindu methods.²⁵

The traditional economy of the Rabhas in general is based on agriculture, forest based activities and weaving. They also domesticate pigs. In the past, the Rabhas used to practice shifting cultivation. The Rabha society was matriarchal. By birth they used to obtain the 'gotra' or 'clan name' of their mother.²⁶ But

²²Ibid.

²³"Autonomy Movements of Plain Tribes of Assam Save Bodos." *Shodhganga*, shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/114324/15/15_chapter%207.pdf, Accessed 25 April, 2018.

²⁴Signed between General Sir Archibald Campbell on the British side and by Governor of Legaing Maha Min Hla Kyaw Htin of the Burmese side on 24 February, 1826

²⁵"Socio Political Changes." *Shodhganga*, shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/66997/10/10_chapter%204.pdf, Accessed 25 April 2018.

²⁶Mandal and Roy, 5

now they are shifting from matriarchy to patriarchy. It is difficult to say that the Rabha community is purely matriarchal or patriarchal. There is a mixed practice. The daughter inherits the jewellery and ornaments of her mother. The son inherits the property of his father. If there is no daughter then a part of jewellery and ornaments of mother goes to the daughter of the nearest kin and the remaining goes to the daughter-in-law. The Rabha Community previously believed in animism. But now they are intermingled with Hinduism. They believe in Hindu God and Goddesses and also practice animism. They celebrate Hindu festivals as well as their traditional *Baikho Puja*.

The Struggle for Autonomy

The term "autonomy" derives from two Greek words: "auto" meaning self and "nomos" meaning law or rule (Benedikter 2009, p. 18). It appears that to make one's own laws or self-rule is the basic meaning of autonomy. More precisely, autonomy implies certain degree of independence that a specific entity enjoys within a sovereign state relating to the matters of self-rule over special affairs concerned to them (Ghai 2000, p. 8).²⁷ Verrier Elwin advocates policy of isolation for tribal people. He feels that it is important to give some protection to tribal people in transition period during which they must learn to stand on their own feet and become strong enough to resist those who exploit them. In his book, *A Philosophy of NEFA*, he advocates for development of tribes residing in remote areas of North-East Frontier and suggests spending a great deal of money to eradicate poverty, degradation and unhappiness.²⁸ India has been applying the idea of autonomy as an important approach in dealing with ethnic problems since the early period of post-independence.²⁹ But after independence not much has been done for

²⁷Boro, Jagmohan. "Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council: A Case of Contested Autonomy in Indian State of Assam." *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India*, Vol.2, Issue 3, No.4, 2015, pp.37-45, <http://www.ticijournals.org/rabha-hasong-autonomous-council-a-case-of-contested-autonomy-in-indian-state-of-assam/>

²⁸Guha, Ramachandra. *Savaging the Civilized*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 63-97

²⁹Boro, 2015

the Rabha community by the government, whether educational, political or socio-economic issues. In beginning of shaping government's policy for tribal development, the Constitution of India under Article 46 directs states to promote special care on educational and economic interest of tribal people. Constitutional provisions, particularly Schedule V and VI of the Constitution of India, provide for the special status to the tribes for the preservation of their language, culture and identity.

Ethnic politics of the Rabhas that started in the late 1980s was concerned with separate political arrangement to safeguard their cultural identity, land and socio-economic and political interests and to determine the future of their generations.³⁰ The Rabhas were given autonomy in 1995 under the "Rabha Accord." But the Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council has been given very limited powers and functions which is subject to the interference by the state government.

The root of ethno-based student organisations and ethno-based student politics among the Rabhas can be traced back to the pre-independence era itself. In the pre-independence period, some educated youths among the Rabha community came forward to safeguard distinct ethnic identity of Rabhas resulting in the growth of ethno-nationalism among the Rabha community. This started with the formation of the Assam Rabha Chhatra Sanmilan in 1926 under the patronage of Gobardhan Sarkar, an educated youth and one of the path-finders of the Rabha community. The Assam Rabha Chhatra Sanmillan was formed under the leadership of Dwarikanath Rabha, Holiram Rabha, Kartik Rabha and Rajen Rongkho (Rabha Hakacham, 2010:202). In the subsequent period, certain youth organisations were formed, such as "Rabha Yubak Sangha" (1941) under the patronage of educated youth Khirodmohan Rabha, Habraghat Rabha Chhatra Sanmilan (1945), Garo Hills Rabha Chhatra Sanmilan (1956) etc. These organizations contributed a lot to create the community awareness and solidarity among the Rabhas and also paved the way for the growth of ethnic nationalism

³⁰Boro, Jagmohan. "Rabha Ethnic Politics and Role of the State: An Appraisal." *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India*, Vol.3, Issue 3, No.1, pp. 1-7, 2016, <http://www.ticijournals.org/rabha-ethnic-politics-and-role-of-the-state-an-appraisal/>

among the Rabhas (Rabha, Hakacham 2010, p. 203).³¹ The feeling of deprivation among the Rabhas provided a strong means to unite them and it worked as a major factor in building up ethno-based youth organisations for the upliftment of their socio-economic and political status.

Towards the later part of 1970s, few Guwahati-based school and college-going students coming from different places of Assam and also from adjoining Meghalaya during unscheduled discussions raised the issue of forming a common platform of the emerging educated youths and students of the Rabha community. This idea gradually got momentum and after several rounds of informal and formal discussion, "The Greater Gauhati Rabha Students Union" was formed as a common platform among the Rabha students (Rabha, Anil 2004). This new-born organisation gradually has grown, and within a period of two years since its formation has expanded its shape, size, and scope leading towards the formation of "All Rabha Students Union" (ARSU) (Rabha, Anil 2004).³² The sense of unity and the need for the development of the Rabhas led to the formation of All Rabha Students' Union (ARSU) on 12th February 1980 in a representative meeting in Goalpara district under the patronage of Mr. Listi Rabha Rangkho and under the Presidentship of Kanta Ram Rabha, Vice President Pranoy Rabha and General Secretary Sabyasachi Rabha. The Political movement of Rabhas for distinct identity assertion and autonomy got motion after the formation of ARSU. The movement for recognition and overall development of the Rabha society was strengthened after the formation of ARSU. ARSU played a significant role along with other organisations for the demand of Rabha Hasong autonomy. They organized the Rabha people under the banner of All Rabha Sahitya Sabha (ARSS) and launched mass movements to fulfil their demands. Their claims resulted in the introduction of Rabha language as a subject up to class three in 70 primary schools in Goalpara, Dhubri and Bongaigaon district in 1988 (See fig. a).

³¹Das, Dhruvajyoti. "Ethno-based Student's Organisation and Movement for Ethnic Autonomy in North-East India: Understanding the Role of All Rabha Student's Union (ARSU) in The Movement for Rabha Ethnic Autonomy in Assam." *Indian Streams Research Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 10, 2012, pp. 1-7, figshare.com/articles/658703

³²Das, 5



fig. a: Members of Rabha Hasong Demand Committee - From Left to Right: Dhaneswar Rabha (V.P), Sarat Chandra Rabha (President), Solochan Rabha (Secretary), Sabyasachi Rabha (V.P) 14th March 1993, Janta Bhawan, Guwahati

These appointments were done on an experiment basis and number of teachers was to be increased every 3 years. But no primary teachers were appointed thereafter and the number remained the same. Now, the remaining teachers have been diverted to teach Assamese and at present the Rabha language is not taught in schools. At the moment, ARSU, with the cooperation of ARSS, are still demanding the State government to provide a Constitutional safeguard to their language and promote it as medium of instruction and to appoint 300 Rabha language teachers in the schools of Rabha dominated areas in Assam.³³ ARSU in their subsequent phases formed the Rabha Hasong Demand Committee (RHDC) in 1992 and All Rabha Women Council (ARWC) on 8 August 1993, Sixth Schedule Demand Committee (SSDC) in 2003 and launched mass movements to assert and safeguard their distinct ethnic identity as well as to achieve their desired goal (Rabha, Dhaneswar 2005, pp. 23-29).³⁴

During my field work, I observed that there is a structured and organised system within the ARSU. There are four committees of ARSU at each level namely, Central Committee, District Committee, Anchalik or Branch

³³Ibid

³⁴Ibid

Committee and village committee. There is co-ordination among all these committees regarding the different activities related to the demands of Rabha people. ARSU, ARWC and SSDC jointly launched mass movements demanding greater autonomy in the Rabha Hasong area under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India and to form Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council covering the area of the two districts of lower Assam-Kamrup and Goalpara from Rani of South Kamrup to Jairamkuchi of Goalpara district including 3161 square km land in the Southern bank of river Brahmaputra and the Northern foothill areas of Meghalaya. Due to the active and relentless effort and demand movement of ARSU, RHDC, ARWC, the Rabha Accord was signed on 10th March, 1995 between the Government of Assam, the then Chief Minister of Congress led Government Hiteswar Saikia, the Chief Secretary A. Bhattacharya and the members of ARSU, President Gangaraj Rabha and Secretary Ratan Rabha of ARSU, President Sarat Chandra Rabha, Secretary Sulochan Rabha of RHDC (Rabha, Dhaneswar 2005, p. 29).³⁵

Thus, their Rabha Hasong demand movement got a positive response from the Government of Assam and accordingly the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Act, 1995 was passed in the Assam assembly. This resulted in the formation of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (Hazarika 2005, p. 109).³⁶ By the notification dated 3 April 1998, there were 306 villages under Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council which have more than 50% of ST (P) population. ARSU, ARWC and SSDC submitted a memorandum to the State government for inclusion of 1120 villages under the Autonomous Council. By the notification dated 17th May 2005, 779 villages were included under the Autonomous Council.³⁷

Referring to the Rabha Accord, the 1st Interim Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) was constituted under the chairmanship of Sabyasachi Rabha along with other 19th executive members on 20th July, 1995, but the boundary of the proposed council's area is yet to be demarcated

³⁵Das, 6

³⁶Ibid

³⁷Rangkho, Kushadhwaj. Personal Interview. 12 April 2018

in an agreed manner. From 1995- 2007, during this period, already three interim RHAC's have been constituted by the Government of Assam. The 2nd interim RHAC, was constituted in 1997 by the Govt. of Assam with the initiatives of Chief Minister Prafulla Kr. Mahanta taking Sarat Chandra Rabha as chief executive member along with other 25 additional members and the 3rd interim RHAC was formed in 2001 by the Govt. of Assam with the initiatives of Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi taking Dr. Sarat Chandra Rabha as chief executive members along with other 24 additional members (Borah, 2008).³⁸ There were some problems with the functioning of the council. There was no demarcated boundary for the electoral constituency and therefore elections were not held for 18 long years after the formation of the Rabha Accord and the government would appoint members of the Autonomous Council. Also there are problems like underdevelopment and encroachment of land of Rabha people by illegal immigrants. Thus, although some amount of political autonomy was granted to the Rabhas, in a real sense, the aspirations of the Rabha people were not fulfilled due to the gaps in the implementation of the Rabha Accord. This led to the demand of a higher autonomy by the Rabhas. A memorandum dated 14 April 1998 was submitted by the executive members of the Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council to the then Prime Minister of India with following demands:

- ♦ To implement the provisions of the Rabha Accord, signed on 10 March 1995
- ♦ To implement the provisions of the Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council Act, 1995 without further laches
- ♦ To demarcate the boundaries of Rabha-Hasong Autonomous council along with the 830 number of revenue villages demanded by the Rabha community
- ♦ To amend the Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council Act 1995 suitably to allow the Council better autonomy in the way of more financial, administrative and legislative powers

After 8 years of the Rabha Accord, in 2003 ARSU demanded the upgradation of Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council under the Sixth

³⁸Das, 6.

Schedule of the Constitution of India. In this regard, Rabha National Convention was organised on 7 and 8 June 2003, in Dudhnoi College, Goalpara. At that time, Tankeswar Rabha and Bijan Rabha were the President and Secretary of ARSU respectively. On 8 June, 2003 Sixth Schedule Demand Committee (SSDC) was formed under the Presidentship of Gauri Shankar Rabha and Biren Totola as Chief Secretary. On 11 April 2004, Organising Secretary, Kushadhvaj Rangkho (Patgiri) was arrested during the movement for the demand of Sixth Schedule for 19 days. (See fig. b)

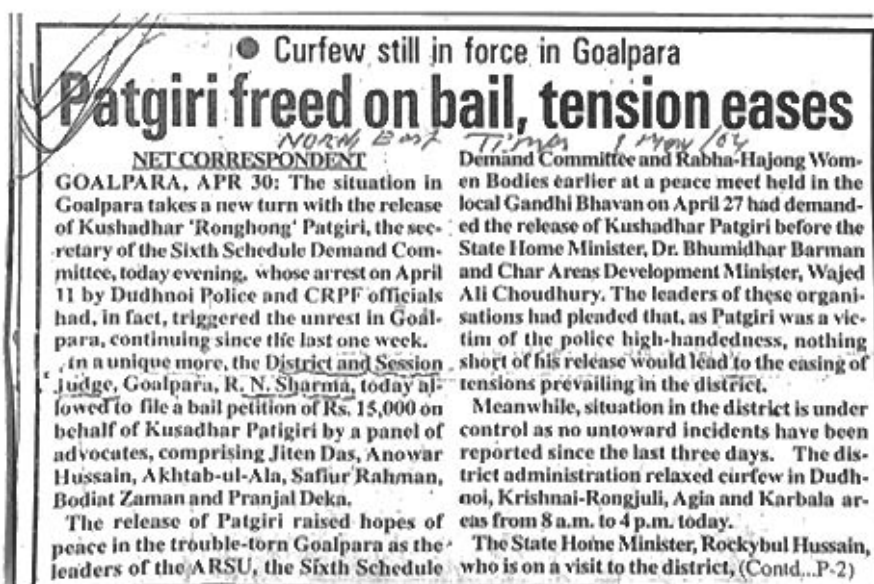


fig. b: Newspaper clipping of North East Times (1 May 2004) reporting release of Kushadhvaj Patgiri (Secretary) SSDC.

For 72 hours thereafter, the Rabha-Hasong area witnessed a bandh in protest of the arrest of Patgiri. During the bandh, 3 persons named Anukul Rabha, Pawan Rabha and Ravindra Rabha, who were the members of the Rabha-Hasong Demand Committee, were killed. The Rabhas consider them as the first Martyrs of the Rabha Political movement. Clause 5(a) of the Rabha Accord 1995 states, "The provision of Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 and the Assam Municipal Act, 1994 (amended) shall not apply to the areas of the villages included in Rabha-Hasong Village Council (RHVC)".

This was the major contention because Panchayat elections were continued to be held in the villages included in (RHVC) whereas no elections were held till 2013 for the Autonomous Council. The ARSU and other organisations opposed Panchayat elections in 2008 and 2013. In 2013 during the protest against the Panchayat election violent clashes took place among the police forces, Rabhas and non-tribals. 20 people died and many were injured due to the violence. (See fig. c.)



fig. c.: Photos showing harm caused to lives and property due to the violence during Panchayat Election in 2013.

After the formation of SSDC the movement for the upgradation of Autonomous Council under the Sixth Schedule started. After 2005, ARSU, ARWC and SSDC started the movement again. There were mainly three demands:

- ♦ To upgrade Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution

- ◆ To hold the election for the Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council
- ◆ To appoint 300 Rabha Language Teachers in schools.³⁹

But none of the demands were fulfilled immediately. However, an election for the Council was held in 2013 after several instances of violence took place in Goalpara opposing the Panchayat elections. In 2010, the Sub-Committee which was formed by the state government to probe into the demand of the Rabhas for Sixth Schedule submitted its report to the state government recommending the upgradation of Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. But the report was not sent to the Central government by the then state government.⁴⁰ In this context, a sub-committee has been reconstituted by the present state government on 27 March 2018 to examine the demand of Rabhas for the recognition under Sixth Schedule with the following members:

1. Shri Chandra Mohan Patowary, Minister- Chairman
2. Shri Ranjit Dutta, Minister- Member
3. Smt. Pramila Rani Brahma, Minister- Member Convenor

Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC): An Overview

According to the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Amendment Act, 2005, the RHAC consists of 'Core Areas' and 'Satellite Areas' of villages. The 'Core Areas' means the compact and contiguous areas predominantly inhabited by the Schedule Tribes population having 50% and above as a whole in the area and not necessarily in the individual villages. The Satellite Areas consist of non-contiguous clusters of villages predominately inhabited by Schedule Tribes population having 50% and above as a whole in the cluster and not necessarily in the individual villages (Amendment Act, 2005).⁴¹ Therefore, it can be said that both tribal as well as non-tribals are subject to the jurisdiction of the Autonomous Council.

³⁹Rangkho, Kushadwaj. Personal Interview. 12 April 2018

⁴⁰Rabha, Harish. Personal Interview. 14 April 2018

⁴¹Boro, Jagmohan. "Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council: A Case of Contested Autonomy in Indian State of Assam." *Journal of Tribal Intellectual Collective India*, Vol.2, Issue 3, No.4, 2015, pp.37-45, <http://www.ticijournals.org/rabha-hasong-autonomous-council-a-case-of-contested-autonomy-in-indian-state-of-assam/>, Accessed 25 April 2018.

Also, according to the RHAC Amendment Act, 2005, the RHAC is constituted by a General Council, an Executive Council and Village Councils. The General Council consists of 40 members of which 36 are directly elected and 4 members are nominated by the Government to give representation to those communities of the council which are not otherwise represented in it. Out of 40 seats, 25 seats are reserved for the tribals and out of 25 reserved seats at least 6 seats are reserved for women of any community (Amendment Act, 2005). The rest of the seats may be understood as unreserved and open for all since the Act does not mention who they belong to.⁴² Therefore, the council has representation from all the communities including tribals as well as non-tribals.

According to the RHAC Accord, 1995, the executive council of the RHAC is vested with the executive powers and functions on 34 subjects in relation to the Council area. According to the Accord, the RHVC has the executive powers and functions on 29 subjects in relation to the Village Council area. Although the General Council has power to make bye-laws/rules or orders on aforesaid subjects, the General Council has to exercise its power according to the norms prescribed by the State Government of Assam. Besides, all laws or rules made by the General Council are subject to the approval of the State Government.⁴³ Regarding the judicial power, the Rabha Accord provides that the State shall take steps to set up customary courts if rival parties wish to settle disputes in these courts. Therefore, it can be stated that the State government has the power to interfere in legislative and judicial functions of the Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council.

The Demand for the Sixth Schedule: A Relook

The desire to provide a proper constitutional set up for the tribal areas of North East was to see that the aspirations of the people of the area are met, and that these areas are assimilated with the main stream of the country.⁴⁴ A Sub-Committee was formed on 27 February 1947, to report on the North

⁴²Ibid

⁴³Ibid

⁴⁴Hansaria, Justice B.L., Revised by Vijay Hansaria. *Sixth Schedule to The Constitution*. 2nd ed., New Delhi, Universal Law Publishing Co., 2005, p. 1

East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas. Its chairman was Shri Gopinath Bordoloi who was then the Premier of Assam and other members were Shri J.J.M. Nichols Roy, Shri Rup Nath Brahma, Shri A.V. Thakkar and Shri Mayang Nokcha who was later on replaced by Shri Aliba Imti.⁴⁵ The Sub-Committee submitted its Report on 28 July 1947 to Shri Ballabhbai Patel who was the Chairman of Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights. The report included the thoughts on development, special features of these areas, land, forest, jhumming, courts, finance, control of immigration, mines, legislation, representation, services etc.⁴⁶ Shri Brajeswar Prasad of Bihar was of the opinion that tribal areas should be brought under the jurisdiction of the centre and that the President should look after them. His reason was the ongoing conflicts between different communities and mass infiltration in the state of Assam. Therefore, he was of the view that there is no political stability in Assam and administration of such a vast tract of land should not be left in the hands of provincial government. Shri Kuladhar Chaliha said that giving too much autonomy to the tribals, would result in creation of "tribalstan" just as Pakistan had been created.⁴⁷ On the issue of provisions of autonomy to the hill areas, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar insisted that tribal communities of Assam were different from tribal population of rest of the country as their roots were still in their own civilisation and their own culture and, therefore, they should have a different administrative structure. Therefore, to retain such institution of local governance provisions in the Sixth Schedule were proposed by Bordoloi Committee. The committee recommended for autonomy in the hill areas for administration and accordingly autonomous hill district council were set up under Assam in 1952.⁴⁸ Regarding the autonomy of plain tribes, Bordoloi Committee report states that the population of the plain tribals which is being gradually assimilated to the population of the plains, should for all

⁴⁵Hansaria, 8

⁴⁶Hansaria, 9

⁴⁷Hansaria, 10

⁴⁸Baro, Aniruddha Kumar. "Sixth Schedule and its Implementation: Understanding the case of Bodoland (BTAD) in Assam." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 22, No. 12, 2017, pp. 05-09.

practical purposes, be treated as minority. They also stated that at present certain seats are reserved in the Provincial Legislature for them. However, the possibility of there being certain areas inhabited by tribals in the plains or at the foot of the hills whom it may be necessary to provide for in the same manner (Clause A (3) and Clause P of Appendix A, Bordoloi Sub-Committee Report).⁴⁹ Even during Constituent Assembly debate, Pandit Hirday Nath Kunzru stated that no matter how good the provisions of the Sixth Schedule might seem, they segregate people living in different districts and thus make unity much more difficult. He further stated that our policy should be to take advantage of the natural progress made by them in respect of the understanding of their interests bring them closer to the other areas, like the plain districts without in any way affecting their essential interests.⁵⁰

If we look at the Rabha movement from 1980-83, it was for educational reform and to improve the quality of education. After 2 years language was added as a subject of the movement. In 1987 main movement for the recognition of Rabha language started. It succeeded as the state government appointed 70 Rabha language teachers in primary schools in 1988. During AGP regime in 1986 a Convention was organised in Golaghat. There were leaders from AGP, AASU and other communities. It is said that Rabha leaders did not get respect and recognition in that convention. Therefore, Rabha leaders realised that they should revive their identity as a tribe apart from an Assamese identity. This was one of the reasons for the formation of ARSU.⁵¹ Before that in 1981, a memorandum was submitted to the then Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi demanding an autonomous status for Rabha identity. They got the political identity in 1993 after the formation of Rabha-Hasong Demand Committee. On 10 March 1995 Rabha Accord was signed between the then Chief Minister of Assam and leaders of ARSU. But immediately after the formation of RHAC, the State Government constituted an interim council on 20th July, 1995 to run the Council for time being which lasted till 1996. Instead of conducting election after the first interim

⁴⁹Hansaria, 242

⁵⁰Hansaria, 344

⁵¹Rabha, Tankeswar. Personal Interview. 16 April 2018

council the State Government constituted a second interim council which existed from 1996 to 2001. Moreover, the State Government constituted a third interim council in 2001 which malfunctioned after 2010 (Batori 2012, p. 2). Accordingly, the RHAC had been run by nominated members for many years since its inception and the State Government never held election to the council till 2012.⁵² In 2013, election to the Council was held in three phase after 18 years of the enactment of Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council Act, 1995 and 12 executive member Council was formed with Tankeswar Rabha as Chief Executive Member (CEM). In this context we can say that The State Government's failure in implementing the RHAC Act, 1995 for a long period of time has forced Rabhas to ask for more autonomy. (See fig. d.)



fig. d.: Rabha Movement for Sixth Schedule.

⁵²Boto, 2015

⁵³Ibid

There was a constant demand from the Rabhas to hold election to the Council and to include the Council under the Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution. In the meantime, other tribals (Garos) and non-tribals are mobilized under the banner of Non-Rabha Coordination Forum urging the Government of Assam to exclude their villages from the Council.⁵³ There are 3 pertinent issues which led to the demand of Sixth Schedule by the Rabhas:

1. Encroachment of land of Rabhas by the illegal immigrants
2. Under development in the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Area
3. State Government's interference in functions of the Autonomous Council (Restricted Autonomy)

During my field work, I visited the mentioned villages of district Goalpara in Assam and district North Garo Hills in Meghalaya. During the visit to villages, I observed that there are only primary and middle schools in most of the villages. Rabha language is not taught as a subject in schools. The medium of education in schools is Assamese. This is a threat to the survival of the Rabha dialect. The majority of the population in these villages have not even completed senior secondary level education. On an average 1 to 5 persons went for graduate level education in few villages like Hathisila, Matia, Majerburi, Gojapara, Sarapara. In villages like Sangdanpara, Khaisukpara, Tobalpara, Kathalguri nobody has completed post-graduate education. In few villages like Gojapara and Majerburi where Rabhas have been converted to Christianity, Don Bosco schools have been established by Christian Missionaries. With regard to health facilities, government hospitals are located very far from some villages, while most villages have hospital sub-centres, many don't.

Also, not much has been done to improve the quality of living for the people. Agriculture is the main occupation. About 90-95% of total population is engaged in agriculture. Very few people are in the service sector. Therefore, it can be deduced that the Council area is still underdeveloped. Rabhas are very rich in culture. The basic structure of the social life of the Rabhas is based on customs, traditions and religious beliefs which distinguish the tribe from other communities. The women of the villages are engaged in weaving. Seven Rabha women have received National Award for weaving:

Apila Rabha from Devitola, Dhubri (1990); Lady Rabha from Goajapra, Goalpara (1991); Amaya Rabha, Udalguri (1993); Nishawari Rabha from Dalmaka, Kokrajhar (1994); Aprika Rabha from Dalmaka, Kokrajhar (1995); Rijubala Rabha from Kokrajhar, (2000) and Binapani Rabha from Dudhnoi (2013). (See fig. e.)



fig. e.: Binapani Rabha from Dudhnoi receiving the National Award for Weaving for the year 2013.

If we look at this from the perspective of development and identity, it can be said that more autonomy is required in Rabha Hasong Council Area. It may be observed that although the Council is named after the Rabhas, the composition of other tribal and non-tribal population of the area is no less significant. The Council may therefore be observed as inclusive in nature, and as exclusive since the objective does not reflect the interests of other non-tribals in spite of having a large number of aforesaid communities in the area. Moreover, the objective tells about socio-economic and cultural advancement of the Rabhas of only the Council area excluding the aspirations of the Rabhas of other parts of Assam.³⁴ In this context, one can question how the other communities within the Council Area and Rabhas of other parts of Assam may benefit from the upgradation of Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council in the Sixth Schedule.

³⁴Boro, 2015

During my interview with CEM of Autonomous Council, I raised this question, but he refrained from answering it, stating he is not inclined to disclose policy issues, since their movement is still going on. In this context, the aspirations of non-tribals and Rabhas of other parts may be a questionable issue. The same problem can be seen in Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Area. Post-BTC Accord has also shown violence in the region between groups residing in the territory. It has experienced two major outbreaks of violence in 2008 and 2012 which has cost life and property in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) area.⁵⁵ If we see the implementation of Sixth Schedule in BTC area, it has both merits and demerits to it. Although development can be seen in BTC area, one cannot ignore the challenges faced by the Council. With the increasing of powers and functions of the Council, there is the flow of funds as for the development of the region as well. The fund provided by the federal government was implemented for development works. There are construction of roads, electrification to villages and subsidies for the poor. Though these facilities are under the central government, these are properly implemented for the development of the region.⁵⁶ If we see other sectors such as education in BTAD area, it has not improved a lot after the formation of BTAD. Because of poor infrastructural facilities in the educational sector and the high cost of education, poor inhabitants of the region could not afford to educate their children. On the other hand, lack of higher educational institutions is also one of the great challenges of development in higher education in these rural areas (Dasgupta, 2015; Saha, 2013).⁵⁷ Another problem in this area is the conflict between tribal and non-tribal groups.

Conclusion

Rabhas are one of the plain tribes of Assam. They have their unique language, culture and identity. Before independence, Rabhas have converted into Rajbonshi and adopted Hinduism. This was done to avoid discrimination and to uplift their status in the society. Therefore, it can be observed that

⁵⁵Ibid

⁵⁶Ibid

⁵⁷Ibid

their identity was threatened because they were converting to other religions for their upliftment. In 1926, efforts have been made by persons like Govardhan Sarkar, Darikanath Rabha and others to revive their identity and create awareness among Rabhas to preserve their language, culture and identity. The political movement of Rabhas started in 1980s for recognition of the Rabha identity. After a few years, there was a demand for autonomy by the Rabhas. On 10 March 1995, Rabha Accord was signed between the State Government and ARSU which led to the formation Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council in the year 1995. But very limited autonomy was given to the Rabhas. The State government has the power to interfere with the legislative and judicial functions of the Council, and has the final say in the implementation of any scheme in Rabha-Hasong area. Also, Autonomous Council is both inclusive and exclusive in nature. Inclusive in the sense that it includes both tribal and non-tribal population. Exclusive because its objective does not reflect the interest of non-tribals despite having a large number of aforesaid communities in the area and Rabhas in other parts of Assam. This is one of the reasons for the parallel running of Panchayat system and Autonomous Council in Rabha-Hasong area. Few seats are left unreserved in the Council for non-tribal people to contest. The lack of proper implementation of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Act of 1995 led to the demand of sixth schedule.

Also, few instances of violence can be seen in 2008 and 2013 during the Panchayat elections. This shows the existence of tension between Rabhas and non-tribal groups. Hence, non-tribal groups are demanding exclusion of their villages from the jurisdiction of the Council.

Overall, Rabha-Hasong Area remains largely underdeveloped, till date. About 60% of the land is not patta land.⁵⁸ There are problems like illegal immigration, encroachment of land of tribals and lack of educational and health facilities. To resolve all these issues, more autonomy should be given to the Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council but the interest of non-tribal groups and Rabhas of other parts of Assam and Meghalaya should also be protected. Otherwise it could lead to violence between Rabhas and other

⁵⁸Rabha, Tankeswar. Personal Interview. 16 April 2018

groups. Also, after upgradation to the Sixth Schedule, the Council will have more power to utilize funds for the development of Rabha Hasong Area. The challenges like improvement of educational facilities, raising the living standard of people, providing health facilities, to implement the socio-economic schemes along with the infrastructural improvement can be met and solved. In this context, I would put more emphasis on the individual development along with infrastructural development while protecting the interests of other groups in the Rabha-Hasong Council Area.

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