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Understanding ethnicity and ground reality: A socio-political case study of the Rabha tribal community of Assam in their fight for sixth schedule

Srishti Gautam

Abstract

The North-eastern part of India is often viewed by the mainstream to be a conflicted zone, where issues pertain between the neighbouring states and more often than not, within a single state as well. The state of Assam is dissected into diverse groups of ethnicities which have long been subdued and their rights unrecognized and overlapped by the mainstream dominance of the Assamese community. Faced with enormous socio-economic backwardness, national and domestic politics; understanding the appeal and demands of the tribal community is greatly significant in history and shaping of policies and politics of the contemporary times. One such tribe within Assam is the Rabha Schedule Tribe community has been fighting for complete autonomy within the state itself since post-independence period. Therefore, the paper tries to understand the historical politics responsible for forming the basis of the present autonomy movement of the Rabha community. Moreover, it is evident that the state has not been ignorant on this front and have continuously taken measures for the betterment and upliftment of the community, however there still remains to be a larger dissatisfaction looming around among the Rabha community and its political associations. The reasons pertaining to this dissatisfaction and the gap that needs to be filled between the state and the community will be scrutinized through this paper. The main focus of the paper remains the beneficiaries; upholding their views on the movement and ensuring their needs being met in the ground reality; abstaining from forming prejudices and biases as the tribal community continuous to live with the Assamese community at large in the Goalpara district of Assam, the district majorly inhabited by the co-existence of Rabha tribal community and Assamese community. Keeping this in focus, the question that the paper answers is how the beneficiaries will benefit from a separate state that is currently being denied or whether it is a mere political motive of the people in authority.

Keywords: Ethnicity, rabha tribal community, autonomy, rabha hasong autonomous council (rhac), all rabha students union (arsu), sixth schedule

1. Introduction

1.1 Ethnicity and Autonomy: With brief reference to Rabha

Modern democracy position terms such as 'ethnicity' and 'autonomy' with great consciousness as it holds immense prominence in the contemporary times. According to Oxford dictionary, ethnicity is "the fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition" [1]. The word of importance here is 'belongingness'; the need to be recognized and the need to have an identity and group association. With the era of globalization, traditional societies and associated practices, cultures and customs are getting withered away rapidly. Fear of losing one's rights, feeling inferior to a dominant culture and crisis over one's ethnic identity has made several indigenous groups to raise their voice, speak for their rights and fight against all odds to nurture their ethnic identity and generational practices.

India has been known to be associated with the phrase 'unity in diversity'. From a very tender age, we are taught of India being accommodating and living in harmony despite being a country of various class, caste, race and ethnic identity, in which every part of the country has their own languages, special dishes and festivals and practices that has been passed on by generations. However, as we grow, we become aware of the negative side of the differences.

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¹ According to Oxford Learners Dictionary, facts of belongingness depends on many factors such as class, gender, age and ethnicity.



(Source: The Sentinal, 2018)^[14]

With the world being modernized and the mainstream dominance being politicized and given importance to, the line between ethnicity and nationality has been blurred and somewhat merged. Nationality is the union collective belongingness to one's country, which most often caters to the dominant culture. This makes the small ethnic groups further secluded and wary of their identity loss. This phenomenon is mainly true for the tribal communities prevailing in India, and in particularly, in Northeast.

One such tribal community in the North East state of Assam is the Rabhas who have long been fighting for autonomy and their incorporation into the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Rabhas are Schedule Plain Tribes of Assam, marking their lineage from Tibeto-Burman community of Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh and the Indian state of Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal. Initially, the Sixth Schedule was meant for the administrations of the hill tribal communities of undivided Assam, however with the establishment of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), the demand aggravated among other plain tribal communities as well. Although the Rabhas and the Bodos have long been fighting for autonomy and Sixth Schedule, only one has yet succeeded and the Rabhas continue to raise their voice and demands. The community indeed has come a long way but there continues to remain gap which needs to be bridged in order for them to be successful in the grant of Sixth Schedule (D. Dewri, 2016)^[7].

1.2 Sixth Schedule: History and Prominence

1949 was the year when the Sixth Schedule came under the constitutional framework in the constituent assembly. This constitutional provision was put forward by the Bordoloi Committee under the then Chief Minister of Assam Gopinath Bordoloi, to protect and promote the tribal culture and retain their administrative structure. At the initial phase of the adoption of sixth schedule, it was designed in two parts – Part A and Part B by considering the development of the area and possibility to introduce new governance system in those tribal inhabited areas.

Part A

1. United Khasi - Jantia Hills District.
2. Garo Hills.
3. Lushai Hills.
4. Naga Hills.
5. North Cachar Hills.
6. Mikir Hills.

Part B

1. North East Frontier Tract (Balipara Frontier Tract, Tirap frontier Tract, Abor Hills District and Mishmi Hill District).
2. Naga Tribal Areas^[2]

Under Part A, it was decided that the tribal areas could establish District councils and Regional councils. However, under part B, the discretionary power was decided to be with the governor of Assam for tribal administration as district and regional councils were not deemed to be fit for governing the area.

However, major changes had occurred in the provision after the state reorganization in Assam. Today it provides administrative powers to the tribal areas in the state of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram under the provision of 244(2) and 275(1) of the constitution. A few main features of the provision are-

- “Under it, Autonomous District Councils (ADC), bodies representing a district to which the Constitution has given varying degrees of autonomy within the state legislature, was formed in order to safeguard the rights of the tribal population.
- The provision gives power to the governor of the state to determine the area or areas as administrative units of the Autonomous Districts and Autonomous Regions.
- The governor is allowed to create a new Autonomous District/Region, as well as, alter the territorial jurisdiction or name of any Autonomous District/Region.
- The tribal areas in the four states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram have been constituted as Autonomous Districts. But, they do not fall outside the executive authority of the state concerned.
- If there are different tribes in an autonomous district, the governor can divide the district into several autonomous regions.
- Each Autonomous District shall have a District Council consisting of not more than thirty members, out of which four are nominated by the Governor while the rest are elected on the basis of adult franchise.
- The elected members hold office for a term of five years (unless the council is dissolved earlier) and nominated members to hold office during the pleasure of the governor.
- Each autonomous region also has a separate regional council”. (Ministry of External Affairs)

The present ADCs are as follows

Part –I

1. Dima Hasao Autonomous Council. (North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council)
2. Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council.
3. Bodoland Territorial Council.

Part-II

1. Khasi Autonomous District Council
2. Jantia Autonomous District Council.
3. Garo Autonomous District Council.

Part-IIA

1. Tripura tribal Areas District Council.

² Sankar Das (2020), ‘The Status of Sixth Schedule in Northeast India: An analysis from the colonial response to the present context’, Journal of Critical Reviews, Vol 7, Issue 8.

Part-III

1. Chakma Autonomous District Council.
2. Lai Autonomous District Council.
3. Mara Autonomous District Council^[3]

For the Northeast India region, the constitutional debate's aim was to make an arrangement that would allow the people of the region to be assimilated with the rest of India and at the same time provide administrative set up for the tribal people of the hills. The plain tribes^[4] weren't initially considered for the provision. It was only in 2003, with the implementation of Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD), popularly known as Bodoland that the plain tribes got included into the Sixth Schedule provision.

The Rabhas, among many other plain tribes are not included in this provision yet which is why their demand for autonomy continues.

1.3 Aim(s) and Objective(s)

- To understand history and the different factors responsible for forming the basis of the present autonomy movement of the Rabhas.
- To understand the contemporary situation and viewpoint on the autonomous struggle from the common masses living in Rabha concentration areas of Goalpara district.
- To study the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) and draw inference from the historical study to the events that unfolded simultaneously, leading to their demand for greater autonomy

1.4 Literature Review

“‘Nationality’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘cultural identity’ are the 3 issues that hold multinational importance in view of the urgent need for economic, social, cultural and political developments of the northeast India”, says B. Pakem in his book ‘Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in Northeast India’. The book is a follow-up and analysis of the proceedings of a 2-day seminar held on December 5-6, 1986 on the topic of the 3 issues of nationality, ethnicity and cultural identity. The focus of the seminar was on theoretical issues, historical background of nationalities and identity movements in Northeast India. The paper correlates with this research as it puts light on the pre-colonial time conditions of the Rabha community and how it changed with the British colonialism-the impacts it had, the awareness and consciousness that unfolded with their ethnic identity in relation to their family, clan and villages due to the sociological process of developing an ethno-tribal identity. A particular chapter from the book by SK Chaube titled ‘Tribal Societies and the Process of Nation Building’ was selectively reviewed as it spoke on the partition and the impact it had on the tribal communities of Northeast India. With the partition of British India, Bengali speaking and Muslim majority districts of Assam, Sylhet, went to East Pakistan. Partition brought thousands of Bengali refugees and resulted in bulk Muslim migrations from Tripura to

Assam; causing the complexity of the region and leading to the confusion of the racial picture.

To get a greater glimpse of the political spectrum of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC), a book titled ‘Satellite Autonomous Council of Assam and the Tribal Law(s)’, Volume 3 by Dr. Khireswar Borah was reviewed. It gave a historical background of the Rabha community in South Goalpara district, ruled by Rabha Raja Parsuram in the 17th century and how the district was where mainly the community resided until it was annexed to the British India. It highlights on the withering away of power of the ethnic Mongoloid group by the process of silent assimilation and engulfment, that later gave shape to the demand for a Rabha Autonomous State. It further puts light on the struggle movement under the leadership of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) and All Rabha Students Union (ARSU) to assert their demand on the creation of a Rabha land. Besides, they also demand extension of the provisions of 6th schedule of the constitution of India to other Rabha inhabited areas i.e the tribal areas of North bank of river Brahmaputra. It further talks about the political, socio-economic and cultural issues faced by the community. The book has the official preamble and objectives of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) and the Rabha Hasong Accord (10th March, 1995) which gives an understanding of the legal background a case study on the agreements and movements.

The third literature that was reviewed was ‘Marginality and Ethnicity: Understanding Autonomy Movement of the Rabha Tribe of Assam, India’ by Dr. Manoj Gogoi that throws light on the Rabha community's prevalence in Assam and the different issues faced such as ‘migration and land alienation’, ‘low level of economic development’, ‘perception of marginalization and alienation’, ‘fear of losing culture and tradition’ and ‘Political exploitation and failure of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC)’. The paper, therefore, critically analyses the different factors that led to the emergence of the autonomy movement of the Rabha community.

The fourth paper titled ‘Exploring the Demand for Ethnic Autonomy in North-East India: A Study on the Ethnic Autonomy Movement of the Rabha Tribe in Assam’ by Dhrubajyoti Das gives a solely political glimpse of the ethnic autonomy movement in North-East India of the Rabha community to fulfill their aspirations protect their ancestral soil or ethnic homeland. It tries to understand the concept of ‘ethnic autonomy’ with great details and brings to light the recent trends and implications of the ethnic autonomy demand movement of the Rabhas. Failure of the Sixth Schedule is mentioned as how it could not protect them from exploitation, deprivation and give them their constitutional rights over their land. The quest for autonomy of the Rabhas can be traced back to 1987 when the creation of a separate tribal state in the Southern part of Brahmaputra called ‘Nilachal’ was demanded by the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU). Soon after in late 90s, the Rabhas also demanded a separate state within the state of Assam. The first phase began with the demand for the formation of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) in 1995 and after few years of subdue, dissatisfaction with the powers and functions of RHAC rose, leading to the second phase—a phase for greater autonomy demanding constitutional safeguards under the Sixth Schedule which formalized in 2013. Since then, many phases have unfolded and the fight

³ Sankar Das (2020), ‘The Status of Sixth Schedule in Northeast India: An analysis from the colonial response to the present context’, Journal of Critical Reviews, Vol 7, Issue 8.

⁴ There are 14 plain tribes in Assam – Barmans, Bodo, Deori, Hojai, Kachari, Sonowal, Lalung, Mech, Mising, Rabha, Dimasa, Singpho, Khamti and Garo.

for autonomy still continues.

BG Karlsson in his paper 'Indigenous politics: Community formation and indigenous people's struggles for self-determination in Northeast India', rightfully highlights the flawed North East policy of the ruling government in New Delhi. Secessionist movements have been a part of India since independence and an integral part of Northeast since the British rule and the subsequent installations of tea plantations, railways and bridges by hurling the forest land of the tribal communities. Therefore, New Delhi has since time immemorial have been lurking on the issue and facing with the indigenous demands of the country and especially the North East. However, Karlsson puts light on the flawed mechanism of countering or combating such secessionist movements; a policy that they have learnt over the years-to allow them to form different levels of autonomy, states, and so-called autonomous district councils within them. However, this strategy is deemed to be a 'failure' at large because it has in fact agonized the communities and has intensified ethnic violence. In other words, instead of containing the secessionist movements, the policy has in affect inspired and instigated insurgency politics in the northeastern region.

1.5 Research Question:

- How will the beneficiaries benefit from their community being represented under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, that is currently denied or is it just a political motive of the people in authority to gain power?

1.6 Methodology

The study was held in Goalpara district of Assam. Among other districts in Assam, the Goalpara district has the maximum number of Rabha population. As per the 2011 Census Report, the total Scheduled Tribes population in the district is 231,570 comprising of 116,013 males and 115,557 females. The percentage of Scheduled Tribe population to total population in the district is only 23.0%. The Krishna region where the community was interviewed is populated with a total of 90,179 people according to the 2011 Census Report (Census of India 2011).

The study utilizes key informant interviews with the following stakeholders-

- The local Rabha community residents from Dudhnoi region of Goalpara district to bring to light the demands and desires of the community people and draw inference of their viewpoint in accordance with the political authorities
- All Rabha Students Union (ARSU) leaders in Dudhnoi, Goalpara district to understand the political point of view and get a broader perspective on their history, documents and council ideologies.

The interview questionnaire was set in a way that would mainly cater to understanding three distinct ideas which are-

- Their relation with the Assamese community
- Their awareness and viewpoint on the autonomy movement and whether they are in support of the movement
- The resulting benefits from Sixth Schedule and the current issues faced due to its lack, if any

Moreover, Qualitative data analysis was also done as it a

good medium to capture the nuances of the sub-regional tribal politics at district level.

- **Secondary data analysis:** Through literature review of articles, research papers, government records and journals.

- **Primary data analysis:**

1. Interview of the target audience through a mix of questionnaire method and ex-post-facto interview method.
2. Random data sampling survey of the community on the targeted areas.

2. Understanding the Rabha Demand in Assam

2.1 Brief history of Northeast India

Connected to the eastern part of India via a narrow corridor bordering Nepal to the North and Bangladesh to the South, the Northeastern part of India consists of the Seven Sister States-Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, along with the brother state of Sikkim. The region shares over 2000 km of border with 4 countries-Bhutan, Nepal, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh (The Northeast Today, 2021). Known for its magical biodiversity, the region holds immense diversity in its people; a home to 166 separate tribes speaking a wide range of languages.

The region, during the British rule, was treated separately and differently from the other regions of British India. It was the fertile land with rich natural resources available abundantly that lured the British into annexing the Northeast and set up their commercial activities first in the Brahmaputra valley. It was during this British colonialism that the term 'tribe' was used pejoratively to call out the people in the colonial areas as uncivilized, primitive, conservative and inferior; making them being looked down upon by the others due to the differences in their traditions and loyalties. This made it easy for the British to get hold of the area and consequently practice its core policy of 'separation and isolation' in the Northeast region; having an impact of exclusion to this day. The protection of minority, indigenous ethnic groups in the hill areas of Assam was their focus and this was achieved through the core policy by restricting outsider's entry, land settlements, transaction and any business activities being held in the region. Therefore, in 1935, the hill areas were demarcated and divided into "excluded areas" and "partially excluded areas". The former came under British jurisdiction and the latter was given partial British representation and administrative rule.

This separation and exclusion slowly built feelings of resentment and incompatibility among the Northeastern people against the other regions of India. Therefore, a crucial task for the Indian government post-independence was national integration and consolidation of the region. Pre-independence geographical composition of the Northeast comprised of one composite province of Assam, the princely states of Manipur and Tripura, the hill districts and North Eastern Frontier Tracts (NEFT). The excluded and partially excluded areas of Assam were transferred to the Government of India's jurisdiction, however, the policy of isolation and alienation still prevailed among the region [5].

Therefore, in 1950, the constitution of India promulgated a special provision for the tribal areas in the form of 'Sixth

⁵ Singh, J. 'Making of the Region', IGNOU, Unit 1

Schedule', meant to protect the tribal population and the ethnic groups residing in the hill regions of North East. The provision divided the tribal areas into two parts—Part A and Part B. The former consisted of The United Khasi and Jaintia Hills District, Garo Hills district, Lushai Hills District, Naga Hills District, the North Cachar Hills District and the Mikir Hills District as autonomous districts administered by Government of Assam, with limited representation in the Assam State Legislative Assembly and in the National Parliament and the latter consisted of NEFT, Balipara Frontier Tract, Tirap Frontier Tract, Abor Hill and Mishmi Hills District and the Naga Tribal area was administered by the Governor of Assam acting as agent of the President of India (Nikhilesh Kumar, 2005).

In 1956, during state reorganization in India on the lines of language, 14 states were created. However, in Northeast, only Assamese language was approved which led to immense dissatisfaction of the minority, especially the ethnic groups of the hill areas. This was due to the institutionalization of their subordination to the Assamese community and disregard of their ethnic identity. This dissatisfaction led to the demand for autonomy and establishment for a separate state. Consequently, separation of states from Assam took place, starting with Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya in 1972, along with the princely states of Tripura and Manipur in 1972, Arunachal Pradesh (formerly known as NEFA) in 1982 and finally Mizoram in 1987.

2.2 Rabhas and the Question of Autonomy

The tribals constitute 13% of the total population in Assam (Census of India, 2001). The autonomy movement in Assam among the tribal groups have risen since independence as they were the among the earliest community to migrate to this land. Faced with varied factors such as the attitude of upper caste Assamese community towards the tribal community made them feel inferior and experience instances of subordination and alienation faced in all fronts from land to education to resources.

Among them are the Rabha tribal community. The Rabhas are one of the most prominent Schedule Tribe Plain communities of Assam. The community of the Rabhas constitute 8.4% of the total 13% tribal population of Assam (Census of India, 2001). According to 2011 census, they are the 3rd largest tribal plain tribes in Assam. They are the indigenous Tibeto-Burman community of Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh and the Indian state of Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal (Anurag Trivedi, 2021). In Assam, the Rabha tribe is mainly found in Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Buksa, Kamrup and Udaguri district, as well as found in some places of Bongaigaon, Chirang, Sonitpur and Karbi Anglong districts (Anurag Trivedi, 20201).

The people of the Rabha community have long been fighting for autonomy. The lack of political consciousness among the common mass during the pre-colonial time led the communities within Assam live harmoniously with each other. It was during the colonial administration period when the sociological process of acquiring the development of ethno-tribal identity was developed. Soon after, along with socio-economic development, to retain their traditional roots and prestige became their utmost focus leading to competition, conflict and power struggle.

With the awareness and growing visibility of prevailing social issues such as illiteracy and socio-economic backwardness among the community came to the focus, the

need for development was more strongly felt among the tribal community members. Gradually, the awareness led to a portion of the population to gather education and come out stronger to recognize their rights and hold mass movements and protests for the upliftment of their community. To achieve this, unity of the tribal community was required which would only be possible with greater autonomy and separate political arrangements exclusive for them to exercise their needs and motives. One such tribe in Assam that has long been fighting for greater autonomy are the Rabha tribal community.

2.3 A political history of the Rabha community

The Rabha community has long been forming unifying separatist communities in Assam. A few examples of which are Assam Rabha Sanmillan in 1926, Sadao Assam Rabha Sanmilan in 1965 and Rabha Jatiya Parishas in 1971. At the Ghaska Convention gathering of the Koch and Rabha people of Assam, two bodies of the Sahitya Sabha were formally formed and came the emergence of 'All Rabha Sahitya Sabha' (ARSS). On 11th April, 1985, Government of Assam, after discussions with ARSS, agreed to introduce the Rabha medium in 106 primary schools in regions such as Goalpara, Dhubri and Kokrajhar district. Moreover, in 1980, 'Nikhil Rabha Chatra Santha' (formerly known as 'Nikhil Bharat Rabha Chatra Santha') was founded that set forth the history of socio-political activities of the Rabha. It brought dynamic leaderships come out to set forth their journey onto achieving their goal of socio-cultural, economic and political upliftment of the Rabha community. It was the year that All Rabha Students Union (ARSU) under the leadership of Mr. Kanta Rabha and Secretary Sabyashasi Rabha was formed.

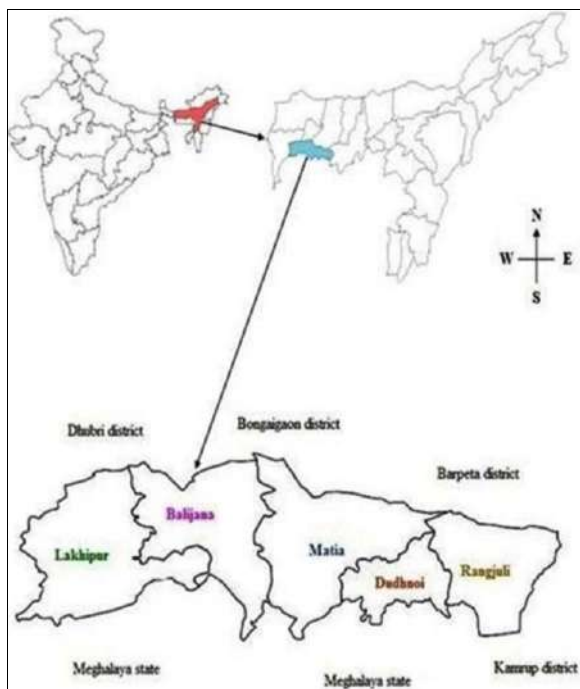
Therefore, it can be seen that the quest for autonomy of the Rabha community can be traced back to 1987, when a section of the Rabha leaders supported the demand for creation of a separate state in the Southern part of Brahmaputra called 'Nilachal' by the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU). It was this Bodo community demand for separate state that ignited the need for autonomy among the Rabha community. But the demand did not last long due to no formal organisational backing. This further led to the eruption of a sense of unity that gave strength to the Rabhas to uphold their people and start a movement. The demand for a separate state of the Rabhas within the state of Assam emerged during the late nineties and since then has gone through different political phases.

2.3.1 First phase: Creation of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC)

As the ethnic community of the Rabhas started growing conscious and aware of their power and culture being withered away by the process of silent assimilation and engulfment, they grew and strengthened their demand for a Rabha Hasong Autonomous State. The Rabha, under the leadership of All Rabha Students Union (ARSU), All Rabha Kriti Sanmillan (ARKS), All Rabha Women's Association (ARWA) and Rabha Yuba Chatra Parishad (RYCP) demanded the creation of a Rabha land. Besides, demands were also made to extend provisions of Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India to other Rabha inhabited areas i.e. Rabha tribal areas of North bank of the river Brahmaputra.

The ARSU in consultation with other agitated organisations prepared their demands in the form of 'memorandum',

which was submitted before the honorable Prime Minister of India, PV Narsimha Rao and the Chief Minister of Assam Hiteswar Sakia, in 1995. Therefore, came the establishment of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC), constituted by the Government of Assam in 1995. The main objective of the Rabha Hasong Accord of 10th March, 1995 was to set up the 'Administrative Authority' to provide maximum possible autonomy within the framework of the constitution of India for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement of the Rabha people in the state and under their jurisdiction. (Khirswar Borah, 2013). The RHAC is an autonomous administrative area within the state of Assam. It was formed under the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Act of 1995 under the Government of Assam. The autonomous council was established through a state legislation for socio-economic, educational and cultural advancement of the Rabha tribe (Assam Info). The current RHAC Headquarter is in Dudhnoi, Goalpara district of Assam and the Chief Executive Councilor (CEC) is Tankeswar Rabha. The jurisdiction of the council, or commonly known as the Rabha tribal belt, extends from Dakshin Rani Mouza of South Kamrup district to Joyram Kuchi Gaon Panchayat of Goalpara district. As per the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Act, the General Council consists of 40 members out of which 35 are directly elected. Currently, there are 36 members that are appointed by the governor in the Rabha Hasong Council. However, after the formation of the RHAC, the movement remained subdued for a short period of time, backed with dissatisfaction with the functioning of the authorities in power. Thus, came the second phase in their fight for autonomy.



(Source: Assam District Fatbook, 2018)

2.3.2 Second phase: Greater autonomy demanding constitutional safeguards under Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution

Engrossed in agitation against the financial and administrative power, ARSU called for a Rabha National Convention at Dudhnoi College on 7th to 8th June, 2003. A committee named 'Sixth Schedule Demand Committee'

(SSDC) was formed in this convention and since then the fight for greater autonomy has taken a new dimension. Subsequently, in 2007 and 2009, a memorandum was submitted to the Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi, demanding the inclusion of RHAC into the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and exemption of elections from the RHAC area according to clause 50 of the Rabha Accord (1995) that demands fresh elections in the area (Twinai, 2007). Regularization of bandhs, rallies and economic blockades by ARSU took place to show stronger resentment of the Rabha community against the age old deprivation. Since then, both ARSU, ARWC, with the collaboration of SSDC are jointly struggling to achieve their demands for greater autonomy. In 2010, after years of putting deaf ears on their demands of democratic political representation, the council members dissolved the council.

2.3.3 Recent trends

It was finally in 2013, after 18 years of interim government rule and as a result of the council dissolution that the fresh democratic elections were held in the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC). Since then, elections have been taking place democratically. Till today, three elections in total have taken place.

However, on the societal front, even after seven years of India's independence, the Government of Assam has not been successful in protecting the community of Rabhas as they continue to be exploited, deprived of their basic human and constitutional rights and continue to lag behind receiving faster economic development. Their forest and land rights have been snatched away, making them alienated from their own land and the people. Thus, continues their fight for representation under the Sixth Schedule.

2.4 Developmental failures among the Rabha Tribal Belt

The Rabha community, historically, were peacefully co-existing with the Assamese community. However, slowly realisations erupted among the community members of their exploitation, non-representation and developmental failures political, economic and cultural factors for their community's upliftment. These realisation in various sections of life made them realise the importance of forming a unity and fighting for autonomy. Till today, the community continues to be under-represented and faced with developmental issues.

2.4.1 Political injustices and failures

Post-independence in 1947, the Rabhas had been deprived of their political rights. Their demands which were initially for a Rabha district to later being an autonomous state within Assam was lend to deaf ears as the government in position paid no attention to their needs. This, therefore led to a Rabha Autonomous movement that was peaceful and limited to just discussions and talks.


In 1950, with the formation of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC), the community anticipated powers at their hands. However, the powers given to the autonomous council of Rabhas were extremely limited which did not fulfill the needs and aspirations of people and the functionality of the Rabha authorities remained zilch in the political forum. The government's reluctance to transfer power made the community lose trust on the council.

For 18 long years the council could not hold elections and was running through an interim government, while

according to the Rabha Accord agreement it was assured to hold elections within six months. No serious attempts were taken by the government which led the council to a nasty ground of politics of divide and rule by picking members on the basis of political affiliations.

The first council elections were held in 2013 wherein the Rabha community were given their political right to cast their vote onto their desired ruling representative along with

an increased annual budget. However, this was greatly shortcoming as the key control over domestic, external and financial powers remained in the hands of the Assamese ruling authorities of the State, making their power go to vain and leave them unsatisfied of their political power. The mere grants and doles are not enough for the people of the community as what they require is real power that is stated under the Sixth Schedule.



GOVT. OF ASSAM
OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER: GOALPARA
(DEVELOPMENT BRANCH)

No. GDP-5/2011/29 Dated Goalpara the 19th January, 2013

To,

1. The Chief Convenor,
Rabha Hasong Joint Movement Committee,
Dudhnoi, RHAC, Assam.
2. The Chief Co-ordinator,
Rabha Hasong Joint Movement Committee,
Dudhnoi, RHAC, Assam.
- ✓ 3. The Co-ordinator,
Rabha Hasong Joint Movement Committee,
Dudhnoi, RHAC, Assam.
4. Sri Tankeswar Rabha,
President, All Rabha Students' Union,
Dudhnoi, RHAC, Assam.

Sub:- Meeting on the issues relating to Election of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Election.

Ref:- WPT's letter No. TAD/BC/160/2007/Pt/64, dated 18-01-2013.

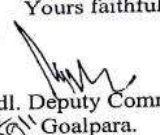
Sir,

With reference to above, I am to inform you that Dr. Bhumidhar Barman, Hon'ble Adviser to Chief Minister desires to hold a meeting on 21-01-2013 at 12.30 P.M with your Forum regarding various issues relating to the Election of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council at the Conference Hall of C.M's Block, Ground Floor.

Therefore you are requested to attend the meeting accordingly.

Venue:- Conference Hall,
C.M's Block, Ground Floor.


Time :- 12.30 P.M on 21-01-2013
(with representatives of Rabha Organizations).

Yours faithfully,

Addl. Deputy Commissioner,
Goalpara.

Memo No. GDP-5/2011/29 (A) Dated Goalpara the 19th January, 2013

Copy to:-

1. The Superintendent of Police, Goalpara for information and necessary action.
2. C.A to D.C for kind appraisal of Deputy Commissioner, Goalpara.


Addl. Deputy Commissioner

(Primary source: Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Office)

The above document is the official document that was written to the RHAC members by the Chief Minister's Advisor to hold a meeting to discuss the issues related to elections. It marks as the beginning of the Rabha community's journey towards holding democratic elections.

2.4.2 Socio-Economic Problems

The Rabha Hasong area has been greatly neglected with regard to a proper development plan for its economic upliftment. Till today, no serious measures have been initiated by the state or central government.

Moreover, lies the problem of illegal immigration and migration in the land of Assam. Being close to the capital and adjacent to the porous border with Bangladesh, the region witness regular migration of people from within and outside the country. This led to various problems such as the forest protection as the forest was the primary livelihood of the tribal community but was inhabited by illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Similarly, many tribal blocs which were initially laid down to protect the rights of the tribal community were occupied by non-tribal communities. Subsequently, the demographic composition of the region changed, undermining the interests of the native population (Kulbir Krishnan, 2001) ^[9]. The overwhelming fear of losing one's own homeland demographically and economically further increased the momentum for the fight for identity and autonomy. On 29th November, 2014, the Rabha Hasong Joint Movement Committee submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India that stated "their rights over land have been snatched away and large scale land alienation has uprooted the Rabha people along with other tribal people from their homeland". In addition to this, they pointed out that "Goalpara district as the corridor of illegal immigrants and expressed their worries about the large scale occupation of the forest land" (Manoj Gogoi, 2018) ^[16].

Another aspect that led to a greater alienation and perception of marginalization among the tribal community is the 'big brother' attitude of the dominant Assamese community of the region. Many tribal leaders alleged the first Chief Minister of Assam, Mr. Gopinath Bordoloi, along with some other caste Hindus of depriving the plain tribes of Assam from getting constitutional safeguards under the Sixth Schedule.

2.4.3 Cultural issues

The Rabhas have been experiencing acculturation and rapid modernization for several decades due to the years of coexistence with non-tribal communities that resulted in emulation of non-tribal life and values. With time this emulation got intensified, leading to the process of 'detribalization' and 'sanskritization', wherein many tribal caste groups started following various folds of Hinduism in gain upward mobility in the hierarchical society. This could also be witnessed in the form of inter-caste marriages and religious conversions.

The early years before the concept of autonomy erupted, many Rabha community people practiced religious conversions. Often people were seen to be converted to Christianity as they believed changing identities would make them develop and evolve from the societal constraints. But today, the awareness of ethnic identity has been institutionalized among the community and the conversion practices have stopped (Bordoloi, 2022)

However, as the autonomy movement came to the forefront, many tribal groups who initially converted sought back their tribal status. Thus started a new trend of cultural revitalization on the basis of language and culture. In this regard, the demand for inclusion of Rabha language in academic curriculum came up. Moreover, recently in the month of February 2022, the State Education Minister of the Government of Assam, Mr. Ranaj Pegu announced the introduction of four tribal languages as a medium of instructions in government schools from classes 1 to 5. These tribal languages are Rabha, Mising, Tiwa and Deori

[6].

3. Findings and analysis

3.1 Rabha concentration and ethnic preservation

To have a deeper insight of the situation, the researcher interviewed different sections of the Rabha community. In the process, it was found that the Rabhas, particularly at the Krishnai area were divided into two groups—one that co-exists with the Assamese community and speaks the Assamese language and the other section is secluded completely with their own tribe and speaks their own dialect. It was revealed that 1 in every 20 people would have the basic knowledge of Assamese language as the majority spoke the Rabha dialect. The latter is particularly true for Krishnai area's Dairong village where the first set of interview was conducted. The area is completely inhabited by the Rabha community and the sense of ethnic preservation and identity crisis is more strongly felt in the region; curtailing to the reason for them sticking to their traditional ethnic roots and way of living.

Although the area is exclusively inhabited by plain tribes, they showed no hostility towards the Assamese community. Their agitation is solely against the State Government for the non-recognition of their people under Sixth Schedule. For them, the Assamese community is respected, but at the same time, they believe they deserve their own jurisdiction and sovereignty to demarcate their tribal belt and does not prefer encroachment of 'foreigners' which they also consider Assamese community to be.

3.2 Political awareness in the region

It was found that the male section of the society was comparatively more aware than the women folk upon asking about their knowledge on 'autonomy'. However, awareness of the term 'Sixth Schedule' is prominent among the population, showing the word's importance in the region. Every person in the area was aware of the demands at the forefront for their political recognition. Upon asking them if they really want it, the answer was same for all—"Sixth Schedule is extremely important for the Rabha community", often comparing their status with the Bodo community, who enjoys the fruits of coming under the Scheduled Policy.

3.3 Importance of Sixth Schedule: Community perspective

They believe that once the recognition by the Centre is achieved, a lot will be established for their development and livelihood upliftment. To them, the succession of the movement will only bring laurels to them with zero negative impact as invariably due to their incursion of great recognition and the withering away of uncertainty and fear for their identity crisis that prevails today due to the increasing homogeneity with the Assamese community being seen among other tribes.

The most crucial result of the succession, according to them, would be the benefits of direct negotiation with the Centre. This would lead to fund allocation from the Centre directly to the Rabha Council members, marking the absence of the current intermediary, that is the ruling State Government of Assam, Shri Hemanta Biswa Sarma. The current

⁶ Extracted from a News Article in 'The Sentinal' titled 'Assam Govt to Introduce four Tribal Languages from LP School Level' (2022)

intermediary functionary makes the whole process of negotiation and implementation lag behind and inefficient for the Rabha tribal community's development and growth. For instance, the commuting to Krishnai High Schools from Dairong village is to be done through boat as the roads are still not constructed and the bridge construction is very weak. To make the condition better, the council members plan to budget in road construction, which is one of the major developmental issue in the region. However, the current system allows them to only plan and provides them with no implementation power because of which they need to appeal to the state to ask the Centre to give them 'X' amount of funds for the construction process. Now, the state further has to appeal to the Centre and this whole process therefore makes it time-consuming.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that the state would surely appeal to the Centre for funds and the Council Members also have no power to keep scrutinizing or put pressure. Therefore, they just need to wait without any guarantee. The process lags transparency as well, making the system corrupt. Believing that the Centre finally decides to provide INR 800 cr. for the project, it is given to the State government, who then gives the Council Members an amount much less than the receiving amount, say INR 68 cr., which is not a sufficient amount for the project and for the development of the community keeping the population in mind. Therefore, the frustration of the community can be seen from the way they have been felt exploited and not heard by the Centre, their demands being concealed and their development being hindered by corruption and non-transparency. However, according to the ex-cultural affairs speaker of the region, Mr. Tarun Chandra Rabha, the Rabha condition have slightly improved since 2013-14. A lot has been done for the educational and healthcare sectors, which have improved immensely. The concern, therefore, mainly lies with the road and bridge construction and the direct hold of power of the community to make speedy progress, without having to depend elsewhere.

3.4 Historical and current need for autonomy: From ARSU's lens


The next set of interviews were conducted among the Ex General Secretary of the All Rabha Student's Union (ARSU), Mr. Jibon Chandra Rabha at his residence in Dudhnoi, Goalpara, along with a few other members of ARSU who gave a glimpse of the historical notion to the autonomous movement, how and why it started and the different levels of accomplishments till date, along with the contemporary problems and updates.

It was said that historically, during the All Assam Students Union (AASU) movement in Assam against foreign

invaders and illegal immigrants, co-existence with the Assamese community existed and both the communities together fought with the invaders. There existed no notion of 'autonomy' and they considered themselves a union. But gradually, they realized that they too were felt inferior to the dominance of the Assamese community, allowing them very little political representation and social value. They realized the importance of their ethnicity, the strength of their unity and the value of their language and tribe which in that notion might soon go non-existent. To stand for their community, their rights and to mainly preserve their ethnicity, they started raising their voice for a separate state within Assam, exclusively for them to rule, have power and ensure development.

It started in 1980s and things finally got formalized with the establishment of the 'Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council' and the signing of the Rabha Accord on 10th March, 1995. However, the council members were not satisfied with how little power they were given as they were only established as puppets to the Government of Assam who mainly took all the decisions for them. Henceforth, the movement continued for greater autonomy and full power, leading to the devolution of the Council in 2010. It was only in 2013, after 18 years when the first elections of the RHAC took place as before that interim government ruled the Council. Till today, there has only been total of 3 elections held.

Upon asking the current situation and about their achievements and succession till date, the response was quite positive and hopeful of a greater future for them, according to the ARSU official. They say that they have come a long way from nothing to an interim government to democratic elections taking place to identification of Rabha languages in schools and to very recently forming the sub-committee to look into the matter of their demand for Sixth Schedule. They consider it to be an accomplishment to come till this stage and are hopeful of a nearing future when their demands will be granted by the Centre. However, they share that their journey has been full of challenges but the most continuous one is the need to push the State government continuously. Moreover, things get done in a tit-for-tat or bribery form in politics. For instance, the Rabha authorities are required to be in good books of the State government in order to fasten the process or gain success in their demands. Therefore, they are often asked to help in leading party's political favour, especially during the election processes. During elections, the Rabha council members are asked to get seats or make political gains for the leading party. By doing this, they are doing a favour in return for their demands being fulfilled. Henceforth, it can be assessed that the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council has been efficient in leading their demands and adhering to the public needs by engaging with the current government.


GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM
WELFARE OF PLAIN TRIBES & BACKWARD CLASSES DEPARTMENT
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ORDERS BY GOVERNOR
NOTIFICATION

Dated Dispur, the 16th August, 2021

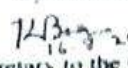
No.TAD/BC/160/2007/114: In supersession to earlier Notification issued vide No.TAD/BC/160/07/108 dated 23-08-2018 and No.TAD/BC/160/07/109 dated 11-06-2019, the Governor of Assam is pleased to reconstitute the Cabinet Sub-Committee with the following Hon'ble Ministers to examine the issue of giving Sixth Scheduled Status to Mising, Rabha Hasong and Tiwa Autonomous Council Area and recommend policy for demarcation of the boundaries thereof:


1.	Dr. Ranaj Pegu, Minister	Chairman
2.	Shri Atul Bora, Minister	Member
3.	Shri Ranjit Das, Minister	Member

Sd/- (Mukesh Chandra Sahu, IAS)
Principal Secretary to the Govt. of Assam,
WPT & BC Department, Dispur

Memo No. TAD/BC/160/2007/114-A Dated Dispur, the 16th August, 2021
Copy for information to:

1. P.P.S. to Hon'ble Chief Minister, Assam, Dispur, Guwahati-06.
2. P.S. to Hon'ble Minister, WPT & BC, Assam, Dispur, Guwahati-06.
3. P.S. to Hon'ble Minister, Agriculture etc., Assam, Dispur, Guwahati-06.
4. P.S. to Hon'ble Minister, Food, Civil Supplies & Consumer Affairs, Assam, Dispur, Ghy-06.
5. P.S. to Chief Secretary, Assam.
6. P.S. to Legal Remembrancer, Judicial Department, Assam.
7. The Principal Secretary Mising Autonomous Council, Gogamukh, Dhemaji/ Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Goalpara/ Tiwa Autonomous Council, Morigaon.
8. The Director, WPT & BC, Assam, Rukmininagar, Ghy-06.
9. The Deputy Commissioners, District.
10. The Director, Printing & Stationary, Assam, Bamunimaidam. He is requested to publish the notification in the next issue of Assam Gazette.

By order etc.,

Joint Secretary to the Govt. of Assam,
WPT & BC Department, Dispur


Addl. Deputy Commissioner,

(Primary Source: Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council office)

This recent official document dated on 16th August, 2021 for the reconstitution of the sub-committee to examine the issue of giving Sixth Schedule Status to the Rabha, Mising and Tiwa Autonomous Councils and further recommend demarcation of boundaries show how far into succession have the RHAC come.

The basic idea of conducting interviews of the local community was to understand their perspective and their needs from the grassroots level and ensure the seriousness

of Sixth Schedule's demand among the community and its alignment with the political authorities. After understanding and analyzing the community, it can be said that the Rabha representing political authority of the RHAC works in accordance with the public demand as the wishes and needs of both are aligned onto a common goal of extracting direct power through the Sixth Schedule; a dream that has long been fought for and a dream that is not very far away from achievement.

4. Conclusion

It can be said that the provision of Sixth Schedule changed the nature of Indian Politics and this is especially true for the tribal communities of North-East India. The Rabha community have come a long way since the 1980s to today in their fight to position itself under the provision of the Sixth Schedule. To make this possible, the role of RHAC is immensely significant as a conflict management institution. It is their constant determination to withstand with the needs of the community and fight against all odds posed by the state and the Centre that has allowed them to come to an almost nearing point of succession. Moreover, the democratic elections held by the RHAC has greatly helped the process in bringing greater recognition to its people, in allowing political representation and thereby giving them a voice to seek money for developments and help the Rabha community. Therefore, it can rightly be said that the fight for autonomy by the RHAC is not a mere political motive to gain power, but an overall drive for development for the community, for preservation of their ethnic identity and to bring greater recognition to its people. This fight is equally important for the community beneficiaries as it is for the political authorities.

Problems have emerged from ethnic identity clashes of Rabhas with the non-Rabhas in the Rabha Hasong areas such as the Garo-Rabha conflict ^[7], infiltration of invaders in the tribal land and lack of economic support and development hurdles that the community continues to fight. To smoothen the process and bring changes in immediate effect, the government must take measures to stop such infiltration of illegal migrants, make initiatives to develop the tribal belt and have a responsive grievance cell for the people to give recognition to their needs. Moreover, employment generation and skill development workshops by establishing public private sectors is very crucial for the development of the community and the region. Lastly, the farsightedness of the leaders together with the right actions and initiatives by the state and the Centre will result in the development of the state of Assam as a whole and pave away the problems of the Rabha community.

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⁷ December 2010 and January 2011 were the two years when violent clash between the Rabhas and Garos took place in the Assam-Meghalaya border areas. The background to the conflict between the two communities is that the Rabhas are recognised as Scheduled Caste in Goalpara district of Assam but not in the East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. The East Garo Hills district has its own Autonomous District Council under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution. But because the Rabhas are not a Scheduled Tribe community in Meghalaya, they never had their representation in the elected district council. For quite some time, the Rabhas had been agitating in the Garo Hills for gaining Scheduled Tribe status. But the Garos are opposed to it (Jaikhleng Basumatary, 2013).