

Marginality and Ethnicity: Understanding Autonomy Movement of the Rabha Tribe of Assam, India

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Abstract: The Rabhas are one of the prominent distinctive Scheduled Plain Tribe of Assam. The aim of the paper is to critically evaluate the different factors responsible for forming the basis of the present autonomy movement of the Rabhas. The identity movement of the Rabhas demanding autonomy can be traced back to late eighties, but it remained subdued for a short period after the creation of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) in 1995 by an act of Assam State Assembly. Poor and lackluster economic development; large scale unabated migration into their land, feeling of marginalization and social exclusion; political exploitation and failure of RHAC and creation of BTAD under sixth scheduled of Indian constitution are the prime socio-economic and political factors that led to the resurgence of the autonomy movement among the Rabhas.. This study is based on prolonged field experience as well as close interaction with the people in both personnel and group level. Secondary data were also collected to substantiate the findings of the study.

Keywords: Autonomy, Autonomous Council. Tribal Belt and Blocks, Scheduled Tribe, Sixth Schedule.

INTRODUCTION

The tribal population of the state which roughly constitutes 16 percent of the total population are socio-economically backward compared to the other non-tribal groups. The quest for autonomy movement among the tribal people of Assam can be traced long back to pre-Independence period. The annexation of the then Assam by British in 1826 through Yandaboo treaty [1], British established their political and administrative suzerainty over the local people of the region. The Yandaboo Treaty was signed on 24th February 1826 between the King of Burma and British in which Burmese renounced all claims upon and agreed to abstain from all sort of interference with Assam and her neighbouring states of Cachar and Jaintia. After gaining control over Assam, the British introduced the 'Exclusion and Isolation' [2] policy in name of protecting the tribes from the outsiders. Though this policy was theoretically correct to save the tribes from the intruders, but in reality, British adopted the policy of Exclusion to facilitate their administration and exploitation of the tribal areas instead of development. Traditionally and geographically, the tribals used to live in remote and interior parts of the region and fortunately or unfortunately most of these areas are enriched with natural resources. This seems to be one of the prime reasons for targeting tribal areas for economic exploitation in name of development. Following

Independence, the profound economic and political changes in the wake of independence created a sense of unease among the tribal population of the region. Feelings started to grow among the tribal people that if such situation prevails, it will take no time to submerge their culture and tradition by so called mainstream India. On the other hand, the Government of India initiated a number of measures to deal with the feelings of discontentment and discrimination. One of the most significant measures in this direction is the provision of the Sixth Schedule in the Indian Constitution for the administration of the tribal areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram [3]. In later period, it was noticed that most of these tribal areas under the Sixth Schedule provision became separate States, leading to the break-up of Assam into seven separate smaller states. Even now, the state of Assam has three Autonomous District Councils created under the provision of Sixth Schedule and six Autonomous Councils under State government act for better governance and development of the tribal groups. But despite conferment of such autonomy, it is notice that separateness nursed during the colonial period has survived and is frequently expressed through various movements to bolster their demand for autonomy, economic concessions, political representation, and even for independence from the Union. Like many other ethnic groups and communities of North East India,

Rabhas are also demanding autonomy within the state of Assam under the Sixth Schedule provision of the Indian Constitution.

Rabha is one of the major plain tribe of Assam with rich cultural heritage and tradition. According to Census 2001 the total population of the Rabha tribe is 277517 and they are mainly concentrated in Goalpara, Kamrup, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Nalbari, Udalguri, Darrang and Sonitpur districts of Assam. Beside these, they are also found in some pockets of Garo Hills of Meghalaya, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts of West Bengal and some areas of Bangladesh[4]. The quest for the autonomy of the Rabhas can be traced back to 1987 when a section of the Rabha leaders supported the demand of All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) for creation of a separate tribal state in the Southern part of Brahmaputra called *Nilachal*. But their demand never took the form of an organised movement and did not last long. The demand for a separate state for the Rabhas within the state of Assam emerged during late nineties and since then it has passed through several phases. The first phase for the autonomy movement of the Rabhas came to an end with the creation of *Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC)* in 1995. After the formation of the RHAC, the movement remained subdued for a short period. Consequently dissatisfied with the powers and functions of the RHAC, the Rabhas resumed their second phase of movement with great intense and momentum for greater autonomy demanding constitutional safeguards under Sixth Schedule of Indian constitution. Presently, after election of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council in 2013, the movement for the inclusion of RHAC under Sixth scheduled is gradually resurfacing, but in a slow momentum. The aim of this paper is to critically evaluate the different underlying factors that led to the emergence of the autonomy movement among the Rabhas. In this paper, five core factors viz., low level of economic development, large scale migration and land alienation, feeling of marginalization and isolation, political exploitation and failure of RHAC and creation of BTAD under Sixth Schedule of Indian constitution have been identified that led to the resurgence of the movement for the autonomy among the Rabha tribe.

Low level of economic development

Absent of proper development plan for economic upliftment of the Rabha Hasong area is one of the paramount factors that has fuelled the growing discontentment among the tribe. The deep sense of economic neglect of the region becomes evident from the fact that after seven decades of independence, no serious measures has been initiated by both central and state government for proper economic development, despite being territorially very nearer to the state capital. Barring a few pockets of small private industrial units, not a single public sector unit came up in the area that can provide employment and other income

generating avenues to the tribal youths. Except agriculture, no other sources of income are available for the Rabha people. It can be justified that unemployment is one of the causes that has abetted the growth of ethnicity and identity among the Rabhas. The Rabha Hasong area is endowed with numerous natural resources such as tropical forests, timber, rubber, silk, jute and various horticultural products. Some of these natural bounties have been already exploited by scrupulous traders while others are yet to be harnessed. Hundred crores of rupees were pump into the area for several decades in the name of development, but most of them are siphoned off by scrupulous officers, contractors and politicians through their unholy nexus. As a result, the economic development has been lopsided. The region continues to remain mainly agricultural and less than forty per cent of the geographical area is under cultivation. The prospects for modern industries are not bright, as there is a lack of local or regional markets. It is observed that most of the Rabha inhabiting areas lacks basic infrastructural facilities, forcing them to live in extreme misery and destitute. As a result the growth of modern sector failed to bring changes in increasing the standard of living of the tribal people. Thus, it can infer that the sluggish economic growth, poor infrastructure, lack of market accessibility, restricted land market and under utilisation of the natural resources of the region have plagued not only the economy of the region, but it is also acting like a catalytic agent to increase the feelings of marginalisation and discontentment among the Rabha tribe, fuelling the demand of autonomy.

Migration and Land alienation

Being very near to the state capital on one end and adjacent to the Bangladesh porous border on the other, the region is witnessing regular migration of people from within and outside the country. It is observed that many areas of *tribal belts and blocks* which were created for protecting the tribal people were mostly occupied by non-tribal groups. The forest which is part and parcel of tribal livelihood started to dwindle and became the settlement areas of the immigrant Muslim population. This unabated influx of the migrants and consequent undermining of the economic interests of the native population changed the demographic composition of the region, eventually leading to political tension. The fear of losing one's own homeland and overwhelmed demographically, culturally, and economically by the outsider have increased the momentum of the identity movement of the tribe. Their apprehension of losing their land and identity in the hands of the growing immigrant Muslim population can be evident from the memorandum submitted by Rabha Hasong Joint Movement Committee to the Prime Minister of India on 29th November 2014 [5]. In the said memorandum, they had categorically stated that '*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. Another major problem of the tribal people is the gradual loss of control over the land in the hands of businessman. It has been noticed that due to gradual expansion of market areas, the tribal people became the victims of persuasion and compulsion of scrupulous businessman and sold or mortgage their land to the traders and businessman. Gradually, the locals have lost large chunk of their lands with commercial values in the hands of non-tribal people.

Perception of marginalisation and isolation

It is always alleged that the big brother attitude of a section of so called Caste Hindu Assamese people and step motherly treatment of Assam government are responsible to a large extent for the growth of feeling of perception of marginalisation and isolation among the tribal people. This opinion is reflected in many writings and speeches of the leaders during the course of agitation. A large section of the tribal leaders still alleged that the first chief minister of Assam Mr Gopinath Bordoloi along with some of the Caste Hindu leadership of the then Assam has deprived the Plain tribes of Assam from getting constitutional safeguards under Sixth Schedule. This feeling of deprivation grew more when the tribe experienced more apathy, callousness and negligence from Assam government. However, it must be made apparent that such feelings of discontentment among the Rabhas were comparatively mild and has been developed much later compared to some other tribes of Assam like Bodo, Karbi, Dimacha, etc. This can be justified from the fact that most of the leaders of the anti-foreigners Assam movement (1979-85) in Goalpara district were from the Rabha tribe and the whole community participated in the movement from the beginning to the end. Even after the end of the agitation, when the Assam government was formed in 1985 under the banner of *Assam Gana Parishad*, a student leader from the Rabha tribe was elected to the state assembly from the Dudhnoi Constituency. However, a thin line of arguments regarding negligence and apathy by Assamese Caste Hindu leaders behind the consolidation of the thought for the movement of ethnic identity of the Rabhas can be evident from some of the write-ups published by different organisation of the tribe. According to the president of Six Scheduled Demand Committee Mr K. Rongkho, the 'All Goalpara Rabha Jatiya Parishad'(AGRJP), which spearheaded to form the Rabha Hasong Demand Committee in February 1989 was the result of not allowing the Rabha leaders to voice their grievances in the AASU conference held at Jorhat from 5th to 7th December 1988. To him, it was the callous and big brother attitude of the Assamese student leaders that led them to felt that their language, culture and identity can be realised only through political autonomy [6]. No doubt there were several organisations like 'Rabha Jatiya Parishad'

(1971), 'Nikhil Rabha Sahitya Sabha' (Bebak Rabha Krawrung Runchum, 1973), 'Nikhil Bharat Rabha Chatra Santha' (1980), etc., before the birth of AGRJP or RHDC among the Rabhas, but most of them are non-political and were formed for the growth and development of culture and language of the tribe. It was only in early and late nineties, a number of social and cultural organisations came up among the Rabhas which has played a significant role in bringing awareness about their socio-cultural political rights and privileges.

Fear of losing Culture and Tradition

The fear of losing their culture and tradition under the influence of the non-tribal people is also apparent among the Rabhas. For several decades, they co-exist with non-tribal communities and are experiencing rapid modernisation and acculturation. The result was that they started to emulate the way of life and values of the non-tribal. In due course, the trend of emulation became so intense and powerful that the process of detribalisation started and many families of the tribe adopted various fold of Hinduism with a desire to move higher in the tribe-caste based social hierarchy. But as the movement of autonomy progressed and the question of Rabha identity came to the forefront, a new trend of cultural revivalism on the basis of language and culture started. It is very interesting to find that many of those who have accepted Hinduism are now re-seeking their tribal status. Minute observation of their movement shows that they are now trying to establish a very strong linkage between cultural identity and the autonomy movement. In this regard, mention may be made about the demand for inclusion of Rabha language in academic curriculum, observation of community rituals and festivals in more grandeur manner, wearing of their traditional dress in meetings and functions, etc. to develop solidarity among the tribe. These strategies have played a significant role in redefining Rabha identity and solidarity formation. This has also helped to mobilize people for their much expected political space in the contemporary democratic process of the country.

Political exploitation and failure of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC)

Initially the demand of RHDC was the creation of an Autonomous District for the Rabhas including some Rabha dominated areas of the then Kamrup and Goalpara District. But later on their demands were modified and the demand for creation of an autonomous state within the state of Assam covering *Dakshin Rani Mouza* of South Kamrup district to *Joyram Kuchi Gaon Panchayat* of Goalpara district came into being. Several memorandums regarding demand for autonomy were placed before the state government, but it lend to deaf ears [7,8.]. The government pave no attention to solve the issues. The movement which was totally peaceful and was mostly confined to discussion and talks gradually started to turned into a mass movement. Consequently for pressurising the government, the

movement resorted to various pressure agitational tactics. Frequent bandhs, economic blockade, mass gatherings, etc. become the order of the day and the whole area became volatile and disturb. Finally, the Assam Government after several round of discussion conceded to some of their demands and an autonomous council called Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) was created on 10th March 1995. Initially, this move was accepted with great hope and aspiration by the Rabha people. But it took no time to realise that the RHAC was a non-starter and was created only as 'safety valve' to release the mounting pressure of their movement on the government. The RHAC which was formed with an assurance and provision of fair degree of autonomy to the Rabhas has very limited power and function and cannot fulfil the wish and aspiration of the people. Consequently dissatisfied with the existing powers and functions of the RHAC, the Rabhas resumed their movement for greater autonomy demanding constitutional safeguards under Sixth schedule of Indian constitution. To fight for constitutional safeguard a new organisation called Sixth Schedule Demand Committee came up in June 2003 under the initiative of the All Rabha Students Union. The other demands that find places in the demand list of SSDC were appointment of Rabha language teacher in the primary schools of rabha dominated areas, holding of election of RHAC instead of panchayat election, to enumerate forest village into revenue villages and to free the areas under the tribal belt and blocks from encroachment by illegal migrants [9]. In addition to this lacuna out of so many, the other major reason for the failure of the accord was the state-level politics of divide and rule within and between the tribes and communities of the region. Some of the major catalytic issues that fuelled the resurgence of the movement are

- The government reluctance to transfer power to the council as per the agreement due to which the Rabhas has lost complete faith on the council. The ARSU publicly denounced the agreement and the whole exercise of creation of RHAC proved to be futile. The long cherished wish and aspiration of the tribe remained a distant dream, far from fulfilment. As a result, discontentment and unrest started to grow in the region.
- Non-holding of election for the council for long 18 years, while it was assured to hold the same within the six months of the agreement. The Government never made any serious attempt to hold election of RHAC. Instead of it, the government pick up members on the basis of political affiliation turning the council into a nasty ground of politics of divide and rule among the Rabhas and also between the various ethnic groups who were peacefully co-existed for several decades.
- Government strategy to hold Panchayat elections for weakening the power and function of RHAC

despite stern protest from the tribe. This move by the government was vehemently protested resulting into the death of 21 innocent protesters. This incident has further deteriorated the situation and the movement became much powerful and strong and the government was left with no alternatives except to hold the council election.

Finally, after several rounds of discussion, persuasion and compulsion, the government succumbed under the pressure of the movement and holds the election in November 2013, after 18 years of creation of RHAC. After winning a thumping majority of 29 seats out of 32 in the RHAC, the reign of council came into the hands of the movement leaders. Closed observation for last 4 and half years, it is noticed that despite limited powers and functions, initiative has been taken for development of the areas irrespective of caste and community. This has sent a positive signal to the non-Rabha communities who were afraid of being deprived from the benefits of the RHAC. Today, the community still continues to fight for protection under the Sixth Schedule through non-violent means.

Trust deficit and trust building measures of the movement

The leaders of the movement struggled hard to build up trust with the other communities living within the periphery of the RHAC. The movement initially witnessed severe trust deficit and had to face stiff resistance from different quarters, either in organised or unorganised manner. Such forms of opposition are due to trust deficit between the Rabhas and other ethnic groups along with certain state sponsored opposition groups. The first form of opposition is apparent in most of the movement where a few sections belonging to minority groups tends to oppose such movement because of the fear of becoming a second class citizens in their own birth place. A fear psychosis of facing atrocities in the hands of the dominant group prevails depending on the mode of movement. Initially in this movement also there were so many instances of oppositions due to trust deficit between agitated group and the other communities living in the area, but for a short tenure. The Rabha-Garo ethnic clash in 2011 was the most unfortunate instant of trust-deficit which has vitiated the friendly relationship between the two tribes that had peacefully co-existed from time immemorial. The conflict was the result of the erroneous policies and inefficient administration of the government. The second form of opposition is the strategy adopted by government to weaken such autonomy movement indirectly by sponsoring or inciting various organisations based on ethnic and community lines. In the course of Rabha movement also, various organisations in the name of safeguarding the non-Rabhas and the non-tribal came up and have adopted several strategies to weaken the movement. Participation by a section of population in the Panchayat election and the stiff opposition by few other

groups was the glaring example of the involvement of such groups.

Farsightedness of the leaders spearheading the movement had prevented further escalation of enmity and trust deficit among the various population groups living in and around the Rabha Hasong territory. The most significant and positive move by the leaders of the movement towards trust and confidence building was their initiative in forming the Rabha Hasong Joint Movement Committee (RHJMC) on 18th November 2012. This committee was a conglomeration of 34 student and ethnic organisations of Rabha Hasong area that were united together and vowed to fight under the same banner for inclusion of RHAC under the Six Schedule of Indian constitution [11]. The resounding success of the RHJMC in unifying the all ethnic groups and communities under its banner can be evident from the result of RHAC election. It has won 29 seats out of 32 seats. The same trend was reflected in the State Assembly Election, 2016 where its supporting candidate from the 36 LAC Dudhnoi constituency won by a huge margin. This was possible only because the candidates of RHJMC they have able to garner from non-Rabha communities. This is a positive indication of trust building between Rabha and Non-Rabha communities.

CONCLUSION

The demographic changes brought about by the continuous influx of outsiders both from across the borders as well as from different parts of the country have sharpened divisions and 'anti foreigner' sentiment has spawned the autonomy movement. The Government must take immediate measures to stop such infiltration of illegal migrants into the tribal belts and blocks of the region. Prompt but systematic action is required for proper economic development of the region. Initiatives should be taken to establish private and public sectors units to harness local products so as to generate avenues for income and unemployment. More

autonomy to the council will pave the way for better solution of the problems.

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