CHAPTER – III
AUTONOMY MOVEMENTS AMONG THE RABHAS OF ASSAM IN RECENT PERIOD

Dimensions of the Movement:

Emergence of middle class and the growth of political consciousness:

The middle class of the society always plays a vital role in the transition of a particular society. The rise of the middle class marks the beginning of a new era of enlightenment in the society. The Indian middle class emerged as a result of socio-economic changes brought by the British administration. The Assamese middle class sprang up in the latter half of the 19th century. The British administration shook the tribal society and the missionaries helped in westernizing it and have given the tribals a sense of identity. Consequently a middle class began to grow among the tribals also in the first decade of the last century. Naturally it was weaker than the Assamese middle class. This newly born elite was from the larger Bodo community. There was no dearth of educated and conscious people from the Tiwa, Rabha and other tribes also.

The most versatile personality from the tribals undoubtedly, was Bishnu Prasad Rabha (1909-1969). Not only was he the representative of the tribal culture but was also the towering personality of greater Assamese culture and society and is known as ‘Kalguru’
Thus, a middle class had emerged among the tribes during pre and post independence era. The backwardness of the tribals and the negligence and lack of interest shown to them by the non-tribals has led to the simmering discontentment of this class culminating in their struggle for self protection in subsequent time.

Thus, the emerging middle class played a pivotal role in the growth of political consciousness among the tribals. It is a fact that initially the educated youth paid lukewarm interest to their own society. But when they had to compete in the field of employment, trade and commerce, and realized the negligence of the non-tribals, only then had a spirit of assertiveness generated in them. Consequently, they began to organize themselves to protect their language and cultural identities and to derive economic benefits. “They are denied of justice, constitutional rights, equality of status and opportunities as enshrined in the sacred preamble of the Indian constitution. The Bodos and other tribals want nothing but only to survive and all-round prosperity and security.¹

The growth of political consciousness among the ethnic groups is based on their socio-cultural, political and economic conditions. After independence the tribal life of North-East has been changed with developed political consciousness among them. They had gladly availed the better and improved facilities for education, public health, agriculture, communication etc. The tribals of North-East study by themselves because of its geo-political and historical

¹ Memorandum to the President of India, All Bodo students Union, January 30, 1987
backwardness. In developing a sense of larger tribal identity, education and the emergence of middle class among the tribals have played important roles. The most important factor in any analysis of tribal identity is the class nature of the present-day tribal society, the underdeveloped tribal economy due to imperialist capital, negligence by the non-tribals etc. The rising tribal aspirations are expressed through cultural identity crises which stimulate tribal movement relaying on means ranging from constitutional agitation to insurgency. The growth of administration and administrative centers, the spread of education and Christianity offered opportunities for inter-tribal interaction. The establishment of modern social associations and political organizations too has played a significant role.

Each ethnic group of the tribes organized itself for the preservation and development of its identity, culture and heritage. The most prominent among them is the ‘Bodo Sahitya Sabha’ a literary organization of the Bodos was formed in 1950 by the educated section of the Bodos. Though it is primarily an organization of the Bodos living in the plains, an attempt has been made to organise other Bodos living in the Hills also. As such proposals for introduction of Bodo as an additional subject in primary stage, as third language at the secondary stage and as a medium of instruction in North-Cachar were taken jointly by the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and the Dimasa Bodos in its initial stage.

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3 The Assam Tribune – May 24, 1985
Among the Rabhas, the Rabha National Council, All Rabha Students Union, Rabha Sahitya Sabha, All Rabha Women’s Council, Sixth Schedule Demand Committee are the main organizations which have been articulating various demands for their protection of identity, language and culture. Of late the Rabha Hasong Demand committee has been organized fundamentally to demand autonomy for themselves.

Nazi Rustomzi in his book “Imperilled Frontiers” has concluded that it was Assamese chauvinism, ironically enough, that diminished Assam and lost her tribal population. The Assamese middle class took its chauvinist approach when it confronted with the Bengali hegemonism in language, service, trade and commerce and the subsequent Muslim immigration during the British rule. Therefore, it tried its best to dominate other nationalities including the ethnic groups and to establish its superiority which resulted in the simmering of its undercurrent of discontentment and disenchantment among tribals. Obviously, they began to organize themselves to assert their identities since the British Period. After independence they have become much more conscious and assertive. The first step was to bring out the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1952 as an alternative literary body to Assam Sahitya Sabha. The Assam Sahitya Sabha has failed to bring the various tribes under its banner to build a greater Assamese Society. Its view on the development of various tribal languages and cultures is poor and not acceptable to them. In 1967, the All Bodo students Union and subsequently other student’s organizations of the tribes have been formed. The
All Assam Student’s Union for its big brotherly syndrome and negligence to the tribals had been taken by them with a large pinch of salt. During the Assam Movement, on the issue of foreign nationals, particularly in the earlier phases, the leadership of the movement did not specify their role and position. At one stage the AASU demanded the abolition of constitutional safeguards provided to the tribals.\footnote{Monirul Hussain- (ed.) Understanding Society and Politics, Selected Essays- Tribal Question in Assam -1992.} Clause 10 of the Assam Accord, 1985 which provides for eviction of tribal people from forest land and other Government land had sharpened the separatist outlook and identity consciousness of the ethnic groups. The Government of Assam had adopted none-too-subtle pressure tactics to the needs and aspirations of the tribal people since independence. The language policy of Bimala Prashad Chaliha Govt., which made Assamese compulsory brought a feeling of insecurity among the tribal leaders of Assam.

Among the Rabhas, organisations like Rabha Sahitya Sabha, Rabha Sanmilan, Rabha Students Union are aiming at the development of Rabha language and culture, ensuring the safeguards by the constitution, implementation of the reservation policy and introduction of Rabha language in Primary Schools.\footnote{Related by Mr. Heramba Rabha, Ex-secretary, Rabha Sahitya Sabha.}

But after 1980’s the Rabhas are also well organized and organizations like Rabha Hasong Demand Committee, All Rabha National Council have been set up to meet their demands. These organizations have demanded mainly an
autonomous council with 823 Rabha dominated villages of Kamrup and Goalpara District. They also demanded Autonomous Rabha Districts in the Rabha dominated areas of Darrang and Dhubri District. Mr. Sabhya Sashi Rabha, President, Rabha Hasong Demand Committee said, if the areas overlap into BAC areas, even in such situation autonomy must be given. However, he added that Rabha Organizations would hold discussions with the BAC leaders and there might be a separate understanding with Bodos regarding the status of the Rabhas. Mr. Dwijen Rabha, the President of the All Rabha National Council and other leaders demanded that all foreigners in the Rabha Hasong area must be deported.\(^6\)

However, an accord between the Govt. of Assam and the representatives of Rabha Hasong Demand Committee and All Rabha Students Union was signed on March 10, 1995 with a view to giving autonomy to different tribal groups on the basis of Dr. Bhupinder Singh Committees (Three men Expert Committee) recommendation, the Government of Assam had constituted a committee under the Chairmanship of Mr. Mukut Sarma, the Revenue Minister, Government of Assam, to initiate discussions with the tribal groups. The committee has finalized the recommendation and on that basis the Accord has been signed. Accordingly, a two-tier administrative system has been speculated: the Rabha Hasong Autonomous council and the Village Council.

\(^6\) Related by Mr. Sabya Sashi Rabha, President, Rabha Hasong Demand Committee.
Like the Bodo movement in North bank of Brahmaputra, Rabha movement also sprang up in the south bank of Brahmaputra including Kamrup and Goalpara districts since 1980’s. Agriculture is the main occupation of the Rabha people. Although a huge amount of budgetary allotment was made for the welfare of the Rabha people, they were not able to develop. Therefore, some conscious Rabha leaders discussed their problems and demanded separate autonomous council to solve their problem. Though the concept of Tribal Block and Belts came into existence in 1946 under the leadership of Gopinath Bordoloi, the interests of the tribal people were not properly protected. Therefore, the demand for separate Autonomous Council came into existence.

The Rabha movement started after the formation of the All Rabha Students Union (ARSU). ARSU was formed on 12th February 1980 at Goalpara College campus. This was attended by a large number of delegates from Assam, Meghalaya, West Bengal and Nepal. Dr. Kanta Rabha was the first President and Sri Sabya Sashi Rabha was the first general secretary. From the very beginning the Bodo movement has had a great influence upon the ARSU. This has also helped in creating consciousness among the Rabha people.

A brief profile of Goalpara District:

The history of Goalpara goes back to several centuries. The original Goalpara was created by David Scott in 1822 A.D. In 1866 Garo Hills was separated from Goalpara district area and in the same year a new district named ‘Greater Koch Behar’ was created and the residual portion of the Goalpara
district was withdrawn from Rangpur and tagged with Koch Behar. Later the original Goalpara District was further divided into the districts of:

i. Goalpara

ii. Dhubri

iii. Kokrajhar and

iv. Bongaigaon

The district of Goalpara is situated on the South bank of the river Brahmaputra, and it covers an area of 1,824 Sq. Kilometres and is surrounded by East and West Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya on the South, Kamrup district on the east, Dhubri district on the west and river Brahmaputra along the north. The geographical location of the district is between $25^0 53'\ N$ to $26^0 30'\ N$ latitude and $90^0 07'\ E$ to $91^0 05'\ E$ longitude.

In the year 1983, Goalpara Civil Sub division was separated from original Goalpara district to form the present Goalpara district. The district thus consists of only one sub-division, namely Goalpara (Sadar). The district is divided into five revenue circles – Lakhipur, Balijana, Matia, Rangjuli and Dudnoi and eight development blocks namely – Jaleswar, Lakhipur, Kharmuja, Balijana, Krishnai, Matia, Dudnoi and Kushdhowa. The total number of villages in the district is 837 of which 761 are inhabited. There are 81 Gaon Panchayats in the district.

An autonomous council has been constituted – “Rabha Hasong Autonomous council” with its head quarter at Dudhnoi. The jurisdiction of this council extends up to Rani area of Kamrup district and except some parts of
Matia, Balijana and Lakhipur revenue circles, it embraces almost the entire
district of Goalpara. The autonomous council has been created to fulfill the long-
standing demands of the Rabha people of the area. However, as the council is
constituted only for the Rabhas, the tribals like the Bodos, the Garos the Koches,
the Rajbongshis and others who constitute more than half of the population of
Hasong area have been left out from the benefit of the council. As a result of
this, there is a growing demand for Autonomous District Council comprising of
all tribal groups of these area.

As per 2001 census, the population of the district is 8,22,305 with a
decadal growth of 23.03 percent during 1991-2001, which is higher than the
state and national average. Goalpara district is the home to a large number of
ethnic and religious communities. In addition to a sizeable section of the Muslim
population, the district is inhabited by the ethnic communities such as the Rabha,
Bodo, the Garo, and Koch Rajbongshis. All together 16.03 percent population in
the district belong to various scheduled tribes and 4.80 percent is from scheduled
caste communities. In terms of religion, the Muslims constitute the majority with
around 53.71 percent. Around 38.22 percent of the population is constituted by
the Hindus. 7.87 percent is constituted by the Christians and a negligible
proportion of the total population of the district belong to other religions.

In respect of Human Development Index (HDI) Goalpara is one of the
lowest ranked districts of Assam. The district ranks 18th in respect of HDI with
an index value of 0.308, which is below the state average of 0.407.
After the historical Bodo Accord signed on 20th February 1993, the Rabha people deeply felt the need to protect their socio-cultural tradition. Later ARSU submitted a fresh memorandum to the State Government to justify their problems and started to demand a separate Autonomous Council like the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). In 1992, ‘All Rabha Conference’ was held at Salpara and delegates from Assam, Meghalaya, West Bengal and Nepal participated in this conference. They discussed their problems and later on formed the “Rabha Hasong Autonomous District Demand Committee”. Sri Sarat Chandra Rabha (Ex MLA) was the first President and Sri Sulochan Rabha was the first General Secretary of the committee. They prepared a memorandum in this regard to submit to the State and Central Government.

After several agitations and Assam Bandh Programmes, the State Government initiated the discussion process to solve the problems. But the then Hiteswar Saikia Government was not able to provide the separate boundary and financial power to the “Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council”. Ultimately the matter was sent to Bhupinder Singh Committee and the Committee submitted its report to the State Government. The historical Rabha accord was signed on 10th March 1995, in the presence of Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia, A. Bhattacharya - Chief Secretary, Government of Assam, and members from various Rabha organizations viz. ARSU, Rabha Hasong Demand Committee. On 16th June 1995, an interim Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council was formed and Dudhnoi was made its head-quarter. The chief executive member of Rabha Hasong
Autonomous council was Sri Sabhya Sashi Rabha and Sri Sulochan Rabha was the Chief Councillor of interim Rabha Hasong Autonomous council.

Later on, the AGP Government in its second tenure dissolved the Rabha Hasong Autonomous council. As a result of this all the developmental work came to an abrupt stop. The AGP Government’s intention was to constitute the council through their own members but the people of RHAC could not support this intention.

The Constitution of India recognizes the Rabhas as the Plain tribes of India. As a result of this, the Rabhas are enjoying all the facilities of plains tribe provided by the constitution. But of late they were not satisfied by the existing constitutional provisions. As a result, they started the demand for autonomy according to the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the constitution. All Rabha Student’s Union adopted a 10-point demand charter way back in 1982, and one of the main demands was the demand for autonomy. These demands included that all the tribal dominated areas should be declared as tribal belt and block and the foreigners should be removed constitutionally from these belts and blocks and the non–tribals should be shifted from these areas; these areas should be brought under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution; and to form a new autonomous District Council.

In their demand, the ARSU demanded the autonomous status for all the tribes under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution. But in their demand, the nature and scope of the Autonomous District was not clear. Later, ARSU
presented a memorandum to the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi on 31st August 1982. In this memorandum the earlier demands were made clear. The 7th demand of the memorandum was that, the present districts of Assam should be newly demarcated, the tribal areas, specially the tribal sub-plan areas should be curved out and these areas should be provided autonomy under the Six Schedule of the constitution. Some of the other demands mentioned in the memorandum are- the Rabhas who resided in Meghalaya, Karbi Anglong and North Kachar Hills district and some other parts of the country should be provided the ST Status. Along with this, those Rabhas, who are known as Koch should also be provided the ST status. Secondly in the tribal areas of Assam, a census should be made by the tribal people and the reservation of the ST should be increased to 25% instead of 10% in all the states of India.

Thirdly, the Rabha language should be recognized and it should be introduced as a medium of instruction in the Rabha dominated areas. The activities of ARSU remained static due to the last phase of Assam agitation.

Later, Rabha Sahitya Sabha took the initiative for the introduction of the Rabha language as the medium of instruction in 1988, during the AGP rule. ARSU also extended its support to this demand of Rabha Sahitya Sabha. This demand-centric movement lasted for nearly six months and subsequently, Rabha language was introduced as a subject-language in some schools of Goalpara, Dhubri, and Kokrajhar district. But the demand for autonomy along with some other demands remained unresolved. In the last part of 1988, a national
convention under the leadership of AASU was held at Jorhat. After the conclusion of the convention the leaders of the Rabha community got united on the issue of autonomy. The Rabha leaders received ill-treatment from the organizers and they left the convention immediately. On their way back home, they arranged a meeting at a guest house in Kaziranga amongst themselves. Rajen Pam took the initiative and they adopted two major resolutions. These two resolutions were-

1. There will be one Rabha National conference on all Goalpara basis to be held at Salpara or Kothakuthi

2. In this conference, various Rabha organizations of the Goalpara district, Rabha Sahitya Sabha, Rabha Kristi Sanmilan, various student organisations, political personalities, educationists, senior citizens and the conscious people will be invited. As per the resolution of this meeting, a one-day conference was held at Salpara (Krishnai) on December 18, 1988. Sarat Ch. Rabha presided over the meeting. A new organization called ‘Goalpara District Rabha National Council’ was formed and their main demand was to form an autonomous district covering the areas from Dhupdhara on the east to Jayramkushi on the west. The same organization organized another conference at Salpara (Krishnai) on February 11, 1989. In this conference a new committee namely ‘Rabha Hasong Autonomous District Demand Committee’ was formed to take the future steps. This committee met the then Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta and
submitted a memorandum in this regard. They had discussions with the Chief Minister regarding their demands. But the AGP Government was suspended and as a result of this the development in this regard also stopped.

After the downfall of AGP Government, the Congress Government led by Sri Hiteswar Saikia came into power. But due to the ideological differences with the Rabha Hasong Autonomous District Demand Committee, they were not in a position to place their demands. After a long gap the committee submitted a memorandum to Sri Hiteswar Saikia on 8th June, 1992. After this, Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia convened a meeting of all political parties and tribal organisations in order to solve the problems faced by the tribal people. In this meeting all problems of the tribal people were elaborately discussed.

In this period, a new development took place. On 21 & 22nd July 1992, a Rabha National Convention was held and it covered all the Rabha dominated areas of Goalpara and Kamrup Districts. The main aim of this convention was to form a new committee. In this convention itself a new committee was formed : “Rabha Hasong Demand Committee”. This new committee extended the demand for a new autonomous state instead of an autonomous district. They also demanded the extension of the proposed autonomous state upto Rani of Kamrup District.
On the other hand, the ARSU through their 35-point charter tried to give a new dimension to their demand for autonomy. Two of the main demands of this 35-point charter were –

1. According to the Article 244(a), Goalpara and Kamrup districts should be rearranged in order to form a new autonomous state on the South bank of river Brahmaputra.

2. According to the Sixth Schedule of the constitution, the Rabha dominated areas of Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal should be merged in order to create an autonomous district.

On the basis of these two demands, ARSU submitted a memorandum to Sri Hiteswar Saikia, Chief Minister of Assam on 30th October, 1991. It is worthwhile to mention here that ARSU was not in a position to take any agitational programme for the support of their demand for autonomy. The reason behind this was that the organisational structure of ARSU was not very strong at that time. In this period, the AGP government formed a parallel student organisation named ‘Rabha Youth Students Society’ (Rabha Yuva Chatra Samaj). But later on, after strengthening their organisation, ARSU launched a series of vigorous agitational programmes by boycotting the Independence Day in 1993 for their demand for autonomy.

Subsequently, the ARSU and the Rabha Hasong Demand Committee adopted some common agitational programmes and they organised a huge rally at Guwahati on 24th November, 1993. Both the Rabha Hasong Demand
Committee and ARSU adopted their joint strategies for autonomy. Interestingly, in this period, Chief Minister of Assam, Sri Hiteswar Saikia announced on numerous occasions that autonomy will be provided to the Rabhas along with the Mishings and the Tiwas. On 10th December, 1993, a meeting was held between the Government and the leaders of the movement. In this meeting, the Rabha Hasong Demand Committee, Rabha National Council, ARSU, All Rabha Cultural Council jointly submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister. In this memorandum they demanded the formation of Rabha Hasong Autonomous State according to the Article 244(a) and 275(a) and formation of Rabha Hasong Autonomous District and Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council according to the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution covering 862 numbers of revenue villages and forest villages.

Consequentially, a committee was formed under chairmanship of Revenue Minister, Sri Mukut Sarma in order to solve the demands of the Rabhas. Two meetings were held, on 14 December & 30 December, but both proved unsuccessful in arriving at a consensus with regards to the inclusion of 862 villages in Rabha Hasong and formation of District Council at Dhubri & Darrang District.

Soon after the formation of RHAC, the Rabha people gradually became dissatisfied with the functioning of RHAC and they resumed their movement for greater autonomy, demanding constitutional safeguards under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. There are five major factors behind the resurgence of the
autonomy movement of Rabhas, namely – i) very low level of economic development; ii) large scale unabated influx of infiltrators into their land; iii) growing perception of the feeling of marginalisation and social exclusion; iv) political exploitation and failure of RHAC; v) creation of BTAD under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. There are some other sensitive and conflicting issues, such as the relationship with some other communities living within the territorial boundary of RHAC, which are equally responsible.

The much awaited Rabha Accord was signed on March 10, 1995 and subsequently amended in 2001 known as the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (amendment) Act 2001. According to this Act, there are all together 36 functions allotted to the Apex Council. Regarding village council, there are all together 29 functions allotted by this Act. After this Act, dissatisfaction started to mount among the non-Rabhas and Garos of this region. In the latter part of December 2010, violent clashes broke out between the Rabhas and the Garo communities in the Goalpara district of Assam and East Garo Hills District of Meghalaya. The Rabhas have a very close cultural affinity with the Garos, both being of Tibeto Burman origin. But in the recent past the Rabhas have resorted to a series of bandhs and road blockades to press for the demand of Rabha Hasong. The identity assertion movements of the Rabhas have also given rise to inter ethnic conflicts between the Rabhas and the non-Rabhas within the Rabha Hasong area. As a result of these developments, some significant ethnic conflicts
among the Rabhas and the Garos took place in the border areas of Assam and Meghalaya on December 2010 and January 2011.

The problem started, when 416 villages inhabited by the Garo people were included in Rabha Hasong, opposing the demand made by Garo National Council to form a separate Garo Autonomous council in Assam. The Rabhas are recognised as a scheduled Tribe in Assam but not in Meghalaya, so they never had their representation in the elected District Council. For quite some time the Rabhas have been demanding the ST status in Garo Hills. But the Garo people had opposed their demand. As a result of this, the Rabha organisations started declaring a series of bandhs and blockades. Such type of bandhs and road blockades cuts off all road communication between the two sides of Meghalaya. It ultimately led to inter-tribal clashes between the Rabhas and the Garos. As a result of these clashes the members from both the communities have suffered extensively. Though the Rabha-Garo clashes have subsided for time being, but we cannot deny the possibility of such clashes until the basic problem of granting the Scheduled Tribe status to the Rabhas in Meghalaya and the problem of RHAC administration is resolved once and for all. But new hope arises, after first democratic election for RHAC was held in last part of 2013. The Rabha Hasong Joint Movement Committee (RHJMC) led by Sri Tankeswar Rabha took charge of the RHAC.
Agitation by the members of ALI Rabha Women Council

Protests launched by the Non Rabhas against the inclusion of villages under RHAC
Protests launched by the various Non Rabhas organisation

Celebration of Baikhow Festival
Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Secretariat Building