

# **Reconstructing Ethno-Cultural Identity:**

## **A Study on the Assertion of Ethnic Identity of the Rabha Community in Assam (Specific Study Area: Goalpara district and South Kamrup)**

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### **Abstract:**

The North-east India, the homeland of cultural diversity, exhibited by more than three hundred culturally distinct ethnic groups of various sizes and at various stages of development. The identity assertion movement of the different ethnic groups has emerged as a strong force in North-east India through which the different ethnic groups try to fulfil their aspirations, demands, rights and to protect their ancestral soil or ethnic homeland, safeguard and maintain their distinct ethnic identity as well as to create a political space for all-round development for themselves within the existing polity. The movements for the assertion of identity of the different ethnic communities have changed the socio-political structure and the demographic composition in this region. The issues of identity and autonomy have been observed as the core behind these sustained socio-political movements launched by different tribal groups in this region. The ethnic identity assertion movements based on the protection of distinct ethnic identity of the diverse groups have also changed and moulded the nature of politics of North-east India. Within the framework of the Centralized State-Structure, the identity assertion movement has assumed great political significance.

This paper intends to deal with the emergence, growth and genesis of ethnic identity assertion movement in North-east India with special focus on the assertion of ethnic identity assertion of the Rabha Community in Assam.

## **Introduction:**

Ethnicity is indeed an excellent tool for pinning down the aspirations of people and safeguarding their distinct ethnic identity<sup>1</sup> (N.K.Das, 2007). The term “Ethnicity” is a sense of ethnic identity involving both the objective cultural markers and subjective self-consciousness of an ethnic community<sup>2</sup> (Hutnik Nimmi, 1991). Ethnicity is a sense of ethnic identity consisting of the “Subjective”, symbolic or emblematic use by a group of people... of any aspect of culture in order to differentiate themselves from other groups<sup>3</sup>. (Paul Brass, 1991). The Ethnic identity assertion movement of different ethnic groups has emerged as a strong force in North-east India through which the different ethnic groups seek to fulfil their aspirations, demands and to safeguard and maintain their distinct ethnic identity as well as to create a political space for all-round development for themselves within the existing polity. The movements for the assertion of identity of the different ethnic communities have changed the socio-political structure and the demographic composition in this region. The issues of identity and autonomy have been observed as the core behind these emerging identity assertion movements launched by different tribal groups in this region. These socio-political movements based on distinct ethnic identity of the diverse ethnic groups have changed and moulded the nature of politics of North-east India. Within the framework of the Centralized State-Structure, the identity assertion movement has assumed great political significance.

It has been observed that during post-independence India, the path of uneven development perpetuated by the Indian state has led to the emergence

and growth of new social forces like regional bourgeoisie, middle class and educated elite which have constructed ethnicity an important aspect of Indian polity<sup>4</sup>(A.K.Baruah,1991). Ethnic identity assertion of the different ethnic communities in this country manifests itself in the demand for the right to cultural and linguistic survival, demand for separate statehood within the existing system and also extends to secession from the existing polity in order to preserve and maintain their distinct identity<sup>5</sup>(Phandis and Ganguly,1989). During the post-independence period, Gorkhaland movement, Jharkhand movement, Dravidian movement, Naga movement, Bodoland movement etc. can be seen as manifestations of ethnic identity assertion in India. Ethnic identity assertion in India also revolves around the issues of economic advancement, educational opportunities, local political power etc<sup>6</sup>. (Hutchison and Smith, 1996).

North-east India is inhabited by more than three hundred culturally distinct ethnic groups of various sizes and at various stages of development. The politics of North-east India has been increasingly shaped by the movements of various ethnic communities for safeguarding and maintaining their distinct identities. Owing to ill-planned economic development policies, there is evident regional imbalance and backwardness in all spheres of life in this region. Poverty, lack of employment opportunities and aimless political process has resulted in gross dissatisfaction among the groups. Ethnicity has been growing rapidly and ethnic identity assertion of the different ethnic groups has become a strong force to attain socio-political and economic gains by the groups as well as to safeguard and maintain their distinct identity within the existing polity. The emerging identity assertion has been observed as a significant aspect which has become a socio-political reality of the contemporary democratic landscape of this region. In North-east India ,most of the ethnic communities struggle for creating a political space within the existing polity and their demands on the

basis of ethnicity has not yet ended<sup>7</sup>(Girin Phukan,2007).Thus, the emerging movements for the assertion of distinct ethnic identity of the different ethnic groups in this region continues to be a significant aspect and a dynamic factor which has changed the socio-political structure and demographic composition as well as changed and moulded the nature of politics of North-east India as well as Assam.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to focus the ethnic identity assertion in North-east India with special reference to the Rabha community in Assam. Before analysing the assertion of ethnic identity of the Rabhas, it is important and desirable to know who are the Rabhas?

### **Who are the Rabhas?**

The Rabhas are a distinct racial community under the greater Mongoloid ethnic group in Assam. The Rabhas are ethnically Mongoloid and linguistically Tibeto-Burman. As S.K. Chatterji observes, “the Rabhas belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group of the greater Indo-Mongoloid stock”<sup>8</sup>. S. Endle observes the Rabhas as the closely – allied tribes of the Kacharis<sup>9</sup>.The Rabhas are regarded as a section of the Bodo race, which appears to be an offshoot of the Garos<sup>10</sup>. The Rabhas are one of the aborigines or the earliest known inhabitants in this region which is basically a scheduled plain tribe under the greater Bodo Community. The Rabhas are scattered throughout the districts of Kamrup, Goalpara, Darrang, Dhubri, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Udalguri, Baksa, Nalbari, undivided Sivasagar, Lakhimpur in Assam, though their main concentration is found on the South Bank of river Brahmaputra in the districts of Kamrup and Goalpara. A section of the Rabhas is also found in the northern part of hill districts (East and West Garo Hills) of Meghalaya and also in North Bengal. The Rabhas form a unique and distinct community having own

language, literature, cultural life and also having rich socio-cultural heritage and traditions<sup>11</sup>. (Hakacham, 2010).

Dhananjay Rabha observes when king Dadan and their followers introduce Baikho festival in Athiabari of Goalpara district making essential work division which led to the creation of certain sub-groups of Rabhas such as- Pati, Rangdani, Maitori, Dahori, Chonga, Bitolia, Kocha etc<sup>12</sup>. (Dhaneswar Rabha, 2005). Thus the Rabhas are divided into a number of social, cultural and linguistic groups such as Pati, Rangdani, Maitori, Kocha, Dahori, Bitolia, Totla and Hana etc<sup>13</sup>. (Hakacham, 2010).

## **Objectives of the Study: -**

### **The objectives of the Study are:**

1. To trace the Socio-historical background of Ethnic identity assertion of the Rabhas as well as to examine the growth and Genesis of the assertion of identity of the Rabhas in Assam.
2. To analyze the recent trends and implications of the identity assertion movement of the Rabhas in Assam.

## **Data and methodology: -**

The data for the proposed study have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data have been collected from Government reports and other relevant documents. The secondary data have been collected through reviewing books, monographs, articles, magazines, journals and other printed materials. A number of literatures have been reviewed to collect required data for the research study. Among these, a limited literatures revolving around the issues of identity, autonomy and socio-cultural, political,

economic aspects of the Rabha Community, such as, the literature of Dr. Upen Rabha Hakacham, Dhaneswar Rabha, Prof. Niru Hazarika etc. are remarkably helpful to gather required data for the research study. A survey method also has been used covering Dudhnoi- the Head quarter of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council area and its adjacent villages to collect required data for this research study. A descriptive content analysis of the information obtained from secondary and primary data have been taken up for a comprehensive understanding about the socio-historical background and the growth and genesis of the assertion of ethnic identity of the Rabhas along with the recent trends and implications of the identity assertion movement of the Rabhas in Assam.

### **Socio-historical Background of Ethnic identity Assertion of the Rabhas:**

As ethnic identity assertion is a socio-historical process, the Rabha ethnic identity assertion has also its socio-historical background. The roots of ethnic identity assertion of the Rabhas were found in the pre-independence period mainly in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The ethnic identity consciousness among the Rabhas was found expression during the protest against the process of religious transformation. During this period, three pioneers of Rabha Community contributed to develop ethnic identity consciousness and in the emergence of ethnic identity assertion among the Rabhas through modern education, social reforms and cultural revivalism. These main three pioneers or pathfinders of the Rabha Community are 1. Dwarikanath Rabha (1888-1983) 2. Gobardhan Sarkar (1887-1982) who was the founder and led the Rabha Chatra Sanmilian (1915), Rabha Yubak Sangha (1941). Assam Rabha Sangha (1963) and led these Rabha national level organizations with his pioneering personality, and 3. Rajen Rongkho

(1890-1974) who authored Rabha Grammar and other writing in order to safeguard and develop the Rabha language and literature<sup>14</sup>. (Hakacham, 2010)

The pioneers of the Rabha Community, known as the Trimurty-Rabha, Sarkar and Rongkho tried to reform the Rabha society giving priority on education, social reforms and cultural revivalism and to create and deepen consciousness about lingual, ethno-cultural identity among the Rabhas in order to upgrade their community which was backward in terms of education, economy and socio-political consciousness. They took active initiatives for assertion of their distinct identity which resulted in the formation of certain Rabha national level organizations like Rabha Chatra Sanmilan (1915), Rabha Yubak Sangha (1941), Assam Rabha Sangha (1963) etc<sup>15</sup>.

At the early phase of Rabha ethnic identity assertion, especially in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century for the first time, ethnic identity consciousness and assertion among the Rabhas emerged against the process of religious transformation i.e. Sanskritization, Christianization under the Southern Dudhnoi Rabha Samaj in Salpara, Chotmatia, Manikganj etc. in these places, in a bid to conserve their traditional Gotra-Pratha, recover lingo-cultural identity under the active leadership and patronage of certain socially conscious emerging educated people among the Rabhas. Jagat Pam, Rajen Rongkho, Jibeswar Pam, Prasanna Kumar Pam, Rajen Pam, etc. were prominent among them<sup>16</sup>.

Certain traditional Social organizations such as- Mechpara Purbanchal, Madhyanchal- the traditional Jammad system among the Rabhas, and the different sections among the Rabha community, which are called “Thal or Khel” of the community as well as the existence of different types of traditional administrative social units such as the village or clan organization, the Jamad or branch organization and the district, state or regional organization, contributed in the ethnic identity formation and assertion among the Rabha community<sup>17</sup>.

In the pre-independence period in 1926, the formation of Assam Rabha Sanmilan in Santipur of Goalpara district under the leadership and patronage of Dwarikanath Rabha, Gobardhan Sarkar, the two great pathfinders of Rabha community, marked the significant beginning to assert Rabha identity. The Assam Rabha Sanmilan become All Assam Rabha Sangha in 1949, All Assam Rabha Sanmilan in 1965, Rabha National Council in 1971 and since 1976, it is functioning as All Rabha National council (ARNC) till today. This is the first ever father institution of Rabha community in which the roots of Rabha ethnic identity assertion was found expression in 1926. It is significant that, the root of ethnic identity assertion movement of the Rabhas is found expression in 1926. The ethnic unification of the several clans of Rabha ethnic group merged into a single entity under the umbrella of ARNC which paved the way to create national solidarity among the Rabhas and played significant role in the ethnic identity assertion movement of the Rabhas since its inception<sup>18</sup>.

Despite the community's setback due to the process of Sanskritization and Christianization in the early and middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been able to maintain their rich socio-cultural heritage and traditions through the dynamic socio-cultural organizations of the Rabhas. The relentless efforts of the pioneering personalities and the socio-cultural organizations had far reaching impact on the Rabha ethnic identity assertion movement through the ages<sup>19</sup>.

## **Genesis of Assertion of Ethnic Identity of the Rabhas:**

Even after several decades of independence, the Rabha elites increasingly felt that they remained much more backward in terms of educational,

economical and even political than the other sections of the Assamese society. Indeed they had not only been experiencing the problems of land alienation, unemployment, socio-economic and political oppression under the existing socio-economic system but also discrimination in achieving their rightful place in the society. Due to the feeling of deprivation and to get their rightful place in the society, the emerging Rabha elites became conscious about their own distinct identity and they realized the fact that without organizing themselves, they cannot conserve and develop their language and cultural heritage which are considered to be identity symbols. Since the pre-independence period, the Rabhas began to revitalize the ethnic consciousness on the basis of their distinct socio-cultural traits which culminated in the formation of a number of socio-cultural and political organizations among them. Having developed ethnic consciousness, the Rabha elites organized and mobilized their community and led their ethnic identity assertion movement establishing different Rabha national level socio-cultural and political organizations at different phases in order to uphold their aspirations, as well as to safeguard and maintain their distinct ethnic identity.

It has been observed that the ethnic identity assertion movement of the Rabhas has passed through different significant phases of growth and development.

The All Rabha National Council (ARNC) provided a common and unique platform among the Rabhas to assert their distinct ethnic identity at the initial phase. The Bebak Rabha Kraurang Runchum (BRKR) i.e. the All Rabha Sahitya Sabha established on 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1973 also provided a common literary and cultural platform for the Rabhas to safeguard and develop their language, literature and socio-cultural heritage. Since its inception, the ARSS efforts to upgrade their Mother language the Rabha and to provide it a constitutional safeguard with a view to promote it as a medium of instruction<sup>20</sup>. The Rabha

leaders after the formation of ARSS come forward with the vital task of protecting their language shaping into a written form<sup>21</sup>. Their principal demand was to introduce the Rabha language in the schools of Rabha dominated areas. They organized the Rabha people under the banner of ARSS and launched mass movements to fulfil their demands since 1979<sup>22</sup>. During the struggle for the language issue, the formation of ARSU on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1980, encouraged the agitation of the Rabha people to achieve their objectives. Their claims for a long duration resulted in the introduction of Rabha language as a subject up to class iii in 70 primary schools in Goalpara, Dhubri and Bongaigaon district in 1988<sup>23</sup>. In 1973, ARSS submitted memorandum to the then Chief Minister Sarat Chandra Singha for recognition of the Rabha language<sup>24</sup>. Thus, language become an instrument for the assertion of Rabha ethnic identity.

Even after the six decades of independence, due to the absence of any protective measures taken by the government, the original Rabha language, culture and traditions are on the verge of extinction because of the social and cultural onslaught of the developed and flourishing culture of high caste, the dominant section of society<sup>25</sup>. In a bid to save their language, literature and the rich socio-cultural heritage, the Rabha educated elites organized the All Rabha cultural conference in 1955<sup>26</sup>.

The formation of All Rabha Student's Union (ARSU) on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1980 under the founder President Mr. Kanta Rabha and Secretary Sabyashasi Rabha at Boko of Kamrup district marked the politically significant phase in the ethnic identity assertion of the Rabhas. ARSU provides the greatest contribution and has played active and significant role in the ethnic identity assertion movement of the Rabhas famous as Rabha Hasong movement<sup>27</sup>.

A politically significant phase of the ethnic identity assertion movement of the Rabhas started since 1980's with a new and strong vigour and direction

especially after the formation of ARSU. ARSU in their subsequent phases formed the Rabha Hasong Demand committee (RHDC) in 1992 and All Rabha Women Council (ARWC) in 1993 and launched mass movements to assert and safeguard their distinct ethnic identity as well as to achieve their desired goal<sup>28</sup>.

The All Rabha Women Council (ARWC) the first ever Rabha women's national level organization formed on 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1993 under the founder president Sumitra Hato and Secretary Rangili Rabha at Boko high school under the active patronage of ARSU provided a common and active platform for all the Rabha women of Assam and abroad in order to organize and mobilize the Rabha women to play an active and efficient role and to provide dynamicity to the ethnic identity assertion movement of the Rabhas. Since its inception, ARWC has taken important initiatives to organize and unite all the Rabha women of all the Rabha dominated districts of Assam and abroad in socio-political and cultural front establishing Anchalik or regional committees in different districts of Assam with the organized Rabha women in order to create active participation among the Rabha women in all the plans and programmes of the identity assertion movement of the Rabhas. ARWC has played significant role to empower the Rabha women in all spheres of life as well as it encouraged the Rabha women in the active participation in every programmes of the ethnic identity assertion movement of the Rabhas. ARWC has rendered active associated role and cooperative effort with ARSU giving a new vigour in the ethnic identity assertion movement of the Rabhas since its inception<sup>29</sup>.

The ARSU, in their subsequent phases, formed the Rabha Hasong Demand Committee (RHDC) in 1992 and All Rabha Women Council (ARWC) in 1993 and launched mass movements with the cooperation of RHDC and ARWC by demanding for the creation of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) in the southern bank of river Brahmaputra<sup>30</sup>. Having inspired by the politics of ethnic identity, politics of Sixth Schedule and the doctrine of right to

self- determination, ARSU launched a mass movement with the active cooperation of RHDC and ARWC for the protection and safeguard their ancestral soil or ethnic homeland from the problem of land alienation and encroachment by illegal migrants and to assert and safeguard their distinct ethnic identity. The identity assertion movement of the Rabhas started with a new vigour with the formation of RHDC in 1992 under the banner of ARSU. They launched mass movements demanding greater autonomy in the Rabha Hasong area under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India and to form Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council covering the area of the two districts of lower Assam- South Kamrup and Goalpara from Rani of South Kamrup to Jairamkuchi of Goalpara district including 3161km<sup>2</sup> land of Southern bank of river Brahmaputra and the Northern foothill areas of Meghalaya. Due to the active and relentless effort and demand movement of ARSU, RHDC, ARWC, the Rabha accord was signed between the Government of Assam, the then Chief Minister of Congress led Govt. Hiteswar Saikia, the Chief Secretary A. Bhattacharya and the members of ARSU, President Gangaraj Rabha and Secretary Ratan Rabha of ARSU, President Sarat Chandra Rabha, Secretary Sulochan Rabha of RHDC <sup>31</sup>.

Thus, their Rabha Hasong demand movement got a positive response from the side of the Government of Assam and accordingly the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Act, 1995 was passed in Assam State Assembly that resulted in the formation of Rabha Hasong (interim) Autonomous Council on 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1995<sup>32</sup>.

Referring to the Rabha accord, the 1<sup>st</sup> Interim Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) was constituted under the Chairmanship of Sabyashasi Rabha along with other 19<sup>th</sup> executive members on 20<sup>th</sup> July, 1995, but the boundary of the proposed council's area is yet to be demarcated in an agreed manner. From 1995- 2007, during this period, already three interim

RHAC's have been constituted by the Government of Assam. The 2<sup>nd</sup> interim RHAC, was constituted in 1997 by the Govt. of Assam with the initiatives of Chief Minister Prafulla Kr. Mahanta taking Sarat Chandra Rabha as Chief Executive member along with other 25 additional members and the 3<sup>rd</sup> interim RHAC was formed in 2001 by the Govt. of Assam with the initiatives of Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi taking Dr. Sarat Chandra Rabha as Chief Executive members along with other 24 additional members<sup>33</sup>.

Although the council was formed through polls till 2001 according to the provisions of the RHAC act, 1995, but later on the council poll was not being held. Thus, although some amount of political autonomy was granted to the Rabhas, but in real sense, the aspirations of the Rabha people weren't fulfilled due to the gaps in the implementation of the Rabha accord. The failure of RHAC led to a new dimension in the agitation for more autonomy for the Rabhas under the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Thus, the failure of RHAC compelled the Rabha educated elites to reject it and they started mass movements demanding fresh and greater political autonomy under Article no- 244 (A) of the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Constitution of India<sup>34</sup>.

As a platform for assertion of Rabha identity, the formation of the Sixth Schedule demand committee (SSDC) under the banner and patronage of ARSU on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2003 was another significant effort in the phase of ethnic identity assertion movement of the Rabhas<sup>35</sup>. Since then, both ARSU, ARWC with the collaboration of SSDC are jointly struggling to achieve their demands for greater ethnic autonomy till today.

ARSU has submitted memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi in 2007 and 2009, demanding to send the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule proposal to the Union Government and include the RHAC into the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution and also exemption of Panchayat elections from the RHAC area

according to the clause no 5 of the Rabha accord of 1995 and demanding immediate holding of fresh RHAC elections in the area and implement the provisions, decisions of Rabha accord of 1995 and complete all necessary steps and actions for recommend the Sixth Schedule proposal to the Union Govt. and conduction of RHAC election with immediate actions<sup>36</sup>. It has been observed that the leader of these organizations has adopted various methods such as-Bandh, Economic blockade, Road blockade etc. in the Rabha Hasong area to pressurize on the Govt. in order to fulfil their long cherished demands.

### **Recent trends and implications of the Ethnic Identity Assertion movement of the Rabhas:**

Even after the six decades of India's independence and governance under the Government of Assam could not protect the Rabhas from exploitation, deprivation from basic human and constitutional rights and bring about faster socio- economic development. Their right over their land and forest was snatched away. Due to illegal migration and other developmental activities, large scale tribal land alienation started uprooting the Rabhas from their own ancestral soil. This led the Rabhas to seek protection under the Indian constitution and demand autonomy in order to safeguard their ancestral soil, preserve their distinct socio-cultural heritage as well as to safeguard and maintain their distinct ethnic identity. As a result of their ethnic identity assertion movement, the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) was created according to the Rabha accord, 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1995, with much hope and expectation which got shattered soon. The state machinery showed interest neither to strengthen the council nor to hold the election of RHAC to make it a democratic institution by implementing the Rabha accord properly. The Pathetic failure of the RHAC compelled the Rabha people to reject it and demand fresh and greater Autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution by ARSU, ARWC and SSDC with other Rabha national level organizations and

launched mass movements in joint effort with a new spirit in to achieve their desired destiny. In the wake of this mass movement, the Chief Minister of Assam, Mr. Tarun Gogoi announced on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2004 and on 13<sup>th</sup> October, 2007 to grant the Sixth Schedule Autonomy to the Rabhas. At present as many as 779 Revenue villages with a total population of 6 Lakhs (approx) has been notified by the Hon'ble Governor of Assam as under the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC)<sup>37</sup>.

In the recent trends of the ethnic identity assertion movement of the Rabhas, ARSU, ARWC and SSDC submits memorandum to the State Government demanding to recommend and send the Sixth Schedule proposal to the Union Government and include the RHAC into the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, and to implement and amend also the Rabha accord of 1995 making RHAC a democratic and dynamic institution for proper development and also demand the exemption of Panchayat election from the RHAC area according to clause No.5 of Memorandum of settlement (Rabha accord) of 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1995 and immediate hold the council election as well as to implement the decisions taken the Government of Assam to complete all the necessary steps for recommend the Sixth Schedule proposal to the Union Govt. and to conduct RHAC election with immediate effect. They also demand not to take any step for holding Panchayat election instead of RHAC election in the area falling within the council area which may take into violent turn and ethnic clashes in this area<sup>38</sup>.

It is also important to note that the emerging identity assertion movement has significant implications. The identity assertion movement of the Rabhas has been observed to generate inter-ethnic conflict among the Rabhas and Non-Rabhas within the council area. The Non- Rabha ethnic groups inhabiting in RHAC area, particularly the Muslims, Garos, Assamese, have been found to pressurize the State Govt. to hold Panchayat elections in the villages dominated

by the non- Rabha communities which fall under RHAC area and to exclude their villages from the council. On January, 2008, the Non- Rabha communities form Non- Rabha coordination forum and under the banner of Non-Rabha coordination forum, also resorts agitation and counter movement against the movement of the Rabhas by urging the Govt. to fulfil their demands due to their feeling of insecurity and deprive of civil, political rights within the council area. These developments have been found to generate some significant ethnic conflicts-such as a violent clash broke out among the Rabhas and Non- Rabhas, particularly among the Rabhas-Muslims in Lakhipur area of Goalpara district when a Rabha mob came to defer Panchayat elections from the RHAC area in 29<sup>th</sup> March, 2010,<sup>39</sup> and the 48 hour No-37 National Highway bandh on December, 2010 called by ARSU, ARWC, SSDC are also observed to cause the tragic inter-ethnic conflict among the Rabhas and Garos in the Assam-Meghalaya border areas on December, 2010 and January, 2011<sup>40</sup>. Such ethnic unrest in the RHAC area compelled the State Assembly to withdraw the RHAC (Amendment) bill on March 2010, which was moved to discuss in the State Assembly about the Sixth Schedule demand of the Rabhas<sup>41</sup>. The constant bandh, rail blockade, economic blockade, adopted by ARSU, SSDC, etc, the Rabha national organizations for the fulfilment of their Sixth Schedule demand pressing the Govt. have been found to create different violent incidents and also disrupts the trade, commerce, travel, communication and economic development and the growing ethnic rifts among the Rabhas and non- Rabhas have resulted in growing acrimony and disharmony among the communities in the Council area. The ethnic identity assertion movement of the Rabhas poses as an issue of concern for the Govt. of India as well as of Assam. It has been observed that the growing ethnic activism resulting different ethnic rifts among the Rabha and non- Rabha communities in the Council area has become an issue of peace and conflict and human rights in the contemporary democratic setup of this region. Therefore, it has been observed that the growing ethnic

activism of the Rabhas and the emerging inter-ethnic conflicts among the Rabha-non Rabha groups, have led a process of ethnic mobilization and counter- mobilization in this area as well as in Assam.

### **Conclusion:**

It may therefore be observed that ethno- cultural identity of the Rabhas transformed into a more specific demand for greater ethnic autonomy i.e. politics of ethnic identity of the Rabhas after 1980's i.e. the demand for the creation of RHAC and then the inclusion of RHAC within the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. It has been seen that the ethno-cultural identity of the Rabhas was reconstructed and it took a political colour especially after 1980's with the arrival of ARSU, ARWC, RHDC, SSDC etc. Thus, the ethnic identity assertion movement of the Rabhas has been passing through different significant phases of growth and development.

Another significant point is to be noted that the growing ethnic consciousness and the identity assertion movement of the Rabhas has been found to create inter-ethnic tensions as well as to generate inter- ethnic conflicts in the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council area such as the inter- ethnic conflicts among the Rabhas and Non-Rabhas like Rabha- Muslim conflict, Rabha-Garo conflict etc. have clearly reflected this significant implication and now which has become an issue of concern of peace and conflict and human rights within the existing polity. Thus, the ethnic identity assertion movement of the Rabhas has different significant phases resulting different issues and implications which needs serious and systematic investigation to find out the major issues and solve the emerging problems with the collaboration of both the

people and the concerned State machinery in order to restore peace and democracy in this region.

I conclude with the observation that the Rabha community is politically and socio-economically suppressed and is perhaps considered to be the most backward tribal group in North-east India lacking proper socio-economic development as well as proper representation and so on, which requires very sympathetic attention in the existing socio-political set-up.

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