

Report-II

Fact Finding Report on the Rabha-Garo Clash in Meghalaya-Assam Border Area*

On January 9, 2011, a joint team of activists from the Parag Kumar Das Documentation and Research Centre and Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti visited the affected areas in Goalpara region of Assam, to take stock of the clashes between the people of the Garo and the Rabha communities residing in the region. The conflict has rendered almost 30,000 people homeless, more than 30 villages burnt to ashes and an increasing number of dead and missing people.

Talking with the people in the shelters in the Krishnai region, the team visited the Garo-relief camp in Hudakona Lower Primary School No.687 and the Rabha camp in Kukurkata. The team also followed up with source information and background of previous episodes pertaining to the building up of the conflict. Here are some of the several points we drew out of our investigation:

Variations of Interpretations

The people interviewed by the team offered differing views of the origins of the current clashes. We got a picture of several isolated incidents that contributed to the narrative of the root causes of the clashes.

In the stories shared by most Rabha people, the incident of December 31, 2010 was the starting point. Apparently there was an altercation between a Rabha shopkeeper and some Garo customers over the purchase of some cigarettes resulting in the ransacking of the shop, which resulted in public (Rabha) assault on the Garo youths. This resulted in the “burning down of Mr. Medhi’s house, who is a local teacher by some Garo people”. The Garo people had a different version. The Garo complained about the *bandh* declared during Christmas Eve by Rabha organization in support of their autonomous jurisdiction council “Rabha Hasong”, when a

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priest belonging to the Garo community was assaulted by some Rabha youth on December 22, 2010.

The blame game went from one date to another, depending on who was being asked the question. Both communities have a collective retrospection of events, which would shift the blame to the other (community). There were clashes periodically in every month even before December 2010-January 2011.

Root Causes as Perceived by Team

The Politics of Two Autonomous Councils- The main problem lies in the handling of the autonomous councils in both the states. In Meghalaya, there have been problems brewing up because of the suspension of the Garo Autonomous Hills Council. The ruling United Meghalaya Alliance (UMA) coalition in Shillong has dissolved the Garo Autonomous Council following allegations of discrepancies in the fund and unchecked appointments. Garo Student Union (GSU) and parties have time and again raised demands that the Council be soon made functional and enquiry into it be done simultaneously. However, as quoted in many news reports from Shillong, Chief Minister Dr. Mukul Sangma deliberately kept the issue in limbo so that he can run the Council through “Administrator Rule”. Common people and council employees have suffered the most in this process. Till last October payments of salary were overdue for 8 to 9 months. The insecurity regarding land and property has set in and has fueled the discourse of “the outsider” and the “son of the soil” in the Garo Hills. In East Garo Hills, when rumours started the clashes, Rabha people who had *pattas* (land titles) to their landholding and the mining labours from Assam working in East Garo Hills were especially targeted. The exodus started following the failure of the administration to prevent the planned destruction of property.

It is often said that Garo and Rabha communities have lived together in relative harmony since many decades. While this is true, regular clashes inside the borders of Assam in Goalpara, have taken place between the two communities, sometimes involving their civic and political organizations as well. Ironically, it also pertains to another autonomous council inside the borders of Assam, in this case the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council**. Garo people and their organizations along with a conglomeration of non-tribal minority communities and their forums have been jointly protesting against the inclusions of their villages inside the Rabha Hasong Autonomous jurisdiction. Such protests have caused serious clashes among the communities. The Rabha Hasong Autonomous Bill was not tabled in Assam Assembly for this reason. This has created a vicious atmosphere between the communities. However Assam government had a

chance of intervention when on Nov 3, 2010 at the Central Office of the All Rabha Student Union in Dhudhnoi several Garo organizations under the leadership of the President of Garo Jatiya Parishad, Arbitson D' Momin declared that there were no conflicting demand regarding the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council from the Garo side. There was no demand for any other autonomous position since Garos already have a “functional” Autonomous Council in Meghalaya and also there was no demand for conducting “Panchyat Election” as that would further complicate the struggle by the Rabhas for their own council. Momin further added that such demands are made by some “self-styled” leaders of Garo community in Assam for selfish interests. He also extended his support to the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council and declared a joint struggle for Rabha Hasong. Assam government should have seized the momentum the initiative had provided and carefully tried to assuage the grievances of both the communities. *However, it failed to capitalize on the progress that civil society had made.*

*(**Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council was constituted with headquarter at Dudhnai town. The jurisdiction of this council extends upto Rani area of Kamrup district and except some parts of Matia, Balijana and Lakhipur revenue Circles, it embraces almost the entire district of Goalpara. However, as the council is constituted only for the Rabhas, tribes like Bodos, Garos, Kochs, Rajbongsis 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, there is a growing demand for Autonomous district council comprising of all Tribal groups of these areas. (http://goalpara.gov.in/rabha_hasong.htm)*

Political Calculation in Assam and Upcoming Assembly Elections -

Given the history of clashes between the Rabhas and the Garo, the government should have taken steps to curtail any such incidents or their escalations. It was not, however, the case. News of Garo villages being burnt in Assam resulted in destroying of Rabha colonies in Meghalaya. People started vacating villages prior to attacks, which made it even easier to burn them down. Again, if news of deteriorating conditions of Rabha in relief camps in Mendipathar, in East Garo Hills, came to Assam, more villages were burnt or Garo relief camps attacked. This cycle was allowed to continue with little or no policing of the affected areas. Since Garo relief camp in Assam were in Rabha dominated area, lesser relief materials were made available to the Garo camps, since mobs controlled the highways and roads. This infuriated the Garo people and relief carrying trucks were attacked. The roads in the Krishnai region to Kukurkata relief camp was controlled by angered mobs of both communities. When this team visited the area, the absence of administration of was starkly visible. Scattered soldiers of the Sikh Regiment tried to guard the camps, while people began filling the relief camps. The only Assam Police officials we noticed were

busy in escorting various politicians and high officials paying a visit to the areas.

In an important political development, Rabha groups had boycotted the Congress from that area in the upcoming elections. They had also contemplated supporting an independent candidate from their side against the Congress. It should also be remembered that the Congress-led government had been castigated for rampant corruption.

The Rise of Ultra-Nationalism in Garo Hills and the Presence of Communal Parties and Lobbies Influencing Rabha Politics- Some communal parties and lobbies have been acting inside the Rabha parties and have managed to spread its ultra-Hindu ideas in the community too. On September 19, 2010, sensing the danger brewing up in their society, Rabha student leaders-- Bijon Rabha and Sanjeev Rabha -- along with their Garo counterparts -- I Marak and Franklin Marak – issued a joint appeal to people of both communities, to check growing communalism. The non-tribal minority groups were also alarmed by such activities and began to express their misgivings. This is a dangerous trend in the Rabha community and there are spaces left to ponder if the *bandhs* called during Christmas Eve was to incite communal flare up.

On the other hand, in spite of such incidents occurring in East Garo Hills in Meghalaya earlier, there was never such a drastic response as the recent one. One of the main factors working as a catalyst, was the newly formed (in 2010) ultra-nationalist underground organization of the Garos--the Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA). It was formed by a former officer of Meghalaya police with the objective of carving out a separate Garo state. On Dec 8, 2010 just days before the riots started, two hard core members of GNLA, were arrested with a huge cache of arms in Williamnagar, the headquarter of East Garo Hills. In order to make their presence felt in the Garo community they actively participated in the riots with the objective of chasing away the Rabha people living there. The Rabhas have voting rights in the area. Out of the whole population of the Rabhas (more than 8000 as per census 2001) in East Garo Hills, almost 4000 thousand were seen as a decisive vote bank in that area. There were several reports that “surrendered” militants were ransacking and attacking Rabhas in East Garo Hills; interestingly most of the cadres of GNLA were former members of other organizations active in that area.

Tale of Two National Highways- The road to East Garo Hills is through Goalpara, where major control of the road and taxation accruing from it, is controlled by Rabha groups. Garo groups in that area have always complained about this. Taxation on this National Highway was also a major coffer-filler for various organizations.

Interestingly, this conflict reiterated the case for building the Shillong-Tura Highway through Nongstoin, the headquarters of West Garo Hills. Every organization has been lobbying for the national highway, which has been stalled by red-tape in Delhi. The estimated cost of the construction of the road is INR1498.48 crores. Opposition Leader Conard Sangma, who has his base in Tura is said to be pushing this project while the incumbent Chief Minister, Dr. Mukul Sangma's government has urged the Centre to set up a special project monitoring committee, with the involvement of the state government, to speed up pending road projects in Meghalaya. The revenue from the road, political mileage, the kickbacks and the percentages points to a nexus of politician-builders and share taking underground organizations are profiting from the ongoing Rabha-Garo clashes.

Cumulative Appraisal from the Findings

Land Reforms: Land reform policies have to be implemented, mainly on matter of ceiling, land distribution and other land-related reforms whether of the primary, secondary or tertiary nature.

a) Rabha, among the major Schedule Tribes of Assam has the least land-holding at their disposal. For Instances, the Miri and the Deuri have the highest number of land owners and *land-cultivators* as against Rabhas who have the highest number of ST landless laborers (derived from The Scheduled Tribes Census of India 2001)

b) The communal atmosphere, especially, in times of polarization on the eve of elections in Assam state is being deliberately used to blur the concept of land-owners and settlers, especially in case of individuals belonging to the religious minority. Reports in some of the newspapers have mentioned it as a “clash between Hindu Rabha and Christian Garo and illegal Muslim immigrants. Land is the crux of identity politics in Assam.

Border-disputes have been one of the major reasons of clashes and disturbances among the communities of Assam and bordering state. Along with the Rabha-Garo clashes, in 2010 there were clashes of intense nature in the Saraipung area, between the people from Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. People were displaced in the summer of 2010 and there were numerous incidents of arsons, killings and villages being burnt. Existing state policies and initiatives have failed to provide solution. The polity of Assam and Meghalaya was supposed to sit in deliberation to resolve the long lasting inter-state border issue during August 2011. After five months of that diplomatic overture, the Rabha and Garo clashes erupted in the bordering areas of Assam-Meghalaya.

List of Villages Affected

Mendipathar	Harinkata	Hatibasa-6	Bakenang
Genang	Soinang	Thapa	Dagal
Mongre	Rome	Daram	Jongla
Upper Manikganj	Depa Dangkhang	Noksar Rabhapara	Tekelipara
Miapara	Tharika	Garomara	Darakona
Nibari	Halowapara	Bakripara	Rongrong
Chrokpara	Paham	Nabang	Nehrubazar
Moranodi	Darangshi	Rongdup	Jamgaon
Belpara	Khamari	Khasigara	Chigsin
Mongan Kodam	Nagati		

List of Relief Camps

Ghorapota.M.V. School	Chorakpara L.P. School	Bongaon L.P. School
Khamari L.P. School	Kalajhar L.P. School	Beldengpara L.P. School
Bamune Pani Khowa L.P. School	Nibari Meselkhowa M.V. School	Nakatipara
Borpathar	Jira	Guria Hirapara
Chenimari Nowapara	Damra	Khardang
Hatigaon (3 Nos.)	Bordag	Barali
Rongchai	Beldengpara (2 Nos.)	Chechapani L.P. School
Chotomatia (Nowapara)	Nagarapara	

Information about Goalpara

Total Population: 8, 22,306 (2001 census) Sex-Ratio: 956 Literacy Rate: 36.03%
 Goalpara Town population: 39, 208
 Rabha- (ST) 277, 517 (population)
 Goalpara- 16% is the total ST population in the district