



ETHNIC CLASHES AND SOCIAL UNREST IN GOALPARA DISTRICT OF ASSAM

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Abstract

Society moves with social change, development and social instability. Mixed with various groups of people belongs to language, religion, tribes and community, society bears lots of experiences of different types of conflict and violence. Social and economic crisis among the tribes and communities of North East India leads to various ethnic clashes in the region followed by political fragmentation of the region. The tribal movement in north-east India is a manifestation of fight for identity although based on ethnic considerations. Ethnic conflicts have severely affected the newly emerged nation states. The state of Assam populated by communities with strong primordial values has been experiencing ethnic assertion and strife for quite sometime. Many secparatist demands for autonomy, controversies over linguistic and religious issues and insurgent situations are rooted in the failure of the state to fulfill aspirations of the competing ethnic community and address this question in a more objective manner.

Goalpara district is the home of different tribes and communities like Rabha, Bodo, Garo etc. along with the immigrants from different parts of the country and border nations holds complex socio-cultural identity. The district experiences various stages of agitation, mass movement, conflict and violence between different groups which develop social unrest in the district. The ethnic clashes among the Rabha and Garo people of the district and neighbouring Meghalaya brings much more social instability in the district. In this paper attempt has been made to study the ethnic clashes occurs recently in the district creating social unrest and unstability causing lots of life.



Key words : *Goalpara, Ethnic, Bodo, Rabha, Garo.*

Introduction :

Society is a mosaic of different groups of people identical in caste, community, religion and language. Mixed with different groups of people, society bears lots of experiences with different types of conflict and violence amongst the socially distinctive groups. North East India is the land of diverse physiography with mountainous terrain, hills, plateaus and plains dissected by rivers and streams, covering an area about 255083 sq. km. and supports 38.5 million population (2001 census). North East India, comprising of the seven sister states, presents a wide diversity of almost 400 tribal, ethnic and non-ethnic communities, with their distinct culture, language and economy¹. The unique geopolitical situation and historical background of North East India leave impressions of tribal movements in the region. Living in the tract of different ecological settings of North East India, along with share of ethnic and cultural affinities across international boundaries and foothills, each community characterized by distinct identity markers such as livelihood pattern, food habit, language, religion, dress, customs etc. The tribal communities in North East India are ethnically, socio-culturally, linguistically and economically differ with different levels of economic development. Due to this heterogeneity and population pressure, the region is facing various social, political and economic problems among the groups of people, which leads conflicts and violence among different ethnic groups. Social, political and economic crisis among the tribes and communities leads to various ethnic clashes in the region causing social unrest followed by political fragmentation of the region. Usually ethnic groups which became minority claim special privilege to preserve their culture, language etc². The tribal movement in north-east India is a manifestation of fight for identity although based on ethnic considerations.

Geographically Assam situated in a strategic position in terms of its location and population characteristics covering an area of about 78,438 sq. km. with a total



population of 3,12,05,576 (2011 census). Assam, the highest populous state in North East India, comprising with different communities with strong primordial values and has been experiencing ethnic assertion and strife. It is the home land of about 90 ethnic groups with various socio-cultural, linguistic and racial affiliations.³ The different groups for protecting their own identity and culture demanding their autonomy time to time through aggitational programme leading to conflicts among various groups causing unrest in the region. Demands for autonomy, controversies over linguistic and religious issues and insurgent situations are rooted in the failure of the state to fulfill aspirations of the competing ethnic community which leads unrest among the people of Assam. The Bodoland movement, the Karbi autonomy and other demands for politico-territorial autonomy status of various insurgent groups are the reflections of relative deprivation, ideology and ethnic class conflict which are crystalised along geographically distinct areas of lands of Assam⁴.

Goalpara district situated in the south bank of river Bralmaputra, is the land of different ethnic groups like Rabha, Bodo, Garo etc. The district is also largely affected by immigration creating a great threat to its population composition. Goalpara district, like other parts of Assam is also witnessed ethnic conflicts during last few years. Economic and political crisis among the various ethnic communities with population pressure including the force of immigration are responsible for unrest among the people of the district with incidence of ethnic conflicts. After Bodo movement the movement of Rabha people demanding autonomous territory creating havoc through their agitational programmes in the district. The vulnerability of the agitation programme creates fear among the other communities of the district creates clashes among the groups. One major incidence of conflicts exposed in the month of December, 2010 in Goalpara district among the Garo and Rabha people leaving social unrest in different parts of the district.



Description of Study Area :

Goalpara district, situated in westernmost part of Assam extending between $25^{\circ} 28'$ N and $26^{\circ}15'$ N latitudes and $89^{\circ}42'$ E and $90^{\circ}15'$ E longitudes covering a geographical area of 1824 sq. km with a total population of 10,08,183 (as per 2011 Census). The district is bounded by river Brahmaputra in the north, foothills of Meghalaya plateau in the south, river Petabhokla in the east and flood plains in the west. Politically the district is bounded by Bongaigaon and Barpeta district to the north; Kamrup district to the east; Meghalaya state to the south and Dhubri district to the west. Physiographically, the whole district is covered with flat plain with scattered isolated hills and hillocks, which are part of Meghalaya plateau and scattered char-lands in the flood plains of river Brahmaputra.



Materials and Methods :

In the present study both primary and secondary data are collected. Necessary secondary data regarding total population, ethnic groups, group-wise population, incidences etc. are collected from the Statistical Handbook Assam, Census Reports, Office of the Economics and Statistics, Govt. of Assam; Govt. offices, records of office of the Superintendent of Police, Goalpara, related articles, books, Journals, news paper



and other Govt. publications. Primary data are collected from the field through interview with affected persons, eye witnesses, leaders of Garo and Rabha organizations and NGOs which provide relief to the victims.

Results and Discussion :

Ethnicity is a sense of identity, feeling of belongingness within a particular ethnic community, associated with political, juridical, religious and other social views and forms of interaction, which constitute important ingredients of ethnic phenomenon. Ethnicity is a very complex phenomenon. Like other social phenomena, it is subject to change. Its form, place and role in society may alter⁵. Socio-political domination and economic exploitation on community are major causes for conflicts and social unrest among different ethnic groups. Ethnic conflicts have severely affected in the state of Assam in last few decades. In 1992, severe tense occurs including few incidences of burning temples by muslim miscreants in Goalpara district following the incident of demolition of Babri Masjid In Ayodhya. Since last decade few sporadic incidences of conflicts among different ethnic groups occurs in the district, which causes social instability in the region.

The pleasant social environment is also affected from the immigration of people to the district intruding in the areas of tribal habitat since last few decades. The major tribal groups Rabha, Garo, Bodo people peacefully habitat in the district start demanding their various demands and autonomy in different aspects. Demand for Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) and Six Scheduled in the area along with the increasing population of immigrant Muslim are the major root causes for growing ethnic conflicts in the district. Last three decades the district is severely affected by the agitation programme and bandh called by various organisations in the district as well as in the state for their own demands.

During the last two decades of twentieth century, the Bodo movement prevails tense in Goalpara district along with the other part of western Assam. After that the



continuous struggle for Autonomous Council of the Rabha people in the form of various agitation programmes severely affects the social peace and harmony in the last decade. It also causes sporadic incidences of group clashes among different community mainly in Goalpara and south Kamrup district of Assam specially among the Rabha and Non Rabha people. In December 2010 a major ethnic conflict occurs in Goalpara district between Rabha and Garo communities affecting thousands of peoples with loss of life too. The violence took place mainly for the frequent aggitational call given by Rabha organisations and some misunderstanding arising out of stray incidence. On 1st January'2011 at about 5:30 P.M. at Manikgang under Meghalaya some drunken youth of both the Garo and Rabha communities started verbal confrontation resulting assault of two boys of Garo community by the Rabha youth. On the 2nd January'2011 there were a few sporadic incidents of violence. A youth on motorcycle was accosted by some people stated to be Rabha youth and the motorbike was vandalized while the youth managed to escape. As a retaliatory measure at 9:30 P.M. one grocery shop and few houses in Hatibhasha were torched by irate mob of Garo youths and locals. On 3rd January, 2011, five Hundred Garos assembled in the Mendipathar and all the houses of Rabha people were gutted down by (Garo) miscreants within a radius of 50 to 100 metres from the Police Station. Tension continues for long time and both the community continues to counter attack in both Rabha and Garo villages in Goalpara district and parts of Meghalaya bordering with Goalpara. About 36000 and more people are badly affected including loss of houses from the violence, killing 12 people in Goalpara district. The tense continues and intense fear among the people of the district prevails causing social unrest and economic stagnation prevails mainly in the Rabha and Garo dominated villages. The following table shows glance of the violence took place in Goalpara district in 2011.

Table- 1 : Showing the affect of Garo- Rabha Conflict in Goalpara, 2011.

Sl.	Particulars	Police Station	Name of	Name of
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No.		where affected villages located	Circle where affected people live	the affected Community
1	No. of Villages affected = 24 Nos.	1.Dhupdhara.	1. Matia.	1. Rabha.
2	No. of persons killed = 12	2. Rongjuli,.	2. Balijana	2. Garo.
3	No. of person injured = 16.	3.Dudhnoi.	3. Dudhnoi.	3. Bodo.
4	No. of population affected = 36000 (approx.)	4. Krishnai.		4. Koch.
5	No. of Relief Camps opened = 54 Nos.	5. Agia.		5. Bengali.
6	No. of house damaged = 605 Nos.(approx)	6. Mornai.		6. Hajong.

Source : DDMA, Goalpara.

All together 54 (fifty four) Relief Camps were opened for the affected people of Assam and Meghalaya with about 36,000 inmates in the camps. The total number of affected villages from Assam is 24 (twenty four). The conflict caused dead of 12 person including 1 due to police firing and injured 16 person of which 13 belongs to Rabha, 2 belongs to Garo and 1 belongs to Kachari community. After incidence endless fear spreading among the people of Goalpara district, specially in the border areas and





ethnic communities are become much aware to about violence. Beyond Garo and Rabha, the non Rabhas residing in the areas under demand for Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) starts demonstration and agitation programme calling bandh, claiming deduction of their villages from RHAC creates disturbances in Goalpara district and South Kamrup region. The immigrant Muslims are also in fry creating some of the major communal conflict in the district. Ethnic conflict also occurs at different places on the issue of Panchayat election in RHAC areas between Rabha community and Bengali Muslims and other non Rabhas in Goalpara district in February, 2013, which not only delay the formation of Zila Parishad but also tense remains within the society in the district. After passing three months many of the victims who were became homeless in the incident are living in the camp rather they wish to go their own house feeling insecurity.

Conclusion :

North East India is a land of diverse physiography and habitat of different tribes and community living with different economic condition in different parts of the region. Peaceful society of Goalpara district was affected largely by some conflicts among different community since last three decades resulting social unrest in the region. Frequent agitation programme, economic blocked, bandh called by different community in the district along with sporadic conflicts severely affected claiming life of people and loss of property in the rural agrarian society of backward Goalpara district. It leads socio-economic uncertainty and tension among the people creating unrest in the society of the district. Lack of good leadership and deep social concern along with poor relationship among the various communities are vital problem facing by the district.

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