

## Chapter 7

### SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The study titled **Inter-ethnic Conflicts in North East India: A Case Study of the Garo-Rabha Conflict** analyses the structural differences, historical sequences, type of causes, impacts and suggested framework for peace process of the inter-ethnic conflict in Northeast India. The study formulates the research problem on the basis of survey of the literature and analyses the data collected through an interview schedule administered to the 260 sampled families comprising 1582 persons inhabiting 13 conflict affected villages of the Assam-Meghalaya border area. The units of the study were selected from the universe of the study with the help of purposive sampling. The analyses of the research are placed in the context of socio-cultural, economic and political life of the families in the study area and it is attempted to understand the cause of the loss of bonding between these two communities that resulted in the violent outburst on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2010 and in January 2011.

#### I

#### THE RESEARCH STUDY

Conflict is a dissociative social process and is the opposite of cooperation. Conflict is a type of social interaction involving two or more individuals, groups or communities consciously attempting to oppose, defeat, injure or even destroy the opponent. Conflict is a highly intense type of competition. Conflict also leads to direct confrontation, fight, quarrel, enmity, disagreement etc. The conflict model developed by Karl Marx (Sheffer 2003) suggests that in almost every society, subordination of some groups to others is taken for granted and social harmony is regarded to be the result of the imposition of the will of those in power through education and mass media. But when conflict occurs between these groups, power moves from one group to another and consequently a major social change takes place. Coser (Sheffer 2003) defines conflict as strife over values or claims to power, status, and limited resources, in which the goals of the opponents are both to gain the desired values and neutralize, injure, or eliminate one another. Some of the causes of conflict are egoism, or the tendency to satisfy one's needs at the expense of other human beings; the scarcity of resources (power, material goods and services); different interests and values; and

economic changes, industrialization, urbanization, etc. which create new life styles that lead to strife.

Historically ethnic conflict between two or more groups of people is an old phenomenon. In the recent world scenario, fragmentation, constriction of identity, intense regionalism, socio-cultural hegemony, inter-ethnic antagonism has often resulted in the evolution of ethnic violence or conflict that have taken a heavy toll on human life and property. Conflict has become part and parcel of human existence in this world and, as such, permanent solution to this problem seems to be almost an impossible task. Conflict is a universally acclaimed phenomenon that poses threat to human existence in almost every part of the world. India, especially its Northeastern region is not an exception to this reality. India is the abode of diverse cultures, ethnicity, religion, castes and creeds and its Northeastern region is a multi-ethnic world that provides home to various tribes, communities, religious and linguistic groups. Therefore, this region is highly vulnerable to ethnic unrest. The Garo-Rabha conflict is one of the several conflicts that have wounded the Northeastern region, so far. It was ignited by a small incident on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2010 and took a violent shape from January 2011 resulting in massive bloodshed and displacement of people. The violence resulted in the killing of 20 people, torching of about 1,500 houses and rendering about 50,000 people homeless. In this conflict Rabhas were more affected, particularly those living in the state of Meghalaya.

In contemporary times, ethnicity has gradually changed the world scenario which witnesses incessantly increasing ethnic consciousness, identity problems and ethnic conflicts. In the present studies of ethnicity in negative sense have continuously increased in the Indian society (Subha 1992; Oommen 1990; Rastogi 1986). Several scholars have contributed to the understanding of ethnic identity movements in India which are distinctly dynamic and demand-divergent in nature (Basu 1992, 1994; Rastogi 1986; Develle 1991; Panikkar 1893; Phadnis 1990; Tiwari 1990; Bhagabati 1992; Roy-Burman 1992). Terrorism or insurgency is another widespread, emerging ethnic phenomenon in the present world (Sehgal 1996; Sarma 2002; Tiwari 1990). The plural societies like India are characterized by large-scale violence, widespread insurgency and extensive civil war (Phadnis 1990; Hutnik 1991). The ethnic conflicts in Northeast India started in 1950s when the ethnic identity movements were launched- sometimes, by tribal communities and, sometimes, by non-tribals on the

issue of religion, language, 'sons of the soil' and foreign nationals, ethnic separatism, migration, etc. (Singh 1987; Baruah 1980; Barua 1978). In the region even the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed a series of inter-ethnic conflicts such as Karbi-Kuki, Bodo-Muslims, Kuki-Naga etc. (Phukan 2005). The state of Assam has witnessed various ethnic conflicts such as the conflict between the Assamese and the Bengali speaking groups existing since 19th century, the anti-foreigners' movement during 1979-85, the long-standing Assam-Nagaland border conflict, the Bodo and the Muslim conflict in 1993, 1996, 2008 and 2012, the Karbi-Kuki conflict in 2003-04, the Karbi-Dimasa conflict in 2005, the Dimasa-Naga (Hmar) conflict in 2009, the Karbi-Dimasa conflict in 2005 (Kabui 1992; Nag 1990; Roy Burman 1998; Majumdar 1992; Kumar 1995, Samanta 1994). There are many contributors on the ethnic conflict in Assam, such as Sanjib Baruah, Apurba Baruah (1991), Udayon Misra (1999), Asghar Ali Engineer (1991), Meeta Deka (1996), Amalendu Guha (1980), Devabrata Sharma (2009), C.K.Sharma (2009), P.N. Rastogi (1993) H.Srikanth (2000), Hiren Gohain (1985), Madhumita Sengupta (2006) and others who have reported that language, religion, form of xenophobia, economic resources, identity consciousness, immigration and autonomous council are the major issues of ethnic conflicts in Assam. Historically ethnic conflicts in Meghalaya have been very rare. Only a language feud occurred, when Assamese leaders wanted to dismiss the tribal languages around 1950s and 1960s, to introduce Assamese in the school curriculum of the hill districts (Burling 2003). L.S. Gassah (1990) inform that except some administration related protests between the Khasi, Garo and Jaintia and protest against Assamese language during 1970s, there is no major ethnic clash in Meghalaya till the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. P.Biswas (2004) shows the displacement of Khasi-Pnar families due to life threats given by a section of Karbi militants in 2003. But in the recent years, some serious ethnic conflicts have occurred since 2005 such as the conflict between the Khasi and Garo in 2005, between the Khasi and Nepali in 2010 and between the Garo and Rabha in 2011. The ethnic conflicts have taken place between the tribal and non-tribal as well as hills and plains ethnic groups in Northeast India. In the hilly regions, the land and other related resources (including demands for autonomous regions) are the common issues of ethnic conflicts. On the contrary, religion, language, tribal and non-tribal, immigrants, border dispute, land and other related resources, etc. are the major issues of ethnic conflict in plain regions, especially in the state of Assam. The insurgency groups are

treated as effective forces to fulfill their demands in Northeast India and therefore, with almost all the outbreaks of ethnic conflicts the name of one or the other insurgency group is always noticed. Insurgency groups are involved in inter-ethnic conflicts in Northeast India. The inter-ethnic conflicts have gradually been increasing among the native communities, particularly in tribal areas as compared to non-tribal areas since 1992, for example, the Naga-Kuki conflict in 1992-2000, Meitei-Pangal conflict in 1993, Arunachalese and Chakmas conflict in 1994-95, Zeme-Kuki conflict in 1997-98, Hmar- Dimasa conflict in 2003, Khasi-Pnar and Karbi conflict in 2003, and others. Separate nation, state, autonomous region, Sixth Schedule status, separate revenue circle, etc. are noticed as the major demands of ethnic groups in Northeastern region of India. The causes of the inter-ethnic conflicts are various: immigration, economic discrimination, changing demographic scenario, land alienation, dominant and subordinate relationship between larger and minor ethnic groups, emergence of new nationalism, inter-state border dispute, political and cultural domination by non-tribal/migrants communities, etc. and the governments have adopted the peace framework of engaging insurgency groups through talks to maintain peace in Northeast India.

In the Garo-Rabha conflict there has been the role of religious differences in the hill areas as well as the cultural and economic difference between the plains and hills while they have lived together peacefully for centuries. Besides, this case also reveals that, now a day, conflicts are more frequent in the tribal areas than in the non-tribal areas and Meghalaya is a burning example of it. The Garo-Rabha conflict involves these new dimensions of inter-ethnic conflicts, and this conflict has not been studied so far. Therefore, the study attempted the question: *What factors are responsible for inter-ethnic conflict in Northeast India, specially the one that has occurred between the Garo and Rabha communities in the Assam-Maghalaya border area?*

## II

### THE METHODOLOGY

The study was attempted to understand the characteristics, causes and impacts of the Garo-Rabha conflict. Field study were conducted during the period from 15<sup>th</sup> June 2014 to 20<sup>th</sup> December 2014 the administering an interview schedule to a sample of

conflict affected families of the Assam-Meghalaya border area. Family has been taken as unit of the study for the collection of data. However, the primary data have also been collected from political leaders, student leaders, teachers, and popular personalities belonging to the neighbouring villages on the basis of interview schedule, informal interviews and case studies which were very helpful in revealing truth about the ethnic conflict that occurred between the Garos and the Rabhas.

There are about 50,000 persons in 200 villages alternatively settled in the study area. Of these, 38 villages were most affected by this inter-ethnic conflict. Of these 38 villages, 31 are inhabited by the Rabhas and 7 by Garos and 13 villages (Belpara, Khamari and Ginogre, Daram, Jamgaon, Jonglapara, Mendipathar, Nokchar, Rompara, Soinang, Thapa, Resubelpara and Bongaon) were purposively selected as a sample for data collection on the basis of geographical location and severity of effect of the conflict. Of the 13 villages, 4 villages are selected from the rural area (3 from Rabhas; namely, Nokchar, Rompara and Soinang and 1 from Garos, i.e, Ginogre), 4 from the suburban area of Mendipathar and Resubelpara towns (3 from Rabhas; namely Jonglapara, Mendipathar and Daram, and 1 from Garos i.e, Resubelpara), 4 from the villages situated in the Assam-Meghalaya bordering line (3 from Rabhas; namely, Belpara, Bongaon and Jamgaon and 1 from Garos, i.e, Khamari) and 1 Rabha village (Thapa) which is situated in a remote area far away from the border in the Meghalayan side. Again, of these 13 villages, 9 (Daram, Jamgaon, Jonglapara, Mendipathar, Nokchar, Rompara, Soinang, Thapa and Resubelpara) belong to the East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya and 4 (Belpara, Khamari, Bongaon and Ginogre) belong to the Goalpara district of Assam. From the 13 villages, 260 families, (30.23% of 860 families) were purposively selected from different occupational and status groups like labourers, teachers, political leaders, defense personnel, etc. For the purpose of analysis there were used four categories of Garos and Rabhas; namely, the Garos of Assam, the Rabhas of Assam, the Rabhas of Meghalaya and the Garos of Meghalaya.

### III

#### FIELD OF THE STUDY

The Garo and Rabha communities have been living together in the border areas of Assam and Meghalaya since long time. Their social, cultural, economic and political aspects are being introduced here.

The Rabha community is a group of Mongoloid racial stock. Linguistically the community belongs to Sino-Tibetan group. Major Playfair (Marak 2004) had tried to trace the origin of the Rabhas in the Tibetan region who migrated from that place to the Garo Hills in Meghalaya and then they scattered over the plains of Assam. The Rabhas have divided into numerous sub-groups such as Pati, Rongdani, Maitory, Koccha, Tatla, Hana, Dahuri, Bitalia Tutla and Chunga Rabha. The Rabhas have 12 gotras: Chung, Chilan, Nafa, Nongdo, Diya, Dogom, Fathu, Rangrong, Kasu, Daru, Nongbag and Dobathol. The contemporary, Rabha religious beliefs and practices are mainly based on animism as well as Hinduism. Particularly the Pati-Rabhas have been assimilated into Hindu culture. Adoption of Christianity by a section of the tribe is also noticed in the Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam and in the East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. The Rabha marriage system follows some customs: (i) in Rabha society, marriage cannot take place between the groom and bride of the same 'Barai' or clan, (ii) the junior levirate and sorrorate marriages are permissible in Rabha society, (iii) the cross-cousin marriage is also permitted but it is limited to marrying the daughter of one's maternal uncle and (iv) the cousin marriage is not practiced but two brothers can marry from the same family provided the elder brother chooses to marry the elder sister. Rabhas have traditionally followed matrilineal family system, but with the passage of time and contact with the caste people, mainly Hindu castes, their family has undergone various changes. The Rabhas have traditionally practiced different festivals and worships like Baikho Utsav, Bishuwa Utsav, Langamara puja, Dadan and Risi Puja, Lakshmi Puja, etc. Besides, the Rabhas also celebrate Rongali Bihu, Kati Bihu and Magh Bihu- festivals of the Assamese community as a whole. Family property is mainly of two types: Movable and immovable properties and both the rights are enjoyed by sons but if the family does not have a son then a daughter gets the property right. If someone does not have one's own child, the property right is enjoyed by the nearest kin. An adopted child gets the property rights only if he or she is able to get *Barai* and *Warish* status. A son normally

gets the property right; however, in case of mother's property, a daughter inherits that property. The most crucial organization of the Rabha society *All Rabha National Council* (ARNC), aims to maintain/preserve Rabha identity and to obey the laws regarding food habits, dress pattern, behavioural patterns, worship and other social customs and traditions. The Rabhas are very conservative and they always try to preserve their traditions and customary laws. Agriculture is the main source of their economy. Besides, Rabha have increased their participation in services, business, animal husbandry, handicrafts, spinning and weaving etc. They are often seen occupied as masons, salesmen in big shops and servants in hotels.

The Garos are also of Mongoloid origin, a section of the Tibeto-Burman race which belongs to the greater Boro stock. The Garos once inhabited the northern region called Garuland in Tibet, bordering China. Gradually they migrated from Tibet to the Northeastern part of India. Finally they settled in the Garo hills of Meghalaya. They are also scattered in different places such as Bangladesh and Assam in particular. The Garos call themselves Achik Mande- 'Achik' means hill dwellers and 'Mande', means men. The Garos, in antiquity, were fierce warriors engaged in constant war with others. Head hunting or killing was regarded as a noble activity and it was a sign of maturity in man. The Garos are divided into twelve endogamous groups: Akawes, Chisaks, Duals, Matchis, Matabengs, Kochus, Atiagas, Abengs, Chiboks, Rugas, Ganchings or Garas, and Atongs. Within each group, there are five major clans; viz., Sangma, Marak, Momin, Shira and Areng. The Garos is a matrilineal tribe. Its descent is counted through female line and, therefore, the Garo society is based on the sub-clan which is called MA'CHONH or motherhood. In Garo family, the mother is the head of the family and inheritance passes through mother to daughter. Father is considered as an outsider. The youngest daughter of family automatically owns mother's property. She is called NOKMA, meaning heiress. Rest of the daughters establish separate households after their marriage. Agriculture is the main source of economy in the society. The Garos living in plain areas practise sedentary agriculture whereas in the hilly areas they practice jhum cultivation. Rice, ginger, turmeric, green chillies, maize, potato, pineapple, cabbage, and millets are mostly grown for consumption as well as marketing. The rubber plantation has emerged one of the contemporary agro practices, particularly in the Garo Hills. They also rear cattle, pigs and poultry. A big section of Garo youths is engaged in service

sector, especially police and army services. A big portion of their traditional beliefs and practices are related to shifting cultivation. During the cultivation, the Garos perform a series of rituals in the village like *o.pata*, *a.galmaka*, *jakra gama*, *bamil gama* and *wangala* festival. More than 70% of Garos have adopted Christianity. But they still remember their traditional religious beliefs and practices, known as *Songsarek* or the spirit of worship. There is only one traditional festival, Wangala, which is celebrated even today. But presently, New Year, Christmas, and Good Friday are the major festivals celebrated by the Garos. The Garos have clan exogamous marriage. A Sangma girl cannot marry a Sangma boy. Thus, husband and wife belong to different clans or motherhoods. After marriage the groom goes to stay with the bride at her home.

Field of the study is located in the two districts each in Assam and Meghalaya near the border. These districts are the East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya and the Goalpara district of Assam. The population of the Goalpara district comprises three major religious groups- Muslim (53.71%), Hindu (38.22%) and Christian (7.87%). The ethnic groups are known as Bengali Muslim, Bengali Hindu, Rabha, Garo, Hajong, Kalita, Koch, Dimasa and Bodo. The languages spoken by the people are Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Rabha and Garo. Agriculture is the backbone of the economy of the district. Of the population 16.09% comes from scheduled tribe population. The East Garo Hills is the district of Meghalaya. The greater portion of the district consists of hills. A majority of the population of this district belongs to the Garo tribe. Other inhabitants include Rabhas, Hajongs, Koches, Rajbonsis, Dalus, Meches and Kacharis. The district was formed in 1976. In 2012 it was bifurcated and a new district, North Garo Hills district, has been carved out. Most of the people are engaged in agriculture. In the hilly areas, the traditional cultivation mode is being replaced by rubber plantation. Paddy is cultivated in plain areas.

In the Assam-Meghalaya border area, one can observe a unique feature of the settlement pattern of the Garo and Rabha villages. Unlike other areas where one finds a large area inhabited by the people of a particular tribal community, in this areas small villages of the Garos and Rabhas are situated alternately. The sequential names of these villages according to their situation from the east to the west are like this: Rangpathar East Garo village, Rangpathar West Rabha village, Amjunga Chuchiyapara Garo village, Amjunga Chuchiyapara Rabha village, Nidanpur Garo



village, Dakpara Rabha village, Khara bagaripari Rabha village, Majipara Garo village, Upper Chilok Rabha village, Lower Chilok Garo village, Chilok Bakharapara Rabha village, Chilok Sarokpara Rabha village, Saoraghat Garo village, Khungrajani Rabha village, Khungrajani Garo village, Tengasot Garo village, Damra Patpara Rabha village, Bakhrapur Garo village, Maju Burgung Rabha village, No. 2 Hatimara Rabha village, Loskarpara Garo village, Habangiri Rabha village, Damaj Garo village, Rangchi Rabha village, Karanchakona Rabha village, Khaskona Garo village, Chitokona Rabha village, Chitokona Garo village, Thobalpara Rabha village, Niyapuli, Garo village, Deoripara Rabha village, Nolbari Garo village, Nolbari Rabha village, Miyapara upper Garo village, Miyapara lower Rabha village, Manikganj upper Garo village, Manikganj lower Rabha village, Khamari Garo village and Khamari Rabha village. The area of the conflict falls under six police stations; five police stations are in Assam; viz., Dhupdhora, Ranjuli, Dudhnoi, Krishnai and Agiya police station. Among these, the area under the Krishnai Police Station suffered a heavy loss. On the Meghalaya side, the violent incidents took place under one police station that is Mendipathar Police Station. The areas have three police outposts- 1. Resubelpara, 2. Dainadubi and 3. Bajengdoba. Violent incidents took place under Mendipathar and Krishnai Police Stations where maximum conflict affected villages are found. In the other four police stations only relief camps were organized and there a few minor incidents took place. About 200 villages were found in the Assam-Meghalaya border area where conflict occurred.

The Garo and Rabha communities in the area have the following socio-cultural differences:

- (i) The Rabhas have still 47.57% joint families while 87.04% of the Garos have nuclear families.
- (ii) Of the Garo families 98.15% preferred love marriage while 92.23% of the Rabha families preferred arranged marriage.
- (iii) The Garos have no reservation for marrying in any community, caste or religion. But 97.09% Rabha families reported restrictions in their society on marriage with a person from other community. They prefer marrying within their own community, or at least within Hindu community.

- (iv) Cross-cousin marriage was prevalent among the Rabhas in the past but it has discontinued now. Yet, 5.34% Rabha families it is not a taboo, even now. On the other hand, 88.89% of the Garo families practiced cross-cousin marriage.
- (v) All the Garo families situated in Assam or Meghalaya understand Rabha language but they do not speak Rabha language. On the contrary, 82.52% Rabhas can understand as well as speak Garo language.
- (vi) The Garos modern western outfits (T-Shirts and Jeans). On the other hand, 96.53% of the Rabhas use their ethnic dress at any festival or social ceremonies.
- (vii) There are 66.02% Rabha women are engaged in weaving for their own use as well as sometimes for sale. Contrary to this, the Garos have abandoned all traditional practices, including handloom production.
- (viii) All the Garos settled in the Assam side are connected to Mendipathar (Meghalaya) only and seldom visit places of Assam while 77.06% Rabhas of Meghalaya frequently visit the Dudhnoi town (Assam) as the Dudhnoi town is the centre for all Rabha people residing in the conflict affected areas.
- (ix) The Garos living in Assam are marginalized while the Rabhas of Meghalaya are dominated by the Garos. For instance education, fuel, sanitary and road condition are very poor in Garo villages of Assam.

#### IV

#### FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The major findings of the study are as follows:

#### **A. Sequences and Causes of the Garo-Rabha Conflict**

##### *(i) Sequences of the Historical Happenings*

The following are the socio-historical sequences which generated discontentment between the two tribes:

1. The exploitation of the Garos by the plain people through levying of tax could be traced back to the pre-colonial period. During the pre-colonial period the

Garos came under the Mughal Emperor who collected revenue from the Garos. The Garos of the hilly areas came to the plain areas through a number of passages or Duars for conducting trade and other purposes. The Zamindars at the bordering areas of the Goalpara district collected tax from the Garos.

2. During the colonial period, also, the Zamindars continued to levy tax on the Garos and thereby harassed them. As a result, there arose a Garo protest between 1807 and 1819 where 157 villages were burnt and 180 persons were killed.
3. The Garo customs regarded the Nokma as the owner of the village lands in the hills and plains. The Garos also considered that the plain lands were also an integral part of their villages and they had a strong feeling of differentiating themselves from the plain communities.
4. David Scott the first Commissioner of Assam thought to replace the traditional institutions of *Nokma* (traditional authority of the Garos) and councils by a new institution of *Laskar*. The Laskar would be responsible for collecting revenue from the Mouzahs and the Zimmandars.
5. The borders of Kelso line (border line between plains and hills) were drawn in 1849-51. The southern side of the line belonged to the Government and the northern side belonged to the Zamindars. The Garos were not satisfied by the Kelso line and so they resorted to raids again. In 1852, 44 persons were killed due to seven Garo raids.
6. The traditional method of shifting cultivation was prohibited by the Government and it compelled them to work without remuneration in construction of roads and carrying loads. It displeased the Garos due to the exploitation by the Zamindars. They organized a protest under the leadership of Sonaram Sangma. In the year 1902, Sonaram led a march of about 700 Garos who posted notices calling on cultivators not to pay rent to the Zamindars. The Zamindars who originally belonged to the plain areas started to oppress and exploit the Garos. It created bitterness among the Garos towards the people of the plain areas. This bitterness ultimately created divide between these two tribes and each demanded a separate homeland.

7. The conversion of the Garos into Christianity played a major role in changing their lifestyle and socio-cultural life. The Garo response to the intrusion of Western religion and culture was very different from the rest of India as a lot of Garos embraced Christianity.
8. The state of Meghalaya is an outcome of the struggle for preserving tribal identity initiated by All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC). APHLC played a significant role in bringing statehood to the hill tribes of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills. This struggle for identity was further geared up by the impending official language Act of the Government of Assam. The Greater Garo Land (GGL) is a demand of Garo insurgency group, GNLA, to include a vast area comprising- 49 villages of West Khasi Hills, 76 villages of Kamrup and 195 of Goalpara district of Assam.
9. Genesis of the Rabha consciousness of distinct ethnic identity could be traced back to the colonial period. The Rabha identity consciousness took shape in the activities related to the development of modern education and cultural revivalism. In Independent India, Rabhas strongly feel that they are lagging behind in education, economic and political affairs compared to other sections of Assamese people. In this respect many organizations have been formed such as Assam Rabha Sangha (1963) which later became All Assam Rabha Sangha, All Assam Rabha Sanmilon (1965), Rabha National Council (1971) and Bebak Rabha Kraurang Runchum (BRKR) or All Rabha Sahitya Sabha (ARSS). These Rabha organizations have come under the All Rabha National Council (ARNC) since 1976. Besides, demand for Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council was amply raised through mass movements organized by RHDC and ARWC. To pressurize the Government, ARSU, ARWC and SSDC have adopted various methods like bandhs, economic blockades, road blockades, etc. Due to such activities, various violent incidents have taken place, disrupting trade, commerce, travel, communication and economic development and resulting in an increased disharmony between the Rabha and non-Rabha communities in the council area.

*(ii) Causes of the Garo-Rabha Conflict*

**(a) Predispositional Causes**

The following are the predispositional causes which provided a socio-cultural and political environment for the conflict:

(i) The Greater Garo Land (GGL) demand was originally raised by the Garo insurgency group A'chik National Volunteers Council (ANVC). The demand for territory or boundary of the GGL extended up to the river Brahmaputra in the Goalpara district of Assam where Garos form minority as compared to Rabhas. On the contrary, the Rabhas of Assam demanded Sixth Schedule status for them in the same area. Of the Garo families from Meghalaya, 95.24% and Garo families from Assam 75.76% supported the GGL Demand.

(ii) The demand for Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council has been opposed by all communities other than Rabhas belonging to the area in the Goalpara district (Assam). Especially the Garos and their organizations and minority communities (Muslims) and their forums have been jointly protesting against the inclusion of their villages into the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council's jurisdiction. The Garos of Meghalaya also resented that the Rabhas of Meghalaya often went to Goalpara to participate in the Rabha Hasong movement. However, of the sampled Meghalayan Rabha families, 37.65% were full supporters of the RHAC demand.

(iii) Pressure for religious conversion is an important cause for the Garo-Rabha conflict. Of the sampled Rabha families 81.55% were reportedly asked to accept Christianity. During the time of the conflict the houses of those Rabhas who embraced Christianity were spared of violence and were not burnt. Rather, these were provided shelter by the Garos.

(iv) In the field of political competitiveness, discontentment between the Garos and Rabhas is very much evident. The Rabhas in the Garo dominated state of Meghalaya are deprived from active political participation. A Rabha political leader contested elections from the Mendipathar legislative constituency against F.W Momin, a Garo (congress) candidate in the year 2007. This aggravated the situation of political discontentment among the Garos. The political assertion of

Rabhas through the candidature of James Pam in the elections was not savoured in the Garo dominated area.

(v) In the religious scenario also, discontentment is visible. In Nalbari area (Assam), a priest belonging to the Garo community was assaulted by some Rabha youth during the bandh on December 22, 2010. A rumour was spread in the East Garo Hills district that 'our Christian Garos were assaulted by the Hindu Rabhas'. This incident created resentment among the Garos.

### **(b) Precipitative Causes**

The precipitative causes that are responsible for the immediate outbreak of the Garo-Rabha conflict are as follows-

(i) The bandh calls and road blockades constituted the principal cause of the Garo-Rabha conflict. Nalbari is a small place situated between Assam and Meghalaya and the place belongs to Assam. The road through Nalbari is a link road between Assam and Meghalaya. The Garos have no alternative road to go from one place to another. This is the place where ARSU has established its office. It disrupts passage of the Garos during ARSU's bandh calls, demanding Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council. The Garos are greatly disturbed because of this small portion of the road that falls in the Nalbari area. Several times, Garo patients, political leaders and other officials are prevented from crossing the Nalbari road even when there is an emergency. The Garos even sometimes threatened the Rabhas of the consequences for the frequent bandh calls. Besides, the bandhs call announced at the time of Christmas, every year in the Goalpara district. In December 2010, All Rabha Students Union (ARSU) put up a blockade on the National Highway 37 (NH-37) in Assam's Goalpara district. During this bandh call the Garo-Rabha conflict broke out. Of the Garos 80.95% hate ARSU for the frequent bandh calls. Of the Rabhas of Assam 41.67% also said that it was wrong to announce bandh during the time of festivals like Christmas.

(ii) Due to spread of a wild rumour, the Garo-Rabha conflict could take the shape of a massive violence, destroying several lives and huge amount of property. In Meghalaya a rumour was spread that the Rabhas had killed 7 Garos in Mendipathar area. As a result, lakhs of Garos from the entire Garo Hills came to

Mendipathar area (Meghalaya) with sharp weapons to take vengeance on the Rabhas there. Further, news also spread in Meghalaya that the Garo villages were being burnt in Assam and it resulted in the destruction of Rabha houses in Meghalaya.

Simultaneously, news also spread that from the Mendipathar relief camps (East Garo Hills) the Rabhas had fled for Assam due to attacks by Garos. Then, rumour spread that the Rabha villagers were attacking the Garo relief camps in the Goalpara district. Since the Garo relief camps in Assam were located in the Rabha dominated area relief material as not were not available in the Garo camps. This further infuriated the Garo people and the Garos in Meghalaya attacked the carrying relief material in the conflict area falling in Meghalaya.

(iii) Inactiveness role of the Meghalaya State administration was also responsible for spreading the Garo-Rabha conflict. The Jonglapara village is situated only 50 meters away from the Resubelpara Sub-division Administrative office and the Resubelpara Police OutPost. Among the victims, 30.59 of the families were located at a distance of less than one kilometer from the nearest police station/Outpost; namely, Mendipathar Police Station and Resubelpara Police OutPost. But the houses were deliberately burnt by the Garos for three days. These villagers have been the worst victims of the conflict, losing life and property.

## **B. Social Impact of the Garo-Rabha Conflict**

After occurrence of any conflict the social equilibrium breaks down, giving rise to many problems like death of family members, injuries, loss of home and property, etc. Besides, the following social impact is the matter of a great concern:

(i) The loss of fellow-feeling and goodwill among the members of these two communities is the major impact of the Garo-Rabha conflict. Of the Rabha families from the Meghalaya side 85.29% believed that normalcy and the earlier state of peace and security would not return easily after the devastating conflict. Majority of Rabhas located in Meghalaya had lost their faith in return of stable peace and security because after the conflict the Garo insurgency groups like

GNLA had become more active and they were harassing the Rabha people living in Meghalaya; they were imposing illegal taxes on the Rabhas: Rs. 4 lac from middle class and a minimum Rs.10000/- to 20000/- from poor families.

(ii) Besides displacement, shifting and resettlement of villagers from one place to another place is also a significant impact of the Garo-Rabha conflict. 15 Rabha families have already left Dainadubi and Thapa villages of the East Garo Hills district and have settled in the Goalpara district of Assam. On the other hand, 6 Garo families from the Khamari village of Goalpara district have left it and have settled in the East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya.

(iii) Proper maintenance of health, food, clothes and medical facilities were the major problems in the relief camps. Overcrowded, unhygienic and very humid conditions led to sleep disorder and lack of fresh air. No medical practitioner or security person was available regularly in the relief camps. In the relief camps, 8.08% families did not receive medical care. Besides, 23.85% of the families were deprived from nutritious food, 8.46% of the families were not supplied clothes and 16.54% families did not get sanitary facility in the relief camps.

(iv) Lack of fund allocation to face emergency situations like ethnic conflict is a problem. For this reason, the conflict victims economically collapsed. The compensation provided by the government is not adequate. So the conflict victim can not revive their earlier economic condition. The Garo-Rabha conflict pushed the already backward tribal to the realm of poverty, backwardness and loss. After the collapse of economy, destruction of homes, private and public properties, the Garo and Rabha victims became as backward as they were many years ago.

(v) In the border area of the two states the Garo and Rabha communities have lived peacefully since time immemorial but the outbreak of the conflict shattered all the threads of harmony between them and return of the pre-conflict state of harmony and goodwill seems to be impossible, now.

(vi) In the Garo-Rabha conflict, lot of innocent people suffered immensely by losing their near and dear ones, their homes and their entire possessions.

(vi) Education of the children who were in relief camps as well as who studied in the schools which were used as relief camps was adversely affected in the study



area. Because, most of the schools in the study area were closed for long period of time in order to shelter the displaced people.

## V

### THE SUGGESTED FRAMEWORK FOR PEACE PROCESS

From the study a peace framework emerges, which is as follows:

(i) Revival of the traditional cultural roots is a source of maintaining peace where in these two antagonized tribes visualized a world of affinity. The Garo and the Rabha communities have evolved from the same racial stock and the same linguistic family. Gradually, difference increased, generating discontentment. Ultimately, discontentment was replaced by violent ethnic conflict. Efforts should be undertaken at the Government level, community level or individual level to bring awareness in these two tribes about their past or traditional commonality and homogeneity.

(ii) Common cultural practices or festivals are one of the essential factors that enforce unity in a culturally diverse society like Northeast India. For instance, the cultural festival, Bihu, is celebrated by different tribes and communities of Assam. Therefore, the celebration of Bihu festival acts as an adhesive to bind various tribes and communities. The Rabhas are used to celebrate Bihu. For instance, Magh Bihu, the post-harvest festival (a symbol of bliss in agrarian life) is celebrated in the winter season in the month of January every year. Similarly the Garos are also celebrating their traditional festival, Wangala, which is also a symbol of happiness after a good harvest just before a few days of Magh Bihu celebration. So these two similar festivals could be used to encourage participation of members of both the communities

(iii) A sense of religious and cultural tolerance should be instilled in these tribes to minimize the gap between them. Religious and cultural differences are some of the major factors that are responsible for the disruption of peace between the Garo and Rabha communities. But this could only happen through the flourishing of education. Knowledge about their common ethnic origin, and issues of tolerance or respect for other cultures or religions should be incorporated into the school course curriculum. Moreover, the state authorities of both Assam and

Meghalaya should look into the matter of equal distribution of rights and opportunities to both the tribes to prevent further clash between them.

(iv)The field investigation in this research work reveals an unpleasant reality that the literacy rate is very poor in the Garo and Rabha communities in the conflict-ridden areas. Lack of education means ignorance that often results in hindering broad mindedness, tolerance, development and progress. Therefore, steps should be taken by the concerned authority to increase literacy rate and the rise of education among these people so that they can together move towards the road of development and not towards ethnic violence and ghastly killing. One can here refer to the situation of Mizoram where establishment of peace and dissemination of education as well as development go hand in hand.

(v)The State Government should take adequate steps for the solution of the problems related to the **GGL** and **RHAC** in such a way as the other communities in the area are not disturbed or harmed. While designing the ethnic homeland the rights and welfare of the non-Rabhas and non-Garos should also be taken care of. Besides, constitutional provision should be introduced to meet the needs of the conflict affected people.

(vi)The major task during the post-conflict era is to search for a permanent solution to this problem of bandh calls and road blockades. In order to solve this problem the Government authority as well as NGOs should take initiative in this regard. Public meetings should be organized where democratic discussions should be held among members of both the communities to put an end to the problem of bandh calls.

## CONCLUSION

Northeast India is an abode of various ethnic groups and therefore, one can see the frequent occurrence of ethnic conflicts in this region. The outbreak of inter-ethnic conflicts between the Garo-Rabha communities did not occur due to a specific cause. It is rather the consequence of discontentment that has been going on since a long time and is geared up by multiple events and incidents. The changes pertaining to family structure, marriage system, dress pattern, occupation, food habits and habitat (plains and hills) are the major points of difference between the Garo and Rabha

communities that made these two tribes to fall apart. The historical factors like adoption of Christianity, abolition of traditional Nokma system, collections of road tax by the plain people etc. are responsible for widening of the gap between them. In due course of time, they asserted distinct identities and demanded separate homeland. This demands for ethnic homeland prepared the battleground between the Garos and Rabhas. There are predispositional causes which provided a social, cultural and political environment for the conflict- religious conversion, Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council demand, etc. However, the precipitative causes include the incidents like bandh calls, spread of rumour and inactiveness of the governments of both the states ignited the conflict.

Thus, the conflict has passed through three stages; namely, difference, discontentment and conflict. Socio-cultural differences created the senses of otherness. Due to the structural differences and some unfavourable historical happening discontentment grew between them. Identity differences and discontentment prepared a battle ground for the outbreak of the conflict. Finally, the conflict broke out through the spread of a rumour, taking a violent shape.

Therefore, there is a need for constant engagement of diverse identity groups in North-East India in some common, constructive activities and to promote unification of different people at wider level and sense of citizenship in place of the ever hardening identities.