

Chapter 5

SEQUENCES AND CAUSES OF THE GARO-RABHA CONFLICT

This chapter attempts to highlight as well as comprehend the sequences and causes of the Garo-Rabha conflict. There are several phases of historical events that have contributed to the decline of goodwill between the hills and the plains people as well as the Garos and Rabhas settled in the Garo Hills and Goalpara districts. The Garo-Rabha relationship can be observed through historical phases divided into – the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods for the purpose of the study. This chapter makes a chronological study of the origin and rise of the discontentment in the two communities from the pre-colonial to the present time. Besides, this chapter also discusses the types of causes that prepared the battle ground between the two communities.

THE GARO-RABHA CONFLICT

The Garo-Rabha conflict is the outcome of a continuous discontentment in the two tribes which has been accumulating for a long time. It is not a sudden outburst but rather a predisposed event that was awaiting an excuse to erupt. The violent series of the Garo-Rabha conflict started on 31 December 2010. On that day some Garo youths were celebrating the Eve of the New Year (2011) and they went to a nearby house asking for cigarettes. The house belonged to a Rabha family where a shop was run every day. Since on that day there was a bandh call imposed by Rabhas, the family/shopkeeper refused to sell cigarettes. There started a quarrel between the shopkeeper and the Garo youths. Consequently the Garo youths were beaten up by some Rabhas. This incident took place at Manikganj area. The news of this incident spread throughout the entire northern part of the East Garo Hills district as an instance of ethnic hatred. The rumour spread was that the Rabhas were attacking the Garos. Subsequently on 1st January 2011, there prevailed a great tension in the Manikganj area. The Garos and the Rabhas assembled in that area in large numbers. One side of the Manikganj area belongs to Assam and the other one belongs to Meghalaya.

Due to this incident the Garo police of the Dainadubi Out-post went to the office of All Rabha Students Union (ARSU) situated at Nalbari in Assam to ask the ARSU members to withdraw the bandh call. Then, there arose a conflict between the Rabhas and the policemen at Nalbari and the police vehicle was damaged by the

Rabhas. After that, a police party from the Mendipathar Police Station went to the spot and rescued the Garo policemen. On 2nd January 2011 the incident was spilled over. Violent incidents took place at various places on that day. For example, the Garo set on fire two *Vela Ghars* (the icon of Magh Bihu) at Genang and two shops at Harinkata in Meghalaya on the day. Moreover, they organized a meeting at the Dilma Afal village. On 3rd January 2011 the Garos organized a procession to the Mendipathar Police Station. On the same day, at 12.30 pm the Mendipathar village was set on fire and then the Garos from the Garo Hills began to pour into the place. The Mendipathar villagers rushed to the Mendipathar Police Station to take shelter therein. In the afternoon of 3rd January 2011, the people from Jonglapara and other nearby villages went to Resubelpara Police Outpost to take shelter. But the policemen sent them back to their villages with a promise to protect them. But on the same day, at 8 pm in night, about 40 Garos came to these villages and started to burn the houses. The Rabha villagers fled to the Resubelpara Police Out-post but due to lack of security they were shifted to the Mendipathar Police Station. On 4th January 2011 relief camps were held at Mendipathar College. Since there was no proper facility of food, clothes and security, the people started to elope to Assam on 5th January 2011. It was 5th and 6th January 2011 that the Rabhas started to burn Garo villages in Assam. Thereafter, the Rabhas of Assam started economic blockade of Meghalaya. Following these incidents Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) came out in support of Garos and attacked a Rabha village called Belpara which is situated in the border area of Meghalaya. By 6 January 2011 almost all the Rabha villages situated in the Meghalaya side of the border area were burnt. In this conflict about 20 persons were killed and these people were mostly the Rabhas working at Williamnagar, Tura and other places in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya. The Rabhas under the study area falling in the Meghalaya side had lost all their belongings including paddy.

HISTORICAL SEQUENCES OF THE GARO-RABHA CONFLICT

The Garo-Rabha conflict is the outcome of a long drawn discontentment in these two tribes that has its roots in the pre-colonial times. It will perhaps be a little difficult to talk about the pre-colonial and the colonial history of Meghalaya because the state of Meghalaya was born in 1972. On 26th January 1950, United Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills became part of the Assam Province. But Meghalaya has a separate geo-political history passing through the pre-colonial and colonial periods which may

be discussed here. The British annexation of Assam to colonial India happened in 1824 AD as a response to the Burmese invasion of Assam in 1822. The Assam province in 1874, was a large administrative area which included the areas like the Naga Hills annexed in 1826, Jaintia, Garo and Khasi Hills by 1835 and the Lushai Hills in 1895 into British India. Till 1947, the Northeast India comprised the states of Assam, Manipur, Tripura and the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), which much later in independent India was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh. But after Indian Independence, different ethnic groups in the administrative domain of Assam began voicing their aspirations for autonomy within the Indian Union. The Naga Hills district of Assam was separated from Assam and became a full fledged state within the Indian union in 1963 and Mizoram in 1987. The following is an analysis of the three historical phases that unveiled the circumstances and causes of the discontentment in the Garo-Rabha communities located in the East Garo Hills and the Goalpara district.

I

The Pre-Colonial Garo Hills and Goalpara Region

The exploitation of the Garos by the plain people by 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 revenue was not based upon land but rather it was based upon cotton trade carried on with the Garos of the hills on the frontiers of the hills. The Garos of the hilly areas came to the plain areas through the number of passages or Duars for the purpose of conducting trade and for other purposes. Four Zamindars of Bijni, Mechpara, Kallumallupara and Karaibari at the bordering areas of Goalpara district started, in course of the time, to levy house tax on the Garos thereby reducing them to be mere tenants in their own lands. Consequently their relationship worsened and the enmity between them got intensified during the British rule (Kumar 2005).

II

Colonial Garo Hills and Goalpara Region

During the British colonial period, also, the role of the Zamindars did not change. In the year 1765, The East India Company got the revenue rights of these areas but the Zamindars continued to levy tax on the Garos and thereby harassed

them. As a result, there arose the Garo protest between 1807 and 1819 where 157 villages were burnt and 180 persons were killed (Kumar 2005). In 1822, Zamindars were dismissed and the administration of the Garos came under the British control. In the year 1831, an arrangement was made by the British official, David Scott, by which the Garos were not allowed to sell or alienate their land (Sanjeeva Kumar 2005). The British Government administered the Garos directly and the Zamindars were excluded from the hills and foot hills. According to this administrative arrangement, the Garos were divided into the following three classes:

- (a) The Bemalua Garos who lived on the hills and paid no revenue to the Government.
- (b) The Nazarana Garos who paid nominal tribute to the British.
- (c) The Zamindari Garos who lived under permanently settled Zamindari areas (Kumar 2005).

A large portion of the Garo territory was taken away and therefore various agreements were made between the traditional chiefs and the British Government to regulate their relationship. The native rulers were classified into the following groups:

- (i) Subsidiary allies of the British,
- (ii) Semi-independent states,
- (iii) Dependent states and
- (iv) States under direct control (Joshi 2004).

Among all the hill tribes, the Garos were the first people to be affected by the changes brought about by the British. David Scott the first Commissioner of Assam thought to replace the traditional institutions of *Nokma* and councils by a new institution of *Laskar* which he founded. Scott introduced written agreements and thereby 19 Laskars gave written agreements of these items: (i) I, having been appointed Laskar of Mouzah named below with the general consent of... hereby, of my own free will, declare that I shall remain subject to the British Government and pay Ruppee... nazzaranah for Mouzah specified below: (ii) I shall assess and collect rents from ryots at the rate prevailing in the Mouzah and pay nazzaranah either in the Sudder station or in the Surkurakari's Cutchery. I shall never pay without a receipt; all allegations of payment without receipt will be considered invalid. Any order of alteration of juma I shall attend to. If any officer of the government happens to be in

my jurisdiction, I shall assist and guide him, till he reaches another illaka. When a criminal case occurs, I shall report the matter to the police or the Fouzadar Court and I shall assist in its investigations. If I fail I shall be subject to any order that may be passed. (iii) It was customary to murder human beings and hang their skulls in our homes. I shall henceforth discontinue the practice and shall not allow any of my subjects to do the same. If anyone adheres to the former practice and commits murder, I shall apprehend and bring him to justice. (iv) If an escaped offender happens to come within my jurisdiction I shall apprehend and bring him to justice. (v) I shall annually pay nazzaranah either in the Sudder or Surkurakari's Cutchery and abide by the foregoing rule; in case of failure, our houses will be assailed by Sepoys and our property destroyed for which any claim on my part is groundless. (vi) I shall keep the boundaries of my Mouzah unaltered (Joshi 2004:8).

This agreement shows that the British were determined to put an end to the practice of head hunting and raids of the Garos. The British Government intended to bring the Garo territory under their complete control (Joshi 2004:8).

In the year 1865, Captain Morton, the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara district (that comprised the Garo Hills also) said that the Laskar should have a more homogeneous jurisdiction and one or more chiefs should be appointed as police Zimmandars. The Laskar would be responsible for collecting revenue from the Mouzahs and the Zimmandars (that are appointed by the Laskars) would be responsible for maintaining law and order but regarding civil and criminal cases, they would be having a limited jurisdiction (Joshi 2004:09). Sanjeev Kumar (2005:2941) wrote:

The protest of the Garos was a result of their dissatisfaction with colonial natural resource management practices, which were based on expropriation of resources long seen as customary rights. The resistance against the colonial order and the Zamindars soon transformed itself into a broad-based struggle for a homeland, a demand that figured in similar protest movements during the colonial period. These movements were largely unsuccessful, yet their legacy lives on. This is because natural resource management in the post-colonial period is still marked by some continuity with an earlier period.

This is especially true with regard to the centralized framework of forest management introduced by the British, which still remains in place.

During the period of 1930s the tribes demanded participative (ethnic) representation in the Principal Legislative Assembly. This demand for ethnic representation was first raised by the Naga, Khasi, Ahom, Mizo, Bodo-Kachari, Mishing and Deuri. In 1983, All Assam Garo Union was established. The Hajongs also raised their demand for recognizing them as Scheduled Tribe (Das 2009:02). Like many other tribal groups, the Garos had a strong sense of community feeling. They had a sense of belonging to a common lineage but the classification of the Garos as different groups stood as an obstacle to this feeling of unity (Kumar 2005:2943).

Due to difficult geographical locations, the boundaries of Nazarana and Bhibagnama land remained ill-defined. The borders of Kelso line were drawn in 1849-51. The southern side of the line belonged to the Government and the northern side of it belonged to the Zamindars. The Garos were not satisfied by the Kelso line and so they resorted to raids again. In 1852 where 44 persons were killed due to seven Garo raids. Although peace was established for sometime by blockade and closure of the frontier markets, yet the raids were resumed in 1856. Meanwhile, the Zamindars of Bijni continued to levy taxes on the Garos and as an attempt to put an end to this system, the Garo Hills was conferred the status of a separate district in 1869. On 11th April 1900, Phongpong Laskar and six others submitted a petition to the Chief Commissioner of Assam against the new demarcation lines as surveyed by Beckett and Kelso. Shrimati Rani Abhoyeswari Debi of Bijni Estate submitted another representation regarding land encroachment to the then Viceroy, Lord Curzon (Kumar 2005:2943).

However, the British Government gave the ruling in favour of the Garo petitioners by referring to what is known as the Bibhagnama settlement, under which the Bijni Raja made 21 plots of land in the Duars over to the Garo maharies (clans). Nazarana was based on Nazars (land tax) paid by the Nokma to the British Government according to the 1822 settlement with the British Political Officer of Goalpara. This agreement excluded the Zamindars from the hills and converted the Garo chiefs into tributaries of the British Government. At the same time the border villages of the Garos were brought under the dominion of the British Government and

consequently they had to pay tax to the political agent who settled their dispute with the people of Bijni (Sangma 2008:54).

The British officer Beckett transferred a large portion of land from Habraghat to the Garo hills district during his survey of its northern boundary. The Zamindars were highly displeased over their deprivation from the revenues and consequently 75% of the gross collection of revenue was given to them by the Government. The Garos resented this system. This showed that the British Government was superimposing of landlordism (Kumar 2005:2949).

Another important matter to be noticed is that while the Zamindars' right for tax collection was recognized, the Government fully overlooked the custom of the Nokma by which the village headman (Nokma) used to collect rent from the landlords suitable for cultivation. According to the Garo customs, the Nokma was regarded to be the owner of the village lands both 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 other communities. For instance, if the plains lands were cultivated by the Garos of the Nokma's own clan, they were exempted from paying rent. But if the Rabhas or Kacharis or any other community cultivated the land they had to pay rent to the Nokma (Kumar 2005:2943).

Earlier, in the Garo Hills areas the Zamindars and the Government did not have an appropriate valuation of the resources. But after the annexation of the Garo Hills, basically for the purpose of revenue collection, the resources or commodities attained good market values and the Zamindars and the British Government discovered new ways of conducting economic exploitation of the Garos (Kumar 2005:2943-44).

The Government introduced new rules for governing the reservation and use of forests. This new regulation stood in contrast to the Garo traditional rights to fuel, grazing and cultivation. Since the land became the property of the British Government, the houses of the forest dwellers were demolished with the payment of a minimum amount as "an act of grace". Moreover, the traditional method of shifting cultivation was prohibited by the Government (Kumar 2005:2944). The Government failed to see the dependence of the Garos on forests for grazing, food collecting and its likely significance for rituals. The Garos were completely compelled to work

without remuneration in construction of roads and carrying loads. This 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. Due to this movement, the Zamindars could not collect rent for a period of 5/6 years (Kumar 2005:2945).

So far as the Garos are concerned, the culture of the plains did not enter the hilly domain of the Garos until the Mughal period when the Hindu Zamindars came to exist in the foot hill areas. The freedom loving Garos could not tolerate the oppressive strategy of the Zamindars and consequently conflicts broke out in those areas. The Mughal rulers however did not interfere with the Garos. They allowed the Zamindars to formulate their own policies towards the tribals. Consequently 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 one started a separate homeland (Kumar 2005).

III

The Post-Colonial Garo Hills and Goalpara District

Growth of New Identity among the Garos

The conversion of the Garos into Christianity started only after the annexation of the Garo Hills by the British in the middle of the 18th century. The Britishers used the Christianizing mission to colonize the Garos. David Scott, a British official, designed a plan to convert the Garos in 1822. In 1864, the American Baptist Missionaries first established a mission in the Garo Hills. The first two Garos converted to Christianity were Omid and Ramkho. In 1867 there was established a Church at Goalpara with 40 members (Deb Roy 2002:174).

Christianity played a major role in changing the lifestyle and the socio-cultural life of the Garos. 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 but they retained their traditional customs and practices especially those related to property rights. The entry of Christianity into the Garo villages divided them into the

Christian and non-Christian blocks, called Christian Gittim and Songsarek Gittim respectively. The Christianized Garos gave up the cultural aspects of their traditional religion like feasts, festivals, music, dance and animal sacrifices. Traditional music and folk dances were replaced by Christian hymns and folk dances. Moreover, the authority of the Thamal Nokma or village priest was fully overshadowed by the Pastors. Notably, the literacy rate among the Christian Garos is higher than the non-Christian Garos. There were 87,311 Christians in the Garo Hills and another 40,000 immigrant Garo Christians came from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The Garo Hills witnessed a good progress of English education along with the spread of Christianity. In spite of the drastic change which the entry of Western religion and culture has brought, the Garos have retained some basic aspects of their culture. Kinship relationship has remained in its traditional form. The law of property right to the youngest daughter and the practice of exogamous marriage are still continuing (Deb Roy 2002:175).

David Scott, the then Magistrate of Rangpur tried his best to win over the Garos mostly through the act of converting the Garos into Christianity and his efforts were fruitful. But after the transfer of David Scott, the Garos again returned to their earlier ways of life their savagery and raids created havoc in the life of the plainsmen. The British Government had once thought of taking coercive measures to control the Garos who were posing threats to the life and property of the plainsmen. However, using prudence the Britishers invited the missionaries to work among the Garos. Consequently the Britishers could run administration over the Garos smoothly for the period from 1867 AD to 1947 AD (Deb Roy 2002:166).

The state of Meghalaya is an outcome of the struggle for preserving tribal identity initiated by the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC). The 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 named GNLA, to include a vast area of the Khasi land- 49 villages of West Khasi Hills, 76 villages of Kamrup and 195 of Goalpara district of Assam (Sangma 2008:211, 214).

Growth of Identity Consciousness among the Rabhas

The genesis of the Rabha consciousness of distinct ethnic identity could be traced back to the colonial period. But the sources of knowing about the socio-political life of the Rabhas in the colonial period are very limited. Besides, they lately engaged in identity movement or identity consciousness. This Rabha attitude was articulated in their protest against the religious transformation. The Rabha identity consciousness took shape in the activities related to the development of modern education and cultural revivalism. In this regard the contributions of Dwarika Rabha, Gobardhan Sarkar and Rajen Rongkho should be taken into account. To achieve this aim of enriching the socio-cultural aspect of the Rabha life in the colonial period certain associations were formed like Rabha Chatra Sanmilon (1915) and Yubak Sangha (1941) (Rabha 2007).

In Independent India the Rabhas strongly feel that they are lagging behind in education, economic and political affairs compared to other sections of Assamese people. Besides, in the existing socio-economic system the Rabhas are facing problem of land alienation, unemployment, socio-economic and political oppression. As a result of this relative deprivation, the educated Rabhas have tried to organize the people and promote development through various socio-cultural and political organizations with an aim to enrich Rabha language, literature and socio-cultural heritage. 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 (Das 2012).

All Rabha Sahitya Sabha (ARSS) organized a mass movement in the year 1979 to introduce Rabha language in schools of the Rabha dominated areas. The Rabha language agitation was sparked by formation of All Rabha Students Union (ARSU) in 1980. In the movement for Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council, ARSU took an active part (Das 2012).

After the formation of ARSU, there were formed two other important organizations of Rabhas; viz., Rabha Hasong Demand Committee (RHDC) in 1992 and All Rabha Women Council (ARWC) in 1993. They invested great effort to organize mass

movements for the sake of safeguarding and asserting their identity especially from the Bangladeshi immigrants. The identity assertion movement of Rabhas was empowered by the formation of ARWC in 1993 (Das 2012).

The demand for Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council on the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra was amply raised through mass movements organized by RHDC and ARWC. Gradually they started to believe that the Sixth Schedule status could protect their land from illegal immigrants. The area under RHAC comprises two districts of lower Assam; viz., South Kamrup and Goalpara. The RHAC area that extends over 3,161 kms of land starts from Rani of south Kamrup district to Jairamkuchi of Goalpara district. The northern foothills areas of Meghalaya are also included in this movement of the Rabhas Hasong Autonomous Council. The demand for RHDC received a positive response from the Government of Assam and subsequently the RHDC Act was passed in Assam. But confusion prevailed over the boundaries of the RHDC and permanent settlement of boundary is yet to be decided in a peaceful manner. But, due to this non-implementation of Rabha accord, the Rabha aspirations were seriously hurt. As a consequence of the failure of RHAC, the agitation for more autonomy for the Rabhas under the provision of Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution grew in a larger scale than before. The Rabhas started mass movements demanding greater political autonomy under Article 244 (A) of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (Das 2012).

Until the year 2003 the ARSU, ARWC and SSDC struggled for autonomy and it is still continuing. But on 7th June 2003, the Sixth Schedule Demand Committee (SSDC) started movement. In 2007 and 2009, ARSU submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi, demanding for inclusion of the RHAC into the Sixth Schedule and requesting for sending this proposal to the Union Government. They also sought exemption of Panchayat elections in the RHAC area and demanded from the State Government to conduct fresh elections in the area according to the Rabha Accord of 1995. To pressurize the Government, ARSU, ARWC and SSDC have adopted various methods like bandhs, economic blockades, road blockades, etc (Das 2012). Due to the mass movements, Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi, announced to grant the Sixth Schedule status to the Rabhas on 12th January 2004 and on 13th October 2007. At present, under the RHAC area, there are 779 revenue villages with a population of about 6 lakhs. The movement for preservation of ethnic

identity of the Rabhas has given rise to inter-ethnic conflicts between the Rabhas and non-Rabhas in the council area. The non-Rabha communities like Muslims, Garos and Assamese of the RHAC area have been pleading to the State Government to exclude their villages from the council area. These communities pressurize the Government to conduct panchayat elections in the villages dominated by non-Rabha communities (Das 2012).

As a consequence of the inter-ethnic tension, a non-Rabha coordination forum was formed in January 2008 to counter the Rabha movement. This development resulted in the Rabha and non-Rabha conflict at Lakhipur area of Goalpara district particularly between the Rabhas and Muslims. As a reactions to this inter-ethnic tension, a Rabha mob came to defer panchayat elections from the RHAC area on 29th March 2010, and a 48-hour 37 NH Bandh was called in December 2010 by ARSU, ARWC and SSSDC. These incidents are responsible for the outbreak of the tragic inter-ethnic conflict in Assam-Meghalaya border areas between the Rabhas and the Garos in December 2010 and January 2011. Due to such ethnic unrest in the RHAC area, the State Assembly had to withdraw the RHAC (Amendment) Bill on March 2010 (Das 2012).

To fulfill their demand of the Sixth Schedule status, ARSU, SSSDC, ARWC and Rabha National Organization have often given call for bandhs, rail blockades, and economic blockades to pressurize the Government. 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 (Das 2012).

The above mentioned historical sequences reveal the reasons for creating an environment of discontentment among the ethnically diversified dwellers of these areas.

CAUSES OF THE GARO-RABHA CONFLICT

The above discussion shows that discrete identity consciousness gave rise to the demand of separate ethnic homelands. The socio-cultural differences between the Garo and Rabha communities gradually took the shape of discontentment. There evolved a tenuous situation between the Garos and the Rabhas. At a point of time, it

sparked a violent conflict through a small incident that took place in the already fuel-smearred situation. Though there are several causes that prepared the ground for the conflict, the most important factor that widened the gap between two discrete communities is the difference pertaining to culture, language, religion and others. The discrepancy between the Garo and Rabha tribes prepared the battleground and the incident that took place added fuel to the outbreak of the conflict. Thus, the causes of the Garo-Rabha conflict are of two types: (1) **predispositional causes** which provided a social, cultural and political environment for the conflict and (2) **precipitative causes** which let the lid off the potential conflict. These are accounted here.

1. Predispositional Causes

It refers to the causes that were lurking in the background and preparing a socio-cultural and political platform for the outburst of the violent conflict between two communities. These are as follows:

(i) Ethnic Tension and Rabha Hasong Movement

The demand for Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council has been opposed by all communities in the region other than Rabhas. The non-Rabha communities like Muslim, Bodo, Garo, Koch and others are afraid of their deprivation in case Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council comes into existence. Therefore, especially the minority communities (Muslims) and their forums have been jointly protesting against the inclusion of their villages into the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council's jurisdiction. Such protests have caused serious clashes among the communities. Due to this, the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Bill was delayed by the Assam Government. This has created a vicious atmosphere between the two groups of the communities. However, on November 3, 2010 at the Central Office of the All Rabha Students Union in Dhudhnoi several Garo organizations under the leadership of the President of Garo Jatiya Parishad, Arbitson D' Momin, declared that the Garos of Goalpara had no dispute regarding the demand of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council; there was no demand for any other autonomous council as Garos already had a functional Autonomous Council in Meghalaya and also there was no demand for conducting panchayat elections as that would further complicate the struggle by the Rabhas for their own council. Momin further added that such demands were 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 Hasongs. The Assam Government should have seized the momentum the initiative of the Garo leader 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. The Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council was constituted with headquarters at Dudhnoi town. The jurisdiction of this council extends upto Rani area of Kamrup district and except for 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 Rabhas, the tribes like Bodos, Garos, Kochs, Rajbongsis and others who constitute more than half of the population of the 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 all the tribal groups of this area (Utpal Phukan 2011). The following are the responses on the Rabha Hasong movement collected from the Garo and Rabha families in the Assam and Meghalaya areas:

Table 5.1

The Garo and Rabha Families' Concern regarding the Rabha Hasong Movement (Percentage in Parentheses)

Concern with the Rabha Hasong Movement	Rabha Families of Assam			Rabha Families of Meghalaya									Garo Families of Assam			Garo Families of Meghalaya	Grand Total
	Belpara	Bongaon	Total	Daram	Jamgaon	Jonglapara	Mendipathar	Nokchar	Rompara	Soinang	Thapa	Total	Ginogre	Khamari	Total	Resubelpara	
Engaged in the Rabha Hasong movement	26 (100)	09 (90.00)	35 (97.22)	0	0	01 (2.86)	0	0	0	0	02 (4.55)	03 (1.76)	0	0	0	0	38 (14.62)
Supporting the Rabha Hasong movement	0	01 (10.00)	01 (2.78)	06 (60.00)	06 (54.55)	12 (34.29)	10 (45.45)	04 (28.57)	08 (34.78)	03 (27.27)	14 (31.82)	64 (37.65)	05 (23.81)	01 (8.33)	06 (18.18)	0	70 (26.92)
No comment	0	0	0	04 (40.00)	05 (45.45)	22 (62.86)	12 (54.55)	10 (71.43)	15 (65.22)	08 (72.73)	28 (63.64)	104 (61.18)	16 (76.19)	11 (91.67)	27 (81.82)	21 (100)	152 (58.46)
Total	26 (100)	10 (100)	36 (100)	10 (100)	11 (100)	35 (100)	22 (100)	14 (100)	23 (100)	11 (100)	44 (100)	170 (100)	21 (100)	12 (100)	33 (100)	21 (100)	260 (100)

Source: Field Study Conducted during the Period from 15th June 2014 to 20th December 2014

In the field of the study, there were found sharp differences growing between the Garo and Rabha communities. The Garos of Meghalaya had a complaint that the Rabhas of Meghalaya often went to Goalpara to participate in the Rabha Hasong movement. However, during the field investigation it was found that 97.22% of the Rabha families of Assam were associated with the RHAC movement and only 1.76% of the Rabha families of Meghalaya were associated with the movement. But 37.65% of the Meghalayan Rabha families were full supporters of the RHAC demand. They opined that there was Garo Autonomous Council in Meghalaya but for the Rabhas there was none. Of the Garo families of Assam 18.18% supported the RHAC movement. They opined that peace was more important for them and the Garo-Rabha conflict was started by the Garos of Meghalaya and not by the Garos of Assam. But the majority of Garo families did not answer any question in this regard. During the field study of the Garo families in Assam 81.82% did not utter any comment regarding this issue of RHAC. On the other hand, all the Meghalayan Garo families opposed the demand for RHAC. In the Assam-Meghalaya border area the Garos are also settled and they fear that they may be deprived if Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council becomes operational. The Garos expressed their opposition to the Rabha Hasong movement by burning the flags of RHAC.

(ii) Involvement of Insurgency

The involvement of the insurgency groups is also found in the Garo-Rabha conflict. This is another cause of differences among the Garos and the Rabhas. It is directed towards materialization of the demand for a separate homeland named Greater Garo Land (GGL) for Garo people. This GGL demand is originally launched by the Garo insurgency group Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA), and, later, by the A'chik National Volunteers Council (ANVC). The demand for territory or boundary of the GGL is extended up to the river Brahmaputra in the Goalpara district of Assam where Garos are a minority as compared to Rabhas. On the contrary, the Rabhas of Assam also demand Sixth Schedule status. The Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) was formed in 2010 by a former officer of Meghalaya police with the objective to carve out a separate Garo state. On December 8, 2010, a few days before the outbreak of the conflict, two hard core members of GNLA were arrested with a huge cache of arms in Williamnagar, the headquarters of the East Garo Hills district. In order to make their presence felt in the Garo community they actively participated

in the riots with the objective of chasing away the Rabhas living there. Several reports stated that the surrendered militants were attacking Rabhas in the East Garo Hills. In the Mendipathar village, when the Rabha houses were burnt by the Garos and Muslims at that time a Rabha person who was not getting chance to flee from the village climbed up a tree and there he noticed that after destroying the village, a group of people came to the village with guns and they moved towards the Resubelpara area. It is also said that Belpara is a Rabha village of Assam which is situated very near to Resubelpara town and the villagers left their village due to a couple of gun firing by a group of Garos. Thus, it also becomes a major cause of the inter-ethnic conflict between the Garo and Rabha communities. The following are the reactions of the Garo and Rabha families to GGL movement as shown in the table:

Table 5.2

The Garo and Rabha Families' Reactions to GGL Movement (Percentage in Parentheses)

Type of reaction	Rabha Families of Assam		Rabha Families of Meghalaya										Garo Families of Assam			Garo Families of Meghalaya	GrandTotal
	Belpara	Bongaon	Total	Daram	Jamgaon	Jonglapara	Mendipathar	Nokchar	Rompara	Soinang	Thapa	Total	Ginogre	Khamari	Total	Resubelpara	
Supports Greater Garo Land	0	0	0	01 (10.00)	0	03 (8.57)	0	0	0	0	0	04 (2.45)	15 (71.43)	10 (83.33)	25 (75.76)	20 (95.24)	49 (18.85)
Opposes the movement	26 (100)	10 (100)	36 (100)	0	0	02 (5.71)	02 (9.09)	0	03 (13.04)	0	0	07 (4.12)	0	0	0	0	43 (16.54)
No comment	0	0	0	09 (90.00)	11 (100)	30 (85.71)	20 (90.91)	14 (100)	20 (86.96)	11 (100)	44 (100)	159 (93.53)	06 (28.57)	02 (16.67)	08 (24.24)	01 (4.76)	168 (64.61)
Total	26 (100)	10 (100)	36 (100)	10 (100)	11 (100)	35 (100)	22 (100)	14 (100)	23 (100)	11 (100)	44 (100)	170 (100)	21 (100)	12 (100)	33 (100)	21 (100)	260 (100)

Source: Field Study Conducted during the Period from 15th June 2014 to 20th December 2014

In the field investigation, opinions were also gathered about the GGL movement as it was done in case of the RHAC movement. 95.24% of the Garo families of Meghalaya and 75.76% of the Garo families of Assam felt that if the GGL was formed then development would take place in the Garo villages. The Garos also said that the land which was demanded by the Rabhas for their homeland (RHAC) originally belonged to the Garos. One Garo educationist of Goalpara district Mr. T. Sangma opined that the conflict between the Garos and Rabhas took place in the Assam-Meghalaya border area due to the fact that both the communities demanded the same area of land as their distinctive homelands. On the other hand, all the Rabha families as well as social activists like Mr. S. Rabha and Mr. P. Rabha of Goalpara district reported that the inclusion of the Rabha dominated areas of Assam in the GGL was not based on the fact as the Rabhas had been living in the Goalpara district since many centuries. 4.12% Rabha families of Meghalaya said that the GGL Demand would be harmful for the Rabhas because it would be retaliated by depriving them in socio-economic and political realms. But most of the Rabha families of Meghalaya were silent and they did not answer the question. They were still under the trauma of the conflict that took place in 2010-11.

(iii) Political Factor

In Meghalaya, a problem started after the suspension of the Garo Autonomous Hills Council. The ruling United Meghalaya Alliance (UMA) in Shillong dissolved the Garo Autonomous Council, following allegations of discrepancies found in the fund utilization and unscrupulous appointments. The Garo Students Union (GSU) raised a demand for restoration of the council and institution of a simultaneous enquiry into it. But the council is run by the Bureaucrats. Common people and council employees suffered most in this process. Insecurity of land and property set in. That gave rise to the discourse of “outsiders” and the “sons of the soil” in the Garo Hills. In the East Garo Hills, when rumours resulted in the clashes, Rabhas who had pattas (land titles) of landholdings and the mining labourers from Assam working in the East Garo Hills were especially targeted (Phukan 2011).

In the field, political competitiveness and discontentment between the Garos and Rabhas is very evident. Garos were not happy with active political participation by Rabhas in Meghalaya. The Rabhas belonging to the Garo dominated state of

Meghalaya are deprived of political rights. In this context one can refer to two particular cases. First, the case of James Pam, a Rabha BJP leader of Mendipathar constituency who contested Assembly elections (2007) against F.W Momin, a Garo congress candidate. The case of James Pam further aggravated the situation of political disparity in this context. The political assertion of Rabhas through the candidature of James Pam in the election was not digested in the Garo dominated area. F.W Momin when elected as MLA commented that the Rabha voters did not vote for him. Interestingly, Rabhas are a majority in the Mendipathar Constituency and without their votes the Garo candidate Mr. Momin could not have won the election. After elections, some Rabha voters have been transferred to Resubelpara constituency with an intent to divide the Rabha voters. Second, Moni Rabha, an ex-MLA of West Garo Hills district, was also threatened by the Garos. In an informal interview on 15.01.2013 when asked a question to Mr. Moni Rabha on the Garo-Rabha conflict regarding the problems faced by the Rabhas of Meghalaya after the conflict he said that they were not facing problems at all. But in the mean time a Muslim came to his home and said, ‘Sir, better, leave this place and go to Assam. You are all (Rabhas) threatened by the GNLA insurgency group. Mr. Moni Rabha did replied, ‘we are born and brought up in this land and where will we go?’

(iv) Social Exclusion and Inequality

The issue of social exclusion is usually related to the problem of unequal opportunities. Social exclusion results in injustice for certain communities as it denies them access to public offices and primary goods (Kumar 2013:21). For instance, Garos and Rabhas both are tribal communities but in Meghalaya Rabhas do not get benefit of the Sixth Schedule Status. Therefore, the Rabhas of Meghalaya also supported the Rabha movement for creation of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council in the Goalpara district of Assam. When asked about their support for Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council, the Rabhas of Meghalaya hesitated to respond, fearing of the conflict. They perhaps harboured a sense of marginalization in that state. But the fact is that All Rabha National Council (ARNC) is the principal organization of the Rabhas of Assam and Meghalaya and the demand for Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council was originally raised by the ARNC. In this context, the Rabhas of Meghalaya also supported the RHAC.

The Rabhas are mostly Hindus. The Garos are mostly Christians. The Garos eat beef which is a taboo among the Rabhas. Therefore, the Garos were treated like untouchables by the Rabhas. This behaviour socially excluded them in the study area and further widened the gap between them.

(v) Intrusion of Muslim Immigrants

In the context of the Garo-Rabha conflict, influence of Muslim immigrants could also be taken into account. These immigrants are often seen to establish marital relationship with the Garo women. Thereby, Muslim immigrants are able to enjoy the landed properties of their Garo wives, which serve a means for consolidating their hold in the Northeast. Moreover, the Muslims are opposing their inclusion in the Rabha Autonomous Council area and so they are supporting and sheltering the Garos during the Garo-Rabha conflict in Goalpara district. Thus, Muslims and Garos visualized the Rabhas as their common enemy. The villagers of the Mendipathar Rabhapara reported that on 3rd January 2011 when a procession was organized by the Garos of Meghalaya, the Muslims also joined them at Mendipathar town and later the Muslims were also involved in burning Rabha houses along with the Garos. Moreover the Muslims took away the domestic animals of the Rabhas in the Mendipathar area.

(vi) Pressure for Religious Conversion and Social Divide

Forcing the Rabhas of Meghalaya for religious conversion caused a rupture between the Garo and Rabha communities. During the field investigation, the Rabha families complained that they were asked to undergo religious conversion. The Rabhas of the Meghalayan side complained of being pressurized to accept Christianity. They also said that a group of Christian Garos visited the Rabha families door to door and requested them to accept Christianity. The following table classifies the responses of the families regarding the pressure exerted upon them for religious conversion:

Table 5.3

Responses of the Families Regarding Pressure Exerted upon them for Religious Conversion (Percentage in Parentheses)

Kind of Pressure for Religious Conversion	Rabha Families of Assam			Rabha Families of Meghalaya									Garo Families of Assam			Garo Families of Meghalaya	GrandTotal
	Belpara	Bongaon	Total	Daram	Jamgaon	Jonglapara	Mendipathar	Nokchar	Rompara	Soinang	Thapa	Total	Ginogre	Khamari	Total	Resubelpara	
Asked to adopt Hinduism	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	01 (4.76)	05 (41.67)	06 (18.18)	0	06 (2.31)
Asked to adopt Christianity	04 (15.38)	0	04 (11.11)	09 (90.00)	11 (100)	31 (88.57)	21 (95.45)	14 (100)	23 (100)	11 (100)	44 (100)	164 (96.47)	0	0	0	0	168 (64.62)
Not asked anything	22 (84.62)	10 (100)	32 (88.89)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	20 (95.23)	07 (58.33)	27 (81.82)	21 (100)	80 (30.77)
Voluntarily adopted	0	0	0	01 (10.00)	0	04 (11.43)	01 (9.09)	0	0	0	0	06 (3.53)	0	0	0	0	06 (2.31)
Total	26 (100)	10 (100)	36 (100)	10 (100)	11 (100)	35 (100)	22 (100)	14 (100)	23 (100)	11 (100)	44 (100)	170 (100)	21 (100)	12 (100)	33 (100)	21 (100)	260 (100)

Source: Field Study Conducted during the Period from 15th June 2014 to 20th December 2014

Pressure for religious conversion is one of the important causes of the Garo-Rabha conflict. 96.47% Rabha families of Meghalaya and 11.11% Rabha families of Assam reported that they were asked to accept Christianity. On the other hand, 18.18% Garos of Assam also informed that they were asked by Rabhas to become Hindu. But after cross examination, the Rabhas of Goalpara district denied to have done so and even they were not aware of such thing. The Garos have a strong sense of good will for Christian people. For example, during the time of the conflict the houses of those Rabhas who embraced Christianity were not burnt. They were provided shelter by the Garos. Some of such Christianised Rabhas are Niranjan Rabha, British Rabha, Monesory Rabha, Mokreng Rabha and others.

(vii) Religious and Community Sentiment

In the field it was known that a priest belonging to the Garo community was assaulted by some Rabha youths during the bandh on December 22, 2010. It created resentment among the Garos. A few days after this incident, Mr. R. Rabha, a Rabha student leader, was asked by his friends from the Garo community that this kind of unfair thing should not take place to avoid flare up of communal violence. Each and every information about bandh calls, individual dispute, etc. between the Rabha and Garo communities immediately spread in the entire Garo Hills districts. It signifies that a high sense of discrete identity consciousness prevails between the communities.

During the year 2008-09 in the Rompara and Jonglapara villages, the Rastriya Swayama Sevak Sangha sakha activities were started by the Rabhas in the native field to impart Hindu ideals. And the Garos always noticed the RSS activities every evening. In the Sakha, there was schedule of physical and martial art exercise in the field. The Garo people thought that this physical exercise was to prepare the Rabha youths for attacking the Garo people. Garos opined that some communal groups like RSS, Seva Bharti, Durga Bahini, Bajrang Dal, etc. were operating and these events created religious rivalry between the Garo and Rabha communities.

Another dangerous trend continued by the Rabha community, i.e, bandhs calls announced at the time of Christmas every year in the Goalpara district. This included a religious sentiment in the Garo-Rabha conflict. In Jonglapara village, three Rabha houses were not burned by the Garos as these belonged to the Christian Rabhas. It was also known that the Christian Garos put pressure on the Rabhas to adopt

Christianity in the East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. Now, the number of Rabha Christians is gradually increasing in the Resubelpara area but in some places like Tikirkilla, the Christian Rabhas re-embraced their earlier religion, i.e, Hinduism. In the East Garo Hills district, there seems to be developing a sharp division and discontentment between the Garos and Rabhas on the basis of religion.

(viii) Road and Illegal Taxation

Collection of tax in the area is not a contemporary phenomenon. It started during the Mughal period. During that period the Zamindars collected tax from the Garos and harassed them. As a result, the Garos protested between 1807 and 1819, resulting in killing of 180 persons. In this period, the Garos in the hills area came to the plains area through numerous passages or Duars for conducting trade and other purpose. But Zamindars were situated at the bordering areas of the Goalpara district. In course of time, these Zamindars started to levy house tax on the Garos. Consequently the relationship between the hills and plains people declined during the British rule. In contemporary time also, the road to the East Garo Hills is through Goalpara where the road and taxation is controlled by Rabha groups. The Garo groups in that area have always complained about this.

Significance of Land in Tribal Society

In tribal society, land is the integral part of their life; the primary force of their economy; related to their tradition, family ties, religion and so on. The tribals in the hills as well as in the plains of northeast India have been disturbed in a great variety of ways from their land since 1947, notwithstanding the government policies and programmes. The process commenced in and around Shillong, the headquarters of greater Assam administration and now the capital of the State of Meghalaya, where land was released liberally after 1947. The same story was more or less repeated in Nagaland after 1963. The regrouping of villages in Mizoram after the insurgency in 1966 and in Nagaland earlier found the villagers at communication points under the care of security forces. But in the process they completely lost their ancestral villages, paddy fields and traditional places of worship. The land alienation of tribals in Tripura was largely caused by machinations of vested interests, as a result of which the tribals sold their ancestral land to migrant Bengalis and moved deeper into remote areas of the hills. Assam is a classic case where the tribals have lost their land. However, the

future of social cohesiveness and maintenance of peace would greatly depend upon the way the land problem of the tribals is tackled in the coming years. The Assam scenario is large in size and in its possible impact on other States of the region. There are separate provisions in Assam for administration of the land in the hill districts (North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong) and the plains districts. In the hill districts, the land is owned communally and no individual has any right to transfer it. Under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, the authority of land administration is vested in the autonomous district councils which run the administration in accordance with old customs and usages. As regards the plains, the tribal belts and blocks (in all, 37) were constituted immediately after Independence under executive orders under the direction of a perceptive indigenous leadership... (IDMC Report, November 2011).

The edited book of N.G. Mahanta and D. Gogoi (2012) inform that the native communities have been agitating to preserve their identity and protect their rights. In 1947, the Bodos constituted 49% of Assam's population, but this percentage dropped to 29% in the 1971 census due to internal and external migration. Land alienation also took place especially in the tribal areas. Gita Bharali (2012:63) cites:

My land is my backbone... I only stand straight, happy, proud and not ashamed about my colour because I still have land. I can dance, paint, create and sing as my ancestors did before me... My land is my foundation. I stand, live and perform as long as I have something firm and hard to stand on. Without land...we will be the lowest people in the world, because you have broken down our backbone, took away my arts, history and foundation. You have let us with nothing"- An aboriginal leader from Australia.

The N.C Hills District Council is empowered to make laws for occupation, allotment and use of land, forest management; regulation of shifting cultivation, social custom and succession of headmen and chiefs. In the Sixth Schedule area, an outsider is not allowed to buy and sell land. Moreover, in the area regulation for control of non-tribal traders is made by the council. The council is also vested with the power to collect revenue and taxes (Borbora 2002:1286). This strategy of vesting power on one particular ethnic group obviously results in the empowerment of one group and the relative deprivation of several other groups inhabiting the region which comes under the jurisdiction of autonomous council. The traditional political institutions are not

democratic. They favour separatism and therefore they exclude outsiders. Since traditional authority is the basis of tribal identity, the forces of separatism and conflict are more active. Hariss mentions that in the modern democratic system, through the arrangements of the Sixth Schedule, the tribal populations are allowed to enjoy self-rule by establishing special autonomous district councils that are sometimes exempted from national laws (John Harriss 2002:05). Sanjay Borbora in his study finds that the existing state policy towards the ethnic groups in the Northeastern region is responsible for the outbreak of conflicts. For instance, in N.C. Hills, certain land related government policies affected social relations (Sanjay Borbora 2002:1285-92).

Land alienation has emerged a major problem in the Garo hills or the marginalized areas in the contemporary era. In order to strictly restrict the alienation of tribal land, the Garo Hills District (Transfer of Land) Act was passed in 1955. This act prohibited the transfer of land by a tribal to a non-tribal. But in the border areas instances of forceful occupation of land could be seen (Mark 2004:526-27).

The relationship between man and land is considered to be a sacred relationship. The Garos and much of Garo culture and history revolve around this. The Garos are believed to have migrated to the present Garo Hills of Meghalaya from the Tibetan plateau. The Garos call themselves *A'chik* meaning, **the bite of the land**. That feeling elevates the relationship between the land and the people, who inhabit and work on it, to a sacred level (Sangma 2008:53).

One of the important causes of the Garo-Rabha conflict is possession of land especially cultivable land. During the field visit it was noticed that the Rabhas possessed maximum cultivable land whereas the Garos mostly had land for houses and not a sufficient cultivable land. Mr. X Momin, a Garo working in a Missionary based NGO said that the Garos liked to live and cultivate in the hills because they were not fond of muddy things. The plain lands are cultivated by other communities like Rabha, Bodo and Hajong and the Garo collected taxes from them. Now, the situation has changed. The Garos are working in muddy land, engaged in settled cultivation because the production is more in plains as compared to the hills. Many poor Garo people were working in the paddy fields of Rabhas as labourers. They have learnt to work in the plain muddy paddy field. But most of the cultivable plain land is occupied by the Rabhas. During the time of conflict, paddy fields of Rabhas were targeted and destroyed. Even after conflict it was found that in many Rabha cultivable

lands were occupied by the Garos, especially in the Thapa village. So, land is one of the major factors of the discontentment between the two communities.

2. Precipitative Causes

There are the causes that finally triggered the violent conflict between the Garo and Rabha communities. These causes added fuel to the already existing spark resulting in the outbreak of the violence, killing of lots of people, burning of houses and shattering of lives.

(i) Road Blockade

More than 200 villages along the Assam- Meghalaya border are inhabited by members of, both, the Rabha and Garo communities: while the Rabhas are minority in the Garo-dominated East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya, they constitute a majority in the Goalpara district of the Assam State. The Rabhas have been demanding Sixth Schedule status for them and have been lobbying for their own autonomous council. The Garos and other minorities in Goalpara feared of discrimination out of creation of such council opposed this demand. In late December 2010, All Rabha Students Union (ARSU) set up a blockade of National Highway 37 (NH-37) in Assam's Goalpara district. The districts of East, West and South Garo Hills in Western Meghalaya have no direct road connection with Meghalaya's state capital, Shillong, and all traffic has to use NH 37, including commercial trucks, transporting coal and other goods. Due to the road blockade, on 3rd January 2011 violence started and the Rabha houses in Mendipathar in East Garo Hills were burnt (IDMC 2011).

At the time of field visit it could be sensed that the road blockades called by the Rabhas in support of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council demand created disturbance for all the people belonging to this region. The most disturbed people due to such road blockades are the Garos of Meghalaya because they can move to other places from Garo Hills only through Assam. There is no direct road to Khasi Hills from Garo Hills. Even some Rabha people also expressed their resentment to these bandh calls. However, the ARSU respondents did not answer any of the investigator's questions during the field visit because the road blockade has become a big issue even among the Rabhas and the ARSU leader might have realized the fact that the road blockade was a wrong decision taken by them. The responses of the Garo-Rabha families on the issue of bandh calls are presented in the following table:

Table 5.4

The Garo and Rabha Families' Responses to the Question related to Bandh Calls (Percentage in Parentheses)

Type of Responses	Rabha Families of Assam			Rabha Families of Meghalaya									Garo Families of Assam			Garo Families of Meghalaya	Grand Total
	Belpara	Bongaon	Total	Daram	Jamgaon	Jonglapara	Mendipathar	Nokchar	Rompara	Soinang	Thapa	Total	Ginogre	Khamari	Total	Resubelpara	
Garo hatred was due to Bandh Calls during Christmas by ARSU and other Rabha organizations	10 (38.46)	05 (50.00)	15 (41.67)	02 (20.00)	03 (27.27)	07 (20.00)	10 (45.45)	03 (21.43)	0	0	12 (27.27)	37 (21.76)	20 (95.24)	12 (100)	32 (96.97)	17 (80.95)	101 (38.85)
Meghalaya Rabha joined the Rabha Hasong movement	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	04 (19.05)	04 (1.54)
Insurgency involvement in Garo-Rabha Conflict	05 (19.23)	01 (10.00)	06 (16.67)	03 (30.00)	02 (18.18)	05 (14.29)	01 (4.55)	02 (14.29)	02 (8.70)	0	10 (22.73)	25 (14.71)	0	0	0	0	31 (11.92)
No comment	11 (42.31)	04 (40.00)	15 (41.67)	05 (50.00)	06 (54.55)	23 (65.71)	11 (50.00)	09 (64.29)	21 (91.30)	11 (100)	22 (50.00)	108 (63.53)	01 (4.76)	0	01 (3.03)	0	124 (47.69)
Total	26 (100)	10 (100)	36 (100)	10 (100)	11 (100)	35 (100)	22 (100)	14 (100)	23 (100)	11 (100)	44 (100)	170 (100)	21 (100)	12 (100)	33 (100)	21 (100)	260 (100)

Source: Field Study Conducted during the Period from 15th June 2014 to 20th December 2014

In the field investigation it becomes apparent that the Bandh calls specially during Christmas period are very irritating for people, especially for the Garos of Meghalaya who are extremely dissatisfied. There are 96.97% Garos of Assam and 80.95% Garos of Meghalaya who hate ARSU for the frequent bandh calls during Christmas. In this case the Garos of Meghalaya were fully dissatisfied because they cannot go to market during their festivals and the Garos of Meghalaya at least have markets in the East Garo Hills district but the most harmful effect was that those Garos who were working outside could not come home from their work places. Even a troop of Meghalaya Police went to Dudhnoi in order to forcefully close the ARSU office a few days before the outbreak of the Garo-Rabha conflict. Moreover, 21.76% of the Rabha families of Meghalaya also expressed their dissatisfaction over the bandh calls and 41.67% of the Rabhas of Assam also said that it was wrong to announce bandh during the time of festivals like Christmas. Being asked the question of involvement of insurgency in the Garo-Rabha conflict, 14.71% of the Rabhas of Meghalaya admitted that insurgency groups were involved in the conflict. It has been mentioned earlier that a group of Garos with guns were seen in the Mendipathar (Meghalaya) and Belpara (Assam) villages. According to the villagers, they were neither police nor general people. Thus, 19.09% of Garos of Meghalaya stated that the Rabhas of Meghalaya were involved in the Rabha Hasong movement. The following table classifies the Garo and Rabha families' feelings during the bandh calls given by various Rabha organizations:

Table 5.5

The Garo-Rabha Families' Feelings during Bandh Calls Imposed by the Rabha Organizations (Percentage in Parentheses)

Type of Feeling during bandh calls	Rabha Families of Assam			Rabha Families of Meghalaya									Garo Families of Assam			Garo Families of Meghalaya	Grand Total
	Belpara	Bongaon	Total	Daram	Jamgaon	Jonglapara	Mendipathar	Nokchar	Rompara	Soimang	Thapa	Total	Ginogre	Khamari	Total	Resubelpara	
Faced problems due to bandh calls	02 (7.69)	0	02 (5.56)	0	0	01 (2.86)	01 (4.55)	01 (7.14)	03 (13.04)	0	04 (9.09)	10 (5.88)	01 (4.76)	02 (16.67)	03 (9.09)	10 (47.62)	25 (9.62)
Collected information before any visit	04 (15.38)	0	04 (11.11)	10 (100)	11 (100)	34 (97.14)	18 (81.82)	13 (92.86)	20 (86.96)	10 (90.91)	40 (90.91)	156 (91.76)	0	0	0	0	160 (61.54)
We always visited Mendipathar (Meghalaya)	0	0	0	0	0	0	02 (9.09)	0	0	0	0	02 (1.18)	20 (95.24)	10 (83.33)	30 (90.91)	11 (52.38)	43 (16.54)
Faced no problem	20 (76.92)	10 (100)	30 (83.33)	0	0	0	01 (4.55)	0	0	01 (9.09)	0	32 (18.82)	0	0	0	0	62 (23.85)
Total	26 (100)	10 (100)	36 (100)	10 (100)	11 (100)	35 (100)	22 (100)	14 (100)	23 (100)	11 (100)	44 (100)	170 (100)	21 (100)	12 (100)	33 (100)	21 (100)	260 (100)

Source: Field Study Conducted during the Period from 15th June 2014 to 20th December 2014

On being asked whether they faced problems due to bandh calls, 47.62% of the Garo families of Meghalaya and 9.09% Garo families of Assam reported to have been much affected by bandh calls. Many of the families said that they were irritated when their family members were to be taken to hospital but the Rabhas did not permit them to move. Moreover, the Garos who were working outside Meghalaya wanted to come home at the time of Christmas but they were compelled to stay in hotels at Goalpara for a couple of days. Such type of incidents took the form of inter-ethnic tension between these two communities. Even 5.88% Rabha families of Meghalaya were affected due to these bandh calls. To the contrary, 83.33% of the Rabhas families of Assam informed of having no problem during bandh calls and 5.56% of them claimed to be disturbed. Interestingly, 90.09% Garos of Assam frequently visited Mendipathar because most of them were working or engaged in Meghalaya and not in Assam. The rest of the families did not respond to the question.

Thus, most of the incidents took place during bandh calls in the Nalbari area. 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. People from Meghalaya have to go by this road to other places like Guwahati, Shillong, Dudhnoi, etc. The Garos have no alternative to go from one place to another, except via Nalbari where ARSU has constructed its office in order to disrupt the communication of the Garos during ARSU's bandh calls for Rabha Hasong council demand. The Garos are greatly disturbed because of this small portion of 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. Administrative officers, police personnel, political leaders, MLAs, businessmen and employees need to frequently visit Shillong (state capital). But they are also blocked in Nalbari by the Rabhas. So every section of population of the Meghalaya side was adversely affected. This was one of the major causes of the spread of conflict. Due to these disturbances several meetings were organized between the Garo and the Rabha communities in the past. The Garos even threatened the Rabhas on account of the frequent bandh calls. The Garos even managed a new road that does not cross the Nalbari area and leads to Damaj. Besides, a Garo political leader, Selbiya, was also assaulted in the Nalbari area during the ARSU's bandh call

in 2010, i.e, before the Garo-Rabha conflict. This incident also ignite the Garo-Rabha conflict.

(ii) Inefficiency of Administration

Role of the Meghalaya State administration was not proper against the violent activities. The Jonglapara village is only 50 meters from the Resubelpara Sub-division office and Resubelpara Police OutPost. But, as the people of this village told, the village was burning whereas the office employees and police personnel were simply observing the violent activities without taking any action. When the Jonglapara, Daram, Rompara and Soinang villages were burnt and the Rabhas went to Resubelpara Police OutPost for shelter, the Garo employees of the Resubelpara Sub-divisional office (now DC office) said, ‘Now, it is looking good’. It signified the extreme level of discontentment or hatred between these two communities. Garos of Meghalaya also said, ‘Though wrong persons did wrong, innocent people also have to pay the cost’. Here, the Rabhas of Meghalaya were innocent. Unfair was done by the Rabhas of Assam. But the Rabhas of Meghalaya were mostly harmed in the conflict. This is perhaps an articulation of intense hatred in minds of the Garos due to frequent bandh calls and road blockades that often interrupted normal life. To understand the inactiveness of the police the following table classifies the distance between the villages burnt and the nearest Police Station in Assam and Meghalaya:

Table 5.6

Distance of the Burnt Villages from Police Station in Meghalaya (Percentage in Parentheses)

Distance between the police station and the burnt villages	Rabha Families of Assam			Rabha Families of Meghalaya									Garo Families of Assam			Garo Families of Meghalaya	Grand Total
	Belpara	Bongaon	Total	Daram	Jamgaon	Jonglapara	Mendipathar	Nokchar	Rompara	Soinang	Thapa	Total	Ginogre	Khamari	Total	Resubelpara	
Less than 1 km	0	0	0	0	0	33 (94.29)	19 (86.36)	0	0	0	0	52 (30.59)	0	0	0	18 (85.71)	70 (26.92)
1 to 5 km	0	0	0	10 (100)	11 (100)	02 (5.71)	03 (13.64)	14 (100)	23 (100)	11 (100)	0	74 (43.53)	0	0	0	03 (14.29)	77 (29.62)
6 to 10 km	01 (3.85)	0	01 (2.78)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	03 (6.82)	03 (1.76)	10 (47.62)	0	10 (30.30)	0	14 (5.38)
Above 10 km	25 (96.15)	10 (100)	35 (97.22)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	41 (93.18)	41 (24.12)	11 (52.38)	12 (100)	23 (69.70)	0	99 (38.08)
Total	26 (100)	10 (100)	36 (100)	10 (100)	11 (100)	35 (100)	22 (100)	14 (100)	23 (100)	11 (100)	44 (100)	170 (100)	21 (100)	12 (100)	33 (100)	21 (100)	260 (100)

Source: Field Study Conducted during the Period from 15th June 2014 to 20th December 2014

In the conflict, the Garos of Meghalaya were not affected. Only the Rabha villages were harmed or destroyed in Meghalaya. Among the victims, 30.59 of the families were located at a distance of less than one kilometer from the nearest police stations; namely, Mendipathar Police Station and Resubelpara Police OutPost. But these people were the worst victims, losing their property. 43.53% Rabha villages of Meghalaya were located at 1 to 5 kms and 30.30% Garo villages were located at 6 to 10 kms from the police station.

On the other hand, in Assam 97.22% of the Rabha families were located more than 10 kms from the police station, i.e, Krishnai Police Station but in this area as compared to Meghalaya side the loss was less and even 69.70% of the Garo families were located more than 10 kms from the Krishnai Police Station. It was only after the third day of conflict that the Meghalaya Government deployed army. If the Governments of Assam and Meghalaya could have taken immediate action to control the situation then many families of the two communities would have saved their properties, life and goodwill.

(iii) Spread of Rumour

As stated earlier, the Garo-Rabha conflict started with a minor incident. However, it took the shape of a massive violence destroying several lives and huge amount of property. It all happened due to spread of a rumour. In Meghalaya a rumour was spread that the Rabhas had killed 7 Garos in Mendipathar area. As a result, thousand of Garos from the entire Garo Hills came to Mendipathar area (Meghalaya) with sharp weapons to take vengeance on the Rabhas there.

Moreover, 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 spread that from the Mendipathar (East Garo Hills) relief camps the Rabhas retreated to Assam due to attacks by Garos. Rumour also 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 materials were not available in the Garo camps. This further infuriated the Garo people and the relief carrying trucks were attacked by Garos.

CONCLUSION

In brief, unlike other conflicts in Northeast India, the Garo-Rabha conflict involves the largest number of causes which were responsible for the Garo-Rabha conflict. Of these, one cause related to the frequent bandh calls by Rabhas was very crucial in the outbreak of the last conflict in 2010. And after the outbreak of the conflict two factors, i.e, spread of rumour and inactiveness of administration in Meghalaya and Assam added a fuel to the fire and thus the conflict took a violent shape.