

ETHNIC CONFLICT IN
DIMA HASAO DISTRICT

Chapter-IV

Ethnic Conflict in Dima Hasao District

In the previous chapter, mentioned has been made of diversities and the system of managing it through institutional arrangement of the sixth schedule, but in Dima Hasao district, the implementation of the Autonomous district Council under the sixth schedule has shaken, confronting to different problems such as ethnic conflict among the various ethnic communities. As such, Dima Hasao which once was a peaceful district has turned into inter-ethnic conflict zone among various ethnic groups inhabiting the district. This chapter provides the events that had forced the participants to desert their villages in Dima Hasao district of Assam. It has also provided an essential context to understand the magnitude of the persecution, suffering, and loss that are experienced and the influence these events had on their lives in resettlement.

Ethnic conflict in Dima Hasao district has gained a significant amount of attention among many, particularly media, social scientist and scholars over the years. This attention is perhaps understandable because of what appears to be an increasing trend of hostile interaction among ethnic groups, sometimes threatening the very political, social and economic foundation of the society. Ethnic conflict and violence in Dima Hasao district also represents the serious negative implications for political stability and national development which had been a major problem that has plagued the district, and spreading across the state. Often various tribes and ethnic groups have long standing histories of conflict amongst themselves that may perhaps explain these outbreaks of violence; however, far too often ethnic conflict has produce from politics and socio-economic biases, rather than simply cultural issues.

Identity and ethnicity are powerful drivers of conflict. An identity group can, in apprehension, question the historical or political process of their homeland with a federal state and asserts their identity to claim secession without making any reference to horizontal inequality. Identity may be constructed by the elite of a group for claiming measures of positive discrimination in a federal structure.

Ethnic consciousness of a group often encourages others to reconstruct their identities. Clan cleavages are also found to be a potential source of conflict.⁶⁰ A recent history of ethnic conflict, ethnic diversity and ethnic discrimination are other indicators that are most strongly associated with the outbreak of ethnic conflict. The politics of identity then results into inter-group conflicts which might lead to ethnic cleansing and violence. By and large, ethnic conflict is an outcome of a number of interrelated factors. It is thus very important to carefully and systematically study each of the factors of ethnic conflict and establish relationship among the attributes involved.

It is popularly assumed that minority groups within a state are more likely than dominant groups to be targeted for persecution for reasons of race or nationality. Therefore, states with higher levels of ethnic heterogeneity suffer from more refugee flows than more homogenous states.⁶¹ It may be mentioned that the mere existence of high levels of ethnic diversity within a state is not by itself a sufficient condition for the creation of conflict and refugees. Rather, the size of the ethnic group, how various ethnic groups within a state are distributed across its territory, and the political balancing

⁶⁰ Menkhaus, Kenneth. "Beyond the Conflict Trap in Somalia", in NeclaTschirgi, Michael S. Lund, and Francesco Mancini (eds) *Security and Development: Searching for Critical Connections*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2010, p.p 70-135.

⁶¹ Zolberg, Aristide, Astri Suhrke and Sergio Aguayo, "International Factors in the Formation of Refugee Movements," *International Migration Review*. Vol. 20, No. 2, Summer 1986, p.235.

by the state between ethnic groups, may better determine the presence of ethnic conflict and refugee movements.

4.1 Ethnic conflict: A recapitulation

In North East India, cultural incompetence and the problem of identity sharpened the ethnic boundaries and generated cleavages along ethnic self-importance, leading to inter-ethnic conflict. Reappearance of ethnic identity and persistence of ethnicised politics does not indicate denial of the political state but can result to ethnic violence.

An analysis of the current conceptual and theoretical debates over ethnicity and ethnic conflict shows that there exist competing views and wider gulfs among scholars in the field. Academics perceive ethnicity and ethnic conflict from different views. These approaches to the explanation of ethnicity and ethnic conflict are the primordialists, the instrumentalists and the constructivists" approaches.

The concern for variously perceived threats to their distinct ethnic identities and their anxiety for preservation of culture and language and their demand of autonomy cannot be seen as a healthy functioning of the society. Their aspirations can be seen rather as a basic requirement for distributive justice, to which no nation state can neglect.

The Indian path of institutional adjustments aimed at winning over and changing the opinion of hostile ethnic groups and extending special safeguards to Hill States have helped solve ethnic problems to a great extent and these needs to be sustained. Though the unrest in the region has a history of political causes, the regional conflicts is much related to multi-ethnicity. These

conflicts are social, political and economic conflicts between groups who identify themselves and others in ethnic terms. They are well-known as they tend to be unevenly confusing; as the different groups fought unconventionally using political and psychological means and methods; and these conflicts often develop into prolonged violence of slow destruction.

Besides, land issue; fight for supremacy and minority-majority issue have shaken the various groups in the Dima Hasao district leading to increase of ethnic conflicts. Vested interest and fight over diverse ethnic groups led to clash among themselves. Despite several successful peace initiatives, there has been widespread conflict with the growth of population and change in political condition that has erupted in the district.⁶²

4.2 Dima Hasao: A Historical Overview

The story of the Dima Hasao (old name: North Cachar Hills) District⁶³ presents a very magnificent history and all along the district has passed through variable levels of stress and strain until it acquired the existing socio-political identity. Long before the British occupation, Dima Hasao previously known as the North Cachar Hills district was very much a part of Dimasa Kingdom which extended to cover the whole of the Cachar District, the existing Karbi Anglong District, major part of Nagaon District and also several parts of Nagaland including Dimapur right up to the Nichu Guard on Dimapur-Kohima Road.⁶⁴

As a part of Kachari kingdom, the kingdom had stretched from Jamuna in the North to the foot-hills of Lushai Hills in the south &

⁶² Sources from the interviewed respondents in DimaHasao district.

⁶³ The name of the district Dima Hasao was well known as North Cachar Hills. The nomenclature of the district was changed in 2011.

⁶⁴ Thiek. H, *History of the Hmars in North East India, with special reference to Assam*, Bhabani, Guwahati, 2012, p. 150-151.

from the Kopili in the west to the Angami & Katcha Naga hills beyond the Dhansiri in the east. In those days the Dimasa Kings had established their capitals at several places like Dimapur (Nagaland), Maibang (N C Hills), Khaspur and at Haritakhar in Cachar District. Thereafter time rolled by and immediately after the assassination of last Dimasa King in the year 1830, under the provisions of Doctrine of Lapse on the 15th August, 1832 the Dimasa Kingdom had to be annexed to the British Empire.⁶⁵

Subsequently the area, which now belongs to the North Cachar Hills District, was made part of the newly created Naga Hills district as an administrative Unit with its headquarters located at Asalu. Soon after that North Cachar Hills was again taken away from Naga Hills and was attached to the District of Cachar, by naming it as one of its Sub Division. However in 1880 AD the Sub Divisional Headquarters was established at Gunjung. And then in 1895 AD the Sub Divisional Headquarters again had to be shifted to Haflong. From that time onwards it has remained as the Headquarters of North Cachar Hills.⁶⁶

As per the Government of India's Act 1935, the backward areas were reclassified as excluded and partially excluded areas. Ultimately the areas were classified into Part I: Excluded Areas, consisting of North East Frontier, Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur, Naga Hills and Lushai Hills district. Part II known as Partially excluded areas consisting of North Cachar Hills, Garo Hills, Khasi and British portion of Jaintia Hills district other than Shillong Municipality and Cantonment.⁶⁷ Nevertheless North Cachar Hills after its amalgamation with the District of Cachar, was administered as an Excluded Area, being a Sub Division of that

⁶⁵ibid.

⁶⁶ibid.

⁶⁷Hazarika Niru, *Ethnic Autonomy Question in N.E India, Search for an answer*, Spectrum Publication, 2005, p.5

District till 1947 when India attained its independence. Later on in 1951, North Cachar Hills remained as a Sub Division of the newly formed separate District of United Mikir and North Cachar Hills after it's annexation with Mikir Hills (presently Karbi Anglong District) as after commencement of the constitution of India, North Cachar Hills, under paragraph 20 of the sixth schedule to the constitution, ceased to be a part of Cachar district. North Cachar Hills along with Mikir Hills constituted a new civil district namely – United district of North Cachar & Mikir Hills with effect from 17th November, 1951.⁶⁸

In accordance with the provision of sixth schedule, two different councils were constituted, namely North Cachar Hills District Council & Mikir Hills District Council within the geographical boundary of the district. North Cachar Hills District Council was inaugurated on 19th April, 1952.⁶⁹ Under the provisions of the sixth schedule to the Constitution of India, this North Cachar Hills Autonomous District Council (N.C.H.A.C.) was mandated to administer this autonomous district with the proviso that it will have three wings of administration, viz., Legislature, Judiciary, and Executive. North Cachar Hills also remained as a Sub Division of the district till February 2, 1970 on which date it was upgraded into a full-flagged Civil District in Assam.⁷⁰

On 2nd February, 1970, the Government created an independent administrative district, viz., North Cachar Hills District with the geographical boundary of autonomous North Cachar Hills district council. Besides the subjects enshrined in the sixth schedule, the Government of Assam claims to have transferred almost all the departments along with the executive

⁶⁸ibid.

⁶⁹The Assam autonomous District (Constitution of District Council)Rules 1951(as amended)
Published by NCHADC, Haflong 2001.

⁷⁰ibid

power to the Council except General Administration, Police, Treasury, election and judiciary. The nomenclature of North Cachar Hills was changed on April 1, 2010 by Tarun Gogoi led coalition government of Assam renaming as Dima Hasao District and since then it has been known as Dima Hasao. The Dima Hasao District is an Autonomous District constituted under the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. According to 2011 census, the average literacy rate is 77.54%, with male literacy of 83.29 % and the female literacy is 71.33%, with the total number of villages in the whole of North Cachar Hills district being 605.⁷¹

The population of the district comprises of various tribes & races who maintain their own dialect, culture, customs & usages. Apart from various tribes, non-tribals also account for a sizable amount of the population. They are mostly government employees, traders, graziers living in urban & semi-urban area. Integration without consent, relative deficiency, cultural racial intolerance, majority-minority syndrome and other vicious conflict has sparked the region now for many decades.

The hill tribes of Assam inhabit the two hill districts of Assam viz. the North Cachar Hills (Dima Hasao) district and the Karbi Anglong district. Dima Hasao (old name: North Cachar Hills) district is situated at the southern end of Assam covering an area of 4,890 Sq.km. The main constituents of the hill tribes living in Dima Hasao(Old Name: North Cachar Hills)district are the Dimasa, the Zeme Naga, the Hmar, the Kuki, the Biate, the Karbi, the Khasi, the Hrangkhoh, the Vaiphei, the Khelma, and the Rongmei. Haflong is the district headquarters of Dima Hasao (old name:

⁷¹Census of Dima Hasao district, 2011.

North Cachar Hills) district which is at an altitude of 3900 feet from the sea level.⁷²

The North Cachar Hills district is situated at southern part of Assam & is bounded by Nagaland & Manipur state in the east, Cachar district of Assam in the south, Meghalaya state & the part of Karbi-Anglong district in the west & another part of Karbi-Anglong & Nagaon district in the north.⁷³ The total population census of Dima Hasao is shown in below.

Dima Hasao district has four revenue circles and five development blocks. The development blocks of the district are Haranagajao, Jatinga, Diyung Valley, Diyungbra and New Sangbar. There are 605 inhabited villages and 4 towns in the district.⁷⁴ Along with the establishment of district council in Dima Hasao district (old name: North Cachar Hills), the political consciousness started to develop rapidly among the tribal population of this part of the region. Political consciousness awakened them to think over their distinctive identity. The age old friendly relations of the ethnic groups in the district have started to fade away with the socio-economic and political changes that have taken place.

In 2011, Dima Hasao had population of 214,102 of which male and female were 110,802 and 103,300 respectively. In 2001 census, Dima Hasao had a population of 188,079 of which males were 99,822 and remaining 88,257 were females.

There was change of 13.84 percent in the population compared to population as per 2001. In the previous census of India 2001, Dima Hasao District recorded increase of 24.72 percent to its population compared to 1991.

⁷²Hand Book of N.C. Hills, Office of the Deputy Director of Economics and Statistics, N.C. Hills district. 2002, p.5

⁷³ibid

⁷⁴Census of Dima Hasao District, 2011.

The initial provisional data released by census India 2011, shows that density of Dima Hasao district for 2011 is 44 people per sq. km. In 2001, Dima Hasao district density was at 38 people per sq. km. Dima Hasao district administers 4,888 square kilometers of areas. Average literacy rate of Dima Hasao in 2011 were 77.54 compared to 67.62 of 2001. If things are looked out at gender wise, male and female literacy were 83.29 and 71.33 respectively. For 2001 census, same figures stood at 75.67 and 58.39 in Dima Hasao District. Total literate in Dima Hasao District were 140,873 of which male and female were 78,559 and 62,314 respectively. In 2001, Dima Hasao District had 1,371,897 in its district.⁷⁵

With regards to Sex Ratio in Dima Hasao, it stood at 932 per 1000 male compared to 2001 census figure of 884. In 2011 census, child sex ratio is 967 girls per 1000 boys compared to figure of 955 girls per 1000 boys of 2001 census data. In census enumeration, data regarding child under 0-6 age were also collected for all districts including Dima Hasao. There were total 32,414 children under age of 0-6 against 30,800 of 2001 census. Of total 32,414 male and female were 16,480 and 15,934 respectively. Child Sex Ratio as per census 2011 was 967 compared to 955 of census 2001. Children under 0-6 formed 15.14 percent of Dima Hasao District compared to 16.38 percent of 2001. There was net change of -1.24 percent in this compared to previous census of India. As of now, Government of India has not declared population of Hindu, Muslim, Sikhs, Christian, Buddhists and Jains in district of Dima Hasao, Assam. ⁷⁶

The Dimasa people comprised of 43% of the total population whereas non Dimasa tribes comprised other 57%. In this complex multi lingual, multi ethnic society each tribe is very much unique

⁷⁵ Dima Hasao district census, 2011

⁷⁶ ibid

and distinct from other. This distinctness many times created trouble for them when one tribe become majority and others become minority. The trouble started when each tribe tried to protect their identity in the process affecting process of socialization. The majority- minority issue, the issue of identity, strife for political power, land issue have let loose the peaceful atmosphere that the Dima Hasao district have once had. History of conflict between different ethnic communities has resulted in the continuation of the hostile relationship persistently and unless some effective measures which can change the negative attitude towards one another are addressed at some point, hostilities will continue.

Indeed if there is a history of conflict which had negative consequence, it would become very difficult, if not impossible, to change the type of relationship between different ethnic groups.

4.3 Causes of Ethnic Conflict in Dima Hasao district

Poor governance has been a major problem in the Dima Hasao district and is caught in an inhuman series of lack of economic development which results into ethnic violence. Under the circumstances of conflict, it is natural to find the people of the district sheltering in a sense of alienation from the mainstream and feel neglected.

The demographic changes and migrant encroachment, competition for resources, land alienation, lack of protective mechanisms, violation of traditional laws, histories of animosity, failure to provide security, changes in the power structure, vote bank politics, competition for political and government posts, unemployment, failure to address economic disparities, lack of public transparency and accountability, corruption, poor

governance, and lack of development has resulted in a violent outcome.

The explanations of ethnic diversity could partly be explained by the fact that respondents were referring to different cases of conflict. In addition, their grievances obviously covered a wide range of issues. Therefore it can be said that there is no single cause for ethnic conflict; it is rather the result of interaction of a number of factors. The prevalence of diverse ethnic groups in a particular region may not by itself lead to violent conflicts but the specific political and economic contexts tend to influence the nature of interactions among the groups. Nevertheless, there is an emerging trend of shaping similarities and patterns that may explain the causes of ethnic conflict.

Understanding the causes of ethnic conflicts will help in some way to explain who fights in ethnic conflicts and how. It is important to bear in mind that ethnic conflicts do not just exist or come into being. They are the product of deliberate choices of people to pursue certain goals with violent means. This is true for inter-ethnic conflict, as much as for the actors involved in ethnic conflicts that are external to the region in which the conflict emerges. Some factors responsible for the causes of ethnic conflict can be discussed as follows:

Historical Factors: One should also consider the fact that differences in traditions, values, and the possible fear of suppression can lead to ethnic strife. Ethnic conflict is the result of the quest for cultural or ethnic group autonomy by the minority groups who are suspicious of cultural assimilation or suppression by the dominant group. This means that a politically dominant group may impose its traditions, values and beliefs on others. Historical factors also matter and it can be a source of conflict.

History of an ethnic group created class divisions and give those in the allied group special privileges and influence that would not extend to other groups. This can further cause resentment among the ethnic groups, particularly when the favoured group belongs to a majority group. The conflict between the group occurs either because of the rage of the dominated group against the dominators in history who are currently minorities and may be weaker, or the fact that the former dominant group owns the best of the communities' resources as compared to the majority because of their past political power and opportunity.

Conflicts can be initiated by the past history of conflicts between particular groups. Such history of the past may make it difficult to put together different ethnic groups successfully because of their past experiences. History of conflict between different people can easily result in the continuation of the hostile relationship persistently unless some effective measures which can change the negative attitude towards one another are addressed at some point. Indeed if there is a history of conflict which had negative effect or which has left a big scar upon the other group, it would become very difficult, if not impossible, to change the type of relationship between such groups.

Political Factors: It is believed by many that political power can be considered as a vital factor for generating ethnic conflict. The struggle for political power is the most important cause of ethnic conflicts. The sources of conflict in the district are the results of the interplay among many factors such as unequal distribution of political power under the special provisions for self-governance and autonomy which are provided for people within the Constitution of India, particularly through such Acts as the Sixth Schedule.

Although political power is fundamental, it alone cannot explain the root causes of ethnic conflict. Political exclusion if combined with discriminatory economic policies and exploitation often produce ethnic tension. Regardless of the form it may take, the real cause of ethnic clash in the district is the desire to secure access to land and political power in the region concerned. Conflicts can breed another conflict, particularly if groups have history of conflict or that they have experienced conflict among each other, it has an impact upon the current relations.

A settlement in one district that satisfies one group also alienates some communities in another part of the same district. There are special laws, constitutional provisions such as the Sixth Schedule and Article 371A, which seek to protect the traditions, lands and rights of various hill communities but as the practice of the system on the ground differs from what was perceived to bring regulations, eruptions of ethnic-conflicts became an obvious phenomenon.

It is clearly evident that the District Autonomous Councils are constrained in their ability to create opportunities for economic and social growth within their territorial jurisdiction and are thereby, unable to function appropriately. Thus, granting of territorial autonomy appears impracticable to address the region's innumerable ethnic aspirations. Some factors such as a desire for self-expression, perceived discrimination and injustice, aspirations of small time politicians, better economic development by any majority groups also results into conflicts. The majority communities do not recognize even the legitimate needs and aspirations of the weaker ethnic groups and as such intolerance and unresponsiveness lead to the growth of a feeling of discrimination and alienation on the part of the minority group.

The smaller groups get lost in the process of forced assimilation in the name of accommodation and integration thus giving rise to the desire for self-expression and an identity separating them from the dominant groups. Along with such factors of ethnic identity formation, a crisis is created by politicisation. The very crisis arising out of cultural, economic and linguistic deprivation grows and develops into a conflict through political interference. Interaction of institutional and political factors with ethnic emotions leads to ethnic competition, ethnic intolerance and ethnic conflict.

Fear of losing identity by the marginalised communities and the want of autonomy also results into misinformation, mismanagement and alienation thereby causing ethnic conflict. The main factors for ethnic conflict are the fights for their rights and as a self-protection against the atrocities made by the majority ethnic groups towards the minority ethnic groups. Minority consciousness, feelings of in-group – out-group, perceived marginalisation have been causing ethnic unrest in the long history of this region. Though the unrest in the district has a history of political causes it is much related to multi ethnicity and the core issues are about gaining more power, land and other resources.

Ethnic conflict also occurs because of a variety of reasons. Those who indulge in them justify them as struggles for justice. Most ordinary people want to live in peace but are often dragged against their will to rise into conflict for their own protection. Those affected by ethnic conflict tend to see violence as a law and order issue though most conflicts go beyond it. When a problem is not solved for a long time, it can become a vested interest of those who benefit from it and as such popular resentment can result in a conflict.

Apart from the above mentioned factors there are a number of structural factors which are responsible for the increases of ethnic violence. Feelings of relative deprivation intensify not only when benefits including political, religious and language rights as well as economic wellbeing decline, but also when expectations increase. But the best part of Dima Hasao district is that religion and language has never resulted into a violent conflict.

When large numbers of an ethnic groups experience relative deprivation simultaneously, it results into violence. Historical legacies of mistrust make it more likely that the feelings of deprivation results from the unrealized expectation which are interpreted as an ethnically motivated injustice. If contribution is given to deprivation a more equitable social order can be re-established.

Among the district of Assam, when it comes to inter ethnic conflicts, Dima Hasao district is the worst affected district as it has also started witnessing ethnic violence in lower intensity which could be worst if not addressed by the authorities in time.

Economic Factors: Apart from the above mentioned political factor, economic factor also inevitably produces social tensions, even in ethnically homogeneous societies under the most favourable circumstances. Development and urbanization cause tremendous socio-economic disorder. External problems are caused by changes in the economic and political environment that adversely impact a developing region but are not accessible to control by its political leaders.

Economic development strategies must acknowledge the reality of ethnic diversity and the economically disruptive causes of violent ethnic conflict. Economic insecurity leads to ethnic conflict where political power holders discriminate the marginalized ethnic

groups. While some ethnic conflicts may have clear ethnic or cultural dimensions, the core issues are about gaining more power, land and other resources which is well defined as an economic base of conflict.

Ethnic conflict has become a shorthand way to discuss almost all violent confrontation between communities living in the Dima Hasao district of Assam. But such an uncritical view misrepresents the reality of the shared past of these communities, which evolves cooperative and sustainable community living strategies, and invoke up images of ancient tribal hatreds.

In the context of the hill tribes, ethnic conflict usually manifests itself more in terms of its socio- economic and political deprivation rather than cultural or religious and racial discrimination. Political and economic issues play an important role in determining ethnic tensions and conflicts resulting in the repression of demand, or resolution of the problem.

Since the partition of India so many people have been killed and uprooted as a result of ethnic or communal violence and till today Assam has seen ethnic conflict time and again. In a multi-ethnic society like Dima Hasao inequality among identity groups is a driving force of conflict and such inequalities may arise due to unequal access to political, economic or social opportunities. A sense of relative deprivation among the minorities exists and as such the minorities suffered from perceived discrimination which in turn leads to inter ethnic conflict.

Ethnic groups often compete with each other for a share of jobs and other privileges like government contracts, trade license, supply orders and other benefits and this competition for privileges leads to hatred resulting in ethnic conflict. Violent communal and ethnic clashes have become a part of the Dima Hasao syndrome.

Such clashes have taken place so regularly and frequently during last few years that it hardly surprises anybody now.

Dima Hasao district has witnessed three major ethnic conflict in the region in which scores of innocent lives were lost. More than hundred persons were killed in ethnic clash between Karbis and Dimasas during 2005 in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts (now Dima Hasao) of Assam. 40 Jeme Nagas and 26 Dimasas lost their lives in the ethnic clashes around Haflong during March to July 2009 between the Dimasa-Naga conflicts; it is reported that 500 houses were burnt during the Dimasa-Naga conflict. The worst consequences can be analysed from the Hmar-Dimasa conflict which took place in 2003 where hundreds of innocents have lost their lives.⁷⁷

Dima Hasao district like any other district of Assam has faced ethnic conflicts since time immemorial and has become a kind of untold problems. Conflicts between inter- ethnic tribes in Dima Hasao resulted in many alleged cases of human rights violation. Three major ethnic conflicts: Dimasa-Hmar conflict (2003), Dimasa-Karbi conflict (2005) and Dimasa-Zeme Naga conflict (2009) respectively are seen in Dima Hasao (old name: N.C.Hills) district of Assam.⁷⁸

Apart from the Hmar Dimasa conflict in 2003, yet another conflict between the Dimasa –Karbi and Dimasa –Jeme Naga was witnessed. The 2005 Dimasa Karbi conflict is the result of the ideological conflict between the Dimasa nad Karbi Militant group. The Dima Haram Daoga (DHD) the Dimasa group and the United Democratic People’s Solidarity (UDPS) both engaged to outnumber other. Actually, the clash between the Karbi and Dimas is not a

⁷⁷This data is based on field work and interview with the ethnic groups involved in the conflict of Dima Hasao district.

⁷⁸ibid

new one. The cold war and the tension between the karbi and dimasa were always there but the bitter turf war started only when the militants came into limelight. The original clash was not happened in Dima Hasao District but the actual scene of war was in Karbi Anglong. The ethnic violence in the district was triggered on 26th September when three Dimasa auto-rickshaw drivers were hacked to death by unidentified persons at Tissom village in the Diphu police station area. Diphu is the headquarters of Karbi Anglong, a district dominated by the Karbi tribe. In retaliation, five members of a Karbi family were hacked to death at Hemari Terang village on 2nd October, 2005, followed by killing of another three Karbis at Upper Dikrong two days later under the same police station. On 8th October, 2005, at Borsingbe village six Dimasas were killed in retaliation to which eight Karbis were killed the next day at Langsoliet village.⁷⁹

Then five more Dimasas were killed at Kheroni village the day after. On 12th October, 2005, a Dimasa woman was hacked to death. Four bodies were recovered on 16th October, 2005, from Karbi villages Hojaipur, Bokolia, Jamunapar and Sing Teron area where five people were also reported missing. On 17th October, 2005, 36 Karbi villagers were killed in three separate attacks. The victims included 22 bus passengers who were hacked to death by DHD rebels. The very next day, at least seven more Karbi tribal were massacred by militants. These attacks took place in Doyangmukh village of Karbi Anglong district. The rebels set ablaze at least 50 homes before leaving the village. The death toll in current spell of ethnic violence neared 90 when nine Karbi militants were killed on 21st October by the rival Dimasa tribe, in Tamulbari in Upper Assam. According to the police, a group of

⁷⁹ Kumar, Anand (2005), Assam: Ethnic Clashes Threaten Prospect Of Peace, paper no.1595, South Asia Analysis Group, New Delhi ,p.2.

Karbi extremists after torching 12 houses at Kakubasti and seven at Kisiri Bongaon villages in interior areas of a reserve forest headed for Tamulbari. Dimasa guerillas ambushed them as they were about to enter Tamulbari and shot dead nine of them.⁸⁰

The bloodshed between the Dimasas, the major tribe and the Jeme Nagas, the largest minority tribe in the area started from March 2009. The inter-ethnic violence between the two tribes has resulted in 63 deaths (39 Nagas and 24 Dimasas). 528 houses have been burnt of which 228 belonged to Nagas and 300 houses of the Dimasas.⁸¹ Resurgence of ethnic identity, economic underdevelopment, trying to outcast other groups, politicization of ethnic identity and illiteracy injected ethnic clashes. Many times even those people who become victim of this clashes never got the idea why they become victim at the first place and never even got the due they are worthy of. The tribal democracy in that time played a very important role of protecting their tribes as well as sending the message to others that don't become violent, makes peace with all, that peace is the only solution.

The three conflicts has taken many innocent lives, displaced hundreds of families and threatened the prospect of the democratic and citizenship rights of the different ethnic tribes. Inequality between identity groups confining to ethnic, caste or religion is another powerful driver of conflict. Of late minor ethnic clashes are often seen thereby depicting the unstable conditions of the various ethnic groups of Dima Hasao district of Assam.

Ethnic conflicts are often based on non-negotiable qualities and values and therefore tend to be of a longer duration than other conflict, as the tension between parties is likely to be deeply well-

⁸⁰ *ibid*

⁸¹ Goswami, Namrata (2009), *Outlook*, 14th August, 2009.

established creating the conditions for long-drawn-out conflicts. It is very important to cautiously and systematically study each of the factors of ethnic conflict as it results into many unpleasant outcomes.

The research is mainly concerned with the conflict faced by the Hmars of Dima Hasao district with the Dimasas in 2003 which let loose their age old bonhomie. Ethnic demographic imbalance, high growth rate of population, and territorial problems has reflected the difference of the two ethnic groups in their economic aspiration and achievement and this has let loose the socio economic and political life of the people.

4.4 The Hmars: A Brief Historical Overview

The Hmars historically, are a group of hill tribes in North East India and Myanmar (then Burma), living in the states of Manipur, Assam, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya and Upper Burma. On the origin and meaning of the term 'Hmar' there are two theories, whereby the first theory suggests that the term might have originated from the word 'Hmar' which means 'North'. The second theory opines that the term was originally derived from 'Hmarh' or 'Tukbemsawm' which means "tying of one's hair in a knot on the nape of one's head" Whatever be the truth, it is true that the term 'Hmar' as a common nomenclature gained popularity and wider acceptance among the Hmar ethnic group living in different parts of North-East India only with the dawn of political consciousness by the beginning of the 20th century.⁸²

In the past the Hmars called themselves as "Manmasi Lanu" which means children or offspring of Manmasi. It was believed that

⁸²Lal Dena, *In Search of Identity: Hmars of North-East India*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, India, 2008, p. p 5- 8.

Manmasi which means man or human being was their progenitor. Manmasi is also believed to be a special and unique creature or a being capable of making his own needs available.⁸³

The term 'Hmar' in ordinary sense means 'North' or 'Northerners', and if it came to be used to identify a group of people living in the northern part of Lushai Hills then they were called as Hmars in the later part of the 18th century or from the early days of the 19th century. In course of time, the term Hmar came to be used more popularly among themselves and by other neighbouring tribes to distinguish them from the Lushais, the Raltes and other Lushai-Kuki-Chin groups of the Tibeto Burmans.⁸⁴

The Hmars trace their origin to Sinlung. Numerous poems, songs and tales about this place has been made and handed down from generation to generation. However, the exact location of Sinlung is still open to debate. Several theories and views regarding the origin and location has been forwarded, some of which are (a) Sinlung must be somewhere in South West China, possibly in the present Tailing or Silung of Yunan Province of today's China. b) It might have been Silung in central China. c) It might have been derived from the Chin Dynasty of 221-207 B.C.d) It might have been a derivative of the Chinese king Chieulungwho ruled during 1711 A.D (e) It might have been a cave, and because it was sealed with a huge stone, it was called Sin (seal, close) Lung (stone/ rock) (f)Sinlung was located at Retzawl village in North Cachar Hills of Assam and was named after the rock fortress. g) Sinlung was located at Aopatong in the border of Burma and China. The town was named after the chief Silung during the erection of the Great

⁸³Thiek. H, *History of the Hmars in North East India: with special reference to Assam*, Bhabani printers, Guwahati, 2013, p .p. 1-2.

⁸⁴ibid p.p.67

Wall of China. h) It might be the present Sinlung, located near the Yulung River in Szechuan Province of China.⁸⁵

Although historians differ on the issue of the location of Sinlung and the origin of the name, the fact that they were in Sinlung, however, still remains. Sinlung was said to be a city-state where a form of democracy was in existence. While in Sinlung, it was possible that they fought many a war with their neighbouring tribes. The Hmars eventually left Sinlung. Theories about why the Hmars left Sinlung was in search of greener pastures, while another ascribes it to the oppressive rule of the Chinese rulers and the Hmars' inability to repulse their enemies in Sinlung.⁸⁶

The Hmars have entered the district of Dima Hasao (old name: North Cachar Hills) from the middle part of the 18th century as recorded by the Britishers. Many Hmar villages were established in North Cachar Hills (Dima Hasao) from 1953 to 2003.⁸⁷

The government of India's revision of tribal list in 1956 declared the Hmars as one of the Scheduled Tribes of India vide notification Order S.R.O. 24774, Gazette of India Part II, Section No 316-A on 29th of October 1956. After the recognition of the Hmars as Hill tribes it has also granted recognition of the Hmar language as a medium of instruction in the schools.⁸⁸

4.5 Genesis of the Hmar - Dimasa Ethnic Conflict

Dima Hasao district which was formerly known as North Cachar Hills was created in 1886 and all the different ethnic communities have co-existed and lived peacefully for centuries. The Hmars and

⁸⁵Hmar. Darliensung, *The Hmars*, L& R printing Press, Imphal, 1988, p.6

⁸⁶ibid

⁸⁷Sources derived from field works and data collection. See table 2 for the Hmar villages established from 1953 to 2003.

⁸⁸Thiek. H, *History of the Hmars in North East India: with special reference to Assam*, Bhabani printers, Guwahati, 2013, p.p. 166.

the Dimasas in particular have been living as good neighbours and their relation have been marked by cordial and close social interactions for many years. There have been many instances of inter marriage and there were no records of conflict between these two tribes for more than a century. Several contentions have remained a matter a concern for the root cause of ethnic conflict.

The Hmars have claimed to have a number of grievances be it political, social and economical and these are all said to be the result of long neglect of the tribe by the central government in spite of their repeated demands for various development. These grievances according to the respondents are also considered to be the outcome of ethnic conflict among the Hmars and the Dimasas, but it cannot be wholly considered as the main factors of conflict.

But mentioned can be made of the factors such as issue of land, supremacy and political power to be the main causes of ethnic conflict among the two tribes. Political awakening has also resulted in political upheavals and identity crisis among the hill tribes as well. The new political concept began to disturb the age old peaceful co-existence and communal harmony resulting in mutual distrust and disharmony.

The violence and incidents in Dima Hasao district, the brutal killings of the innocents and ruthless torching of villages not only has not only taken away many innocent lives but also have rendered people homeless, at a very highly deplorable act.

Dima Hasao district like any other district of Assam has faced ethnic conflicts since time immemorial and has become a kind of untold problems. Conflicts between inter- ethnic tribes in Dima Hasao resulted in many alleged cases of human rights violation. It has taken many innocent lives, displaced hundreds of families and

threatened the prospect of the democratic and citizenship rights of the different ethnic tribes.

The Dima Hasao district or the erstwhile North Cachar Hill District was once upon a time a very peaceful area. Surrounded by beautiful Barail range Dima Hasao is the only hill station that Assam got. The tribes here live very peacefully in their own areas like in Harangjao, Tlansang, Songpijang, Hatikhali, LodhiBasti, Upper Bagetar, Simtuiluong, MahadevTilla, Ditokcherra, some part of Mahur, Maibong, Manderdisa, Retzawl, Dehangi, Dibarai, Langting, Diyungbra, Sontilla, Jatinga, Umrangsu, Songbar Area, Fiangpui, Muolhoi, etc.⁸⁹ For many years the tribes in this district of Assam was living a very peaceful life. Of late minor ethnic clashes are often seen which depicts the instable conditions of the various ethnic groups of Dima Hasao district of Assam.

Apart from the above mentioned factors, some other factors are also considered to be responsible for ethnic conflict such as the majority-minority issues; whereby the minorities are discriminated and oppressed by the majorities. Demand for land rights and territorial council is also the other factor responsible for ethnic conflict in Dima Hasao district. Unequal distribution of power through unequal political representation is also considered as the factors leading to ethnic conflict.

North Cachar Hills District Council which was later renamed Dima Hasao Autonomous Council was inaugurated on 19th April, 1952 under the provisions of the sixth schedule to the Constitution of India. This North Cachar Hills Autonomous District Council (N.C.H.A.C.) was mandated to administer this autonomous district with the proviso that it will have three wings of administration, viz.,

⁸⁹Some of the names of villages of Dima Hasao district of Assam. Many ethnic groups reside in these villages for many years. But some of the villages are not inhabited anymore because of the Hmar-Dimasa conflict of 2003.

Legislature, Judiciary, and Executive and will remained as a Sub Division of the district till February 2, 1970 on which date it was upgraded into a full-flagged Civil District in Assam.⁹⁰ Since its inception in 1952, an agreement was made that there should be equal numbers of members in the Autonomous Council representing the majority group that is the Dimasas and the Non Dimasas.

Under this provision, six members from the Dimasa community and six others from the Non Dimasa were elected in the first Autonomous Council election held. But delimitations of seats and powers have started deteriorating along with the growth of the population of the majorities. Changes took place in the next Autonomous election where the seats for the majority community was increased from six to fifteen whereas the seats for the non Dimasa basically the seats of the minorities was increased from six to eight⁹¹. From this unequal allocation of seats in the autonomous council the unjustified delimitation of seats is clearly seen thereby creating the issue of minority- majority syndrome which is the major factor for ethnic conflict.⁹² But unexpectedly, this issue of marginalisation has not resulted into any violent incidents.

The main factor responsible for the outbreak of the Hmar Dimasa conflict in 2003 was the abduction of three Dima Halim Daogah (DHD) cadres, namely Azir Dimasa, Samal Dimasa and Sri P Kapla by the NSCN(IM) on February 26, 2003 from Purana Zoar, a Hrangkhoh village on Cachar border. The DHD mistakenly believed that the kidnapping was the handiwork of the Hmar

⁹⁰Hand Book of N.C. Hills, Office of the Deputy Director of Economics and Statistics. N.C. Hills district.2002,p.5.

⁹¹Keivom L.H, Hrangchal N.C, "History of the Hmars: Problems of Maintenance of Peace" in DuttaAnuradha, BhuyanRatna, (ed) *Genesis of ethnic Conflict and Peace understanding North East India views and reviews, Peace Studies, Vol. 1*, OKSID and Akansha Publishing, New Delhi, 2007, p.203.

⁹²Thiek H, *History of the Hmars in North East India: with special reference to Assam*, Bhabani, Guwahati,2013,p.257

People's Convention- Democratic (HPC-D).In revenge the DHD in full military uniform attacked Purana Hnachangzawl and Purana Zoar village on the 2nd of March, 2003. Prior to 1961 census the Dimasa were regarded as the Kachari sub tribe living in and around North Cachar Hills.⁹³ In the year 1972 they set up 'Dimasa Jalaironi Hosoma' (DJH). In the year 1979 the Dimasa National Organization (DNO) was born and their main demand at that time was preservation of ancient monuments and relics⁹⁴.

The Hmar people's convention which was engaging in violent conflict with Mizoram government for their identity up till 1994 when they surrendered started to slowly influence the Hmar people of this particularly peaceful area. But up to year 2000 these people were not engaging with any ethnic clash with each other. There were various insurgents groups emerged after 1990's but they were basically revolved around their community. ⁹⁵The Dima Hasao district is economically very poor district and people here are mainly dependent on agricultural cultivation. The aspiration to create a state which will include Dimasa majority area of the Dima Hasao district, Karbi Anglong and parts of the Nowgaon perceived as a threat by the non Dimasa tribes. The violent events started during 1990s when DHD formed and demanded Dimaraji. In the meantime Hmar People's Convention Democracy, an outfit loosely inspired on Hmar People's Convention of early Mizoram, started reorganizing Hmar Community People and tried to form an autonomous district. Slowly the communal feeling started to grow up leading to three violent clashes in Dima Hasao District among the Hmars and the Dimasa in 2003.⁹⁶

⁹³ibid p.257

⁹⁴Das, N.K, "Regionalism and Ethnicity in North East India", *Anthropological Survey of India*, 2001, p.p1-16.

⁹⁵Sources from field notes

⁹⁶Panel moots implementation of ceasefire rules with DHD Source: *The Telegraph*, Guwahati, January 12,2003.

According to Justice P.C. Phukan 'Commission on Enquiry' the Hmar Dimasa clash happens because of the kidnapping of the three DHD Boys. Then the massacre of 28 Dimasas in one single night on April 1, 2003, at Chakarcham and Meghnathal in Cachar district, the worst incident, turned the conflict between the two communities into full-blown communal clashes. Over 50 people lost their lives in the Hmar Dimasa conflict whereas more than hundreds of houses were burnt down during the clash. On March 3, Dimasa militants, said to be cadres of the DHD - a group that had entered into a ceasefire with the Government struck back by kidnapping three Hmar farmers. Two days later, on March 5, armed Dimasas attacked two Hmar villages in North Cachar Hills district forcing nearly 800 Hmars to desert their homes and flee to Lakhipur, on the Assam-Mizoram border. Again on March 26, Dimasa rebels launched a fresh attack on some Hmar villages in the area, and ordered the Hmar people to leave North Cachar Hills or face dire consequences.⁹⁷

These attacks and counter-attacks culminated in the latest massacre has worsened relations between the two ethnic groups of the Hmars and the Dimasas that are concentrated in the Southern Assam districts of North Cachar Hills and Cachar on the border with Manipur and Mizoram. The 1991 Census put the total population of Dimasas in Assam at 65,104, and the Hmars at 11,189. The immediate provocations aside, the latest string of attacks is seen as a battle for territorial supremacy.⁹⁸

The worst carnage took place in April when about 23 Dimasas were brutally killed by Hmar militants. Since then, each has been routinely killing members of the other and burning down villages. This has not only spread terror in and around the Cachar district,

⁹⁷ibid

⁹⁸Hussain, Wasbir, "Manipur: Caught In a Homeland War", *South Asia Intelligence Review (SAIR)*, Vol. 2, no.13, October 2003.

but resulted in thousands of Dimasas and Hmars being displaced from their gutted down villages, to take shelter in about 25 relief centres. The area has been intermittently under curfew, and this had led to a severe scarcity of essential food items because of the disruption in supplies and the people's inability to go to or set up the market in the midst of all the violence.⁹⁹

Less than a week after leaders of the Dimasa and Hmar tribes signed a peace treaty, Assam's North Cachar Hills district erupted in a fresh wave of violence that left two Dimasa youths dead and reduced clusters of huts to ashes.¹⁰⁰ When ethnic groups find themselves victimized or threatened by other groups, their identification in terms of their ethnicity becomes particularly important and in the absence of an intervention, violent ethnic conflict is the final outcome. Neither ethnicity nor ethno centrism in itself causes ethnic conflict. Rather, the problems in ethnic conflicts are extremely diverse, ranging from legitimate political, social, cultural, and economic grievances of disadvantaged ethnic groups to name but a few.

As organized ethnic groups confront minorities and majorities alike, the extent of ethnicity becomes a common factor to organize conflict for the struggle over resources, land, or power. Therefore ethnicity does not comply with the state political separation and the territorial lines.

When violence breaks out in an area it affects the whole region and thus gives a tough time for a specific areas to deal with the situation. Ethnic conflicts are likely to occur, but understanding their causes, consequences, and dynamics can provide us to deal with them so that further prevention can be maintained.

⁹⁹*The Telegraph*, Assam, 20 June 2003

¹⁰⁰*The Telegraph*, Assam, 18 June 2003.

4.6 Efforts to Resolve the Hmar - Dimasa Conflict

Conflict resolution is a long term solution to ethnic conflict which requires at least an adequate just and effective redressing of the root causes of ethnic conflict that are often found embedded with the internal socio cultural, economic, political and security situation of the region. It also involves in the varying degree of long term intra and inter-community reconciliation of socio economic reconstruction and reform, peace building and peace consolidation strategies.

The Hmar Dimasa ethnic conflict has let loose reigns of terror and various peace meetings were convened by the district administration in the district. Peace meetings were formed by the Church bodies, Para Church Bodies, Womenbodies, Apex bodies and representative from the Hmar and Dimasa bodies and Non-Governmental Organisation.

But much was not achieved through talks and meet and therefore the Government of Assam has sent the Inquiry Commission under Justice P.C Phukan, vide Notification No. PLA 261/2003/2 dated Dispur June 30, 2003 to enquire into the ethnic clashes between Hmars and Dimasas in North Cachar Hills and Cachar Districts. The Commission submitted its report on July 12, 2005.¹⁰¹The terms of reference of the Commission were to ascertain the root causes leading to the clashes between the Hmars and the Dimasas, to ascertain whether there was any involvement of third party in the ethnic clashes, to ascertain actions taken by the law and order authorities of NC Hills and Cachar Districts and to give appropriate recommendations for ensuring harmony and peace between Hmars and Dimasa in North Cachar Hills and Cachar

¹⁰¹Panel Moots implementation of the ceasefire rules with DHD, *The Telegraph*, Guwahati, Jan 12, 2005.

districts among others. Based on the facts, the Commission has provided a number of conclusions as follows:

1. The district administration of both N C Hills and Cachar districts should remain in a state of alertness and be prepared with a detailed action plan for the maintenance of law and order in order to meet any eventuality.
2. Top priority should be given to improve connectivity to the interior villages through rails, roads and telecommunication to enable security forces to take prompt and effective action.
3. Establishment of new police stations and border outposts along the inter-state borders, implementation of ground rules framed under the ceasefire agreement between the government and DHD and addressing of demands for autonomous State/ separate administrative unit through political means by initiating political dialogue.
4. The State Government has accepted the report of the Commission and is reviewing the security station in NC Hills districts in connection with two mega projects on regular basis.¹⁰²

Although peace was restored in the district momentarily, long term peace policies has not existed as ethnic violence broke out between the Karbis and the Dimasa in 2005, and again between the Dimasas and the Jeme Nagas in 2009. No concrete proposal or long term peace policy has been recommended so far.

¹⁰²Justice P.C. Phukan Commission, Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Ethnic Clashes between the Hmars and the Dimasas in North Cachar Hills and Cachar Districts of Assam in the Year 2003, Guwahati, Justice P.C. Phukan Commission, 2005.

As such, no ethnic violence has taken place after the Dimasa and Jeme Naga conflict in 2009, but the demand of bifurcation by the Non Dimasa community uplifted by political aspiration has let loose the socio political condition of the district. A thorough and comprehensive analysis of the causes and consequences of the conflict are necessary to inform conflict resolution activities to further maintain endurable peace process. Hereafter the consequences of ethnic conflict will be studied in the next chapter so that further preventive measures can be adopted.