

Assam in turmoil

* Nipon Saikia

It has been a common practice of Bangladeshi Muslims in Assam to float organizations in autonomous councils in the garb of protecting the rights of non-tribal populace within the council areas.



The fire that burnt many villages in the BTAD (Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District) area of Assam only a few months ago had not even lost its flame that another area started burning. This time it is the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) which comprises of western part of Kamrup (Rural) and the eastern part of Goalpara districts of Assam bordering East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. The issue now is holding of panchayat polls in the RHAC. The last phase of the three-phase panchayat polls was to be held on 12th February, 2013 in the Rabha Hasong area which was vehemently protested by Rabha Hasong Joint Action Committee (RHJAC), an umbrella body of 34 organizations. It was clear from the beginning that if the Congress government of Assam led by chief minister Mr. Tarun Gogoi went ahead with holding the polls, the situation might become volatile.

The Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) was constituted on 10th March in 1995 with its headquarters at Dudhnoi town. The jurisdiction of this council extends up to Rani revenue circle of Kamrup (rural) and covers almost entire Goalpara. While the Bodos were given actual autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution with the signing of the new Bodo Accord in 2000, Rabha-Hasong autonomy is still not guaranteed by the Sixth Schedule. The Rabhas have been protesting mainly over two issues over the years - poll to the RHAC has not been held since its formation in 1995 and there is no demarcation of the council area. Recently, the simmering tension erupted into an inferno when the state government announced panchayat polls in the state. The Rabhas refused to allow the polls to be held in the three zilla parishads of Kamrup district and eight zilla parishads of Goalpara, saying these areas fall within the autonomous council area. The Rabhas' point of contention is that the memorandum contained a provision in Section 5, which stipulates that the provisions of Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 and Assam Municipal Act, 1994 shall not be applicable to villages included under the RHAC. The argument for this provision was that if two local governing bodies co-exist it may lead to a power tussle. But the revised Panchayat Act of 1992 included in the 79th amendment of the constitution and adopted in 1994 made it mandatory for all states to hold panchayat polls. This has become the main argument in the arsenal of the government of Assam. But then the memorandum of the government with the Rabha Hasong Council was signed only in 1995, a year after the amendment to the constitution was adopted.

Then why the government is so keen on holding the polls when the situation is so sensitive? Before the polls, most of the candidates of political parties other than Congress withdrew their nomination. Of the remaining candidates in the field, only 20% were independent and 80% were Congress candidates. Because of the angry protests, there was not a single candidate in 240 polling stations. No candidate filed nomination against 227 panchayat ward member seats. 8 village panchayats were totally without any candidate. Even 5 anchalik panchayat were without a single candidate.

Blaming the state government for violence in the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) areas of Assam, opposition Asom Gana Parishad today said the situation had escalated due to "high-handedness" of the ruling Congress party. "The opposition parties, including the AGP, had asked the state government to hold talks and reach an understanding with the Rabha Hasong Joint Action Committee (RHJAC) before going for the panchayat polls in the RHAC areas," AGP president and former chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta said here. "However, the government did not heed to the suggestions made by the opposition and went ahead with the announcement of the polls. This has led to current conflagration," he added.

This led to the speculation that Tarun Gogoi led Congress government wants a repetition of the election of 1983, the infamous Assembly elections during the Assam agitation when over 1300 people were killed in communal and ethnic violence. "This is a conspiracy of the Congress party. They wanted to win the seats in the Rabha Hasong areas and so went ahead with the panchayat polls, despite being aware that the Rabha community people are opposed to the elections," Mahanta said.

In the run up to the polls on 11 February, the Rabha Hasong areas already looked like a battlefield. The RHJAC declared a people's curfew. Many places of the Rabha Hasong area witnessed isolated incidents of violence. People opposing the polls charred several schools, panchayat offices, bridges, market houses, residential houses and vehicles. Late night, miscreants set fire to a truck loaded with cements. Consequently the truck was totally charred along with its load. On the other hand, more than 500 people blocked NH 37 at Hadlapara under Agia police station in the afternoon. When police arrived at the scene, the crowd started pelting stones at them. The police resorted to blank fire and succeeded in clearing the highway.

On the night of 10 February, at around 7-30 pm 5 houses were burnt at Singra market under Boku police station in Kamrup (rural) district when some anti-poll people set fire to the market. Lilaram Bodo, a congress candidate of ward no. 7 of 10th south gaon panchayat in Boku constituency was declared elected without contest. Anti-poll factions put his house on fire using petrol on the night of 10 February.

Sl.	Name	Sex	Village	Age
1	Amiya Rabha	F	Okhaibari	45
2	Dharani Rabha	M	Gohainburi	50
3	Amrit Rabha	M	Kathalguri	52
4	Kamini Rabha	F	Ghilamara (Amtali)	55
5	Bichitra Rabha	F	"	50
6	Patan Rabha	M	"	18
7	Panchami Rabha	F	Kachadol	45
8	Prabin Rabha	M	Pitandara	40
9	Binoy Rabha	M	Letekubari	16
10	Prafulla Rabha	M	Bekipool	
11	Aloka Rabha	F	"	46
12	Jare Rabha	F	"	
13	Nikon Rabha	M	Siluk	

The army staged flag march at several places in Goalpara district that fell within Rabha Hasong council. It looked as though it was a battlefield and not a panchayat poll in Rabha Hasong areas. Election officials had to be stationed at district headquarters even a few hours prior to the polls.

The government and the election commission aggravated the situation by making provocative statements. When asked about the deteriorating situation arising as result of anti-poll movements, the state election commissioner Sri Biren Dutta categorically said, "Election will be held." He further added that stern actions will be taken against those opposing the polls and resorting to violence preventing the government exercise its constitutional right to hold the panchayat polls. Sources of the election commission revealed that additional 80 companies of para-military forces would be deployed to ensure security and law-and-order in the Rabha Hasong area. Home secretary G. D. Tripathy also commented similarly. Finding themselves at a cross with the government, the anti-poll groups went out all the way to prevent poll officials from arriving at the polling booths by digging burrows and putting logs on the roads and burning bridges or otherwise making them unusable. In the remote areas of Jira, Khardang, Bardamal in Goalpara district bordering Meghalaya, crowds were seen wielding machetes, spears, batons etc. even during the day. It is worth mentioning that out of 825 schools where polling booths were set up, 23 had already been burnt down during day. Even the administration expressed helplessness in sending the polling officers to their booths for fear of head-on confrontation with the crowd.

On the day of the polls, on 12 February, 2013, the situation worsened. 13 people died in the hands of the security forces which inflamed the people. As a result violence spread to many areas.

Table 2 Names of persons burned in Rakshashini area

Name	Sex	Village
Madan Rabha	M	Futoripara
Ramen Rabha	M	"
Lakhindra Orang	M	"
Kancha Nepali	M	"
Haworia Rabha	M	"
Haso Rabha	M	"
Rabi Orang	M	"

However, at 10 in the morning, thousands of frantic people of the Muslim community lashed with staffs, spears and machetes surrounded the Orangpara village and started burning down the houses one after the other while targeting the Rabha people. 7 persons died on the spot and 6 went missing. Within moments, the crowd charred the entire village. 110 families became homeless. Similar incidents took place at nearby Futoripar and Milanpar villages. Both villages were reduced to ashes at 10 am. 216 families from these two villages became homeless. The women of these three villages had already fled from the villages and taken shelter in a school building at Garaimari.

In Krishnai Bekipur village, police threw tear gas cells at the agitating crowd. One Rabha women was injured. When she entered the house of a villager for shelter, a Muslim man attacked her. The angry crowd then set fire to the village. The village was predominantly Hindu Bengali dominated. About 100 houses were burnt and the people of the village are camping at Krishnai Vivekananda english School.

All the three parts of the Govindpur village were charred. Some residents of the village abstained from voting. They were threatened with dire consequences by Muslim leaders if they failed to vote. Muslims from surrounding villages laid siege to the village, shouting "Allaho Akbar". The attack continued till midnight. Houses of the Hindus were gutted. According to the local residents, the police administration did not pay heed even after being informed. The attackers looted the households before putting fire to the houses. These people have now taken shelter at Rangagarha M.E. School. According to local report, the attack was led by one Rajjuddin Ahmed.

Table 3 List of relief camps set up so far

Sl. Name

- 1 Moijunka L.P. School
- 2 Govindpur Rangagarha M.E. School
- 3 Garoumari
- 4 Dhuapara
- 5 Makori
- 6 Moijunka Tea Estate

In Rakshashini area near Mornoi, 7 Hindu villages were burned by thousands of Muslims. Several persons were burned alive. Seven dead bodies have been recovered from that area so far, though, many are still missing. It is suspected that some may have been charred beyond recognition. Interestingly, no demonstration was staged in any of these Hindu villages by the anti-poll groups and elections too had ended. The most disturbing fact is that not only Rabha, but villages of every Hindu community were targeted. Refugee camps are set up at three places in this area, however, many are still hiding in the forests. The district administration has not provided adequate security arrangement so far. Hooligans are at large looting the houses of the abandoned villages and no effort has been made to rescue the missing persons. The affected people are from the Rabha, Rajbongshi, Adivashi, Nepali, and Bengali communities. Even non-tribal Assamese people were not spared.

Though many in the government, including Governor Sri J.B. Patnaik, admitted of ethnic clashes, the ground reality presents a different and scary picture — it is more communal in nature along religious lines than ethnic. It has been a common practice of Bangladeshi Muslims in Assam to float organizations in autonomous councils in the garb of protecting the rights of non-tribal populace within the council areas. For example, they had floated Abodo Suraksha Samiti (Non-Bodos Defense Committee) in BTAD, Arabha Suraksha Samiti (Non-Rabha Defense Committee) in Rabha Hasong area and so forth. Their game plan is to take every opportunity to attack Hindu villages. The present confrontation is between the RHJAC and the government, but it has already turned communal. What this turns out to be, only time will tell.

The Times of India reported on 14th February: A security source said army columns patrolling the troubled areas recovered three big boats anchored on the banks of the Brahmaputra at Dubapara in Goalpara district. "There is information that about 1,000 people from Barpeta have come to Goalpara by these vessels," the source said. "The security forces are looking for them." It is also supported by eye-witnesses from nearby villages.

Table 4 List of affected villages

- Sl. Name**
- 1 Dhakurpita**
 - 2 Futoripur**
 - 3 Paharsingpara**
 - 4 Milonpara**
 - 5 Kochpara**
 - 6 Udaypur**
 - 7 Rakshashini Bazar (Chandan Bazar)**
 - 8 Orangpara**
 - 9 Leba bazar**
 - 10 Govindpur**
 - 11 Dobapara**
 - 12 Makori**
 - 13 Bekipur**

Thus there seems to be a greater conspiracy than what appears on the surface. It is a political conspiracy to keep the districts where indigenous communities are already in minority and where the rightful demand would soon be raised to drive out the illegal Bangladeshis as it happened in Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District. It is in the interest of the lobby that supports the cause of the Bangladeshi infiltrators that these areas remain in a constant state of mayhem. No opportunity is lost to fabricate any instance of confrontation as communal clashes and put the blame on the indigenous people. Even in the present case, the Congress-led Assam government wasted no time in putting the blame on the anti-poll agitation for violence. But the government did everything to provoke the protesters in the first place. The golden rule appears to be *Make the aggressors look like the victims and victims the aggressors*.

The crisis that had hit the Rabha Hasong council does not seem to be receding any time soon. As long as the government does not take a holistic view on these problems, and continue to address each conflict in isolation while maintaining its policy of appeasement for vote banks and disregard the aspirations and apprehensions of the indigenous communities, we may see more such news making the headlines.

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