Politics of Identity: A Study on the Political Identity of the Rabhas of Assam

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Abstract:

Identity is a complex issue to understand as well as to define. The identity of an individual or a group various from time to time and situation to situation. So, it is always a complex phenomenon to understand. The political identity is nothing but the importance of a community or a group in politics or in the other words, the hegemony or influence of a community or a group in electoral politics of a state or a nation. As a citizen of a democratic country, everyone has the right to elect and right to be elected. In electoral politics, influence of a community is measured by the number of voters and their distribution along with their common interest and representation. The Rabhas are one of the prominent plain scheduled tribes of Assam, who are playing or otherwise can play an important role in the electoral politics of Assam. This paper is to examine the role of the Rabha tribe in the electoral politics of Assam, particularly in the Assam Legislative Assembly in the post-independence era.

Keyword: Politics, Identity, Tribe, Representation, Rabha.

Introduction:

Identity is always ambiguous and fluid, in the sense that it has different connotation depending upon the situation and environment. An individual identity may be of different kind when it comes to the contact with others. A person can have multiple identities based on affiliation with different groups. The word 'identity' was originated in the late 16th century from the Latin word 'idem' which means 'same'. The term states the 'fact of being who or what a person or thing is' and also stands for 'a close similarity or affinity'. According to Beller and Leerssen (2007) "identity means being identifiable and is closely linked to the idea of permanence through time: something remaining identical with itself from moment to moment". Samuel P Huntington (2003) defines identity as "concept of identity, it has been said, is as indispensable as it is unclear. It is manifold, hard to define and

evades many ordinary methods of measurement". Erik Erikson (1959) defines it as "mutual relation, in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself and persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others".

Karina V. Korostelina in her book "Social Identity and Conflict: Structures, Dynamics and Implications" defines social identity as "a feeling of belonging to a social group, as a strong connection with social category and as an important part of our mind that affects our social perceptions and behavior".

Karina V. Korostelina mentioned following components of social identity.

(i) In-group tradition and values;
(ii) In-group language;
(iii) Characteristics of in-group members;
(iv) In-group history;
(v) In-group ideology;
(vi) Interrelation with out-groups;
(vii) Reverberated identity;
(viii) Out-group image.

Identity formation is a continuous process based on some solid basis. But, in the age of liberalization, privatization and globalization, the solid basis on which the identity of an individual or community is formed, is eroded by rapid changes. Thus, the complexity of identity has further intensified in the present age.

Political Identity:

Political identity is how a person or a group of persons think of themselves in relation to the politics and government of a country. Political identity is a form of social identity marking membership of certain groups that share a common struggle for a certain form of power. This can include identification with a political party, but also positions on specific political issues, nationalism, inter-ethnic relations or more abstract ideological themes. Political identities develop in individuals and evolve over time. A significant amount of research has focused on parental influence on the political identity of individuals. In addition to the socialisation of politics through the family, the influence on the political identity of personal factors such as genetics or certain personality traits, has also been the subject of much debate[1].

Objectives of the Study:

The main objectives of this study is to examine and evaluate the

i. Role of Rabha tribe in the electoral politics of Assam.
ii. Political participation of the Rabhas in the Assam Legislative Assembly in the post-independence era.

Methodology and source of data:

The methodology used for the study is basically analytical and descriptive. For the purpose of the study, data will be collected from secondary sources like already published books, research works, journals and magazines, articles etc. By analyzing these already available data, the study will be concluded.

Area of Study:

The study will be concluded within the territory of Assam and the political identity of the Rabhas will be analyzed with reference to the representation of the Rabhas in the Assam Legislative Assembly especially in the post-independence era.

Discussion:

As we know, the north eastern part of India is the hub of various tribal communities. As a one of the major player of north east India regarding tribal population, Assam is also a habitation of various tribal communities. They are scattered more or less in all the districts of Assam. The tribal people residing in Assam are divided into two broad categories basing upon their habitation. The tribal people living in the plain districts of Assam are known as Plain Tribes or Scheduled Tribe (Plain) and the tribes living in hills districts of Assam are known as Hills Tribe or Scheduled Tribe (Hills). At present Assam has three hills districts viz. Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao and remaining 32 districts are plain districts.

In Assam, there are 23 constitutionally recognized Scheduled Tribes including the plain and hills tribes. They constitute around 12.82% of the total population of Assam, as per 2011 census. In Assam, there are nine recognized Scheduled Tribe (Plain) in the plain

districts of Assam. They are- the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Deuris, the Sonowals, the Mishings, the Barmans, the Tiwas, the Mechs and the Hojais. There are fourteen Scheduled Tribes (Hills) in the hills districts of Assam. They are- the Dimasas, the Garos, the Mizos, the Nagas, the Karbis, the Hajongs, the Mans, the Pawis, the Chakmas, the Hmars, the Lakhers, the Syntengs, the Khasis and the Kukis.

Among the nine prominent Scheduled Tribes (Plains) residing in Assam, the Rabhas belonging to Mongoloid origin. They belong to the family of Bodo group, who constitute a major section of the ethnic groups of Assamese society. Though they are scattered all over the state of Assam, but their main concentration is in the lower and middle southern part of Assam. They are concentrated in the undivided districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang. Besides Assam, their distribution spread over Garo hills of Meghalaya and in Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal. But their main concentration is found on the south bank of the Brahmaputra River i.e. in Goalpara and Kamrup district. The Rabha tribe is one of the aboriginal tribes of Assam. There are no clear-cut historical records and authentic documents about the origin and migration of the Rabha tribe to the different parts of Assam and India. The scholars have expressed their divergent views about the origin of the Rabha tribe. Yet, from the racial point of view, the Rabha tribe belongs to the family of Bodo group[2]. The Rabha language belongs to the Assam-Burmese group of the Tibeto-Burman Branch of the great Sino-Tibetan family of languages[3].

According to census report 2011, Assam has 38,84,371 Scheduled Tribe population, which is 12.4 percent of total population of Assam, out of which 2,96,189 are Rabhas. To understand the political identity of the Rabhas, it is also important to know the population of the Rabhas residing in Assam. The census year wise Rabha population in Assam from the year 1911 to 2011 is shown in the Table1.1:

Table 1.1: Census year-wise Rabha population in Assam		
Sl. No	**Census year**	**No. of Rabha Population**
1	1911	79,072
2	1921	70,000
3	1931	69,000
4	1941	86,249
5	1951	88,748
6	1961	1,08,029
7	1971	1,38,630
8	1981	No census data
9	1991	2,36,931
10	2001	2,77,517
11	2011	2,96,189
Source: Rajen Rabha, 2008. Rabha Janajati, pp-25-30, Dhananjay Rabha, 1998, Rabha Janajatir Chamu Itihas, pp-67-75 and Census Report 2001 & 2011.		

Political safeguards for the Tribes of India:

Political identity is nothing but the role or importance of a community in the politics. Demographic distribution is utmost important so far as the political identity of a community is concerned. It is worth mentioning that, as far as Indian politics is concerned, caste and class always plays an important role. For inclusive development, proportionate representation of every community in decision making process is important. By recognizing the political vulnerabilities of the tribes residing in India, the framers of the Constitution of India made elaborate arrangement to safeguard the political interest of the tribes of India. These provisions were basically to increase and also encourage the political participation of the tribes, which are otherwise also important to the Rabhas. The provisions are-

Table 1.2: Constitutional provisions to preserve the political rights of the tribes of India	
Article of the Constitution of India	Provisions
Article 243D	Reservation of seats in Panchayats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes including reservation for women belonging to Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes
Article 243T	Seats shall be reserved for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in every Municipality including reservation for women belonging to Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes
Article 330	Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the House of the People.
Article 332	Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Legislative Assemblies of the States.
Article 334	Under this Article, reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are extending after every ten years by amendment of Constitution.
Source: Constitution of India	

Assam Legislative Assembly:

The history of the Assam Legislative Assembly started from the first day of its sitting on 7th April, 1937 in the Assembly Chamber at Shillong, the erstwhile Capital city of undivided Assam under the provision of the Government of India Act, 1935. It was a bicameral legislature. Earlier to that, provisions were also made under Legislative Council of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Legislative Council of Assam etc. during the colonial period. The

number of members of the Assam Legislative Assembly at the time of its inception on 7 April 1937 was 108, where all members were elected. The strength of the Legislative Council (Upper House) was not less than 21 and not more than 22 members. It became unicameral in the year 1947. In the first General Election held in 1952, the number of members was 108 in the Assam Legislative Assembly. In 1957, it was reduced to 105. Again in 1962, the number of constituencies was enhanced to 114. The number of constituencies in Assam Legislative Assembly was enhanced to 126 in 1972. Since 1976, out of 126 constituencies, 8 constituencies are reserved for the Scheduled Castes and 16 constituencies are reserved for Scheduled Tribes, where candidates belonging to respective categories can contest.

Representation of the Rabhas in the Assam Legislative Assembly:

As a citizen of a democratic country, as like as other citizen, the Rabhas has also the right to elect and to be elected. To be elected, the population and their distribution play a crucial role, so far as ethnic representation is concerned. As compared to the total population of Assam, according to the 2011 census, the Rabhas are only 0.95% (2,96,189 out of 3,12,05,575) of the total population as shown in Table 1.1. Their political identity is always in a vulnerable situation due to their number, which is further intensified by their distribution. The hills tribes in Assam are comparatively in a better position compared to the plain tribes of Assam as far as political identity is concerned. The hills tribes are concentrated particularly in three districts of Assam. But the plain tribes are scattered all over the Assam, particularly all over the Brahmaputra valley. It is very true in case of the Rabha tribe. The Bodos, one of the plain tribes of Assam, on the other hand, is in advantageous position compared to the other plain tribes.

In the post-independence era, first General Election in Assam was held in 1952. The representation of the Rabhas in the Assam Legislative Assembly is shown in the following Table 1.3 from the first election held in 1952 to last general election held in 2021.

Table-1.3: Table showing the representation from the Rabha tribe in the Assam Legislative Assembly in post-independence Assam				
Sl. No	Year of election	Name of the candidate elect from Rabha community	Constituency	Party Affiliation
1	1952	Hakim Chandra Rabha	Goalpara (Double member seat, one reserved for ST)	Indian National Congress
2	1957	Hakim Chandra Rabha	Goalpara (Double member seat, one reserved for ST)	Indian National Congress
3	1962	Hakim Chandra Rabha	Dudhnoi (ST)	Indian National Congress
4	1967	Sarat Chandra Rabha	Dudhnoi (ST)	Communist Party of India
		Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha	Tezpur	Independent
5	1972	Anandi Bala Rabha	Dudhnoi (ST)	Indian National Congress
6	1978	No candidate from Rabha community was elected from any constituency		
7	1983	No candidate from Rabha community was elected from any constituency		
8	1985	Akan Rabha	Dodhnoi (ST)	Asom Gana Parishad
9	1991	Paniram Rava	Barama (ST)	Natun Asom Gana Parishad
10	1996	Akan Rabha	Dodhnoi (ST)	Asom Gana Parishad
11	2001	Pranay Rabha	Dudhnoi (ST)	Indian National Congress
		Paniram Rava	Barama (ST)	Indian National Congress
12	2006	No candidate from Rabha community was elected from any constituency		
13	2011	No candidate from Rabha community was elected from any constituency		
14	2016	Dipak Rabha	Dudhnoi	Bharatiya Janata Party
15	2021	Prithiraj Rava	Tezpur	Asom Gana Parishad
Source: Website of Assam Legislative Assembly & Wikipedia				

The Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) area is the homeland for the Rabha tribes of Assam, where they are mostly concentrated. The Legislative Assembly constituencies come under Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council area until 2023 delimitation

of constituencies by Election Commission of India are part of West Guwahati, Palashbari, Chhaygaon, Boko, Dudhnoi, Goalpara East and Goalpara West. Out of the 16 (Sixteen) constituencies reserved for Scheduled Tribes in Assam, the only one seat come under RHAC is Dudhnoi (ST), where Rabha community candidates are contesting comfortably after independence. The population pattern is always advantageous for the Rabhas in this constituency. But, not necessarily all the elections were won by the Rabha leaders. It is the only constituency, where the Rabhas have a decisive role to play. For the first two General Elections, Dudhnoi (ST) constituency was within the Goalpara constituency, as it was a Double-Member constituency, where one seat was reserved for Scheduled Tribe. Later Goalpara constituency was spilt into two constituencies, viz., Goalpara and Dudhnoi (ST). From the above Table 1.3, Tezpur is the only constituency of Assam Legislative Assembly, where representative from Rabha community was elected neither from reservation background nor from population background. In 1967 General Election, Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha, the splendid Assamese personality won the seat as an independent candidate. In 2021, the same seat was retained by his son Prithiraj Rava as a candidate from Asom Gana Parishad. Barama (ST) is the another seat occupied by a Rabha community leader in 1991 and 2001 General Election. Akan Rabha, elected from Dudhnoi (ST) constituency in 1985, became the Minister of State in 1989. In 1996, he again became the Minister of State and later elevated to Cabinet rank in the state Council of Ministers, the only minister of Cabinet rank till today from the community. Pranay Rabha, elected in 2001 assembly election, also became Minister of State of the State Council of Ministers. In the post-independence history of Assam, only in two occasions (in 1967 and 2001 Assembly election), more than one Rabha leader at the same time represented the community in the Assam Legislative Assembly. But, this is not the adequate representation of the community to fulfil their demands. To be remain

politically relevance, representation in the state legislature, particularly indecision making is important.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it is clear that the political identity of the Rabhas, in case of Assam, is not very impressive like some other plain and hills tribes of this region. In case of overall progress and development of a community, political identity is important along with other facilitating factors. As the Rabhas are not in an adventitious position from the angle of the distribution of population, they must be united wherever they are, to fulfill their aspirations, along with other developmental issues. All the social and political organizations of the Rabhas in cohesion can play an important role in this aspect, so that development and self-identity goes side by side in the age of globalization. Though their political identity is always in quest, as a group, the Rabha organizations are playing an important role as a presser group, which is also important in a democratic setup.

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