

CHAPTER- III

Articulation of the Demand for Autonomy

The demand for political autonomy among the Tiwas and the Rabhas has a long history. Following is a brief analysis of the articulation of the Demand for political autonomy by the Tiwas and the Rabhas in Assam.

3:1 A brief history of the Autonomy Demand by the Tiwas in Assam:

As it has already been mentioned, the ethnic identity-based consciousness is evident among the tribal's of the Brahmaputra Valley during the early part of 20th century. They became conscious about their socio- political conditions, compared to the other sections of the Assamese society, even during the colonial rule. During this period the ethnic consciousness among the Tiwas was evident when a group of Tiwa elite had tried to revive their culture and identity against the large-scale assimilation into the greater Assamese society, more particularly, in the Vaisnavite culture. With the support of these Tiwa elites, Bhimbor Deori formed the first tribal organization of the plain tribes the 'Tribal League' in 1933 in Raha, which is a Tiwa dominated area. Some of these leaders are Dhirsing Deuri, Maneswar Pator, Rameswar Kunwar, Hemo Ram Bordoloi, Buddhiman Bordoloi and Dhanbor Pator. However, during that period these Tiwa elites did not think about any political movement for the cause of autonomy for the Tiwa community.

It is noteworthy that during the freedom movement and also immediately after the independence of India, the Tiwas of Assam extended full cooperation to the Congress leaders as well as to the newly independent state government. After independence, the Tiwas formed "Lalung Sanmilan" which was a Tiwa cultural organisation in 1950 at Morigaon to protect their socio-cultural identity against the large scale conversion to the cast Hindu Assamese culture. The political consciousness first emerged among the Hill Tiwas (during 1950's) living in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, which extended upto the Tiwas living in the plain districts, particularly in the present Nagaon and Morigaon districts of Assam. The Constitution of India provided the Mikir Hills (Karbi Anglong) and the North Cachar Hills as the Autonomous Hill District under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. It was late Abra

Malang, belonging to the Tiwa Community from Ulukunchi, a village in the Mikir Hills, raised for the first time the demand in the early part of 1950's for an Autonomous Hill Districts for the Tiwas (Lalungs) taking the Tiwa (Lalung) dominated areas of Mikir Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills districts. Abra Malang organized a small movement among the Hill Tiwas (Lalungs) living in the Mikir Hills area. But the movement was suppressed by the then special officer to Mikir Hills Mr. C. S. Booth. Malang was imprisoned for four years and his property was confiscated by the Government. Although this incident was politically less significant one and the Government was successful to suppress it in its initial stage, it opened the scope for a bigger political assertion among the Tiwas living in both Hills and Plains of Assam.

In the post independence period, the alleged hegemonic nature of the Assamese nationalism inflicted the tribal communities first in the Hill areas and then in the Plains of Assam to raise the demand for political autonomy for the protection and development of their culture, language and identity. Such claim for autonomy was further intensified after the passing of the Assam Official Language Act on 10th October, 1960. The Act had alienated the Hill Tribes from the Assamese nationalism on the apprehension of suppression of their language and cultures in Assam. Such political mobilization by the Hill Tribes had inspired the Plain Tribal communities too for an ethno-centric identity consciousness in the subsequent periods.

During that time, an educated Tiwa (Lalung) youth Indrasing Deuri (died in 1994), left his government job in the Garo Hills and came back to his native village in the Mikir Hills (Karbi Anglong) and organized some educated Tiwa youths. A meeting was convened at 'Umsuai' of Mikir Hills on 6th July 1967, in which educated Tiwa youths hailing from the Plain areas including Ananda Ram Deuri from Jagirod took part. The meeting took two important decisions concerning the future of the community. Some of these are:

- 1) It considered the imprisonment of the Abra Malang and confiscation of his properties as utter humiliation for the entire Tiwa community of the State.
- 2) It formed an organization in the name as 'Lalung Darbar', a political organization for the Tiwas (Nath Ramesh Chandra, 1996 "Growth and Development of Political Consciousness among Tiwa Community of Assam in the Post Independence Period", unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the Gauhati University. p. 68.).

Abra Malang was the first President of the Lalung Darbar. But Malang died soon after the formation of the organization, thereafter, Hemo Ram Bordoloi became the President, Indrasing Deuri was the Secretary, and Ananda Ram Deuri was joint Secretary (Nath Ramesh Chandra, 1996, p.68).

3:1:1 Demands of the Lalung Darbar

The main demand of the Lalung Darbar was the creation of 'Lalung Hill Autonomous District' taking the Tiwa dominated areas of Mikir Hills, Nagaon and Kamrup districts of Assam and Tiwa inhabited areas of the Jaintia Hill District of Assam. The Darbar held several meetings at different Tiwa inhabited areas for building mass awareness regarding the demand for autonomy among the general Tiwa masses. They had also submitted several memoranda to the various authorities of the State and Central Governments for their demands. On 8th July 1967 the Darbar sent a telegram to the Union Home Minister where they had demanded for creation of a 'Lalung Autonomous Hills Sub-Division' with an Autonomous Council instead of 'Autonomous Hills District'.

On 19th May 1968 a public meeting was held at Nelee under the Chairmanship of late Gambhir Bordoloi where again reiterating the demand for creation of a 'Lalung Autonomous Sub-Division' and urged the Central and the State Government to take necessary steps in this regard. As per the resolution of the meeting the Darbar sent another telegram to the Union Home Ministry on 20th June 1968 for the fulfillment of the demand. On 24th July 1968 the Lalung Darbar held a public meeting at Amsoi in Nagaon District under the Presidentship of Madan Konwar on the issue of autonomy for the Tiwas.

In this phase of growing political mobilization of the Tiwas for the demand of autonomy, the Lalung Darbar held its two-day convention on 15th and 16th October 1969 at Makankuchi L.P. School, Jagirod, under the presidentship of Ex-MLA Bali Ram Das. It was unanimously decided in the convention to raise the demand for the 'Lalung Autonomous Hill District' instead of 'Lalung Autonomous Hill Sub-Division' and urged the State and Central Governments to take the necessary steps in this regard. A nine-men delegation comprising Indrasing Deuri, Raiman Patar, Bin maloi, Narayan radu Kakati, Thal Amsong, Maina Ram Patar, Butbor Kharai, Madan Deka and Parshing Poma met the then Governor of Assam B. K. Nehru on July 15th 1970 at Raj Bhawan Shillong and submitted a memorandum demanding for creation of the 'Autonomous Lalung Hill District'. Thereafter on 24th June 1983 along with the Lalung Youth Front (a youth unit of the Darbar), submitted a

memorandum to the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and reiterated the same demand for the creation of the 'Autonomous Lalung Hill District' covering the Lalung inhabited areas of Assam and Meghalaya. Along with this main demand they raised some two more demands stated below;

1) protection of land in the Tribal Belts and Blocks within the Tiwa inhabited areas, and

2) recognition of the Tiwa people as the Hill Tribes living in the proposed 'Autonomous Hill District' and anywhere in the hill region of North East India.

Although the Lalung Darbar successfully articulated the demand for autonomy of the Tiwas, a rift was gradually developed among the Hills and Plains Tiwa leaders. Since majority of the Tiwa peoples are living in the plains areas of Assam (mostly in the middle part of Assam), the Tiwa leaders hailed from the plains areas prefer to demand for an 'Autonomous Lalung District' instead of 'Autonomous Lalung Hill District'. Therefore the Lalung Darbar revised its demand in its subsequent memoranda. On 5th February 1991, the Darbar submitted a memorandum to Chandra Shekhar, the then Prime Minister of India. On 14th October 1992 the Lalung Darbar submitted another memorandum to the Prime Minister of India P. V. Narasimha Rao. In this memorandum the Darbar proposed the geographical area of their demanded territory. It included nine blocks, twelve complete Mouzas, and parts of seven other Mouzas falling in the districts of Nagaon, Morigaon, Karbi Anglong and Kamrup districts of Assam. The proposed blocks were - 1) Gobha Tribal Blocks 2) Raha 3) Tetelia 4) Ghogua 5) Zamadari 6) Barangani pathar 7) Amsoi tribal block 8) Dimoria 9) Amri Development Block. (Nath Ramesh Chandra 1996, p.78)

The proposed Mouzas were - Gobha, Uttarkhola, Tetelia, Morigaon, Ghogua, Silpukhuri, parts of Manaha mouza, parts of Pakaria mouza, parts of Bakani mouza, parts of Bhuragaon mouza, parts of Laharighat mouza, parts of Charaibahi mouza of Morigaon district; Barapujia, Sahori, Garubat and part of Raha mouza of Nagaon district; Dimoria mouza excluding Khetri revenue town of Kamrup district; Damal and Amri mouza of Karbi Anglong district.

3:1:2 Tiwa Sanmilan and Tiwa ethnic resurgence:

The political movement led by the Lalung Darbar for securing political autonomy for the Tiwas could not proceed further towards its goal owing to many shortcomings. The

Darbar was basically confined to the Hill Tiwas only and they failed to involve all the sections of the Tiwa people, especially the plain Tiwas. During 1970's a good number of Tiwa educated youth had emerged in the Tiwa society, most of them were university graduates and post-graduates and were well-placed with either Government jobs or entered other professions. These educated youths thought about the necessity of a strong organization of the Tiwa community to work for the educational, social, cultural, economic and political advancement of the Tiwas. They took the initiative to convene a meeting of the Tiwa educated youths at Barapujia High School (near Morigaon town) in 1971. Some leading personalities of this initiative were Budhiman Bordoloi (an employee in the Income Tax department and Assistant General Secretary of the All Assam Tribal Students Sanmilian), Giridhar Pator (an advocate), Bhognath Deuri (Headmaster in Kopahera high school), Prahlad Sing Dekadoloi (Headmaster in Tetelisara high school), Dharmeswar Doloi (Headmaster in Baropujia high school), Narahari Dekaraja (Headmaster in Kathiatoli high school), Khirod Pator, Khitesh Bordoloi, Surendra Nath Kunwar, Ganesh Senapati, Udhab ch. Senapati etc. These Tiwa youths formed a Tiwa (Lalung) cultural-social organization named as 'Sadou Asom Tiwa (Lalung) Yuba Chatra Sanmilian'. Late Buddhiman Bordoloi was the president and Khirod Pator was its General Secretary. In 1978 the 'Sadou Asom Tiwa (Lalung) Yuba Chatra Sanmilian' in its Amsoi annual conference was renamed as 'Sadou Asom Tiwa (Lalung) Sanmilian'. The Sanmilian tried to revive the rich Tiwa social culture and language and had tried to strengthened and establish the Tiwa ethnic identity in Assam. In 1978, at the initiative of the Sanmilian the Asom Sahitya Sabha had published the first book on the Tiwas "Tiwa Sampradayar Parichay".

Although the Sanmilian claimed to be a non-political socio-cultural organization only, they showed concern to the political issues such as problem of land ownership, filling up of the backlog posts and also eviction of illegal encroachment and protection of tribal land in the tribal belts and blocs, etc., which is directly related to the economic life of the Tiwa society. Even for these issues they took agitational programmes also. The Sanmilian expressed its strong concern to the issue of de-reservation of the Morigaon Legislative Assembly seat in 1975, which was earlier reserved as the ST seat.

Gradually the Sanmilian shifted its prime concern to the political issues and began to think about the political autonomy of the Tiwas to resolve the long standing political issues. The Sanmilian considered that in order to protect the political, social and economic rights of the Tiwa people, to protect their lands from the illegal encroachment by the non-

Tiwas, to ensure the employment of the Tiwa youth in the government jobs (in backlog posts), for the proper implementation of the Tribal Welfare Funds, etc. the political autonomy for the Tiwas was considered to be a legitimate demand. Therefore, to discuss about the prospect and to determine the future course of action for securing political autonomy of the Tiwas, the Tiwa Samilan convened a meeting of different tribal organizations, namely, Morigaon District Tiwa Sanmilan, Morigaon District Tribal Sangha, Nagaon District Tiwa Sanmilan, Nagaon District Tribal Sangha at the office of the Morigaon District Tribal Sangha in the year 1989. In that meeting the organizations agreed to advance the demand for the political autonomy of the Tiwas as a legitimate demand. To that end, they formed an organisation named as “Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee (ALDDC)” under the chairmanship of Tulsi Bordoloi. Sidam Deuri, a professor at Morigaon College took the charge of Executive President, Narayan Radu Kakati as the General Secretary, Ananda Bordoloi and Panindra Bordoloi as the Assistant Secretary of the organization. Renowned Tiwa writer Maneswar Deuri, Seniram Kunwar became the advisor of the ALDDC and advocate Giridhar Pator was the legal Advisor of the ALDDC.

3:1:3 Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee (ALDDC) and the Tiwa Autonomy Movement:

The ALDDC was the key organization of the Tiwa Autonomy Movement in Assam. The ALDDC submitted a number of memoranda to the different authorities in Assam, demanding political autonomy for the Tiwas. On 5th October 1990, a memorandum was submitted jointly by the ALDDC, Tiwa Sanmilan, Morigaon District Tribal Sangha and All Tiwa Students Union to the then Chief Minister of Assam Prafulla Kumar Mahanta at Morigaon. In the memorandum they demanded for creation of the “Autonomous Lalung District”, covering all the Tiwa villages and forest areas of west Nagaon District, entirely Morigaon District including the Tribal Belts and Blocks and curving out the Tribal Blocks of east Kamrup and western part of the Karbi Anglong District.(Nath Ramesh Chandra, 1996, p.80) The ALDDC submitted another memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam Hiteswar Saikia on 10th May 1993 and reiterated their demand for the creation of Autonomous Lalung District Council. In the memorandum they demarcated an area of 3,260 sq. k.m. with 3, 61,949 Tiwa population and overall 5, 51,151 of total population in the proposed area. On 21st June 1994 the ALDDC submitted another memorandum to the Union Home Minister at Guwahati and urged for the consideration of their demand for political autonomy of the Tiwas in Assam.

3:1:4 All Tiwa Students Union (ATSU) and Tiwa Autonomy Movement

By 1990, the Tiwa autonomy demand had attained a mature stage in the political scenario of Assam. A movement to that effect lacked its vigour to influence the political decision makers of the State just because of the division between the Hills and Plains Tiwa leaders. Therefore, a group of young Tiwa students realized the necessity to unite the Hills and Plains Tiwa leaders for the greater interest of the Tiwa community. Considering this on 25th February 1989, a meeting was convened in the Tribal Rest House in Nagaon. In that meeting the first Tiwa students' organization, the All Tiwa Students Union (ATSU) was formed. The ATSU in its first general conference held on 17th and 18th March 1990 formulated three main demands for the interest of the Tiwa communities in Assam. These demands are-

A) Constitution of Autonomous District Council for the Tiwas under the Six Schedule of the Constitution taking the Tiwa inhabited areas in Assam.

B) Recognition of the Tiwas living in the Karbi Anglong District as the Hill Tribes.

C) Introduction of the Tiwa language at the primary level in the schools of Tiwa dominated areas in Assam.¹

The ATSU refused to accept the Government census data about the Tiwa population in Assam. They claimed that the actual number of the Tiwa population in Assam is more than the Government census data. Therefore, in 1990 they carried out their own census of the Tiwa population in Assam and found a total of 4,28,169 Tiwa population in Assam.

The ATSU had changed the nature of the hitherto leader centric Tiwa autonomy movement. The ATSU tried to mobilize the general Tiwa masses politically for the demand of autonomy and tried to launch a mass movement with the participation of the common Tiwa peoples. It formed regional units at the grass root level to mobilize support for the movement. The ATSU successfully carried out various agitational programmes with the participation of the general Tiwa peoples, particularly the young youths. Under its banner, the first mass agitational programme of 12 hours Assam Bandh on 24th October 1990 to press the demand for the Tiwa autonomy. After that various agitational programmes, such as, lbandh,

¹ The demands of the All Tiwa Students Union was mentioned in the Article "Tiwa Jatiyo Sangram aru Sodou Tiwa Chatra Santha" written by Seniram Malang, Secretary of ATSU published in "MORIPIL-E-PALISHARON" a Souvenir published on the occasion of 8th General Conference of ATSU held at Morigaon on 8-10 March 2014. The texts are translated into English from Assamese.

strike, mass rally, cycle procession, public meetings, and so on, were held in the banner of the ATSU, and sometimes in collaboration with other Tiwa organizations. The agitational programmes undertaken by ATSU during 1990 to 1995 are stated below in a tabular form.

Table- 3:1: List of Assam Bandh programmes

Date	Bandh Programmes
24 th October 1990	12 hrs middle Assam Bandh
2 nd February 1991	12 hrs middle Assam Bandh
3 rd May 1992	24 hrs middle Assam Bandh
15 th – 16 th June 1992	36 hrs middle Assam Bandh
9 th August 1992	12 hrs middle Assam Bandh
22 nd September 1992	24 hrs middle Assam Bandh
27 th January 1993	12 hrs middle Assam Bandh
23 rd February 1993	12 hrs middle Assam Bandh
20 th May 1993	24 hrs middle Assam bandh
13 th & 14 th September 1993	36 hrs middle Assam bandh
29 th & 30 th October 1993	48 hrs middle Assam bandh
5 th November 1993	24 hrs middle Assam bandh
27 th April 1995	24 hrs middle Assam bandh
1 st June 1995	24 hrs middle Assam bandh
22 nd June 1995	12 hrs middle Assam bandh
27 th July 1995	12 hrs middle Assam bandh

Table- 3:2: List of Dharna programmes

Date	Programme
28 th May 1992	24 hrs hunger strike in front of the D.C. office Morigaon
8 th February 1993	Dharna at Morigaon
23 rd March 1993	Hunger strike
27 th July 1993	Demonstration at Dispur
20 th September 1993	Dharna at Morigaon
11 th October 1993	Demonstration at Dispur
13 th September 1994	Demonstration at Dispur
11 th November 1994	Dharna at Morigaon

20 th March 1995	Demonstration at Dispur
31 st May 1995	Dharna at Morigaon

Table – 3:3: List of Mass Rally and Public Meetings

Date	Programme	Place
19 January 1990	Public Meeting	Toradubi, Karbi Anglong
23 rd January 1990	Do	Umsuai, Karbi Anglong
30 th January 1990	Do	Morten
21 st February 1990	Do	Umsuai
17 th May 1990	Do	Kothiatoli
25 th May 1990	Do	Baropujia
30 th September 1990	Do	Manipur, Morigaon
12 th October	Do	Jagirod
16 th October 1990	Do	Silchang
12 December 1990	Do	Azarbari
21 st January 1991	Do	Umsuai
25 th January 1991	Do	Jorabari
31 st January 1991	Do	Jagirod
12 th February 1991	Do	Baropujia
13 th September 1992	Do	Jagirod College
25 th April 1994	Do	Silchang

Source: “*Growth and Development of Political Consciousness among Tiwa Community of Assam in the Post Independence Period*” by Ramesh Chandra Nath, PhD thesis submitted to the Gauhati University in Faculty of Arts, 1996.

3:1:5 The Leadership and Nature of the political mobilization for the Autonomy Demand (During pre-1995 period):

Though there are number of Tiwa organizations raising the demand of political autonomy for the Tiwa community in Assam, most of these organizations failed to involve the common Tiwa masses in their political struggle. Except All Tiwa Students Union, All Tiwa Women Association and Tiwa Cultural Society, other organizations did not have the mass base. The Lalung Darbar, though was the first Tiwa organization to raise the demand

for political autonomy for the Tiwas, it could not mobilize the common masses. Even the Darbar could not hold public meeting since 1971. Moreover, the ALDDC the only political organization of the Tiwa elite group, also failed to involve the common masses in its cause. It could not hold public meeting on the issue since 1990. The leaders of both organizations tried to maintain good relations with the ruling party and the Government in the State. Therefore, instead of organizing any agitational programmes, they tried to make compromise with the Government. These organisations failed to make the common masses aware about the autonomy demand. The common masses were not aware about the works and programmes of the organizations. They did not have any organizations at the grassroots to mobilize support base. The activities of these organizations confined to the leaders only.

The leaders of the Darbar and the ALDDC belonged to the well-to-do families of the community, mostly belonging to the teaching other professions. Moreover, most of the leaders from Darbar and ALDDC joined active party politics instead of strengthening their own tribal organizations. This was mainly to obtain the high political positions. The founder leader of the Lalung Darbar Indrasing Deuri was an active member of the Communist Party of India. Giridhar Pator, an advocate by profession, the founder leader of Tiwa Yuba Chatra Sanmilan, was also a member of the Communist Party of India. Later on he joined the Indian National Congress (INC). The former secretary of ALDDC Narayan Radu Kakati was also a member of the Congress. Another leader Sidam Deuri, former President of ALDDC, was also a member of Asom Gana Parisad and later on joined the INC. Thus, it is clear that this section of Tiwa leaders had no consistency of their own political ideology.

Contrary to these organizations and the leaders the All Tiwa Students Union (ATSU), All Tiwa Women Association (ATWA) and Tiwa Cultural Society (TCS) were trying to make the Tiwa peoples aware about their demand for political autonomy and trying to mobilize the people through different agitational programmes. For this, they formed the regional units at the grass root level. The leaders of the ATSU, ATWA are full time workers mostly representing the younger generations.

3:1:6 Government Response to the Tiwa Autonomy Demand:

The Government response to the demands raised by the different tribal groups may be put into three categories. The first was accommodation of tribal elites through the electoral process and distribution of patronage. The second type of response was to split the movement leadership and to keep them satisfied by distribution of spoils and granting patronage. The

third was to deal the movement with the repressive forces. In the case of the Tiwa movement, the Government of Assam adopted all these three methods. However, in a significant political development, the Government of India, in 1989 appointed a three-member committee under the Chairmanship of Dr. Bhupinder Singh to study the tribal problems in North East India. On the basis of the recommendation of the committee, the Government of India decided to sign an Accord with ABSU and decided to constitute an autonomous council, instead of a separate state. Following the Bodo Accord, the other plain tribal groups, mainly the Tiwa, Rabha and Mishings raised their strong voice for the autonomy.

Till 1993 the Assam Government did not respond to the demands of the different Tiwa organizations. But in a significant political development on 11th March 1993, the Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia announced in a public meeting at Lakwa, in Dibrugarh district that the Government of Assam was considering the demand for autonomy raised by the Misings, the Rabhas and the Tiwas. Following the announcement, the leaders of Autonomous Lalung District Demand Committee (ALDDC) met the Chief Minister of Assam on 10th May 1993 and requested to create the Tiwa (Lalung) Autonomous District. This was the first discussion of any Tiwa organization with the State Government on the issue of the autonomy of the Tiwas.

Gradually the ATSU felt that the leaders of ALDDC were going away from the link of ATSU. The State Government also maintained a close relation with the ALDDC leaders. The ATSU on 30/8/1993 organised a press meet in which they vehemently opposed the Government decision to constitute the Autonomous Council for the Tiwas. Instead they demanded for the Tiwa (Lalung) Autonomous District. They accused the Government that they adopted a policy of divide and rule by winning the leaders of ALDDC and invited the so-called Tiwa leaders, instead of the genuine ones. These leaders were handpicked by the Chief Minister of Assam, who eventually joined the ruling Congress for their own petty interest. With these resentments the ATSU leaders organized some agitational program, like Bandh, Dharna, etc.

After the tough stand taken by the ATSU, the Government of Assam finally called the leaders of ATSU and ALDDC for discussion on 10th December 1993, in which the Government constituted a committee under the Chairmanship of Mukut Sarma, then Revenue Minister of Assam. The other members were Gomeswar Pegu, Minister of Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes, Jatin Hajorika, advisor to the Chief Minister, T. L. Baruah,

Commissioner Home and political Department and special Secretary to the Chief Minister. The committee was constituted to consider the matter of granting autonomy to the three tribal ethnic communities, namely the Tiwas, the Rabhas and the Mishings. In that meeting three committees were constituted by the Government with the agitating students' organisations of the Tiwa, Rabha and Mishig community, in addition to the representatives of the ALDDC and the ATSU. In the Government of Assam forwarded a draft proposal to all the autonomy demanding organizations on the subject of autonomy. On the draft proposal a meeting was held on 14th and 15th December 1993 at the Janata Bhawan between the Autonomy Committee of the Government and ATSU and ALDDC. The ATSU opposed some points in the draft Government proposal. The major point of disagreement raised by the ATSU was that there was no fix boundary of the Tiwa Autonomous Council. Although the ATSU demanded more power for the autonomous Council, the ALDDC did not oppose the Government proposal.

Another round of discussion was held between the ATSU and the State Government on 22nd Dec. 1993 in which the Government assured the ATSU leaders to consider their demands sympathetically for greater autonomy of the Tiwas. In December 1993 the ATSU organized a special convention in Tarun Ram Phukon field in Morigaon, in which leaders of various autonomy demanding organizations, such as, the Mising Mimang Kebang, the Takam Mishig Porin Kebang, the Rabha Hasong Demand Committee, the All Rabha Students Union and the All Deuri Students Union participated. The leaders from these organizations criticized the Government for not fulfilling the demands of the tribal communities in Assam.

On the other hand, the ALDDC also organized a special convention on 19th December 1993 in Morigaon. In the convention the ALDDC presented the Government proposal on Autonomous Council to the public and made a detail discussion on the proposal. Some leading personalities of the Tiwa community, Ganesh Senapati, Maneswar Deuri, Prasanna Kunwar and Mileswar Pator made some suggestions for the proposed council. They demanded the inclusion of two mouzas namely- i) Dwar Amla and ii) Amri Mouza of Karbi Anglong district in the proposed Autonomous Council.

On 30th December 1993 another round of discussion was held between the autonomy committee of State Government and leaders of the ALDDC and the ATSU. In that discussion some modifications were made in the Government proposal. The ATSU proposed a new principle for the proposed council area, such as, Core Areas and Satellite Areas which was

accepted by the Government. The Core Areas were the contiguous Tiwa dominated areas where all the Tiwa customs and traditions would prevail. The Satellite Areas were the areas under the Autonomous Councils where Tiwa people are not in majority, but would be under the control of the Core Area administration. The proposed Autonomous Council should be composed of both the Core and Satellite Areas.

Although the State Government held several rounds of discussion with the Tiwa organizations, but there was no consensus among the Tiwa leadership on the issue of autonomy. The ALDDC always tried to compromise with the Government to serve their vested interests, while the ATSU was clear and firm in its demand for clear demarcation of the areas of the proposed Council and constitution of Autonomous District Council with greater financial and administrative powers. Thus, a difference between the ATSU and ALDDC leadership emerged.

Due to the casual response of the State Government, the ATSU decided to launch a fresh movement for securing autonomy for the Tiwas. The ATSU supported by the Tribal Student Federation (TSF), All Tiwa Women Association (ATWA), Autonomy Demand Struggling Forum (ADSF) wrote on the wall 'No Autonomy No Rest'. Foreseeing trouble, the State Government was all set to sign the memorandum of understanding with the leaders of the three tribal ethnic communities of the Tiwas, the Rabhas and the Mishings. It negotiated with the supporting organizations only, instead of reaching at a consensus among all the organizations of these communities. Accordingly, the Tiwa Accord was signed on 13th April 1995 between the Government of Assam and the ALDDC. Although the ATSU was invited to sign the accord by the State Government, it refused to accept the invitation on the ground that the Government did not respond to its demands. On behalf of the State Government, the accord was signed by Arunodoy Bhattacharjee, the then Chief Secretary of Assam. From the ALDDC, it was signed by Sidam Deuri, President, ALDDC, Narayan Radu Kakati, Secretary, ALDDC, Giridhar Pator, Legal Advisor, ALDDC, Mr. Nadiram Deuri, President, Tiwa Yuba Chatra Parishad, Kalpana Pator of the Lalung Nari Santha.

3:1:6 Tiwa Autonomy demand in post Tiwa Accord era (post 1995):

The ATSU, the All Tiwa Womens Association (ATWA) and the Lalung Youth Front (LYF) strongly opposed the Tiwa Accord. They alleged that the ALDDC leaders did not have the support of all the sections of the Tiwa people and that they were opportunists and they had no right to sign the Accord on behalf of the Tiwa people. On the day of signing the

Accord, in the evening the ATSU, the ATWA and the LYF volunteers came out in large numbers to protest against the Accord at the PWD Bungalow at Jagirod. When the signatory leaders reached Jagirod they were 'gheraoud' by the agitating mob and were severely humiliated. They had been rescued by the Jagirod police. The protesting gathering shouted slogans "cancel the Accord", "Hiteswar Saikia Murdabad" and "ALDDC Murdabad". On 19th April 1995 all the Tiwa Organisations except the ALDDC met at Jagirod College premises, organized by the ATSU to review the autonomy to the Tiwas. The meeting resolved to hold a 24-hour Assam Bandh on 27th and 28th April 1995 in protest of the Tiwa Accord, which was supported by the all Tiwa organizations. Violence erupted in many places in the Nagaon and Morigaon Districts of Assam during the Bandh when the supporters of the Bandh were arrested in many places. The ATSU leaders met the then Chief Minister of Assam on several occasions and demanded for cancellation of Tiwa Accord signed by the ALDDC and more autonomy for the Tiwas but the Government did not respond to their demands. Therefore, the ATSU and other like-minded Tiwa organizations resumed the agitation again from May 1995. Along with the agitations led by ATSU and other organizations in the middle part of Assam for greater autonomy of the Tiwas, the interim Tiwa Autonomous Council was formed by the ALDDC leaders, who subsequently joined in the ruling Congress party to secure the power in the Interim Tiwa Autonomous Council. The Interim Council was formed by the loyal party workers of the ruling party in the State Government.

In a significant political development, the Government of Assam appointed a ministerial sub-committee vide Order No. TAD/BC/198/97/Pt-I/26 dated 18th December 2003 under the Chairmanship of Bhumidhar Barman to study the feasibility of inclusion of the Mishing, the Rabha and the Tiwa Autonomous Councils in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Committee submitted its interim report in 2005, in which they made some recommendations to the Government of Assam. In the recommendations it was stated that "...the Government of Assam has already agreed, on principle that the three Autonomous Councils – Mising Autonomous council, Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council and Tiwa Autonomous Council should be included into the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. But as the area of the three Autonomous Councils have not yet been concretely demarcated, as the matter requires amendment of the Constitution (which is a lengthy process involving passing of a Bill in the Parliament) and altercation of certain administrative boundaries. ...in this interim report we make recommendations for establishment of democratically elected Councils, provide more autonomy to accelerate development works and to protect interest of

the tri-bal communities as well as non-tribals.”² The submitted the list of villages for the three Councils, which they recommended the Assam Government to notify immediately.³ The number of Villages and the- population pattern in the three Autonomous Councils are-

Table- 3:4: List of villages, population, ST population in per cent.

Council	Villages	Population	ST population	ST per cent
Mishing Autonomous Council	1613	842672	547235	65%
Rabha Autonomous Council	779	543192	243628	56%
Tiwa Autonomous Council	241	225738	113748	50%

Following this political development, different Tiwa organizations raised their strong voice for the inclusion of the Tiwa Autonomous Council into the Sixth Schedule and holding of election of the Tiwa Autonomous Council. On 3rd May 2007 the ATSU, the ADSF, the ATWA and the All Tiwa Cultural Society (ATCS) jointly staged a 10-hour Dharna in front of the Deputy Commissioners Office Morigaon. Their main demands are:

- To send the proposal to the Central Government for the inclusion of the Tiwa Autonomous Council in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.
- To hold a tripartite talk between the State Government, Central Government and Tiwa leaders on the inclusion of the Tiwa Autonomous Council in the Sixth Schedule.
- To dissolve the Interim Tiwa Autonomous Council and hold elections of the Tiwa Autonomous Council.
- Implementation of the Tiwa Language Accord and appointment of teachers in Tiwa Language.
- Eviction of illegal encroachment from the Tribal Belts and Blocs.

(Source: From the Press Release issued jointly by the Tiwa Students Union (ATSU), Autonomy Demand Struggling Forum (ADSF), All Tiwa Women Association (ATWA) and

² Interim Report of the Ministerial Sub Committee on inclusion of Mising, Rabha and Tiwa Autonomous Councils in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, Government of Assam, Dispur, Guwahati, Assam, March, 2005, Chapter IX, pp. 35- 36.

³ *ibid*, pp. 36-37

Tiwa Cultural Society (TCS) On 3/5/2007 at Morigaon. The text is translated to English since the Press Release was given in Assamese).

In 2007, a conflict between the State Government and the Tiwa Organisations started on the issue of holding Panchayat elections in the Tiwa Autonomous Council area. In the Tiwa Autonomous Council Act 1995 under Clause-5 unequivocally mentions about the non-operation of the PRIs in the Council areas. On 22nd November 2007, the organizations like the ATSU, the ADSF, the ATWA and the TCS sit in a discussion with the Assam Government in which the Tiwa organisations raised three main demands. These are:

- Adopt a strong resolution to include the Tiwa Autonomous Council under the provision of the Sixth Schedule to solve the constitutional impasse, so that a permanent settlement could be reached.
- To hold the Council elections immediately by delimiting constituencies of the Tiwa Autonomous Council.
- To take initiative to hold tripartite talk among the Central Government, the State Government and the Tiwa organizations.

(Source: From the Copy of the Demand Charter prepared by the All Tiwa Students Union (ATSU) and signed by the Autonomy Demand Struggling Forum (ADSF), All Tiwa Women Association (ATWA), and Tiwa Cultural Society (TCS) on 22th November, 2007, at Dispur, Guwahati)

On 26th November 2007 a meeting was held at the Chief Ministers residence at Koinadhara between the State Govt. and the Tiwa leaders. In that meeting along with the Chief Minister, the minister of Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes Pramila Rani Brahma, minister of Panchayat and Rural Development Chandan Brahma, Minister of Food and Civil supply Nazrul Islam, PWD Parliamentary Secretary Bibekananda Doley, Commissioners of Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes and Panchayat and Rural Development Departments were also present. From the Tiwa organizations the ATSU, the ADSF and the TCS took part in the meeting. In that meeting following decisions are taken:

- The Government of Assam would be approached with a request to send the proposal to the Central Government for the inclusion of Tiwa Autonomous Council in the Sixth Schedule.

- A Committee was formed with the representatives from the Tiwa Autonomous Council, and other organizations demanding autonomy, local MLAs, Ministers and Commissioner Secretary of the Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Department to determine the constituencies and inclusion of the Tiwa villages in the Council area for holding of elections to the Tiwa Autonomous Council.
- The Committee was entrusted to complete the work by March 2008.

The State Government did not take steps on the first resolution. However, the Government took the initiatives to hold the election of the Tiwa Autonomous Council.

In another significant political development, on 18th March 2010, a joint convention of the All Tiwa Students Union, the All Mishing Students Union, and the All Rabha Students Union was held in the Silpagram auditorium, Panjabari, Guwahati. The main objective of the convention was to discuss and to decide the future course of action about the long standing demands of the three communities, especially related to the inclusion in the Sixth Schedule. They considered that the State Government had been continuously neglected the legitimate demands of these three communities. They alleged that the State Government have failed to convince the non-tribal peoples living in the Tiwa, the Rabha and the Mising Autonomous Council areas about their security, rights and liberties and the necessity of greater political autonomy for the development of the people in that areas. They alleged that the State Government had deliberately ignored the genuine political issues affecting the greater tribal societies like the problem of illegal migration and settlement of non-tribals in the tribal belts and bloc areas, issue of land pattas to the land less tribals, protection and recognition of tribal languages, etc. They had regretted that they are neglected by any party in the Government because numerically they are minority in any Assembly Constituency to determine the fate of any candidate in the elections. They alleged that, today the tribal peoples of Assam are losing their land rights from their ancestral land. Therefore, these three organizations had decided to launch a joint struggle to secure their demands for autonomy. In between these resentments of the Tiwa organizations, the State Government hold the election of the Tiwa Autonomous Council in June 2010.

On 11th December 2012 the ATSU, the ADSF, the ATWA and the TCS submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam with the demand to:

- send a proposal to the Union Government for inclusion of the Tiwa Autonomous Council under the provision of Sixth Schedule;
- hold elections in the Six Constituencies of Tiwa Autonomous Council in Dimoria under the Kamrup metro district and by-elections in the 15 No. Bihubori vacant constituency, and
- appoint the Tiwa language teachers immediately.

In the year 2013, the ATSU brought out a leaflet on the various issues which they are fighting for and tried to create a mass awareness on these issues. In that leaflet they proposed a series of agitational programmes to pressurize the Government to fulfill the long-standing political demands of the Tiwa community, such as:

1. to hold elections of the Village Councils in the Tiwa Autonomous Council areas and decentralization of the power through these village councils in the TAC areas;
2. to transfer power on land to the TAC as per the Amendment Act of Tiwa Autonomous Council Amendment Act 2005 in the TAC areas;
3. to send proposal to the Central Government for the inclusion of the TAC in the Sixth Schedule;
4. to accord S.T. status to the Karbis living in the plain areas of Assam;
5. to hold elections in the six TAC constituencies under the Kamrup Metro District (Dimoria Revenue Circle); and
6. to take steps for the immediate appointment of the Tiwa language teachers and to introduce the Karbi language in the schools in some selected Karbi inhabited areas.

For these demands the ATSU declared a series of agitational programmes. The proposed agitational programmes were:

- sit-in demonstration on 19th September 2013 in front of the offices of the all Revenue Circle Offices in the TAC areas and sending of memorandums to the Chief Minister of Assam through the Circle Officers;
- torch light procession on 28th September 2013 in the TAC areas;

- 24-hour middle Assam Bandh on 23rd September 2013;
- 36-hour middle Assam Bandh on 30th September 2013; and
- Ringing War Flute at Morigaon Sador Office on 7th October 2013.

In 2014 the ATSU held its Silver Jubilee conference on 8th, 9th and 10th March at the Khirod Barua stadium in Morigaon. There the ATSU had decided to organize a united Tiwa movement taking all the Tiwa organizations for securing their rights of the Tiwa community. The ATSU considered that the existing Tiwa Autonomous Council severely affecting the Tiwa movement because the Tiwa elites have been fighting among themselves for securing the political power of the Tiwa Autonomous Council. Moreover, they considered that the Tiwa Autonomous Council was constituted with the Tiwa inhabited villages in the middle part of Assam. A large number of Tiwa people living in Karbi Anglong, Khasi Hills in Meghalaya and in upper Assam were left out of the existing Council. As a result, they were separated from the Tiwa movement weakening the movement. The ATSU leaders in the conference considered that the existing Tiwa Autonomous Council failed to solve the basic political problems of the Tiwa community in Assam. The functionaries of the existing Council tried to woo the public support by taking some populist schemes rather trying to solve the major issues like the problem of land rights of the Tiwa peoples, protection of Tiwa language and culture, unification of all the Tiwas in North East India, demand for more autonomy under the Sixth Schedule, and also the problem of poverty, unemployment, etc. They considered that the existing Council was not the appropriate arrangement for the socio-political upliftment of the Tiwas, because it lacked autonomy under the existing system. Since the Council was constituted by the State Law, there was undue interference of the State Government in political and financial matters. The ATSU leaders considered the necessity of constituting Regional Council for the Tiwas, living in the Karbi Anglong district after their recognition as the Schedule Tribe. Similarly they regretted that the Tiwas in the Khasi Hills were still deprived of the Schedule Tribe status. Therefore, it was a matter of great concern that these Tiwa peoples in Meghalaya were converted to the Khasi community to get the benefits of the Schedule Tribe. Thus, it was a challenge to the identity and existence of the Tiwa community in North East India.

Consequent upon these developments, the ATSU carried out a strong political movement along with some other Tiwa national organizations like the Tiwa Cultural Society,

the Tiwa Yuba Chatra Parisad, the Tiwa Women Society, the Autonomy Demand Struggling Forum, etc.

3:2 Brief History of Demand for Political Autonomy by the Rabhas in Assam:

The ethnic mobilization for the political autonomy of the Rabhas in Assam is based on some historical beliefs in their society. The Rabha society considered that in the remote past, they established their own territory in the South Western part of Assam. But due to the influence of the Aryans as well as continuous war with the Mughals they lost their political identity in Assam. It is alleged that as in the past, they are being converted to the caste Hindu Assamese nationality even today. Moreover, after the political-administrative reorganization of Assam, particularly after the creation of the Coch-Bihar district, they have been reduced to a minor ethnic community in Assam.

The first ever ethnic consciousness of the Rabhas emerged in 1926, when a group of Rabha leaders, namely, Dwarika Nath Rabha, Gobardhan Sarkar and Rajen Rangkho held the first ever Rabha ethnic national convention in Santipur, Krishnai in present Goalpara district, where they formed the first organization of the Rabha community called Assam Rabha Sanmillan. The main objective of the organization was to promote the culture of the Rabha ethnic community and protection of the Rabha ethnic identity in Assam. In 1976 some new generation of Rabha leaders have renamed the Assam Rabha Sanmillan as the All Rabha National Council (ARNC). During this period of ethnic resurgence their emphasis was non-political in nature rather it was social and cultural. But gradually a section of educated youths of the Rabha community felt the necessity of an organisation to represent the Rabhas socially, politically and culturally. Therefore, in 1980 on 12th February the Nikhil Rabha Chatra Santha (ARSU) was formed at the premises of Goalpara College in Goalpara. The founder Secretary of ARSU, Sabya Sashi Rabha, explained about the foundation of ARSU in the mouthpiece of ARSU Singi Hurang published in April 1999 that in 1976 a group of young students in Guwahati felt the necessity of a strong youth organization following the path of All Assam Students Union (AASU), and some other youth organization of tribal communities. The Rabha youths, namely, Anil Rabha, Kanta Rabha, Harendra Rabha, Kankan Rabha, Pranay Rabha and Sabya Sashi Rabha convened a meeting in the year 1976 and formed the 'All Guwahati Rabha Students Union'. Later on these Rabha youths convened a meeting on 12th February 1980 at Goalpara College to form the Rabha Youth Organization. In that meeting the representatives from Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal participated. In

that meeting the earlier organization was renamed as All India Rabha Students Union. In later stage it was again renamed as All Rabha Students Union. The main objectives of the organization were:

- to strengthen the unity and solidarity among the Rabhas living in different parts of Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal;
- to work for the social, cultural, economic upliftment of the Rabhas in Assam;
- to create a healthy educational environment for the students in the Rabha inhabited areas;
- to work for securing the constitutional rights of the Rabha peoples in Assam; and
- to spearhead a strong socio-political revolution in order to find solution to the long-standing problems of the Rabhas in Assam.

At the initial stage, the ARSU was basically concerned with the general issues affecting the overall development of the community. One major issue which was most emphasized by the ARSU leaders was the introduction of Rabha language as a medium of instruction at the school level in the Rabha inhabited areas. Responding to this demand the Government of Assam (during the Chief Ministership of Late Hiteswar Saikia in 1983) instructed the Rabha leaders to submit the draft of the textbooks in Rabha language to the Directorate of Assam Publication Board. But in 1985, immediately after the signing of Assam Accord, the existing Government formed under the Chief Ministership of late Hiteswar Saikia (in 1983) in Assam was declared as illegal and the fresh election was declared by dissolving the Government. As a result the process of introduction of the Rabha language at the school level was also stalled. However in 1986, the textbook in Rabha Language was published by the Assam Publication Board.

After the Assam Accord in 1985, a new Government was formed in Assam by the newly emerged Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) under the Chief Ministership of Prafulla Kr Mahanta. The Rabha leaders, who actively supported the Assam agitation, again raised their demand for introduction of Rabha language at the school level. But the Assam Government did not respond to such demands. The Government apathy towards the demands of the Rabha organizations caused utter dissatisfaction among the Rabha community. Therefore, in 1987 the ARSU and the Rabha Sahitya Sabha resolved to take an agitational programme for the

demand. Owing to the continuous pressure from the Rabha organizations the Government of Assam in 1988, on 19th March decided to introduce the Rabha language as an elective subject at the primary level schools in the Rabha inhabited areas and decided to appoint teachers in Rabha language in 70 primary schools in different areas of the Goalpara, Dhubri and Kokrajhar districts. This was the first ethnic resurgence of the Rabhas involving the issue of protection of Rabha language in Assam.

As already mentioned, during the Assam movement in the 1980s, the Rabhas actively participated in it. Even when the ARSU was founded in 1980s, some Rabha youths, actively associated with the AASU had strongly opposed ARSU leaders to run a separate youth organization for the Rabhas in presence of AASU. After the signing of Assam Accord in 1985, the AASU held a national convention (Asomia Jatio Abhibartan) from 5th to 7th December 1988 in Jorhat to discuss about the issues affecting the Assamese nationalism as well as to help the newly formed AGP Government to sort out the common problems of Assam. Following the invitation of the AASU, the representatives from the Rabha community, namely, Rajen Pam, Dhaneswar Rabha, Bichitra Rabha, Suluchan Rabha, Dibyajyuti Rabha, Bharat Rabha, Dhwanjen Rabha, Prafulla Rabha, Maheswar Rabha, Sarbananda Rabha, and Banikanta Rabha attended the convention. But the Rabha representatives alleged that the AASU leader did not paid sufficient attention to the Rabha leaders in that convention.⁴ Even they did not receive the Rabha leaders properly for which they felt humiliated and left the meeting in half way. In their back journey they sat for a meeting in Kaziranga, where they decided to hold a Rabha National convention to discuss the political rights of the indigenous Rabha community in Assam. Accordingly on 18th December they held a public meeting in Krishnai in Goalpara under the presidentship of Sarat Ch. Rabha. In that meeting it was resolved to raise the demand for an Autonomous District Council for the Rabhas in the areas from Dhupdhara (Goalpara) in the east to Jairamkuchi (Goalpara) in the west. This was the beginning of the demand for political autonomy by the Rabhas in Assam. In that meeting an organization “All Goalpara District Rabha National Council” was formed under the presidentship of Dhaneswar Rabha and Suluchan Rabha as Secretary to serve the political interest of the Rabha community. On 11th February 1989, the Rabha National Council convened a Rabha national convention in Salpara (Krisnai), in Goalpara District. In that convention the Rabha leaders unanimously supported the resolution

⁴ Kuswadhvaj Rongkho, former President of Sixth Schedule Demand Committee, in an article published on 15th September 2009 in *Singi Khurang*, a bilingual(Rabha and Assamese language) newspaper published from Goalpara, leveled this criticism.

of Autonomous District Council for the Rabhas in Assam. To fight for this demand they formed an organization “Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Demand Committee” (RHACDC). The first Executive Committee of the RHACDC was formed with Dhaneswar Rabha (President), Listi Ram Rabha and Praneswar Rabha (Vice President), Suluchan Rabha (Secretary), Bichitra Kr. Rabha, Banikanta Rabha and Baluram Rabha (Assistant Secretary).

The RHACDC was formed as the leading organization of the Rabha autonomy movement. The RHACDC submitted the first memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam Prafulla Kr. Mahanta on 13-08-1989 demanding the creation of Rabha Hasong Autonomous District. However, the RHACDC during the period from 1989 to 1991 did not initiate any strong programme for their demand of autonomy except submitting a few memoranda to the Government of Assam. It was due to the close attachment of the RHACDC leaders with the A.G.P., the ruling party in the State. Later on, a convention of RHACDC was held on 21st - 22nd July 1992 in Krishnai, in Goalpara district, where the Executive Committee was reformed with Sarat Ch. Rabha as the President and Suluchan Rabha as the Secretary. These new leaders had initiated a strong campaign to generate the mass awareness among the common Rabha people so that a strong movement could be started to pressurize the Government for the sake of autonomy for the Rabhas. On 10th Nov. 1993 the RHACDC submitted a detailed memorandum to the then Chief Minister of Assam Hiteswar Saikia raising five main demands. These demands centered a round the creation of:

- the Rabha Hasong Autonomous State within the State of Assam, covering Joyramkuchi G.P. in Goalpara District to Dakhin Rani Mouza in Kamrup District;
- the Rabha Hasong Autonomous District within the District of Darrang;
- the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council within the Districts of Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Nalbari and Sonitpur; and
- the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Village Council in the Districts of Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Dhemaji, Nowgaon, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Karbi Anglong and Demoria areas of Kamrup.
- In addition there was a demand for the Reservation of 5 (five) seats for the Rabhas in the Bodoland Autonomous Council.

(Source: Memorandum submitted to the Chief Minister of Assam by the Rabha Hasong Demand Committee on 10-11-1993 at Dispur, Guwahati, Assam)

In this memorandum it was stated that “.....we are demanding for creation of Rabha Hasong Autonomous State under the Article 244(A) and 275 (A) and Six Schedule of the Indian Constitution to protect our Identity, Language and cultural heritage and to secure justice. We want to enjoy the constitutional right, equal status, opportunities and basic human right and liberties just like the other tribes of India have enjoyed.” (**Memorandum submitted on 10-11-1993**) Further, it demanded creation of 12 new Assembly constituencies and 2 Parliamentary constituencies in the proposed Rabha Hasong Autonomous State such as: 1) Rani, 2) Barduar 3) Pathan 4) Bogai (Bongaon) 5) Luki (Boko) 6) Bikali (Dhupdhaa) 7) Thekasu 8) Bodahapur 9) Kalyanpur 10) Bardamal 11) Baida and 12) Panisali (Jayramkuchi). The Parliamentary constituencies are- 1) Bogai (Boko) and 2) Thekasu (Dudhnoi).

3:2:1 Rationale for the Autonomy Demand

In the memorandum, the RHACDC highlighted the following as the basis for the growth of autonomy demand for the Rabhas.

(a) Historical: The RHACDC cited historical evidences of existence of Rabha ethnic territory in the Southern bank of the river Brahmaputra. It alleged that the caste Hindu Assamese snatched away the territorial supremacy of the Mongoloid Ethnic Groups through the process of assimilation and engulfment since Independence of India. They stated in the memoranda that “... in South Goalpara and South Kamrup District the indigenous Rabha people were the master till this region was annexed to British India. Even the foothills which are known as “B” Mahal under the present state of Meghalaya are occupying by the Rabhas as majority. But now the so-called artificial and chauvinist Assamese has unjustifiably snatched away the reign of power from the Mongoloid Ethnic Group through poisonous process of silent assimilation and engulfment since Independence of India.” (Memorandum submitted on 10-11-1993)

(b) Political Factors: The memorandum stated that despite the active participation of the Rabhas in the India’s freedom movement, they were deprived of their political rights in the post-independence period. Politically and administratively the Rabha inhabited areas were rearranged in such a way that they became politically less significant in these areas in terms of electoral politics. Moreover, it was alleged that they were being deprived of the

government jobs. It accused the Governments for allowing the influx of the people from Bangladesh in to the Rabha inhabited areas and regretted that the census reports did not show the exact population of the Rabha tribe. In the memoranda it is stated that “the Assam Government is not at all interested to protect the interest of the Rabha. ... the State Government fails to give opportunity to the Rabhas for the employment in different jobs, they freely allow to influx the people in to the Rabha Population pockets. In this way the Government of Assam is fully exploiting the Rabha population in Assam.” (Memorandum submitted on 10-11-1993)

(c) Problem of Land Ownership: It was argued that the problem of land ownership was a serious issue for the Rabhas. Most of the people depended on agriculture for their livelihood. It was alleged that the Chapter-X of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, which provided for the protection of the tribal land, proved to be a farce and meaningless, as the provisions of the Act were not enforced sincerely by the State Government. Rather the Government official infringed the provisions of the Act by allowing illegal encroachments in the protected tribal Belt and Blocks.

(d) Socio Economic Backwardness: The RHACDC felt that the Rabhas were converted to the caste Hindu Assamese through acts of conspiracy by Assamese ruling elites. Such conversion was viewed aggression of the Assamese nationalism. It was further alleged that the Rabhas were been deprived of opportunities for their economic upliftment.

(e) Educational and Cultural Backwardness: The RHACDC alleged that the Govt of Assam since independence did not take steps towards the protection of the Rabha Language and culture. Although the AGP led State Government in 1988 promised to introduce the Rabha language at the primary levels in the schools of Rabha inhabited areas and assured to appoint 70 teachers in Rabha language, but the Govt. decision was not implemented in time. The memorandum urged the Government to protect the rich Rabha culture, art and music, dresses etc.

Subsequently, several memoranda were submitted by the RHACDC and the ARSU demanding for the political autonomy of the Rabhas. But the State Government did not show its concern about these demands. Such Government apathy towards the demands of the Rabha organizations infuriated the community. Felt cornered they resolved to undertake a series of agitational programmes to pressurize the Government to accept their demands. The ARSU on 7th and 8th August 1993 convened a meeting at the premises of Boko Girls High

School, Kamrup, to discuss the future action plan on their demands. In that meeting the ARSU formed the women organization of the Rabhas called All Rabha Women Council (ARWC). Moreover they took the following agitational programmes in that meeting:

- 1) 15th August 1993, Boycott of Independence Day celebration
- 2) 20th to 29th August 1993 Publicity Drive
- 3) 4th September 1993 24 hours blockade of natural resources
- 4) 4th October 1993 12 hours road blockade
- 5) 5th November 1993 12 hrs Rabha Hasong Bandh
- 6) 24th November 1993 public gathering at the judges field

During this high stage of the movement, the AGP Government tried to weaken it by dividing the leaders of the movement. It was alleged that a parallel organization was formed in the name of “Rabha Yuba Chatra Samaj” at the patronage of the ruling AGP party by taking some Rabha youths loyal to the party. Moreover, it was due to the obstruction from the ruling AGP workers in the Goalpara district, the ARSU could not form the district committee.

3:2:2 Government Response to the Rabha Autonomy Demand:

After a relentless campaign by the ARSU, the RHACDC, the Rabha Women Council (RWC), etc. a general awareness was created among the Rabha society regarding the political demand for autonomy of the community. Meanwhile, Chief Minister of Assam called for a discussion with the movement leaders on 10th November 1993. This was the first negotiation between the Rabha leaders and the Government on the issue of political autonomy of the Rabhas, consequent upon which a committee under the chairmanship of the then Revenue Minister Mukut Sarma was appointed to decide the matter of granting political autonomy to the Rabhas. The Rabha leaders representing the committee were Sarat Rabha, Dhaneswar Rabha, Sabyasashi Rabha, Suluchan Rabha from the RHDC, and Ganga Raj Rabha and Tulsi Manas Rabha from the ARSU, Dwijen Rabha from All Rabha National Council, Bubul Rabha the adviser of ARSU. In course of the discussion in the committee held on December 14, 1993 and December 30, 1993 the Rabha leaders demanded the creation of a Rabha Hasong Autonomous State, taking 852 villages (Revenue and Forest) and constitution of

District Council in Dhubri and Darang districts for the Rabhas. The Government did not agree to the demands as a result of which the discussion ultimately failed.

While the negotiations were going on, there was a split in the Rabha leadership. A section of the Rabha leaders remained firm on their demand, while other group mostly having close relationship with the ruling Congress Party were in favour of accepting whatever the Government agreed to give. Some educated peoples of the Rabha community had criticized the role of the pro-Government leaders comprehending that these leaders basically supported the Government just to gain the political power, by realizing the possibility of formation of an Autonomous Council for the Rabhas.⁵ Taking the advantage of the split in the Rabha leadership, the Government of Assam signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU), which came to be known as the Rabha Accord of March 10, 1995, with that section of Rabha leaders, who accepted the Government position. An Autonomous Council was constituted in the nomenclature of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council in accordance with the Rabha Accord. (The details of the Accord will be discussed in the next chapter). The signatories of the Rabha Accord were Sarat Rabha, the president of RHDC, Suluchan Rabha, Secretary of RHDC, Ganga Raj Rabha, the president of ARSU, Ratan Ch. Rabha, Secretary of the ARSU.

There was a mixed reaction among the different Rabha leaders regarding the Rabha Accord and for the newly constituted Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council. A section of the Rabha leaders were not satisfied with the nature of autonomy granted to the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council. To them, real autonomy for the Rabha community still remained illusive even after long years of struggle. The president of the RHDC Sarat Rabha, one of the signatories, was not satisfied with the types of autonomy granted to the Council. In an interview, he remarked: “We got child’s autonomy” (published in a local megazine “Samannay” under the heading “Prasangakrame Rabha Hasong”, published by Jyoti Printers, Badalmari, Goalpara, 1st Year, Volume-2, May-June, 1995). On the other hand, a section of the Rabha leaders were jubilant, after signing of the Accord. Most of them were the loyal partymen of the ruling Congress party. Sabya Sashi Rabha, a loyal Congressman, was appointed as the Chief Councilor in the first interim Council, instead of Sarat Ch. Rabha, the President of RHDC, who had the support of all Rabha leaders for the position. It testified to the common perception that the leaders of the tribal ethnic movements for political autonomy

⁵ Kushadwaj Rongkho, “Rajnoitik Shorojantror Grashot Rabha Janajati”, *Singi Khurang*, 15th October 2009, opined that because of their support to the Government, the leaders from this group were nominated by the State Government to the Interim Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council.

were serving their political self-interest in the name of autonomy for the people of their respective communities.

After signing of the Rabha Accord, the division among the leaders became a matter of fact both politically and ideologically. The unhappy section of the leadership convened a public meeting in Dudhnoi on 8th August 1995 in which many Rabha leaders from South Kamrup and Goalpara districts participated. Besides, the leaders of RHDC, the ARSU and the RWC also participated. In the meeting the Rabha leaders criticized the pro-Congress Rabha leaders who run the Interim Rabha Hasong Council, ignoring the public sentiment and for their act of self-aggrandizement. In that meeting a new political platform was formed in the name of “Rabha Hasong Protection Council” (RHPC). Dwijen Rabha was elected as the President and Sarat Rabha the Secretary of the newly formed organization. In that meeting, Sarat Rabha announced the dissolution of the RHDC. The main objectives of the newly formed RHPC were:

- to ensure socio-cultural, economic and educational development of the Rabhas;
- to make aware the Rabha people about their political rights and to fight unitedly for securing such rights; and
- to ensure unity and peace among different communities living in the Rabha Hasong area.

The RHPC became popular in a very short span of time. In 1996, during the general election to the Assam Legislative Assembly the RHPC declared conditional support to the opposition alliance led by AGP with other left parties. On 21st April 1996 the RHPC convened a public meeting at Dudhnoi in which the opposition alliance leader Prafulla Kr. Mahanta attended along with the CPI and the CPI(M) leaders Bhugeshwar Dutta and Hemen Das. In that meeting the RHPC published a demand charter on the basis of which they offered support to the opposition alliance. The demands were:

- to fix the boundary of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council in the areas;
 - a) from Rani of South Kamrup to Jairamkuchi of Goalpara district;
 - b) all the Rabha villages falling under the Tribal Sub Plan area; and
 - c) all the Forest villages inhabited by the Rabhas.

- to provide more legislative and financial autonomy to the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council with the power of separate budgeting.
- to formulate a new land policy to protect the Tribal Land.
- to dissolve the Interim Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council and reconstitution of the Council by the democratic means of holding election as provided in the Rabha Accord.

After the general election in 1996 the opposition alliance led by AGP came to power in the State. The new Government, following the demand of its supporting group RHPC, dissolved the interim Rabha Hasong Council led by the Congressmen Sabya Sashi Rabha on 21st April 1997 and formed another interim Council appointing Sarat Rabha as the Chief Executive Councilor. In this way, the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Councils become a centre of fulfilling political interests of the loyal party workers of the ruling party in the State.

Later on, the Rabha leaders were divided into two opposite political groups on the basis of their political allegiance to the two main political parties of the State, namely the Congress and the AGP. They were affiliated to these main ruling parties in the State only to attain the political power in the interim Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council. These former Rabha Hasong Autonomy Demand Committee (RHADC) leaders formed two opposite organizations namely the Rabha Peoples Conference (RPC) formed by Congress affiliated group and the Rabha Hasong Protection Council (RHPC) formed by the AGP loyal group. During this period the other Rabha organizations like the ARSU, the Rabha Women Council and the Rabha Sahitya Sabha did not get involved in the politics of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council. Instead, the ARSU sometimes made efforts to unite the politically divided Rabha leaders but without success.

Taking advantage of the internal cleavages among the agitation leaders, not only among the Rabhas but among all the three tribal communities namely the Tiwas, the Rabhas and the Mishings having their own Councils, the Government reduced these councils merely an alternative power centres to recruit their loyal party workers. The successive Governments in the State did not showed their interest to implement the provisions of the signed Accords and to transfer the powers for the sake of true autonomy to the Autonomous Councils. The Government ignored the core issues of the autonomy demands by these tribal communities, such as fixation of boundary of the autonomous council, protection of their land rights,

stopping encroachment in the tribal land, and protection of their language, culture and identity. Rather the tribal leaders, who were at the helms of the Councils, involved in huge corruption by siphoning off the money meant for the Council, allegedly at the patronage of the State Government. In such a situation, some organizations of all the three tribal communities i.e. the Tiwas, the Rabhas and the Mishings raised their voice for implementation of the provisions of the signed Accords and holding of elections to the Council to form the Councils democratically and for the inclusion of these tribal communities under the Sixth Schedule for the sake of real autonomy.

In the meantime, in 2003, the Government of India provided to the Bodos the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under the Sixth Schedule by constitutional amendment. This inspired the other plain tribal groups, such as, the Tiwas, the Rabhas and the Mishings, hitherto having their autonomous councils to demand for the inclusion in the Sixth Schedule.

In view of this development, and in order to initiate a strong democratic movement for attaining autonomy under the Sixth Schedule, and to protect the community interest of the Rabhas from the scourge of the narrow selfish political interest of some of their leaders, the ARSU convened a public meeting on 7th and 8th June 2003 at the premises of Dudhnoi College in which a new organization was formed in the name of “Six Schedule Demand Committee” (SSDC) to fight for the demand of political autonomy of the Rabhas under the Sixth Schedule.

As already mentioned, due to the growing demands from the organizations representing the Tiwas, the Rabhas and the Mishings the Government of appointed a ministerial sub-committee under the Chairmanship of Bhumidhar Barman to study and recommend on the feasibility of inclusion of the Tiwa, the Rabha and the Mising Autonomous Councils under the Sixth Schedule. The newly formed SSDC of the Rabhas submitted its first memorandum to the ministerial sub-committee on 9th June 2004. It was a joint memorandum, signed by some other Rabha organizations, such as, the ARSU, the Rabha Women Council (RWC) and the Rabha Sahitya Sabha (RSS) in which the following demands were raised:

- inclusion of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council into the Sixth Schedule taking the boundary from Jayramkuchi of Goalpara district to Beltola Mouza of the Kamrup district;

- constitution of four (4) districts in the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council area with their headquarter at Rani, Bekeli (Boko), Thekasu (Dudhnoi) and Dodan (Baida);
- constitution of two (2) new parliamentary constituencies and ten (10) Legislative Assembly constituencies within the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council;
- creation of the Rabha Autonomous District Council in Darang District and Regional Council within the District of Dhubri, Kokrajhar and Nalbari, creation of the Village Council in the District of Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Dhemaji, Noagaon, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Karbi Anglong and in the Dimoria area of the Kamrup District; and
- nomination of a member in the APSC from the Rabha community with special provision.

(Source: Memorandum submitted by the Rabha Students Union, Sixth Schedule Demand Committee, All Rabha Women Council and All Rabha Sahitya Sabha to the Chairman, The Cabinet Sub-Committee, Government of Assam on 9th June, 2004 at Dispur, Guwahati)

In the memorandum, the SSDC regretted the Government apathy towards the solution of the long standing demands of the Rabha community, despite the continuous struggle carried out by different Rabha organizations. It expressed serious concern for the non appointment of the teachers in Rabha language, continuous inflow and settlement of illegal immigrant Muslims into the Rabha inhabited areas, which allegedly caused imbalance in demography and disharmony in the socio-economic life of the Rabha community. Thus, the SSDC demanded for inclusion of the Rabha language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. They alleged that after the delimitation of Assam Legislative Assembly constituencies in 1977, the Rabhas became politically less influential in the constituencies falling in their inhabited areas since they had been scattered into several Assembly Constituencies. Therefore, they demanded for re-delimitation of the Assembly constituencies' falling in the Rabha inhabited areas particularly in the Kamrup and Goalpara districts. The SSDC demanded for creation of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council under the provisions of Article 224 (A) and 275 (A) of the Indian Constitution comprising an area of 3261 sq km falling in Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam with 1047 Revenue Villages, 52 Forest Villages, having 67.49% Rabha population in that area. The SSDC expressed its strong

dissatisfaction to the Government of Assam for non implementation of the Rabha Accord 1995 and had demanded for immediate demarcation of boundaries of the RHAC, holding election of the Council, actual transfer of powers over 34 subjects and handover of authority of corresponding 34 departments with financial allocations.

(Memorandum submitted on 9th June, 2004 at Dispur, Guwahati)

3:2:3 Report of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Plain Tribes Autonomy (2003):

In a significant political development the ministerial sub-committee headed by Bhumidhar Barman submitted its interim report in 2005. The committee made some vital recommendations for the autonomy of the Rabhas, the Tiwas and the Mishings. The committee observes that after the creation of BTAD under the Six Schedule of the Indian Constitution, there was perhaps no justification for not giving the same status to the other three autonomous councils. The Government of Assam has agreed on principle that the three Autonomous Councils- Mishing Autonomous Council, Tiwa Autonomous Council and Rabha Autonomous Council should be included in the Six Schedule. The Chief Minister announced this on several occasions. As the matter required amendment of the constitution which demanded a lengthy process involving passing of a Bill in the Parliament the committee, interim report made the following recommendations for the establishment of democratically elected councils, to accelerate development works and to protect the interest of the tribal communities.

The Recommendations are:

- The area of the Mishing Autonomous Council, the Tiwa Autonomous Council and the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council should be notified immediately on the basis of Core Area and Satellite area.
- The three autonomous councils had been functioning for over almost eight years by the Interim Councils (formed by the Government with some nominated persons from the respective community), which were supposed to be very short-term measures. Therefore, the Government should hold elections to these Autonomous Councils immediately.
- The Government should work out the mechanism for entrusting the subjects to be administered by the Councils.

- All the funds to the Councils should be, as in the case of BTAD, released through ‘Single Window’ system from a single budget head, to be provided in the budget of the Welfare of Plain Tribes & Backward Community department. (Interim Report of the Ministerial Sub Committee on inclusion of Mising, Rabha and Tiwa Autonomous Councils in the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, Government of Assam, Dispur, Guwahati, Assam, March, 2005)

In 2007, in October in a joint discussion between the Assam Government and the Rabha organizations, the Government assured the Rabha leaders to send the proposal to the Central Government recommending the inclusion of the Rabhas in the Sixth Schedule and to hold the election of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council within 31st March 2008. In the meeting the Assam Government was represented by the Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, Himanta Biswa Sarma, Minister of Health and Education Department, Pramila Rani Brahma, Minister of Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes Department, Chandan Brahma, Minister of Panchayat and Rural Development Department.

In spite of these developments, the Government of Assam did not implement the promises made to the Rabha leaders. Alleged lack of insincerity on the part of the Government infuriated the Rabha leaders. They considered it as utter negligence of the Government towards the genuine demands of the tribal societies in Assam. In November 2012, a meeting was held at Jana Mandir field in Dudhnoi, where organizations of different communities living in the Rabha Hasong area were represented. The meeting was convened by the ARSU, the RWC, the SSDC, the Rabha Sahitya Sabha and the All Rabha Kristi Sanmilian to auger a joint movement for the inclusion of Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council area in the Sixth Schedule, to ensure equal development and equal protection of all the communities living in the Rabha Hasong area. In the meeting a resolution was adopted to form a “Rabha Hasong Joint Movement Committee” (RHJMC) represented by 34 organisations of the RHAC area.

In December 2012 the Government of Assam decided to hold the Panchayat election in Assam. This created a legal constitutional crisis in the Autonomous Council areas. In the Autonomous Council Act of 1995, under para-5, it was mentioned that “the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 shall not be extended in the Autonomous Council areas”. Therefore, the Rabha Hasong Joint Movement Committee (RHJMC) vehemently opposed the Government decision of holding the Panchayat election in the Council area

and demanded immediate election of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council. In February 2013 violence was erupted in the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council area. The Government forcefully tried to hold the Panchayat election in the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council area. Violent protests following, resulting in the death of about 12 persons, for which the Government had to suspend the election. Due to the tough stand of RHJMC the Government of Assam at last decided to hold the election of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council in April 2013. The RHJMC fought all the 36 Council constituencies and won 30 seats. The major issues of the RHJMC stated in the election leaflets were:

- constitution of a strong Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council ensuring equal development and equal rights of all the sections of the people, living in the Rabha Hasong Autonomous council area;
- accountability, transparency and commitment for the development in the functioning of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council;
- effective measures for enjoyment of the right over land by all the sections of the people living in the Council area;
- improvement of the basic facilities of education, pure drinking water, electricity etc. in the Council area;
- development of the weaving culture and in agriculture sector; and
- employment of the kins of the Rabha martyrs.

(Source: From the election leaflet published by the RHJMC in 2013)

After winning the majority in the Council election the RHJMC formed the Executive Council of the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council. Thereafter, there is no agitational activity and peace returned to the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council area.