

Socio- Cultural Aspects of the Rabha Community: A Study in Western Assam

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Abstract:

One of Assam's significant plains tribes is the Rabha. Although they are classified as Tibeto-Burman communities linguistically, they belong to the Mongoloid group of people ethnographically. Their language is a part of the Tibeto-Burman group's Bodo branch. But because they speak Assamese at home and in social settings, the majority of the Rabha group has lost its native tongue and now refers to itself as an Assamese-speaking community. There are various sub-branches of the Rabha tribe, including the Pati, Rangdani, Maitori, Totla, Bitolia, Dahuri, and Shonga. The Pati groups, who have entirely lost their native speech and are now identifying as Assamese speakers, make up the majority of the Rabha population. The Rabhas are dispersed over the unincorporated areas of Goalpara, South Kamrup, Meghalaya, Darrang, Garo Hills, and other places. The Rabhas are carefree and jolly type of people. The hardships of their economic lives have considerably influenced their social life. They celebrate several fairs, festivals, rituals, which have some connection with their traditional beliefs, customs and religions.

Key words: *Rabha people, society, culture, customs, beliefs.*

Date of Submission: 02-01-2023

Date of Acceptance: 15-01-2023

I. Introduction:

The Rabha language belongs to Bodo sub branch of Tibeto-Burman language and so it is a sister language of the Boro language. Rabha does not have its own scripts and so the Assamese script has been adopted to write this language.

The Rabhas are primarily found in Goalpara district, the northern Garo Hills, and Kamrup district, which is on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. The Rabha people are dispersed over the districts of Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, and Darrang. The Rabha population is 296.189 people, or 8.6% of all Tribal people, according to the 2011 Census Report.

The Rabhas have accepted Assamese as a working language for their overall development and survival. They have also accepted various cultural and ritual functions of the Assamese society. Linguistically, the Rabhas are only of two types: Bilingual and Monolingual.

Objectives:

The objective of the study is to document the social and cultural activities of the Rabha community.

Social Aspects of the Rabhas:

• Dwelling and Livelihood Pattern :

A main house, a guest house, an outside house for the adult family members, and a kitchen shed are the typical number of homes rooms in a Rabha house. These houses are all built on the courtyard's four sides. A cow shed and a granary are kept in addition to these four dwellings in order to store the paddy. Some of them even construct a separate, three-part poultry house with a length of 13 to 15 metres each called "Noksrab," "Tograb," and "Rosinok."

Like the rest of the plains tribes, the Rabhas also depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Those who reside on the bordering areas with Meghalaya resort to shifting cultivation i, e 'Jhum' to a certain extent. The Rabhas have marginal land holdings and some live below the poverty line.

Their main meal is rice. They also enjoy eating rice beer, pork, and dried fish powder. A positive development is the stringent enforcement of the excise law, which is steadily reducing the consumption of rice beer. Of course, they occasionally consume rice beer that they make themselves. It benefits the socioeconomic development of society.

The women of Rabha are skilled weavers. The family's clothing, including that of the males and children, is made by them. The 'Rifan' (women's clothing worn in the lower region of the body) and 'Kambung' make up the women's dresses (cloth worn by Rabha women in upper part of the body). Men's apparel consists of "Pajar" (a towel worn as a muffler), "Phali" (a scarf with embroidery), and "Pasara" (a long scarf made of endi yarn, with the rest being made of fine cotton). People are accustomed to modern clothing today.

- **Marriage:**

In Rabha society a person may marry his fathers' sisters' daughter or mothers' brothers' daughter. A widow may also get married if she wants to, but she is only permitted to wed the late husband's younger brother. However, the Rabhas often do not support such unions. After the passing of his wife, a man is permitted to wed her younger sister. A widow forfeits all claims to her ex-"property" husband's if she forms new marriage ties. The Rabha culture adheres to the monogamy norm. Although divorce is legal, these instances are uncommon in Rabha society. Child marriage is extremely uncommon. Girls can only get married after reaching puberty.

It is said that originally the Rabhas were identified as a matriarchal tribe. This belief is based on the prevailing custom of the female live and practice of inducting the children of a marriage into the 'Barai' of the mother, it means that if the fathers 'Barai', happens to be 'Rongkho'; and mothers; 'Charchung' barai then the children's' barai will identify as mothers' barai.

The Rabha family is now based on the patriarchal system. But the influence of the neighbouring khasis and the Garos on the Rabhas has been still observed. But the matrilineal system is not a common feature in the Rabha society.

- **Religion and Rituals :**

Religion is founded on conviction. Belief is the idea that there is a higher power at work, either to the benefit or harm of men. "One of humankind's oldest and most important organisations is religion. Religious ideas have always had a significant influence on society, and they significantly influence how people behave.

The Rabhas follow Animism. Animism is the notion that there are spiritual beings present in all objects, both living and inanimate. Endless Opinion is a better source for this quote: The religion of the Rabhas is definitely animistic in its broad forms, but some Patis are claimed to have a tendency toward Shakta-style Hinduism.

Religion plays a vital role in the lives of the Rabha people. Animal sacrifice is a common characteristic of the rituals. At any religious ceremony offering a pigs, goats etc. is quite common.

Cultural Aspects:

- **Fairs and Festivals:**

Numerous fairs and festivals are observed by the Rabha people, and many of these have ties to their ancient values and traditions. "Dadan mela" is the name of the Rabha people's most well-known fair. About 35 kilometres to the southwest of Goalpara Town is where this fair is conducted at "Ronchoi." There is a "Dadan" temple. According to the Assamese calendar, the two-day fair takes place in February. The Rabha people frequently attend this fair, even travelling from remote villages. They perform hymns to "Dadan" and "Marukhetri" (The great heroes of the Rabhas).

There, a large majority of women in stunning traditional attire congregate. They commemorate "Risi-Bai," a revered Rabha goddess, during ceremonial worship in the temple. At the start of the fair, musicians play their instruments as they walk in a procession with the priests, who are followed by a large throng.

The people are in a good mood and enjoy the fair while sipping handmade rice beer called "Janga." The evenings feature folk dancing. To the tune of the "Kham" (traditional Rabha drum) and "Mukbangshi," men and women perform this dance simultaneously as well as occasionally in separate groups (flute). This fosters a joyful and jovial mood.

Their main communal celebrations, known as "Khokchi" or "Baikho," are based on their own religious ideas and ideals. This spring celebration is observed from the middle of April through the middle of May. The Pati Rabhas combine their event with "Langa puja." Additionally, they celebrate two other holidays: "Domasi" (harvesting on January 14) and "Mambe-Bakai" (the start of planting in March/April).

The 'Baikho' or 'Khokchi', puja is observed by the Rangdani and Maitori communities with the goal of appeasing the Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity, Baikho. In majority of the villages, 'Hachang puja' has taken the place of this celebration at a designated location known as 'Hachang than'. During this event, young people sing the traditional song 'Sathar geet' or 'Khokchi geet' to express their love and affection for their loved ones.

Another folk festival of the Pati Rabhas is 'Langa puja'. 'Langa' means Mahadeva, one of the Trinity of the Hindu Mythology. There are many other deities, such as: Dhan-kuber, Thakurani, Dudhkumar, etc. The deities are represented by different pieces of stones for each of them. This festival is observed in the month of April or May, either in a forest area or on the bank of a nearby river. Langa is propitiated to have profuse yield

of crop as well as to get rid of all the evil influences that might be looming large over men and animals in the year just beginning.

If there is anything that can be said about the Rabhas' entertainment, it must be that dancing and drinking seem to be a big part of many social gatherings and religious events. The folk dances of the Rabhas and the Garo share some characteristics. Such a folk dance is "Dhawa," which resembles the Garo folk dance "Grika" in several ways.

II. Methodology:

Two types of method are taken for the study .i.e Primary and Secondary. Primary study is based on Field Survey and data is collected on random basis with the help of informants of various aspects and from various age groups. For secondary data, I collected some books, Journals, Magazines, Bulletines etc. intensively.

III. Findings:

- The Rabhas are bilingual. They speak their own Rabha language and also speak Assamese language.
- The Rabha society appears to be multidimensional in character as we see them through their socio-religious, socio-cultural perspectives.
- The conversion of a sizeable section of the tribe to Christianity is another phenomenon.
- Animal sacrifice is a common characteristic of Rabha Community.
- Rice beer is used in every ritual.

IV. Conclusion:

However, it is evident that as social mobility, communication, and education have increased, the Rabha villages have been completely eliminated from socioeconomic life. Due of this effect, people are drawn to careers in a variety of fields. In both the academic and technical domains, it is crucial.

I sincerely hope and declare that the younger generation will step forward and conduct new research on the Rabha people, their dialects, folk traditions, etc. For both the nation and the Rabha community, it would be tremendously beneficial.

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Dr.Jaba Thakuria, "Socio- Cultural Aspects of the Rabha Community: A Study in Western Assam." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 28(1), 2023, pp. 01-03.