

LIVELIHOOD CONDITIONS OF THE RABHAS OF COOCH BEHAR :AN ETHNIC AND SOCIO-CULTURAL APPRAISAL



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ABSTRACT:

Rabhas are one of the important but little known scheduled tribe community residing in a pocket located in the northeastern corner of India, known for their unique customs, tradition and beliefs. Rabhas have gained enormous popularity for their unique and distinct social customs and traditions and have become the subject of great interest among geographers, sociologists and researchers all over the globe. They reside mainly in Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam and Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal. They like to dwell in small villages. They have many significant habitual practices with conspicuous ethnic and linguistic characters. They can be parted into two groups on the basis of their occupancy like: the forest dwelling Rabhas and the village dwelling Rabhas. Of these, the later group has intermingled with other racial clusters prevalent in this geographical setting and has undergone acculturation. On the other hand, the former group still practices rudimentary rituals and customs pertaining to them. This paper envisage an overall picture of the livelihood patterns of the Rabhas with special emphasis on their age- old customs and traditions followed by them.

Keywords: Scheduled Tribe, Habitual Practices, Dwelling, Racial Clusters, Livelihood.

INTRODUCTION:

Rabhas are of Indo-Mongoloid ethnic origin and have similarities with other members of Bodo group such as Garos, Kachari, Mech, Koch, Hajong and others. They have penetrated through the mountain passes of the North Eastern frontiers and came to settle in the mainland of India. Initially they distributed themselves to the mountainous ambience of Tripura, Manipur, Meghalaya and some of them also adapted to the fertile plains of Assam. Presently, they are found in Assam, Tripura, Manipur, Meghalaya and West Bengal. In West Bengal, the Rabhas have conglomerated in the district of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. So, the entire area of the Dooars may be referred to as the homeland of the Rabhas.

OBJECTIVES IF THE STUDY:

The objectives of the study are:

- a) To find out the socio-economic condition of Rabhas of the study area.
- b) To analyze the changing pattern of population of Rabhas after independence.
- c) To identify the ethnic composition and occupational structure of Rabhas of the study area.
- d) To analyze the religious and social customs of Rabhas.
- e) To suggest different strategies for development of Rabhas in this region.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The main data source of this study is field survey or primary data and the other sources of secondary data are District Census Handbook from Census of India and Office of the Director, Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics, Govt. of West Bengal, various books, articles and some much updated information from various websites, concerned with my topics. To supplement the information collected through interviews, indirect and informal discussion were also carried out with the respondent and other members of the family. The data collected was statistically treated, using statistical software SPSS and various cartographical representations.

ABOUT THE STUDY AREA:

In West Bengal, about 65% of the Rabhas reside in Jalpaiguri District, nevertheless Cooch Behar deserve special mention as they have settled in the villages of Bhariya, Haripur, Bansraja, Talliguri, Bonchamari, Rasikbil, Chengtimari, Takoymari, Paglikuti, Madhur Bhasa under Bakshirhat Police Station and Chhatrampur village under Tufangunge Police Station. The whole area of Eastern and Western Dooars, may be termed as the Cradle land of the Rabhas. The Rabhas refer to themselves as Koch and declare a connection to the historical Koch Kingdom.

ETHNIC STRUCTURE:

Rava or Rabha tribes of North Bengal are no exception a deep-rooted faith that they have inherited from their forefathers that revolve around the world of deities and spirits. Like most tribal societies they have their set of community activities to ensure safety, security and prosperity. Rabha family is fundamentally matrilineal. The female individual holds higher position in the family as well as in the society. According to the matrilineal custom, the new borns are identified and named as per their maternal 'Housuk' or 'Gotras'. People having identical Housuk or Gotra are treated as close kins having ancestral blood relation. So, marriage is prohibited among people having same Housuk. There are many Housuks like Mouji, Mouji Pran, Moujidong, Moujismanpar, Bandha, Bandhadhay, Bankachag, Kattang, Houndoum, Kara Pouloung, Karalepa, Uni, Unichitak, etc.

According to Dr.Francis Buchanan, the aspects of socio- religious and material life of the Rabhas have similarities with those of the Pani-Koch. While E. Dalton argues that Rabhas and Hajongs are the branches of the Kachhari race and are also connected with the Garos. Furthermore he supports Dr.Buchanan’s opinion. A.Playfair pointed out that the Rabhas and the Garos have striking similarity in their dialects which might led one to think that at some point of time they lived in contact with each other. Many are of opinion that the Rabhas were known as the ‘Kochs’ since time immemorial. Presently, the Rabhas use the term ‘Kochs’ or ‘Kochas’ in order to refer to their own community, language and culture for example “Koch jati” (Koch race), “Kochakrou” (Koch language) and “Kochani Alekh Achar” (Koch art and culture).

POPULATION:

In India, according to 2011 census, 8.60 % of the 1210 million people belong to 705 S.Ts, 75 % of which have been declared as Primitive Tribal Groups (G.O.I, 2004).

Growth of Tribal Population in India

Year	Total Population(million)	S.T. Population(million)	% of S.T. Population to Total Population
1951	356	19	5.3
1961	439	30	6.90
1971	548	39	6.90
1981	685	54	7.90
1991	846	68	8.08
2001	1002	84	8.20
2011	1210	104	8.60

Source: **Census Reports.**

In West Bengal 47 tribes have been identified against 705 in India of which 19 are major. Tribal population has shown a declining trend i.e. 23.3% in 1961-71; 21.2% in 1971-81 and 20.88% in 1981-91. This declining trend of tribal population compared to the higher growth rate of general population in West Bengal has to be understood against the backdrop of continuous inflow of migrants from across the borders and out migration of a section of tribal population outside the state to the metropolises like Delhi and Mumbai in search for jobs.

The Rabhas in West Bengal has shown an increasing trend. The total number of Rabhas were 2,235 in 1971 which has increased to14,534 in 2001(i.e. an increase of 12,299 Rabha persons) showing 550.29% of increase. At the district levels the Rabhas in Cooch Behar (2,280 persons in 2001) and in Jalpaiguri (12,221 in 2001) have emerged as a major tribal group showing an increasing trend.

RABHA DIALECT:

Through there is cultural dynamism among the Rabhas found in all these areas but the Rabhas of West Bengal and Assam normally speak the local Bengali and Assamese dialects. The language spoken by the Rabhas, is also of the same name (i.e. Rabha language). Those who live in isolation especially in the forests and in the remote areas have mostly retained their original

Rabha dialect. Infact, Rabha is a Northeastern Indian language under South Asian linguistic area, surrounded by Indo-Aryan languages viz, Assamese and Bengali. Its dialects stand uniform with Garo, Bodo, Koch etc. and the Tibeto-Burman languages while it is varied with Khasi language of Austic origin. As remarked by George Abraham Grierson, Rabha language belongs to the Bodo Group of languages of Assam-Burmese branch. Genetically, Rabha language belongs to the Baric division of Barish section of the south- central group of languages(Shafer,1985) as well as to the Bodo sub-group of Assam-Burmese section of the Tibeto-Burman family(Grierson,1903).

OCCUPATIONAL PATTERN:

The conventional economy of the Rabhas in general, is based on agriculture, forest based activities and weaving. The Rabhas are closely linked with nature and for this reason their economy is largely forest based. Rabhas are familiar with hunting and in the past, the Rabhas used to practice shifting cultivation. Later, the colonial rulers forced them to leave the forests as the forest lands were being demarcated and protected legally and shifting cultivation was barred and started cultivation with plough. As a result, most of the displaced Rabhas either switched over to sedentary cultivation by becoming sharecroppers or took refuge in the forest villages as plantation labourers. After independence, Indian Government more or less sustained the same regal system of forest management, where the communities like Rabhas could not reclaim their rights to the forest. In recent time Rabhas have diversify in terms of occupation. They are found almost in all modern occupation as well, like teaching, doing official jobs etc. They also earn their living by kitchen farming, poultry and piggery along with working as daily wage labourers. Hunting has now become nominal due to forest laws and direct interference of the Government. Weaving was a traditional occupation of the Rabha women.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND SOCIAL CUSTOMS:

In primitive societies religion began as accumulation of ideas, attitudes, creeds and acts of supernaturalism, beyond the realm of the normal. In early tribal societies of the world, this elementary form of religion played a significant role in the life of the community. Today Rabhas practice a faith, which is basically a blend of some Hindu and a few animistic rituals. There are substantial differences in ritual practices among forest Rabhas and village Rabhas. The forest Rabhas follow conventional animistic practices tinged with some rituals of normal Hinduism. On the other hand village Rabhas have merged with local Hindus as far as their religious practices are concerned.

The Rabhas usually worship Shiva, Parbati, and Lakshmi as their major Gods and Goddesses. In addition are the deities Rungtuk and Basek, represented by two earthen pots of rice placed on the northern side of the store. These two deities are considered as the daughters of Rishi or Mahakal. Rungtuk and Basek are household deities and considered as the deities of wealth like the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi. These deities do not have any morpic figures. A red coloured earthen pitcher filled with rice represents the 'Rountuk Baye'. An egg is kept on neck of the pitcher. The foundation of 'Rountuk Baye' is strictly done by the female head of the family and she remains responsible for its worship throughout her life. The traditional priest 'Deosi' counts the auspicious day for lading the foundation of the 'Rountuk'. 'Chakat', the handmade liquor is the most important item offered to the Goddess. Like most tribal communities, dances and music play an important part in the life of the Rabhas. After every ritual they perform various dances to ingratiate their deities. Most Rabha women can both

dance and sing. 'Chika' (water) and 'Chakat' are also two very important items required during the funeral rights of a person after his death. The offering of 'Chika' and 'Chakat' is known as 'Chika Bouroui'. The 'Chika Bouroui' can only be performed by a person belonging to the same 'Housuk' or 'Gotra' as that of the deceased. Rabhas do not follow any Brahmanical methods of worship. There is also ritual sacrifice of certain birds and animals. The ritual sacrifice is an essential part of Rabha religious practices and blood- the essential element to appease their Gods. Usually they give up pigeons and fowls for their deities. Occasionally they sacrifice pigs too.

In recent times Hinduism and Christianity are the two major religions that have shaped the Rabha community. The influence of Christianity is very much seen among them as they have gained education through the Missionaries in some areas. The matrilineal society gives the males enough independence to choose their dress. The female members on the contrary wear 'Lufun' (a self made, hand-woven piece of cloth), 'Kambang' and 'Fakchek' (usually worn on the upper part of the body). The silver made ornaments are most popular among the Rabha women. Some of them are known – 'Chandrahari', 'Labak', 'Sukimala', 'Boungta' etc. In some pockets of North Bengal Rabhas are still trying to preserve their traditional ways of life. It is a struggle to maintain the age-old practices of their forefathers without turning away from the fruits of modernity. Only time can reveal the outcome of this social metamorphosis-taking place in the tribal heartland of North Bengal.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

Rabha people have now come in direct contact of the Hindu majority, as a result of which there have been various socio- cultural transformation among them. The traditional livelihood pattern has been modified to a greater extent. The factors responsible for transformation can be broadly classed into two groups- Traditional and Modern. The traditional processes include the concepts like Hinduization, Sanskritisation and tribe-caste continuum etc. While the Modern processes includes factors like Christianity, urbanization and industrialization. Tribal development, community development schemes, modernized education, communication and administration are of recent origin. Nevertheless, they have retained the principal elements of their ways of life. Their demographic trends as per census records have relieved us to say that unlike the general declining trend of the population growth rates of the tribes in North Bengal, the Rabhas have shown an increasing trend over time.

CONCLUSION:

With the passage of time strong initiatives have been taken by the govt. as well as by the nongovernmental organizations to develop the socio-economic condition of the Rabhas. Many approaches of tribal development have been taken into consideration in order to develop their standard of living. They have recently come in direct contact of higher education also through tribal school in their villages. It is expected that in the near future Rabha people will be more illuminated by the light of education as a result of which they will give up their typical tribal superstitions and will also be more interested in a better standard of living.

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