CHAPTER - 9
THE RABHA CASE

I. A Background Note:

The Rabhas are divided into a number of groups with separate identities although all the groups except the Rangdanis and the Maitoris have veered away from their tribal moorings and adopted the modes and mores of their non-tribal neighbours in various degrees. The Pati Rabhas who represent the most acculturated section are numerically the strongest among the various groups. It is almost impossible to find out when this process of acculturation had started but from all accounts it can be guessed that it must be at least a hundred years old. There is also no record of any large-scale proselytization among the Rabhas. But whatever the factor or factors might have been, the process of change has effected almost all the Rabha groups except the Rangdanis, the Maitoris, the Dahiris and the Koches, who still retain the language and also the older beliefs and customs.

As the Pati Rabha division is numerically very strong, so naturally in most of the public issues they represent the Rabha community as a whole. For this reason the other divisions have also been greatly influenced by the Pati Rabhas. The acculturated nature of the Rabha community as a whole has been visible in many aspects of their life including economy, religion, material culture, social norms, language and so on.
It may be pointed out that the areas with Rabha concentration in the erstwhile Goalpara district were under the zamindari system and as such, the Rabhas there had been effected by the revenue and administrative systems associated with zamindari. Some Rabhas held offices under the zamindars and enjoyed prestige and power attached to such offices. They also used surnames indicating the offices held by them, such as Sarkar and Patgiri. This is a feature of the life of the Rabhas not present in any other tribal community taken up for our study.

Again the zamindars of the Goalpara region had imbibed various elements of Bengali culture, including language and life style, which was followed by other sections of the land owning gentry. This had influenced the ryots - including the Rabhas – to a considerable extent. As such, traces of such influence are still discernible among the Rabhas of the older generation. However, the new generation has overcome that tendency and it aligns itself with Assamese language and culture.

The Rabha villages that we have covered for our field study are as follows:

Dappara, Beldengpara, Rongpathara, Sarakpara, Siluk Bhakrapara, Kamarbari, Khara Halgiripara, (all from South Goalpara district); Hahara, Bhakatpara, Satpara, Dakuapara and Dakhilipara (of South Kamrup district); Uttar Saoni of North Kamrup district.

Of the villages in South Kamrup covered by us, only one belongs to the Hana Rabha group while the inhabitants of all the others are Pati Rabhas.

The village in North Kamrup in the Goreswar area has a concentration of Totla Rabhas.
The villages of South Goalpara are inhabited by Rabhas of the Pati, Rongdani, Dahuri and Bitolia groups.

II. Trends of Change:

i) In the Field of Socio-Economic Life:

As in the case of all the other communities under study, the socio-economic life of the Rahas also centers round agriculture and related activities. Though we have not seen any visible shift in the technique of production during our study, it was reported in many places by elderly persons that jhuming was practiced much earlier when they had a hill background.

Anyway, at present the Rabhas are completely settled cultivators like their non-tribal neighbours. Different varieties of ahu and sali paddy are produced along with other crops and horticultural products. The traditional varieties that the Rabhas have been growing are bordhana, parochouka, silguti, kehor, bora, sikra bora, bakeng bora, pinto bora, guwahati bora, malbhog bora, ghuguri bhog, tulsi bhog, petphakri, hatibandha, hatumal, porma, lal porma, hurki, etc. Apart from paddy, the other crop items include mustard, sugarcane, sesame, cotton, etc. Horticultural products like pineapple, lemon, orange, jack-fruit, mango, litchi, betel nut, coconut, banana, papaya, guava and various kinds of vegetables are also grown.

In recent time various new high yielding varieties of rice as well as other crops and vegetables have been introduced. Again, the cultivation of some of the items with low yield like pulses, cotton etc. have been slowly given up. Although till recently they had been using natural fertilizers and pesticides, the new generation has become eager to use chemical fertilizers and pesticides for better yield. They are even trying to introduce new crops like sunflower.
As the Rabhas had adopted the settled cultivation from their non tribal Hindu Assamese neighbours, so the implements connected with the technique had also followed. Again, the new technological advances like power tiller, pump sets etc. have made their entry.

With the changes in the cropping pattern and the availability of different items, the food habit also has undergone a considerable changes. In the past different kinds of taros, tapioca, arum, tuber roots and shoots constituted a major portion of their daily meal along with rice. However, nowadays rice is the major staple item. Traditionally, the use of oil was very limited while no-a-days it is the commonly used for cooking. Dry fish pounded with a number spices and kept in a bamboo tube is a favourite delicacy of the Rabhas. Dishes prepared with tender bamboo shoots is another favourite item. Pork, mutton, chicken, duck are the favourite meat commonly taken by the Rabhas. But those who have come into the caste fold or have become sarania avoid these meats.

Various preparations especially made of bara rice are popular snacks items. However, gradually the factory made varieties of food are also gaining popularity.

Like all other tribal communities, the rice beer (chako, mad) constitutes an indispensable food item of the Rabhas. However, due to the consciousness of the bad effects of alcohol and for economic reasons slowly they have been giving up regular consumption of rice beer. Of course it still has an important place in the society and is used on a large scale during social ceremonies and religious activities. Tea is gradually taking the place of rice beer in normal day to day life.
Even though the economy of the villages under study is based mainly on agriculture, quite a good number of persons are service holders. Many of them have moved to urban centers. Rabha women excel in the art of weaving and it provides a source of income to many of those who produce handloom articles on commercial basis.

Earlier the villages were by and large economically self-sufficient and whatever trading there was operated at the local level. Now the forces of market economy have gradually penetrated into the village life.

(ii) In the Field of Social Institution:

So far as the social institutions are concerned, changes have taken place in many aspects. First of all, family, the smallest social unit, has undergone a number of changes, particularly in respect of size and type. Earlier the joint family was the common type, and therefore, the size of the family varied from large to medium. But nowadays the picture is quite different, as the nuclear family with a limited number of members has become the common pattern found in almost all sections of the Rabha community. The descent is traced through the father’s line and property is usually inherited in equal shares by the sons. The maternal property is inherited in equal shares by the daughters. However, nowadays, the paternal property is often divided between sons and daughters.

As we have mentioned in the ethnographic account, the Rabhas have several clans termed baray or husuk which are matrilineal in nature. A number of clans have been found in the villages under study, the most common among them being Pam, Hato, Juro and Rungdung etc. As in all other tribal communities clan exogamy is strictly maintained by the Rabhas also. Though the huri system is still functioning, the kinship ties associated
with the system is losing importance day by day. The *baray* system plays
a very important role in the regulating marriages of the Rabha society.
Although the clan system harks back to a past when matriarchy might have
been the norm, there has been a definite shift towards patriarchy.

Changes are also visible in the kinship terminologies and
relationships. For example, except the Maitori, Rangdani and Koch divisions,
the other divisions use the Assamese kinship terms. In fact, in most of the
villages under study (other than Pati Rabha villages) the local variety of
Assamese is used almost like the mother tongue although they continue to
use Rabha words and expressions. Again certain Rabha terms are still used
for either reference or address like *jejoi* and *jiji* for *jetha* and *jethi*
respectively.

So far as kinship relations are concerned, some changes have
been found in some of the major relationships. For example, formerly though
the relationship between the husband and wife had been based on mutual
love and respect, the wife obeyed the husband in all circumstances because
he upholds the authority of the patriarchal family. But now such attitude has
changed though the husband still enjoys greater authority within the family.

Again, formerly because of the prevalence of the system of
cross-cousin marriages the relationships between father’s sister and mother’s
brother with their spouses formed a separate group and relationship. However,
nowadays due to non-practice, such relationship has lost it’s older significance.
Some of the important types of marriages found commonly in the villages
under study are *saja biya* marriage by negotiation, *gharjai biya*, (marriage
by elopement) and more commonly, love marriages.
Like many other tribal communities, cross-cousin marriage was once very popular but nowadays it has been losing its popularity. Similarly, the gharjai biya in which the son-in-law resides in the bride’s parental residence was more or less common. But it has also lost its older popularity as the attitude of the people has changed. However, in the case of settlement of marriage, and negotiations, the bride’s family still enjoys a very high status in all sections of the Rabha society.

Marriages outside the community have been taking place in large numbers nowadays. Though it was not formerly accepted easily, it has become quite common in the Rabha society. Marriages with caste Assamese members (except Hari, Dom & Hira), and Bodo-Kacharis etc. are accepted almost readily and without much formalities. On the other hand, though marriages with the Garos are often taking place (because of close proximity), it is not considered desirable by the Rabhas especially the Pati Rabha. However, ultimately such marriages are also accepted by the society.

Nowadays, the pandulipi – the codified written laws of different social rules and customs of the Rabhas - plays an important role in marriage regulations and other social customs and practices.

A significant feature connected with marriage, particularly among the Pati Rabhas, is the performance of Mare or Bishahari Puja i.e., the worship of Goddess Manasa of the Hindu pantheon. (Some more details about the prevalence of Manasa Puja among the Rabhas have been incorporated in section on socio-religious life).

(iii) In the Field of Socio-Religious Life:

The religious life of the Rabhas, like most of the other tribal communities under study, gives the picture of a mixture of different elements.
The different elements present here can be identified as (i) the traditional Rabha religious beliefs and practices, (ii) the Hindu belief system as practised in the respective locality and (iii) the neo-Vaishnava influence of both Assamese and Bengali affiliation.

The deities that are traditionally worshipped and pujas that are performed by different groups of the Rabhas at different places and times are Langa Puja, Baikho Puja, Risi Puja, Hasong Puja, Khoksi Puja, Hanaghora Puja and so on.

Risi is the supreme household deity in the traditional Rabha religion and is represented either by a pitcher on a bamboo platform on the main post of the house. It is also known by different names such as Rantak or Runkuk, Ghardeo or Ghargohani etc. The puja paraphernalia includes vermillion, cotton, rice power mixed with water, rice beer, pigs, fowls, white and red pieces of cloth. Performance of this puja is essential before holding any kind of social and religious ceremonies, such as marriage.

Generally, Pati, Rongdani and Bitalia groups practice Langa Puja at Langamara Thans or in the jungle or on the bank of the river in the month of Bohag or Jeth (April-May). Langa is identified with Lord Siva. Along with Langa, several other deities – Dhan Kuber, Phul Kumar, Dudhkumar, Khoksi are also worshipped. Offerings include sacrifices of pigs, goats, pigeons, fowl, rice beer along with various kinds of fruits and pulses. Puja over, the chief priest who performs the puja pays homage to the deities on behalf of all so that all the people and the domestic animals and birds of the village may live a healthy and prosperous life and the community can get a good harvest. The Rongdanis also perform Langa Puja in a slightly different way.
Khoksi Puja is practised in many of the villages. Sacrifice of pig is compulsory. She is considered as a malevolent deity and puja is performed for her appeasement.

Hasong Puja, mainly performed by the Rangdanis, is the worship of Hasong which is a combination of thirteen deities. Out of the thirteen Damang is the chief deity. The preparation of the puja starts with the cleaning operation of the site of the puja and also clothing, cooking materials and so on in individual households, along with a purificatory ritual. Puja is performed by the chief priest (Oja) with the help of his assistants. Fowls, pigs and goats along with rice beer are offered to the deities. At the end of the puja performance and community feast, merry making starts with singing and dancing.

The influence of neo-Vaishnavism has also been a strong force in bringing about a leaning towards Hinduism. Here the speciality is that the Chaitanya Vaishnavism of Bengal origin had somehow been more active than the Assamese neo-Vaishnavism. This has led to the performance of Vaishnava hymn-singing in place of some original tribal rituals. Some section of the Rabhas have formally come into the caste fold by initiation (saran) through certain Satras or Vaishnava Gurus, but some section of the Rabha population, particularly the Pati Rabhas, without any formal entry have adopted the Hindu ways of life of the local variety.

Traditionally a death ceremony called Pharkanti (also known by other names like Toronga) used to play a most important role in the socio-religious life of the Rabhas. The highly elaborate ceremony incorporates various aspects of Rabha culture — philosophy connected with the soul, communion with the supernatural powers, songs and dances expressive of
the belief system, etc. However, because of various kinds of factors – including the economic one the performance of Pharkanti has gradually lost its former significance. The performance of songs and dances associated with Pharkanti is receiving greater attention as representative of Rabha performing arts. Nowadays former Pharkanti rituals are being replaced by kirtan-singing.

In the evolution of the Rabha religious life, there has been a remarkable blending of traditional tribal elements with local Hindu elements. The transition has been so smooth and natural that for all intents and purposes the Pati Rabhas have moved into the caste Hindu Assamese fold accept for the fact that they continue to rear pigs and eat pork and that rice beer continues to be a part of social and religious life.

In fact, many of the shrines in the Rabha inhabited areas represent the process of the “universalization” of local tribal deities or that of “parchiolisation” of some well recognized divinities of the Hindu pantheon. A few good examples are provided by various Mother Goddess shrines, Siva temples and holy places associated with Vaishnavism, like – Tiamari, Gosani Than, Madan Mohan Mutiphuta Devalaya, Banavasi Than, Ram Chandra Than etc., where Rabhas play a dominant role.

(iv) In the field of Socio-Political Life:

The Rabhas have always been participating in all mainstream events of Assam considering themselves as part and parcel of the great Assamese society. In the 1920’s under the leadership of Gobardhan Sarkar and Dwarika Nath Rabha, an effort was made to reform and revitalize the Rabha society. As a result of this effort the first conference of the newly constituted Assam Rabha Sanmilan was held in Goalpara in 1926. Thus a
formal beginning was made to establish the separate identity of the community.

During the 50 years period from 1926, the name of the Assam Rabha Sanmilan was changed several times, extending its scope and functions. It was renamed as All Assam Rabha Sangha in 1949, All Assam Rabha Sanmilan in 1965, Rabha Jatiya Parishad in 1971 and finally Nikhil Rabha Jatiya Parishad in 1976.

As a fall-out of the Assam Agitation spearheaded by the All Assam Students' Union the Rabha students initiated a new organization namely Nikhil Bharat Rabha Chatra Santha. Later the name was changed to Nikhil Rabha Chatra Santha or All Assam Rabha Students' Union. The Rabha Students lost no time worked out a plan to raise the demand for tribal autonomy under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and Accordingly submitted a memorandum to the then Prime Minister on 31st August, 1982. This is for the first time that the autonomy issue was raised formally from the side of Rabhas.

The Rabha students decided to reactivate the demands for autonomy. There were similar demands from the part of All Assam Tribal Students Union (AATSU) for constitution of Zilla Parishads for the plains tribes of Assam under the Sixth Schedule. The Rabha students started their organizational activities to create awareness among Rabha people about self-rule. They held meetings and conferences at village and town levels, and succeeded in motivating the people.

In 1992, a national conference was convened in Krishnai appealing to all Rabha organizations and intellectuals and citizens to participate. It is in this convention that the demands for a Rabha Hasong
covering 3161 square km. from Jayramkushi of Goalpra to Rani of Kamrup district and a Zilla Parishad and an Anchalik Parishad in the North Bank of Brahmaputra were raised. The Rabha Hasong Demand Committee was formed and entrusted with the responsibility of leading the agitation along with the ARSU for realizing the demands raised. The agitation was conducted in different phases but it did not take the leaders and for the matter the Rabha people for long to hear the government decision about granting of autonomy. On 16th March 1993, the then Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia declared in the floor of the Assembly about the Government decision. Finally on 10th March 1995 the Rabha Accord was signed. Accordingly, the first interim Rabha Hasong Council was constituted.

The Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council Act, 1995 was passed in the year 1995. The Act in the preamble clearly states that the legislation was enacted with a view to providing maximum autonomy within the constitutional framework for social, economic educational, ethnic and cultural advancement of the Rabha community.

(v) In the Field of Material Culture and Language:

a) Material Culture:

More or less similar kind of developments in regard to change have occurred in the field of material culture of the Rabhas as we have found in other communities.

House-type:

At present the Rabhas do not have the raised platform houses. Of course, the possibility of having such type of chang houses in the past, when they might have a hill background, can not be ruled out. Now they
do not have any distinctive house pattern. It is more or less the same as that of the non-tribal Assamese neighbours. It is the common mud plinth, bamboo and wooden structured mud plastered, thatched roof house. Of course the plinth is in certain cases very high. The modified varieties are the common Assam type houses available in the villages under study. Again the more recent changes are the shift towards R.R.C. constructions of latest designs.

Textile:

The Rabha women are famous for their weaving skill. They not only produce various items for their own requirements but also for commercial purposes. They have adopted the common Assamese loom the throw shuttle loom and later on the fly shuttle one. The traditional female attire consists of a _ruphan_ – the loin cloth, _Patani_ – (a piece of cloth tied around the breast, hanging down to the knees), _kambung_ – (a scarf) and _khakha_ – (a veil used to cover the head).

The traditional male attire consists of a loin cloth called _pajal_ or _gamosa_, a turban called _khachne_ and a short-sleeved jacket called _bakchali_.

_Phali_ (head-band) is used by both men and women. However, nowadays almost all the sections of Rabha people use the common Assamese dress in their day to day life. Again, in more recent years the young generation has started wearing all kinds of mill-made garments of the latest fashion.

Transport and Communication:

Similar changes, as visible in other communities, in transport and communication have occurred here also. The changes have been
particularly remarkable some villages because of the easy accessibility of good roads and public conveyance system, telecommunications, and electronic media. Connectivity with electricity has been a potent factor.

(b) Language:

Except Rongdani and Maitori, the other groups of the Rabhas have practically given up their tribal language in favour of Assamese. The Pati Rabhas have and a few other groups have completely lost the tribal language and taken up Assamese of the local variety as their mother tongue. Even the Rongdani and Maitori, who have retained their language, are more or less bilingual and speak the local Assamese with ease. However, the Assamese they speak has a distinct Rabha flavour. A recognized Rabha scholar has termed it as “Rabhamese.”

As for the status Rabha language, the position is similar to the ones relating to the Deuris and the Tiwas. All Rabha groups have been receiving education through the Assamese medium. The educated Rabhas also do their writing through Assamese. But as in the case of the Deuris and Tiwas, there has been a demand for introduction of Rabha as a language at the primary schools of Rabha dominated areas. The demand has already been fulfilled. Rabha text-books for the purpose have been produced. A small number of books in the Rabha language have also been published and there is a new tendency to use Rabha terms for Rabha public organizations.
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1. The researcher with the family of a local guide and host
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