CHAPTER I
1.0: The People:

The Rabhas belong to the Indo-mongoloid ethnic group. They are found dwelling substantially in the districts of Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri and South Kamrup and they are found scattered almost in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and North-eastern regions. They live wide apart in some regions of Bangladesh, North Bengal and Nepal, with less cachet and varied identity.

It is admissible a fact that the generic name ‘Rabha’ is mixed with mystery of fact and legend, which is still prevalent among the people.

The principal male deity Lord ‘Risi’ brought (in Rabha, ‘rabatna’) the people from ‘Rangkrang’ (the heaven, broadly Tibet) to the downword, and that is why, they became ‘Rabha’ in course of time. The legend actuates the migratory trace of the people from Sino-Tibetan tract.

The other legend says that the name ‘Rabha’ or ‘Raba-ha’ was given by their kith and kin, the Garos, and in turn, the Rabhas call the Garos as ‘Mutang’ while another legend narrates that Raja Dodan brought this people (in Rabha, ‘rabatana’).

1.1: The Rabhas have migrated from their abode Howang-ho and Yang-Chikiang (Chatterjee : 1974: p.21), to the North-eastern regions of India and subsequently spread out to other neighbouring places. Hall opined...

*Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples were somewhere between the Gobi desert and North-East Tibet possibly Kansu (Hall : 1968: pp.144).*
It is not denying a fact that the neighbouring people still call the one section of the Rabhas, i.e. Kocha, as ‘Kochu’ (preferably ‘kansu’).

1.2: The Rabha monolingual people call themselves as ‘Raba’, as no distinct aspirated phoneme is found intact in their speech. Jose asserts.....

> The native speakers do not pronounce the word Rabha with the sound signified by the compound letter, -bh. They pronounce it as ‘Raba’. They refer to themselves as ‘Rabatang’ (with singular) and plural signification.” (Jose: Preface: 1999).

In this regard, John M. Cosh was right while he recorded this generic term both as ‘Raba’ and ‘Rabha’ in his monograph (Cosh :1937 p.131,166).

So, it has been crystal clear that today’s ‘Rabha’ is a new accretion from its typical ‘Raba’ or ‘Rab-ha’ (Raba-ha) which is still prevalent among the native and monolingual people.

1.3: It is noticeable that a number of short account on the Rabhas, both foreign and native writers were undoubtedly scrappy and fragmentary ones: they lack a conspicuous agreement. Another vital points reveal that such disparities were also seen among the people in the early periods. As stated earlier, (Chap-1, p.01), they live....with less cachet and varied identity. In some regions, the generic term Rabha is still a poleonym or exonym, while Kocha is an autonym or neonym. Further, the scheduling process for the tribe concerned by the authority of Indian Government was not identical one. AS for instance, Koch (Kocho, Kocha) and Rabha are now being treated and studied separately in Meghalaya, due to political boundary of the state, and scheduling process.

1.4: In fine, both the legend and modern anthropologists assert the same: symmetry among the various sections of the Rabhas. Besides, a Rabha folk song,
Kalaguru Rabha⁹, Martin¹⁰ and genetic affiliation of the people prove their oneness. They are divided into several clan-based sections.

According to friend-peraira, they are Rongdania, Pati, Maitoria, Koch, Dahuri, Baitlia, and songa (Pereira : 1911: 142).¹¹ Further, Endle (1999: Reprint : 82)¹², Playfair (1990:pp. 19-20)¹³, and Koch (1981)¹⁴ also envisaged the same statement. A recent re-classification has been made by Robert Shaffers on the languages of the Tibeto-Chinese group, where Rabha is classed with the Koch group, in his monograph (1953).¹⁵

1.5 : The present population of the Rabhas in Assam is 2,77,517 as per Census Report (2001). In the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, Rongdani, Maitory Kocha speak their dialects, but the rest speak the patois of Indic, mainly Assamese and Bengali, due to linguistic convergence, and acculturation process. This process was initiated in the transitional period of Vaishnavite movement headed by Mahapurusha Sankardeva (1449-1568 AD), and for them, words of patois of Assamese are now becoming exglossic one. Grierson once opined “....Rabha language is fast dying”. (Grierson : 1903)¹⁶, and this process reveals the truth.

1.6 : In Baharistan-I-Ghaiibi, it is stated that:

The Rabhas constitute a tribe of Kamrup, which chiefly confined to the parts of this district that lie towards its eastern extremely. They are akin to the branch of Kunch tribe known as Pani Koch, who are thinly scattered over all the parts of Assam, and lower parts of Bhutan” (Nathan p.850)¹⁷.

More specifically, it is to be recorded that Kocha variety is found in the districts of Kokrajhar and Baksa of lower Assam, in some parts of Meghalaya, North Bengal, Bangladesh and in Nepal, while Rongdani and Monitory dialects are
spoken in the district of Goalpara, and in some parts of Garohills district of Meghalaya.

1.7: The other traditional groups of the Rabhas, viz. Hana, Pati, Bitolia, Totla, Dahuri are sparsely populated in almost every districts of Assam Valley, but not anywhere outside Assam.

It is heartening to note that after shifting their language and culture, they are, of late, practicing the patriarchal systems, keeping aside their clans and matriliny patterns.

1.8: The Ethnic Affinities:

The Rabhas possess an ethnic affinities with that of Bodo (Boro-Kacharis), Garo, Tiwa in the Brahmaputra Valley and their far aside kith and Kins are to be mentioned as Dukpa (Bhutanese), Lepcha, and Limbu in the Himalayan ranges. Various legends and folk-narratives exhibit the ethnic affinities among these tribes. Such relatedness depicts not only their dialects, but also focus their cultural traits, clans and traditional attire, food and vebarage, too.

In terms of linguistics affinity, Burling has rightly asserted

...Kachari or Mech on the Northern sides of the river in Goalpara district,
Dimasa Kachari in the Cachar hills, Lalung (Tiwa) East of Gauhati,
and Tripuri in the south in the state of Tripura, all these dialects are
said to be mutually intelligible (Burling: 1961: p.80).18

1.9: The Indo-mongoloid ethnic group retain the common 13 outstanding characteristics, as meted out by Smith (1925: pp.120),19 and the Rabhas also share them equally.
Major Playfair asserted:

There are some affinities between the Garo and the Rabhas in respect of language, and some cultural traits... having a common origin.\textsuperscript{20} They retain their form of lineage called ‘Barai’, and ‘mo:chang’ systems respectively. As of matrilineal society, the marriage within the same clans are forbidden in their societies. More specifically, there are great similarities among the clans of the Rabha and Garos: viz.- Chira, Rungdung, Rongkho, Darbot, Barung, Raksam, Napha, Banda, Mejenga, Kama etc.\textsuperscript{21}

1.10 : Das also observed:

In respect of breadth height index also the Rabha-Garo similarity is apparent. The Kachari are also nearer to the Rabha than other (Das: 1960: 105).\textsuperscript{22}

1.11 : The present inhabitance:

As stated above, (Chap-1...), the Rabhas are found dwelling substantially in the ‘Rabhas-hasong Autonomous Council; (RAC: 10 March, 1995) areas in the lower Assam, Kokrajhar and Odulguri districts of BTC areas, and they are sparsely populated in some regions of Assam, North Bengal, Meghalaya, Bangladesh and Nepal, too.

More specifically, the Rongdani dialect speaking group inhabit mainly ion the foot-hills of Garohills of Meghalaya, bordering area of Assam and Meghalaya in the Southern part of the river Brahmaputra, and in the plains areas of mainly Goalpara district of lower Assam, while minority section reside mainly in the west Garohills, and sparsely in the Goalpara district of lower Assam.

The Kocha speaking people inhabit mainly in the district of Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Baksa, Bongaigaon in the lower Assam and they are also found in some parts of Meghalaya, North Bengal, Bangladesh and Nepal.
Note and references:

1. In the field work, one 90 year old woman, named Smti Sewani Rongkho of Tobalpara village (Rangchi) under Damra Outpost, P.S. Dudhnoi (District : Goalpara : Assam) informed that they (The Rabhas) call the Garos as ‘mutang’ (<mung (name)+ Vtan (to keep)+ tang (both definitive and plural suffix) >* mungtantang> * mungtang> mutang (name-keepers). Dhananjay Rabha narrates the legend, along with ‘Risi’, who brought down the Rabhas from apparently Tibet region (Bodo Tribes and Ethnic Afficities of the Rabha : ‘Musung-Dammai : A mouthpiece of the North Goalpara Rabha Students’ Association, edited by Baneswar Koch, Kokrajhar : 1973, p.53).


Formerly, the Rabhas call themselves as Raba and not as Rabha. Even now, in the interior places, they call themselves as ‘Raba’ (Dhananjay Rabha : op-cit, p.32).


7. The Gazette of India : Extraordinary, pt-II, Section-I, Ordinance (Scheduled Tribes Order Amendment) 1987: In part XI, Meghalaya, the following tribes have been inserted:

1. Boro-Kachari,
2. Koch,
3. Raba, Rava,

Dated : 19th Nov, 1987

8. A popular folk-song ‘Tukuria Geet’ narrates that the Rabhas were the Koches in olden time:
b) Dakshin Kamrupar Rabha Sanskritit Abhukuki (As) : S.K. Mazudar, 1989 : 70

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17. Mirza Nathan: *Baharistan-I-Ghaibi* : Translated by Dr. I.M. Borah.
20. Playfair, Major: op-cit, p.150