INTRODUCTION
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01.1 : The Rabhas & their Nomenclature:

The Rabhas belong to the Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group, and they inhabit mainly in some regions of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) areas and Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RAC: 10 March, 1995) areas in lower Assam. They are also found sparsely almost in some districts of Assam, Meghalaya, North Bengal and Bangladesh and Nepal, too.

There are some traditional clan-based divisions of the Rabhas. Friend Pereira (1911: 142) mentioned them as Rongdonia, Pati, Maitoria, Koch, Dahuri, Baitlia, and Songa.

The generic name and nomenclature of the Rabhas are said to be mixed with that of fact and legends, and these are still prevalent among the tribe. The principal deity ‘Risi’ brought the tribe from the ‘Rangkrang’ (‘heaven’, broadly ‘Tibet’) to the downward, and that is why, they became ‘Raba’ (Rabha) in course of time. The other legend narrates that the name ‘Rabha’ was given by their kith and kins, the Garos, and in turn, the Rabhas call the Garos as ‘mutang’. Today’s ‘Rabha’ is a new accretion from its typical ‘Raba’ or ‘Raba-ha’ which is still prevalent in the native monolingual speakers. Jose asserted…….

*The native, however refer to themselves as ‘Rabatang’ (singular and plural noun).*

01.2 : The Rabha Language and its linguistic Variation:

Rabha is a linguistic offshoot of Sino-Tibetan family of languages, and it has three principal dialect groups, viz-Rondani, Maitory and Kocha. The rest other group, viz-Pati, Dahuri, Bitaliya, and Hana have given up their dialects, due to the acculturational process in the medieval period in the Brahmaputra valley, and now
they speak the patois of Assamese. But it is noteworthy that the younger generation of the dialect speaking group, invariably Rongdani and Maitory, are in a ‘unstable bilingual’ position, and in its dire consequences, the number of Rabha dialects speaking people is becoming less; The population of the Rabha people is 2,77,517 (as per 2001 Census Report), but only 1,30,875 speak their dialects in Assam valley.

The most remarkable features of Rabha is its two tonecity: high and low, and its labio-dental phoneme. But both colonial and native writers or researchers could not ascertain these features.

However, the Rabha folk literature is fairly rich in their motif. The folk tales, folk art, proverbs, songs and hymns are remarkably interesting in their vivid features.

01.3 : **Earlier Works on Rabha: An Appraisal:**

The British and other foreign Missioners had initiated to record the multifarious notes on the Rabhas: their folk-tales, linguistic and ethnographical notes. These are shortly as follows: Hamilton (1800), Hodgson (1846), Williamson (1869), Damant (1880), John M, Cosh (1837), Friend Pereira (1881), Hunter (1880), Grierson (1903) and many others.5

It is worth mentioning that most of writings on the Rabhas are unchartered and scrappy ones. The language, culture, clan-systems, matrilineal traits and kinship terms of the Rabhas have not been vividly dealt with.

Most of the earlier writers classified the Rabhas into Bodo (Boro-Kacharg) group, while others termed Rabha as the branch of Garo (Burling : 1961...)6, and Koch as an offshoot of Garo, and others dichotomized Rabha from that of Koch. Hunter asserts....... "The Bodos (Kocharies), Garos, Mech and Dhimals belong to the same family, and Koch was the name by which these people were originally known in olden days. (Hunter : 1973)7."
01.4: It is, then seen that the ethnographic notes of North-Eastern regions of India are not synchronic ones. In case of Rabha and Koch, Hamilton (1800) shaffters Friend Pereira (1911) asserted the oneness of this tribe and the tribe have also been working unitedly for the sake of their identity since the time immemorial, and in later period, they have organized their socio-cultural organizations. They are, among others, ‘Rabha National Council’ (RNC : 1926), and ‘Bebak Rabha Kraurang Runchum’ (All Rabha Sahitya Sabha; BRKR : 8th April, 1973, which are still playing a pivotal role for the upliftment of the society.

It is worthmentioning that in recent times, most of native writers could synchronize the ethos of the tribe: they are, among others as follows:


01.5: The British and other foreign Missionaries had initiated the writing tradition in Rabha, the first being ‘Jisuni Nemkai Markni Saikai Katha’ (1909) in Bengali Script. It is a Rabha (Rongdani dialect) rendering of the epistle of Mark of the Holy Bible, and it was published by British and Foreign Bible Society, Calcutta, and as natural, it does not fall under creative literary genre.

Then came to the first creative literature by the native: Purna Chandra Koch (Rabha) composed a lyrical book entitled “Penem Lamon Dam” in 1926. It is an anthology of Rabha hymns based on Lord ‘Risi’, and these are to be termed rightly as songs celestial and ‘Noble numbers’. These are followed by a Rabha grammar written in Assamese by Rajen Rongkho in 1930.

After the emergence of the Rabha literary body, the Runchum, an attempt was made to introduce the Rabha language in the primary schools of Assam valley, and when it was introduced in 1988, most of Rabha writers engrossed
themselves in creating literature with great enthusiasm, and thus, the process of standardization of Rabha has been initiated then. As stated earlier, this process was known plan and normative one. Today, the Runchum, being the apex literary body is playing a proactive role in this process and published a substantial number of text books and other reference books.

01.6: As stated earlier, most of colonial and native writers could not ascertain as to the existence of tonal prominence in Rabha. However, in the recent time, some remarkable works have been done.

01.7: The present study is made on the empirical and field work. As a native speaker of Kocha variety, this work has been performed with an experience for longtime attachment; in ABILAC, and an MRP Project under UGC are the attachment with research, and eventually these have paved the way, through which, this study could bear the fruits.

The objectives of this work envisage mainly to bring all the uncharted ideas into consolidated form. It is a systematic study in its kind: as Rabha dialects are fairly intelligible to each other, and as such, the speech community preserve their speeches, working jointly. It is, therefore a least contribution towards the extant knowledge of Tibeto-Burman language and linguistics in general and to the dialect speaking people in particular for emotional integration.

01.8: Research Design, Methodology and Field work:

The present work is aimed at visualizing the dialects of the Rabhas in the light of dialectology. The process of acculturation and diffusion in the linguistic levels of their society has been divulged in this work, and samples have been cited from each linguistic variations. Of course, Kocha has been profusely cited, when felt necessary. So, it has been apparent that the methodology is synchronic study.
of language, being.....” an account of its structure either at present or at some specific moment in the present” (Mathews : 2007, P-396)

The field work was done in the three-dialect speaking areas; eg: foothill areas of East Garohills of Meghalaya, i.e. Goalpara district, and Kokrajhar district of lower Assam. As per theoretical knowledge, these linguistic materials have been collected, with the utmost empirical care. The three NORMS were frank, more liberal and they possessed the physical soundness.

01.9 : Problems of the work :

As envisaged in the Synopsis, there has been some vital problems for the study but much care has been taken. The first problem is the generic name and nomenclature of the tribe: while the description as to this term was initiated, the very care has been taken. As ‘Rabha’ is an autonym, while it an exonym or neonym for other group. But nevertheless, the tribes are keeping their entity, with their emotional integration.

The other problem is quite personal one: as stated earlier, due to lack of know-how of computational linguistics, I could not deal with high-tech apparatus. Even, as envisaged in the Synopsis, it has not been able to consult with CIIL (Mysore) and CIEFL, Hyderabad due to personal constraints. But I have taken much pain for achieving this work, exploring the linguistic properties, with the able guidance of the revered Guide.

01.10 : As per hypothesis is concerned, it is to be confirmed on correctness, if the predictions made on its basis prove to be successful. It is the foundation of human knowledge, associated with a supposition or conjecture’, a premise with its underlying assumption, but not fully asserted. In this way, with a host of experience, this study has been initiated.
01.11: Scope for further studies:

There lies an ample scope for further initiating the exhaustive study in Rabha and in its linguistic variations, with socio-linguistic point of view, and with that of technical knowhow. It has been meticulously observed that the two dialects viz Rongdani and Maitory are in 'unstable bilingual position', and their younger generation easily shift their 'code-switching' to the patois of Assamese. Such aspects are highly interesting in socio-linguistic view in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Of course, such trends, naturally create the emotional integrity among the various people in the regions 'making more conducive' for their co-existing.
Notes and references:

1. Friend Pareira, J.E.: 1881: *Census of Assam*, Vol-III,
2. One aged old woman Smt. Sewani Rabha (90) of Thobolplara village, near Damra, under P.S. Dudhnoi, Goalpara (Assam), had first informed this author, see also; Dewangsing Rongnathu: 'Apason Agana' where such legend was narrated.
   Both ‘Raba’ and Rabha have been recorded in this monograph.
5. A detailed notes on Rabha and their ethnographic description have been given in Bibliography.