

CHAPTER II

THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

The arrival of Ahoms in 1228 AD marked a significant event in this geographical zone and their reign for six centuries was a significant turning point in the history of Assam. However, the state of Assam was officially formed on 26th January 1950. It comprises an area of 78,523 square kilometers with a total population of 31, 169, 272 (Census 2011). It has a recorded history dating back to the 4th century B.C. It has Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and West Bengal as their neighbouring states. The economy of this frontier land is based on agriculture and crude oil together with a significant part of the total tea produced in the world. It has been well known that Assam produces more than half of India's petroleum as well. The process of social formation in Assam has been marked by simultaneous sanskritization and tribalization of the different groups of people that have settled in Assam at different points of time, and this process of social formation is best studied in three segments namely, Pre-colonial, Colonial and Post-colonial periods (*Manorama Year Book* 2012: 536-567).

2.1 A Brief History of Assam

The history of Assam goes back to ancient times. The origin of this history can be found in Tantric literature, Buddhist literature, Assamese folklore and Vedic literature. However, the mention of the state is found for the first time in the epics and religious

legends. The first known ruler of Assam was Mahiranga Danava of Danava dynasty, who was succeeded in turn, in the direct line by Hatakasur, Sambarasur and Ratnasur. After them came Ghatakasur, the ruler of the Kirata. He was defeated and killed by Narakasur, who is referred to in *Puranas* and *Tantras* (*Assam Year Book* 2013: 27).

According to some scholars the word Assam has been derived from the Sanskrit word *asam* which means 'of uneven terrain'. Assam also means 'unparalleled' or 'peerless' which was applied to Ahom dynasty who gave an identity to the land where they settled in the 13th century A.D. The Ahom built up agricultural economy of the valley, a powerful state that repulsed the Mughal, and a cultural system that synthesized diverse elements. The anglicized word Assam is of colonial origin. The foreign travelers during the 17th and 18th century used the words Assem or Asam, Achem, etc. The 18th century copper plate inscription of Ahom kings has three forms Acham, Asam, and Ahom (Phukan 1989).

Assam is the homeland of diverse tribes and ethnic groups. The State is reported to have nine scheduled tribes in the plains districts and few hills tribes in the two autonomous hill districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. Some of the major tribal groups of the state are Barman-Kachari, Karbi (Mikir), Dimasa-Kachari, Boro-Kachari, Rabha, Mishing (Miri), Tiwa (Lalung), Sonowal-Kachari, Deori, Hojai, Mech and so on. Besides these there are a quite good number of ethnic groups, who inhabit the State since time immemorial.

The identity of the people of Assam is marked by language, territory, dress, cuisine, festivals such as *Bihu*, the overarching influence of Vaishnavism, folklore, etc. In this state we find all the three major language families, viz. Austro-Asiatic, Indo-Aryan, and the Tibeto-Burman. Assam is linguistically heterogeneous with forty five languages spoken by its communities. Altogether 24 languages belong to the Tibeto-Burman family, 12 to Indo-Aryan language family and 5 to Austro-Asiatic language family.

Assam became the settling ground for many civilizations that came here through different routes as it was connected by land to many states and country. The Negrito, Dravidian, Alpine, Tibeto-Burman and the Aryan were the major races that made a settlement in Assam. They made Assam their home and came to be known as Assamese.

The largest population in Assam is of the Tibeto-Burmese origin like the Bodo, Mishing, Karbi and Rabha tribes. The major tribes of Assam earn their livelihood through agriculture and by producing and selling their handicrafts.

Though in the colonial period a few monographs on tribes such as Kachari (Endle 1990), Mikir (Stack & Lyall 1908) and Nagas (Haimendorf 1939) were done, yet the post colonial researches and anthropological studies were done at a later period by the Department of Anthropology in Gauhati University and the Anthropological Survey of India. But it was later under the National Project 'People of India' initiated by the Anthropological Survey of India that all communities of Assam (115) were covered in an elaborate manner for the first time. Out of these 115 communities 17 of them belong to the Scheduled Castes and 31 to Scheduled Tribes (Singh 2003: xiv-xxi). The tribe, Rabhas on whom the present study is based is one of the major plain tribes who are concentrated in western Assam, Meghalaya and in some parts of northern Bengal.

Assam is the meeting ground of three major language families, the Austro-Asiatic, the Indo-Aryan and the Tibeto-Burman. The state is linguistically heterogeneous with as many as forty-five languages spoken by its communities. There is a high level of bilingualism. There are plains tribes and hills tribes in Assam. One hundred and fifteen communities have been studied in Assam under the People of India project. Of the 31 scheduled tribal groups eight groups have more than 1 per cent of population each, out of the total tribal population of Assam. They are Boro (40.09 per cent), Mishing (17.80 per cent), Karbi (10.68 per cent), Rabha (8.14 per cent), Sonowal-Kachari (7.01 per cent), Tiwa (5.02 per cent), Dimasa (3.35 per cent) and Deori (1.20 per cent). The eight groups together account for 93.29 per cent of the total tribal population in the state.

It is pertinent to observe here the larger implication of the most important institution inherited by the people of Assam from the 16th century religious reform movement led by Sankaradeva (1449-1568), is perhaps, its *Sattras* institutions. However, it is also very important for us to realize that the institution with its physical structure as we find today did not develop along with the emergence of religion at the behest of the great saint. This also is true that as societies everywhere have undergone tremendous changes it

is therefore, understandable that religious and cultural institutions have emerged and restructured it to give society meaning and cohesiveness.

Here below we shall take a look at the population structure of Assam before we undertake study on the district of Goalpara in particular wherein we find the Rangdani Rabha population who is the focal point of our study.

Figure 1: Map of Assam

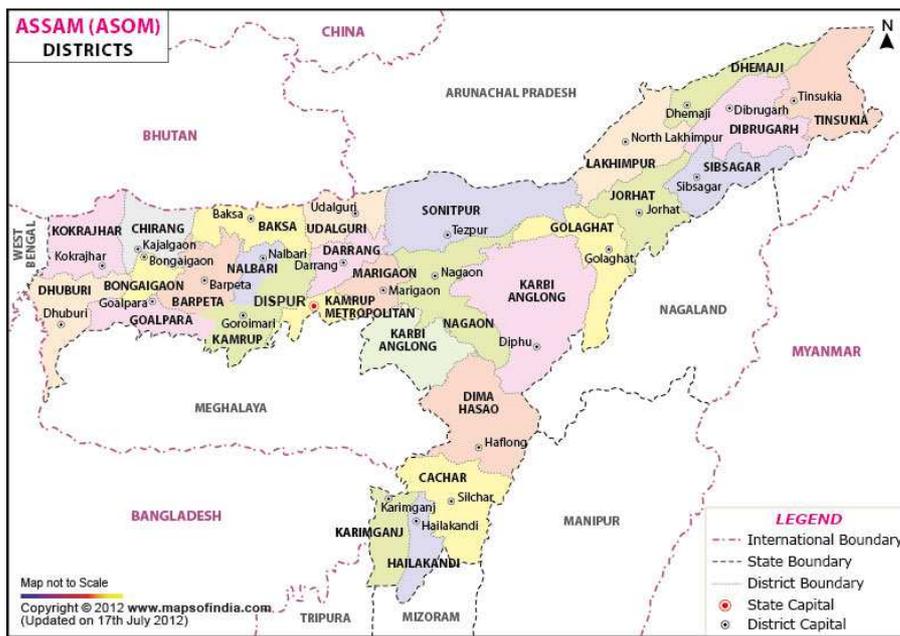


Figure 2: Map of Goalpara

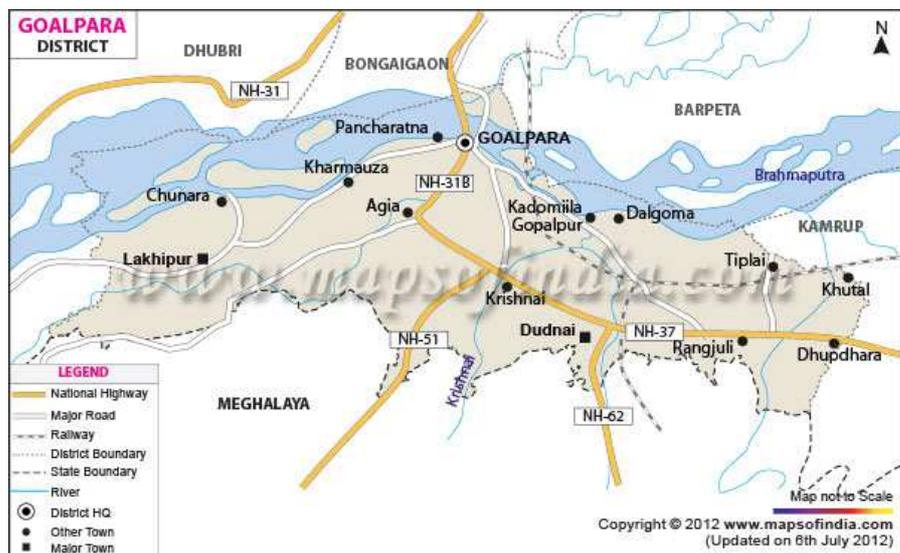


Table 1

State/District-wise area/ population/ headquarters of Assam

Sl. No.	State/District	Area in sq. km.	Population (2011)	Headquarters
1	Assam	78,438	31,169,272	Dispur
2	Barpeta	3,245	1,693,190	Barpeta
3	Bongaigaon	2,510	732,639	Bongaigaon
4	Cachar	3,786	1,736,319	Silchar
5	Darrang	3,481	908,090	Mangaldai
6	Dhemaji	3,237	688,077	Dhemaji
7	Dhubri	2,798	1,948,632	Dhuburi
8	Dibrugarh	3,381	1,327,748	Dibrugarh
9	Goalpara	1,824	1,008,959	Goalpara
10	Golaghat	3,502	1,058,674	Golaghat
11	Hailakandi	1,327	659,260	Hailakandi
12	Jorhat	2,851	1,091,295	Jorhat
13	Kamrup	4,345	1,517,202	Guwahati
14	Karbi Anglong	10,434	965,280	Diphu
15	Karimganj	1,809	1,217,002	Karimganj
16	Kokrajhar	3,169	886,999	Kokrajhar
17	Lakhimpur	2,277	1,040,644	N.Lakhimpur
18	Morigaon	1,704	957,853	Marigaon
19	Nagaon	3,831	2,826,006	Nagaon
20	Nalbari	2,257	769,919	Nalbari
21	Dima Hasao	4,888	2,13,529	Haflong
22	Sivasagar	2,668	1,150,253	Sibsagar
23	Sonitpur	5,324	1,925,975	Tezpur
24	Tinsukia	3,790	1,316,948	Tinsukia
25	Kamrup Metro	1,272	1,260,419	Guwahati
26	Udalguri	1,852	832,769	Udalguri
27	Baksa	2,400	953,773	Mushalpur
28	Chirang	1,469	481,818	Kajalgaon

Goalpara is one of the 27 districts of Assam, which has an area of 1,824 sq. km. with a total population of 10, 08, 959 persons. Out of these 5, 14, 162 are males and 4, 94,797 are females. Sex ratio is 962 female per 1000 males. Density of population is 553 per sq. km with a total literacy rate of 68.67 per cent. The district of Goalpara is situated on the south bank of river Brahmaputra and is bounded by West and East Garo Hills Districts of Meghalaya on the south and Kamrup district on the east, Dhubri district on the west and river Brahmaputra all along the North. The geographical location of the district is between latitude $25^{\circ} 53'$ and $26^{\circ} 30'$ N and longitude $90^{\circ} 07'$ and $91^{\circ} 05'$ E. This district is primarily agrarian in nature since 90 per cent of the total population depends for their livelihood on agriculture. It is industrially backward and there is hardly any industry worth the name. It was a land locked district with poor transport and communication facilities till the opening of rail cum road bridge, the *Narayan Setu*, over the river Brahmaputra. As per 2011 census, the total population of the district is 1, 008, 959. The density of population is 451 persons per square km. The district is the home of large number of different communities including Bengali Muslims, Bodos, Garos, Rabhas and Rajbonshis.

This district is home to a large number of different communities including Rabha, Bodo, Garo, Koch-Rajbongshi, Yougi (Nath), Goal (Ghose), Hira, Sutradhar and indigenous Muslims. Presently there is a growing number of Muslims from outside coming over to the district of Goalpara (for eg; Pancharatna, near Kumri village where Rangdani Rabhas and Garos resided earlier, is now turned completely in to Muslim villages) whose language is completely different from Assamese (Data from a Rabha teacher in a village school).

In Goalpara the Rangdani Rabha are mostly concentrated in the southern region. They are mostly confined to the areas of Balijana, Lakhipur, Matia, Dhupdhara, Dudhnoi and Rangjuli revenue circles of Goalpara district. The vast majority of the Rabha living in Goalpara district are Rangdani Rabhas, besides a few Pati Rabhas and Koch Rabhas can be found to be distributed to the south-west region of Lakhipur and to the north along the Brahmaputra between Goalpara and Pancharatna. Besides, a sizeable number of Dahori Rabhas inhabit the northern part of the district, especially in Jogighopa and Pancharatna areas (Rabha 1998: 11).

The Rabha, who constitute one of the major tribal communities of Assam, are widely distributed throughout the region of North East India but confined mostly to lower Assam. Since time immemorial they have inhabited the state of Assam, as one of the predominant inhabitants, with moderately high concentration of population. In this regard Das (1960: 2) has observed,

‘...Goalpara district provides home for the maximum number of the Rabha population. In Goalpara again, the bulk of the population is confined to the southern region. And that very strip of land lying between the mighty Brahmaputra in the north and Garo Hills in the south is believed by some as the original home-land of the Rabhas’.

In Meghalaya also some Rabha habitations are found spread over the adjacent districts of Kamrup and Goalpara in Assam and Jalpaiguri and Koch Behar districts of West Bengal. In Meghalaya the Rabha area starts from the easternmost corner of the northern border of East Garo Hills district stretching up to the westernmost corner of the northern borders of the West Garo Hills district. Only one fourth of the eastern part is inhabited by Pati and Dahori sections while the rest of the eastern half is occupied by the Rangdani and the western half is occupied by the Maitori sections.

The villages of Goalpara district are scenic and attractive which display the rich cultural traditions and historical legacy of the region through the various folklores, folk songs and dance that are an integral part of the culture of the people of the region. Almost all the villages of Goalpara are special in their own peculiar way. The self sufficient villages with its serene and calm surrounding with paddy fields and small hillocks, valley and plain interspersed provide great joy to the villagers from the stress and strains of daily life. Each village has a number of small and big trees including areca nut, banana, mango, jackfruit, lemon, litchi and the all time green and luxuriant bamboo, all of which are used by the villages in their daily life.

The field of our study Matia and Majerburi villages in Balijana revenue circle in Goalpara District in Assam. It is situated at a distance of 12 kms from the Goalpara district headquarters and 136 km distance from its State capital Dispur. There are other villages namely Buduchar, Karipara, Matia, Nabagota Simlitola, Sidhabari, Harimura, which fall in the same Matia *tehsil*. Nearby villages with distance are: Majerburi (0 k. m.), Dhoroni (5.0 k. m.), Nadiapara (7 k. m.), Rokhapara (4 k. m.), Ghengamari (4 k. m.), Amguri (3 k. m.), Bamengopa (4 k. m.), Hadlapara (3 k. m.), Makuri (5 k. m.), Borjoli (2.5 k. m.), Bordomal (2 k. m.), Borbakra (2 k. m.), Rampur (2 k. m.), Gendra (1 k. m.), and Sarapara (1 k. m.). All of these are Rangdani Rabha villages. Nearby small towns are Agia (8 k. m.), Lakhipur (15 k. m.), Krishnai (20 k. m.), Dudhnai (40 k. m.), Goalpara (12 k. m.) and Rongjuli (50 k. m.). There are also other nearby villages with either Garo or Rabha and mix populations for example Kochpara (2 k. m.), Nichinta (1 k. m.), Segunbasi (1 k. m.), Boiskuli (5 k. m.), Garopara (2 k. m.), Alojjar (6 k. m.), Borbakra (1.5 k. m.), etc.

In our study area of 2 villages, there are 121 families in total and there are 539 numbers of the total population of Matia and Majerburi villages. The origin of the names of Matia and Majerburi is like this. Once there was an outbreak of *Kala-Azar* or cholera, in that epidemic a large number of people were wiped out. Later on slowly and steadily this villages were set up once again. Mati = wiped out; Majer = centre and Buri = raised up area. In sum, Majerburi = where people can be settled. This was said that once these villages were centre of all the neighbouring villages. About 16 families of Majerburi are followers of traditional Rangdani religion and 45 families are Christians, whereas in Matia 40 families are traditional worshippers and 20 families are Christians (Field, April 2013).

2.2 The Rabha

The Rabha of Assam belong to the Tibeto-Burman family within the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. Linguistically they also belong to the Bodo family. The term Bodo denotes a language group to which belong the Boro-Kachari, Garo, Mech, Tiwa (Lalung), Dimasa-Kachari, Koch (Koch-Rajbongshi), Deori, Chutiya, Sonowal-Kachari, Moran, Tripuri (Kok Borok) and the Rabha. The generic name of Rabha is given for a number of communities, which can be designated as sub-tribes, namely the Pati, Rangdani, Koch, Maitori, Totla, Dahori, Bitlia, and the Shonga (Hana). The Rabha are the fourth largest

tribe among 31 tribal communities in Assam and constitute about 8.14 per cent of Assam's total tribal population. Interestingly, the Rabha were earlier a matrilineal society, making them more like the Khasi and Garo in their lineage. However, in the modern times this trend has changed and now they are following the patrilineal system. According to a study by Debadatta Barkataki, Director of the Assam State Resource Centre, only about half the Rabha population still speak the traditional language (Hakacham 2010: 1).

The Rabha are one of the oldest and distinct racial communities of North East India. They are proud of their origin and cultural heritage. They are inhabitants of Kamrup, Nalbari, Darrang, Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Nagaon, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, North Lakhimpur in Assam; and Garo Hills in Meghalaya. Besides, they are also scattered in many places like Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal; Nagaland, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and in neighbouring country like Bangladesh (Singha 2006: 80-81).

The identity of the people consists of their racial, geographical, historical, ethnic, linguistic and other features, which give them distinct characteristics and distinguish them from other peoples of the country. Being an indigenous tribe, the Rabha have their distinct identity in respect of their racial origin, original abode, language, culture, customs and way of living. In the present chapter the origin of the name, ethnic composition, migration, geographical and ethnic identity of the Rabha etc., have been mainly dealt upon.

Sidney Endle (1911), the first English writer to include the Rabha in his 'Appendix' to the book *The Kacharis* (Bodo), remarked: 'The name of this tribe (Rabha) is of uncertain derivation...' (Endle 1911: 83). Therefore, the origin of the name 'Rabha' has been a subject of controversy. Till today it is obscure as to how the term 'Rabha' came into usage. Many writers on this subject have different opinions as to the derivation and meaning of the term itself. But no scholar or writer has been able to give a satisfactory explanation for the term 'Rabha'. The tribe itself is known to outsiders as 'Rabha' and the Rabha natives identify themselves as Rabhas. In the following paragraph let us take a look at some of the contrasting views regarding the origin and derivation of the word 'Rabha'.

In the dialect of the Koch-Rabha, the word '*marab*' means 'man'. Hence, Dhanjay Rabha is of the opinion that the word 'Rabha' has been most probably derived from the words '*ma*' < '*mra*' = man and '*rab*' = uneven, rough; '*ha*' > '*a*' > '*ni*' = land or earth, that is, man of uneven place. He is of the opinion that during the migration a group of people called 'Kochhe' first took refuge in Tibet in a place called 'Rab-ha' and then entered into Assam and migrated to Garo Hills. Since they came from the place 'Rab-ha' > Rab-a' they came to be known as Raba or Rabha. He says that still there is a place in Tibet called 'Raba' in the Mongo valley (Rabha 1998: 25). According to Rehati Mohan Saha, Koch is the traditional identification of the Rabha. The name 'Rabha' was given to a section of the Koches by the Garo (Saha 1988: 47).

Friend Pereira in the Census Report of 1881 states, 'When Husheng was the chief of the powerful Atong clan, he brought the Rabha into Someswari valley to till the land, because at that time the Garo, being nomads, were not acquainted with more settled methods of husbandry'. Basing on this report Rehati Mohan Saha is of the opinion that the Rabha, who in the past were known as Koches, were called back by the Garo king Husheng to teach the Garo the art of cultivation, because they had lived mainly on hunting. Hence, the Rabha people, who had been once driven out of Garo Hills, had to teach them how to till the soil. He attests that these people (Rabhas) were 'called back' were called 'Raba' by the Garo. The word 'Raba' in Garo language means "recalled" or "called back" (Saha 2006: 46).

Thus, many writers have tried to trace the origin of the nomenclature 'Rabha' without any satisfactory explanation. The above view of Rehati Mohan Saha cannot be taken for granted as absolutely true but it needs further investigation to arrive at certitude. There is meaning for the word 'Raba' but not for 'Rabha'. Nevertheless, when they write the word they spell it with 'bh' or with the equivalent letter of the Assamese alphabet. Hence, the origin and meaning of the word 'Rabha' is still shrouded in mystery.

According to a legend *Sirgini Risi* (Supreme God) brings the Rabha down from *Rangkarang* (above the cloud/sky/heaven) to the *Hasong* (earth) and they are called the *Rabha* (brought down). Another legendary belief shows that the Garo were not quite acquainted with agricultural activities mainly the wet cultivation. So they hired some

Rabha people and engaged them as appointed workers. These two legends have a strong base among the Rabha as well as the Garo (Rabha 1930: 72).

2.2.1 Different Rabha Groups

The Rabha tribe comprises of a number of linguistic groups. Each group possesses its own socio-cultural elements with certain distinctive characteristics. Thus, based on their linguistic and cultural differences, the Rabha can be broadly divided into eight endogamous sections *viz.* (i) Koch/Kocha (Sunga), (ii) Rongdani/Rangdani, (iii) Maituri, (iv) Pati, (v) Totla, (vi) Dahori, (vii) Bitolia, and (viii) Hana. Of these sections the Koch/Kocha, the Rangdani and the Maituri are non-sanskritized groups, while the rest are considered to be sanskritized (Hakacham *et al.* 2004: 37). Moreover, the first four groups are believed to be the dominant ones who constitute the majority of Rabha population. B.M. Das is of the opinion that the Rangdani, the Maituri and the Pati enjoy a superior social status compared to other sub-groups of the Rabha (Das 1960: 6). Friend Pereira points out that the Pati section is the most advanced section of the tribe, for they have adopted the Hindu customs (Raha 1989: 10).

However, the present day data from the field seems to have a difference of opinion on these observations of Das (1960) and Raha (1989). The scholars of the day say that Pati Rabhas have almost entirely merged with Assamese society so they cannot claim to be superior within the larger Rabha conglomeration while adhering to Assamese life style and culture. Then, again in the case of Maituri Rabhas they are found in some parts of Assam only, and that too in a scattered manner, so comparing with any other Rabha group and saying that they occupy superior status is unwarranted (Field, May 2013).

The Scholars hold the view that the Totla is an offshoot of the Pati among whom the influence of Hinduism is clearly discernable (Rabha 2000: 24). In Endle's view the name Totla 'may perhaps be a nickname' (Endle 1911: 83). Both the Pati and the Totla sub-groups follow Hinduism to a great extent and as such they no longer follow the traditional customs of the Rabha but adopted the Hindu customs and manners. Moreover, they have abandoned their own dialects in favour of Assamese. On the other hand, some scholars assume that the Maituri Rabha are most probably the purest specimen of the tribe

who bear a close resemblance both to the Garo and the Pani Koch, both in their dialects and in their habits and customs (Das 1960: 13). Moreover, they have a status equal to that of the Rangdani and the Pati groups. It is said that the Bitolia Rabha have already merged themselves with the Pati Rabha, the reason for which is still not clear. Some also observe that the Sunga and the Koch are the same people. The Rabha refer to all the Koch people as Sunga (Baruah 1996: 42).

It should be borne in mind that the different sections of the Rabha do not form any hierarchical order in the proper sense of the term. The basis of each group is the dialect although a few such groups possess certain distinctive socio-cultural elements of their own. In other words, all the different sections of the Rabha can merely be called dialect groups, consisting of a common set of clans. There is, however, no sharp difference between the dialects of the Rangdani and the Maituri and their dialects are mutually intelligible. The Rangdani, the Maituri and the Koch/Kocha Rabha have retained their own dialects, while the other sections have already lost their own dialects and adapted Assamese. Thus, in respect of dialect the Rangdani, the Maituri and the Koch Rabha maintain distinctiveness of their own. But each sub-group retains its traditional ethnic homogeneous identity.

Besides the above mentioned principal sections there are also a few other sub-groups who claim to be Rabhas. Some of these groups include Domasa, Modahi and the three sections of the Koches *viz.* Tekia (Tintekia), Sapra and Wanang. These numerically lesser groups have a close cultural resemblance with the other larger sections of the Rabhas. The distribution of the various Rabha sections spreads over Assam, Meghalaya, West Bengal and the neighboring countries of India, especially Bangladesh.

As regards the origin of division into different sections we do not find any written records. Rajen Rabha, a noted Rabha litterateur, points out that the division is based on functions connected with a ritual called *Khokchi puja*, which was observed occasionally at a place called Athiabari (Rabha 1974: 15) in the present day Goalpara district of Assam. He describes that for performing the ritual (*Khokchi puja*) different types of duties were entrusted to different groups of people. Thus, a particular group was given the charge to collect a few flat stones from nearby hills. In order to propitiate the goddess *Baikhu* (alternatively known as *Khokchi*) an altar was set up in the *dham* (a common place of

worship) and the stones (*rong*) were placed in upright positions to make the place of worship. Later on the group was named Rongdan>Rangdani (*rong* = stone; *dan* = to carry or collect). During the *puja* all the participants used to have a common meal. In order to cook and distribute rice a group of persons were appointed, who were later on came to be known as Maituria>Maituri (*mai* = rice; *turia* = to distribute). A third group was given the responsibility to collect banana leaves for distribution of rice, *prasad* and for cooking purposes. Later on the group came to be known as Pati (*pat* = leaf). The term 'Pati' is derived from the word *Patratang* i.e. leaf cutters. Generally the *Khokchi puja* was organized outside the village, somewhere near the hill side, where a common meal was also served. It is understandable that when the birds got the smell of the delicious food they would gather in that open place and disturb the ceremony. Therefore, a group of people were appointed who kept on chasing the birds with a *dahari* (a long *nal* bamboo) till the ritual or the meal was over. This particular group got the name Dahari>Dahori (Dahori is the corrupted form of Dahari). Further, a few persons were given the charge to cut bamboo tubes (*sunga*). The rice-beer, which they prepared for the ritual was served in the tubes. Later, on the whole group got the name Sunga (*sunga* = bamboo tubes). Lastly, a few jokers were selected to crack jokes and make the ceremony lively. These members got the name Bitolia, which means delighter (Rabha 1974: 15-17).

The assumption of Rajen Rabha regarding the origin of division is still obscured. Therefore, in this context a detailed inquiry is necessary to ensure the division.

As indicated above, the Koch is a section of the Rabha, which is also believed to be the original section of the Rabha. The history reveals that in the primitive and epic period the Rabha were identified as 'Koches'. But till recent past they have always been considered as two separate tribes. Even today due to the ignorance of the Rabha tribe many consider that the Rabha and Koch constitute two different Mongoloid tribes. It may be mentioned here that both the Rabha and the Koch have a common set of clans (*barai*, or *husug*) and language. In recent years the close ethnic affinities of the Rabha and the Koch have been recognized by both the communities, thereby coming closer to assert their own identity. Even some of them have gone to the extent of claiming that the Koch are the Rabha and the Rabha are the Koch. In 1972-73 except the Koch of Meghalaya, all the Koch and Rabha of Assam and West Bengal came together and raised the slogan: *The*

Rabha are the Koches and the Koches are the Rabha, although in the past they have been considered as different tribes.

Thereafter things started to change. In 1973 a *Sahitya Sabha* (literary organization) was formed with the initiative of some educated Koch youths of Kokrajhar district. It was formed with a view to shape their language in written form that be introduced as a medium of instruction at the school level. They named the organization as *Kraurang Runchum*. This was later renamed as *Bebak Rabha Kraurang Runchum* (All Rabha *Sahitya Sabha*) (Baruah 1996: 46) and registered under the Society Registration Act, 1860, Assam, No. 2369 of 1993-94. The *Runchum* prepared Rabha text books borrowing words from different dialects of the Rabha and the Koch for the purpose of unification of all of them through a common language.

From its very inception the *Bebak Rabha Kraurang Runchum* had to launch various phases of mass movement urging upon the Government to introduce the Rabha language as the medium of instruction in the primary schools of Assam. Consequently, on March 19, 1988 the Government of Assam introduced the Rabha language as subject language in seventy primary schools of Assam. Furthermore, in 1995 the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) was formed comprising the Rabha dominated areas of Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam and a portion of northern Meghalaya where the Rabha inhabit.

But the Rabha identity of the Koch has been opposed by many in both the communities of the Rabha and the Koches, and as such it has led to confusion and controversy. In this context Kalyan Baruah remarked,

‘... it has been observed that ethnic identity of the Koch is becoming confusing and controversial. Differences of opinion among the Rabha as well as the Koches are adding fuel to the flames of this controversy and its shadow is looming large over the process of Rabha identity formation. Therefore, an important role is being played by a selection of the emerging educated middle class among both the groups in this identity orientation process’ (Prakash 2007: 934).

In sum, it is important for us to identify the present day habitats of each of these Rabha groups. For e.g. the Pati Rabha live mostly in Dudhnoi, Rangjuli, and Dhupdhara of Goalpara district. The Rangdani Rabha are found in Chotomatia, Bongaon, Hatisilla Bardamal, Kurabasa, Boiskuli, Droni, Chohori, Rampur, Nadiapara, Gojapara, Maladhara, Baida and Chatabari of Goalpara district and Tikrikilla, Manikganj and Resubelpara areas of Meghalaya. The Maitori and Dahuri Rabha are found generally in Lakhimpur and Jairamkuchi areas of Goalpara district. The Shonga Rabha are found in Gauripur, Golokganj areas of Dhubri and Bongaigaon district. The total and Bitlia Rabha are found in the areas of Thomna, Barama, Tamulpur of Nalbari and Khoirabari, Tangla and Dhekiajuli, Hugrajuli and Tezpur of Darrang and Sonitpur districts of Assam respectively. The Kocha Rabha live on the Northern parts of Kokrajhar district of Assam, the Garo Hills of Meghalaya, Kamakhyaguri and Fufanganj areas of Jolpaiguri and Kochbehar of west Bengal (Rabha 1998: 51).

2.3 Ethnographic Profile of the Rangdani Rabha

As pointed out above, the Rabha are divided into different groups, called sub-tribes, such as – Rangdani, Maitari, Dahari, Bitalia, Totla, Hana, Pati and Koch. Of these the Pati is the largest group. All the Rabha have religious beliefs which are animistic in character. One such practice is the worship of pieces of stone attributing to them virtues of their primitive deities. But in course of time, a group of the Rabha arranged their seats on a flat slab of stone during the rituals because, they came to believe that sitting on flat stone on a holy day would bring them luck. Since that time, these groups of the Rabha have been called Rangka-dam - Rongka-dami - Rong-dani. The term *Rongka* in the Rabha langue means a stone and dam means a low stool. Even today, the Rangdani Rabha sit on a flat slab of stone during the public worship of their deities (Rabha 2000: 24).

Some of the scholars say that *Rongkai* also means ‘strong’. They say this because among the Rabha groups Rangdani Rabha is the only one group believed to have preserved the language, customs, traditional dress patterns etc. more or less intact. So, they believe that it was possible because of their strong adherence to their vital and traditional individuality. In this connection they call the other group especially Pati as ‘small’ because of their moving away from the larger Rabha group abandoning their language and customs

and traditions. Though this observation is debatable it throws ample light on one of the perspective which is prevalent among the scholarly fraternity (Field, 5th May 2013).

The present study is based exclusively on the Rangdani Rabha with special reference to an anthropological understanding of their religion. In the census records of the Government of India all the Rabha sub-groups/sub-tribes are returned under the generic term 'Rabha' and hence, no separate demographic picture is available in the records. However, the demographic picture that have been mentioned here is exclusively based on data collected from the two villages as mentioned earlier.

2.3.1 Ethno-history

The history of Goalpara is to be considered in conjunction with those of various political units of which it formed a part from time to time. In ancient times it was included in the kingdom of *Pragjyotisha*, which is believed to have comprised large parts of North East India including most of Assam, North Bengal and even portions of erstwhile East Bengal (now in Bangladesh) (Barua 1951: 9-13). The erstwhile Goalpara district experienced several changes of jurisdiction since it first came under British rule. In 1828 it was placed for judicial purposes under the Judicial Commissioner of Assam, and it was finally incorporated in the new province when Assam was created into a separate administration in 1874 (Allen 1905: 29).

Ethnically and linguistically the Rabha belong to the Tibeto-Burman family but till date nothing definite is known as to the origin of this people. There are no historical records about their racial origin as well as their original place of abode. In the remote past they were almost obscure tribe in India. They were brought into Census Report in about the last decade of the nineteenth century. Further, there is no historical evidence about the time, manner, duration and path of migration of the Rabha. Hence, it is difficult to trace out with accuracy many details that could throw light upon their present situation. Different views have been expressed by scholars, historians and anthropologists as regards the early habitat of the Rabha, their route of migration and their close relationship with the other tribal groups.

2.3.2 History of Migration

Playfair (1909) has tried to trace the original habitat of the Rabha and the manner of their migration. His monograph *The Garos* gives an interesting account regarding the migration and settlement of the Bodo group, particularly the Boro-Kacharis, Garos, Koches and the Rabha. In his view most of these tribes migrated from Tibetan regions. According to him the migrations took place from that region to Brahmaputra valley and from thence to the Garo Hills of Meghalaya in the remote past (Das 1960: 2).

The early settlement of the tribe was said to be found in different historic time in Yangtseking and Howangho valley and Burma (Myanmar), although in due course of time they settled in North East India particularly in Assam. In a particular way he also holds the view that the Rabha after migrating from Tibetan region occupied the Garo Hills area and then distributed in Assam plains. He opines that the original home and habitat of the Rabha was the region bordering the northern slopes of the Garo Hills (Playfair 1909: 18). Playfair has also observed some linguistic and cultural similarities between the Garo and the Rabha. He has pointed out the remarkable similarities between the dialects of the Rangdani and the two sections of the Garo, i.e., Atong and Ruga. He writes:

‘The real facts can never be satisfactorily settled, but I am inclined to the belief that in the Rabha, Koches, Atongs, and Rugas we have the representatives of the original inhabitants of the tract of country which we call the Garo Hills. For this reason, while I class all other Garo divisions with Kacharis, and believe that they represent the primitive Bodo, I think that the Atongs and Rugas are of different stock and have a common origin with the Rabha and Koches’ (Playfair 1909: 22).

Sidney Endle (1911) was the first English writer to include the Rabha in his ‘Appendix’ to the book entitled *The Kacharis: Bodo*, as a tribe closely allied to the Boro-Kacharis, who were commonly called as Datiyal Kacharis in Darrang district. As regards

the origin of the Rabha he writes, 'their origin is but imperfectly known, but they are said to be descended from a Hindu father who lost caste by marrying a Kachari woman' (Endle, 1911: 83). George A. Grierson (1903) holds almost the same view. According to his observation, 'Rabha appears to be a Hindu name for the tribe, and many men so called are pure Kacharis' (Playfair 1909: 19).

All the different views and observations expressed by the scholars may well be summarized in the following words of Gait (1892), who identifies the Rabha as a distinct tribe. Gait writes:

'There seems to be a good deal of uncertainty as to who these people really are. In lower Assam it is asserted that they are an offshoot of the Garo, while in Kamrup and Darrang, it is thought that they are Kacharis on the road to Hinduism. That they belong to the great Bodo family is certain; but it is not equally clear that the Rabha are more closely allied to any one tribe of that group than to another. They have their own language (which is fast dying out), and it is not necessary for a Kachari or Garo to become a Rabha on his way to Hinduism. On the whole, therefore, although some Kacharis and Garos may have become Rabhas, it seems probable that the Rabha are in reality a distinct tribe'.

As mentioned there are no records to tell us regarding the migration and settlement of the Rabha. Das (1998: 48-49) points out that the ancestors of the Rabha tribe migrated from the sub-Himalayan region; north of Tezpur towards the Brahmaputra valley via Doangiri to arrive at Bakbua hill near Barpeta. There they rested and later entered Goalpara district. But how far this tradition is genuine and trust worthy no one knows. Hence no detailed account could be traced on the subject of migration of the Rabha. There are certain legends prevalent among the Rabha, an examination of which gives some idea about their route of migration.

According to a popular legend of the Koch-Rabhas (a Rabha sub-group) the Rabha migrated from Mongolia through various regions of China via North-West Tibet. While others opine that they entered the present Garo Hills crossing the mighty Brahmaputra

River. They entered into the deep jungles of the hills, which they called *Kamaltani Simultani Hasong* i.e. the land of peace and prosperity, and settled down in that hills. Much later another group of people arrived in that hill region, which they (Rabha) called *Garru, Gara, Garuda*, lately whose name became Garo. Both the ethnic groups lived side by side for a long period. But after several years due to the fight for supremacy for land the Rabha were driven out to the plain areas of Assam where they are settled presently. Thus, the traditional legends prevalent among the Rabha and the Garo point to Tibet or the eastern sub-Himalayan region as their ancestral home.

Through years of migration and contact with other tribals and non-tribals the Rabha have undergone a perceptible transformation. A few sections of the Rabha, who are said to be Hinduized to a great extent, have already lost their traditional customs and dialects. This tribe is very rich in socio-cultural heritage. In many fields they cherish individual traits which represent their identity even in post modern context. They do have a composite behavior pattern, individual language, social life, traditional dress, food habits, folk songs and dances, occasional festivals too. Except for physical features, these groups have lost almost all the traces of a Rabha. But in spite of such social transformation a few groups have preserved their distinctive identity through a part of the language, some religious practices, elements of cultural expressions, family set up, etc. we shall study below briefly regarding the physical features of the Rabha.

2.3.3 Physical Features

It has already been stated that the Rabha are basically of Mongoloid origin, and as such all the physical features of the mongoloid can be traced among them. They possess brown or light-brown skin colour. They have smooth and straight head hair with a coarse texture. They are average in height and have a medium body build. Their eyes are black or dark brown in colour. They also show scanty beard and moustache and scanty growth of body hair, oblique eye slits, Mongolian eye-folds, separate eye brow, broad and round face, etc.

It is also observed that the affinity of the Rabha is very similar to that of the Garo in general and to the Atong and Ruga sub-groups in particular. According to a famous myth

two Rabha sisters namely, Sae Bonge and Bonge Kate were settled in Someshwari valley in Garo Hills. One of them got married to a Garo youth and the descendants of this couple belong to Atong Garo lineage. Another sister had to face social boycott because of the fact that she got married to a cousin brother of the same clan. This made them shift their settlement to northern part of Garo Hills. The Rangdani Rabha are considered to be the descendants of this couple (Hakacham 2010: 132).

In his ethnography *Ethnic Affinities of the Rabha*, Das (1960: 37-42) has made a scientific study on the somatoscopic and somatometric characters of the Rabha people and observed clear Mongoloid features among them. He has scientifically established that both the males and the females possess Mongolian eye-folds, thin and separate eye brows, oblique eye-slits, homogenous rayed iris, marked zygomatic arches, etc. Besides the Rabha males show scanty growth of beard and moustache and they have medium body and limbs. He also observed medium stature among the males, while females show short stature. He has further observed that in general both the males and the females possess brown skin colour. The form of hair is smooth and straight in both the sexes but this is more frequent among the females than the males, who show a high frequency of wavy hair also. The texture of the head hair is coarse in both the sexes. The facial form is oval in general, though round faces are frequent in the females and pentagonal in the males.

2.3.4 Material Culture

(i) Village

In general the villages of Rabhas are very much akin to that of villages in any other parts of Assam. Most villages do not have well defined boundaries so it is difficult to say where one village ends and another one starts. There is no definite village plan, and houses are constructed in each person's agricultural land. Villages in general have about 20 to 30 families, and the larger ones with 100 and more families are very few in number. However, Sarapara, Droni, Chohari, Nudiapara have about 180, 200, 400 and 500 families each. Each village has a lot of small and big trees, especially rubber, areca nut and coconut trees, jackfruit, lichi, lemon tree and bamboo groves especially towards the boundary of the agricultural fields (Field, April 2013).

Only a few villages have all weather roads, however, roads are fairly well maintained. Each village is usually divided into several localities often called paras. Very small though, religious shrines (*dham*), burial ground (*mangkhardam*), small tea or stationery shops are an integral part of the larger villages. Selection of a village for making residential house is based on the availability of water, approach path, possibility of fertile agricultural fields, marketing facilities, etc.

(ii) House Type

The traditional aspects of building, the shapes, sizes and layouts of buildings such as dwellings, barns, sheds and craft shops, the materials used and the tools and techniques of buildings, the sites chosen and the placement of various buildings on the site, and the use to which buildings and various parts of building were put are major concerns of the families in a village. Most of the houses are constructed with bamboo and some of them are thatched with mud walls too. The household activities are centered on the fire place. The most favorable months for the construction of the house are from March to April. It is during this time the Rangdani Rabhas remain relatively free from agricultural operations. Neighboring houses also will come to help and generally only meal is served to them in return for their service, and poorer households will be only able to offer a few cups of *chocko* intermittently. Most of the house has its own tube well with hand pump attached to it to provide water for the use of its members, kitchen garden and cattle (Field, April 2013).

In the Rangdani villages it is generally observed that houses for eg; main part of the house which is generally occupied by the head of the family (*borghar/nokchungkai*), Kitchen (*noksra*), guest room (*noktoplasa*), drawing room (*moja*), Store room for all the things of the house (*mai-bhandar*) store especially for the rice beer (*tograb*), etc. Verandah (*Balam*) is built around a common courtyard. In front of all these houses an open ground is maintained for thrashing of grains at the harvesting season, and of course, it is also used as the place of meeting of some visitors and ordinary guests. Most of the houses have bamboo walls thatched with mud. Now-a-days we can also come across houses which have walls constructed with bricks and plastered with cement and sand. Towards one side of the house

a shade is constructed very often along with the house where women weave in the simple hand looms. The kitchen is also a similar house structure, of course, the poorer families do not have a separate kitchen but they manage the cooking inside one of their dwelling houses.

(iii) Food

The indigenous food habits of Rabhas have changed due to the impact of other religions, especially Hinduism. The predominance of the non Aryan inhabitants and their inclusion in the Hindu fold may rightly be inferred as one of the strongest factor for which not only the caste system but also the dietary system had to be made liberal in Assam. Wide prevalence of Tantrism, both *Shiva* and *Sakti*, probably contributed towards liberalization in respect of food and drink (Rajguru 1988: 161).

Rice is the staple food of the Rabha. It is the principal food for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Pulses are occasionally used. Fresh fish caught in the nearby streams and waterlogged places also find a place in their diet. The major food prepared by them is as following: Preparation of flattened rice (*rungchu/chira*), puffed rice (*muri*), powdered rice (*gura*), and popped rice (*akhoi*) is also used at various intervals. The local rice beer (*chocko*) is part of their food. This drink is prepared from fermented rice. The best quality beer is called *chocko*. However, they also make other types of home brewed beer. Rice beer is considered to be a wholesome drink for general health and well-being. Many food items like leafy vegetables, tender bamboo shoots are boiled with plenty of water and salt and consumed together with rice. Pork, mutton, eggs, dry fish, and rice powder kind of dal (*bamchakali*) also are their delicacies. It is also noticed that often poor people prepare a concoction of rice, onions, dried chilies and salt. This is done because they are not able to purchase fish, pork or chicken. Names of some of the more common dishes are as given below:

- (i) *Phakay* : A type of food prepared by powdering rice in a bamboo tube.
- (ii) *Khitsarkay (khsarkai)*: A curry prepared with alkali.
- (iii) *Dzaokay (jaokai)* : Fried food prepared using mustard oil.

- (iv) *Phiokchak (fokchak)* : The food prepared in a bamboo tube using edible leaves.
- (v) *Bikai* : This type of food is baked with the help banana leaf.
- (vi) *Aotaykay* : This type of food is prepared solely with water.
- (vii) *Bamchi kali* : The curry prepared out of powdered rice.

(iv) Dress

The traditional dress of the Rabha is a part and parcel of their material culture and deserves special mention. The Rabha love to use colourful dresses. The present scholar has observed that green coloured cloth is used by them more often. However, they say the most favourite colour is red; however red, white, black, yellow, purple etc. also are used. The first three hues are regarded sacred by them. Being asked about the reason for their special liking of green they observed that as they work often in the agricultural field the clothes get soiled soon and so they need to wash the clothes quite often, and in this process most of the colours get faded unlike the colour green (Field, 5th May 2013).

The female apparels are very beautifully designed with flowers and they excel the neighbouring Boro-Kacharis and Garos in this art. Women wear *Ryphan* covering from waist to leg and *Kambung* covering from chest to waist as a form of their traditional dress which is weaved in handloom at home. The Rabha women are expert both in weaving and spinning. In fact all the Rabha women including the grown up girls are expected to be expert weavers. They have to learn the techniques of weaving early in life. Therefore, a Rabha woman having no knowledge of weaving is unthinkable and she is not worthy for marriage. Following are the some of the traditional dresses of the Rabha, most of which are woven by themselves in their own hand-looms.

1. ***Ryphan***: This is the traditional dress of a Rabha woman. It consists of a piece of unstitched woven cloth measuring 4 cubit long and 2.5 cubit broad. It is woven in beautiful colours of red, white and black. Generally the cloth is worn round the chest from just below the armpit reaching up to the ankle when worn. Along with *Ryphan* the women wear blouse (*busil*) as women of other societies do. The *Ryphan* is also used by the young girls but they generally wear it round the waist extending up to the ankle. In Darrang district the *Ryphan* is commonly known as *Kambang*.

2. ***Kambung/Kambang***: It is a piece of cloth, which is used both by the grown up girls and the women to cover the torso. The length and breadth of the cloth are 3.5 cubits and 1 cubit respectively. The *Kambang* is beautifully adorned with flower designs.
3. ***Khodabang/Phoigu***: This is the traditional head-dress of a Rabha woman. The length of the *Khodabang* is 3 cubit and the breadth is 1 cubit.

All the above mentioned female dresses are produced out of red, white and black threads. In the past these dresses were invariably needed for attiring a bride at the time of her marriage. It was the rule of the Rabha society that every bride must put on these three types of garments at the time of her marriage (Rabha 2002: 29).

The traditional dress of Rabha man includes, *Pajal* (cloth wrapped round the waist reaching up to the knee), *Pajar* (muffler - either hanging on the shoulder or wrapped around the neck), *Khupong/khodabang* (head-dress), *Fali* or *Sengkanen* (cloth to wrap round the waist during work), *Pasra* (over the shoulders) and *Bok-Sali/Buksil* (hand-woven short shirt). These cloths are often made by the Rabha women themselves with colourful designs peculiar to the tribe. Some of the local names of their dress items are given below:

<i>Ryphan</i>	: lungi/skirt.
<i>Kambung/kambang</i>	: sheet; scarf (like <i>bihu gamocha</i>) for men.
<i>Pajar</i>	: <i>gamocha</i> cloth used by men.
<i>Khopon</i>	: turban used by men.
<i>Gantho</i>	: under pants.
<i>Khodabang</i>	: cloth used by women on head.

(v) Ornaments

Ornaments enhance the physical beauty of the person, and as such the Rabha women are very fond of adorning themselves with ornaments of beautiful designs apart from wearing colourful embroidered *Ryphan* and *Kambang*. They like to decorate mainly five parts of the body; namely, ear (ornaments like *nabri*, *dala*, *bola*), nose, neck (*hancha*,

sukimala), waist band (*rubuk, rekhop*), bangle (*san*), hairpin (*khusumakrong*), wrist and finger (*chasikam*), etc. In the past wearing of these ornaments was never a fashion among them. In fact no Rabha woman was allowed to remain without wearing ornaments and those who went around without any ornaments on their body were neglected by the members of their own society. Number of ornaments worn is indicative of the economic status of the family of the person. Some of the traditional ornaments worn by the Rabha womenfolk are mentioned below:

<i>Nambri or Mudkor</i>	: An ear ring made of gold or silver.
<i>Bula-nambri</i>	: An ear-ring of gold or silver. This ear-ring is specially used by the bride in the wedding ceremony.
<i>Nakpoti or Nakum-par</i>	: A nose-ring, made out of gold or silver.
<i>Syan or Sandap Bokok</i>	: A bracelet made of gold or silver or copper.
<i>Boli</i>	: A nose-ring made of gold or silver.
<i>Sondro har or Sondromukhi har</i>	: A necklace, made out of silver.
<i>Hanch or Hasa</i>	: A necklace made of solid silver.
<i>Hat-baju</i>	: This ornament is worn along with the bracelet. It is made of silver.
<i>Kata-Baju</i>	: An armlet made of silver.
<i>Jinjhiri</i>	: A necklace made of gold.
<i>Hiki or Hukia</i>	: A kind of garland worn round the neck.
<i>Molkharu</i>	: A gold bracelet.
<i>Har Gulai</i>	: A bracelet of the womenfolk, made out of gold or silver.
<i>Bauti</i>	: A bracelet made of brass.
<i>Bhorikharu</i>	: An anklet made of silver.
<i>Soichitam</i>	: A finger-ring.
<i>Khush Makrang</i>	: It is a spike or iron pin which is pushed lightly and placed inside the knot of hair tied on the top of, or behind the head. The length of this spike is about 9 to 10 inches.

Some of the local names of their dress items are given below:

<i>Nambri /Bola nambri</i>	: An ear ornament.
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<i>Tshanka / rubuk</i>	: A bracelet.
<i>Khutshumakron</i>	: A typical hairpin collected from porcupine's spine.
<i>Kantiabadzu</i>	: An armlet.
<i>Bali (nakapati)</i>	: A kind of nose ornament.
<i>Katabaju</i>	: An ornament of shoulder.
<i>Shan, Chandap, babak, Mayur Chingchap</i>	: An ornament of hand.
<i>Chasikam</i>	: Ring.
<i>Hancha, Chelhar, Jinjiri</i>	: An ornament of neck.

(vi) Economy

Economic life of a community or society is very crucial for its overall development. If the economy is sound there is possibility of development. Any community whose economy is weak cannot progress much in life; however, hard that community may strive. The economy of Rabha community is mainly based on agriculture, and as such their economic activities centre around the agricultural operations through out the year. In order to understand the economy of the Rabha community, we need to go further into the various areas of its activities, which enable the community to have a sound economy. In recent years most of them have also tried to cultivate rubber as an important cash crop.

(a) Agriculture and Horticulture

Rabhas are basically agriculturists. They occupy areas suitable for rice cultivation. Some of the main rice crops cultivated by the Rabha are *ahu (asu),Maga mai, chap raising, ranjit, sonajuli, bahadur, otabua, Sali, asra, masri, aijong, bilsa*, etc. In order to prepare rice-cake (*pitha/bamchi*) they also cultivate some special kinds of rice known as *bora, joho*, etc. They also cultivate other products like jute, mustard seeds, cotton, sugarcane, maize, pulse, sweet potato and so on. Apart from horticulture areca nut (*kui*) and betel leaves (*pana*) cultivation are also practiced on a substantial scale which bring more economy to them on the one hand, and they are essential for all the social functions and rituals as well.

They also grow various kinds of seasonal vegetables. In summer they grow various gourds, pumpkins, cucumbers, ladies' fingers etc., in winter cabbages, cauliflowers, radishes, potatoes, tomatoes, brinjals, onions, garlicks and leafy vegetables are cultivated with care. Some people cultivate chillies, ginger, turmeric, tobacco, jute, plantain or banana, betel nut, bamboo etc.

Table II

The major agricultural/horticulture produces of the Rangdani Rabha of Majerburi & Matia of Goalpara District, Assam

Sl.No.	Local term	English equivalent
1	<i>mai</i>	rice
2	<i>na</i>	fish
3	<i>kantha</i>	potato
4	<i>jamakra</i>	maize
5	<i>turia</i>	ladies finger
6	<i>tipai/matikalai</i>	pulses
7	<i>rethe</i>	banana
8	<i>ragu</i>	lai pata
9	<i>monthophol</i>	papaya
10	<i>giganata</i>	pumpkin
11	<i>rabu</i>	lauki
12	<i>pocho</i>	mango
13	<i>pangchung</i>	jackfruit
14	<i>kriday</i>	star fruit

15	<i>lichu</i>	lichi
16	<i>belthisbantho</i>	tomato
17	<i>haldia</i>	turmeric
18	<i>karchak</i>	beans
19	<i>reng</i>	noolkol

(b) Livestock

Besides agriculture another related economic activity of the Rabha is animal husbandry. The rich as well as the moderate families rear different kinds of domestic animals such as cows (*machu/musu*), pigs, (*bag/bak*), goats (*pryn*), and birds like pigeons, chicken and ducks (*hangchi/khoida*), etc. The bulls (*halua masu*) are reared not for commercial purposes but for agricultural operations. Earlier the animals were also reared for offering sacrifices to deities. The Rabha also rear domestic animals and poultry birds on *adhi* system, that is, the income from the animals or birds is shared both by the owner and the person who reared them.

(c) Marketing

For their day-to-day requirements the Rabha largely depend on the weekly markets. Such markets help them sell their agricultural products like jute, paddy, mustard seeds, chilly, pulses, etc. Market days are also important for them to meet each other and share the news regarding the various events of the village. So invariably most of the youth and even elderly people visit the market at some time of the day for socializing purposes even though they may hardly purchase any item for their personal or home use. The district has many weekly markets out of them some are only for the horticultural products. For eg; there are about 10 to 15 truck load of betelnuts are brought from the village markets to the markets in Bagdoba, Dudhnoi, Darranggiri, Rongjuli, Krishnai etc., where the businessmen dry the betel nuts and make *supari*. This has also created a lot of job opportunities for the villager youth.

(d) Cottage Industry

The Rabha are experts in cottage industry. Bamboo and cane goods are some of the major cottage industries of the Rabha. Many bamboo mats of drying paddy, baskets for storing rice, cages for keeping chicken at night, fishing traps, boundary walls, boundary for the plants at the homestead, etc are manufactured generally at leisure time and they are used for domestic purposes as well as for selling in the weekly market. Cottage industry is one way a pass time job yet it brings in the much needed financial support to purchase the household things.

(e) Fishing

Fishing is another important economic activity of the Rabha especially during the summer (rainy) season. Women including small boys and girls engage themselves in catching fish which are generally for their consumption. Some of the locally available fishes, often caught by the Rabha are *nasong* (Assamese: *cingi*), *magur* (Assamese: *magur*), *nachan* (Assamese: *puthi*), *koi* (Assamese: *kawoi*), *sontrak* (Assamese: *seng*), *row* (Assamese: *row*), *bitia* (Assamese: *botia*), *taki* (Assamese: *goroi*), etc.

2.3.5 Social Structure and Organization

(a) Sub-Groups/Sub-Tribes

As it has been mentioned earlier, Rabhas are divided into eight sub-groups/sub-tribes of which Rangdani Rabhas constitute numerically one of the largest groups. They are most numerous in the Goalpara District, Assam. The other sub-groups/sub-tribes are distributed across the state of Assam, Meghalaya and some parts of West Bengal. The Rabha society has been divided into a number of status groups. According to wealth, education and respectability they are graded. A grown up person especially if he/she is intelligent and knowledgeable certainly is respected and his/her opinion is sought in various matters affecting the family and village. We have observed during the field survey that elderly people with traditional/indigenous knowledge including the village priests

(*Deuri*), village headman (*Gaonburah*) and village medicine men (*Ojha*) has their own special grade of respect.

(b) Family

Family is the fundamental multipurpose organization for many of the principal life functions of an individual and society. Family is the smallest social unit of the Rangdani Rabha consisting of a man, his wife and their unmarried children. The study of social organization deals primarily with significant groupings of individuals. Man does not live alone and at the same time he has to meet his basic needs like companionship, recreation, religious activities, play, etc. Vidyarthi (1976: 146) observes that man forms a group or association with the help of which he makes attempts to satisfy his needs. Mandelbaum (1970: 33-34) argues that family teaches the fundamental lessons of who 'we' are and who 'they' are... Such patterns instill motivation in the young so that in time, they will bring up their own young to seem similar cultural patterns.

Table III

Family Pattern of the Rangdani Rabhas of Majerburi & Matia villages

Sl. No.	Family pattern	Villages/Number of family		
		Majerburi	Matia	Total
1	Nuclear Family	40	49	89
2	Extended Family	19	13	32
	TOTAL	59	62	121

It is evident from table III that there are 121 households in Matia and Majerburi villages, out of which 89 nos. are nuclear family, and 32 nos. are extended family. Nuclear family which signifies that the preference of nuclear family of the people is more in comparison to that of the traditional joint families. Among the Rabha, the nuclear

family consisting of married couple and their unmarried children is most common compared to that of the joint families.

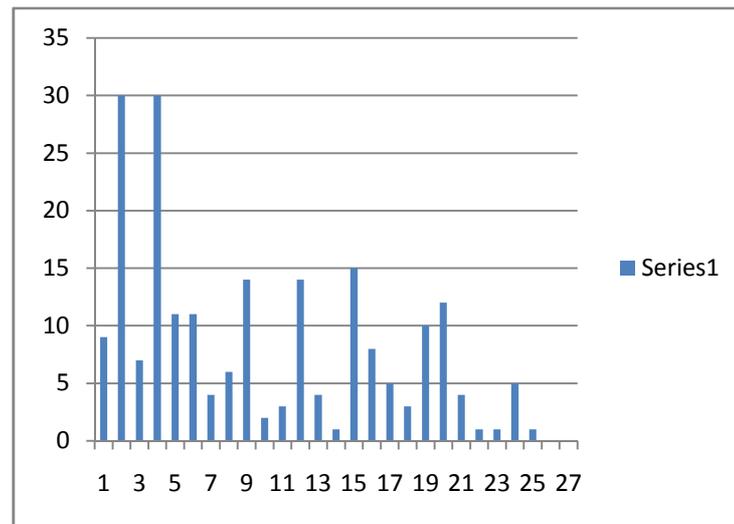
(b) Clan

The Rabha are organized into several clans. Except the Pati Rabha other groups name clan as *bar* or *barai*. Generally some of the names of *barai* are common to all the Rabha groups. Marriage within the same *barai* is strictly prohibited.

Among the Rabha, both widow-remarriage and divorce are allowed with sufficient liberty, *Pan Phala* or the system of tearing a betel-leaf is observed by them as a mark of separation. The Rabha have the custom of paying bride price. Even today children assume the name of their mother's clan; on the other hand, the father's properties are inherited by his sons; in all religious functions, the father is the head. Marriage within the same clan is not allowed. From the data from the field we see that two *barai*, namely; *Rangdung barai* (30) and *Pam barai* (30) are most numerous in the Matia and Majerburi villages. A table is given below in which names of the most numerous *barai* are mentioned. Of course, the study has revealed that other *barai* also is observed in both of these villages, though they occur less than 10 in number. Thus we have not included them in our chart.

Table IV

1. <i>Rangdung Barai</i>	30
2. <i>Pam Barai</i>	30
3. <i>Sanduk Barai</i>	15
4. <i>Gainag Barai</i>	14
5. <i>Hadung Barai</i>	14
6. <i>Fenang Barai</i>	12
7. <i>Chachung Barai</i>	11
8. <i>Debang Barai</i>	11
9. <i>Nebra Barai</i>	10



(c) Birth

Though all the important life cycle ceremonies will be studied at some length in the next chapter titled Life Cycle Ceremonies we shall take a quick look at them here below.

After the birth of the child the umbilical cord was cut with Bamboo strip. Then the placenta is buried in the courtyard. Fire was burnt to keep the room warm. Mother was given light food. Child was bathed with tepid warm water. Mustard oil is used to massage the baby. Ritual tonsure is done on the 7th day after the birth of a child and this ceremony was performed when the umbilical cord dries up. Taboos such as not taking the child outside the room of the house not bathing in cold water etc were strictly observed. Sprinkling the water in the house is done by *Deuri* and the invited guests were fed with food and local rice beer (*chocko*). Two of the important ceremonies associated with birth of a child are given below:

(i) ***Bokthay Phakhakay***: This is a purification ceremony performed after the birth of a baby. This ceremony is observed on the occasion of a baby's naval-thread separation.

(ii) ***Tatshi Ginkay***: This is an auspicious ceremony related to birth. This is celebrated as gratitude to *dhaima*, i.e., the wet nurse of the baby. It is believed that if this ceremony is not performed the mother of the baby has to feed her blood to the *dhaima* after her death.

Name giving ceremony takes place a month after the birth of the child. The whole village is invited for this celebration. A number of items such as betel nuts, areca nut, *Deuri* in a traditional Rabha dress to officiate the ceremony, about 5 kilos of rice beer, a winnowing fan is to be passed around the people who have come to attend the ceremony and the people place in it whatever gifts either in cash or in kind as a present to the child who is given name on this particular day. The *Deuri* and the parents of the child decide the name and on this particular occasion *Deuri* announces to the people gathered that the name of the child is so and so.

(d) Marriage

Marriage is an important social organization among the Rabha. They do not permit anyone to marry from his own clan (*barai*). Marriage is conducted in a very simple way though it has to follow several initial stages of preparation. Marriages are generally arranged by the match maker (*ghatak*). Various elements of negotiations take place before the marriage proper. In the previous evening of the marriage people assemble in the courtyard of the bride's house. Banana trees are used to decorate the entrance of the house, other auspicious leaves like *tulsi* (basil), mango leaves, rice grase soaked in water, *sindhur* (vermilion), a small cock and knife for sacrifice, are required. Generally marriage takes place in the bride's house. It is the duty of *Deuri*/priest to purify the entire house. They all sit in a circle and the *Deuri* invokes name of deities with certain *mantras*. Name of the deity invoked is *Rishi* and *Mahakal*. Offerings of pig, fowl together with rice beer, incense, items used. Some of the forms of marriages are mentioned below:

- (i) *Nok-dangkay* : This is basically a love-marriage.
- (ii) *Dzanoy dangkay* : This can be called a son-in-law marriage i.e. the boy stays in the girl's house after the marriage.
- (iii) *Buri-tshinkay* : This is a socially arranged marriage through the negotiation of the parents.
- (iv) *Krantshi-buri* : This is a marriage ceremony without feasting.
- (v) *To-thakay* : In this marriage ceremony the cocks are sacrificed.
- (vi) *Hatasuani* : The ceremony of distributing food to the public for the first time is known as *hatasuani*.

(e) Death and Disposal of Dead Bodies

On death, corpse is kept inside the house. After a period of ceremonial weeping, a little rice beer and water was given to the diseased. This offering was known as *chika barai*.

Though in earlier days burial was conducted now-a-days they prefer cremation. As soon as the death takes place the immediate relatives and neighbours are informed. Ladies immediately bring rice (*mairung*) and throw over the dead body and in the surroundings. Now-a-days some wild flowers and leaves of *tulsi*, mango etc also used. It is customary that daughter-in-law has to cry loud to show that she has a loving respect for the dead person.

Formerly it was customary to open the abdomen of the deceased to find the cause of death. This was done to make certain regarding the particular type of rituals to be conducted for the repose of the dead. Because they believed each of the particular case of death is caused by a particular spirit which needs to be appeased by a prescribed ritual. It is observed that cremation ground is about one kilometer far away from the village and womenfolk are not allowed to accompany the funeral procession and the rituals too. The dead body is placed on the bamboo stretcher and carried by four male children; if they are not there it will be done by four male relatives or neighbours of the diseased.

All the articles of the deceased were kept on the pyre for example the dress, utensils, medicines etc. Many of the elderly people said that this was done to keep away the spirit of the dead from visiting the house of the diseased. The well-known ceremonies related to death are:

- (i) ***Farkanthi***: A post-funeral ceremony observed by tying a holy knot (*ganthi*) for one night (*phar*). Hence, it is known as *farganathi*>*farkanthi*.
- (ii) ***Toronga***: A post-funeral ceremony observed by setting up a decorated serpent made of bamboo piece (*toronga*) by the Dahori sub-group of the Rabha.

- (iii) ***Hatapak***: A very expensive and ancient post-funeral ceremony observed for a week (*hatapak*).
- (iv) ***Masuani Shradha***: A very popular and newly adopted post-funeral ceremony observed offering prawn and other fish to the deceased as well as the public. It is related with caste-Hindu's *Matsya-sparsha* (*masuani shradha*).

(f) Inheritance

Both movable and immovable belongings of an individual, which he or she earns or acquires by his or her own efforts or receives from his or her ancestor or ancestress or gets as donations are considered by the Rabha as their property. At the death of the mother her youngest daughter inherits the property. The other daughters leave their home immediate after the marriage and establish separate households. The sons together with their wives and children also leave their parents household and live with their parents-in-law.

(g) The Village Administration

The traditional village council among the Rangdani Rabha is known as *Samaj* and is headed by village elder. He is the political head and at the same time he looks after the social, religious and all other aspects of the village interest. Besides him the village priest (*Deuri*) is also considered to be an important official of the village. For the efficient running of the village the headman gets assistance from other respectable elders of the village as well. Even the laws and regulation related to the village is looked after. Any, even which is celebrated will be referred to the headman. Presently there is also *Mahila Samity*.

2.3.6 Religion (*Dormo*)

The various ethnic groups of the world from time immemorial had and have certain very specific beliefs about the past and future of man, which shaped or shaping their way of life. If a person holds on to these beliefs, then he or she is said to be 'religious' and these beliefs are loosely termed under the nomenclature, 'religion'.

All students of human culture admit that religion is one of the most important factors in culture. Not only is it found in every known human society it also significantly interacts with other cultural institutions. It finds expression in material culture, in human behaviour, and in value systems, morals and ethics. No other cultural institution presents so vast a range of expression and implication. The complexity of religious phenomena and their intimate relation to so many other aspects of life have attracted scholars from many disciplines: historians, philosophers, psychologists, even linguists have analyzed religion and with their own methods. Naturally, anthropologists and sociologists are particularly interested in the study of religion, for religion fulfils an eminent social function in human life (Fuchs 1975:12).

E.B. Tylor defines religion as a belief in spiritual beings. Some philosophers have called it 'a superstitious structure of incoherent metaphysical notions'. Some sociologists refer to religion as the 'collective expression of human values'. Followers of Karl Marx define it as 'the opium of the people' and some psychologists call it as the mythical complex surrounding a projected super ego.

For an anthropologist, religion helps to write people in a shared experience and explanation of life. It provides a pattern of human behaviour, often in response to the hazards of life. The sociologists stress the social dimension of religious ideas. Religion provides an agreed way of looking at the world. It gives the individual a sense of purpose and meaning. Historians describe religion in terms of events resulting from beliefs. Theologians are concerned with belief themselves, the question of whether they are true or false, and with people's response to them. The different approaches are valid in different ways and within their limitations. The basic difference is that of their standpoint; that is the way of the believer and the way of the scholar.

The different approaches to the study of religion are not mutually exclusive, for, each method of study can add to our total picture – but the study of religion is necessary to understand the *weltanschauung* of a particular people: No one can understand mankind without understanding the faiths of humanity. Sometimes naïve, sometimes penetratingly noble, sometimes crude, sometimes subtle, sometimes cruel, sometimes suffused by an

overpowering gentleness and love, sometimes world affirming, sometimes negating the world, sometimes inward looking, sometimes universalistic and missionary minded, sometimes shallow and often profound – religion has permeated human life since early and obscure times.

As Pohlong (2004: 12) says, if religion is seen as a set of beliefs, practice or patterns of behaviour or as an institution, it pervades the whole gamut of life. It is thus both a response to man's total environment and an exploration into its frontiers; moreover, it participates in the polarities of life just as culture does. He is of the opinion that 'religion like culture is equally vague and full of complexities; it has different connotations for different people. Whenever we think of religion many things come into our minds like the idea of God, beliefs, rituals, worship and the like. But none of these constitute the essence of religion'.

While in the tribal context religion is intimately interwoven with their tribal way of life, their day-to-day activities, their material and ethical life. As Dabi (2004: 10) observes, "Tribal religion is a part of their everyday life, not confined to individual faith or creed. It has simple social ethical codes distilled all through the ages." They worship deities and spirits, who according to them control rain, crops and epidemics. They propitiate them with sacrifices of fowls, goats, pigs, cows, buffaloes and other animals. They worship deities for good harvest of crops and fertility of agricultural land, and also for the good health and welfare of the whole village.

Rangdani Rabhas are very conservative in their religious practices and beliefs, so they also hold fast to traditional beliefs and values, customs and rituals with great care. They believe in a number of benevolent and malevolent deities and spirits. Epidemic and calamities are believed to be the work of malevolent spirits. According to their concept, the worship of benevolent spirits was done by *Deuri/Gurphang* (tribal priest) and that of the malevolent performed by the *Ojha* (medicine man). The post of the priest in Rangdani Rabha society is neither hereditary nor taught by anybody. It is learnt by experience in analyzing dreams.

Earlier in a usual day, a Rabha commoner had not been practicing any rituals as part of their religion. Now-a-days they take the name of water (*chikka*), fire (*bar*), and wind (*rampar*). Their reason is that in each human body there are these three elements found. Water is seen in the form of blood, fire is seen in the form of temperature and wind is seen in the form of breathing. These three elements they believe are not ordinary things so far as their presence is very necessary for the human beings to exist. So they pronounce the names of water, fire and wind and utter some *mantra* in their honor (Field, 5th May 2013).

2.3.7 Fairs and Festivals (*Bytar – Ranchay*)

Festivals are the external expression of social behaviour. These significant events are the survival of beliefs and magical rituals of ancient community. Robert Jerome Smith says: The folklorists speculated that modern festivals were survivals of ancient community magical ritual, whose purpose was to make the days grow longer, to expel winter, to appease gods of the fields, forests and skies and most especially to promote fertility (Sarma 1983).

Fairs and festivals are part and parcel of the exuberant culture of the *Rabha* tribal community. Traditionally Rabhas were animists and they follow the religious practices of greater *Bodo* Community. These *Rabha* tribes celebrate all the main festivals of the Indian Territory. These include *Janmashtami*, *Durga Puja*, *Diwali*, *Idd*, *Muharram*, *Me-Dam-Me-Phi*, the birth and death anniversaries of the *Vaishnavite* saints *Shrimanta Sankardev* and *Shri Madhabdev*. Apart from these, the *Rabha* people celebrate the *Farkhanthi* Festival and the *Baikhu* Festival. *Hamjar* is a festival celebrated by them before beginning farming on their lands. The people of *Rabha* community celebrate the joyful events with dance, music and songs with great merriment. These people have a distinct form of dance namely *Nakchung Reni* which they perform when they celebrate the fishing. During the different festivals, *Rabha* men and women dance and sing accompanied by the musical instruments like the *karra*, flute and *singa*. *Farkanthi*, *hamjar fusakay*, *girkay fusakay*, etc. are some of the dances of *Rabha* tribe. On the full moon night of *Bahag* (mid April), *Rabha* youths perform a group dance called *Girkay*. Singing and dancing are an integral part of *Rabha* culture. The main festivals of Rabhas are as given below:

(www.vedanti.com/News/festivals_of_rabha_tribes_of_ass.htm)

(a) The *Baikho* Festival

This festival is regarded as the national festival by the Rabha. This is a ritualistic festival which is related more or less to their religious concepts and beliefs. The ritual is celebrated with the intention of propitiating *Baikho*, the goddess of wealth and prosperity which is held once in a year. They worship *Baikho* deity with pomp and grandeur. They pray to the goddesses for good harvest, more crop-yield and favourable rains. In earlier times, *Khoksi* and *Baikho puja* was performed during *Bohag-Jeth* (April-May), but now it is done during *Shawon-Bhadow* (July-September).

Khoksi and *Baikho*, as the Rabha legend goes, were two sisters. *Baikho* was the elder and *Khoksi* was the younger. When their clan was living in Athiabari, they became involved in some clash with the *Dodan* clan, consequent upon which their clan shifted their village to ‘Darmang’ hill. The younger sister *Khoksi* was an adept in black magic. Through sorcery she inflicted torture on some of her own clan-members. At this, the elder sister *Baikho* got enraged upon *Khoksi* and drove her away to ‘Bamundanga’ hill where she met with her death. Those of her community who loved her began to worship her at ‘Bamundanga’ and this clan of the Rabha came to be known as ‘Dahuri Rabha’. Similarly, after the death of *Baikho* at ‘Darmang’ hill, her followers took to *Baikho puja* and they were termed as ‘Maitari Rabha’. The Rabha say that it was *Khoksi puja* which first came to stay and it was followed by *Baikho puja* which began later on. Each of the two clans performed *Khoksi/Baikho puja* separately in the days of the yore. But such division on the basis of clan-ship got eliminated with the passage of time and now *Khoksi* and *Baikho pujas* are done by the Rabha irrespective of any clan-difference. Today many also believe that *Khoksi* is the Assamese word for the *Baikho* in Rabha.

It is to be noted that one of the major *Baikho* celebration ground is Nadiapara about 7 kilometers from Matia-Majerburi village where about 500 Rabha families reside. It was in 1982 for the first time *Baikho* was celebrated in this village and in the year 2006 they celebrated the silver jubilee of this great event by making elaborate preparations to

celebrate a week long *Baikho* with a number of memorable events. They say now-a-days the festival is observed as a group celebration of seven neighbouring villages, namely: Nudia, Borjora, tillapara, gasiapara, dampar, nalungapahar and Garopara.

They make elaborate preparations including the clearing around of the whole area of celebration, including washing of the sacred cloth to be worn by *Deuri*. They take a rehearsal of the whole programme to make it very successful. Honendra Rabha, the president of the 32nd Baikho celebration committee at No. I. *Borjora-Nadiapara Aya Baikho Kristi Mahotsav* Committee observes that now-a-days there is no ritualistic killing of the Pig, because there are other communities also participating in this *puja* who do not appreciate this pig sacrifice. However, Tug of war (*lewa bykay*), playing with the ball made of cloth (*dhop khel*), tiger game (*masa khel*), breaking the seed of *gerok* (*gerok khel*), walking on the fire (*barnakkai*), breaking of the branches of the tree to test the strength of *Deuri* (*killa dibikay*), putting on the sacred cloth (*jama*), offering of Chocko, invoking the names of the 14 deities (*Darmang, Champai, Nakati, Chari, Shibdarman, Daduri, Khusuri, Rangamari, Chaimari* and *Marukhetri*) is done with great precision. It is also important to notice that according to Maitori Rabhas, there were four heroines known as Tamai, Nakkati, Susari and Daduri. We see clearly a close relationship between them and some of the 14 deities invoked by the *Deuri* based on the Rangdani Rabha tradition as well.

They brought out a booklet *Ardhi-Nala* (*ardhi* = prayer; *nala* = source). The main purpose of the booklet, as it is given in the introduction to the book is that, if no proper record is maintained the well meaning traditions of a group of people (in this case Rabha) will be lost to the posterity. So this book has mentioned the traditional ways of *Baikho* celebrations, the names of gods and goddesses propitiated by the *Gurphang* (*Deuri*), some songs to be sung and prayers to be recited by the participants etc. In sum, *Baikho* is the much sought after festival for all which may fall in the month of May or June based on the lunar calendar.

(b) Langa or Langa Mara

This is another important festival which is held annually during the month of April and May in the midst of a jungle or at a river bank. He is propitiated to welcome happiness and to expel the evils. They propitiate *Langa mara* privately and publicly (Mazumdar, 1991: 3). According to Hakacham (2010: 145), this *puja* with spiritual overtone is basically celebrated by Pati Rabhas and is one of the important occasions which deserve to be called festival. This propitiation is done either in the forest or near the bank of the rivulet with two aims namely to achieve abundant crops and ward off evil influences on humans and animals.

(c) *Farkhanthi* Festival

The Rabha people celebrate the *Farkanthi* Festival and the *Baikho* festival. This is associated with the post funeral rites of the Rabha. *Farkanthi* derived as *far* means night, *kanthi* means tie of the cloth, which symbolizes the deceased soul. This funeral rite is performed with popular *Farkanthi* folk songs and dances. With homage to the departed soul, the *Farkanthi* songs generally contain prayers addressed to the soul for its rebirth. To mark this occasion, a makeshift graveyard known as *Mangkram* is prepared in the middle of the courtyard on the day of the '*shradha*' and the Rabha males, with wooden instruments like *Manchalengka*, *Tamjhanka* and *Bodamuk-Pantamuk*, etc. While females with shield and swords in both the hands, perform a series of dances, namely: *Hobachongkai*, *Ganthi mukdagninkai* and *Chedabarikai*.

Hamjar: is a festival celebrated by them before beginning farming on their lands. The people of *Rabha* community celebrate the joyful events with dance, music and songs with great merriment. These people have a distinct form of dance namely *Nakchung Reni* which they perform when they celebrate the fishing. During the different festivals, *Rabha* men and women dance and sing accompanied by the music.

Dinga puja: *Dinga puja* is also known as *Langa puja*. Some *Rabha* people observe *Kechaikhaiti puja* along with *Langa puja*. All the materials of this *puja* are placed on a *Dinga* means boat that is why it is called as *Dinga puja*. After placing all the materials on the *Dinga* then it carried on to the riverbank nearest to the village to perform the *puja*. Emersion of the boat takes place ultimately in the river.

Marei Puja: *Marei puja* is a community festival. *Marei puja* is also known as *Bishahari puja*. *Marei puja* is performed by the *Deodhani* and *Ozapali*. The *Rabha* of South East Goalpara and South West Kamrup observe the *Marei puja*. It is observed on the fifth lunar day of the *Krishna Paksha* (dark part of the Lunar month). When the *Marei puja* is completed in one day then it is called *Ful Marei*, and when the *puja* is continued for three days or more then it is called *Gota Marei*. This *puja* is done to seek blessings against fatal diseases, natural calamities and also fear from serpents during the approaching year.

Hachong Puja: Instead of *Baikho* festivals, the *Rabha*, now observe the *Hachong puja*. *Hachong* is an institution observed by the people instead of merriment of *Baikho*. The songs of the *Hachong puja* are the *Khokshi geet* or the *Sathar geet* though the festival is transformed to *puja* of *Hachong*. They believe this *puja* is done for good harvest. *Baikho* is the main god who is worshipped on the *Hachong puja*.

Hana Ghora: *Hana Ghora* is a festival of merriment. The *Rabha* of Western Kamrup observe the *Hana Ghora* festival. *Hana Ghora* is supposed to be the god of fortune. This festival is observed in the month of *Bohag* (April-May). It is believed in folklore that the companion of *Mahadeva*, when he was engaged and moving throughout the world when *Mahasati* was sacrificing her life in *Daksha Yagna* used this horse.

Dodan Mela: *Dodan mela* is observed since 1971. *Dodan mela* is a new folk festival. This is observed from 8th to the 10th day of the bright forth night of the last month of the Assamese calendar. It is believed that once there was a very powerful king named *Dodan*.

For some reasons *Dodan* had to flee away from his kingdom. With his followers he started in search of a land called *kamalatni chimalatni hasong*, the land of peace and tranquility. *Dodan's* queen's name was Nadai. She had a widowed sister named Champaimari Jimari. Champai had a beautiful daughter named Tabourani. When she grew up, *Dodan* began to search for a suitable husband for her. At last at a place called Moinapur Sonapur he met a disguised prince and married Tabourani to him. He became the general of *Dodan*. This prince's name was Marukhetri. Marukhetri was a clever and strong person. Later on he was made captive by Kings Arimanda and Ghorbimon. When *Dodan* heard about the capture of his general he himself went to fight. His enemies struck him with bows and arrows. Where he fell down it is called *Dodan beel*. To pay homage to this *Dodan* and *Marukhsetri* and to respect and worship the god of the universe *Shiv Shri Risi* the *Dodan mela* is observed.

2.4 Population Dynamics

Population dynamics in the North East India as in other societies and regions has two basic components: dynamics through natural process and dynamics through induced process. As regarding to the natural growth rate of population all the states in the region have registered higher growth rate than the rate for the whole country. As a result, the increasing population pressure in this region has given rise to linkages between quality of life, population dynamics and environmental degradation.

(www.iussp.org/Bangkok2002/S17Mishra.pdf).

The population of North East region is 38.50 million in 2001 according to the Census of India. Out of this, Assam alone accounts for 26.64 million. The average population density in the region is 147 persons per square kilometer. But this varies from state to state and within the states too. While Assam and Tripura have a fairly high population density of 340 and 304 persons per square kilometer respectively, Arunachal Pradesh has the figure at only 13. In Tripura, again the density of population is much higher in the small valleys than the hilly areas. The decadal growth of population in majority of the states is higher than the national average.

The Scheduled Tribe population represents one of the most economically impoverished and marginalized groups in India. Although Scheduled Tribes are a minority, they constitute about 8.2 per cent of the total population in India (Census of India 2001), or 85 million people in absolute number. There are more *than* 400 tribal groups among the scheduled tribe population, each with their distinct cultures, social practices, religions, dialects, and occupations. In North East India, the tribes are heavily concentrated in the northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland although they constitute a small percentage of the total tribal population in India.

In 1961 the Rabha population was 1, 08, 029. In 1971 census it rose to 1, 38, 630 in which 71,497 males and 67,133 females were identified. This is 10.31 per cent of the tribal population of Assam (Sachchidananda *et al.* 1998: 860-862). However, in the year 1991 (as there was no census taken in the year 1981) the population of Rabhas increased to 2, 36, 931 with 1, 20, 139 males and 1, 16, 792 females (Bisht and Bankoti 2004: 1311-1315).

We shall mention specially the case of Goalpara district the area of our study (Mishra 2002). As of 2001 India [Census](#), (Provisional 2001) Goalpara had a population of 48, 911. Males constitute 52 per cent of the population and females 48 per cent. Goalpara has an average literacy rate of 69 per cent, higher than the national average of 59.5 per cent: male literacy is 73 per cent, and female literacy is 64 per cent. In Goalpara, 12 per cent of the population is under 6 years of age. In the following table we shall take a look at the population dynamics of our study areas Matia and Majerburi villages.

Table V

Distribution of population of the Rangdani Rabha by age and sex at Matia village

Age Group	Male	Percentage	Female	Percentage	Total
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in years					
0-4	11		9		20
5-9	20		15		35
10-14	24		16		40
15-19	19		18		37
20-24	10		16		26
25-29	18		13		31
30-34	9		19		28
35-39	18		9		27
40-44	8		6		14
45-49	11		11		22
50-54	7		8		15
55-59	1		1		2
60-64	3		0		3
65-69	3		0		3
70 and above	4		2		6
Total	166	53.72 %	143	46.27 %	309

Table VI

**Distribution of population of the Rangdani Rabha by age and sex at
Majerburi village**

Age Group in years	Male	Percentage	Female	Percentage	Total
0-4	13		6		19
5-9	17		11		28
10-14	15		16		31
15-19	10		9		19
20-24	14		10		24
25-29	12		18		30

30-34	9		5		14
35-39	6		10		16
40-44	4		7		11
45-49	10		7		17
50-54	3		1		4
55-59	5		1		6
60-64	1		1		2
65-69	2		1		3
70 and Above	3		3		6
Total	124	53.91 %	106	46.08 %	230

Population Matia: 309 + Majerburi: 230 = 539.

It is observed that in the age group of 10-14 there are highest number people both in Matia and in Majerburi. (40 + 31 = 71). Generally in the ages ranging from 20 to 39 there are also a large number of people. This can indicate the age group within the range of marriageable age as well as this is also an indication that the workforce in both of these villages is a major factor to reckon with. We also notice that above the age of 49 there are only a very few female members found in both of these villages, especially in Majerburi.

2.5 Socio-Economic Scenario

In Indian society, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population have been discriminated against and confined to the lowest rungs of social and economic hierarchies. Socio-economic factors contribute significantly to literacy and educational attainment among people in rural compared to urban areas. High poverty rates and dependence on

agriculture call for increasing rates of child labor force participation among many of the tribes in India. The tribal dropout rate is extremely high relative to the mainstream population. Children often enroll in primary education and then drop out of school in order to help the family especially in agricultural operations (Vasavi 2002; Jha and Jhingran 2002).

The bulk of the tribal communities in India continue to be techno-economically backward for various reasons. Their economy is not similar and they are at different levels of the techno-economic parameter. Notwithstanding variations in the techno-economic domain tribal economies exhibit three basic features, namely; (I) common ownership of land and joint control over forest and other natural resources; (II) non-acquisitive but community oriented economic value system, and (III) lack of an ulterior motive and lack of interest in the generation of surpluses for capital formation.

The [traditional economy](#) of the Rabha in general, is based on [agriculture](#), forest based activities and weaving. In the past, the Rabha used to practice shifting cultivation. They continued to cultivate the land with *gogo* or bill-hook. Later they took up the job of settled cultivation and started cultivation with [plough](#). Besides cultivation, hunting was also an old practice of Rabha people. Weaving was a traditional occupation of the Rabha women (Raha 1989: 233-234).

Rabhas, who once used to live in the forest and practice [shifting cultivation](#), were deprived of their rights to the forest by the colonial rulers, since the formation of forest department, banning on shifting cultivation and demarcation of forest boundaries. Consequently, with the colonial land settlement system, most of the displaced Rabhas either adopted settled cultivation as sharecroppers or took refuge in the forest villages as plantation laborers. After independence, [Indian Government](#) more or less continued the same colonial system of [forest management](#), where the communities like Rabhas could not regain their rights to the forest (Raha 1989: 234-235).

2.5.1 Economic Standards

The Rangdani Rabha are primarily agriculturists. Besides agriculture, they also practice horticulture, hunting, fishing, collecting fire wood from the forest areas. Other than agricultural works they also rear pigs, fowls, ducks, pigeons, cows, goats etc. Earlier they were only allowed to rear cows etc only for their domestic use and not for sale or business. But now-a-days they have also learnt to do business as part of the supplementary income. Thus horticulture and animal husbandry also have raised their living standards up to an extent (Rabha 2000: 36).

2.5.2 Major Occupations

As with the rural population in other plains of Assam, agriculture is the principal occupation of the vast majority of the Rabha of Goalpara. The most outstanding feature of the economy of the region is its lack of diversification. Apart from a few public sector establishments here and there, there is practically no organized industry. There have been professional workers, both groups and individuals, engaged in other occupations like fishing, pottery-making, ornament-making, working on pith, weaving, basket-making, etc (Datta 1995: 23).

2.5.3 Agriculture and Horticulture

From ancient times, various methods of cultivation have been known to the Rabha. Regarding this one can observe the following lines,

‘... when Huseng was the chief of the powerful Atong clan, he brought the Rabha into Someswari valley to till the land, because at that time, the Garo, being nomads, were not acquainted with more settled methods of husbandry. After migration to the present Garo Hills, the Rabha produced the crops namely millet, maize, paddy, arum, tapioca and cotton by *jhum*

cultivation. First they burnt down trees in a forest area of hills, and cultivated the land either with the plough or spade. At the proper season, the various crops, seeds were sown. To protect the crops from elephants and wild boars, they watch the crops on the *Bhorong* (a platform) day and night' (Rabha 1974: 178-79).

At present the Rabha also, like many other tribal groups of the country, live on agriculture. So it is the main occupation and backbone of the economy of the Rabha. Of course, those who have no land to cultivate, earn their livelihood by day labour. Agriculture is practiced with the help of the plough. Sugarcane, tobacco, jute, chillies, pulses, sesame, mustard, ginger, turmeric, cabbage, potato, brinjal, etc. are cultivated in appropriate seasons. The other horticultural products viz. pine-apple, lemon, orange, jackfruit, mango, litchi, jujube, tamarind, betel nut, coconut, banana, papaya, guava, beans, cowpea and various types of gourds are also raised by them. Sometimes they sell them in the markets and earn money.

They also plant various kinds of bamboo as well as thatch to meet their household purposes. These days, the Rabha are trying to cultivate various kinds of new crops, and follow other than native methods of cultivation. Still, the Rabha are unacquainted with the application of fertilizers for improvement of agriculture. The land use in both Matia and majerburi is also very low compared to the total land available to them. For example in Majerburi out of the 602 *bigha* land a meager 157 *bigha* only is cultivated. Whereas in Matia 301 *bigha* land is available and out of which only 78.5 *bigha* is cultivated (Field, December 2012).

2.5.4 Fishing and Hunting

The Rabha are interested in fishing and hunting also. Fishing is carried on with the help of various implements like scoop (*choreng*), catching by net (*chek*), and a kind of

scoop (*polo*). Generally, the boar, hare, deer etc. are hunted with the help of various nets and weapons like kind of lance (*khapar*), bow and arrow (*kar*), etc. available in the market or made by the village black smith. From the remote past a custom has continued that every adult man and woman must participate in hunting in the forest. Even pregnant women are not exempted. A pregnant woman participating gets her share in double. At present, this custom is almost extinct (Rabha 1974).

2.5.5 Animal Husbandry

Bullocks, pigs, goats, cattle, and dogs are the major domestic animals. Previously, cows were not milked by them. They have a superstitious idea that drinking of milk is sin. Still the majority of the Rabha abstain from drinking milk. Cattle are used in agricultural operation. Sometimes pigs, goats etc. are sold and some cash is earned.

Fowls are reared in large number while, geese, ducks, etc. are seldom found. The Rabha eat their flesh and eggs. Sometimes, they earn some money by selling the birds and their eggs. Parrots and *mainas* are domesticated as pets as they can speak like man if trained. Piggery and poultry farms have been established by some Rabhas in accordance with the government schemes present.

2.5.6 Weaving

From the past weaving is confined to the women folk of the Rabha. They know the art of weaving. They weave with patterns and colours in perfect taste. Most of the families weave their own garments. Learning of weaving is a must for females. No girl can be chosen as bride for marriage who is not expert in the art of weaving. Hence, the family loom is one of the most essential items of their domestic life. In every family we see a loom attached to one of rooms, sometimes loom is put up just outside the room of the

woman who is basically doing this work on a day to day basis. They generally weave the clothes especially during the lean season of agriculture.

2.6 Literacy and Education

Literacy and educational attainment are powerful indicators of social and economic development among the people of any given nation. In India during the British rule there was no organized method to educate the tribal communities except for the work undertaken by Christian missionary organizations in some regions in India. Currently, the tribes lag behind not only the general population but also the Scheduled Caste population in literacy and educational attainment. Scheduled Tribes in India are generally considered to be '*Adivasis*,' meaning indigenous people or original inhabitants of the country. The tribes have been confined to low status and are often physically and socially isolated instead of being absorbed in the mainstream population. Psychologically, the Scheduled Tribes often experience passive indifference that may take the form of exclusion from educational opportunities, social participation, and access to their own land. All tribal communities are not alike because each is products of different historical and social conditions. In the case of Rabhas, today, one finds them in diverse occupations from forest workers and cultivators to all modern occupations like school teachers and government office bearers, etc. though their number in white-collar jobs are not very high.

(www.ou.edu/cas/econ/wppdf/trendsniliteracy%20am.pdf).

One of the important indicators of the development of a tribe is education. Education empowers even the poor to make a decent living. A policy document issued by the Government of India (1984) states that education is the key to development and can be input for the economic development. In spite of all the expansion that has taken place in the formal education system vast majority of Rabhas have remained outside the reach of education. As per 1971 Census report the literacy rate of the Rabha in Assam was only 22.24 per cent. In 2001 it has reached 39.03 per cent (Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Schedules Castes). Even today there are very few graduates and postgraduates from the Rabha community, besides the number of other professionals are much lower. At

present there is not a single representative from the Rabha community in the Parliament as well as in State Legislative Assembly.

Formal education is the key to all-round human development. Despite several campaigns to promote formal education ever since independence, the literacy rate among Scheduled Tribes is only 29.60 per cent compared to 52.21 per cent for the country as a whole (Census of India 1991). The female literacy rate is only 18.19 per cent compared to the national female literacy rate of 39.29 per cent. Alienation from the society, lack of adequate infrastructure like schools, hostels and teachers, abject poverty and apathy towards irrelevant curriculum have stood in the way of tribals getting formal education.

However, it is pertinent to note that some organizations have played major role in ushering in better development of language and literature among the Rabha. The Rabha Sahitya Sabha, the Rabha Bhasha Parishad, the all Rabha Cultural Association, the Rabha National Council etc. have rendered laudable contributions. The All Rabha Sahitya Sabha has the credit of introducing Rabha as a language subject in primary school education. The language has been so far successfully introduced in only 70 schools in Rabha areas (Rabha *et al.* 2010).

The present scholar has made extensive travel around the villages of Goalpara district to take a look at the school scenario especially with reference to primary schools. It is observed that there are only a very few number of teachers who are dedicated to the work and the number of children attending the classes also are far from adequate determination to do well in studies. During the interview it is observed that they seem to blame each other for this anomaly, sometimes they too are not edified by the facilities provided by the government too.

2.6.1 Reasons for Backwardness in Education

1. Lack of awareness regarding the benefits of education is an important cause of low literacy among the Rabha. As they are tradition bound, conservative and confined to home and agriculture, they are not able to adapt changes and thus fruits of education have not percolated to them.
2. As a vast majority of children come from the illiterate rural communities, and as they have no one to look up to as examples to be emulated, they remain in the age old predicament of low literacy.
3. Parents often feel there is no need to educate children as they will go out of their village if they are educated and this will create a lack of helping hand in agricultural operations. This is all the more true in the case of girl children. For a Rabha family girls do not need education as they will remain always in the house to look after the younger siblings and extend a helping hand in the agricultural field. At the present day this is changing towards the better.
4. As many of the parents are daily wage earners they do not save some money for the education of children. They cannot afford to purchase text books, note books, school dress and other things for schooling.
5. The existence of schools also does not encourage the children to study as there are very few functional schools with regular presence of teachers. Moreover, the school building is also without adequate facilities (Rabha 2000: 44-47).

We have identified that socio-economic background, lack of educational facilities, lack of aspiration and motivation, lack of initiative and parental guidance, lack of financial support etc, are some of the important factors responsible for slow spread of education among the Rabha. Hence, the Rabha are in need of special educational efforts from the local self governing institutions and from the state Government as well. As the Article 46 under Directive Principle of State policies in Part IV of the Constitution states,

‘The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interest of the weaker section of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.’ At the same time the Rabha also need to change their attitude towards education because “educational attainment depends, to a great extent, on the attitude of the tribals towards the benefits of education’ (Kariapuram 2003: 106).

Writing on education of the tribals and their development Kariapuram says, one of the acute problems faced by tribals with regards to educational access is the lack of adequate facilities for education in the mother tongue. Language is central to the identity of a people and the preservation of their culture. This is an area where formal education offered by the Government has not given sufficient attention and care. Studies have shown that the problem of the medium of instruction used is a great hindrance to educational development of tribal children. The children are not taught through the medium of their mother tongue, partly because of the variety of dialects they speak. Teaching a child through non-tribal languages directly affect his/her retention in the school.

In this chapter which we just concluded we took a brief look at the history of Assam. This has helped us to locate the Rabha the study population with special reference to their ethnographic profile. The population dynamics, socio-economic scenario and the educational parameters also have thrown light on the over all situation of Rabhas with special reference to Rangdani Rabhas of Goalpara district. Now, in the following chapter (Chapter III) the rites of passage of the community will be discussed.

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