Chapter III

INDIVIDUAL IN SOCIETY

A Rabha villager wakes up at about five; takes his mai machi (break fast) leads his bullocks to plough the fields and works there upto 12 noon. He takes his mai rumkal (lunch) at home and goes back to the field where he further works upto five in the evening when he returns home for a well earned rest.

A Rabha woman besides assisting in cultivation cooks food for the family, keeps herself busy in domestic work and is responsible for rearing up children.

Generally all the members of the household take dinner together at night when all of them are present at home.

NUDITY

Nudity is not allowed within the house or outside. The Rabha tribals maintain high degree or privacy. Crown up children never sleep in their parents' room. Young sons generally above fifteen or sixteen years of age, sleep in the nakthap (separate house).

NORMAL BEHAVIOUR IN DAILY INTERCOURSE

Embracing each other and touching the feet of elders
are the various ways of greeting. Married girls when they leave their parents' home do not embrace any body. A non-Rabha stranger is greeted by uttering the word "namaskar" with folded hands.

Children touch the feet of the elders to greet them. This might have been the influence of contact with the Hindus particularly the Bengalis.

Following is the table which shows how to pay and take salutes from each other:

Table 1
Salutations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Salute payer</th>
<th>Salute Taker</th>
<th>Greeting word</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Rabha</td>
<td>Rabha</td>
<td>Nemato</td>
<td>Nema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Rabha</td>
<td>Stranger (Rabha)</td>
<td>Chan-Nem</td>
<td>Nema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Rabha</td>
<td>Stranger (Non-Rabha)</td>
<td>Namaskar</td>
<td>Namaskar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>No custom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>No custom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Rabhas are generally meek in the house. Towards strangers, they are quite polite and respectful. The younger members are submissive and well behaved. The menfolk are very
emotional towards their women and children.

HOSPITALITY

A guest is believed to be sacred and his blessings are valued. They feel proud to receive and entertain him.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION

A Rabha is not very much concerned about his children's training and education. He wants to utilise their services in the household jobs. Children participate in the domestic work. They are careful about personal cleanliness.

Of late there is an increasing consciousness of the education of their children both boys and girls.

LIFE CYCLE FROM BIRTH TO DEATH

Life cycle begins with conception. Yet primitive peoples have no scientific knowledge of the nature of conception. This is not the result of prudery but of sheer ignorance. After all, even civilized man has acquired a sophisticated knowledge of genetics only in the last hundred years and there is still a good deal of talk about storks in our society.1

CONCEPTION

Among the Rabhas there is no other theory except the popular belief that conception follows sexual intercourse. They believe that a child is the gift of Risí Bai, their Supreme God. There are cases where conception does not occur in spite of usual sexual intercourse. This, the people believe, is due to ill luck or some inherent disease due to secret abortion before marriage. That a woman has conceived, is known when her menstruation stops for over a month from the due date. Some women do not express her conception to her husband immediately. So, the co-habitation takes place even after conception. Even if some husbands come to know about their wives' conception, they co-habit with their wives up to five or six months or pregnancy.

The tribals believe that for a woman it is better to conceive soon after her marriage rather than to give birth too late. They prefer to have a male child.

PREGNANCY

Pregnancy after marriage is very welcome. During pregnancy the expecting mother is not given any special diet. There is no restriction on the movement of a pregnant woman. She works in the field, carries water from the well or a nearby spring and attends to all household works. In other words she leads a normal life and takes the usual diet.
A pregnant woman and her husband have to observe certain taboos during the period of pregnancy. For example, the pregnant woman or her husband should not touch a dead body. If they disobey this taboo, it is believed, the delivery will be complicated and delayed. Similarly, the pregnant woman or her husband should not kill an animal. It is believed that commission of such an act during pregnancy will create complication in the delivery.

WORSHIP OF BAIMA BAI

Baima Bai is a malevolent deity of the Rabhas. He presides over births. He is not propitiated constantly; but as soon as a woman conceives, the deity must be propitiated.

Whenever a woman conceives, her husband immediately promises to sacrifice a male duck or a he-goat to the deity. The sacrifice is performed by the village deuri (priest) in a clear, near water outside the village. Baima Bai is appeased by the sacrifice of a male duck or a he-goat only and never by a fowl or a pig.

ABORTION

Abortion is considered a sin. It is practised very secretly. There are a few women who possess herbal and magical knowledge about abortion among the Rabhas. In the very few cases of pregnancy among unmarried girls abortion is brought
about by using home-made medicines. The people believe that abortion would be punished. Barrenness in conjugal life is generally considered as a punishment for such crime.

BIRTH

Birth usually takes place in the house of the husband. No separate house or room is provided for the expectant mother. Delivery takes place in the sleeping room of the couple.

When the expectant mother reports her labour pain the daima (midwife) of the village is sent for. She observes the expectant mother carefully and if she feels normal delivery will take place the husband is relieved of the anxieties. The husband stays in the house all along till the delivery takes place. If the daima suggests that delivery may be delayed or some complications may arise in the delivery, the husband immediately contacts the nearest ojha (village physician and magic-man) who administers magical water. The husband and the daima wait impatiently to see the result of the magical water. But if this proves to be ineffective, the husband goes to the nearest allopathic dispensary to call in a qualified doctor as a last resort.

It was reported that till about 1950 the Rabhas depended upon a daima and an ojha mainly as qualified doctors were not easily available during those days. Mortality rate both maternal and infant in delivery cases was therefore quite
When a child is born the umbilical cord is severed by the daima or in her absence by an old and experienced woman of the village by a sharp bamboo strip.

WORSHIP OF BADUBA BAI

Baduba Bai is another malevolent deity of the Rabhas who must be appeased as soon as a child is born. Like Baima Bai, he is not propitiated constantly.

When a child is born, the father immediately promises to sacrifice a male duck to Baduba Bai. The sacrifice can be performed on any convenient day after the child's birth.

The sacrifice is performed by the village deuri at a little distance away from the house in a dala (bamboo tray).

Baduba Bai can be appeased by the sacrifice of a male duck only and never by a fowl, a pig or a goat.

DIET OF MOTHER AND CHILD

The mother is not given any special diet. But the following items should not form a part of her diet generally for the first seven days after the delivery.

i) Makham chitha (jonga or home-made beer prepared from bora, a kind of rice).

ii) Jeganat (the bottle gourd)

iii) Rethe (banana)

iv) Rafu (the white gourd)
v) **na pithing** (fresh fish)

vi) **tupai** (phasculus radiatus)

The child is given mother's milk. If the mother does not have sufficient milk, she is given **manthal** (carica papaya) in large quantities.

**TITHER CEREMONY**

This ceremony is observed on the 5th day in the case of a girl and on the 7th day in the case of a boy. All the clothes of the mother are washed and the house is cleaned. The family of the new-born child can take part in the socio-religious functions of the village from this day onwards.

**MUNGTANKAI CEREMONY**

*Mungtankai* is the naming ceremony. The Rabhas observe this ceremony on the 7th day or within one year after the birth of the child. On this occasion relatives, clan-members and the villagers are invited. They are given *jonga* to drink.

The name of the child is usually chosen by the parents; but elderly persons of the village also suggest a name. No horoscope is prepared by calculating the position of stars at the time of birth.

The Rabhas give only one name.

Names are chosen generally from among the existing names of the tribals; but the time of birth and the child's
physical appearance and nature are often counted while selecting a name.

The following table shows the names selected according to the time of birth of a child.

Table 2
Names Selected According to Time of Birth of a Child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Time of Birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Chani</td>
<td>Born in the noon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Naibatang</td>
<td>Born in the midnight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Pharnai</td>
<td>Born in the dawn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Phungi</td>
<td>Born in the morning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Rangchi</td>
<td>Born in the evening</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table below gives a list of names selected in accordance with the physical appearance of a child.

Table 3
Names According to the Physical Appearance of a Child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Physical Appearance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Chafareng</td>
<td>Very small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Hentok</td>
<td>With a short neck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Khodolong</td>
<td>Bald headed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Lodoreng</td>
<td>With a small curve in the neck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Mangkreng</td>
<td>Very lean and thin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Toporam</td>
<td>Very short</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following table shows the names selected according to the nature of a child.

Table 4

Names According to the Nature of a Child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Nature of a child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Gomaru</td>
<td>A child that sleeps much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Khamajangkai</td>
<td>A child that cries much</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DHATRI BIDAKI CEREMONY

This is a simple ceremony observed to receive the daima. This ceremony takes place generally within the first month from the birth day of the new-born. On this day the daima is entertained with a meal. She is neither paid in cash nor in kind in lieu of her service; but presents are offered to her as follows:
1) Kud pancha (20 pieces of betel-nut)
2) Pana muthacha (20 pieces of betel-leaf).

EACHUTI CEREMONY

This ceremony takes place on the fifteenth day. On this day, mother and child both take bath. All utensils of the household are cleaned. The mother and the child wear
new clothes. After this ceremony the mother is free to move about.

If any woman dies at the time of delivery, all possible efforts are made to save the life of the child. Mostly it is the grandmother or an aunt who rears the child. The first born in the house is given more importance.

There is no custom of committing infanticide among the Rabhas.

SUCKLING

The duration of suckling is generally three years; but in the case of the last child, this process is continued for four or five years. The mother starts giving her milk from the first day. First, she feeds the child every two or three hours, but later on the woman feeds her child only when it starts crying.

After three or five years as the case may be, suckling is stopped. In the case of death of a child, the mother pastes some medicine on her breasts and fasts so that the milk in her nipples may dry up.

TASIGONAI CEREMONY

Tasigonai is the first rice giving ceremony to the child of the Rabhas. This ceremony is observed from sixth to eighth months in the case of a boy and fifth to seventh months.
in the case of a girl. On this occasion relatives, clan-members and villagers are entertained at a feast. Mangching (meat) is an essential item of the feast. Jonga is served liberally. Mai amadi (soft rice) is prepared and put in the mouth of the child.

CHULIKARAM CEREMONY

Chulikaram is the shaving ceremony of the child and is performed in connection with a male child. This ceremony is observed in the second, third or fifth year of the child. On this occasion too, the relatives, clan-members and villagers are entertained at a feast. Presents are offered to the child in cash or kind by the relatives.

An elderly person shaves the child. He should invariably belong to the child's clan.

CHILD-CARE

The journey from infancy to youth is not an easy one for the Rabha children, like most other tribal children of the country. The childhood is full of obstacles. The parents cannot leave agriculture and other jobs to look after children. The situation is somewhat easy when grandparents are staying with the family. Otherwise, it becomes the responsibility of the eldest child to look after the younger brothers and sisters till the parents come home in the evening. The children play during the daytime and are
jubilant when parents come home after the day's work. In the evening children move towards the boundary of the village to greet their parents.

In addition to child-care, another equally grave problem is immunisation, against disease. The survival of children generally depends on nature. In most of the villages there is no provision for any medical care except the religious rituals. The rate of infant mortality is quite high. Survival is a matter of luck and chance. There are many clans that have not expanded much or have ceased to exist because of high infant mortality rates.

As children grow up they are dressed according to their age group.

Children up to the age of three or four years are called pichchu. Boys above three or four years of age are called musa-shabra and girls of this age group are called mesa-shabra.

SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

As the age of thirteen, the children of either sex are taught of their sex behaviour. The mother teaches her daughter and father his son about sex behaviour, acceptable to the society. Children indulging in unnatural coitus are checked, though such cases are very few. Chastity among girls is very high. The girls are bashful and the boys are very
strong in character. Age of puberty of boys and girls is considered as 15-17 and 13-15 respectively. The idea about first menstruation is that the girl has become eligible to give birth to a child and fit for marriage. Premarital chastity is expected. Love marriage is considered as a social evil, though nok-dankai (details in chapter iv) a type of love marriage is also approved by the society. Prostitution is never allowed by the society. People do not like any immoral conduct.

PUBERTY RITE AMONG GIRLS

The Rabhas do not observe a ceremony in connection with the attainment of puberty by a girl. When a girl sees the symptoms of first menstruation she informs her mother secretly about the matter who asks her to remain inside the house immediately for two days. The girl's mother then informs her husband about it.

On the third day the girl takes her bath early in the morning and washes all the clothes she used during the menstruation period. In the family nothing is taboo for this incident, except that the girl is not allowed to go to the kitchen or the place where the household deity Rantak is placed. Her touch is not treated as impure although the members of the family prefer not to touch her. The girl is not allowed to do any work.
A boy who attains puberty is called gabur. When he gets married and attains full manhood, he is called musa.

An old man is called budia.

A girl who attains puberty is called doray. When she gets married and reaches full womanhood, she is called mesa.

An old woman is called mari.

CONJUGAL LIFE

Rabha boys and girls marry between the ages of 20-25 and 15-20 respectively. Throughout their married life husband and wife work together in a spirit of co-operation and mutual adjustment which are so necessary to share the socio-economic burdens.

OLD AGE

Old people are given due regard. Sons are responsible to support their parents. People of old age generally want to live with their children. Their advice is sought on important occasions.

As a man grows old, his interest towards life gradually diminishes. A major part of his work he entrusts to his grown up sons. He has also to effect a proper division of his property among his sons as and when each of them gets married. Giving advice in village meetings and guiding important socio-religious operations become the major part of his daily routine.
The Rabhas believe that sikai (death) does not spare any body in this world (prithimi). Sooner or later, every one is supposed to face it.

The soul, according to their belief, goes direct to Memangpur (the city of Memang, the god of an imaginary kingdom) soon after a person is dead.

In regard to the cause of death there are two views among them. According to the old persons death occurs at the expiry of the tenure of one's life in this earth; but the younger section of the people, particularly the educated ones, do not believe in the contention of old persons. According to them disease is the main cause of death specially when it occurs below the age of fifty.

Suicides are less among them, but there are instances like that of a father who killed himself hanging because his only son expired due to some accident, or of a young girl who jumped into a well and killed herself as she became pregnant due to pre-marital coitus.

DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD

The Rabhas cremate their dead. They call it bar rakhukai. But lepers and those who die as result of suicide,
drowning, lightening and snakebite are buried which is called sikalo ha rakhukai. Each village has its own mangkramdam (cremation ground).

The disposal of the dead and the observance of customary rituals play a significant role in their society. It indicates the love, affection and respect of the relations and villagers for the deceased.

The ritual involves the sacrifice of a number of domestic animals like pigs, fowls and goats. The funeral of a rich man is more ostentatious than his birth festivities. When a rich influential or dear person dies, his sons or relatives slaughter five to seven pigs and fowls of like number.

When a person dies, a white cotton cloth is spread over the body. An earthen lamp is kept burning near the deceased. The head is kept towards the north. The deceased is given a formal bath and dressed in new cloths. If the dead is male by sex he is usually dressed by males and if female by the females. If the dead is a married one, the dressing is done by the respective spouse that is, if the husband dies then the wife dresses the body and vice versa.

As soon as a person dies it is the custom among the Rongdania and Maitoria Rabhas to cut a fowl in the name of the deceased which is kept near the deceased. They call it to-dum-duguta. The belief is that the soul of the fowl would
be the companion of the deceased's soul in the Memangpur.

The Dahurias again keep a red thread in the mouth of the deceased and tie two black threads on the two big toes. The Patis and the Baitlias tie two white threads on the two big toes. It is the custom among all the sub-groups to offer food to the deceased.

The news of death is conveyed to all relatives. The clanfolk, friends and villagers assemble in the house of the deceased. Relatives staying at far-off places are informed, but cremation or burial does not wait for them.

The men-folk them prepares a funeral bier by means of bamboo. To prepare a bier, first of all two long bamboos about 2.5 to 3 metres each are placed parallelly keeping a distance of 0.75 to 1 metre between them. On these two poles, some odd number of bamboo splits (5, 7 or 9 in number) are placed and tied with bamboo string. When the bier is ready, a bamboo mattress is placed on it. The bier is kept in the north-south direction.

The body is carried to the village cremation ground by the members of the deceased's clan or close-relatives.

HA PRIJAK

The deceased's eldest son or in his absence brother or a clan-member purchases land from Mother Earth in the cremation ground. This is called ha prijak (purchase or land).
There is a belief among the Rabhas that Mother Earth is the sole owner of ha (land) and that is why a plot must be purchased from Her. For this purpose, the person who purchases land puts a coin into the hole where the pyre is to be constructed. He then addresses the deceased as follows:

"ni nang ai ani, nang babani, yian bhitha"
(you have no father, no mother, this is your land).

The pyre contains 7 layers in case of a man and 5 in case of a woman.

KEMJU RUGUKAI

In bar rakhukai, the eldest son or in his absence brother or a clan-member collects a piece of forehead bone from the deceased uttering the following words:

"ni dahjan, amkani chibani ganthi mura khairangita jate unkam pruna jene usi swarganaringhi".

( the forehead bone of the deceased is collected by me, so that he can go to heaven on the day of the final ritual).

The piece of bone is kept in the deceased's house till the day of the final ritual wrapped in a piece of cloth. On that day it is thrown over the cremation site along with the foods meant for the deceased.

In sikaio ha rakhukai forehead bone is not collected.

After giving a final bath to the dead, the body is placed on the funeral pyre with the head towards the north.
The eldest son or in his absence, the brother or clan-member then rounds the pyre seven times in case of a man and five times in case of a woman. The pyre is then set on fire.

If the deceased is to be buried, the digging of the grave is initiated by the nearest male relation or the dead. He may be helped by others. Till the grave is dug fully, the body is kept near the burial ground guarded by the relatives and clan-members. A coin is put in the grave to indicate that land has been purchased for the burial of the deceased. When the grave is ready the body is placed carefully with the head towards the north. A white cotton cloth is spread over the body. The grave is then carefully filled up so that the body cannot be touched by animals and birds.

In the case of cremation, a small thatched hut is constructed over the cremation site; but no hut is constructed in the case of burial.

In the four corners of the cremation site four bamboo poles are fixed vertically and a chandwa (hanging cloth) is tied to the upper ends of the poles. The chandowa has four layers.

As soon as the cremation or burial is over all persons attending it go direct to a river or a spring and bathe with sherok (seed of a wild plant).

The woman go neither to the cremation place nor do they perform any major function in the house. They wail
loudly and sing mournful songs describing the qualities of the deceased's head and heart.

MARANG-NAKKA CEREMONY

This ceremony takes place on the cremation/burial day. It is a simple ceremony performed by the village deuri (priest). The deuri does not go to the cremation ground. He comes to the house of the deceased and utters some mantras (charm) to drive away the evil spirits from the deceased's house.

In the meantime persons attending the funeral assemble in the court-yard of the deceased's house and sing mournful songs describing the qualities of the deceased's head and heart. They are served with rompe (fried rice powder) and jonga.

MAI MEMANG

On the next day morning after the cremation, the widow, widower or a near relation of the deceased goes to the cremation ground with cooked food and keeps it near the cremation or burial site in the name of the memang (ghost) of the deceased. This is called mai memang (ghost-rice). The foods contain the usual food of the person. This process is continued daily or sometimes once in a week till the final ritual is over.
NOK KHITHERKAI CEREMONY

On the day of the final ritual, all clothes of the family members of the deceased are washed and utensils cleaned. The court-yard and plinth of the house is plastered afresh. The family members of the deceased bathe with gherok.

KAMI

Kami is the final ritual. On this day all relatives, clan-members and villagers are invited. They assemble in the deceased's house early in the morning.

PREPARATION OF GANTHI

The village deuri together with a few leading persons of the deceased's clan prepare ganthi (dish of rice). Altogether seven dishes are prepared as follows:

1. The first three dishes are prepared for memang.
2. The middle one for the deceased.
3. The other three for the fore-fathers of the deceased.

The dish meant for the deceased must contain a tail of a pig and a leg of a fowl.

Next morning, a few members of the deceased's clan and some villagers throw over the cremation site the foods meant for the deceased, together with the piece of the deceased's forehead bone.
The deceased's family entertains the relatives, clan-folk and other villagers with a feast. Some pigs, fowls and goats are killed to entertain them. Jonga is an essential item. It is served liberally.

On this day too, the clan-folk, villagers and relatives sing funeral songs describing the qualities of the deceased's head and heart.

The ritual is generally simple and ends in a day. It is performed on the 7th, 13th, 21st or 30th day. It can be held on any day within the first year from the day of death.