Chapter IX
SOCIAL CHANGE : THE TRIBE IN TRANSITION

Change is the inevitable phenomenon of nature as well as of life. Man has to adapt himself to the conditions about him. It may be rapid or slow, good or bad and complete or partial. Culture itself is never static. Since culture is dynamic, the life of a person cannot be static. The Rabha culture is also in a transitional phase. It is passing through the process of acculturation in many aspects.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Structural change is a product of social interaction, in which pressures are felt, advantages received, responsibilities recognised. Rabhas are coming in contact more and more with outsiders, who work amongst them either as government servants or as traders voluntarily. The interaction leads to interchange. There is a change in

their family structure and other social institutions. Though the tempo of change is quite slow, they are adopting gradually the habits of outsiders. The joint family system has been affected seriously. The young couples do not prefer to live in a large family, which is considered a source of perpetual quarrel.

MARRIAGE

Formerly elopement as a means of securing a bride was widely prevalent; but with the spread of education and higher degree of social awareness, elopement has practically ceased to exist. Likewise, the procurement of brides by means of rendering manual service at their prospective father-in-law's house has also ceased.

The acceptance of bride-price which had its heyday in the Rabha society till about 1950, has since been almost abandoned. Today a nominal bride-price is accepted which does not exceed Rs. 30.00.

The institution of hom-yañna (a burnt offering of clarified butter) as a marital rite in accordance with the vedic system has come to be practised in recent years in a few households of the Dihingri area of Goalpara district which reflects a distinct departure from their traditional marital rites.

Another deviation from their original culture is in the field of exogamy. In the past strict adherence to
exogamous marriages were followed, but sufficient laxity
is allowed now-a-days in this matter. The knowledge of one's
mother's clan as a criteria for settlement of marriage has
been relegated to background by many specially among the
Pati and Baitlia Rabhas.

Some superfluous changes have been observed in the
case of marriage. Due to greater contact with the non-tribals,
the people specially the educated ones have been compelled
to invite non-tribals to their marriages and for them they
arrange sweetmeats, puries, and vegetables while the
traditional feast is arranged for their fellow villagers.
In some marriage microphones are also used.

The use of jonga is decreasing gradually. The
custom of presenting a jonga to the nokswaml is abolished
in some areas. Likewise, the custom of presenting a jonga
by a son-in-law to his parents-inlaw on the day of nok
chibarkai ceremony is abandoned in many localities. Even
the most orthodox sub-groups like the Rongdania and the
Maitoria Rabhas dislike the custom now-a-days.

CULTURAL CHANGE

Cultures are changable. The rate of change varies
from place to place and from time to time. Some cultures
have grown and changed with great rapidity; others have
remained relatively stable for hundreds of thousands of
years.2

Treatment of Illness

The new generation specially the educated section of the Rabhas is gradually losing faith in the traditional methods of treatment. Today an M.B.B.S. doctor is preferred to an Ojha.

House Type

As regards the construction of houses, changes have taken place even in spite of utmost efforts to maintain their traditional characteristics. Small houses are replacing the traditional big ones. Some of them possess Assam-type houses in modern design.

Food Habits

The new generation specially the educated class has come to know the nutritious value of milk. Milk has become a part of their diet now-a-days. Kharchi was once the sole cooking material, but the place of kharchi is taken by jati-thuchi (mustard oil) to a great extent specially among the well-to-do families. Bakery made biscuits and other sweets are entering their villages as important items.

Dress Habits

Changes are also noticed in dress habits — specially among the educated section. Young boys use trousers, terylene and terycotton shirt etc. when they go to schools or visit a relative's house. Mill-made clothes are gradually becoming popular. School going girls use an Assamese chadar (a sheet that covers the body) and a blouse. Elderly people, however, don their traditional dress at home and outside.

Utensils

Marked change is noticed in respect of utensils of the house. Many a household now-a-days possess glasswares, china clay cup-plates, aluminium and stainless steel utensils.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

Though technology has not been developed in this region as in many other regions of Assam, the people are not unaware of the essential things of daily use. Now, the people prefer a hurricane lantern in stead of burning the wood for light. Similarly, the use of safety razors for shaving, umbrella in rainy season, watches for time-keeping, torches for night journey are increasing.

Tailors, carpenters and weavers use factory made tools. The weavers are giving new shape to their art. They
prefer a modern loom to the traditional one.

Many households possess bicycles and a few of them possess transistor radios also.

ECONOMIC CHANGE

No marked change is noticed in economic scene. The people are still tilling their land by the traditional plough. There is not much development in the use of the new agricultural implements.

Although the tribal welfare agencies like the plains Tribes Development Corporation, Assam, are supplying yarn at controlled price and small agricultural loans are sanctioned to the Rabhas, effects of these measures are not perceptible. However, the orthodox attitude of apathy towards anything new is slowly but steadily undergoing a change and people are gradually veering round to the view that small businesses may give them much better return if put systematically. Of late some of them are seen managing petty shops in the weekly markets and towns.

RELIGIOUS CHANGE

Young blood always seeks change. Rituals which were considered to be the first and fundamental duty of a person in the tribe, are now being neglected by the new generation specially by the educated section.

A gradual process of acculturation has taken place
in the mental horizon of some of the Rabhas. In this context reference may be made of the few Rabha (Pati) households of Salpara and Chotamatiya areas of Goalpara district who have gone to the "Brahmo Samaj". A few "Chaitymyapathi vaishnavite" families (Rongdania) are seen in and around Dwarka, Bardamal, Chaibari and Baida areas of Goalpara district. A good number of Rabha families (both Pati and Rongdania) have accepted Christianity in the last two decades or so in Bardamal, Gojapara, Bagulamari and Topolakhowa villages in the Goalpara district.

Another incidence of acculturation has been noticed in recent years. The Pati Rabhas in and around Dudhnoi (Goalpara district) abstain from ploughing on the Full Moon and New Moon days and also consult the astrologer for performing any auspicious event. Some families have practically abandoned their traditional animistic beliefs and have become Hinduised.

POLITICAL CHANGE

To-day a Rabha adult realises the value of his vote. He is keen to cast his vote for the election of a village panchayat member or a councilor of the Mahkuma Parishad or any other elected body. People are anxious to know their rights. There is a considerable change in the activities of village panchayats located in the tribal areas.
MODERNITY

The tribes are neither museum pieces of a forgotten era, nor the "back wash of civilization", as alien rulers liked to call them. They are the product of most fascinating phenomenon in history, when human hordes were loosely organised. ³

The Rabhas are well organised now-a-days and are not an isolated community. They are assimilating other cultures. They possess a sense of beauty whether natural or artificial.

A large number of young boys and girls have a touch of modernity in their tastes and habits.

THE TRIBE IN TRANSITION

The vision of the new is supported by the discontent of the old. ⁴ On the basis of the changes illustrated above it can be said that the Rabhas are in a transitional phase, but this does not mean that there are chances for revolutionary change in the near future as a majority of the people are leading their lives in the same old and traditional ways. It was gratifying to meet one commissioner, one director, one deputy-director, two M.B.B.S. doctors, an engineer, a college principal, two college lecturers and

a few teachers in high and L.P. Schools belonging to this tribe. But in this dynamic age such developments are drops in an ocean.

TRIBAL WELFARE

Like other scheduled tribals (plains) in Assam, the Rabhas enjoy the following concessions and privileges at present:

1. Ten per cent reservation in certain state services;
2. Relaxation of age upto two years in all state government services;
3. Fifty per cent concession in government fee;
4. Ten per cent reservation of seats in technical and non-technical institutions for post H.S., L.C. students;
5. Tribal Belts and Blocks as created by government under chapter V of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations, 1886 in compact areas predominantly inhabited by the scheduled tribes to protect their land;
6. Preferential treatment in the matter of settlements of contracts, forest mahals etc. upto the limit of 7.5 per cent below the highest bid offered. Further, they enjoy 50 per cent concessions in earnest money deposit;
7. Grants-in-aid as provided under Article 275 of the constitution in order to meet the cost of special schemes of development undertaken to promote educational, social and economic interest of the plains tribal people.

These special schemes touch various heads of development and though seem to be additional programme, they are in reality part and parcel of the general state
These schemes under the state sector and centrally sponsored sector for the plains tribes may be broadly classified as under:

i) Education

The educational schemes relate to free education and special scholarships are intended to supplement the educational facilities provided to the plains tribals.

ii) Economic uplift

These schemes cover various sectors of development namely, agriculture, veterinary, co-operations, cottage industries, fishery, sericulture and weaving, communications and craftsman training.

iii) Health and other schemes

These schemes are meant for providing grants to the plains tribal people suffering from diseases like T.B., cancer and other fell diseases and also providing grants to the non-official organisations engaged in anti-leprosy works, for the construction of dispensaries and tribal rest-houses in the tribal areas. Stipends are given to plains tribal students to undergo nursing, mid-wifery
training course. Grants-in-aid are also provided for improvement of water supply in the tribal areas.

At present in each sub-division there is a Project Officer who is in charge of an Integrated Tribal Development Project. He looks after the affairs of the plains tribals that are included in an Integrated Tribal Development Project area. Normally a village having 50 per cent or more tribal population is included in an Integrated Tribal Development Project area. The following table shows the Annual Plan (1982-83) for Integrated Tribal Development Project, Goalpara.

Table 1

Annual Plan (1982-83) Integrated Tribal Development Project, Goalpara

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Estimated Amount (in lakh)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>Rs. 5.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Animal Husbandry and Veterinary</td>
<td>Rs. 3.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Sericulture</td>
<td>Rs. 3.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Weaving</td>
<td>Rs. 1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>Rs. 0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Fisheries</td>
<td>Rs. 0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Co-operative</td>
<td>Rs. 32.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Panchayat</td>
<td>Rs. 1.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contd/-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Estimated Amount (in lakh)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Road communication</td>
<td>Rs. 4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Irrigation</td>
<td>Rs. 5.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Mechanical division</td>
<td>Rs. 1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Public Health Engineering</td>
<td>Rs. 2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Health services</td>
<td>Rs. 3.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Rs. 4.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Social Forestry</td>
<td>Rs. 1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Rural Electricity</td>
<td>Rs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Rs. 1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Social Welfare</td>
<td>Rs. 0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Soil conservation</td>
<td>Rs. 3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Social education</td>
<td>Rs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Tribal villages having less than 50 per cent tribal population are looked after by a Sub-Divisional Welfare Officer. Financial aids are given to the scheduled tribe and scheduled caste people through the Sub-Divisional Welfare Office. The following table shows the Annual Plan (1982-83) prepared by the Sub-Divisional Welfare Office, Goalpara.
Table 2
Annual Plan (1982-83) prepared by Sub-Divisional Welfare Office, Goalpara

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Estimated Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Educational Institution</td>
<td>Rs. 7,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Cultural Activities</td>
<td>Rs. 1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>Rs. 19,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Rehabilitation</td>
<td>Rs. 9,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Animal Husbandry</td>
<td>Rs. 15,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Fishary</td>
<td>Rs. 7,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Rs. 5,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Cottage Industries</td>
<td>Rs. 7,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Sericulture and Weaving</td>
<td>Rs. 10,920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Fell Diseases</td>
<td>Rs. 13,995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Self Help</td>
<td>Rs. 19,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Text Book and Uniform</td>
<td>Rs. 3,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Non-Official Organisations</td>
<td>Rs. 6,615</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sub-Divisional Welfare Office, Goalpara.

The "Assam Plains Tribes Development Corporation Limited" offers "Consumption Loan" up to Rs. 1,500 to the plains tribals through its Sub-Divisional branch offices. These loans can be taken by a plains tribal having a minimum
of 3 bighas (0.95 acres) of land. The rate of interest is 6 per cent and can be repaid in fifteen monthly instalments. Moreover, the corporation has some "Popular Schemes" for economic uplift of the plains tribals.

A change once achieved is never final. It is a continuous process and a phenomenon of life. Thus the changes taking place in Rabha life are not final.