Chapter XI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

SUMMARY

The Rabhas are a plains tribal group of Assam. They are also found in Meghalaya and West Bengal. According to 1971 census their total strength is 1,51,937 of which 1,38,630 lived in Assam, 10,841 in Meghalaya and 2,466 in West Bengal. They have five sub-groups. These are Rongdania, Maitoria, Pati, Dahuria and Baitlia.

They are scattered throughout Assam, but their main concentration is found in the south bank of the Brahmaputra in the district of Goalpara. The percentage of the Rabhas to total general population and total tribal population of Assam is 0.95 and 10.31 respectively (1971 census).

Opinions vary regarding their origin, but it is a fact that the Rabhas belong to the Bodo group of tribes of the Tibeto-Burman race.
The Rabha family is based on patriarchal pattern, but it is matrilineal. Father or in his absence the next male elder member is considered as an authoritative head of the family, but descent is reckoned through female line. A higher number of elementary families are found amongst them.

The Rabhas have a number of clans which are exogamous. Children cannot marry in their respective mother's clan. Except on the occasion of marriage, clan distinction is hardly made. The clans are named after natural objects. These are not totemic. Two or three clans again form another relationship called hur or hurl. Marriage within a hur is also a taboo.

The Rabhas have two kinds of property—paternal and maternal. Paternal property is inherited by the son and maternal property is inherited by the daughter.

Adoption is found in the Rabha society although it is not a regular feature. An adopted son succeeds his adopted parents.

Like other communities the Rabhas have a number of kinship terms. Kinship in Rabha society is a system of relationship in which individuals are bound to one another by complex ramifying and interlocking ties.

The Rabhas have no class or caste system. By profession they are all agriculturists.
Nudity is not allowed within and outside the Rabha house. They maintain a high degree of privacy.

A guest is believed to be sacred. The Rabhas feel honoured to receive him.

Although the Rabhas are not very much careful about environmental hygiene, they are careful about personal cleanliness. They bathe once a day.

The Rabhas believe that conception follows sexual intercourse. Pregnancy after marriage is a matter of pride. Abortion is considered a sin.

Adult marriage is the rule and boys and girls marry between 20-25 and 15-20 years respectively. The Rabhas are monogamous although polygamy is not a taboo. Both junior levirate and junior sororate forms of marriage are prevalent amongst them; but senior levirate and senior sororate forms are taboos. Two kinds of marriage are prevalent among the Rabhas: formal and informal. The formal is celebrated with a detailed ceremony. Although the system of bride-price is prevalent amongst them; it is nominal and never exceeds Rs. 30.00 at present. Divorce is permitted by mutual consent; but it is a rare phenomenon.

Death is considered as a natural phenomenon. They believe that malevolent deities and evil spirits cause illness and premature death. They believe in the doctrine of transmigration of souls.
The most characteristic feature in respect of law and justice prevalent among the Rabhas is that they possess a written code called *bichhi* which is referred to by the village council. They have three elected bodies for the administration of justice. These are: *Mandal*, *Zamat* and *Sanmilan*. The *Mandal* generally decides cases which are ultimately referred to the *Zamat* and *Sanmilan*. Marital irregularities, pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations, breach of social behaviour are some of the major offences tried by the village council.

Cultivation is the major occupation of the people although many of them earn extra income from subsidiary sources like pig and fowl rearing, weaving, bamboo and cane works and hunting and fishing.

The Rabhas are Animists. Religion plays a very important role in their life. Animal sacrifice is a very common characteristic of their rituals as most of their deities are considered non-vegetarian. *Risi Bai* is their Supreme God and *Rantak* is the deity of the house. They observe four festivals in a year.

Magic plays a vital role in their society. They have a few professional magicians.

Like other primitive societies they trace the cause of a disease to the provocation of a deity or an evil spirit which is detected by an *ojha*. Animals are
sacrificed to appease these deities or evil spirits. If a disease is not cured by the above technique, they apply their homely treatment. The Rabhas perform some minor surgical operations too.

Men don their traditional dress which includes a bajal, a bukchil and a khopang while women put on a riphan, a kambung and a khopang. Chingkhaphak is an extraordinary part of the dress worn by both men and women. It is a rope of cotton thread and is worn round the waist. A Rabha woman can be distinguished easily by her dress which are colourful and striking. A Rabha woman knows the techniques of dyeing white cotton thread at home by local herbs and trees.

The Rabha women are fond of ornaments. These are of traditional designs and generally weighty. They use mainly silver ornaments as the people cannot afford gold ornaments. Nambri, bola nambri, chandrahar, hat-baju, kata-baju, and jinjiri are the most common ornaments. Rudak is an extraordinary item of ornament amongst them. It is an ivory garland used by a Rabha woman round the waist.

The Rabha houses are built with local materials. Bamboo and thatch are mainly used in the construction of a house. There are three rooms in a house together with a corridor. The first one is the living room of the man and his wife, the second one is the kitchen and the third
one is the children's room. The corridor serves as the outlet from the first to the third room. The house contains no windows and ventilators. Normally a house has one herth.

Rice is their staple food. Meat, fish, egg, roots and creepers of various kinds are included in their meals. They prefer vegetables boiled in alkali. Mustard oil and dal are used by the people occasionally. The elderly persons generally do not like milk. They have special preparations of meat and fish which are essential items in many socio-religious ceremonies. The Rabhas do not take beef. It is a taboo.

Jonga, a kind of home-made beer is the favourite drink of the Rabhas. It is prepared in every household irrespective of its social position. Jonga accompanies a Rabha from pre-natal to death. It is prepared from fermented rice mixed with bakhar, a kind of specially prepared spice.

Smoking a hukka is prevalent among the Rabhas. Bidis and cigarettes are also in use.

The Rabhas are not good traders. They have a general dislike for trade and business.

The Rabha dialect forms a part of the Bodo language, which again belongs to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. They speak Assamese with a stranger and Assamese script is
used for writing.

The Rabhas have a unique way of expressing their artistic tendencies. These are reflected in their textile designs and bamboo and cane works. Wood carving is done as an off time occupation.

From the old swords and rhinoceros hide shields in the possession of some families it appears that the Rabhas were at some former time a martial race and indulged in warfare. Their important weapons are jora-rai-dyumuk, toral, phik juari, jong hado and shur. They knew the techniques of poisoning arrow-heads and spears.

Music, folk songs and folk dances play a vital part in the life of a Rabha. Their most common musical instrument are dhak or kham, muk brangsi, karha brangsi, lakhar brangsi, singa, badung-duppa, and kantukri.

CONCLUSION

The study in the preceding chapters pinpoints the Rabha society and culture as it is at present, while formulating an account of the form of social life as it exists to-day amongst them, naturally feeling came to the mind as to whether this tribal group surrounded by various alien cultures have maintained their socio-cultural beliefs and practices, modes and morals intact, in spite of dynamic changes all around. On scrutiny of the data it
is seen that the community has been maintaining most of their traditional distinctiveness notwithstanding changes in their socio-cultural fabric, which have been incorporated into the culture in its natural process.