Chapter-I

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Rabha is considered as one of the important plains tribes of Assam. They belong to the Mongoloid group of people, but linguistically they fall under the Tibeto-Burman group of languages of the Sino-Tibetan family of language.

Grierson has put them in the Bodo sub-group of Assam branch of the Tibeto-Burman language group. Many of the tribes and sub-tribes of this language group have lost their own speech and now-a-days almost all of them has adopted Assamese as their mother tongue. The Rabhas are one of such tribes who are divided into different clans or branches. These branches of the Rabhas are Pāti, Rangdāni, Māitorī, Totlā, Kochā, Bitoliā, Dāhuri and Shongā etc. The first three branches are said to be superior to others specially in respect of the social status.

1.1.1 The Pātis form the majority group of Rabha population, but they have almost lost their own speech and they are now identified as Assamese speakers. But their spoken variety of Assamese appears as a broken variety of Assamese which has similarity with the Goalpariya dialects of Assamese. The Māitorī and the Rongdāni who live in Meghalaya and adjacent border area of Assam, have still maintained their own Rabha speech. Of course, many of them are bilingual speakers as they are well-versed in both Rabha and Assamese. Thus linguistically, the majority of the Rabhas are at present Assamese speakers. A small number.
of them is monolingual i.e. Rabha speakers. While some other tongues of this group such as Boro, Garo, Lalung, Dimasa, Mech, Sonowal etc. are considered as the sister languages of the Rabha language. The Moran and the Chutiya of upper Assam are also ethnically very close to them. But they have lost their own speech long back. Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay\textsuperscript{1} proposed a classification of the Tibeto-Burman language in a scientific way and this is quoted below:

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
  \node (TibetoBurman) at (0,0) {Tibeto-Burman};
  \node (AssamBurmaGroup) at (0,-3) {Assam-Burma-Group};
  \node (BodoNaga) at (0,-6) {Bodo-Naga};
  \node (BodoNagaGroup) at (0,-9) {Bodo-Naga};
  \node (Bodo) at (0,-12) {Bodo};
  \node (Naga) at (0,-15) {Naga};

  \draw[->] (TibetoBurman) -- (AssamBurmaGroup);
  \draw[->] (AssamBurmaGroup) -- (BodoNaga);
  \draw[->] (BodoNaga) -- (BodoNagaGroup);
  \draw[->] (BodoNagaGroup) -- (Bodo);
  \draw[->] (BodoNagaGroup) -- (Naga);

  \node at (-2,-0) {\textit{Tibetan Himalayan group North-Assam group Assam-Burma Group}};
  \node at (-2,-3) {\textit{Assam-Burma-Group}};
  \node at (-2,-6) {\textit{Bodo-Naga}};
  \node at (-2,-9) {\textit{Bodo-Naga Group}};
  \node at (-2,-12) {\textit{Bodo}};
  \node at (-2,-15) {\textit{Naga}};
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{1} Chattopadhyay, S.K., \textit{Kirata Janakriti}, p.25
1.1.3 The original home of the speakers of these speeches was in western China near the rivers, Yang-tse-Kian and the Hwang-ho. They migrated to Assam, living mainly in the Brahmaputra valley. After entering Assam they were divided into two groups. One proceeded towards Garo Hills on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra and the other group proceeded towards the plain area of the northern bank of Brahmaputra. The southern group farther moved towards Tripura. The northern group also farther made their way to the Valley of Kapili in Central Assam and the neighbouring areas into the hilly region of North Cachar. While the mountainous tract known as Khasi-hills remained the home of the Mon-Khamer speaking people.
1.1.4 The Rabha language belongs to Bodo sub-branch of Tibeto-Burman language, and so, it is a sister language of the Boro language. Rabha does not have its own script and so the Assamese script has been adopted to write this language. Most of the Tibeto-Burman speeches have adopted Assamese scripts in their languages. Similarly the Boros have also adopted the Assamese script, till 1974-75 only after them the Boros changed their script into the Devanagari scripts.

The Rabhas understands Assamese and also speak Assamese with the non-Rabhas. The Rabha language is more akin to the Garo and the Boro language than to other Tibeto-Burman linguistic groups.

1.1.5 The Rabhas mainly dwell in Goalpara district, the northern areas of the Garo Hills towards the south bank of the Brahmaputra in Kamrup district. Of course, now Rabha population is also found in Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon and Darrang districts, but their numbers are quite small.

According to 1971 Census Report the population of Rabhas is estimated 1,38,000 out of which 71,497 are males and 67,133 are females. The 1991 Census shows the total population of Tribals as 28,74,441, of which the Rabha population is 1,12,424 only, while the 2001 Census shows the total population as 26,638,407 out of which 13,787,799 are males and 12,850,608 are females.²

² Hazarika, Pradip (ed); Census of India, 2001, series-19, page 17
1.1.6 Rabhas are concentrated mainly in the area of the south bank of the Brahmaputra in the districts of Goalpara and Kamrup and they are having a close contact with the Assamese speaking population. Assamese means the permanent dwellers of Assam which includes both Tribals and non-Tribals of Assam irrespective of different linguistic stocks. So, the Rabhas have been identified as Assamese Tribals.

1.1.7 The Pâti Rabhas are more Hinduised because of the influence of the surrounding Assamese Hindu people. They are scattered in the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra stretching from Guwahati to Dudhnoi. Numerically, the Rangdânies are well distributed in western Goalpara and also occupy the eastern region. The Mâitories are relatively fewer in Assam than the Rangdânies. Dâhuri and Totlâ are spreading in the plains of Assam. The Dâhuries have settled down in North Goalpara while the Totlâs are living in a limited number of villages in the northern belt of Darrang district particularly around Rowta and Udalguri.

1.1.8 Since the Pâti, Dâhuri, Totlâ Rabhas adopted Assamese as their spoken medium. They have totally forgotten their own dialect. They were often influenced by the Assamese language. All the educated Rabha people learn the Assamese language as the first language in school, where the medium of institution is also Assamese. But during the last two years some Rabha medium schools have been established in rural areas. The Rabhas have accepted Assamese as a working language for their over all development and survival, and they have also accepted various cultural and ritual functions of the Assamese society. Linguistically, the Rabhas are only of two types: Bilingual and Monolingual.
1.2 Dwelling and Livelihood Pattern:

Each Rabha family generally has four houses such as a main house, a guest house, an outer house for the adult family members and a cookshed. All these houses are constructed in the four sides of the courtyard. In addition to these four houses they also keep have a cow-shed and a granary to preserve the paddy. Some of them also build a separate poultry house. The Rangdänies generally have one house of 13 to 15 metres length divided into three compartments known as 'Noksrāb', 'Togrāb' and 'Rosinok'.

Like the rest of in the plains tribes the Rabhas also depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Those who reside on the bordering areas with Meghalaya resort to shifting cultivation i.e., 'Jhum' to a certain extent. The Rabhas have marginal land-holdings and some live below the poverty line.

Rice is their principal food, dried and powdered fish, pork and rice beer are also their favourite food. The consumption of rice-beer is also gradually coming down due to strict enforcement of the excise law which is a healthy sign. Of course, occasionally they use to take rice-beer, which is prepared by themselves. It is good for the socio-economic growth of the society.

The Rabha women are expert weavers. They prepare their own garments of the family members including children and male members.
The women's dresses consist of ‘Rifān’ (cloth of the women’s used in the lower part of the body), ‘Kāmbung’ (cloth worn by Rabha women upper part of the body). The male clothing consists of ‘Pajara’ (muffler- like towel carried by men), ‘Phāli’ (embroidered scarf), ‘pāsārā’ (a long scarf used by the man, is made of endi yarn while the rest are made of fine cotton)\(^3\). The educated class of Rabhas both male and female members use modern dresses.

1.3 Marriage:

Cousins are not allowed to marry, but a person may marry his father’s sister’s daughter or mother’s brother’s daughter. A widow is also allowed to marry if she is willing and she can marry the deceased husband’s younger brother only. But such marriages are generally not encouraged by the Rabhas. A man is allowed to marry his wife’s younger sister after the death of his wife. If a widow enters into a fresh marriage alliances, she loses all claims to her former husband’s property. Monogamy rule is followed. Divorce is allowed, but such examples are rare in Rabha society. Child marriage is not prevalent at all. Girls are allowed to marry only after attending puberty\(^4\). However, sometimes marriage are also settled before attending puberty.

It is said that originally the Rabhas were identified as a matriarchal tribe. This belief is based on the prevailing custom of the female live and practice of inducting the children of a marriage into the ‘Bārāi’ of the

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3. Bordoloi, B.N.; 'Tribes of Assam' p.123
4. Das, B.M.; 'Ethnic Affinities of the Rabha', p.11
mother, that means if the father’s barai happens to be ‘Rāŋkho’ bārāi and
mother’s ‘Chārchung’ barai then the children will identify them from the
mother’s barai\(^5\).

The Rabha family is now based on the patriarchal system. But the
influence of the neighbouring Khasis and the Garos on the Rabhas have
been still observed. Some impacts of the matriarchal on the matrilineal
system have also been observed in the Rabhas, but this matrilineal system
is not a common feature in the Rabha society.

1.4 Religion and Rituals:

Fundamentally religion is based on belief. Belief is a superior being
and superior forces which may work either to the advantage or
disadvantage of men.

Religion is one of the oldest and the most fundamental institutions
of human beings. It has always been a very powerful force in society, and
the actions of individuals are largely conditioned by religious beliefs\(^6\).

The Rabhas are Animists. The belief that spiritual beings abiding in
all objects, inanimate as well as animate is called ‘Animism’. In this respect
it is better to quote Endles opinion:

\(^5\) Das, B.M.; ‘Ethnic Affinities of the Rabha’, p.11
\(^6\) Smith, Marrions,; ‘Survey of Social Science’, p. 297
“The general types of the Rabhas religion is distinctly animistic, but one or two of the Patis, are said to show a leaning towards Hinduism of the Shakta form ....”7.

Religion plays a vital role in the lives of the Rabha people. Animal sacrifice is a common characteristic of the rituals. At any religious ceremony offering a pigs, fowls or goats is quite common.

1.5 Fairs and Festivals:

The Rabhas have celebrated several fairs and festivals which have some connection with their traditional beliefs and customs.

1.5.1 The Rabhas are carefree and jolly type of people. The hardships of their economic lives have considerably influenced their social life. The only charm in their life is attending the religious fairs such as the ‘Dadan mela’ (Rabha festival) and participating in songs and dances of this melas.

This fair is held at ‘Ronchoi’ about 35 km. From Goalpara town to the south-west. There is a temple of Dadan. The fair is held in the month of ‘Phagun’ as per Assamese calendar on the eight lunar day and lasts for two days. The Rabha people even from far off villages in variably participate in this fair. They sing songs in praise of ‘Dadan’ and ‘Marukhetri’ (the great heroes of the Rabhas), e.g.

Meaning: The Heroism and gallantry possessed by the great brave ‘Rabhas’ takes to be uprooted, why ?

The sturman Bishnu Rabha, The father of nation ‘Dadan’  

Parsuram ’ the great warrior.
‘Naday’, ‘Tamay’
where does lying the chivalrous attitude of their civilion?
Now, time is to raire, them up and have a fortune Ahead for the Rabhas.

People mostly women in their beautiful and traditional dresses assemble there. They perform ceremonial worship in the temple and remember ‘Risi-Bai’ a noble deity of the Rabhas.

At the beginning of the fair, people play on their musical instruments and alongwith the priests move in a procession with a crowd following them.

The people drink ‘Jonga’, which is a home made rice beer and enjoy the fair in a jolly mood. Folk dances are conducted in the evening. Men and women participate in such dance together, and also sometimes in separate groups to the accompaniment of ‘Kham’ (traditional Rabha drum) and ‘Muk-bangshi’ (flute). This creates an atmosphere full of fun and gaiety. The fair ends by 10 p.m. at night, but people from the adjoining villages leave it only in the next morning.

1.5.2 The Rabhas community has generally considered ‘Khokchi’ or ‘Bāikho’ as their major community festival. The different groups celebrate their ritualistic festivals and it is related to their own religious concepts and beliefs. The Rangdāni and Māitorī groups celebrate ‘Bāikho’ or ‘Khokchi’,
i.e. the festival of spring from mid April to mid May. The Pati Rabhas conciliate 'Langapuja' along with this festival. They also observe two other festivals, viz. 'Domasi' i.e. harvesting in January 14th and 'Mambe-Bakai', i.e. beginning of cultivation in the months of March and April.

The Rangdâni and Mâitori groups celebrate 'Bāikho' or 'Khokchi' puja with the intention of propitiating 'Baikho' the Goddess of wealth and prosperity. It is instituted once in a year in the month of 'Baisakh' (Assamese month) just before the beginning of agricultural operation. But the pomps and splendour of the 'Baikho' festival are not to be seen nowadays in the Rabha villages. This festival has been substituted by 'Haachang puja' in a specified place called 'Hâchang than' in most of the villages. The folk song 'Sathar geet' or 'Khokchi geet' are sung during this festival by the youths to convey feelings of love and affection to their loved ones.

Another folk festival of the Pâti Rabhas is 'Langa puja'; 'Langa' means Mahadeva, one of the Trinity of the Hindu mythology. There are many other deities such as Dhan-Kuber, Thakurani, Dudhkumer, Phul-Kumar and Goddess 'Bāikho' and 'Khokchi' are also find place in the alter of worship. The deities are represented by different pieces of stones for each of them. This festival is observed in the month of 'Baisakh' or 'Jeth' either in a forest area or on the bank of a nearby river. Langa is propitiated to have profuse yield of crop as well as to get rid of all the evil influences that might be looming large over men and animals in the year just beginning.
1.6 Folk Songs and Folk Dances:

Religion and rituals offered ample opportunities to the Rabhas to sing and dance. The people dance in the name of their Goddesses such as Kechāikhāiti, Risibai, Báikho, Khokchi, Langa, Dhan-Kuber, Thakurani, Dudhkumer, Phulkumer etc. The folk dance is called 'Hānāghorā'. The whole atmosphere of this festival is cheerful. The multicoloured dress of the people and their typical ornaments lend a peculiar charm to the celebration. The people forget the hardships of poverty and the natural calamities. In such festivals they like to drink 'Jongā' to enjoy the festival.

If anything can be said of the tribal entertainment of the Rabhas, it must be about dancing, for this accompanied by drinking, appears to form a very prominent feature of several social function as well as of the religious ceremonies.

Folk dances of the Rabhas have some similarities with the Garo folk dances. Such a folk-dance is 'dhawa' which shows some similarity with the Garo folk-dance 'Grika'.

1.7 Methodology:

This study is mainly based on field work, while necessary help has been taken from some reference books, journals, articles etc. For the theme data has been collected from library source and field investigation. The library work has been done at different libraries of the State with a
view to collecting the secondary data. Besides, the published works, some unpublished manuscripts, papers and letters have also been studied intensively.

During field investigations tape-recorder, and camera were also used for recording songs, folk-tales, language etc. Photographs of the Rabha people were also taken. The map of various Rabha villages of the Goalpara and Kamrup district were also collected.

1.8 Collection of Data:

During field investigation it was necessary to visit some selected hilly areas in remote and interior places with the informants of different age-group.

With the help of informants materials have been collected from various sources.

The selection of informants for intensive study was made on the following basis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of informants</th>
<th>Informants selected</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social aspects</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Above 60 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious aspects</td>
<td>Priest</td>
<td>50-75 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material Culture</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>40-50 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>teen-agers and Old Rabhas</td>
<td>14-55 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Materials have been collected in certain Rangdāni and Māitorī Rabha villages of Goalpara district. Such villages are Baida, Chatabari, Rongchoi, Salpara, Hatishila, Jangpara, Balbala, Amguri, Amtola, Baladmari, Bamundanga, Bhojkhuli, Chotomatia, Dariduri, Dipkai, Dwarka, Harimura, Kuruabhasa, Nadiyapara, Gojapara, Dakurbhita, Bhalukdubi, Bardamal, Bonjuli, Rokhapara etc. Similarly selected Pāti Rabha villages in Kamrup district have also included in such field work alongwith the informants such villages are— Chukunia, Singra, Rajapara, Sakhati, Belpara, Turukpara, Dilinga, Tarabari, Batakuchi, Kahibama, etc.

1.9 Importance:

The linguistic research particularly in the under developed colloquial languages of the North-East India is a very important work. It is expected that the work will give some information regarding the Rabha people and their present linguistic situation. It is also hoped that the work would be able to develop mutual good understanding among different linguistic groups of this region and encourage in fostering a broad based national spirit among the speakers of different languages. It is also-feel that there is academic need for a scientific study of this language to establish co-relation among different language speaking tribes and communities of this part of the country.

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