A Historical Outline of the Rabhas of North Bengal

Manadev Roy,
Assistant Professor of History, Khandra College (Affiliated to Kazi Nazrul University, Burdwan, West Bengal, India.

Abstract: The Rabhas are the indigenous tribes of North Bengal. They belong to the Indo Mongoloid group of people and have similarities with other members of the Bodo group. Scholars have pointed out that the primal land of the Rabhas was the Tundra region of Southern Siberia in Russia. They came to India through North-Eastern hill-passes around thousand yours before the birth of Christ. Gradually they spread over the various parts of North Bengal as well as South East Asia. Anyway the main objective of this paper is to highlight the livelihood of the Rabhas of North Bengal over the last years since their settlement in this region. They have many traditional beliefs and practices. It is a matter to regret that after the interaction with the well to do Rajbansis and the Southern Bengalis, they began to lose these long established cultures. Now some of them have settled themselves like advanced people of this region but most of them remain in their primal situation. Therefore they are facing identity crisis.

1. ‘Introduction’

Numerous tribes have been living in North Bengal which lies in the lap of northern part of West Bengal, comprising seven districts- Cooch Behar, Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda since the period of pre-colonial India. Even many tribes migrated to this region from Bihar, Orissa, Central Province as well as other parts of Bengal in the colonial period. All tribes of North Bengal may be divided into two category i.e. indigenous tribe and migrant tribe. The Rabha is one of the indigenous tribal groups of this area. Many historians and scholars carried out even carry on their valuable research works on various tribes of Northern Bengal, yet it is perceived that there is a little bit of research gap about the origin and habits of the Rabhas. Hence in this paper I have tried to analyze the origin and practices of the Rabhas of North Bengal.

2. ‘Original Identity of the Rabhas’

It is generally believed that a Tibeto-Burman speaking Indo-Mongolid tribe, the Bodos, migrated into India through Patkoi Hills between India and Burma and gradually spread into Assam, North Bengal and parts of East Bengal. They ruled over these tracts of land for many years. It is probable that they marched towards three directions. One part went south up to Kachar and are called Kacharis. The second part went along the river Brahmaputra and established themselves in Assam. This branch of the Bodos is known as Boros. Most probably the third branch referred to above went and lived in the sprawling fertile valley washed by the Mechi river in the Morang region of present day’s Nepal, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Bihar, Darjeeling and Sikkim. They were further subdivided into four classes, namely, Mech, Koch, Rabha and Garo.

The Rabhas or Ravas belong to the Indo Mongolid group of people and have similarities with other members of the Bodo group. British authors like Francis Buchanan Hamilton, Edward T. Dalton and B.H. Hodgson et al. admitted that the Rabhas are invariably close to the Koch, Pani-Koch, the Garos and the Kacharis.

Scholars have pointed out that the primal land of the Rabhas was the Tundra region of Southern Siberia in Russia. They came to India through North-Eastern hill-passes around thousand yours before the birth of Christ. Scholars also argued that the Rabhas were actually Koch and they left their main land and gradually marched towards south-western China of the Plateau of South-East Tibet. After some years they further marched into the pass of Patkoi Hill and followed the course of Noyang-Dihang River and thereby reached via Brahmadesh to East-India. After reaching the starting point of the Brahmaputra river they were divided into two groups. One group crossed the river and went ahead westwards through the northern bank of the river. The other group marched towards south without crossing the river and settled themselves in south Goyalpara of Assam as well as the region of...
Garo Hill. Further they fought with the Garos. On the other hand the first group settled themselves in Shonipur (Tejpur) and later spread to North Bengal. A part of this group came and settled in earlier Jalpaiguri district by the name of Rabha. They settled themselves at Dakshin (South) Kamakhyaguri, Madhya (middle) Kamakhyaguri, Narar khal, Radha Nagar, Hemaguri (East Shalbari and Jhitlong), Ray-Dak Indu forest adjoining the village of Kumargram police station, Nimti, Mendaranga of Kanchini police station and villages of Madarihat police station as well as Khuklung basti of Dhpuguri police station under Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts. Now they are also found in various parts of Cooch Behar and Darjeeling districts. There is no mention of the name of ‘Rabha’ or ‘Rava’ in ancient literatures or documents. The name ‘Rabha’ can be located for the first time in the book of Mirja Nathan Alauddin. He mentioned this word in his Farsi book ‘Baharistane Ghayeb’, which was written by the years 1608 to 1624 A.D. Actually the Rabhas were Koch. Because, Hucheng the leader of the Atang branch of the Garos welcomed some of the Koches in the Someswari valley of the northern bank of Brahmaputra river for agricultural development of the almost vagabond Garos between of 1450 to 1460 A.D. The Garos of the Brahmaputra valley called the new Koches by the name of ‘Raba’. The meaning of the term was welcomed people. In 1662, Mir Jumla the commander of Mughal empire sent some troops to conquer Assam. Naturally the Rabhas left this place and took shelter in the deep forest of the northern part of Parbatijhora region. Later they were also influenced by the main branch Koches. As a result they are known as Koch-Rabha. So the educated Rabhas of Northern Bengal identify themselves as Koch-Rabha. Besides, there is a good similarity between the Rabhas and the Koches. According to some anthropologists and scholars it is clear that at the time of entering India the Rabhas (Koch or Kocha) were defeated by some other races and many men of the Rabhas were killed. Consequently the women went under the possession of the victors. As a result the next generations of these Rabha women were of mixed blood. It is imagined that the prime-Rabhas (Koches) had to fight with the prime-Austro races. Hence some scholars argued that the Rabhas are of Austro-Mongoloid origin. In the census report of 1901, there was no mention of the name of Rabha tribe in the districts of North Bengal and even in West Bengal. In the census report of 1911, the name of the Rabhas came out for the first time and they were considered as Scheduled Tribes. Usually the Rabhas are medium height and have flat as well as short nose. They have also slide fold on upper eyelid, high and prominent cheek-bones. Their hair is black and their complexion an olive brown. Physically they are strong. They have good physical similarities with the Meches, Garos, Rajbansis, Hajangs and Lalungs. The Rabha women have long hair, small eyes and developed lips.

3. ‘Society of the Rabhas’

The Rabhas of North Bengal are traditionally matrilineal like the Garos. Still the mother has highest respect in their society. They have been living jointly since the time of their settlement in the various parts (forest and forest adjoining villages) of North Bengal. There are two groups of Rabhas who have two different sets of social patterns. The social pattern of Agriculturist Rabhas is quite akin to the Rajbansi community, while the forest adjoining villages’ dwellers have still retained many of their traditional socio-religious beliefs, customs and practices. Naturally they have many long established social customs which is observed by them. Children trace their lineage from their mother’s side. Anyway most of the Rabhas of North Bengal still lead their poor and self-sufficient social life, which is regulated by some folk customs. After the introduction of Panchayati Raj and influence of the Christian missionaries as well as interaction with other developed communities such as educated Rajbansis and Southern Bengalis, a transformation has been occurred in the social structure of the Rabhas.

‘Clans’

The Rabhas are basically divided into eight distinct groups (khels). They are [i] Bongdania, [ii] Maitari, [iii] Kocha, [iv] Pahi or Petti, [v] Dohari, [vi] Bithalia, [vii] Hema and [viii] Totala. But most of the Rabhas of North Bengal are ‘Kocha’ and hence they identify themselves as ‘Koch-Rabha’. They are further divided into six different groups or clans. These are [i] Pani Koch, [ii] Sharaniya Koch, [iii] Mahat Koch, [iv] Garami Koch, [v] Jalsa Koch and [vi] Mahadi Koch. The Rabhas inherit their mother’s gotra and which is not changed after their marriage. The identification of their gotra is done by the names of some animals, birds, trees etc. According to Kochakrou (language of the Rabhas) language gotra is called ‘Hosuk’. For example, fawn is the symbol of ‘Moistik gotra, iron is the symbol of ‘Saradiyang gotra’, likewise brinjal is...
'Bantao gotra', seat-fish is 'Majipan gotra' etc. They have taken position in their society on the basis of their gotras.

‘Homestead’

In the past the Rabhas have a conventional house building system. The name of the area, where the Rabhas build their house is called ‘Kocha-Hadam’. Likewise the name of their house is ‘Nagau Ju’. They also observe few rituals to select the area for making homestead. They do this to save themselves from the affect of evil eyes and to prosper their familial lives. They set up their house in the system of east-west length. The first part of the house is verandah (Bauchi), second part is bed room (Nu), third part is kitchen room and the fourth part is granary or farm house (Maychasang). It is to be noted that the well to do Rabhas do not follow this long established system.

The Rabhas make their houses with bamboo, straw, jute and mud. Only one entrance is made of each hut, which is called ‘Nagaur’. Every part of the house is divided by wall that is also made with bamboo and a narrow door (made of bamboo) is set up there to move one part to another. Straw is used to make the thatch of the house. They also use mud to paste the small hollows of the bamboo’s wall. In the course of time and by the interaction with other communities the established Rabhas have changed the pattern of their usual house. Gradually they set up buildings and houses of wood and tin for living themselves like the wells to do people of the region.

The Rabhas have a long-established ‘Naksanagou’ that is youth dormitory. From ten (10) to marriageable age (18 to 25), the boys have to live in the dormitory where ladies are not allowed to enter. This house is also a training centre for the Rabha boys before getting married. The leader of the house is called ‘Tarao naksa’ and he is selected or elected by the villagers of the Rabha society. The members of the house also participate or co-operate in social programmes. Even this house is used as guest house and also as a court of justice. Still it is prevailing in the Rabha society of Northern Bengal.

‘Household affairs’

The Rabhas use wooden code, chair, table and box as furniture. They also utilize some bamboo made furniture like chair, table and code etc. Gradually they begin to use some modern furniture like the modern people of the area. They use wood and bamboo to make their bed. They also apply some domestically prepared clothes to cover their wooden code or bamboo code. In the course of time the wells to do Rabhas have changed their habitual bedding system. They have also started to use modern beds like the modern people.

The Rabhas have numerous habitual utensils. They use bamboo cylinders called ‘Ba-Chang’ to keep water. They use spud of wood called ‘Maykan’. They use table spoon of wood called ‘Chaplaq’, skin of plantain tree (Maykang), leaf of plantain tree (Laychak) as utensils. Earthen cauldron called ‘Hariha-Kambai’ and bowl are used for preparing vegetables as well as cooking rice. Besides they use ‘Pantam’ (big chopper), ‘Kangka’ (medium chopper), ‘Kanka-Kongelo’ (small chopper), ‘Kattai’ (bill-hook), ‘Kodal’ (spud), ‘Bakhru’ (small spud), ‘Bakeng’ (axe), ‘Shelu’ (stick), ‘Bhusuri’ (knife), ‘Kinchi’ (scissors), ‘Dabor’ (big earthen pitcher) etc. Apart from these they also use many basked, which are made with bamboo. Besides these traditional utensils they have also started to use modern utensils which are utilized by the other developed communities.

‘Food’

The Rabhas are basically non-vegetarian. Their main food is rice. Seasonally they eat maize, barley, millet and various corns. Gradually they begin to take wheat as their food. But they do not consider these corns as their main food. They must eat rice that is called ‘May’ in a time of the day. They also eat ‘Mayrang’ (beaten rice), ‘Pumfret’ (puffed rice). They eat the dust of burn rice that is called ‘May gundi’, and ‘Phap’ (cake), ‘Panchak’ (various vegetables), ‘Kalay’ (leguminous seeds of pulse), ‘Na’ (fish), ‘Kan’ (meat), ghee etc. The women who just gave birth to a child, children, old aged persons and the persons who are under the custom of funeral system can’t eat ‘Ha-a’ (sour or pickle), fruits, ginger, milk, curd, some fishes like shal, boyal ( seat-fish), meat of tortoise, meat of crane etc. They take food thrice in a day. According to their language breakfast is called ‘Main-fani-sarni’, lunch is called ‘Rasan dupar ni’ and dinner is called ‘Gasam sani’. Gradually a change has been taken place in the food habit of the Rabhas by the interactions with the neighbouring communities such as the established Rajbansis, Southern Bengalis and many other well to do communities. Impact of globalization also takes a significant role for changing the menu of the Rabhas of North Bengal.

‘Drinking & Smoking’
From childhood to adulthood the Rabhas are habituated to drinking ‘Chakat’ (rice beer) that is domestically prepared. Rice, water, roots of plantains (Dhala ora), leaves of some vegetables, dust of rice etc. are mixed, boiled and then rotted. It is called ‘Chakat-Phaf’, which takes a shape like of cake. This cake is put in a pot for few days. Side by side some rice is placed into water within one night and this rice is then kept in a funnel and thereafter boiled it in an earthen pot. Afterward this rice is washed through a bamboo basket and this washed water is kept in an earthen pitcher. Therefore the cake is dipped in that pitcher and the mouth of the pitcher is covered with some cloth very well. When the cake and water are mixed and damaged as well, it is considered that the ‘Chakat’ is ready to drink. At first they offer the ‘Chakat’ to their forefather (Jourakal) and their main god and goddesses like ‘Rishi-Jug’ and after putting three drops on earth, they use to drinking. The young educated and converted Christian Rabhas are not accustomed to drink this rice bear like the others.

The Rabhas are usually accustomed to smoking. From young to old, men and women all are habituated to smoking tobacco. They use an earthen ‘Piski’ that is like a tobacco pipe of smoking. Few of them make ‘Nasa’ that is like cigarette, formed with a full leaf of tobacco and smoke it. Besides, they also smoke ‘biri’. The all male and female Rabhas chew ‘Gay-pan’ (areca-betel) in their daily lives as well as ceremonial programmes. The young generation of this community is gradually coming out from this customary smoking and chewing.

‘Dress & Ornaments’

The Rabhas put on their traditional clothes, which are woven by the women at home. With the help of bamboo made handloom they weave many time-honoured dress named ‘Lufang Kambang’, ‘Kyamlet’, ‘Faakcheek’, ‘Soloylone’, ‘Kalai’ etc. The Rabha women apply three part cloth for covering their bodies. They utilize ‘Kambang’, which covers their body to waist, and ‘Kyamlet’ is used to cover the waist to knee. They also use ‘Faakcheek’, which seems to modern lady’s gauze scarf. They use ‘Khodabang’ to cover their hair. They men put on ‘Kalai’ that is one kind of towel or loin cloth, ‘Shokok’ like dhoti, ‘Bukhill’ like shirt etc. ‘Khansse’ is used to bind their head and ‘Faoli’ is for binding their waist. The new generation of the Rabhas does not utilize their traditional dress except in long-established rituals. They always put on modern dress like the modern people such as the well to do Rajbansis, Southern Bengalis etc.

Earlier most of the Rabhas were barefoot. Some of them used ‘Kharam’ that was one type of wooden sandal or made of bamboo. Gradually they start to use sandal or shoes like other advanced people.

The Rabha women are fond of ornaments. But the male do not put on any ornament excepting sometimes a plain ring round of a finger. The women use golden and silver ornaments. Many of them also can’t afford. The women wear ‘Nambri’ for upper ear. It has two upward projections, one for upper ear and another for lower ear. They use ‘Nakpati’ for nose. It is a small flower or a knob stuck to the nostril or to the outer skin of the nose through a hole made earlier. ‘Hingchil’ is a necklace, which hangs on the chest from the neck; ‘Syan’ or ‘Soukku bakala’ is an ornament for hand like bracelets. They put on a chain (made of ivory) around the wrist named ‘Lobok’. They also wear finger ring namely ‘Chhoushtian’. Now the young generation of the Rabhas of North Bengal is not accustomed to use their traditional ornaments.

‘Marriage & Divorce’

Some long established forms of marriage have been prevailing among the Rabhas of North Bengal since the time of their settlement in this region. Arrange marriage is the popular form of marriage among the Rabhas. A ‘ghatak’ (middle man) or guardian or relative of the bride and bridegroom takes leading role in this wedding. The marriage is arranged between the two different ‘gotra’ (clans) but not to other tribes. ‘Gharjai’ is another form of marriage among the Rabhas. In this form of marriage the bride groom has to live temporarily in the house of newly bride. The groom can take his wife in his house, if he builds his own house. Sometimes he permanently settles in the house of his father-in-law. As a poor marriageable young man can’t give any bride-dowry, he serves as a labour in the house of the bride’s father up to the period of six months to two years. During this time he can marry the daughter of his lord if he (lord) becomes please of his servant’s activities. In this marriage the bridgroom is also allowed to spend his rest life in the house of his lord cum father-in-law. Some time bride’s father does not agree to arrange the marriage ceremony of his daughter with the young servant. In this situation the village headman called ‘Marapsan’ solves this problem by giving pressure to the father of the bride for accepting the young servant as his son-in-law or paying him money as wage. Monogamy is
prevailed and polygamy is not practiced by the Rabhas. The woman who has been already divorced or widow, remarriage is practiced in their society. ‘Bou faivi nem’ is one type of marriages where bridegroom brings the bride in his own house and then marriage her. Anyway after slaying a foul and taking its blood and thereby chanting incantation before the goddess Rountuk Bay, the marriage ceremony is started. ‘Chokat’ that is domestically prepared wine, ‘Gay-Pain’ (areca-betel), ‘Bak-kan’ (pork), ‘Tou’ (foul), banana etc are used as gifts for both sides. Ornaments, money, pig etc. are given as bride-dowry by the groom. During marriage they also sing and dance together. Though some changes have been taken place in the marriage system of this community, yet they observe their usual rituals at the time of marriage.

The Rabhas have a conventional divorce system which is still more or less followed by them. A couple can divorce themselves through a custom that is called ‘Pan chenra’. It has been practiced since the time of their permanent settlement in the region. In this system a Rabha priest lights an earthen lamp in the courtyard and calls the couple there. Then the wife and husband stand there face to face and the priest hands over a betel leaf to them and asks them to tear this leaf. Therefore they begin to rip the leaf and divide it into two parts. As soon as it is done the couple is declared by the divorced. Educated and well to do families of the Rabhas do not follow this divorce system. They also follow the law and order of the government for granting the divorce.

‘Diseases and Medicine’

Once, Cholera, dengue, black fever, pneumonia etc. were common diseases of the Rabhas of North Bengal. Skin disease was also there. To treat the patients the ‘Huji’ (Rabha priest) was called who prescribed herbal medicine and arrange worshipping to propitiate the evil spirit. Still the ‘Huji’ is called for the same purpose. The Rabhas usually worship malevolent goddesses for the good health and prosperity of their family members. Tukini is one of the evil goddesses. Apart from this vice goddesses they also worship Bulua Bay, Paniya Bay etc. to save people from madness behaviour. Miching Bay (female goddess) is worshiped to save the newly born child, as this evil spirit can change the colour of a child time to time. Lung of duck is sacrificed to propitiate her by the ‘Huji’. Dekal the evil goddess is also worshipped by the Rabhas. If anybody feels pain in his or her stomach, it is imagined that he or she has been affected by the evil goddess. Joka-Jukini the iniquity goddesses are worshipped by the ‘Huji’ to save the children from their wickedness glance. The impact of modern education on the Rabhas has been observed as now they go to the chambers of Doctors for treatment.

‘Conventional Beliefs’

They have some traditional beliefs in their daily lives which are regarded as unscientific in modern sense. If they look anybody carries a log of wood or laying a log of wood on road side or anywhere or a person carries his or her working spud or axe, they consider that this is the bad signal of their particular mission. They usually stop their proposal for marriage if they see this awful signal. On the other hand, if they see a basket of fishes on road or snake in the left side of the road, or a fox or pitcher full of water; they consider this is a good signal for their object. Then they carry on their discussion about the marriage ceremony and bring it to a final position.

4. ‘Religion of the Rabhas’

The Rabhas have some conventional religious beliefs and practices. The religious life of the Rabhas also includes the basic animistic concept and faith of other Mongoloid groups akin to them namely the Mech and the Kachari; but there are some significant differences too. The supreme god of the Rabhas is called Rishi that is also considered as just another name of Mahakal or Siva. God Rishi is worshipped in all important social and religious occasions. It seems, therefore, that the Rabha’s religious life develops around Rishi as the omnipotent and omniscient being. Besides Rishi, the Rabhas worship two female goddess named Rungtuk and Basek who are actually the two daughters of Rishi. In their language the God is called ‘Bay’ and sacrificial place is called ‘Baydam’. They do not believe about anthropomorphism.

Two reddish earthen pitchers filled with rice up to the neck where an egg is placed in each of them represent Rungtuk and Basek. Rungtuk being the elder of the two seems to be more important as the goddess of wealth and prosperity, whereas Basek is just considered as junior to Rungtuk but capable of the same power of bringing fortune and misfortune to a family or a person. For that reason the two pitchers representing the two goddesses are reserved in the main room of the house as though occasionally guarded by the headman or guardian...
of the family. Few Rabhas consider Rungtuk and Basek as Lakshmi and Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of wealth and education respectively. They also worship Kamaksha Devi during Ambubachi that is a Hindu holy festivals related to Kali goddess. The senior male persons of the Rabhas make one pipe of musical instrument like drum and beating this they collect subscription from the nearby villages. The Kamaksha puja of Kamakshaguri under Jalpaiguri district is a big festival of the Rabhas. Rice, reeds, flower, leaf of basil plant, branches of mango, leaf of yatras (a low dwarf tree), ripe plantain, mustard oil, vermilion, earthen lamp, curd, ghee, milk, pine apple, earthen pot (ghot) etc. are required to worship the goddess Kamaksha. Two groups of god and goddess are worshipped by the Rabhas of North Bengal. One is auspicious goddess and another is harmful goddess. Kamaksha, Rishi, Jug, Mahakal, Bataram, Ranatub Baneb, Gangraja, Michin Bay, Nur Bay are propitious goddesses. On the other hand Buluya Bay Ganch, Papiya, Bhe Michin Bay, Nur Bay are propitious goddesses. One is auspicious goddess and goddess are worshipped by the Rabhas of North Bengal. One is auspicious goddess and another is harmful goddess. Kamaksha, Rishi, Jug, Mahakal, Bataram, Ranatub Baneb, Gangraja, Michin Bay, Nur Bay are propitious goddesses. On the other hand Buluya Bay Ganch, Papiya, Bhe Kaali, Joura Kali (spirit), Joka-Jokuni etc. are the evil goddesses.

Nur-Bay is worshipped for the auspiciousness of babies and newly mother who just gave birth a child. Mahakal is worshipped for the prosperity and happiness of the family members. Gangraja is also worshipped for good crops. Rungtuk is worshipped like Mata Kali of the Hindu religion. According to the Rabhas, ‘Rungtuk Bay’ is the united form of Lakshmi-Parbati the goddesses of the Hindus. The worshiping of the Rabha community is commenced by ‘Huji’ who is the priest of their society. Vermillion, flower, egg, foul, pig, pigeon, duck, goat, wine (chakot), banana, earthen lamp, reeds, mustard oil, leaves of Yatrasi (a low dwarf tree), etc. more or less are required for every pujas. At the time of harvesting of crops they also observe some rituals. During this occasion they sing and dance also. It may be said that the new generation of this community is not careful to observe this long established rituals as they are facing identity crisis before the other advanced communities such as the well to do Rajbansis, Southern Bengalis etc.

Sacrifice of animal or bird or any other thing is one of the characteristic features of the religious life of the Rabhas. They sacrifice goat, pigeon, pole of bamboo, etc. to the goddess Kamakshaya. At the time of worshipping of goddess Rishi, the Rabhas also sacrifice animals and birds. Pigeon is slaughtered to propitiate goddess Nur Bay. Wine (Chakat) and water (Chika) also sacrifice at the time of worshipping these goddesses. Foul, duck, pig etc. are sacrificed during the festivals of ‘Nabanna’ that is a feast of new rice like the Bengali Hindus.

4.1. ‘Funeral rites and spirits’

It is usually believed by the Rabhas that after death a person will go to heaven. So they observe some rituals through funeral system. After the death of a man or a woman, the Rabhas put the dead body accordingly north to south direction (Head of the body to north and legs of the body to south). They also put the dead body on a bed prepared of bamboo and this bed is placed on the floor of the body’s hut. According to ‘Kochacro’ language, this custom is called ‘Pirpatang’. The relatives of the dead usually gather around the body and sacrifice ‘Chakot’ (domestically prepared wine), ‘Chika’ (water) and foods to it. After this programme they transfer the body on ‘Mer-Sang-Grang’ that is a cot made of bamboo and bring the body with this cot abroad the hut. Then they tear the straw or reeds of the thatch of hut where the dead lived and scatter these on his or her courtyard. Thereafter they begin to sing and dance taking with bow-arrow and big sly. At that time they play some musical instruments like ‘Dangsi’, ‘Hyam’ and ‘Kal flout’. They bring the dead body to the cremation ground with singing, dancing and playing these musical instruments and put it on the burning pyre. It is called ‘Mair Gondi’. A small chicken is hanged on the pyre to accompany the dead. Then they light up the pyre.

After four days of cremation they again sing and dance at the house of the deceased which is called ‘Doiba Serengi’. They arrange the programme of ‘Shradhya’ after one month or one year of death. In the case of accidental death the funeral rites is different from the rituals of normal death. In this regard the wife of the dead husband or husband of the dead wife pour ‘Chakot’ (wine), ‘Chika’ (water), rice, meat on plantain leaf from opposite side of his or her mouth. In the case of a dead pregnant woman, they take up the baby from the womb of dead woman and then put both of them under the ground and cremate them. This was also the case of accidental death. In the programme of ‘Shradhya–Shanti’ they put some foods (Mayjudag) and slayer hog in the room of the departed. Then the relatives of the dead sacrifice wine, water and other foods to him or her. This is called ‘Chikabaray’ and it is arranged by the maids.

Now Hinduism and Christianity are two other major religious forces that have shaped the Rabha community. The influence of Christianity is
5. ‘Economy of the Rabhas’

Most of the Rabhas of North Bengal are very poor since the time of their settlement in this region. Basically they are depended on agriculture, first shifting and then permanent. Forest products, hunting, fishing, weaving and animal husbandry etc. are the secondary occupations of the Rabhas. Actually they lead self sufficient livelihood. Rabha men and women both work on land for digging and sowing seeds and finally harvesting. The forests adjoining Rabhas are usually depended on the products of forest i.e. fruits, corns, woods, honey etc. and wild animal also. They hunt deer, hog, bird, goat etc. the wild animals. Besides, the Rabhas who have been living in the village-areas since long times like the other communities such as the Rajbansis, Muhamedans are mostly depended on agriculture, fishing, weaving and cattle bearing. Duck, foul, hog, goat, sheep, cow, buffalo etc. are their domestic animals. The women weave their clothes with bamboo made handloom at home. They also sell these products. Even they make their ornaments. The Rabhas have numerous traps for fishing, which are made with bamboo and jute namely Polalo, Jekha, Thusa, Kholoi, Dhoska, Barshi, Koncha, Temai, Jangla etc. Fishing-net is also used for hunting fish. They make some musical instruments and sell these products in the market as these are essential for their entertainment. Educated and well to do Rabhas have appointed themselves in various services of State Government and Central Government. Some of them have also involved in business.

The main occupation of the Rabhas is agriculture. Since nomadic livelihood they engaged themselves in cultivation. Their primal agricultural system was called ‘Tanjia’ that was a type of ‘Jhum’ cultivation. They used a small hand spud (gag) for digging land. After digging land by this hand spud, they scattered seeds on the fertile land. They used this cultivating system called ‘Tanjia’ for a long time. Gradually they become permanent cultivators from shifting stage. Then they began to use plow-yoke, bullock or buffalo for cultivation. The Rabhas who lived at the villages, cultivated their own land or others’ like the Rajbansi, Muslim land lords as share-croppers. Now most of them are basically depended on cultivation. Men and women both work hard for producing crops. Some of them work in the forest department of West Bengal Government for plantation or any other concerned works of the forest and receive few facilities from the department. They produce rice, maize, millet, various corrn, wheat, vegetables and ‘Endi’ (silk-worm) for making thread and thereafter cloth. Now they have started to apply modern technology and chemical manure in the field of cultivation. Even they have produced numerous hybrid types’ valuable crops such as rice, wheat, maize, millet, potato, cabbage, brinjal, cauliflower etc.

The Rabhas have some domestic animals and birds as animal husbandry is their long-established source of income. Duck, foul, pig, goat, sheep, cow, buffalo etc. are their domestic birds and animals. Pork and chicken are their popular meat since nomadic life. Naturally hog and cock are their subsidiary source of income from colonial period to post colonial period. Now the established families of the community do not interest in animal husbandry.

The Rabhas have customary cottage industry, which is a part of their source of income. They both male and female more or less are trained in various cottage industries. The men make various houses hold affairs with bamboo, wood and mud. Besides the women are good weavers of handloom. Their taste of colour combination is praiseworthy. Their bamboo made handlooms are also attractive. These instruments are traditional and with the help of these usual handlooms they weave lufung, kambang, faaheck, solaylone, kalai etc. They make these clothes for their own use and selling also. They make many musical instruments for entertainment. It is also a matter of regret that these cottage industries are gradually going to collapse for the impact of modern technology.

One of the traditional occupations of the Rabhas is hunting. From nomadic stage the Rabhas used to hunt animals and fishes to lead their livelihood. They hunt deer, wild pig, wild foul, goat, cow etc. They use ‘Fya’ (bow), ‘Khapar’ (spear), ‘Kaindam’ (stick) in the time of hunting. They use ‘Jonje’ (A trap made of bamboo), ‘Jhoka’ (bamboo made trap), ‘Dingir’ (bamboo made trap), fishing-line, fishing-rod, fishing-net etc. the fishing-tackles to search for fish. They catch fish from their neighbouring ponds, drain, river, flooded land etc. Even the ladies of this community are still very skillful to hunt fish. At the time of field survey the present investigator noticed some Rabha women who were fishing then with bamboo made fishing
6. ‘Politics of the Rabhas’

The Rabhas of North Bengal participated in the struggle for India’s freedom against the British Government. Under the leadership of Deben Das (Rabha) the Rabha community of Alipurduar took part in the Quit India Movement in 1942. Even as a president of Indian National Congress of Kumagram Block of present Alipurduar district Deben Das tried to improve their community in many ways. He established some primary schools, high schools, libraries and a training centre of Endi cultivation in the Alipurduar (Now Alipurduar itself a district) Subdivision of Jalpaiguri district. Besides in the first half of the twentieth century some Rabhas named German Rabha, Rajbar Rabha, Hanuram Rabha, Bholanath Rabha et al. of Madhyamansi, Daldali and Hemaguri of Alipurduar thana under Jalpaiguri district (then Alipurduar was a Subdivision of Jalpaiguri district) started movement for upgrading the position to get equal social rank as that of Hindu caste like the Rajbansis. Hence they gave up their Rabha title and started to use the title named ‘Das’. Actually this was their social movement. But they were even are politically suppressed by the other advanced communities such as the well to do Rajbansis or the Southern Bengalis of the district. After the introduction of Panchayat system, very few of them take parts in politics in their areas. But they do not participate in the present politics of North Bengal like the other advance communities. Still they are respectful to their folk administration of Justice.

The Rabhas have one kind of folk administration of justice. It has been prevailing in their society since the beginning of their social system. They strictly maintain discipline. Nobody can raise any voice against this folk administration of justice. The body of the folk administration can announce decree of punishment against them, who avoid this justice. In their society this folk administration of justice is called ‘Marapsan’. It takes necessary steps against these people who cause any quarrel or any anti-social activities in their society. Always old aged wise persons or village headmen become the members of the folk administrative system. According to the direction of the folk administration of justice the accused persons are bound to pay money to the committee or have to leave the village. In the forest adjoining village, a ‘Gaon-Buro’ or ‘Tarao Pare’ (Head man) performs this duty actively since long time. The common Rabhas also represent their respect to the Head Man. After the introduction of Panchayat system and impact of western education as well as globalization this folk administration of justice can’t perform its duty actively which it could earlier times.

7. ‘Culture of the Rabhas’

The Rabhas have a big cultural heritage and they are also respected to their long-established culture. They have separate language also.

‘Language’

As the Rabhas have no script to write or read, they use a colloquial language that is also their mother tongue and called ‘Kochakrou’ language. According to George Abraham Grierson the famous surveyor of the Linguistic Survey of India, the language of Rabha is a part of ‘Bodo’ language and it is self sufficient. Numerous folk-tales, poems, songs of this language have been prevailing in their society since the time of their settlement in the area. They can easily guess and speak their neighbours’ languages like the Rajbansi or Bengali or Hindi. They become bi-lingual from childhood. George Abraham Grierson compared this language with the Tibeto-Burmic language. The great surveyor further said that the language of the Rabha had a good relation with the language of the Riang tribe of Tripura and the Lampung tribe of Assam.

‘Education & Literature’

During the times of nomadic life, the Rabhas had no formal education. Even now they have no script to write or read. Traditionally they have earned informal or practical education to lead their livelihood. They have learned the technique of weaving or hunting or cultivating etc. After the coming of missionaries to North Bengal the Rabhas begin to obtain formal education from various schools, colleges or universities in the languages of English or Bengali or Hindi. Now a good number of Rabhas have obtained western education and appointed themselves in various departments of state government or central government.

The Rabhas have a rich tradition in respect to the folk-literature. Among the Ravhas, songs of some of the folktales, legends, chamars’ (yak’s tail) related various religious festivals and performances, various myths, idioms, and proverbial sayings are still prevailing as relic of the folk knowledge. The written tradition of the Rabha literature was started towards the beginning.
of the twentieth century with the publication of religious book ‘Markani Nima Saikai’ in 1901, which was translated into Rongadani dialect from the Gospel of Mark of the original Holy Bible. It was most probably the oldest specimen of written trend in Rabha. ‘Penam Lamon Dam’ (a religious book) was written by Purna Chandra Kosh in Rabha, 1926. Besides some pioneer works were done by Rajen Rongkho and Adhar Bantho. ‘Rabha Zibraw Orgi’ and ‘Bhag Tekkang’ in 1948 were written by Rajen Rongkho and published by Iswar Chandra Hato. Thus Adhar Batho wrote a book ‘Rabha Bhasu’ in 1950. Prasanna Kumar Pam wrote a legendary drama ‘Dodan Bir’ in 1957, which was most probably the first drama in Rabha language. In 1973 the first Rabha magazine ‘Zatini Khurang’ (massage of the race) was published under the editorship of Prakash Rabha. In 1978 an outstanding magazine ‘Champai’ (honeycomb) was published under the editorship of Listi Rabha Ronkho. In this way the literature of the Rabhas are being flourished on their socio-cultural aspect.

‘Entertainments’

Singing and dancing are the main traditional legacy of the Rabhas of North Bengal. They arrange the programmes of singing and dancing in the religious ceremony, marriage ceremony, love-affairs, joy and sorrow etc. every sphere of life. In their language dance is called ‘Basini’. Rabha ladies jointly participate in dancing and singing programmes. One of the Rabha priests named ‘Saranga’ also dances in the time of magical juggling or worshipping. The dance called ‘Marbar Changi’ is arranged only in the funeral ceremony. They also jointly dance during the time of catching prawn that is called ‘Nakcheng reni’. ‘Mak-par-basini’ (dancing with beer) is another dancing programme of the Rabhas. In the month of Kartik (a month of Bengali calendar), during the festival of Mata Kali, they dance by putting on the mask of bear and an artificial skin of this animal. ‘Handa-Baru’ is the dance of war. ‘Basar Pidan’ dancing is arranged during Holly Festivals. They use many musical instruments in these programmes, such as Khan (long drum, made of wood and skin of dead goat), Daydi (made of brass, like cymbal), Buburinga (made of bamboo, almost like a flout), Sanai (flout), Mukha Bingshi (flout made of bamboo), Kalbingshi (It is also bamboo made flout and its tune is very melancholy. It is played only in sad programmes), Jhapkhaba (also a flout, made of bamboo) etc.

One example of the song is given below.

“Neng duku le ou ang palau nungya
Saray hasai noiman nakcheng retihiya.”

If we render these two sentences of the song in to English, it would be thus;

Jakhoi (fishing trap) have, I taken in my hand, you come and hold Kholoi (fishing pot),

yon the flowing old river, let’s go and catch prawn.

The Rabhas also cite their sorrow or joy in songs. These songs are made in two or three sentences. These are traditionally practised by the Rabhas. They also play various traditional musical instruments at the time of singing these songs. One example is given below.

“May ha ni kanka
Sang surung surung kurung tang a
Ang dekang noya sangko.”

If we translate this verse into English, it would be thus;

Cut the paddy o maid, with full care,
however weak the sickle may be,

I will bring you a pair of new bangles made of shell from the next hat (small market).

Or

“Soiraga lou lou puniyong uyan boka tiya
Kabak ango na na lapa kou dirungtam piya.”

In English it means;

O maid, I will purchase for you the green parrot by rupees three twenty (sixty),

that is flying in the sky.

8. ‘Conclusion’

The Rabhas of North Bengal are minor in numbers but they had a rich distinct traditions composed of distinct name, language, religion, folk forms of performing arts, musical instruments, folk technology of making crafts and liquor, traditional panchayats, customary laws, folk medicine, dress,
food habits, social institutions and organizations, norms, beliefs, values and so on. While living in multi-cultural set-ups they often come under the influence of neighboring communities with more powerful cultural capital, and the mediated cultures of national and international origins. Changing livelihoods, demographic structure, penetration of new exogenous forces, instruction of consumer culture have influenced and continue to influence the cultural fabric of the Rabhas; they lost many of their language, traditional religion and faith, traditional art and technology, and much of their distinctive mode of life. In the recent years the Rabhas have gained education through missionaries and other educational institutions. Nevertheless some Rabhas are still trying to preserve their traditional ways of life. It is a struggle to maintain the long-established practices of their forefathers without turning away from the fruits of modernity. Only time can reveal the outcome of this social metamorphosis taking place in the tribal heartland of North Bengal.

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