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The socio-religious practice of ‘Song Bai Tangi’ of the Koch Rabhas: A Case study with special reference to the Kokrajhar District of BTAD, Assam

Romeo Rwtin Lokobok

Asst. Prof, Dept. of English, Janata College, Serfanguri, Assam, India

Abstract

The Rabhas are one of the major tribal communities of the North Eastern region of India. As a tribal community, it has magnificent traditional beliefs, social practices and cultural ceremonies which have been observed and practiced since time immemorial. These beliefs and practices have been handed down traditionally from one generation to the other. The present paper is an attempt to mirror the socio-religious practice of “Song Bai Tangi” of the Koch Rabhas practiced in the villages as a community festival and ritual.

Keywords: *Song Bai Tangi, Koch Rabhas, culture, language.*

Introduction: The Rabhas are one of the most primitive and indigenous tribes of North East India. Racially they belong to the Mongoloid stock of the Indo-Mongoloids or Indo-Tibetans who seem to have come down from the North Eastern region of Tibet in China. Linguists and scholars are of the opinion that the Rabhas, Boros, Garos, Missings, Tiwas, Dimasas are known as the cognate groups of languages who belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages under the greater Sino-Tibetan family. The Rabha society is a matrilineal form of society in which parental lineage and title inheritance are traced through women’s line. But the system of inheritance of the property is on the father’s line. However, with the passing of time, certain things have been changed. In spite of certain changes, the Rabhas continued to maintain their distinctive culture and identity throughout the ages. Their unique traditional costumes, rituals and other social and religious practices, fine intricate music, resonate and colourful folk dances are noteworthy. They also have rich stores of tradition and social customs such as socio-beliefs, practices and ceremonies relating to birth, death, marriage, adoption, cultivation, harvest, etc of which only few of them have been put to written form till date. The “*Song Bai Tangi*” is one of the socio-religious practices of the Koch Rabhas which is still practiced in most of the villages is an outcome of the case study done in the villages of Rampur and Kolabari in the district of Kokrajhar BTAD, Assam.

The practice of ‘*Song Bai Tangi*’: “*Song Bai Tangi*” is the greatest religious and social festival of the Koch Rabhas. Traditionally, it is celebrated collectively in Koch Rabha villages every year around the months of February or March. The festival is performed for the good harvest of crops which also signifies the bidding farewell to the old year and ushering the new fruitful year. This festival is performed as a kind of ritual to propitiate various gods and goddesses for the success of cultivation. The word ‘*Song*’ means village, ‘*Bai*’ means god or deity and ‘*Tangi*’ means an act of worship. So, the term ‘*Song Bai Tangi*’ in a simple language means ‘an act of worship of village god or deity. The festival is also generally known as “*Gaon Raja*” which means ‘Village King’. So, the festival mean the ritual performed to appease god who is regarded as the king of the village for peace and prosperity and for protection from all evils and diseases. The festival is celebrated for up to three days.

Before the festival is begun, the villagers clear up the spot for the ritual which is known as “*Hadam Halaingi*”. Usually, they keep a small plot of land which is used as the fixed shrine of worship in the village itself as it is celebrated every year. After the clearance of the spot the “*Huji*” (the Priest) foresee about the spot accompanied by inaudible chants of murmur foreseeing the holiness of the place with the aim of avoiding impending misfortunes. This is called “*Bit Chwingi*” or the “*Baidam Chwingi*”. Here, ‘*Bai*’ means gods or goddesses and ‘*Dam*’ means altar or place of worship.

For this ritual, a pair of betel nut, a pair of bettel leaf and a handfull of rice are required. After the clearing of the place the "Huji" or "Sranga" (the priest) bless the place all around it known as "udrwi Laongi" by sprinkling water from a "Lota". After blessing of the area, 13 small huts called "Bai Nog" (house of god) are made signifying different deities. Sometimes, the number of deities worshiped in this ritual varies from village to village depending on the situation of the village and the neighbours surrounding it. In this sacred place, along with the Kocha deities there are also other deities belonging to other tribes called "Kwchir Bai" which means Boro deities and "Leng Bai" which means non-tribal deities. The Koch Rabhas believe in one God called "Mamabwlw" who is the creator of all things. At the same time, they also have tremendous respect for other gods and goddesses. For this reason, they built many huts around the shrine representing other deities signifying their appeasement with them. Inside these small huts no statues or any form of figure is placed. Instead a bunch of banana or two bunches of bananas are placed inside the hut which signify the offerings of the people. The rest of the villagers do various works as per the command and directions of the "Maitok", the person who helps the 'Huji' the priest. There are three "Maitok"s, they are "Gor Maitok", "Bhar Denni Maitok" and "Hapsangi Maitok". When the ritual takes place, three persons who are called the "Maitok" stay close to the Huji. Among the three Maitoks only "Gor Maitok" is engaged for various sacrificial works.

The second day is the main day of the ritual/festival. On this day, the village community including man, woman and children assemble around the "Bai Dam" for celebration. The festival is begun with rituals and sacrifices of he-goats, chickens, ducks, pigeons and a pig. The Huji begins the rituals by chanting the mantras and calling by name on to different deities. While the Huji conducts the rituals, the three maitoks help him in various activities. To appease different deities a pair of ducks, a pair of hens, a pair of pigeons and a goat is sacrificed. For that ritual, only the two maitoks are allowed to touch the animals and birds brought for the sacrifice. It is believed that the three Maitoks should be holy in order to get the good fruits of the ritual.

The Huji performs the rituals chanting the mantras for every offering and sacrificial offerings. To some gods, sacrificial offerings are not made instead an egg is used and for some gods a pair of white pigeons are set free in the name of him. The most important part of this sacrificial ritual is called "Bak Makal Hanni" in which a male pig is sacrificed by slitting its throat in name of the "Kocha Bai". These sacrificial offerings signify rituals for purification performed for cleansing uncleanness of the village community and in order to be protected from all natural and man-made calamities to appease gods and goddesses.

After the various rituals and sacrifices are done, the whole village community gathers together near the "Bai Dam". The whole village community assembles near the "Bai Dam" to have a community meal together symbolizing the sharing of love, peace and prosperity among themselves to stand hand in hand in times of sorrows and happiness for the days to come. After the community meal, "Bhor Lanni" which means 'receiving blessing' is begun. The Koch Rabhas believe that to live a happy life, they need blessings from gods and goddesses. For this Bhor Lanni ceremony, only the heads of the family is allowed. The rest of the village folk only stand as mere spectators. Those who practice the worshipping system of "Runtuk" only are allowed to take part in "Bhor Lanni" ceremony. The "Runtuk" is an earthen pot half filled with rice where an egg is placed in the centre of it which symbolizes "Siva Lingo". The Koch Rabhas traditionally profess the faith of "Runtuk" worship or the worship of "Siva Lingo". The heads of the families come in for taking blessings carrying along with them "Dhon" (a kind of basket wrapped of a bamboo) full of rice, a bunch of banana, incense and lighted "Chwti Bar" a kind of earthen lighted lamp. The 'Bhor Lanni' ceremony begins first with the three Maitoks, then the villagers and lastly the 'Huji'. After taking the blessings, the people go back home dancing, shouting and praising accompanied by sweet sounds of flute and drum beats. The heads of the families go to their respective houses and then put the "Dhon" near the 'Runtuk'. The ritual ends in a happy mood. Later, the head of the duck which was sacrificed earlier is carried to one of the Maitoks' house accompanied by songs and dances in joyous mood.

On the third day, it is called the "Basaingi". The word 'basaingi' means to drift it away or to throw it away. On this day, they prepare a kind of boat made of banana leaves or banana tree carrying the remains of the festival and take them to the nearby river to drift them away which imply ousting of bad and evil from the village. It is believed by the Koch Rabhas that if "Song Bai Tangi" is performed in the villages every year, they receive showers of blessings from the deities and are protected from every sin bringing them fruitful harvest and successful year.

Conclusion: The Rabhas, who constitute a major section of the ethnic groups of Assam of North East India do not lag behind in the field of traditional believes and practices. Their rich traditional rituals and other social and religious practices will lose their originality and uniqueness and may slowly even vanish away until and unless carefully documented or written them down in the form of books or films. Though the process of cultural assimilation and fusion with other races have become a threat to their identity and existence as an distinctive ethnic group, the Koch Rabhas have continued to preserve their primitive social systems till today which are still practiced alive afresh despite of the spreading of Hinduism, Christianity and the acceptance of their ideologies in most of the villages of the Koch Rabha society.

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