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Religion of the Rabhas of Assam: A Study

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Abstract

Religion becomes the important part of the human society since the dawn of the civilization. The Rabhas of Assam is a Scheduled tribe community who belong to the Indo- Mongoloid group of people. Numerically and sociologically, they are one of the most important tribes of northeast India, particularly of Assam. The most concentrated areas of Rabha population is found in Goalpara, Kamrup, Dhubri, Darrang, Udalguri and some parts of Assam. They are recognized by the Constitution of India as the Scheduled Tribe of Assam. The Rabha people has magnificent traditional rituals and religious practices of their own. But the influence of Hinduism and Christianity has a far reaching impact on the religious life of the Rabhas. This paper attempts to discuss the religious life of the Rabhas and their socio cultural transition.

Keywords: Rabhas, Indo- Mongoloid, Constitution, Assam, India, Scheduled Tribe.

Introduction: The Rabhas are an important plain tribe in the Northeast India. They are the inhabitants of mainly the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The physical appearance of this tribe indicates that they are of Mongoloid origin and constitute a major segment of the Bodo linguistic group. The term “Bodo” was first used by Hodgson which is originally a linguistic one but it is also used in ethnic sense too. Ethnologically, the term Bodo encompasses a number of tribes. Practically it covers the entire plain tribal population of Assam like the Kacharis, Garo, Mech, Rabha, Lalung, Hajong, etc. Rev Endle in his book “The Kachari” refers to seven divisions or sub tribes of the Rabhas viz. Randania, Maitoria, Pati, Koch, Bitlia, Dahuriya and Sangha. However, E.A. Gait refers to five sub groups of the Rabhas such as Randani, Pati, Maitory, Dahuri and Kachari. The Rabhas of Assam are mainly concentrated in the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Dhubri, Darrang, Sonitpur, Udalguri, Nalbari and Barpeta. The Rabhas are also located in the neighbouring states like Meghalaya and West Bengal. They are also located in the neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bangladesh.

As per 2001 Census of India, the total Scheduled Tribe population of Assam is 3308570.

Out of that the Rabhas had a total population of 277517 constituting 8.4% of the total population of Assam. Their percentage of literacy rate is 66.7% out of which male is 76.2% and female literacy rate is 57%.

Objective of the Study: The objective of this paper is to present a systematic account of the religious faiths and beliefs of the Rabhas of Assam. This paper also deals with the diversification of the religion of the Rabhas.

Methodology: The proposed study will rely on both primary and secondary sources. The technique of collecting the primary data is through interview and observation. For secondary sources, the literary writings of scholars and critics will be included.

Religious Belief of the Rabhas: Religion is a complex phenomenon. Religion is the root of rites and rituals, which means the system of faith and worship. Rites and rituals are one of the most important institutions of human culture, which relates people to each other on special occasions. All societies have some beliefs, which can be grouped under the term Religion.

The belief of the Rabhas in religion is quite ancient and purely of their own. The Rabhas are basically animists and Saktatism has penetrated deep into the magico religious belief system of the tribe (Sarmah Thakur: 180). The Rabhas consider 'Baikho' or 'khoksi' as the supreme goddess who bring prosperity for the community. 'Bai' means deity and 'Kho' means great. Baikho is observed during May-June every year. It is believed that there will be luxuriant growth of the crops if sacrifices in the form of pigs before the goddesses are strong and stout. In Baikho, four different goddesses are worshipped like- Susari, Nakkati, Daduri and Tamai. A legend about the origin of the 'khoksi' is as follows-

Once two sisters named Topke and Naisone went to catch fish in a beel with their 'Jakoi' (bamboo made fishing implement). Every time they applied the 'Jakoi', only a piece of stone appeared in the Jakoi. The two sisters out of curiosity kept this piece of stone in the 'Khaloi' (bamboo made appliance used for keeping the catch during fishing operation) and returned home. When their father enquired about the fish, both the sisters requested their father to look at the Khaloi. The father considered the piece of stone as a boon and kept it in the granary. He offered puja before it and in course of time all his desires were fulfilled. The villagers gathered and began to worship the stone as 'Tangra Singra' (supreme deity). The Rabhas believe that the father in due course of time became 'Khoksi'. In order to indicate the superior status among the deities she is also referred to as 'Baini Kho' i.e. superior female deity (Sarmah Thakur: 181)

Langa Puja: The Rabhas worship Lord Shiva as 'Langa Burha'. Langa Burha is considered as the most benevolent God. During the month of Jeth (May-June) and before the starting of the agricultural operation, the worship of Langa Burha is observed. There is a believe that God Langa Burha will protect the people from the natural calamities and epidemics. Earlier, Langa puja was observed in all Rabha inhabited villages but at present such puja is observed in the Rabha villages of South kamrup and Goalpara areas only. The puja is held

in 'Langamar' i.e. permanent place of worship attached to the village. The essential puja items are a pair of red fowls, rice beer, betel leaves and nuts, fruits, a garland of Tulshi leaves, rice cakes, an earthen lamp, incantations, oil and vermilion etc. The items are collected on community basis. Besides, every household offers certain Puja prasad. On the previous day of the puja, the Deori family invites the deity which is known as 'Jagowa'.

Next day all the villagers gather at the 'Langamar' where the Deori offers oblations to the deity. He sacrifices the pair of fowls and offers the heads and blood to the deity. A boat made of banana stem is dedicated to the consort of Lord Shiva. As soon as Langa worship is over, ceremonial oblations are offered to the goddess. The boat is carried to the nearest river or stream and after placing a chicken and an egg along with other puja articles inside it is allowed to float down stream. After this the participants return to the Langamar and partake rice and meat which marks the end of the ceremony.

Ghar Gosani: 'Ghar Gosani' is worshipped by the Rabha people as house hold deity. This deity is worshipped in Luki Bekeli and other surrounding Rabha inhabited areas of Kamrup district. The main post lying towards eastern direction of the 'Dangghar' (this house is constructed following east west direction with door towards north represents the deity) represents the goddess. There is no definite time for the puja. Generally she is worshipped on the day of starting harvesting operation and other festive occasions. She is also worshipped on the day of partaking newly harvested rice. The essential items of puja are one duck, some rice, rice powder, betel leaves and nuts, earthen lamp etc. The head of the sacrificed duck is offered to the deity. It is believed that 'Ghar Gosani' maintains peace in the household if puja is offered to her regularly.

In some other areas the Ghar Gosani is worshipped as goddess lakshmi by placing a flat stone in the altar. A section of the Rabhas of Goalpara worship the Ghar Gosani as Rontak or Rontuk. Rontak is a pair of earthen pots filled with rice. These are kept in a hanger in the North Western corner of the Dangghar. On both sides of the 'Rontak' the traditional family weapons like sword, shield etc. are placed. A trident is also placed above the 'Rontak'. On the day of Puja the 'Rontaks' are decorated with creepers. The priest spreads powdered rice over them. An egg and a pair of betel leaves and nuts are offered to the deity. Along with this puja a pig is sacrificed. This puja continues for three days and villagers are entertained in a feast.

Goddess Kali is also worshipped by the Rabhas in order to avoid epidemic and other natural calamities but of course in their own typical method.

Rupahi or Paora Deo: The younger sister of goddess kamakhya is worshipped by the Rabhas as 'Paora Deo'. A bamboo about 20/25 feet in length specially procured for the occasion represent the deity. The ceremony starts on the first day of baisakh (14th April) in the courtyard of the 'Deori'(priest). The puja items include rice beer, a pair of pigeon, bananas, cow milk, oil, vermilion, etc. After puja, the Paora Deo is taken round the village and the villagers offer oblations to the deity. On completion of the round, the paora is

placed vertically in a beel or a water logging area. The people believe that worship of 'Paora' relieves them of the evils.

The Rabhas worship 'Lakhar Deo' or 'Gorakhia Deo' in order to have a trouble free year for the cattles. Opinions differ regarding the presiding deity of this worship. A sizeable section of the Rabhas consider Lord Mahdeo as the presiding deity, while another section of the Rabhas worship 'Bishahari' daughter of Lord Mahadeo as the "lakhardeo". In a simple ceremony the cowherds propitiate the goddess with sacrifice of fowls or birds caught in the field.

Gohali Deo: Every year on the 'Sankranti' on the month of April 13th synchronising with the Assamese Garu Bihu (Cow Bihu), the Rabhas perform a puja in front of the cowshed for the welfare of the cattle. Rice beer is essential for this puja. An altar is made in the courtyard and a fowl is sacrificed in the name of the 'Gohali Deo'.

Bagheswari or Lampeti: 'Bagheswari' also called as 'lampeti' is considered as the daughter of Lord Mahadeo. 'Bagheswari' taking the shape of tiger attacks cows and bullocks in the jungle and therefore the Rabhas offer puja to her in the month of 'Magh' (January – February), fagun (February- March) or in Jeth (May-June).

Dharma: 'Dharma' is a benevolent deity of the Rabha pantheon who is worshipped for maintaining family peace. Dharma is propitiated on the day of partaking newly harvested rice in the month of Aghon (December-January) or Magh (January- February). Simple puja items such as sweets, earthen lamp, flowers, Prasad and one white fowl are necessary for Dharma puja. The elderly male person of a household performs this puja (generally on Tuesday or Saturday). A white fowl is flown away in the name of Dharma on the day of partaking newly harvested rice.

Kecha Khaiti Puja: Goddess Durga or Bhagawati is worship as 'Kecha Khaiti' during Bohag and Jeth (April- May). Some Rabha families observe this puja during 'Langa Puja'. It is a community worship held on the bank of the river. For this puja a boat about 6 feet in length is prepared from the stems of babana trees. The womenfolk prepare varieties of rice cakes. Rice beer is an essential item for this kind of puja. 'Haul Kheda' (driving away the evil spirits from the village) forms an important part of the puja which is performed by the young boys. Taking long bamboo pieces in hands the young boys in groups visit each household and drive away the evil spirits symbolically by beating the walls of the household. They also collect unripe fruits, rice, eggs etc. After making a round in the village the 'Haul Kheda' party comes to the venue of the 'Kecha Khaiti' where puja is in progress. It is believed that evil spirits are brought near the 'Kecha Khaiti' who is supposed to take charge of them. Then a procession of the young boys led by the priest along with the boat mentioned above proceeds to the river bank where the 'Deori' performs the puja. Lord Mahadeo, Lord Bishwakarma and goddess Chandi are worshipped on the river bank. No sacrifice is performed; instead a duck or a goat is placed in the boat which is allowed to float downstream after the puja. The participants do not partake of the Prasad instead the

Prasad and other puja paraphernalias are placed in the boat. The Rabhas believe that henceforth evil spirits will not haunt their villages as they were chased away formally.

Maroi Puja: Maroi or Manasa puja is observed by the Rabhas to relieve them of the fear of serpents, epidemics and other natural calamities. Maroi is also worshipped for fulfillment of desires. Manasa puja can be observed at any time of the year. Generally the fifth day of the new moon of the month of Sravan is considered as the most auspicious day for Manasa worship. It may be mentioned that 'Manasa' is worshipped by the non-tribals surrounding the Rabha villages. Although the presiding deity i.e. goddess Padmawati is common for both the Rabhas and the non tribals, yet some differences can be observed in the puja system of the Rabhas.

Christian Religion in Rabha Society: A section of the Rabha people has accept the Christian religion since the first half of the 19th century A.D. The spreading of Christianity among the Rabhas formed a new Rabha- Christian society which rejected the old Rabha customs and rituals and on the contrary, they, with special pomp and grandeur observed the festivals like Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, etc. conforming to the Universal Christian faith.

Mistri and Sarkar observed that various changes have occurred with contact of Christianity. The Church have been providing education, medical care and to some extent orientation for the youth. However, it has a motivating force which gives greater leadership in orienting peoples to become socially minded and testing up challenges of modern societies.

Conclusion: Religion concerns belief and social institution and maintains the social relationship that exists in society. The Rabhas are very conservative in their religious practices and beliefs. So, they also maintained the traditional beliefs and values, customs and rituals with great care. As a result of living with the Hindu people for a prolonged period of time, the religious belief, practices and festivals have altered their ancient cultural traditions and adopted a number of new social customs in the life of Rabha people. The influence of Christianity also has a far reaching impact on the religious life of the Rabhas of Assam.

The process of conversion to Christianity is still going on in Rabha areas mostly in remote villages although in snail's pace. Although there occurs a difference between the Rabhas and the Rabha Christians, but the feeling of nationality remain the same in both the societies. Besides, with the advent of modern knowledge and with the acceptance of modern education and Hindu rituals in their day to day life, they are reaching in Hindu social strata. Rabha religion not only reinforces the social structures but also contributes to social cohesion and community building based on natural trust and benevolent give and take. This also instills in them an element of confidence in their day to day transactions.

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