

A brief account of the socio –economic and cultural status of Women of the Rabha community of North Bengal

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Introduction

i. Prologue:

Women in Indian society are gasping for air to survive –male perversion has become the order of the day – male sexual behaviour has become order of the criminal act – in the flip side of that , Rabha community in remote Himalayan Plateau of Terrain and Doors has a complete different story to tell.

A society known for this unique style of song and dance has a unique practice of matriarchic society. Rabha women have the highest position in the family- they weave , they fish, they cultivate even takes the major economic decisions too. Though the wave of modernization and globalization somehow polluted the sacred tradition, in general Rabhas run the family or society that celebrates womanhood. As the obvious reason Rabha song and dance has the complete representation of their societal practice. Rabha rhythm is the rhythm of womanhood, rhythm of the creator- the women of the world.

ii. Objective of the Study: the backdrop...

The prologue clearly sets the tune of the study that we want to figure out the importance of women in the society and culture of Rabha community. Generally women are the root of any culture and tradition. Male members of the society go outside and mixes with the other cultures and vices of urbanization somehow pollutes them. Women on the contrary, can strongly conserve the indigenous art, culture and tradition within them. They perform rituals, wear traditional dresses, practice traditional dances and theatres; which eventually help any marginal community culture to survive. This is true for any folk culture. Rabha community is not the exception. Rather, they celebrate the womanhood in more serious as well as colourful way. Women in no sense are lagging behind the men here. They took part in every aspect of social and economic life and two opposite sex's complement each other very wonderfully form cultivation to culture. Although, presently matriarchy is not continuing here, but women take dominant part in socio cultural life of Rabha community. It is depicted properly in their dance forms, too. Unlike the other folk dances this Rabha folk dance is completely dominated by women, men only perform as musicians and helping hand. Even in the dances like war

dance, cultivation dance, fishing dance which are supposed to be the male dance as these are the men's work, men usually play the role of back stagers.

Here lies the importance of our study that, in this present era of ugly male dominance if we can explore the life, art and culture of Rabha community and learn the rhythm of their dance, in true sense of the term, we can hold the flag of women empowerment high. In the following chapters we will try to learn about this community, their social economic and cultural life with an absolute emphasis on their different dance forms. We will try to find out how the social importance of women influences their dance forms as a whole. Finally, our aim will be to draw a line of conclusion rather a policy implication for the concerned authority and the society as a whole.

iii. **Scope of the study:** Present study will deal mainly with the socio-cultural and economic features of Rabha community on a special emphasis on women empowerment. The importance of women on their society and culture will be depicted in the survey .

iv. Sample Survey:

As it is discussed earlier that , beside the Assam ,the Rabhas generally live in Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri and CoochBehar District in WestBengal. It is not possible for us to survey the entire region thoroughly due to the financial and time constraint. We mainly surveyed the Rabha villages of Kumargram block, Madarihat block of Alipurduar District and some villages of Gayerkata region in the Dhupguri block of Jalpaiguri District. We even meet some eminent researchers in this field for their invaluable suggestions and guidance. Some secondary data are also collected from the websites and books of various researchers their names are mentioned in citations.

Rabha Community: Social and Economic Overview

i) Description:

Rabha is a little-known Scheduled Tribe community of West Bengal and Assam. The language/dialect spoken by the Rabha people is also of the same name. In West Bengal, Rabha people mainly live in Jalpaiguri district , Alipurduar District and Cooch Behar district. Moreover, almost, 70 per cent of them live in in Alipur Duar . In Assam, the Rabhas live mostly in Goalpara and Kamrup districts. The whole area of Eastern and Western Dooars, may be termed as the cradle land of the Rabhas. The Rabhas refer to themselves as Koch and assert a connection to the historical Koch Kingdom.

ii) Ethnicity and Language

The Rabhas belong to the Indo Mongoloid group of people and have similarities with other members of Koch group such as Garos, Kachari, Mech, Koch, Hajong and others.^[1] Most of the Rabhas of Dooars refer to themselves as Rabha, but some of them often declare themselves as *Kocha*.^[2] According to Dr. Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, the aspects of socio-religious and material life of the Rabhas have similarities with those of the Pani-Koch. E. Dalton on the other hand, argues that the Rabhas and the Hajongs are the branches of Kachari race and connected with

the Garo.^[3] According to B.H. Hodgson the Rabhas belong to the Great Koch or Mech ft Pani-Koch and the Rabhas have the same lineage and the latter has their connection with the Garo.^[4] A. Playfair (1909)(8) also has pointed out some linguistic and cultural similarities between the Rabhas and the Garos. He also remarks that there exists a striking linguistic affinity between the A'Tong language and the Rangdania (Rabha) dialects. This led him to think that, at some point of time they lived in contact with each other.^[5]

The Rabhas of West Bengal and Assam generally speak the local Bengali and Assamese dialects. The Rabhas who live in the forest villages have retained their original Rabha dialect to a great extent. The Rabha dialect, as stated by George Abraham Grierson(9), belongs to Koch group of languages of Assam-Burmese branch.^[6]

iii) Economy and Society

The traditional economy of the Rabhas in general, is based on agriculture, forest based activities and weaving. In the past, the Rabhas used to practice shifting cultivation. They continued to cultivate the land with *Gogo* or bill-hook. Later they took up the job of settled cultivation and started cultivation with plough. Besides cultivation, hunting was also an old practice of Rabha people. Weaving was a traditional occupation of the Rabha women.

Rabhas, who once used to live in the forest and practice shifting cultivation, were deprived of their rights to the forest by the colonial rulers, since the formation of forest department, banning on shifting cultivation and demarcation of forest boundaries. Consequently, with the colonial land settlement system, most of the displaced Rabhas either adopted settled cultivation as sharecroppers or took refuge in the forest villages as plantation laborers. After independence, Indian Government more or less continued the same colonial system of forest management, where the communities like Rabhas could not regain their rights to the forest. Today, one finds Rabhas in diverse occupations from forest workers and cultivators to all modern occupations like school teachers and government office bearers etc., though their number in white-collar jobs would not be very high.

iv. Religion and Culture

Religion among Rabha^[7]

Religion	Percent
Hinduism	98.83%
Christianity	0.62%
Others	0.56%

Rabha people traditionally practice a few animistic rituals. However, today they more often follow a faith, which is a blend of some Hindu and a few animistic rituals. There are considerable differences in ritual practices among forest

Rabhas who still live in the forest villages and the Rabhas that live in the villages as cultivators. The forest Rabhas follow traditional animistic practices tinged with some rituals of mainstream Hinduism. On the other hand village Rabhas have merged with local Hindus as far as their religious practices are concerned.^[8]

Rabha people's religious world is pervaded with various spirits and natural objects. The main deity of the Rabhas is called *Risbi*. *Risbi*, for the forest Rabhas as well as village Rabhas, is a male deity. He is also known as *Mahakal*. Forest Rabhas worship him in all important social and religious ceremonies.^[9]

In addition, there are the deities *Rungtuk* and *Basek*, represented by two earthen pots of rice placed on the northern side of the store. These two deities are considered as the daughters of *Risbi* or *Mahakal*. *Rungtuk* and *Basek* are household deities and considered as the deities of wealth like the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi. The *Rungtuk* and *basek*, are inherited by the heiress of the family. Their traditional priest *deosi*, counts the auspicious day for the foundation of these deities. The room where they are kept is occupied by the head of the family. The deities do not have any idols. A red coloured earthen pitcher filled with rice represents the deity *Rungtuk*. An egg is kept on the neck of the pitcher.¹⁰

Rabha Culture & Women Empowerment

As we said earlier, matriarchy was followed in Rabha community which is not continued presently, though the female members have very important role to play in their daily life. They took active part in all the main occupations of Rabha Tribe: the cultivation (Jum chaash), the hunting, the collection of forest resources, fishing and handicraft (11). Even in the last three sections they are the main players and male provides the helping hand. The rabha women make a team and goes for fishing and hunting. They sing and dance while fishing. All the fetched items are distributed to each of them equally, even if a pregnant women joins a team, she not only gets her part but also her would be child's part. This is a wonderful example of democracy and women empowerment among the Rabhas (12). Rabha women weave their own garments themselves, even they sell them outside. They usually have their own pit loom. They sing songs while weaving. This depicts how their culture is closely related with their livelihood. They make wonderful handicrafts made of bamboo: hand fan, broom, railing, fishing items and pots e.t.c. One of the unique feature of Rabha community is Rabha women participate in worshiping their gods as main priest (michik deosi) with the male priest (miya deosi). This is very rare in male dominated society (13,14,16). This shows the state of women among the Rabhas. Some of the Rabha women compete with the men in the field of medicine and treatment, too. The female folk doctors (nari kobiraj, huji michik) can treat some difficult diseases like fractures, cholera, malaria e.t.c. even they can help the pregnant for delivering locally¹⁰.

The above discussion clearly indicates the point that Rabha women not only enjoy the equal status in their society, rather they are far ahead of their counter parts in most of the aspects of life. Their culture, specially their dance celebrates this freedom of womanhood vivaciously.

Cultural Participation:

Rabha Dances are one of the famous folk dances of north eastern India. Like in most tribal communities, dances and music play an important part in the lives of the Rabhas. They call the dance as 'Bosili' in their own language which means the manifestation of labour, pleasure and love and affection. All the dance forms of their community are somehow related to their occupation : fishing , cultivation, hunting. Besides, after every ritual they perform various dances to ingratiate their deities(18,15). As it is discussed earlier that all most all the occupation are equally done by Rabha women, all the Rabha Dances are performed by Rabha women only(18). Most of them are pretty much skilled in singing and dancing. The men are the helping hands of them .They provide the musical accompaniment, playing the Barangshi (a bamboo flute), Hem (a drum with two faces), Dandi & Barding, (idiophones made from bamboo) and Karnal (a rare tribal instrument made of bamboo and buffalo horn).

The Rabha women have different dances for different occasions, like the "Fai Nang Ning Mein" or Welcome Dance, the "basaurr Pidan" or New Year's Dance and "Handabaru" or War Dance. When spring in transit , when earth puts on her attire of wild flowers, blooms and young sprouts, to look young and even more beautiful than ever, the Rabha woman, attracted by the singular charm of nature , fervent by the fire of youth in their veins, usher in the new year with music and dance(15). The women took sword , shield and other weapons to dance the War dance Handabaru. It is quite astonishing that even the war dances are performed by only women. This clearly indicates the women power and how they take dominant part in Rabha society , even in the war front their active participation is welcomed. Not only war field, the dancers depict the daily life of the community and embody the merriment that enlivens all their festivals.

Like most tribal dances, those of the Rabhas are connected to some daily agrarian activity. 'Hangay sani' is the cultivation dance where women celebrates the Sowing and planting seeds.. In 'ha pongi' dance, dancers worships the mother earth(15,16,17) . They have a unique dance form named "Nakchung Reni" to celebrate fishing in the forest rivulets. Rabha women of all ages take part in this dance **whole – heartedly**¹⁷.

Among the ritualistic dances Routak Kandi is very popular among the Rabhas. After worshiping the devi Kamakhya they float the banana plants in a form of boat in a river and worship Rautak Tangi by singing and dancing together. The English version of the song are like this:

O, mother earth

U are like the head of all mothers

So you are the mother of the earth

I commit to give you the good

Portion of the refined wine(17)

Women even takes part in cremation ceremonial dance 'moir gudungi'(16) and mask dance named Chor kheleyi and 'bhaluk mukhosh naach'(mask of the bear) along with the male players.

All this dance forms are brilliant and worth mentioning not only for their aesthetical brilliance but also for social importance. The women participation, the women dominance even in the men dominated field(war, cultivation, fishing) make those dance forms unique and educative as well. Our male dominated so called elite society can easily learn from this marginal rural tribes how to give women their due respect. Even we, the disciples of traditional classical dance can be enriched from these folk forms . The simplicity , the male female bonding, the brilliant depiction of livelihood all are the learnable materials which can help us to become a complete artist and a good human being in future.

Conclusion & Policy Implication

The ethnological survey as per my capacity reveals that, because of larger social practice and so called pressure of modern civilization the matriarchic society of Rabha's could not exist as the larger practice. Nevertheless, the importance of women in their society till remains in the higher side. The three major economical practices of the communities ,viz , agriculture, fishery and handicraft are essentially run by women folk of the so external pressure could not change the perennial practice of Rabha community. The economic activity always has a predominant role in defining the art and cultural practices of them. Here lies the unique significance of the Rabha community where mostly women folk are carrying forward the tradition of cultural practices. Their dances are mostly occupation based and some are the ritualistic and seasonal. In all the cases women are the main performers and male compliments them with musical support. Even in the war dance , unlike the other community dances, females hold weapons and dance boldly. This is the reason , for what we can say Rabha dance is the celebration of freedom of womanhood in true sense of the term.This is an unique genre of dance and dancing community where women ethos and psyche signifies the form. Hence, this paper recommends the concern authority to explore more in-depth studies on Rabha communities and culture and take serious steps to conserve and upbring the the philosophies of Rabhas. It is the duty of all to save the traditional Rabha art culture from the evils of globalization.

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ⁱ **Folk dances** are dances that share some or all of the following attributes:

Dances performed at social functions by people with little or no professional training, often to traditionally based music.

Dances not generally designed for public performance or the stage, though they may later be arranged and set for stage performances.

Execution dominated by an inherited tradition rather than innovation (though folk traditions change over time)

New dancers often learn informally by observing others and/or receiving help from others.

The terms "ethnic" and "traditional" are used when it is required to emphasize the cultural roots of the dance. In this sense, nearly all folk dances are ethnic ones. **Wikipedia.**

