

Tradition and Culture of North Bengal : A Study in a Tribal Dynamics

Mayank Prakash Assistant Professor, S.K.B.University,Purulia, West Bengal

Abstract

Rabha and Mech is a little known schedule tribal community of West Bengal . Rabha and Mech tribes are found in West Bengal and Assam only.They are mainly distributed in West Bengal in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar only. Total Rabha population in West Bengal as per census 2001 is 9762 and Mech is 9570.The Rabha refers to themselves as Koch and assert a connection to the historical Koch kingdom.The Rabha and Mech belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of people and have similarities with other members of Bodo group such as Garos,Kachari and others.The Rabha and Mech of West Bengal generally speaks local Bengali but their own language is called Kochcrow of Chini-Tibbeto or Kirat language family.

Rabha society is a matrilineal form of society, both matriline and patriline exists among the Rabha. Rabha and Mech both known for their rich culture and tradition. Rabhas are purely forest villagers hence they shows a symbiotic relationship with the forest. Mech tribes are under the process of acculturation. This paper will try to elaborate the traditional and cultural features of North Bengal tribals .

Key words: *The Mech , Rabha, Forest village , Tradition, Culture , Ethnicity.*

Background

The Rabha, a Bodo speaking scheduled Tribal groups, are mainly concentrated in the Goalpara district of Assam, Meghalaya state and West Bengal. In West Bengal they inhabit mostly in the area of Northern Bengal with a population of 15014 souls (2001 Census) which lines along the foot hills of Himalayas between The Teesta and the Sankosh rivers. In the present paper the discussion is delimited on the Rabha and Mech Tribe of Northern Bengal, Rabha who are living in the districts of Jalpaiguri with a population of 12221 (81.40%) and Mech with a population of 10360 (76.60%) .

The Rabha were in the past a matrilineal tribe (Pareira: 1911). Afterwards their contact with other societies increased, who are not matrilineal, for which their social pattern has undergo a change. In the foothills of Himalayas i.e. known as Western Duars, Rabha live along with the Rajbanshi, Mech,Santhal,Oraon , Nepalese and other. After the partition of India in 1947, a large number of populations have come erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to this place. With various ethnic groups this region witnesses a cultural diversification. Some are Hindus, some

profess Christianity and others observe their own tribal religion. This region has ecological importance also with rivers, dense forests, cultivatable lands and Tea Estates. In this ecological set up the Rabha are segmented into forest Rabha and village Rabha. The forest Rabha are those who live in the forest and village Rabhas are others who live in the country side(Das and Rabha: 1967)

The village Rabha who live along with the Rajbanshi, Mech, Bengalee caste Hindus, have some degree of change in their day to day life. Again among forest rabhas, traditional system and customs prevail even till date. Some endogamous divisions are found in goalpara district Assam namely Rangdania, Pati , mataria , Daburi, Totla kochari etc. (Gait 1891, Endle 1911, Dass 1955-1958). But in the Jalpaiguri and cooch Behar districts the above divisions are not found the Rabha are divided into a number of totemic exogamous matrilineal clans. They strictly practice clan exogamy.

Area of the study

Present study is based on the field work of Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal (North Bengal). Village Torsa, village Manglabari and forest village Kodalbastee is been studied during the anthropological field work near Hasimara. These villages comprises the population of two important tribal group of Bodo section namely Rabha and Mech. The present study confined the tradition and culture of North Bengal Tribal life.

Research Methods Applied

For this present study both qualitative and quantitative data have been collected during field work for first hand information. Various tools and techniques have been applied to collect the data such as Interview, Observation, participant observation, schedule, Interview guide, Genealogical Table. Village profile schedule and household schedule have also been applied. To know the traditional and cultural background of the North Bengal tribals case study methods have also been applied.

Findings and Discussion

During field work among the tribes of North Bengal I have studied the Rabha and Mech society of Mongolian Group comes under Bodo section. I have found the Historical background, rich culture and tradition of the both societies which is as follows:

The Rabha :- Tradition and culture

The Rabha culture also shows similar features. The community, as Friend- Pereria sees , once had a full – fledged matrilineal base but now they are in a stage of transition from matriarchal from of life (Friend – Pereria, 1912 : 142) . This tribe which was once matrilineal, has imbibed matrilineal features and is now in the process of patriarchalization. The present day Rabha culture

especially that of the village Rabhas may be said to be in a transitional stage from matriliney to patriliney. Many traits which are matrilineal among the forest Rabhas are matrilineal among the village Rabhas. Again there may be cases among the village Rabhas where the old matriliney still persists. While in one section of the Rabhas (the forest Rabhas) the traditional matriliney still persists to a great extent the other section (the village Rabhas) shows a strong inclination to seek a new path and to form a new masculine society. This change among the village Rabhas is the result of contact and interactions with the patrilineal Rajbansis who have imbued these Rabhas with the patrilineal Hindu culture elements. They have thus hammered on the root of their traditional culture and have paved the way for change. The impact of modernization, urbanisation, market and cash economy etc. have only forced the pace of change in the Rabha culture.

The study reveals that the two ecological sections of the Rabhas- The forest Rabha and the village Rabha – consider themselves as belonging to the same Rabha i.e. the Koch Rabha group though they admit the cultural and linguistic differences between them.

As a result of their cultural homogeneity, little impact of the cash and market economy and lack of regular contact with the outside world due mainly to semi-isolated condition of their habitat, while the forest Rabhas have still preserved their traditional matrilineal culture to a considerable extent, the village Rabhas for their regular and intimate interactions with various matrilineal Hindu castes, particularly the Rajbansis, and for the rapid development of the cash and market economy due mainly to the unprecedented heavy influx of the Hindu refugees from the then East Bengal (now Bangladesh) in their area and also for various other reasons stated above, have chosen the path of changes; and these changes are taking them away from their traditional matrilineal culture traits by those borrowed from the local matrilineal Hindus. The Forest Rabhas too, are changing in the similar direction. But their extent and rate of change is undoubtedly lower and slower.

As for totemism, some of the Rabha clans are totemic in nature, while others are non-totemic. The Forest Rabhas still follow the prohibition against the totemic objects, but some of the village Rabhas show reluctance in observing the same. This is due to their contact with the Hindu castes among whom no such clan organisation and totemism are present.

Later on many of the Rabha family discarded their traditional Hindu religion. And Christianity they have embraced in recent years only for getting certain benefits, mainly economic. But Christianity couldn't influence the village Rabhas and deviate them from their will to become Hindus.

Thus we see that a major section of the Rabhas of West Bengal is transforming their social system from one type to another, from the matrilineal to the patrilineal social system.

The Mech: - Tradition and Culture

The Mech have a rich cultural heritage. In the opinion of Alfred Weber and sociologists like Maclver and R.K.Merton, culture is the direct expression of our nature, in our way of thought and action, in art, religion, morality and recreation. It deals with interest and values conceived as ends, to which various actions and objects are directed as means. The social structure, economy, culture

and religion are the various protective layers that cocoon the precious kernel of a person's identity.

The Mech are an egalitarian society. They do not have any class or caste differences. The present mech society is primarily patriarchal in contemporary times, The women are accorded their due status and respect. The mech woman occupies an important place in the socio-economic structure of her society. It is said that the status of women in a particular society is a significant reflection of the social justice in that society. The mech society seldom witnesses such crimes as persecution or murder of wife by her husband or in-laws. Dowry deaths and divorce due to dowry are non-existent. The mech are now monogamous though in the past polygamy was practiced. Polyandry is strictly prohibited. From the very ancient times, Mech women have been sporting long looks done up in beautiful chignons of different styles. Mothers go about their daily routine with their children carried on their backs.

Marriage:

The institution of marriage is considered to be very important among the Mech. The Mech word for marriage is 'Haba' The marital bond is found to bring together not just two individuals but two families even kindred's and villages. Scholars like Dalton (1872), Hodgson (1880) and Sunder (1895 A.D.) described some of the old marriage customs that prevailed during their time. According to them 'there were three types of marriages, marriage by 1) consent, 2) elopement and 3) forcibly entering the house like the 'Ghar Sandhani' marriage of the ancient Rajbanshis''. The latter two systems soon became obsolete. There were no elaborate rituals and marriage was supposed to be a mere contract, easily dissoluble. It was a matrilineal society and the actual marriage would take place in the house of the groom. Traditionally the Mech had six different types of marriages. They were i) The normal marriage based on negotiation or the negotiated marriage, ii)'Garjia lakhinai' or Gabwi Thanai' system, iii)'Dangoa Thanai' system, iv)'Kharsonnai' system, v) a)'Lanan kharnai' (to elope), b)'Dwisonnai' and vi)'Homan Haba Khwlamnai (to marry by force).

Name and Surname :

The Mech do not observe any specific name giving ceremony. There is no special principle underlying the giving of names to children. Sometimes the children are given names associated with their physical appearance of the day or month in which they are born. The names Damphla (flat faced), Deobar (Sunday), Asharsing (born in the month of Ashar) are some examples. In the present times, many affluent Mech like to give their children meaningful names commonly used by other communities which sound attractive. The mech who consider themselves as Hindus, show a keenness to give their children names like Krishna, Nikhilesh, Uttam, Aditi etc. According to Charu Chandra Sanyal 'from the time of naraka and bhagadatta in east Assam and then hariya and viswasingha of chikna hills (kokrajhar, goalpara, assam) the Brahmins exercised a great influence on them so much so that in the later year large section of the

Bodo including the Mech embraced Hinduism and took Hindu names and surnames. Many Christian Mech also choose English names like Thomas, James Anne, Albert etc for their children. In the past, the Mech used to give their children Mech names and surnames. It was the common Mech who retained the practice of giving their children Mech names like Ranteng, Sombrau, Krishing etc. People of the developed races give their children indigenous names drawn from their own language because one's name is the best proof of one's identity. The names of famous people like Edmund Hillary, Tensing Norgay, Hiuen Tsang etc.

Clearly establish the racial identify of these personalities. It is natural that parents like to give their children names of their own choice. With the changing times the mindset of the Mech has also undergone changes to a great extent. They are now making efforts to safeguard their language and culture and have again started giving their children meaningful Mech name like Sanjarang (reddish like the sun), Srang (bright), Onsula (kindhearted) etc. Surnames or titles also play a significant role in determining the racial identity of person. In the early days, the internal organization of the mech probably rested on a totemistic basic although in the present times there is hardly any real regard for the totems.

The title mushahary or mochary means the clan(ary) of Musha meaning tiger which must have been the totem of the clan in the past. The 'ary' seems to signify some kind of kinship. The title champromary is a combination of 'chompram' plus 'ary' it is not clear how this group originated. But there is a story that a group of mech were cooking food half cooked (Chompram) and flee for their lives.

In mech 'chong' means to cook and 'fram' means to leave any work half done. Hence they were given the surname 'champromary'. Basumata or basumatary or bwiswmuthiary is a combination of 'basumata' plus 'ary'. They are said to be the mech engaged in agriculture or the landlords. In mech 'basu' or bwisu' means earth and 'ary' means sector clan. The surname 'Hazusry' or 'Hajary' is a combination of 'Hajo' plus 'ary'. The word 'Hajo' means hill in mech.

Festivals:-

Festivals are an essential part of the socio cultural life of the mech. Their festivals can be divided into two groups, namely i) Religious festivals and ii) Seasonal festivals. Religious festivals are those festivals which are connected with the performance of religious ceremonies. The 'Kherai', 'Garja' and 'Marai' are some of the important religious festivals of the mech. They are closely linked with the 'bathou' religion. The 'kherai' festival is the greatest religious festival of the bodos. It is performed individually or collectively once or twice a year for the welfare of the people and a good harvest.

Dance:-

The Mech have a rich tradition of dance and music. Some of the important dances are the 'Kherai' dance, Bagurumba dance, Baisagu dance, Rajiw Janai dance, Habajanai dance, Satraili or Dhal Thungri Sibnai dance etc.

Musical instrument

The traditional instruments of the Mech are the Serja, Gongna, Sifung, Kham, Jotta, Gangreem, Binju, Thoraka, Jepkring etc. The serja is a kind of violin. It has four strings and is traditionally played by a small bow made of bamboo strip. The Gongna is the Jew's harp. It is a small wind instrument used by the Mech.

Mech cuisine

The Mech cuisine is multifarious and has its own taste and aroma. Some of the typical Mech preparations are the Phetta (steamed rice cake), Mwidar khwma (a kind of bread made of powdered borni rice), Mairong sobai (fried rice without oil), kharwi, sobaikhari (preparation of kalai pulse), Ondla-Khari (special preparation of powdered sun baked rice), Emphou Khari (curry of castor worms), Samu Khari (curry of snail meat), Oma bidor (pork) etc.

Garments

The Dokna, Phali, Indisi, Aronai, Rejeregang, Janjikhani phalli are some of the garments worn by the Mech. The yellow coloured Dhokna is very popular among the Mech women. They are probably fond of the yellow colour because it resembles their complexion.

Ornaments

The traditional ornaments used by the Mech are the Charakari (necklace), Makhri (earring), Mutha (board silver bangles), Bajoo (Armlet), Nolo (nosering), Nakhaphwl (nose top), Bowla (ear ring used by dancers), Jinjri (necklace), Chandrahar (heavy necklace of five layers), Inthi (earring), Khandla etc.

Fishing Implements

The fishing implements commonly used are the Burung, Jekhai, Khobai, Je (net), Khokha, Bwrshi etc.

Culture and Castor Worms

The culture of castor worms is common among the Mech. They obtain a raw material popularly known as 'Endi' from the castorworms. The Fabric (Endi cloth) is of great value. It is soft, warm and durable. The active cultivation of castor (endi) worms and the manufacture of the Endi cloth is one of the chief industries of the mech. They rare the cocoons, spin the yarn and weave the cloth. It enables the woman to contribute to the family economy without neglecting their domestic chores. The Endi chaddarm(shawl) is a famous local product of mechs. It is popularly as Endisi . The castor worm is also a favourite dish of the Mech.

Weaving implements

Weaving among the mech used to be a part of woman's ordinary household duties. The Mech woman are expert weavers. Their weaving is replace with artistic sensibility and it includes not only cotton textiles but also silk fabrics of the finest quality. Some of the weaving implements used by them are Rasw, Makhu, Jenther , Garet, Hichhan, Swrkhi, gandwi, Gorkha , Thakuri, Chanchali etc.

Conclusion_

In summing up it can be said that the tradition and culture of North Bengal Tribals are very simple and shows a distinct feature. Still they follow their age old tradition but as far as their culture are concern it is changing due to culture contact and Christianity . The tribes of North Bengal shows a Multi- culture and multi- lingual nature. Hence the Tribal of North Bengal form a vibrant culture and ethnicity which protects their ethnic identity.

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